

Thinking like a Christian: The Prolegomena of Herman Bavinck

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Abstract

This article outlines the main contours of Herman Bavinck's Prolegomena. Bavinck's insight was that theological method must be grounded in the substance of theology itself, specifically in its Trinitarian and covenantal aspects. Theology is to be understood as a critical part of the image of God, as he is reflected in the believing consciousness of men in the Church, in response to God's revelation in Christ. This concept is tightly integrated with Bavinck's central understanding of the gospel as God fulfilling his creation design in Christ. In this way Bavinck derives a robustly Christian account of knowledge and certainty.

Introduction

A perennial, if often unrecognised, problem in theology has been the tendency to pursue a *way* of doing theology which has little to do with, or even outright contradicts, the content of the theology being espoused. This has been an issue of importance from the time of the church Fathers onwards, but the problem became acute with the advent of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, when patterns and practices of thought, specifically regarding the question of how we gain knowledge, and indeed what knowledge is, which were profoundly inimical to a Christian worldview, became

dominant in Europe. Theologians of the period frequently proved themselves very sensitive to changes of content in theological formulations while remaining oblivious to changes of method which were, if anything, even more significant. Since it is often the case that *how* people think is of much more enduring significance than *what* they think, this has had serious – indeed often disastrous – consequences for later generations of the church.

So for all theology in the post-Enlightenment period, up to and including our own day, the question of *Prolegomena* – what theology is, the nature of theological knowledge, and the means by which it is attained – is critically important. This is widely recognised at a popular level (classic evangelicals in Britain are united in their conviction that the Bible alone has authority for what we should believe, and that this matters deeply), even if exercised without any great sophistication or careful examination. Nevertheless, recognition of the powerful ways Enlightenment presuppositions have crept into our theological mental furniture – particularly in the field of epistemology, how knowledge is attained – is still all too lacking in much contemporary theology.

Herman Bavinck was the second great figure in the Dutch neo-Calvinist revival of the late 19th Century, the first being Abraham Kuyper. The son of a pietistic minister, he went to study at the Secession seminary at Kampen in 1873 but after one year shocked his family and church by deciding to move to Leiden, known as a centre of modernist theology. He said that this was for the twin purposes of becoming acquainted at first hand with modern theology, and receiving ‘a more scientific training than the Theological School is presently able to provide’.¹ This twin background of religiously warm and confessionally orthodox piety, combined with the drive for consistency and engagement with the modern world characterized Bavinck’s thought.

Bavinck concentrated his energies into developing a consistently Reformed, scientific approach to theology, which dealt with the challenges and attractions of Modernist theology and philosophy

¹ Quoted in Bolt, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1: Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 13.

head-on. Through careful consideration and critique, he was able to produce an alternative theological paradigm and particularly a prolegomenon, which he believed was not susceptible to the weaknesses inherent in modernism and which was fully and uniquely conscious of the religious dimensions of all theology and the thoroughly interconnected nature of all reality, practical, scientific, philosophical and theological.

This commitment both to orthodoxy and to engagement with the foremost post-enlightenment thinkers and theologians sets Bavinck apart from his contemporaries. In particular his work on Prolegomena is a ground-breaking attempt to free theology from the stranglehold of the Enlightenment. Bavinck was acutely aware of the problems that ensue when it is attempted to find foundations for theology upon Enlightenment presuppositions. It was his conviction that only Reformed orthodoxy, when properly conceived and developed, has the resources to deal with the profound metaphysical and epistemological challenges posed to Christianity by the Enlightenment. Indeed, he held that post-Enlightenment philosophy had led itself into a morass of metaphysical contradiction which falsified its very foundations.² A Christian theistic view of the universe is the only one which gives a coherent account of truth because the Christian God really is God, and the universe really is his creation. Indeed, not only is this the only possible starting point for Christian theology, but in fact it provides the only possible starting point for all of the sciences. Demonstrating how and why this is the case is the burden of Bavinck's prolegomena.³

² E.g., 'Does not the whole of modern philosophy, in its Cartesian as well as its Baconian expression, need revision? Are there not other and better principles of science, principles that protect us from materialism as well as idealism?' (*RD* I.222). Bolt comments that what makes Bavinck's prolegomena distinctive is 'the extent to which Bavinck confronts the profound epistemological crisis of post-Enlightenment modernity' (John Bolt, 'Editor's Introduction', in *RD* I.20).

³ Prolegomena comprises the first volume of Bavinck's four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, published in its first edition in 1895 and its second, revised and expanded, in 1906. All four volumes have recently been translated into English by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. We shall refer to them by the abbreviation 'RD' and the volume number. They are *Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1: Prolegomena*; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004);

Bavinck's theological vision is therefore of immense significance in the history of theology. It represents the first clear move in the post-Kantian history of theology to assert that theology stands on its own foundations, that it is built with materials from its own storehouses. He argues that the metaphysical and epistemological assumptions of the enlightenment, so universally accepted within the European and North American worlds, including amongst churchmen and theologians unaware of their implications, implicitly deny the reality of the one Triune God and maker of all creation. In so doing they falsify themselves because such denial is always self-defeating in the universe made by that God.

Bavinck's four-volume *magnum opus*, the 'Reformed Dogmatics', has only recently become fully available in English. The aim of this article is not to engage in a critical evaluation of the success of Bavinck's project, but to set out the basic contours of Bavinck's prolegomenon and show how it is organically related to the material content of his theology. I shall do this by setting out, first, Bavinck's arguments for why theological method (how we know what we know) must be grounded in theological content (what it is that we know); second, an overview of what Bavinck's theological content is, that is, his understanding of the 'big picture' of the gospel; and finally, how Bavinck's understanding of what the discipline of theology ('dogmatics') is, and how we gain theological knowledge, arises out of this.

Basing Theology on Theology: the *Principia* of Dogmatics

A major aim of the *Prolegomena* section of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is to establish that Dogmatics⁴ has its own *principia*. By

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); and Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 4: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁴ 'Dogmatics' is Bavinck's preferred term for what in English is more commonly termed 'systematic theology'. For Bavinck it has a more precise significance than 'theology', and is properly a subdivision of it (*RD* I.54). By 'Dogmatics' Bavinck means the science of the knowledge of God – logically analysed, arranged in a system, and, critically (as we shall see), recorded and held in the human

Principia Bavinck means the foundations upon which theology is built.⁵ At one level all of Bavinck's critique of modernist (and Roman Catholic, and indeed any non-Reformed) theology can be summed up in the statement that it has failed to locate the *principia* of dogmatics within dogmatics itself. This must be so, if theology is to be a real science, because it is predicated upon the assumption that God has revealed himself. It assumes God's existence, self-revelation and knowability; and thus it 'proceeds from a highly significant dogma'. Any other starting point is equally dogmatic in character, but the dogma assumed is one which is a denial of the content of Christian dogmatics.⁶ To attempt to build a prolegomenon which starts outside Christian truth and builds an independent foundation for it,

at the very outset and in principle... abandons the viewpoint of faith, denies the positive character of dogmatics, moves onto the opponent's ground, and is therefore in fact rationalistic, and makes dogmatics dependent upon philosophy.⁷

To assume or affirm the starting-point for theological knowledge as lying outside the field of theological knowledge is to deny the genuine truthfulness of Christianity, and thus to destroy theology from the outset. Precisely because God really is God, there is no neutral starting-point. Thus Bavinck is at great pains to refute the positivist claim that the truly scientific standpoint is a 'neutral' one; there simply is no neutrality in God's universe, and to start with such an assumption is to miss the entire content of religion.⁸ Indeed, this observation holds good for all the sciences. No man can leave the most important thing about him as a human being behind when he enters his laboratory or his study. The standard that is to be expected of a worker in any science is not neutrality, but that he should be a good man, thoroughly equipped for every good work.⁹

consciousness.

⁵ RD I.210. Compare the discussion of the use of the word 'science' in Aristotelianism in the previous chapter; the *principia* of a science would be the self-evident principles from which that science is deduced.

⁶ RD I.38.

⁷ RD I.108

⁸ RD I.73.

⁹ RD I.222. This allusion to 2 Tim 3:17 is used by Bavinck a number of times in this

In this Bavinck shows himself to be in continuity with the principle of *per fidem ad intellectum*¹⁰ which can be found in all the medievals and as far back as Augustine¹¹ and the Cappadocians. Kuyper's insistence on the importance of 'life-systems', and that Calvinism is just such a 'life-system', providing a complete and self-contained way of looking at the world,¹² lies behind Bavinck's thought too. Nevertheless, its explicit development within prolegomena was a new development, for which Bavinck was responsible.

The God whose existence must be assumed in this way is specifically the *Trinitarian* God of Christian dogmatics. Bavinck considers that the very existence and nature of creation as the creature of God and as distinct from God *requires* that God is Trinity, for only so can creation's unity and diversity both be accounted for.¹³ In this way the entire creation reflects and attests to the nature of the Trinitarian God. Therefore it is quite inconceivable that the knowledge of this God, which is what dogmatics is when cast in scientific form, could rest on *principia* which ignore, and therefore implicitly deny, the existence of this God. A Christian prolegomenon must be a Trinitarian prolegomenon.

This appreciation of the architectonic significance of the Trinity for prolegomena was inherited by Bavinck from Kuyper, who had again found it in his reading of Calvin. Furthermore, Bavinck's understanding of the linkage between God's Trinitarian nature and his work of creation (and, of course, his redemptive work of re-creation) was by no means a new one. Bavinck cites numerous supporters for this view, including Irenaeus, the Cappadocians and Augustine. Nevertheless, his recognition of the Prolegomenous significance of this does seem to have been a fresh insight, and it was he who first wove this principle into the fabric of theological prolegomena. The *principia* of theology must take their stand in and under the Triune God, and derive their nature from him.

context, without direct reference to or exposition of the text; cf. *RD* I.92.

¹⁰ Anselm, *Epistle* 136.

¹¹ Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, Tractate 27.9.

¹² Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 29.

¹³ *RD* II.420ff. The point is well noted by Bolt in the 'Editor's Introduction', 21.

Bavinck finds three *principia* of dogmatics. Following the tradition of Reformed Orthodoxy, he distinguished between the *principium essendi*, the essential foundation, the ground of the 'what' of our knowledge, and the *principium cognoscendi*, the foundation of knowing, the 'how' of our knowledge. The *principium essendi* is God himself; who God is determines the content of our knowledge of him. Dogmatics has no business in attempting to derive the being of God from elsewhere; God is absolutely prior to us, and all of our knowledge of him is what it is because he is what he is first. Moreover, even in the case of knowing humans a person is partly the *principium essendi* of knowledge of himself by others, for it is very hard to get to know a person who does not wish us to know them. People must take the initiative in self-revelation to some extent. While this is only partly the case for human beings (people frequently reveal more about themselves than they intended to, by actions, facial expressions, slips of the tongue, etc.), it is entirely the case for God. The *principium essendi* of our knowledge of God is God himself.¹⁴

The *printipium cognoscendi*, in contrast, deals with the epistemological question: how we come to have this knowledge. Reformed orthodoxy had long located this in God's revelation in scripture,¹⁵ and Bavinck does not demur. Nevertheless, he makes a distinction between the *principium cognoscendi internum* and the *principium cognoscendi externum*: the internal and external principles of knowledge. Scripture is the external principle, but by itself it is not enough. The reason for this is the same as the reason why light is not sufficient for us to see an object; we must also have an eye with which to detect the light. Thus also there must be within us the capability to receive the objective revelation placed before us in scripture, which includes (as we shall see) both the rational capacities for comprehension and the religious capacity to receive and believe the truths so comprehended. This is the *principium cognoscendi internum*.

While it is the case that the whole Trinity is involved in the whole of dogmatics, and in the transmission of theological knowledge to

¹⁴ RD I.233.

¹⁵ See the extensive treatment in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics : The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2003), II.151ff.

man the *opera ad extra indivisa sunt*, nevertheless the three *principia* do each relate in a particular way to one member of the Trinity: the Father is the *principium essendi*, the Son who as the revelation of the Father is the *principium cognoscendi externum*, and the Holy Spirit who through his internal work in men is the *principium cognoscendi internum*. As *principia*, the three members of the Trinity are truths of theology which can only be presupposed; and theology as a science of God cannot proceed otherwise.

Immediately one can see the extent to which Bavinck's prolegomena is entirely dependent upon the material content of his dogmatics. For not only the existence of the ontological Trinity is presupposed, but the doctrines of the incarnation, inscripturation, of the internal testimony and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and an entire understanding of common grace including a developed doctrine of creation and of the operation of the Holy Spirit in mankind as a whole. Bavinck's prolegomenon grows organically out of dogma; and, he insists, it could not be any other way:

Theology as a particular science assumes that God has unmistakably revealed himself; in other words, it assumes the existence, the self-revelation, and the knowability of God and therefore proceeds from a highly significant dogma.¹⁶

This observation has a direct implication for the discipline of theology at a personal level: the theologian must himself believe the content of the theology he espouses, that is, he must have faith himself. This is because the revealed truths of theology are designed to evoke faith in the human heart; to fail to see and respond to this is to fail to understand the nature of theological truth at the most fundamental level.¹⁷ Indeed, Bavinck says that mere allegiance to 'Christianity' is insufficient; there is no 'church' in general, but only specific churches with their own creedal statements. We all receive our nurture in the faith from one such group. The dogmatician must therefore take his stance within a particular confessional position; and, further, must be a part of this church: 'dogmatics is possible only for one who lives in the fellowship of faith with one Christian church

¹⁶ *RD I.38.*

¹⁷ *RD I.91.*

or another'.¹⁸ While Bavinck does not put it this way, his point is that the dogmatician being part of the Covenant of Grace is indispensable to the discipline of dogmatics.

A key characteristic of Bavinck's prolegomenon, therefore, is the extent to which it is fully integrated into his theology as a whole. The ground on which the discipline of theology stands is the content of theology itself. Therefore it is impossible to understand in full Bavinck's exposition of Prolegomena apart from a wider appreciation of the shape of his theology as a whole.

The Content of Theology

Grace Renews Nature

Bolt has argued for understanding the principle that 'Grace restores nature' as the core of Bavinck's theology.¹⁹ Others have argued for 'Grace renews nature'.²⁰ There is a subtle but important distinction between the two, which we shall discuss in due course, but both express something we must seek to understand if we are to grasp the architectonics of Bavinck's theology.

Probably the clearest single exposition of this theme in Bavinck's corpus is the 1888 Kampen address 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church'.²¹ Bavinck's concern is to expound the credal article of catholicity as being a doctrine not merely about the church but about the very nature of Christianity: it is '...the conviction that Christianity is a world religion that should govern all people and sanctify all creatures irrespective of geography, nationality, place, and

¹⁸ *RD* I.84.

¹⁹ 'the fundamental theme that shapes Bavinck's entire theology is the trinitarian idea that grace restores nature'. John Bolt, 'Editor's Introduction', in *RD* I.18.

²⁰ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, 'Translator's Introduction', Herman Bavinck, 'Common Grace' *CTJ* 24 (1989): 35-65, at 36. Both Bolt and Van Leeuwen cite Jan Veenhof, *The Relationship between Nature and Grace According to H. Bavinck*, trans. A. Wolters (Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1994), and E.P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcom, 1959) as support for their views.

²¹ Herman Bavinck, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,' *CTJ* 27 (1992): 220-51.

time.' The gospel of salvation is of universal scope, it not only claims the allegiance of all people, but it works for the renewal and redemption of the whole of creation, and therefore the whole of human society.

The issue, according to Bavinck, is how we relate grace and nature, recreation and creation. Creation was made by God with a purpose and destiny in mind. And creation is not superseded by the gospel and made redundant by it; it is restored and renewed through it.

The Gospel is a joyful tidings, not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation.²²

Bavinck's point is that God's purpose in the original creation has not been superseded. He designed the creation as the theatre of his glory. Although sin has spoiled this creation terribly, and rendered man liable for nothing but judgment from God, yet God has not chosen to destroy it and replace it with a better one. Rather, the very substance of the gospel is that he has acted instead to fulfil creation's purpose by repairing it and completing it. His observation that the world created *by* the Son is created *for* him as its heir is a critical one; there is a unity of purpose in God's activity in creation and recreation which will not allow us to view the gospel as destruction-and-replacement. It has to be restoration-and-renewal. Why else would God choose to act by *redemption* at all? Why save lost sinners, rather than destroy them and make new sinless beings? The same goes for the entirety of creation. Grace does not replace nature. It restores and renews it.

Bavinck then spends a considerable amount of time describing how this grand vision has fared rather badly in the history of theology. He is withering in his criticism of the Roman Catholic dualism between grace and nature. Rome ceased to see the problem of the natural man as ethical – to do with sin – and instead saw it as a qualitative distinction between natural and supernatural. The natural is not evil, it is merely incapable of attaining to the higher level of the supernatural. Thus Adam had to receive the *donum superadditum* in order to aspire to fellowship with God; the fall was its loss and a

²² Bavinck, 'Catholicity', 224.

return to a natural state. Man once again needs the supernatural to augment the natural.

Now because of this Rome construes the natural as being good in itself; not necessarily evil. This might be considered to be honouring to nature, and in a sense it is, for it means that man is able to achieve much on his own without supernatural help (and thus this represents a principle which is 'at bottom Pelagian': grace supplements the good that is there naturally),²³ but it also means that grace can do nothing to nature other than allow it its own space, albeit stamped with the name of being profane, and offer a higher and preferable road of the supernatural. Grace and nature have little to do with each other. We are left with a complete disjunction between the sacred and the profane. The natural order has some value, but the Christian ideal is still world-denying monasticism.²⁴

Now the Reformation entirely rejected this construal of nature and grace; so much so that 'it was a radically new way of conceiving Christianity itself.' There is no qualitative disjunction between natural and supernatural; rather, there is an ethical one. The problem with nature is not of inherent incapacity for attaining to the divine, but the problem of sin. Now while this might appear to be a rather gloomier assessment of nature than the Roman one, in fact it honours it infinitely more, because it sees that the gospel is able to permeate it and restore it. Nature is not left as eternally inferior to grace, but is renewed and restored by grace.²⁵

²³ Bavinck, 'Catholicity', 229.

²⁴ Bavinck, 'Catholicity', 231.

²⁵ Bavinck spends some time tracing history of this idea in the church. Not all the Reformers, he says, grasped this equally well. Luther never attempted to overcome the Roman dualism; Zwingli did better but it was Calvin who truly understood the implications of a proper doctrine of creation: 'He traced the operation of sin to a greater extent than did Luther, and to a greater depth than did Zwingli... In the powerful mind of the French Reformer, re-creation is not a system that supplements creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious Reformation that leaves creation intact, as in Luther, much less a radically new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures... Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity... The German reformation, therefore, was a reformation of worship and preaching while the Swiss reformation included a renewal of state and society.... All this results from the fact that the Bible is, for

Furthermore, Bavinck is clear that, as in the classic conception of the Covenant of Works, the goal to which recreation leads is far higher than the original, pre-fall state of creation. That the gospel merely reverses the fall and restores nature and man back to the state of Eden is a Lutheran doctrine that Bavinck rejects.²⁶ What recreation does is not only to undo the effects of the fall, but to bring creation to the eschatological goal to which it originally pointed but never attained. Perhaps we could best summarize the master-thought of Bavinck's theology as 'grace renews and consummates nature'.

In summary, then, Bavinck's understanding of the gospel is that it is God's work in Christ to redeem, restore, renew and consummate his creation, in all its dimensions, including especially man in every aspect of his being.²⁷

The Centre of God's creation: Man as the Image of God

Given this view of the relation of nature and grace, that God's purpose in the operation of grace is the restoration and renewal of his original creation so that it might fulfil his original creation purposes, we are led to ask about the specific aim God had in creating man and

Luther, only a source of salvation truth, whereas for Calvin it is the norm for all of life.' (Bavinck, 'Catholicity', 237-8). However, the Reformed churches have largely failed to capitalize on this position. Largely through the influence of pietism, they have tended to retreat into a more or less Lutheran position which construes the gospel as about personal salvation but leaves the natural world untouched. This leads Bavinck to a damning indictment of the contemporary situation of the church: 'In this way it has come about that the catholicity of Christianity and the church, after a history of eighteen centuries, has ended up on (sic) the obscurantist light-denying jesuitism of Rome and the other worldly pietism of Protestantism... Both movements sin against the catholicity of Christianity and the church and are thus incapable of the Reformation to which we are called today.' (Bavinck, 'Catholicity', 244).

²⁶ *RD* II.572-73. Indeed, the whole of ch. 13 of Vol. 2 is addressing this issue.

²⁷ Bavinck does not hold to a view of the progressive fulfilment of this purpose before Christ returns. He affirms that the normal situation of the church in this present age is suffering. Nevertheless, this does not vitiate the claim of the gospel upon the whole of mankind, and the whole of man's life; nor does it prevent the glorious blessings of the coming re-creation being really present in seed form in the church now; nor does it prevent there being genuine good done to society and the world as a whole through the gospel. See Bavinck, *RD* IV.673-674.

how this aim might be fulfilled in the gospel. This topic is discussed at length in the *Reformed Dogmatics*. Chapter 12 of Volume 2 is about 'Human Nature'. Here Bavinck describes how the essence of human nature is to be created in the image of God. A critical starting-point to the discussion is Eph 4:24 and Col 3:10. While man was originally created in God's image – alluded to in these verses – in the new creation man is renewed on the same model. Being the image of God, the original purpose of man's creation remains his purpose and God's goal in the new creation.

Now, the nature/grace dualism of Rome has made this impossible. Grace does not restore man's nature but elevates it and completes it, while leaving the natural untouched. The Reformation opposed this 'as a matter of fundamental principle'. The Lutheran theology also proved incapable of doing justice to this theme, construing as it did the image as consisting purely in man's moral qualities, entirely lost at the fall. The Reformed, in contrast, 'incorporated... the essence of man in the image of God.'²⁸ They introduced the distinction between the broad and the narrow sense of the image of God to preserve the twin biblical truth that the image remains in fallen man, and yet must have been lost in order to be restored in Christ. But this alone did not complete the picture: rather, note had to be taken of the difference between the image that Adam was before the fall, and the image that Christ has become and will bestow upon the redeemed at the resurrection:

It is only in these three areas, the image of God in the broad sense, the image of God in the narrow sense, and the development or destination of the image of God – that is, in the doctrine of the covenant of works – that the locus of the image of God can be treated to the full extent.²⁹

Several things are important here. One is that the image is not something a man *bears* or *has*, such that he can lose it (as in the Lutheran view); rather, it is what he *is*. The effect of this is that sin spoils the whole person; it damages his very being. The whole being of man is the image of the whole of God. Thus sinful man still is the image, but the damaged image; he fails to image God as he should.

²⁸ RD II.549.

²⁹ RD II.550.

But further, the doctrine of the Covenant of Works – that Adam had held out to him a far greater destiny than the status and nature he had in Eden, on condition of his obedience – points to a far greater realization of the image in the future. For while Adam sinned and so failed to attain this destiny as his reward, Christ as the second Adam has attained to it and was granted it in his resurrection, and those who believe in him receive his reward through their faith-union with him. Christ's resurrection was the firstfruits of the new creation. Therefore the new creation is not merely about the restoration of the image of God, identical to the image Adam was before the fall, but about its completion and fulfilment in far greater dimensions, to the full extent of God's creation purposes, far surpassing Adam.

And here we come to the vital significance of the image of God for Bavinck. The image is the whole of man: body, soul, faculties, powers, and gifts. And this is not to be construed individualistically, as if it is the individual man in isolation who is the complete image of God. Rather, it is humanity as a whole, with the entire network of human relationships and interdependencies which images God.

Although Adam was created in God's image, he was not that image immediately in the full sense, nor was he that image by himself alone. The image of God will only present itself to us in all of its many-splendoured richness when man's destiny, both for this life and the life to come, is included in it.³⁰

Thus man's eschatological destiny becomes a vital part of his image-bearing: it is only as fulfilled in the new creation that man will come to bear the image of God in the full sense. Thus Bavinck considers the doctrine of the Covenant of Works to be vital to an understanding of the image of God. Adam was a type of Christ even before the fall; he always pointed forward to one who would be the image of God in a far greater way than he was.

Now, the Covenant of Works is to be considered as 'the form of religion possessed by man who, while created in the image of God, has not yet received the highest form of religion.'³¹ It must be construed as covenantal because, while there is a reward held out to Adam under it, there is no natural connection between work and

³⁰ *RD* II.564.

³¹ Bavinck, 'Common Grace', 40.

reward for God's creatures; the only way that work can be rewarded is if God has covenantally – that is, by a freely-made verbal commitment – determined that it should be so.³² Christ fulfils the Covenant of Works for all those included in the Covenant of Grace. They are so included because they are united to Christ; they are his body. And the manner in which Christ brings the image of God to fulfilment is in the entirety of redeemed humanity, spread over the whole earth, functioning in Christ as Prophet, Priest and King over it.³³ That this is where the image reaches fulfilment is shown even in the foundation of the doctrine in Gen 1:26-28: the command to fill the earth immediately follows man's creation in God's image.

We are now in a position to relate this understanding of the image to Bavinck's principle that grace restores and renews nature. For the focus of God's renewing work is mankind, who was created to image God in his work of subduing creation as its prophet, priest and king. As the gospel is about God bringing his creation by grace to the completion of its original aim, so the centrepiece and linchpin of that gospel is the bringing of man, created to be God's vicegerent, to fulfil his original aim. This means that the image of God is not in Bavinck's view a piece of background theology which fades from view once the grand truths of salvation come to the fore. Rather, man's identity as the image of God is the central teleological goal of the gospel. God's aim in creating man is that he should have an image: his aim in the gospel is to bring that image to its ultimate fulfilment, and that ultimate fulfilment is the fully consummated, resurrected glory of humanity in all its dimensions, particularly as redeemed community, in the new creation. Because the image of God is seen in the richness of human society, not merely in individuals, this new creation is not a garden containing one man in isolation, but a city – the new Jerusalem.

³² RD II.571.

³³ RD II.577-78. At times here Bavinck sounds almost universalist, as if Christ is the federal head of all those who were in Adam. However, he is clear elsewhere that he does not consider this to be the case. See, for example, his clear affirmation of the reality of hellish punishment for unbelievers, in Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 147ff.

The Nature and Method of Theology

What Theology is

With this insight, that the image of God is not just the starting point of theology but the goal – God will have himself imaged among men – we are finally in a position to understand the power and coherence of Bavinck’s prolegomena. For Dogmatics is about a specific, and highly important, indeed perhaps the most important, aspect of this: how God introduces knowledge of himself into the human consciousness. For it is here that the image of God is most profoundly expressed. Bavinck’s most succinct definition of dogmatics is perhaps this: ‘Hence dogmatics can be defined as the truth of Scripture, absorbed and reproduced by the thinking consciousness of the Christian theologian.’³⁴ Or at greater length, drawing out the paradigmatic significance of the incarnation for Dogmatics:

For just as the Son of God became truly human, so also God’s thoughts, incorporated in Scripture, become flesh and blood in the human consciousness. Dogmatics is and ought to be divine thought totally entered into and absorbed in our human consciousness, freely and independently expressed in our language, in its essence the fruit of centuries, in its form contemporary.³⁵

The central purpose of dogmatics is not for certain assertions to be recorded on paper; it is for God to be imaged in this specific way, that God’s own thoughts are known and held by the human consciousness. And lest we once again construe this as individualistic – the knowledge of God as it exists in the mind of a particular dogmatician – Bavinck states that, true to his understanding of the corporate nature of the image of God,

So much study and reflection on the subject is bound up with it that no person can possibly do it alone. That takes centuries. To that end the church has been appointed and given the promise of the Spirit’s guidance into all truth. Whoever isolates himself from the church, i.e. from Christianity as a whole, from the history of dogma in its entirety, loses the truth of the Christian faith. That person becomes a branch that is torn from

³⁴ *RD* I.89.

³⁵ *RD* I.83.

the tree and shrivels, an organ that is separated from the body and therefore doomed to die. Only within the communion of the saints can the length and the breadth, the depth and the height, of the love of Christ be comprehended (Eph 3:18).³⁶

Thus there is another reason why the dogmatician must live and work in the context of the church, indeed, a particular church, apart from the necessity of himself believing the doctrines of which he treats: only so does he participate in the corporate reproduction of the divine knowledge in the consciousness of the redeemed humanity.

This, then, is what dogmatics – systematic theology – is. This is why it matters. It is the knowledge of God, the creation of which in human minds is among God's principle purposes in creation.

The place of Scripture, Church, and Consciousness

In this way Bavinck is able to provide a strong account of the role of Scripture, the church, and the human consciousness in prolegomena. The Roman church makes the church into a source, perhaps even *the* source, of dogmatics; modernist theology since Schleiermacher has done the same with human consciousness. Erroneous as these positions are, it will not do by way of reaction simply to reject church and consciousness in favour of Scripture. For if the object of God's self-revelation is 'to introduce his knowledge into the human consciousness and through it again to set the stage for the glorification of God himself'³⁷, then that revelation cannot end outside of man; it must reach into human beings themselves. Thus a 'Scripture-only' biblicism, which says that the text of Scripture is itself the end of revelation, and dogmatics need do no more than repeat it, is insufficient. Prolegomena must take account of how the knowledge of God revealed in Scripture is taken up into the human consciousness, within the context of the church.³⁸ However, the Roman and Modernist positions are also flawed, for neither the church nor the human consciousness is a source of dogmatic material, but the context into which dogmatic knowledge is taken up and held.

³⁶ *RD I.83.*

³⁷ *RD I.213.*

³⁸ *RD I.82.*

It is the need for dogmatic knowledge to enter and be held by the believing consciousness of man, and, moreover, into the corporate believing consciousness of the church, that makes a *principium cognoscendi internum* necessary.

Knowledge and Certainty

This being the case, the nature of man as a conscious being is critical for Bavinck. The fundamental problem of epistemology has been in knowing how to relate our knowledge of an object to the object itself. How can we know that there is any relationship between what is internal and external to the human mind? Empiricism and Rationalism are simply two poles of the same problem: the former absolutises the external object, the latter the internal representation, but neither can meaningfully connect the two.³⁹

Bavinck sees that the problem arises because of the failure to adopt the biblical worldview in which we are the creatures of the Triune God, whose aim in creating us was to have himself imaged among men; in particular, to have the knowledge of himself established in the consciousness of men. Thus, theological knowledge (and indeed all knowledge) is not an alien imposition upon a human nature fundamentally unsuited to receive and hold it. Rather, all human knowledge is possible because the same Logos who created the universe enlightens the intellect of all men. Bavinck often cites John 1:9 as referring to this universal enlightening of all men by the Logos.⁴⁰ He sees the significance of this verse in being the fact that it is the same Logos who in creation has enlightened every man, who in Christ becomes incarnate as God's special revelation in the Covenant of Grace. The one who reveals God objectively in the flesh has

³⁹ See the extensive discussion in *RD* I.214-220. Note how Bavinck here appropriates Kant's incisive critique of empiricism and rationalism as having the same fundamental failure; while refusing to travel one inch with Kant's fundamentally atheistic solution. This critical awareness and appropriation of key modern thinkers, without accepting their atheistic presuppositions, is typical of Bavinck.

⁴⁰ *RD* I.232.

previously created man with the subjective capacity to receive that revelation.⁴¹

Now this subjective capacity to receive revelation has two aspects of it, corresponding to the capacity to process knowledge rationally which relates to general revelation, and the capacity to understand and accept the knowledge of God which comes with the Covenant of Grace in special revelation. We consider these in order.

In his important discussion of faith and certainty,⁴² Bavinck is scathing about the claims of positivism that we can only be certain of things which are proved by objective evidence. This is nonsense, he says; there are plenty of things that we consider certain without having evidence to support them:

Over against those who think that nothing can be considered true that cannot be perceived by the sense or mathematically proven, it is a towering certainty that by far the most and the most important things we know are based, not on proofs, but on immediate certainty.⁴³

The most important of these is the certainty that our subjective perception of an object does relate to the object itself. This certainty is quite natural and any philosophy which cannot account for it, but rather ends up destroying it, is to be judged by that fact.⁴⁴ How, then, is this certainty to be accounted for?

Human knowledge is what it is because of its connection to the external world. Given that it is absolutely reasonable, indeed essential, to take our stance within the faith of the church, since faith

⁴¹ Of course this is a strongly contested reading of this verse; many commentators would see it as referring to Christ's enlightenment of all who receive him, specifically through the incarnation. Bavinck does not (as far as I am aware) mount a detailed defence of his view; but such a defence would take the line that the clause 'which enlightens everyone' refers to the preincarnate, not the incarnate, Logos. See Vos's argument for this position in Geerhardus Vos, 'The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,' in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980): 234-67, especially 81-83.

⁴² *RD* I.564-588.

⁴³ *RD* I.567. Bavinck cites such things as our reliance on self, our perception and our thinking; the recognition of the objective existence of the external world; the mutual trust on which all human society is built.

⁴⁴ *RD* I.223.

is the foundation of all knowledge, we must seek to explain human knowledge as a whole theistically and religiously. And when we do that, the reasons for our certainty regarding our knowledge of objects external to ourselves emerges. For one God made both us and the external world. Specifically, the Logos who made the world and structured it according to laws consistent with his being – what we would perceive as logical consistency – also made and structured the human mind. As always the Logos' work is mediated by the Holy Spirit, and so Bavinck makes the (perhaps bold) move of asserting a universal operation of the Holy Spirit in all people, taking the form of reason, conscience, and the sense of divinity. These are capacities inherent in the human consciousness which leap into action in response to stimuli from the outside world. In language deliberately reminiscent of Rom 8:16, Bavinck describes the witness of the human spirit to the veracity of the corresponding phenomena outside of itself. But this is enabled by, and accompanied by, the witness of the Holy Spirit. Thus it is that the same Spirit objectively displays the truth to us and subjectively elevates it into certainty in our spirit. And so the distance between us and the truth has vanished, and the certainty of our knowledge of the external world, which we cannot doubt without absurdity, is accounted for in a way that is impossible apart from the prior recognition of the Triune God.

This is Bavinck's account of human reason and its operation in the entire sphere of human knowledge, as it relates to General Revelation. Thus the *principia* of all human knowledge are Trinitarian: God as the *principium essendi* relates particularly to the Father; General Revelation as the *principium cognoscendi externum* relates to the Logos through whom the world was created, and the rational capacities of man to receive and hold knowledge in his consciousness, knowledge which truly relates to the outside world; the *principium cognoscendi internum* relates to the subjective work and testimony of the Spirit. In this way common grace leads to genuine and valuable knowledge being attainable by mankind in general.

But general revelation cannot lead, since the fall, to saving theological knowledge. The special revelation of the Covenant of Grace is necessary for that. But here the knowledge situation is analogous, and also Trinitarian. Again God is the *principium essendi*, and the *principium cognoscendi externum* relates to the Logos; but now

it is not the General Revelation of the Logos' mark on his creation, but the Special Revelation of Scripture, the content of which is the incarnate Logos' revelation of the Father. And because the mind of the unspiritual person is, since the fall, incapable of dealing with the things of God, the *principium cognoscendi internum* of faith is not a universal work of the Spirit in our rationality (although that is presupposed and necessary), but the specific work of the Spirit in the elect. In an analogous way to how the human spirit testifies to the certainty of our knowledge of external objects in a way we cannot deny, so the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts to the truth of his own revelation in Scripture and elevates it to the level of absolute certainty for us.⁴⁵

Thus Bavinck has provided an account of theological knowledge which deals comprehensively with the place of reason and rationality in theology while recognizing the necessity of Scriptural revelation. Furthermore, all knowledge – that common to all men, and that only found within the covenant of grace through Scripture – finds its origin and its only consistent explanation when we take our stand within the church's confession of the Triune God. The Triune God has designed man to know him consciously; and his work through the gospel has been to bring that knowledge to reality in every dimension of man's being. Dogmatics is the scientific aspect of that knowledge, the knowledge of God in the corporate consciousness of man.

Conclusion

Bavinck's achievement is in showing how the metaphysical presuppositions of the enlightenment lead to a collapse not just of dogmatics but of the whole field of human knowledge. The only coherent account of knowledge that can be given is a Trinitarian one, which takes its stand upon the confession of the Christian church, specifically the Reformed church. And this confession does give a rich and deep account of what human knowledge is, and of what Dogmatics is. God's aim in creation is to have himself glorified in it, and particularly to have himself imaged in man, and within that particularly to have the knowledge of himself established in the

⁴⁵ *RD* I.588.

human consciousness. This creation aim, present in the original Covenant of Works, is not destroyed by the Covenant of Grace but brought to reality by it, fully at the eschaton, but in part and in principle now. Dogmatics is the discipline, the science, of that knowledge, developing to the best of our present ability the image in the human mind of God's knowledge of himself, as he has revealed in Christ in Scripture and as he brings to reality in our minds by the operation of the Spirit.

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