

## Swords to ploughshares: On doing election

Hanna Reichel

Princeton Theological Seminary, United States of America  
[hanna.reichel@ptsem.edu](mailto:hanna.reichel@ptsem.edu)

### Abstract

The article uses the lens of design theory to conceptualize Dirk Smit et al's "reading the tradition against tradition" as a case of theological re-design of the doctrine of election. In analogy to *creatio originalis* and *creatio continua*, it introduces a distinction between *electio originalis* and *electio continua*. It argues that theological conceptual redesign, which turns the doctrine of election from an instrument of violence and separation into an instrument of peace and hope, might not only be in the spirit of the biblical "swords to ploughshares," but might itself constitute a way of *doing* election as participation in the *electio continua*.

### Keywords

*Election; design; theological method; Reformed Theology; Dirk Smit; Herman Bavinck*

## 1. A blade and its use(s)

### 1.1. Finding a blade

Imagine you found a piece of metal with a sharp edge. You turn it in your hands. What you imagine that you could do with it will depend on a couple of different things.

It will partially depend on the characteristics of the blade, which will communicate to you to some extent what it is *for*. Is its tip pointed or rounded? Does it have an edge or is it serrated? Does it have a handle or is it set into a mouldboard? These things will let you know whether you will be able to wield it with one or two hands, or whether you might even need some sort of apparatus to wield it; and they will tell you whether it is more effectively used for puncturing, for chopping, or for sawing.

What you imagine you could do with it will in another part depend on the characteristics of you, the agent: your experience, your skills, your capabilities, your needs, and not least of all: your imagination. “To the man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Are you under attack, looking for a weapon to defend yourself right now? Or are you hungry, rummaging through the drawer in search of something that will help you pry open a can of soup? Are you used to hunting or farming? How many hands do you have and how big are your hands?

In design theory, what an object may most likely and consistently be used for is described by the notion of affordances. Affordances describe “a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (Norman 2013:11). The relationship between the properties of the blade and the capabilities of the person using it determine its potential uses. The affordance of a blade may lie in its ability to penetrate the space between two ribs to stab a person in the heart, or in its ability to break open the ground to plant seeds.

## 1.2. Ploughshares to swords to ploughshares

Imagine you found a blade in your tradition. In the bible, that happens recurrently. Occasionally, the blades found in tradition get used as swords or as ploughshares, occasionally, they are even transformed from one into the other.

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Heb 4:12) The word of God is *as sharp as* a sword – but does that necessarily make it a *sword*, though? Whether its affordance is one of piercing and slicing and cutting and separating will depend on the characteristics of this word itself, on the subject it addresses, and on the relationship between them.

The verse in the letter to the Hebrews sees the word of God as an instrument of judgment – but even this verse leads with an interest in life. And so many of Jesus’s own words, say in the parables, draw on imagery of agrarian life much more than war: the sower, the mustard seed, the weeds, the treasure buried in the field, and so on. It might be worth pondering whether the

affordance of the sharpness and activity, the liveness and edge that is a characteristic of this object, the word of God, may be much closer to that of a ploughshare than that of a sword.

Both are instruments with sharp blades, both intervene in their environment, breaking things apart and breaking them open. In a way, their affordances are remarkably similar, and while they cannot simply be used interchangeably, they can easily be transformed into one another. In fact, several prophetic passages in the bible specifically speak of the transformation of swords into ploughshares, and in one incident, the transformation of ploughshares into swords.

The eschatological vision offered by Isaiah and Micah (and in variation, by Zecharia 8), envision that the blades we find in our traditions would be transformed, and their affordances would serve the building of a peaceful kingdom rather than as instruments of war:

Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Isa 2:3–4, cf. Mic 4:3).

Even as here too there is talk of judgment, the instrument of transformation is not a sword, and even those instruments that used to be used for killing are transformed into instruments of life: swords to ploughshares.

Of course, we also know the tragic and ironic inversion of this vision from the book of Joel. In the face of an overpowering threat, Joel decides to put the manifest and eschatological ploughshares he finds in his own tradition to a different use: “Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior’” (Joel 4:10). Such is the act of despair that transforms every conceivable implement into instruments of war and death in order to achieve judgment of Israel’s oppressors. The language is harsh, and the vision is grim. But even here,

God's punitive judgment on Israel's oppressors is invoked in hope of a divine intervention that would "effect the total renewal of Jerusalem" such that "earlier prophecy will come to fulfilment" (Wolff 1977:85).

Imagine you found a blade. You could stick it on a handle and use it as a sword. Or you could stick it on a mouldboard and use it as a ploughshare. Which is the correct use? And how do we know? You could contemplate it for a long time trying to discern the truth of the blade. But fact is that such truth cannot be found apart from its use. Its use, to cite one of my favourite theologians, *matters* – it matters because it makes a difference how a thing is used, and it matters because the use transforms what a thing means, stands for, and ultimately: is. Whether this blade is a sword, or a ploughshare depends not solely on innate qualities of the object, but on its relationship to the agent with their capabilities in a given environment. What the blade *is* is what it can possibly be used for by such and such an agent. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the knife is in the cutting, and the proof of the ploughshare is in the ploughing.

## 2. A doctrine and its use(s)

### 2.1. Finding a doctrine

Now imagine you found a doctrine. You turn it in your hands. What you imagine you might do with it will depend on a couple of things. The characteristics of the object, for one. Your own capabilities, skills, needs and imagination, conditioned by your physique and your experiences and your context, for another. This doctrine's affordances, its potential and likely use, pertain to the relationship between both, the object, and the agent, in the environment.

So, what if now the agent was a human being, the object was God, and the theological relation in which they found themselves, was one of election? What would be doctrine's affordances? What uses might doctrine be put to then? One of cutting, or one of ploughing? One of judgment or one of comfort? One of separation or one of grace?

In his 2017 retirement lecture at Stellenbosch University (printed as Smit 2018), Smit recounts how he indeed *found* a doctrine and re-purposed it. He tells us the story of his re-discovery of Bavinck's teaching on election

in the midst of the Soweto Uprising. For Smit, it constituted a similarly reorienting moment as the rediscovery of God's justice in Romans was for Luther. "God's justice is not an attribute of God, Luther discovered to his own surprise and overwhelming joy, but rather God's action, it is what God does, namely that God justifies whoever God chooses to justify" (Smit 2018:708). From this insight, a whole different possible use of the doctrine of justification opened up, a use that was in some ways diametrically opposed to the way it had been used by the tradition Luther found himself in. Too long had this blade been used for judgment, for cutting; now it was put to use as an instrument of justification, of comforting and of making right. At the same time, Luther was convinced that he had discovered the doctrine's *proper* use, the use that afforded the best fit of the characteristics of the object (who God is) with the subject (the need of the human being).

Similarly, in the midst of the atrocities of apartheid, Smit discovered that the doctrine of election is not only a sharp and two-edged sword, but that it can be used as a ploughshare. Like the justice of God, the doctrine of election had long been an instrument of judgment and separation, cutting people into different categories: elect and reprobate. But, Smit found, it actually afforded quite a different use as well, and maybe a use that ultimately constituted a better fit between the characteristics of the object (who God is) and the subject (the situation of the human being). He made this discovery when reading the Dutch Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck. Bavinck writes,

Both for unbelievers and believers, the doctrine of election is a source of inexpressibly great comfort. If it were based on justice and merit, all would be lost. But now that election operates according to grace, there is hope even for the most wretched [...] The purpose of election is not – as it is so often proclaimed – to turn off the many but to invite all to participate in the riches of God's grace in Christ. No one has *a right* to believe that he or she is reprobate, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation. No one *can* actually believe it, for one's own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in his death. No one *really* believes it, for that would be hell on earth. But election is a source of comfort and strength, of submissiveness and humility, of confidence and resolution. The salvation of human

beings is firmly established in the gracious and omnipotent good pleasure of God (Bavinck II:402).

## 2.2. "Reading tradition against tradition"?

In his retirement lecture at Stellenbosch as well as in his 2018 Warfield Lectures – and in other places – Dirk Smit talks about how in the context of South African apartheid,

In order to be reformed, we had to learn how to read our Reformed tradition against Reformed tradition, we had to reclaim our own church and tradition from and against our own church and tradition, we had to read our historical figures against their own practices, we had to read our confessional documents against their own reception histories (2018a:4).

Smit recounts how they mined the Reformed theological tradition that had been used to justify apartheid for resources they might afford to their own struggle against it, how they turned to these texts that were regarded as authoritative in order to – half apologetically, half constructively – claim these same authorities for a different, even diametrically opposed cause. A queer hermeneutic might call such an approach “poaching.”

Smit’s self-description is powerful, and it is obviously not incorrect, but – with all due respect – I am not sure that it is the best description. In line with my introductory meditations, I want to offer an alternate or complementing reading, one which I think can specify even further *theologically* what they were doing.

First, this hermeneutic is not primarily an antagonistic, subversive, or deconstructive one, it aims neither primarily at destabilizing tradition out of hostility nor at opening up different possibilities for the sake of openness. Furthermore, it’s primary interest is neither to gain liberty from the chokehold of tradition nor to derive its own justification from it. There is no sense of open-endedness or relativity between the diverging interpretations of “tradition” and “tradition against tradition,” there is rather a clear sense of rightful use vs. misuse, the clear sense of a need to “identify, revitalize, and re-appropriate [...] the gospel which our oppressors have distorted and idolatrously used to legitimate their own selfish ends” (Boesak, 1988:x). The “tradition against tradition” instead means staking of a claim to be the

rightful use, one that, as Smit states citing Allan Boesak, “seeks to restore to its rightful owners what has been taken from them” (Boesak, 1988:xi).

This reading of tradition against tradition is thus primarily motivated by a stubborn faithfulness to the original object and its affordances. In that sense, Smit did not just, if he ever did, read “tradition against tradition” in a contradicting way, as if what mattered was the opposition to tradition or the triumph over it. And while Smit is interested in the “rhetorical effects” of doctrine (as he often even explicitly maintains), his approach is in no way about effectiveness *as such* – as if the ends to which it might be deployed were contingent and interchangeable, as if this was merely a strategic, pragmatist, even opportunist use of tradition. It is not only about the fact that, as he states, “words matter, because they move and affect those who hear” (2018a:x), it is about *how* they move and affect those who hear, and *what* they move them to.

In short, Smit’s approach is about the potential uses this doctrine might be put to by agents in particular conditions, about its affordances. And, as we have seen, these affordances were never a secondary characteristic of the object in question, they very much make it *what it is*. In a word, Smit’s concern is that the effects of doctrine should themselves be an expression of and a witness to the gospel the doctrine is talking about. Smit’s method of “reading tradition against tradition” in that sense has much more in common with a Pauline hermeneutic of the spirit over and against the letter, or, as I want to suggest, a prophetic approach of turning swords into ploughshares. Theologically speaking, it may not even be a hermeneutic at all, but simply a way of “using election” by “doing election” by talking about election, of participation in and response to what I want to call *electio continua*, of making use of the affordances of the doctrine of election for the purpose of doing election. Let me explain.

### 3. On election

#### 3.1. Design and affordance

Interestingly, Smit describes his re-discovery of the gospel of election under its traditional doctrinal interpretations not simply as some kind of turning point from one hermeneutic to another, but as itself an effect of God’s

electing grace. On the realization that “the ‘necessarily restless memory’ may suddenly become alive again, and fragments may surprise us,” Smit notes, “God’s free grace and election has often had such an effect.” (Smit 2018b:716) When Smit states that election, “the biblical doctrine of God’s faithfulness and overpowering grace” is “rediscovered in times of distress and persecution” (2018a:9), we might thus infer that such rediscovery is itself an *affordance* of an original design.

In design theory, we would distinguish the design – the idea and blueprint of it as well as the original act of creating an object – from the affordances of the object thus created. The affordances are of course shaped by the original design, in fact, the original design will be invested in creating the right affordances to carry out its idea and purpose, to teach the user implicitly *to what use* the designed object is to be put and *how* to use the designed object. But while the original design is (to some extent<sup>1</sup>) controlled by the designer – their intention, their skills, their vision – the affordances pertain to the relation between the created object and the user in an environment. While they are the site where the original intent will express and assert itself, where it will aim at achieving its purpose, they are also the site of negotiation between the capabilities, needs, and skills of the user and the characteristics of the object, resulting in potential uses anticipated as well as unanticipated by the designer.

The same is true as regards election: original intention and its reassertion in ongoing negotiation about its potential uses are intertwined, they even constitute one another to some degree. At the same time, it might make sense to thus distinguish an original design, act, and intention of election from its affordances in use.

### 3.2. Electio originalis and electio continua

Similar to the distinction in the doctrine of creation between *creatio originalis* and *creatio continua*, I want to thus distinguish between *electio originalis* and *electio continua*. From God’s history with Israel and God’s

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1 With regard to design, such control will be limited, constrained by the material the designer works with, by conventions, contextual constraints etc. – while also inspired, guided, and informed by them. In our theological analogy of electing grace, we will see God’s design as rather unconstrained – but the fact that the analogy breaks down to some extent here in no way limits its other illuminating qualities.



presence and promise in Jesus of Nazareth, we glean a sustained will for community that asserts itself anew in individual acts throughout history, acting and reacting to human reactions.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, from the rediscovery the doctrine of election in times of distress and strife, and from finding that it affords comfort to the afflicted and oppressed, we infer that God doesn't let go of the objects of God's election and instead continues to unsettle them faithfully, inviting them to respond once more to the grace that expresses itself in election by putting grace to use: extending grace. I thus want to postulate that the rediscovery is itself the expression of an *electio continua* which actualizes the purpose of an *electio originalis*.

Drawing on design theory, the distinction as well as the fundamental relatedness between *electio continua* and *electio originalis* can illuminate some central insights about election (I am thinking in particular of Bavinck's and Barth's reformulations here) while extending them further to the use to which such doctrine is put, as emphasized by Smit. From the experience of *electio continua* in history we might infer a pre-historically eternal act of *electio originalis* in Godself. The *electio continua*, God's sustained faithfulness to election through the course of history, which reasserts itself in the lives of the faithful, points the theologians to something like an original design, an original act of election in Godself in which God elects Godself to be God for and with the human being, and in which God elects the human being for community with Godself.

This is another way of formulating the central insight of Karl Barth that, if taken seriously, election must pertain to the doctrine of God:

At the heart of the gospel lies the fact that God, in complete freedom, elected to be a God for us. God's decision to be God for us became clearly visible in Jesus Christ. He is at once the electing God and elected man. Predestination is not in the first place about man, but about God who predestined himself to be God for us. The doctrine of election bears witness to the eternal, free and unchanging grace of God (CD II/2:1).

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2 I would wager that the distinction and relationship between *electio originalis* and *electio continua* allows to overcome or at least mitigate the traditional split between supra- and infralapsarianism, but that is a topic to be further developed for another day.

Election does thus not describe something that happens merely to the *human side* of the relation (and then to *some* humans over others at that), and it also does not merely describe an *act* of God (as distinct from and secondary to God's being) that then extends to some humans over others, it centrally and irrevocably defines who God is in Godself in God's eternal decree, God's eternal self-determination, the *electio originalis*. The affordances of election thus define its design: who God is by way of the uses God is put to through God's self-application in election.

The personification of both the *electio originalis* and the *electio continua* is, of course, Jesus Christ. The original act of design is the *electio originalis* of the eternal son. But the affordances of the so-designed object, Jesus Christ, are what constitutes the *electio continua*, where the object of election becomes its subject, and as its subject (its use, in the design case) puts into use the original intention of election: God for the human being, the human being for God, in Barth's language. In our design analogy we might thus say that Jesus Christ corresponds to the designed object which manifests the intention of the designer (the *electio originalis*) and mediates them by way of its affordances (in *electio continua*). And this connection, this relation that Jesus Christ is and thus *guarantees* in person, as a covenant of grace in an act of free divine self-determination – election to be God for the human being and to elect the human being for God – this relation that Jesus Christ is grace and thus good news.

Barth has further formulated out the comforting, affirming and empowering dimension of the doctrine of election that Bavinck has hinted at. Barth outrightly maintains, "The election of grace [*Gnadenwahl*] is the sum of the Gospel – we must put it as pointedly as that. But more, the election of grace is the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel *in nuce*. It is the very essence of all good news" (CD II/2:13–14). That is because of its affordance structure, election is the gift that keeps on giving, not a self-contained truth once and for all, but the very relation between God and the human being that extends itself as faithfulness, mercy, and grace, and that can be put to use to toward faithfulness, mercy, and grace.

### 3.3. Doing election

I have formulated this sequence out in its noetic order, that is, as "backward" inference from experience in history to divine ontology,

from *electio continua* to *electio originalis*, from affordances to design. In a sequential, ontological order, Reformed theologians have tended to spell it out “forward” from an eternal decree to God’s sustaining, justifying and sanctifying action in history. Even so, we might discover in their account a similar difference like the one between design and its affordances, namely the curious entry of a relational and participatory quality after an initial unilateral design.

Bavinck writes, “In election humans are strictly passive but in the covenant of grace they play an active role” (Bavinck III:229). The inception of the covenant of grace is unilateral, instituted by God alone, independent of any human achievement or merit, unconditional, and that is precisely why it is grace, and incomparably comforting – it depends on God alone, and can thus not be lost or destroyed by the limitation and failure of the human being. At the same time, this covenant has always been designed to become bilateral, for human beings to respond to and live into the relationship thus unilaterally constituted, in design terms: to make use of it. This is the point of transition from design to affordances, from unilateral and unconditional *electio originalis* to an *electio continua* which is relational, participatory, reciprocal, and where human needs, intentions, capabilities, and experiences *matter* because they co-inform what potential uses election can be put to and thus co-negotiate its *becoming* what it has been all along: grace and good news. In this sense, Bavinck asserts that election “does not destroy their power but deprives them of their impotence” (Bavinck III:230).

The tradition may have spoken of primary and secondary causes to specify both the distinction and dependence between the human and the divine side of the relation that election is. I believe that the language of design and its affordances may ultimately prove more helpful. Like affordances, election is not a self-contained truth, but a relation, and a relation which cannot remain unilaterally defined even as it starts with an act of design but ends up retroactively defining both sides: the electing God and the elect human being. Election pertains to an act of God of creating the conditions for community with Godself, and it pertains to the affordances that continue to offer the human being possible uses of such a relation, as participation in this covenant of grace that itself extends and amplifies grace. As Bavinck states, “The purpose of election is not – as it is so often

proclaimed – to turn off the many but to invite all to participate in the riches of God’s grace in Christ” (Bavinck II:402). Just like in an act of grace, divine election turns sinners into elect and death into life, thus human response to and participation in such election will turn instruments of death into instruments of life: swords into ploughshares, and doctrines that kill into doctrines that give life.

Bavinck’s language resonates with design theory in surprising ways when he writes,

Election is the divine “idea”, the eternal blueprint of the temple that he builds in the course of the age and of which he is the supreme builder and architect. All things are subordinate and subservient to the construction of that temple. Just as all the decrees of God culminate in that of the glorification of God, so the entire history of the world and humankind works together for the coming of the kingdom of God (Bavinck II:404–405).

#### 4. Conclusion

Shouldn’t we have learned by the grace of God, Smit asks at the end of his first Warfield lecture that

to believe in and to confess election is to recognize even the most unworthy and degraded human being in our eyes as creatures of God and objects of God’s eternal love – so that there is hope for even the most wretched? That the purpose of election is to invite all to participate in the riches of God’s grace, so that no-one will lose hope? That this is a source of inexpressibly great comfort for all and everyone, since the salvation of human beings is firmly established in the gracious and omnipotent good pleasure of God? (2018a:13).

The word of God may be a double-edged blade, and the doctrine of election has certainly been used as a weapon in the past. But maybe, just maybe, this blade could be put to use as a ploughshare rather than as a sword. And maybe, just maybe, that was true of God’s election all along: that the God who elects, elects not to cut down, but to build up; not to divide but to create the possibility for communion, that the God who elects, elects not to separate people, but to pull them together, that the God who elects does so,

“such that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isa 2:4 / Mic 4:3).

“Do our personal and corporate lives give evidence of commitment to the sovereign gracious God? Do our lives give evidence of commitment to the God of election – and what would that mean and how would that become visible?” (2018a:10). If at this point human participation in the covenant of grace means that our lives, too, are called to manifest such electing grace, one way such commitment might become visible – the particular task of the theologian – might then consist in *using* doctrine as a “doing” of election: in reading tradition against tradition in order to turn the instruments of death into instruments of life once more. Where tradition has leveraged affordances that it has found in the grace of God to turn them into swords, we might be called to leverage the same affordances to turn them into ploughshares once more: instruments for the hard work of community, kingdom-building, and peace, rather than instruments of enmity and war, instruments of life and growth and flourishing rather than instruments of death and destruction and devastation. “Using election” means “doing election”: responding to the faithfulness of God which turns sinners into elect and death into life, with a faithfulness to this gracious faithfulness. “Using election” then means working with the materials given, but at the same time, in faithfulness to the *electio originalis* and perpetual hope in the promise of the *electio continua*, transforming their affordances in new ecologies into ever new designs of grace.

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