

Bavinck the Theologian

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As the title indicates, this work* deals with Herman Bavinck primarily as a dogmatician. A companion volume, to be published later, will be primarily biographical.

The book is divided into three sections. The first of these sections has three chapters. The first chapter of this section considers Bavinck's relation to Abraham Kuyper. The second chapter deals with Bavinck's relation to such "ethical" theologians as Chantepie de la Saussaye and J. H. Gunning. The third chapter takes up Bavinck's controversies with such modern theologians as B. D. Eerdmans, C. B. Hylkema and Snouck Hurgronje.

This first section is of great historical value. Bremmer had access to much unpublished material. This fact enabled him to trace Bavinck's theological development with great care. This fact also enabled him to delineate Bavinck's true greatness of character. Humble before God and courteous to his fellow-man, Bavinck always refused to compromise his Saviour whose voice he heard in the Scriptures.

In four chapters the second section gives a detailed analysis of Bavinck's theological views, especially as these are expressed in his monumental work, the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. Bavinck was deeply concerned to make the Christ of the Scripture speak to his age. In this sense he was a truly *modern* theologian. He studied the development of modern philosophy and science with great care. He knew that true unity of thought and harmony of life could come to man only if he made every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. But he also knew that those who did not center their life and thought in Christ had, in spite of this, much to teach him. As a true Protestant he learned much from Romanism and as truly Reformed he honored

* R. H. Bremmer: *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*. Kampen: J. H. Kok N. V. 1961. XI, 457. Fl. 18.75.

Luther. Bavinck's *magnum opus* shows true catholicity of spirit as well as unswerving loyalty to the truth as he saw it.

In section three Bremmer gives an evaluation of Bavinck's theology as a whole. It is difficult, says Bremmer, to overestimate the value of Bavinck's work. His theology reflects his own deep spiritual struggle. The Reformation was to him a deeply spiritual movement and, as such, of the greatest significance for himself. On his view Romanism signaled a degeneration of the Christian faith. But in his very commitment to Reformation principles Bavinck's breadth of outlook evinced itself. His was a truly ecumenical spirit. He wrought out his theology in line with the great councils of the church (p. 386).

The permanent value of Bavinck's work, Bremmer asserts, may be summed up (a) in his desire to trace the historical development of Christian theology in general and of Reformed dogmatics in particular, (b) in the openness and courage with which he probed the problems of modern science and culture in the light of the gospel (p. 392).

In seeking to make the Christ of the Scriptures speak to the culture of his time, Bavinck was, however, greatly influenced by Neo-Thomism. All "Bavinck-commentators" are agreed on this point (p. 328). Other men, such as Schelling and Schleiermacher, also had their influence on Bavinck. Even so, it remains true that in "the great systems of Plato, Augustine and Thomas Bavinck found the answer to the questions which modern times and modern thought have posed to the dogmatist" (p. 331).

There are, says Bremmer, two dominating motifs that appear again and again in Bavinck's dogmatics. The first is Plato's theory of ideas. This clearly indicates Bavinck's ontological interest (p. 370). The second is Kuyper's view of regeneration. Even here we must speak of an ontological interest (p. 371). "In these two dominating motifs we see the strong influence of scholastic thinking" (*idem*).

Mindful of Bavinck's great merit recent Reformed theologians have sought to escape the scholastic tendency in Bavinck's theology as it found expression in these two motifs. Reformed thinkers today face new problems. These pertain to such subjects as election, the image of God, sin, soteriology, the sacraments and eschatology (p. 371). As they set forth Reformation teaching on these subjects they seek to work in Bavinck's spirit by going beyond him. To go

beyond Bavinck means negatively to avoid his scholastic tendency and positively to work out a more truly Christological and biblical theology than he did. Thus to go beyond Bavinck is to follow the principles of Reformation theology even more faithfully than he did.

A few details must now be taken up. Fundamental to every present-day discussion of various theological questions is the problem of method. How can we avoid Scholasticism in our method? Bavinck himself gave us the answer. By taking one's start from Scripture (p. 75). This starting-point is to be maintained not only against Romanist but also against "ethical" theologians (*idem*).

This point is of basic importance. The mere substitution of the word "ethical" for "ontological" is of no help. Bavinck finds the basic error of Chantepie, an *ethical* theologian, to be the wiping out of the proper distinction between God as man's Creator and man as God's creature (p. 70). Is not this the root error of all ontologism and therefore of all Scholasticism? The nature-grace scheme of Scholasticism assumes the idea of the autonomy of man's reason in its operation on the realm of nature. And this idea of the autonomy of reason, even when it is limited to the sphere of nature, does not allow for the necessity, the perspicuity, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture in the Protestant sense of the term. On the scholastic view the primacy of Christ and his Word is virtually destroyed.

Mindful of this Bavinck sought to give Christ and the Scripture their proper place. Scripture is not to be taken abstractly. Scripture and the content of Scripture must be taken together. A concrete view of Scripture and a concrete view of Christ go together. Such, in effect, was Bavinck's answer not only to the Romanist but also to the "ethical" and the "modernist" theologian (p. 127).¹

The question now is whether Bavinck realized the full implication of his own view of the centrality of Christ and the Scriptures when he dealt with modern science and modern philosophy. Or did he, perhaps, at these points, to some extent allow the idea of Scholasticism to re-enter the domain of Christian thinking?

Let us look first at the question of natural science. Scholasticism boasts of its generosity in that it respects the claims of a would-be

¹ Cf. Bavinck: *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*.

neutral scientific methodology. But precisely for this reason it does not press the universal claim of Christ as the one through whom alone true organic unity of human thought and life must be attained. Rome does not realize that much of modern science, while claiming to be neutral in its methodology, is, in fact, hostile to God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer.

Bavinck's own truly Protestant view of Christ and his Word should have made him insist that organic unity between man's "religion" and his "science" can be had only if *every* thought of man, not only religious but also scientific, is made subject to the obedience of Christ. Basically he did this very thing but he did not do it constantly and at every point. Often enough he did maintain, in effect, that there is no intelligible philosophy of factuality except upon the biblical presuppositions of creation and redemption. But then again he seemed to drop to a lower level and to take a virtually scholastic position. Is he working on this lower level when he urges us to seek for "the psychological and historical conditions under which revelation and inspiration, incarnation and regeneration take place" (p. 128)? Or is he, in saying this, really working out the "cosmic significance of Christ" (p. 140) even when he seemed to some, including such modernists as Eerdmans and Hylkema, to be modernizing the Christian faith? Was he merely telling the modernists that Christian believers are not closing their eyes to genuine scientific discovery (p. 144)? Bremmer is of the opinion that Bavinck did both. He did great service in indicating to his modernist critics that his whole-hearted commitment to the primacy of Christ included rather than excluded an openness of mind to new knowledge. At the same time he, no more than Kuyper, wholly escaped the penetration of the "concept of reality of the time" into his theology (p. 145).

It was especially in the *locus de creatione* that Bavinck "weakened his own position". He did this by trying to absorb the results of modern science too uncritically into his own thought (p. 146).

In this connection Bremmer calls attention to an article on "Creation and Evolution" by Dr. Herman Dooyeweerd.² In this article, Bremmer tells us, Dooyeweerd seeks to escape the mistake of accommodating Christian teaching to the requirements of modern science. In this article, we find, Dooyeweerd argues against the scholastic tendency

² Published in *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 24 (1959), pp. 113 ff.

that he finds in J. M. Spier's book *Time and Eternity*.³ But the main purpose of his article is to deal with the much debated work of Jan Lever on *Creation and Evolution*.⁴ Lever has done a truly liberating work, says Dooyeweerd, in opposing the "traditional scholastic views of Genesis I and II".⁵ But soon enough Dooyeweerd finds Lever also falling back "into the scholastic line".⁶ For while, at first, Lever denied that man can know "how" God has created the world, he does later seem to understand this "how".⁷ The only way to escape the traditional scholastic position, Dooyeweerd argues, is to insist that the "revealed creation facts of Genesis I belong to a principally different order than the data that may be brought to light by scientific research".⁸ Unless this distinction is made, Dooyeweerd argues, we shall, as believers, create a discord between what we falsely believe the Bible teaches and what are incontrovertible facts discovered by science.⁹ At this point Dooyeweerd, the philosopher, seems to be in essential agreement with Lever, the scientist.¹⁰

The question now is as to what extent, if any, Lever and Dooyeweerd have, at this point, enabled us to escape the "scholastic" tendency of Bavinck.

The root-error of Scholasticism is that it fails to place the whole man, as the creature made in the image of God, subject to the ordinance of God. Hence, as Dooyeweerd has pointed out in several of his works, the idea of the autonomy of theoretical thought marks all immanentistic, that is, apostate thinking.

But modern thought assumes this idea of the autonomy of man's theoretical reason no less than did ancient philosophy. Not only modern scientific and philosophical, but also modern theological, thought agrees that the world of "phenomena" can be interpreted in no other way than on the assumption of human autonomy. To be sure, modern thought, science and philosophy no less than theology, allows for a super-natural, super-rational, non-rational sphere of reality. That is to say, modern thought believes not only in a realm of causality and necessity but also in a realm of contingency. This realm of contingency is assumed to be the realm of person-to-person confronta-

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 118. Cf. J. M. Spier: *Tijd en Eeuwigheid*.

⁴ *Creatie en Evolutie*, Wageningen, 1956.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 125. ⁷ *Idem.*

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 124. ⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 113. Cf. Lever: *Creatie en Evolutie*, p. 11.

tion. It is therefore also the realm of religion and of faith. God lives there and man's free spirit also lives there.

Of particular importance is the fact that on this modern view no recognizable revelation can come from the realm of freedom into the realm of necessity. The God who lives in this realm has no determinate being. If he "speaks" or "reveals" himself to man through the avenue of the world of causality then his speech is wholly identical with the relationships of that world. And causality is assumed to be the product of human rationality impressed on brute factual stuff. Thus, on the modern view, revelation is virtually identical with rationality. So far as his revelation may, in any sense, be said to be God's revelation in the world, it is *wholly* hidden in it. Karl Barth has expressed this modern dialectical relation of God to the world by saying that God is wholly revealed and at the same time wholly hidden in the world. It is this dialectical view of the relation of God to the world that underlies his notion of the relation of *Geschichte* and *Historie*. According to Barth, there is not, because there cannot be, any direct revelation of God in nature or history. Revelation is historical but history is not, as such, revelational. It goes without saying, therefore, that Reformed scientists, philosophers and theologians cannot successfully escape the Scholasticism they find in Bavinck unless they carefully distinguish their concept of revelation from that of the modern dialectical point of view. The modern dialectical view is not basically different from the scholastic view. The form-matter scheme of the Greeks, taken as the substratum of the nature-grace scheme of the medieval scholastics, is constructed in terms of static concepts. The nature-freedom scheme, as it controls the modern dialecticism of post-Kantian thought, is constructed in terms of activist concepts. Even so these two positions are at bottom one. All non-Christian thought operates with an ultimate irrationalist and contingent principle of individuation and a rationalist determinist principle of unification.

If Christian thinkers, then, seek to escape the static categories of medieval Scholasticism by means of the activist categories of modern thought they are merely jumping from the frying pan into the fire. As the temptation in Bavinck's day was for Christian thinkers to seek organic union between Christianity and a medieval form of Scholasticism so the temptation for Christian thinkers in our day is to seek organic union with the nature-freedom scheme of modern thought.

One could wish that the two men mentioned, Lever and Dooyeweerd, had set off their interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis more clearly, than they have done, from modern activism. Lever seeks to set his fellow-believers free from the "fundamentalist" notion that in addition to "truths of faith" Genesis also gives them "concrete data which the biologist must hold to in his scientific work".¹¹ "This view implies", says Lever, "that in addition to the proclamation of creation and salvation Genesis definitely offers scientifically exact knowledge so that the biologist who believes in Scripture must not only bring the Bible and science into confrontation, but must even test the truth of scientific data by the literal teachings of Scripture". This fundamentalist "view holds, in effect, that Genesis is written in scientific terminology" (p. 10).

This fundamentalist view, Lever adds, has been widely held in Protestant-orthodox circles till now. Its evil effects spring from the fact that it imposes outdated scientific views upon current research (p. 12). If biological research is to be set free, Christian men must realize that they can never obtain from Scripture "exact physical, astronomical and biological" and "exact historical" (*exact-geschiedkundige*) knowledge. This is simply not the purpose of Scripture (p. 15). Genesis was written "to reveal to us those realities which are of eternal and basically-religious significance for us" (*idem*). Genesis reveals to us the fact that God has as a Father created all things (p. 16). Secondly, Genesis reveals to us that the world has meaning. "If we should confine our thought to that which can be observed, we should come to the conclusion that this world is oppressively meaningless, or that its meaning lies within itself" (*idem*). In contrast with this, Scripture reveals the fact that this world has its meaning beyond itself in relation to the purpose of God. Thirdly, Scripture reveals the fact that there is teleological relation within the world. "When we stand on the level of scientific data we come to the conclusion that man is an accidental and likely a passing product of nature" (p. 17). But Genesis reveals the fact that the whole of creation was directed toward man as made in the image of God and as able to glorify God (*idem*).

In his first chapter Lever intimates to us some of the liberating effects of his view of the relation of Scripture teaching to the views of modern biological science.

¹¹ *Creatie en Evolutie*, pp. 9 f.

(1) When Genesis speaks of creation "days" we do not think of shorter or longer periods of time (p. 10). The days refer to an ordering. They indicate first of all that God has created all things (p. 11). Lever refers with approval to N. H. Ridderbos' framework theory of the days of Genesis (p. 11, n. 1).

(2) When Genesis uses the expression "after his kind" this does not refer to that which is meant by "species" in modern biology. The Bible does not teach anything with respect to the origination of new species among plants or animals (p. 11).

(3) When Genesis 1:1 speaks of God's creation of heaven and "earth" this refers to the entire globe. But later the word "earth" has a more restricted meaning. Failing to observe this fact fundamentalism got itself into trouble. Did the flood cover the entire globe? Did the ark contain representatives of all the "species" of animals on the entire globe? That would be impossible (p. 12).

In his second chapter Lever deals with the origin of life. Scripture does not teach us how organisms came into existence (p. 44). It does tell us that they did not originate *only* by chance but according to a plan of God. This we could not have learned by a study of the facts. Study of the facts as such would incline us to the exactly opposite conclusion. The Christian biologist will therefore oppose the idea that life has come into existence *exclusively* through the zig-zag play of physical-chemical forces. Beyond that he is free to accept whatever data science has discovered on the subject (*idem*). Christians must not, in doctrinaire fashion, claim to know *how* life originated (p. 45). If they refrain from doing this, then the charge so often made against them to the effect that in relation to the problems of natural science they must introduce a *deus ex machina* will have been refuted (p. 46). It will then even appear that the Christian is less bound with respect to these problems than the scientist who is controlled by a mechanical view of the world (*idem*).

Lever's third chapter considers the origin of types of organism. On this point the Christian need do no more than maintain that evolution is subject to and enveloped by creation (p. 79). The Christian, says Lever, "believes" in creation in the way that a materialist "believes" in chance. But in this case Lever does not say that a consideration of the facts as such would lead one to believe in chance. On the contrary, on this occasion he adds that the facts point toward, though they do not prove, creation (p. 77). The "highest explanation", he says, is that of God's directing plan (p. 79).

The fourth chapter deals with the question of the origin of species. At this point in particular orthodox Protestantism laid itself open to the charge of narrow-minded denial of the established facts (p. 110). Genesis does not teach anything with respect to the constancy of species. It teaches only that which is wholly beyond the reach of research, namely, that it was God who decided which organisms should appear (p. 111). Believing this, the Christian biologist stands without prejudice in the midst of modern research (*idem*).

In his fifth chapter Lever deals with the origin of man. When Genesis 2:7 asserts that God formed man of the dust of the ground this must not be taken to be a technical description of the origin of the human body. Here again the "essence of this communication is . . . a religious revelation" (p. 164). Man is informed that as a totality he is not eternal, that he is not of divine origin but that he is, though made in the image of God, of the earth (p. 165).

Again when the same verse asserts that God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" this does not refer to the insertion of an immaterial "soul" or "spirit". It refers only to the fact that it is God who has formed the whole man (*idem*).

In the final chapter Lever sums up his conclusions on the relation of creation and evolution. He fears that his position may be taken to be that of an acceptance of evolution covered with a light sauce of Christianity (p. 169). But such is not at all the case. He believes whole-heartedly in creation. He is merely concerned to bring out that on the question of biological derivation the Christian may quietly and peacefully cooperate with modern natural science in its search for facts pertaining to the lacunae between animal and man (*idem*). For the difference between evolutionism and creationism does not lie, in the first instance, on the level of the given, of research and of working hypotheses. The difference lies in the realm of faith (p. 170).

The Christian *believes* in creation. But he must not lay himself open to the charge that he needs from time to time to introduce a *deus ex machina* into his principle of explanation (pp. 46, 173). He must not lay himself open to the charge that he holds to a twofold operation of God in time, one the general maintenance and development of what exists in time and the other that of a dated supernatural intrusion of God (p. 173).

If now we survey Lever's argument as a whole we cannot say that he has helped us to go "beyond Bavinck" very far, if at all.

There is a basic confusion in his argument. Lever asserts repeatedly that the Bible does not give us scientifically stated explanations of the facts with which the scientist deals. This is obviously true. And if this is what "fundamentalism" holds then we must reject it. But Lever also asserts that the Bible gives only "truths of faith" and not "concrete data". The unwary reader is likely to conclude from this disjunction that Lever is an adherent of the modern nature-freedom scheme. He will be strengthened in this conviction when he also reads that "when we stand on the level of scientific data we come to the conclusion that man is an accidental and likely a passing product of nature" (p. 17). But this is the modern non-Christian scientist's reading of nature. Is this reading objectively true? And must Scripture with its teaching of teleology be artificially added to what is a proper reading of "nature"? If so, then we have dropped once more to the level of fundamentalism, or supranaturalism or dialecticism. And then we cannot escape the charge that we are positing irrational intrusions into the regularity of nature.

Is not God's revelation of himself clearly revealed in nature and history? Is it not a *wrong* reading of *nature* if it is not seen to be clearly revelatory of God? It is because the natural man represses the truth of God which speaks to him in every fact round about and within him that he comes to such false conclusions about God. Confusing God's revelation in "nature and history" with the natural man's interpretation of it Scholasticism developed its natural theology.

To keep from falling into this Scholasticism it is of the utmost importance to maintain the clarity of the revelation of God not only in Scripture but also in "nature".

Moreover, it is only if the clarity of God's revelation in "nature" as well as in Scripture is maintained that we can have the unity between them that we need as believers and as scientists or as philosophers. A "nature" not interpreted from the beginning in terms of the "religious" teachings of creation and redemption as these are set forth in Scripture is not amenable to supplementation by these teachings afterward.

Calvin and Bavinck, following Paul, have, by teaching this, led us away from Scholasticism toward a unified interpretation of all the facts of human experience in terms of the primacy of the grace of God in Christ. To say the least, Lever is not as clearly anti-scholastic as were these men.

This fact also accounts, it appears to us, for the fact that Lever, in effect, lowers the claims of Christian teaching in relation to the field of science. The Christian biologist will, he says, oppose "the idea that life has come into existence *exclusively* through the zig-zag play of physical-chemical forces".¹² Does life then come into existence *partly* through such forces? And do the teachings of Scripture merely offer creation and redemption as an additional factor, explaining what cannot be *fully* explained otherwise?

Again Lever says that the "highest explanation" of the facts of nature is that of God's directing plan (p. 79). Do facts then have *some* intelligibility in terms of mechanism or chance? Lever has found a way, he thinks, by which as a biologist he can "quietly and peacefully cooperate . . . with modern natural science" in its search for facts pertaining to the lacunae between animal and man (p. 169). And he has found this peaceful way, he thinks, because the difference between creationism and evolution does not lie, in the first instance, on the level of the data of research and working hypotheses. The difference lies in the realm of faith (p. 170).

Now the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian scientist is, to be sure, basically one of faith. But for this very reason this difference enters upon the level of research and hypotheses. The non-Christian scientist's basic view of reality includes the idea that *anything* may happen. If he says that the world *may* have been created or if he says that God's providence *may* control its direction he also insists that the world *may not* have been created and that providence *may not* be directing it. In other words, he holds that the Christian's faith is negotiable while his own is not. And he holds that the "facts" must determine which view, that of the Christian or his own, is right. This appeal to the "facts" constitutes the "neutral" or "open-minded" approach.

It goes without saying that Lever does not want to cooperate with such a non-Christian methodology. For this is the way of Scholasticism and compromise. But he would have helped us to see the issues between Christianity and unbelief in the field of science more clearly than he did if he had more closely followed Calvin in his stress on the clarity of God's revelation everywhere. Then he could have shown that even the scientific enterprise can be intel-

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

ligerly carried on only if it is based on the Christian presuppositions of creation and redemption in Christ. Then too he could have offered an intelligible foundation for cooperation with his non-Christian fellow-scientists. For then such cooperation need not be carried on in the vague no-man's land of nondescript faith. Such cooperation can then be seen to include rather than to exclude the mutually exclusive character of each other's basic presuppositions.

Our conclusion is that Lever's book on *Creation and Evolution* has made no material advance over Bavinck in overcoming Scholasticism. Lever has not made clear the central and therefore all-comprehensive significance of Scripture. He does, to be sure, speak of the religious significance of Scripture. He also says that the Christian must take his Christian faith with him in his scientific investigation. For all that he virtually has two opposing dimensions, one of religious teaching and the other of scientific effort. And in the dimension of science he seeks for a sort of cooperation with unbelief that is scarcely distinguishable from that of Scholasticism.

Lever seeks support for his general approach in the philosophy of Dooyeweerd. He also seeks support in the exegesis of Genesis as given by N. H. Ridderbos. We cannot discuss the issues involved here. We only mention the fact that all three of these men seem, in their attempt to escape Scholasticism on the question of the relation of Scripture to science, to find help in one form or another of the "framework" interpretation of the Genesis account.

Dooyeweerd makes a sharp distinction between creation which is completed and the temporal process of becoming. The latter is the created result of the former.¹³ When in Genesis 2:7 it is said of Adam that God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life this is a matter of temporal becoming and presupposes "that man was already created. Man already stood before God through the Word which called him into being".¹⁴ Dooyeweerd even speaks of the whole of mankind in its totality, represented in its original father and mother, as being called into existence. Mankind as a whole are, he says, included in the completion of creation mentioned in Genesis 2:1.¹⁵

We are not now concerned with the exegetical justification for

¹³ "Schepping en Evolutie" in *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 24, p. 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115, n. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

this sort of view.¹⁶ Our concern now is the question of Scholasticism. There would seem to be no way of challenging Scholasticism but by the insistence of Calvin that God's revelation is clearly because directly present in every fact of the created universe. And it is difficult to see how Dooyeweerd's view does justice to this requirement. A completed creation, either of Adam as an individual or of mankind as a whole prior to the temporal process of becoming, is difficult to distinguish from the Greek idea of an abstract form that precedes matter.

Dooyeweerd seeks, by means of the distinction just discussed, to make clear that in his work of creation God is not involved in the temporal process. And he stresses the fact that as a work of God creation is beyond all human comprehension. But this is equally true of God's providence and therefore of his own "temporal becoming". Dooyeweerd says that within the temporal order Word-revelation *frequently* speaks of God in terms of time.¹⁷ Why not say that it *always* does? And when Word-revelation speaks of God in terms of time, Dooyeweerd asks, does this mean that he is "enclosed in his acts of creation"?¹⁸ Of course not, we reply. But the idea that God in any of his acts terminating upon creation, is above creation can only be expressed if it is presupposed to be true of his every act at every point.

This much, it would seem, must be presupposed, if we are with any justification to speak of Word-revelation with respect to creation as not lying in the level of scientifically ascertainable facts and concepts.¹⁹ This much, it would also seem, must be presupposed if we are to escape Scholasticism and thus go beyond Bavinck on the questions that pertain to modern science and in particular on the question of evolution.

But, as earlier noted, Bremmer evaluates not only Bavinck's discussion on scientific procedure but also such theological questions as Scripture, the image of God in man, sin and redemption. On these points, Bremmer contends, recent theology has made good progress.

¹⁶ Cf. "Creatie en Evolutie" in *Bezinning*, Vol. 12 (1957), no. 1, p. 7 by H. R. Woltjer and "Over het Creationisme van Dr. J. Lever" in *Bezinning*, Vol. 13 (1958), no. 1, by J. M. Spier.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 117.

¹⁸ *Idem.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Recent theologians realize, he says, that in the formulation of their doctrine of Scripture and of the prolegomena of theology in general they must not be controlled as largely as Bavinck was by ontological considerations (p. 330). Reformed theologians are increasingly in agreement on the fact that Scripture must above all, be seen in its kerygmatic or religious significance (p. 324). There is now a greater appreciation than there was in Bavinck's time for the "wholly unique dimension of the Spirit in which Scripture functions" (p. 326). Theological principles, says Bremmer, quoting Van der Walt, must not be confused with philosophical principles (p. 331).

It may be doubted whether Bremmer does justice to Bavinck in this section. As over against Romanism Bavinck defends the Reformation approach to theology as being "of faith".²⁰ Says Bavinck, "The content of dogmatics is the knowledge of God as he has in Christ through his Word, revealed it. The peculiarity of the knowledge of the believer consists in this that he regards everything religiously, theologically".²¹ "In every dogma the heart of religion beats".²² It was from this basically religious point of view that Bavinck developed every doctrine, including that of Scripture. And he did this self-consciously over against Romanism. To be sure, Bavinck was influenced by "ontology". But this influence was not dominant. And it was not, it seems to us, as great as Bremmer thinks it to have been.

But more important is the question whether recent Reformed theologians, in seeking to avoid the danger of scholastic ontology, are alert to the danger of recent philosophical activism. Many modern theologians have, as they think, an eye for the kerygmatic or religious significance of Scripture. But with them this frequently means that they have imported modern activist philosophy into Christian theology.

On the basis of this activist theology there can be no identification of revelation with anything in history. Their view of the "religious" import of Scripture is therefore diametrically opposed to the "religious" approach of which Bavinck speaks.

It appears doubtful whether Bremmer himself sees clearly the

²⁰ *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Kampen, 1918, I, p. 94.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²² *Idem.*

basic contrast between the Reformation view espoused by Bavinck and the activist view as, for example, espoused by Barth. He will allow Barth to warn us against reducing the Christian faith to a mere *gnosis* (p. 328) and, with other recent Reformed theologians, he thinks the *tendency* involved in Barth's violent opposition to the "stabilization" of God bears watching (p. 322). Even so, Bremmer does not seem to sense the fact that Barth's opposition to this stabilization springs from an activist view of reality in which the whole distinction between the creator and the creature is relativized. And therewith a new form of Scholasticism threatens to engulf us. It is well to stress the kerygmatic view of Scripture. It is well to oppose mechanical views of inspiration. To do so is to work in the spirit of Bavinck. But not to set the Reformation view off sharply from that of Barth, the one as mutually destructive of the other, is to be less alert to the danger of false "ontological" control than was Bavinck.

Bavinck's approach to theology proper and to redemption is, says Bremmer, that of the Reformation. For him Scripture speaks primarily of God's acts in grace and wrath. His basic concern is not, as was that of Romanism, to deal with the idea of being in the abstract (p. 333). Even so, in his development of the idea of man as the image-bearer of God Bavinck was influenced by ontology (pp. 334 f.).

But recently such men as Schilder and Berkouwer have interpreted the image idea in more actualistic and relational terms. Herein, says Bremmer, lies a "powerful piece of reaction" against the more ontological view of Bavinck. In this connection Barth's criticism of the idea of *analogia entis* with its threat of natural theology has been fruitful (p. 335).

Against this background Bremmer speaks again of a "mighty piece of reaction" that finds expression in Barth's opposition to the false popular notion of election as a *decretum horribile* or as a permanent threat to the believer's certainty of salvation based on the promises of God (p. 337).

The question here is once more whether Bremmer has sensed the fact that Barth's "mighty reaction" against the view of election as a "decretum horribile" springs from the same source as his violent opposition to the stabilization of revelation in Scripture. Both spring from his conviction that the idea of God is wholly expressed in his act of the essential salvation of all mankind in Christ. Bremmer speaks of the position of J. G. Woelderink who, in his pamphlet

on *De Uitverkiezing*,²³ virtually capitulates to Barth's activism as though it were not essentially different from that of C. Veenhof who, going beyond Bavinck, yet works in his spirit (p. 338). And when he speaks of Berkouwer and his insistence on the fact that election is always election in Christ Bremmer apparently assumes that the Christ of Berkouwer's theology and the Christ of Barth's theology are the same (*idem*).

When Bremmer comes to the question of soteriology he praises the work of Bavinck. Bavinck's approach was clearly that of sin and grace rather than that of the *analogia entis* (p. 343). But then we are immediately confronted with the statement that in recent times Barth has, with tremendous power, called attention to the fact of sin in creation (p. 344). And we at once recall that Barth does not believe in creation or in sin. To be sure, Barth uses the words creation and sin. But their meaning must be taken for what it is in the light of the whole framework of his theology. And this is the diametrical opposite of the framework of Bavinck's view of creation and sin.²⁴

That Bremmer has an inadequate appreciation of this fact appears strikingly when he asks whether Bavinck's conception of sin may not at one point be like Barth's concept of the *Nichtige* (p. 345). God has, says Bavinck, eternally thought of sin as his absolute opposite. As such he has taken it up into his counsel.²⁵ Bremmer thinks that this idea may possibly resemble Barth's notion of the *Nihil* and its opposition to God. But Barth rejects the entire idea of a counsel of God such as is the background of Bavinck's discussion of sin. For Barth there was no *status integritatis* at the beginning of history. For him there was no historical fall. Barth reinterprets both the counsel of God and sin in terms of his activist framework. There can therefore be no more than a similarity of words between his idea of sin and that of those who would follow the lead as well as go beyond Bavinck. We do not go beyond Bavinck if we do not in our day distinguish clearly between the biblical and the modern activist view of sin and election to salvation.

Going further Bremmer points out that Bavinck saw the "great religious significance" of Christology in the whole of his dogmatics.

²³ Delft, 1951. Cf. the writer's "Karl Barth on Chalcedon" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXII (1959-60), 147-166.

²⁴ Cf. C. Trimp, *Om de Oeconomie van het Welbehagen*, Goes, 1961.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, III, p. 50.

And he points out that Barth, according to his own statement, has related the natures and states of Christ in a somewhat unusual fashion (p. 354). But he does not indicate that Barth's "unusual" manner of handling the relation of the divine and the human in Christ involves the idea that in Christ God is at the same time both humbled and exalted. In other words, Bremmer again fails to note that on Barth's view the foundation for salvation as Bavinck believed in it, namely, the once-for-all finished atonement accomplished and applied by Christ and his Spirit at a certain point in history, is completely destroyed. To be sure, Bremmer does indicate that recent Reformed theology is critical of Barth's basic Christology (*idem*). But it does not appear that he appreciates the destructive nature of Barthian activism in the way that he appreciates the destructive character of Scholasticism.

We cannot continue Bremmer's discussion on the *ordo salutis*, ecclesiology, the sacraments and eschatology. At every point Bremmer has given us valuable surveys of Bavinck's ideas and of the development of his theology in relation to modern culture. We look forward to the second volume of his work. The two volumes together will, no doubt, prove to be of great help not only for the understanding of Bavinck but also for an appreciation of the double-headed fact that (a) we must be true followers of Bavinck in order, then, to go beyond him, and (b) to avoid Bavinck's tendency toward Scholasticism we must be alert to the deadly danger of modern activism. Modern activism is, if anything, a more deadly foe of Christianity than was medieval Scholasticism.

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