

The Gospel in Word and Deed: Johan Herman Bavinck's Missiology and Its Application for Today

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Introduction

“Arguably, apart from the gospel the church has little to offer to the world.”¹ Thus writes Paul Wilson, ordained minister of the United Church of Canada and professor of homiletics at Emmanuel College of the Toronto School of Theology. He concludes, ironically, that in this age of critical church decline, where many experiments are being attempted to stem membership loss, a novel approach might be for preachers to go back to preaching the gospel.²

The question of what the church should offer to the world has occupied the church from its earliest history. We already see a reflection of this in Acts 6 where the apostles were determined not to be diverted from preaching the gospel, yet needed to maintain the diaconal work, and so instituted a distinct diaconal office. The apostle Paul later called on the church to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:10 NIV). We hear the question of what the church offers the world expressed in words attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel and if necessary use words.” Churches and

¹ Paul Scott Wilson, “Church Decline: Has the Gospel Gone Missing?” *TST Homiletics Seminar* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 3, <<http://individual.utoronto.ca/jacobsen1/wilson2-2.pdf>> (15 October 2008). These words are posted on the office door of Dr. Mary Hulst, assistant professor of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, reminding students and faculty what the church and this seminary should be all about.

² Wilson, “Church Decline,” 5. Wilson defines the gospel in this way: “At minimum, it is the saving, liberating, and empowering actions of God found anywhere in the Bible (Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1–3 speak directly of good news) yet that have their fullest expression, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection, ascension, gift of the Spirit and promises concerning the end of times. The gospel is the reason the church preaches: Christ commissioned it in Mark 16:15, a text that is canon in spite of variance in ancient manuscripts. Arguably, apart from the gospel the church has little to offer to the world.” *Ibid.*, 3.

Christians continue to wrestle with the implications of the *Missio Dei*, whether in official church documents or the pronouncements of ecumenical organizations. One is reminded of the debates at the end of the last century between ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches and evangelical campaigns such as the Lausanne Movement. Emerging churches today raise the question anew: How does God relate to the world and how, consequently, should the church relate to the world in the ministry of the gospel?³

The Question in the Context of the CRCNA

In the Christian Reformed Church in North America, this question is described in terms of the relationship between Word and deed. Over the years, stimulating discussions have been held about this relationship and its implication for the mission of the church. This discussion was recently revived with the publication of *Communities First*.⁴

As noted above, at the heart of the matter is one's view of how God relates to the world. Should we speak of God-world-church or of God-church-world? Just what does one mean by the *Missio Dei*? What is one's view of redemption, of the relationship between church and kingdom, of the heart and scope of the gospel, of the antithesis, and of eschatology? We are therefore not dealing with minor theological, missiological, and ecclesiological issues when we raise Wilson's statement that "arguably, apart from the gospel the church has little to offer to the world." The matter is very closely tied to the question of the identity of the church and its mission here on earth.

In this article, I will explore these questions from the perspective of the church's mission calling, taking up a position consonant with that of the great Reformed missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck.

J. H. Bavinck's Definition of Missions

The Reformed missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck in his time and context also dealt with the issues and questions raised above, even though the questions were not raised in the same way. Bavinck's theological approach to missions can perhaps be summarized as follows:

Missions takes place in a world that was created good but is now fallen and lives in sin and disobedience against God and is consequently under

³ See, for example, Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon, Calif.: Youth Specialties, 2006); McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

⁴ Jay van Groningen, ed., *Communities First* (Grand Rapids: CRWRC, 2005). Cf. Chris Schoon, review of *Communities First*, by Jay van Groningen, ed., *Calvin Theological Journal* 42, no. 1 (April 2007): 198.

judgment. However, sin and evil were not able to dethrone God who promised to deliver man and the world. This promise was fulfilled in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ in whom the kingdom came to earth. It is through the church that this work of Christ is continued. He builds his church by His Word and Spirit. This church brings the gospel in a world, that, though it is under judgment, does know the concern of God. The church proclaims the new life and reality that is to be found in Christ and the kingdom in word and deed.⁵

Within the context of his theological framework, one can understand Bavinck's well-known definition of missions:

Missions is that activity of the church—in essence it is nothing else than an activity of Christ, exercised through the church—through which the church, in this interim period, in which the end is postponed, calls the peoples of the earth to repentance and to faith in Christ, so that they may be made his disciples and through baptism be incorporated into the fellowship of those who await the coming of the kingdom.⁶

The following definition shows how Bavinck connects Christ, the church, the world and the kingdom within the concept of missions:

Missions is that action of the church over the whole wide world—which in the deepest sense is an action of Christ himself—whereby she calls the peoples of this world in all their diversity to faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ, and to show them in the signs of our service, how the salvation of Christ encompasses the whole of life, and to teach them at the same time to look with hopeful expectation to the completion of the kingdom when God will be all in all.⁷

At the same time Bavinck could also summarize his definition of missions in one simple sentence: “The whole of mission work is finally nothing else than over against all human reasoning to witness in a childlike way, ‘Come and See’.” (John 1:47)⁸

⁵ Pieter C. Tuit, *The Relationship between Church and Kingdom within the Missionary Theology of Johan Herman Bavinck* (master's thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary 2001), 9–10. Cf. *passim* for many of the themes in this article.

⁶ J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David Hugh Freeman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 62.

⁷ J. H. Bavinck, “Zendingsbegrip en zendingswerkelijkheid,” in *De heerbaan: algemeen zendings tijdschrift* 2, no. 1 (January 1949): 6.

⁸ J. H. Bavinck, *Christus en de mystiek van het Oosten* (Kampen: Kok, 1934), 25.

Missions as the Task of the Church

Bavinck sees missions as the task of the church.⁹ He believes that the church must extend itself over the whole world.¹⁰ In regard to the purpose of the church and the place of missions in that purpose, Bavinck believes that Scripture teaches that the church exists first of all to praise God by word, deed, prayer, and worship. He calls this the doxological task of the church, and this task is for him so central and all-controlling that it ought to constitute the very core of the church's life. Second, for Bavinck the church exists to "bear the glory of God's Word from generation to generation." In this sense, Bavinck sees the church as being concerned with itself. Third, he does not want the church to forget that it exists to satisfy the needs of the world. Missionary activity, therefore, is not incidental but "it is a part of the very essence of the church." Here, Bavinck sees some truth in Kraemer's contention that the church is the instrument by means of which divine mercy is extended to the world and "it is through his church that Christ stretches forth his hands to those outside the light of his everlasting salvation." Bavinck believes that, in a church true to Scripture, the apostolic calling to go out can never be hostile to the care of the members of the church.¹¹

The Importance of the Preaching of the Word in Missions

The preaching and teaching of the Word plays an important part in Bavinck's missiology. According to Bavinck, preaching must be an encounter with the whole person as existing in this world in flight away from

⁹ Although Bavinck recognizes the existence of independent mission societies, in principle he does not agree with their formation. According to him the church as a whole must see itself as being sent and must fulfill its calling through its representatives. See J. H. Bavinck, *Ons zendingsboek* (Amsterdam: Gereformeerde Meisjesbond en Gereformeerde Jongelingsbond, 1935), 134.

¹⁰ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 158.

¹¹ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 68–69; cf. p. 300. For Bavinck, missions cannot do without the church, and the church cannot be without missions. A church that does not engage in missions does not answer to something that belongs to its essence. Such a church is unfaithful to its highest calling. Bavinck, *Ons zendingsboek*, 135. At the same time, Bavinck finds Kraemer's position—that the *raison d'être* of the church is found in the need of the world—to be too strong. Rather, the church has a goal in itself or rather in the worship of God in Christ. At the same time, Bavinck reiterates that missions belongs to the essence of the church—it is as a church goes out that the believers enjoy the assurance that Christ is with them to the end. Similarly, the witnessing church is the one that realizes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. J. H. Bavinck, P. Prins, and G. Brillenburg Wurth, *De Heilige Geest* (Kampen: Kok, 1949), 446. In *Ons Kerk Zendingskerk*, Bavinck notes that the mission mandate is not just one mandate next to other mandates but that it points to the true, defining task of the church in the world. See J. H. Bavinck, *Ons Kerk Zendingskerk* (Kampen: Kok, 1948), 49.

God.¹² Bavinck wants the missionary to preach the whole Christ in all the riches of his work as mediator, but this must be done in such a way that it touches the hearer in his or her actual situation.¹³ Abstract, disembodied and history-free sinners do not exist.¹⁴

Bavinck places great stress on the preaching and teaching of the Word and the faith the missionary may have in it. He writes: “This message has only one powerful weapon, namely, that its messengers know that if they bring it obediently and honestly, trusting in God’s help and in his Spirit, it will somehow touch the heart of man.”¹⁵

Bavinck’s View of the Kingdom

Bavinck’s view of the kingdom is perhaps most clearly expressed in his *De Mensch en Zijn Wereld* (The Person and His World).¹⁶ There, he notes that like a piece of mighty choral music all the books of Scripture contain the concept of the kingdom of God. This kingdom has cosmic dimensions that include the whole of created reality, including the angels. Originally, everything was in perfect harmony. This kingdom was not static but dynamic, for, from the beginning there was a call to development, to fulfillment of everything that was included in this kingdom. Thus, the kingdom was there as a possibility from the day of creation. This is why for Bavinck the concept of history and kingdom are closely connected. The full reality of the kingdom could only be revealed in history.

Bavinck sees humanity as occupying a special place in that kingdom. Adam was a subject but at the same time vice-regent and received a special task within the development of that kingdom. Humanity’s cultural task therefore connects with the concept of the kingdom.

Humanity’s fall into sin was a sin not only against God but also against the kingdom. Bavinck defines it as rebellion against the King Most High: It is transgression of the law of the kingdom. Humanity declared itself king and took control of its own life. This sin and disobedience lies at the heart of the disorder in the world. Humanity disconnected itself from the unity God had created and declared itself autonomous. Because of this, the earth was cursed (Gen. 3:17). Bavinck refers here to Paul’s interpretation of these events in Romans 8:20. The world lies under a curse; its harmony is gone.

¹² Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 150.

¹³ J. H. Bavinck, *Christusprediking in de volkerenwereld* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1939), 32. Elsewhere Bavinck writes: “I must bring the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to the whole man, in his concrete existence, in his every day environment.” Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 81.

¹⁴ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 81.

¹⁵ Bavinck, *The Church between Temple and Mosque* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 206.

¹⁶ Bavinck, *De Mensch in Zijn Wereld* (Baard: Bosch & Keuning, 1946), 47–66.

Because of this sin and curse, a power enters into this world. We cannot understand it even though we do experience its terrible power. For him, this is the power of demons, which throw themselves upon nature and upon humanity; indeed, upon the whole beautiful creation. Sinful humanity, therefore, lives in a demonic world and experiences what this means every hour. This is the tragedy that fills life in this world. The kingdom is broken. Bavinck mentions specifically here that it is God himself who has given the world over to these demonic powers who misuse and destroy it with all the resulting consequences.

However, Bavinck also explains how God did not forsake the idea of his kingdom. Rather, he will reveal his kingdom in a greater and clearer way. It is this kingdom thought that Bavinck sees as the motif of history. Here he points out that the Bible pictures the kingdom as a reality of the end time. It is coming and it is near, but it will only find its fulfillment in the end times. The eschatological aspect of the kingdom is very important for Bavinck, and everything else in Scripture comes under this concept. According to Bavinck, the covenant of grace finds its deepest purpose in the coming kingdom. The coming of Jesus in this world is to restore the kingdom. Christ's suffering and death is for the realization of the kingdom, not just because of humanity's need and misery. It is for that one all-encompassing reality that God will restore his kingdom and restore his creation.

This kingdom is realized in Jesus Christ. All threads come together in him. For Bavinck, Christ is the priest who restores humanity's fallen relationship with God. He is also the king who restores his salvation-bringing reign in this lost world. Through his suffering and death, Christ restores the kingdom and brings all things under the rule of God. In him, God's kingdom reaches out to this lost world.

It is this kingdom that Bavinck sees entering into the history of the world. The history of Israel in the Old Testament is a history of the kingdom, though in shadow forms. Scripture reveals that this kingdom of God also has an enemy—the kingdom of humanity, which is the antipode of the kingdom of God and tries to dethrone God. However, all these attempts are fruitless, and God's kingdom keeps on coming. This causes ongoing conflict and battle. Bavinck does not believe in a gradual realization of the kingdom. The drama of history and the coming of the kingdom of God point to the end, to the finale of world history, to the great day of the Lord.

Bavinck on The Relationship among World, Church, and Kingdom

Thus far, I have provided a summary of Bavinck's view of the kingdom.

We have already seen how the church's task of preaching the Word has a place in the coming of the kingdom. Now we need to see how Bavinck saw the relationship between this coming of the kingdom, which will be fully realized at the end of time, and the church that is called to proclaim and live the reality of the kingdom today. The following summary of Bavinck's view on this is also taken from *De Mensch en Zijn Wereld*.¹⁷

Earlier mention was made of the believer's position in Christ. For Bavinck, this believer does not stand alone but is taken up within the bond of the church, Christ's body. Bavinck sees this church as occupying a very special place within a nation and within world history. According to its inner nature, the church stands outside that great world union (*wereldverband*) that originated with the fall in paradise and culminates in that terrible kingdom of man—the kingdom of Antichrist. The church works in the service of another and lives from another principle. At the same time, the church stands in the midst of this world and has a responsibility in it.

Bavinck describes various ways in which the church has related to the world. He mentions the ascetic way in which the church separated itself from the world to leave it to the power of demons. Second, he mentions the imperial longing of the church in which it tried to put the stamp of the reign of Christ upon the world. The church here tries to organize and order the world according to the gospel and tries to form this world and its kingdoms as a prelude to the great coming kingdom. Bavinck points out that the church was only able to do this when it was in a position of power such as in the Middle Ages. In his own time, Bavinck finds hints of the same when the church wants to reform and regenerate life in its totality to serve as a sign of the kingdom of Christ.¹⁸ Third, according to Bavinck, the church can strive in a missionary way to win the world for Christ. This happens through the organized preaching and teaching of the church as well as the simple preaching of the members. Bavinck sees this event in the life of the early church but observes that this missionary response is rare in the history of the church.

Bavinck takes note of the constant danger the church endures, namely, to be overcome by the world. Here, he comments that persecution is not bad for the church, but worldliness threatens the church every day. The church needs to remind itself that it does not belong to this age but to the coming one.

Bavinck, therefore, finds it difficult to describe the place of the church

¹⁷ Bavinck, *De Mensch*, 221–26.

¹⁸ It should be noted that Bavinck interacts little or not at all with the works of G. Berkouwer, H. Bavinck his uncle, and A. Kuyper. At the same time, he does write with their theological framework in mind.

in this world in a few words. He speaks of separation and concern. The church is separated from the world. It lives from a different root than humanity as a whole: It belongs to a different age. However, the church is not indifferent to life in this world. It cannot forsake this world or be unfaithful to it because, until the last day, the church will see this world as the place of God's impossible possibilities where he can include many in his plan of salvation. In that plan of salvation, the church is an instrument in the hand of God because Jesus says, "As the Father sent me so send I you."

For Bavinck, these are the two poles that determine the attitude and life of the church in this world. It can only be truly concerned about this world when the church realizes that it is different and when it is aware of the fact that we are from God and that the whole world lies in evil (1 John 5:19). It is this knowledge that also determines the church's attitude toward national life, culture, and history.

Bavinck warns the church that its concern for the world can eventually lead to its being sucked in by the powers of this world. This is why the church needs to heed the call to be separate from the world and find its life in its own existence. The church can never be at ease in this world; its being in this world is of a precarious nature—living between the two poles is the cross it has to carry until the end of days.

Bavinck on the Church as Institute and Organism

If we examine Bavinck's view on the relationship between church and kingdom from the viewpoint of the church as institute and organism, we note that though Bavinck sees the work within the framework of this distinction he also keeps the lines fluid. For example, he calls the church an entirely different community than a nation or a tribe, yet never free of its responsibility to society. Bavinck sees the church, through what it does within its own walls, as exercising an immeasurable influence upon the entire social order. At the same time, he believes that when the time is ripe the church will sometimes need to testify forcibly against certain national sins. He does not call the church to be revolutionary but, following the way Scripture deals with slavery, says that the task of the church is to proclaim principles that of themselves will awaken the conscience and make an end to what has oppressed society for centuries.¹⁹

In another place, Bavinck states that the church is called to reveal the Christian principle in every area of life. The church needs to call its members to live wherever they are according to the guiding principles of God's Word.²⁰ In another context, he writes that mission work is only

¹⁹ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 168–69.

²⁰ Bavinck, *Ons zendingsboek*, 8.

possible when there is a clear distinction between nation and church. He is fearful, therefore, of mixing missions with politics because then the mission of the church will lose its essential nature and will become impossible.²¹

Bavinck believed strongly that the new life of Jesus Christ must penetrate all areas of life and that God wants to gather all things in this world under Christ and that the church therefore must be conscious of the place of humanity in the cosmos.²² For Bavinck, salvation meant that humanity's guilt had been taken away by the work of Christ—the guilt that made humanity God's enemy and a slave to demonic powers. However, the world and life have also been transformed by the work of Christ so that salvation implies a new attitude toward life and a new vocation. Through renewed individual lives, this new vocation includes a new society and a renewed social life. Bavinck is emphatic that the change in the heart of the Christian must lead to a change in the community. Salvation has personal as well as cosmic dimensions.

Therefore, the church does not just preach the gospel in the narrow sense, rather, its preaching always implies certain kingdom elements, something of being “new creations,” of the new having come. Here, the church must be careful not to identify the kingdom with Western civilization.²³ In mission situations, Bavinck could see that the church could not always achieve what it thought was God's will, yet it would through preaching and teaching lay the foundation for new life, new powers, and new possibilities, which in the future would bring a new society.²⁴ Bavinck insisted that missionaries had to show that the gospel of Jesus included demands and powers that had to and would lead to great social changes.²⁵

Bavinck on the Comprehensive Approach to Missions

Bavinck's evaluation of the so-called comprehensive approach introduced at the International Missions Conference in Jerusalem, 1928, should be noted here. According to this approach, missions were simultaneously preaching, education, medical care, and socioeconomic aid. Bavinck

²¹ Ibid., 7. Visser provides an excellent account of Bavinck's dealings with apartheid in South Africa. Paul Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist, Johan Herman Bavinck* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 309–14.

²² Bavinck, *Church between Temple and Mosque*, 148, 152.

²³ J. H. Bavinck, “Theology and Mission,” in *Free University Quarterly* 8 (October 1961): 65.

²⁴ Bavinck, *Alzoo wies het Woord: een studie over den voortgang van het evangelie in de dagen van Paulus* (Baarn: Bosch & Keuning, 1942), 205.

²⁵ Bavinck, *Ons zendingsboek*, 191. Bavinck could speak passionately about the gospel and social justice, 189.

responded that this concept was misleading because it made all aspects of equal value, whereas Christ had only commanded the church to preach the gospel to all nations. Such preaching must lead to a transformation of all of life, but it may not be reduced to the same level. The missionary approach, therefore, is not four-dimensional, yet its singularity touches life in all its aspects.²⁶

In the context of missions, Bavinck spoke of core and auxiliary services (*kern en neven diensten*). At the center for him was the preaching of the gospel by the church in both word and deed. In this light, he saw medical and other services as auxiliary, a preparation for the Word, though also a word in themselves. He seeks to distinguish Word and deed without separating them.²⁷ For Bavinck, the essential proclamation of the Word needs the continuous illustration of deeds of true compassion.²⁸

It is not easy to describe and evaluate Bavinck's view of the relationship between the church and the world. Sometimes, we find him enthralled with the beauty of the world, including the products of humanity's hand through culture. At other times, Bavinck shows that he is very much aware of the sin and injustice in this world. From a theological perspective, we may conclude that for Bavinck the world is darkness while the church is light. This does not mean that the light of God's common grace does not shine in that dark world and that the darkness of sin is not found in the church. Bavinck is very much aware of the overlap, but he does work with the basic distinction. Bavinck quotes John, "We know that the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:9 NIV), and, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19 NIV). Bavinck sees Scripture as teaching that nothing good can be expected from humanity, from a world bound up in atheism and unbelief and rebellion; there is no future except in the grace of God.²⁹

For Bavinck, a person is either in Adam or in Christ. The church for him, therefore, is a product of God's grace in Jesus Christ and the powerful working of the Holy Spirit through the Word. As such, it stands over against this world. However, Bavinck does not separate the church from the world. The church is in the world, bearing witness to Christ in the midst of this world. For the sake of Christ, it loves this world and prays that one day all things will change, and the kingdoms of this world will become

²⁶ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 107–10.

²⁷ Bavinck, *Ons zendingsboek*, 54.

²⁸ Bavinck, *Zending in een wereld in nood* (Wageningen: Zomer & Keuning, 1948), 47. See also Bavinck, *Ons zendingsboek*, 49.

²⁹ Bavinck, *Het woord voor de wereld*, 29–30, 35.

the kingdom of Jesus Christ.³⁰

According to Bavinck, the church's existence is not just determined by its place and task in the world. Because the church comes from God, it is concerned with God and has what Bavinck calls a doxological task. It is also right for the church to show concern about itself. However, its relationship with God and its concern for itself must lead to the church's being a brighter light and a more effective witness in the midst of this world.

Bavinck is very much Reformed in his perception of the relationship between the church and the world. His writings show that he is aware of the tension that comes from being in the world yet not being of it. He does not flee into a kind of "world-withdrawal" or a "world-engagement" or "solidarity with the world" that wipes out the distinction between the church and the world. In the light of Scripture, he knows the place of both and the relationship between the two.

Visser and Graafland on Bavinck's Missionary Theology

We will now look at how the above impacts the relationship between church and kingdom in the missionary theology of Bavinck. For Bavinck, history moves from a perfect creation and kingdom; through the Fall with its resulting judgment and misery; to God's work of redemption; and, finally, to a restored creation and kingdom, the new heavens and the new earth. This is made possible through the Lord Jesus Christ, the one foretold and promised in the Old Testament, in whom God's kingdom came to earth and whose atoning work on the cross and glorious resurrection guaranteed the future fully coming kingdom.

Visser gives a very helpful summary of Bavinck's missionary theology.³¹ He notes that for Bavinck mission is above all defined theologically. Mission is from God and returns to God. Mission is also in essence christological in nature because he, in a special way, is the one sent by the Father into this world. He is the true Israel in whom God offers his salvation to the world. In him, the kingdom of God is realized. Visser summarizes Bavinck here as saying that based on that orientation in Christ, mission is a prophetic proclamation of the kingdom of God wherein the priestly aspect of the atonement with God and the kingly aspect of the renewal of existence go hand in hand.

Furthermore, Visser sees that Bavinck defines mission *in concreto* pneumatologically. The work that God accomplishes in Christ is realized through the poured-out Spirit, and this applies both to the mission subject as well as to the object. Moreover, mission happens ecclesiocentrically. In principle, the triune God works in this world through the means of the

³⁰ J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 40.

³¹ The following is a summary of Visser, *Heart for the World*, 207–19.

church. However, this does not mean that the church is entirely *defined* by its apostolic calling. Nevertheless, the church loses its meaning in the world if it does not exercise this apostolic function.

Visser explains that for Bavinck this ecclesiocentrism has what Visser calls, a basileiocentric point or apex that is, a kingdom-centric point. This has to do with the dual nature of the missionary approach—both kerygmatic and comprehensive.³² Visser uses *basileiocentric* to encompass both the kerygmatic and comprehensive perspectives because he sees that for Bavinck they are in principle inseparable and irreversible. The kerygmatic work is performed by the church as institute through the offices, whereas the comprehensive approach is carried out through the church as an organism of believers.

Finally, mission is executed in eschatological perspective. Mission occurs in the expectation of the breakthrough of the kingdom that has come, in the tension of the already and the not yet.

The above raises the question of the centrality of the kingdom idea in Scripture. Graafland's remarks, following the thought patterns of Bavinck, are noteworthy here. He asks the question whether, in light of Scripture, it is correct to say that the idea of the kingdom of God is so central that it can serve as a comprehensive idea for all the aspects of salvation. He notes that in the Synoptic Gospels the idea of the kingdom of God is indeed central, but that this is not the case throughout Scripture. At the heart of this kingdom is Jesus Christ. Connected with him, the gospels talk about Israel, church, repentance and faith in Jesus, confessing him, and preaching the kingdom. Around this, in the periphery, Graafland observes the totality and universality of salvation. The kingdom is a kingdom of justice, peace, and freedom in the totality of existence, including humankind.

Graafland speaks here of a narrow sense that includes that righteousness, peace and freedom that is received through faith in Christ. The wider sense includes righteousness, peace, and justice among people, races, and nations.³³ In mission practice this means, for him, that at the heart of the preaching of the kingdom matters such as faith and repentance, the people of God, union with God, and the forgiveness of sins have priority. This priority cannot be exchanged with other aspects of salvation because they belong to another level in the context of the kingdom.

Graafland notes in this context that John's gospel does not speak as

³² This has to do with Bavinck's view of *kerndienst* and *nevendienst* (central and auxiliary service). However, one must understand it in an integrated and interconnected way. John Stott quotes Bavinck approvingly on this concept. John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 26.

³³ C. Graafland, in *Gij die eertijds Verre Waart: een overzicht van de geschiedenis en taken van de zending*, ed. J. P. Versteeg (Utrecht: De Banier, 1978), 111. Graafland, like Bavinck, does not see all aspects of salvation as being on the same level.

much about the kingdom as about life in which the aspect of the reign of Christ is not present.³⁴ This, Graafland believes, should make us careful about placing the kingdom as *the* manifestation of salvation in this world. Graafland prefers to see the idea of the kingdom accompanied by the Johannine idea of eternal life—where it is made very clear that the heart of this salvation lies in union with God through his Son.

Combining the above data with material from Acts, Graafland notes that the coming of the kingdom is realized by way of the *ecclesia*. He concludes that the coming of the kingdom as taught in the Synoptics must be brought in much closer contact with the Christian church after Pentecost than is done in much of modern mission theology. The church is for Graafland both the continuation of the kingdom and its present provisional manifestation.

This means in mission practice that to make the kingdom of God central in mission is nothing else but to see the importance of the formation of the congregation and the bringing of individual people to faith and repentance. By planting and building up churches and by calling people to faith and repentance we are busy working in and toward the kingdom of God.

For Graafland, therefore, in agreement with Bavinck, entrance into the kingdom is connected with entrance into the church, and this is determined by trust in Jesus Christ, through faith and regeneration. Graafland finds here a unique contribution of Reformed missiology that connects the expansion of the kingdom with the multiplication of the church. The members of the church are subjects of Jesus Christ, and in the multitude of the subjects is the king's glory (Article 27, *Belgic Confession*).

At the same time, Graafland does not want to identify the church with the kingdom. This is due to the all-inclusiveness of the kingdom and its eschatological character. Yet, it is the universal aspect of the kingdom that becomes visible in the particular work of the Spirit as he gathers the church over the entire world.

This church is for Graafland the provisional, historical manifestation of the kingdom. As such, it points to the full realization of that kingdom, which is universal, encompassing heaven and earth and all things. This aspect should prevent the church from turning inward upon itself and so losing the worldwide and eschatological aspects of salvation.

Graafland believes that this directedness toward the eschaton will make the church open toward the world and all the aspects of its life with the express purpose of erecting signs of the kingdom therein. It is from the church that God's salvation goes out over the whole world. Such a salvation, centered in Christ, does not remain in the church as the body of believers but touches all aspects of life and reality. In terms of the work of

³⁴ Graafland, *Gij die eertijds Verre Waart*, 113.

mission, Graafland writes:

When we view the salvation of the kingdom from its two perspectives of center and periphery (*centrum en omtrek*) the result will be that the bringing of people to faith and the formation of congregations will receive the priority in mission work. However, surrounding this other tasks will also, in connection with the total life of people and nations, receive their place within the wider contours of God's kingdom. Never will the one crowd out the other. Never should there be talk of competition even though a certain tension will remain. At the same time it is not Biblical to identify center and periphery, or to have them trade places, or that both would have the central meaning.³⁵

Graafland wants to warn us of two dangers. On the one hand, he sees a dualism wherein the kingdom of God and its righteousness is separated from creation and history and receives a spiritualistic narrowing that is contrary to Scripture. On the other hand, he warns against leveling out salvation so as to find it in all aspects of humanization. He realizes that it is not easy to speak rightly here, and he mentions the need to continue speaking with two words, that of center and periphery.

Concluding Remarks

In the following paragraphs, an attempt has been made to apply the main thoughts of Bavinck's missiology to today.

The task of the church is to worship, to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments, to exercise Christian discipline, and to show Christian mercy. This is at the heart of what the church has to offer to the world. The church that does this faithfully and appropriately in its context is truly relevant even when the world around it does not recognize it as such. The Word is preached to those who know in order to build them up as disciples of Christ and citizens of his kingdom and to provide comfort.³⁶ The Word is also preached to those who do not yet know so that they may believe and become members of the body of Christ. Both the church as a whole as well as every member have a part in this preaching.

Members of the body of Christ, as the people of God, are also citizens of the kingdom of God. They show what it means to belong to that kingdom as they live their lives in the midst of the world. They once again fulfill the cultural mandate according to the will of God and, in this way, fulfill God's original purpose for them. In this sense, one can say that the purpose of

³⁵ C. Graafland, *Gij die eertijds Verre Waart*, 111.

³⁶ R. B. Kuiper writes: "The Church must maintain a proper balance between its task to the inside and its task to the outside. But this does not mean that it should do a little of each. It rather should do much of both." R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 161–62. Cf. Michael W. Goheen, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000), 280.

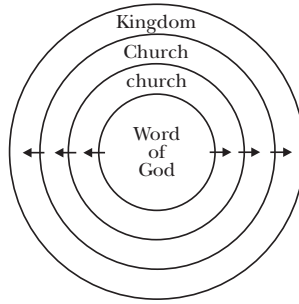
the mission mandate as expressed in the Great Commission is to restore people to a right relationship with God and to a right relationship with one another (in the church), including life in all its relationships—and so fulfill again the original mandate God gave to humankind. The sinner, through the gospel, is called out of this world into fellowship with Christ and the church, and, as a new creation, he or she is sent back into the world to serve Christ, the King, in every area of life.

This means that the believer's life is not only lived in and for the church but also in creation and in the world. The believer will have a *ministry* in the church and a *vocation* in creation. That which happens in the church—especially in the preaching of the gospel—directs the believer's life in the world.³⁷ It is in this context that one can say that mission or ministry are not everything; yet everything—including life in creation—is affected by missions because missions is driven by the Word. Therefore, missions and its purpose cannot be separated from the context of creation, especially because the goal of missions will arrive only when there will be a new heaven and a new earth with a new humanity.

In the paragraphs above, we are at the heart of the application of the different theological perspectives impacting missions today as they have done in past centuries. Many missiologists see all of life lived in the redemptive or ecclesiastical sphere. Bavinck, rightly, I believe, makes a distinction between what belongs properly to the church and what belongs to life in creation. However, it should be kept in mind that though all spheres of life may not belong to the institutional church, believers are engaged in all of them, and believers cannot separate this from the fact that they belong to Christ and are called to live for him in every area of life.

The following diagram by Gordon Spykman regarding church as institute and kingdom life is, I believe, helpful also in a mission situation to give long-term direction to preaching and ministry.

³⁷ The church in its preaching does not tell each believer precisely how to live and work in creation. This is the believer's own responsibility and response to God. However, the Word preached does apply to all of life in that it directs the believer to live for Christ in every area of life. Through the preaching of the Word the church also functions as the conscience of the nation by declaring the will of God for public and political life. Spykman warns against having Christianity degenerate into "churchianity" and writes that it is the task of the church as institute to equip the Church as organism for daily kingdom living in the midst of the world. Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 468.



Spykman explains this as follows:

God's Word is the central dynamic for all of life in the world. The ministries of the church as institute proclaim that Word within the fellowship of the worshiping community. The Church as the body of Christ is then called to translate that Word into concrete forms of Christian witness in every sphere of life. The goal of this ever widening outreach is the coming of the kingdom Thus in the words of [Herman] Bavinck, "The Church is the means by which Christ distributes the benefits of the kingdom of God and prepares for its consummation." (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4:281). Willing kingdom citizenship is coextensive with membership in the Church. But the kingdom's field of operation ... is wider ... since it aims at the control of life in all its manifestations It represents the dominion of God in every sphere of human endeavor" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 409–10, 570).³⁸

I believe the above ties in with Bavinck's view of central and auxiliary services (*kerndienst en neven diensten*). With this perspective, there is in my view no need to overload either Matthew 28:16–20 or John 20:21 with aspects that belong to creation and humanity's responsibility in creation. The cultural mandate is prior to the mission mandate.³⁹ Everyone living in the world is called by God to be obedient to that cultural mandate in harmony with God's will. God's will includes matters such as social and economic justice and righteousness in all of life's relationships. God demands obedience regardless of whether one believes in Christ or not. Humanity either lives in obedience or disobedience to this command of God.

On the Lord's Day, when the believer worships with the body of Christ, the Word is heard. This Word confronts the believer in a loving, guiding,

³⁸ Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 478–79.

³⁹ Al M. Wolters talks about the foundational command and concludes, "within the context of the book of Genesis as a whole the cultural mandate stands as the first and fundamental law of history. Together with the idea of the image of God it sums up—in the context of the whole scope of the world-wide history of mankind—the place and task of man. A. M. Wolters, "The Foundational Command: "Subdue the Earth!" in *IRS-Study Pamphlets No. 382*, Institute for Reformational Studies (1999): 32. For Wolters, Christ's work is a restoration to our original task, and his lordship is a reaffirmation of the original mandate, 33.

reproving, judging, and forgiving way with the God of the universe and his will for all of life. During the week, believers and church members, as citizen of Christ's kingdom, take that word and make that word a light upon their path and a lamp for their feet in the vocation to which God has called them. This vocation in the world, though not separated from it, is distinguished from their being members of the church.⁴⁰ The institutional church does not encompass all of life, though the believer is involved in every aspect of life.⁴¹

Believers, as members of the church, also have a responsibility toward the mission mandate. Their vocation and calling in creation do not negate their responsibilities, according to the gifts given, in the ministry of the church.⁴² Believers, therefore, in the creation sphere of life, live out their calling in their vocations, and in the church, live out their calling in their ministry. These two spheres are distinguished though not separated, because what happens in the one does affect the other.

The above view means that the church as institution does not have to be all things to all people, yet the believer living in the different spheres does. The believer serves Christ in the world in every area of life. The ministry of the church to believers does impact every area of life but does not encompass it.⁴³ The calling of the church in its institutional form is in the preaching of the word—both to those within and those outside—as well as

⁴⁰ Plantinga, quoting Wolterstorff, writes: "Hence a career turned toward this world with God behind one's back is not inferior to a career turned toward God." Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Concern of the Church in the Socio-Political World: A Calvinist and Reformed Perspective," *Calvin Theological Journal* 18, no. 2 (1983): 202.

⁴¹ The Kuyperian statement that every square inch of life belongs to Christ cannot be applied to the institutional church. Consequently, the leadership of the pastor is a special kind of leadership in close connection with the idea of office and the Word. The believer is accountable to God for the Christian leadership he gives in society as a citizen of the kingdom guided by the Word preached and taught by the church leader—the pastor. One could say, therefore, that the life of the believer is mission, within the context of the cultural and mission mandate, rather than saying the church is mission as understood by the missional church movement. Perhaps it sounds mundane, but part of this debate does deal with the question, "Who does what?"

⁴² In mission and new church-planting situations, it is important that teaching new converts to use their gifts within the congregation becomes integral to discipling, not a mere addition. At the same time, it should be clear that we do not plant churches merely so that they will plant more churches. While learning to fulfill their preaching and mission task, the members of these new congregations also need to be taught to live the full-orbed kingdom life.

⁴³ Bolt writes: "The church ministers to the world not by attempting to embrace all of human existence and making it church but by its faithful ministry of the Word which calls the world truly to be the creation which God fashioned through his wisdom and destined for Sabbath glory." J. Bolt, "Church and World: A Trinitarian Perspective," *Calvin Theological Journal* 18, no.1 (1983): 32.

the administration of the sacraments, the exercise of Christian discipline and the ministry of mercy, or, the diaconate.⁴⁴

The exercise of the ministry of mercy (deed ministry) is determined therefore by the nature of the church, its task, and the place where it finds itself in God's providence. In exercising its ministry in this area, the church does not become a social-welfare agency or a political-action group, though the social, economic, and political consequences should be felt as the members of the church live for Christ in every area of life. However, the believer certainly may be involved in Christian or non-Christian social-welfare groups, political groups, and social action committees.⁴⁵

The Word and deed ministry for the church as an institution is determined by its nature and mission. Although in a number of situations on the mission field this may not be easy to apply consistently and does not always need to be applied at the beginning, it will be helpful for the missionary to keep the distinctions in mind.⁴⁶ Thus, the deed aspect of the *ministry* is determined by the diaconal nature of church work and is therefore different from the way a believer in creation may engage in Word and deed ministry.⁴⁷

The view above means that the mission mandate can in a sense be seen as a Word mandate plus the diaconal aspect because the deed is already part of the context. The church that proclaims the good news is also the church of which the members live in obedience for Christ in every area of life and in this way show something of the reality of his kingdom.⁴⁸ Everything does not have to be loaded on the mission mandate given to the church because there is already the cultural mandate. Again, it should be clear that the mandates do apply to all Christians.

⁴⁴ The CRCNA would do well to find a concept that expresses more clearly the theological dynamic of church as institute and church as organism.

⁴⁵ John Suk's editorial advice to the rich not to give all their time and money to the church but also to make a positive difference in their communities is well taken. John D. Suk, "A Word to the Rich," *The Banner* 135 (July 17, 2000): 4.

⁴⁶ Honig writes about the missionaries representing in their own person the church as institute as well as organism. A. G. Honig, *Bijdrage tot het onderzoek naar de fundering van de zendings methode der comprehensive approach in het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 1951), 107.

⁴⁷ In a world filled with dire needs, this sounds like a useless debate. This it is not because it allows service according to the nature of the institution or task. All of life is covered. The question is how it is covered.

⁴⁸ Plantinga writes: "It would be difficult to overestimate the world-formative weight and authority of the law in the gospel in Reformed thought and life. The God who redeems his people wants to be obeyed out of gratitude. And he has provided the marching orders—a remarkably broad, deep, positive, and practical set of instructions for knowing and doing his will." Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "The Concern of the Church in the Socio-Political World: A Calvinist and Reformed Perspective," *Calvin Theological Journal* 18, no. 1 (1983): 199.

Church members of all kinds have their “life in creation” responsibilities under God in the world. All of life is to be lived to his glory and in accordance with his Word, including the political, social, and economic areas of life. Inspired by the Word preached on Sunday and strengthened by the celebration of the sacraments, they give themselves totally and completely to seeking first his kingdom and his righteousness. The institutional church is not called to do and be everything. Believers are.⁴⁹ As far as J. H. Bavinck is concerned, whether one applies the term *mission* to the believer’s kingdom living in the world and to the church’s organic work, is basically a matter of terminology. In today’s context, when many businesses and organizations have vision and mission statements, I prefer a terminology that reserves the word *mission* or *missions* to what the church does in its institutional form.

Believers can unite with like-minded individuals for good causes.⁵⁰ Believers are also part of creation and share this with unbelievers or people from other religions. The believers’ allegiance to Christ determines everything, but this does not mean that they have to withdraw from the world and its citizenry.⁵¹

Believers can give expression of their obedience to Christ in the spheres of creation by joining with other Christians even if they are from other churches.⁵² In some situations, Christians can also join with non-Christians

⁴⁹ Honig sees the church as the proper subject of the mission task, both as institute and as organism. At the home base he sees differentiation that cannot yet exist on the mission field. The deeds of the church as organism fall under the term *preaching*. Honig, *Bijdrage tot het onderzoek*, 106.

⁵⁰ The Christian and the church are accountable to God for carrying out the mission mandate. All people living on earth are accountable to God for carrying out the cultural mandate and living in harmony with his will, which includes the call to social and economic justice. Because of common grace, the Christian can and must cooperate with the unbeliever in striving for the same goals. This is especially true for the political process. Herbert Richardson has some helpful things to say about the Christian as citizen in “Civil Religion in Theological Perspective,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 161–82.

⁵¹ R. Pierce Beaver, in his introduction to Bavinck’s *Church between Temple and Mosque*, writes: “The author shows where the Christian stands both in community with, and over against, other religions.” Bavinck, *Church between Temple and Mosque*, 5.

⁵² North America’s evangelical nonecclesial Christianity provides an especially clear example of how the division among churches and denominations can be bridged for the sake of the gospel, missions and the kingdom. Although there are problems with this evangelical, free-enterprise approach, I do not believe that the approach of the missional church movement, by incorporating everything into the ecclesial sphere, will have better results. The former approach also means that Christians with different political views can still worship together and be members of the same church. It is remarkable though that when churches become political they often find themselves on the left side of the political spectrum while nonecclesial organizations end up to be more on the right and sometimes extreme right side of that spectrum.

for common purposes, based on a common humanity, and because of common grace.⁵³

It is important that the Word preached on Sunday not only comforts believers and brings them near unto God but also helps them live for Christ in the world. In this sense, the ministry of the church encompasses everything because Christ is King over everything and his Word is Word over all.

Many in our world still need to hear the gospel. In so many areas of life, the reality of the kingdom is only a hope and a prayer. There is much for the church and for believers to do while living in this world. Times have changed since Bavinck, and this must be kept in mind. I am thinking of the role of the churches that are from the two-thirds world in missions. I am thinking of the dynamic of “the mission field having come home.”⁵⁴ Here, I am thinking of the challenge of Islam and the need to call the church of Jesus Christ to sacrificial outreach in this area. I am also thinking of the global village dynamic that means that the gospel is preached in a world that, though so divided, is becoming more and more the same.⁵⁵

The above has not been written to discourage deed ministry. The church, through its diaconate, has a responsibility to show the love of Christ in material ways. God’s people also have a responsibility, individually and communally to bring the claims of Christ to bear upon all of life. We should continue to encourage the formation and continuation of volunteer organizations, both Christian and non-Christian.⁵⁶

However, a church in missions is first of all a church that proclaims the gospel of him who is the light of the world. In this, the Word aspect remains central. This is how the church stays relevant in and for the world even though the world may not recognize this as such. Arguably, apart from the gospel, the church has little to offer to the world. At the same time, because of the gospel and its effects, the reality of the shalom of the kingdom can be experienced in the midst of a sinful and broken world.

⁵³ Christians, for example, can join political parties such as the Democrats and Republicans, though care should be taken about maintaining a kingdom and prophetic witness.

⁵⁴ Consider, for example, the Muslim population living in Detroit.

⁵⁵ See for example the similarities among businessmen all over the world. Another group that already lives in a global culture is our youth. There is not much difference between a teenager in Grand Rapids and one in Manila. The West’s fascination with culture is actually very self-centered and is at heart a museum-building enterprise. The rest of the world, if given the opportunity, wants what the West has in terms of development. This dynamic must be taken seriously by missions today.

⁵⁶ For example, we now have Christian school organizations assisting Christian schools in other countries. We find, however, that these organizations often make the same mistake as church-based missions and that competition among organizations with the same mission can be a hindrance to the furtherance of the kingdom.