

SOUTHEASTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CREATED FOR PERFECTION: HERMAN BAVINCK'S COVENANT ANTHROPOLOGY AS THE KEY TO UNITY BETWEEN NATURE AND GRACE

SUBMITTED TO DR. BRUCE ASHFORD  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
PHD 9501 MENTOR DIRECTED STUDIES I

BY  
DENNIS GREESON  
NOVEMBER 9, 2018

There is much debate regarding the central doctrine or principle at the heart of Herman Bavinck's theology.<sup>1</sup> While such a question is perhaps unanswerable, what is certain is that Bavinck's overriding motif of organic unity between the realms of nature and grace is one of his greatest contributions to theology.<sup>2</sup> Dutch Neo-Calvinism's hallmark concern to properly relate Christianity and culture has no greater foundation than Bavinck's slogan of "grace restores nature."<sup>3</sup> That is, God's work in creation and re-creation are intimately linked in such a way that any dualism which relegates the material world to a lower or separate ontological value is stridently opposed.

A similar inspiration for this perspective comes from Abraham Kuyper, the famous Dutchman with whose name Bavinck is nearly always linked. Kuyper's own framework centers less on an articulation of the nature/grace relationship, and much more frequently on the relationship of common and particular grace. While both Kuyper and Bavinck share the same passion for unity between God's work in creation and redemption, many view Kuyper's system as fraught with problems of inner consistency.<sup>4</sup> It would perhaps be tempting to lay blame for

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan Veenhof, John Bolt, and Brian Mattson all argue that the "grace restores nature" motif is the unity-providing theme of Bavinck's theological career. Ronald Gleason takes a dissenting view in seeing the *unio mystica* as central, while Sydney Hielema, perhaps reading Bavinck through a Barthian lens, argues it is his Christology that is central. See Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. Albert M. Wolters (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2006), 7, 9; John Bolt, "Editor's Introduction," in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, by Herman Bavinck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), I:18; Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 5; Ronald Nelson Gleason, "The Centrality of the Unio Mystica in the Theology of Herman Bavinck" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001); Sydney Jacob Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption" (Th.D. Thesis, Wycliffe College, 1998); cf. Mattson, 68n12.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Pass, "The Question of Central Dogma in Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 53.1 (2018): 33–63.

<sup>3</sup> For a concise summary provided by Bavinck on what he means by "grace restores nature," see Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24.1 (1989): 59–60.

<sup>4</sup> Kuyper's doctrine of common grace has come under fire for a number of reasons, and specific to this essay is the observation that Kuyper is inconsistent regarding whether he sees common grace as bearing an independent *telos* from particular grace. See S. U. Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper," in *Communication and Confrontation: A Philosophical Appraisal and Critique of Modern Society and Contemporary Thought*, (Toronto: Wedge Pub. Foundation, 1972), 52–105; Jacob Klapwijk, "Antithesis and Common Grace," in *Bringing Into Captivity of Every Thought: Capita Selecta in the History of Christian*

this in the observation that Bavinck bore the reputation as the more systematic thinker of the two, and that Kuyper, like revolutionary figures such as Martin Luther, developed his thoughts only in response to certain situations and contexts. There may be some truth to this, however, Kuyper was a first-rate theologian in his own right and no doubt capable of analytic thought. A more satisfying and intriguing answer is that both selected different starting points for their theology of culture and leveraged different doctrinal emphases to bear the weight of their system.

It will be argued in this essay that while Kuyper opens himself up to criticism on his consistency regarding unity in the nature/grace relationship, Bavinck's covenantal anthropology preserves the unity between nature and grace for which they both strive. Brian Mattson in a pivotal study argues that the key to understanding how Bavinck conceives of the relationship of "grace restoring nature" is a proper grasp of his "protology."<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Bavinck's covenantal anthropology, which considers how he understands the *imago Dei* at humanity's creation and its relation to the "covenant of works," sets forth a specific eschatology in which creation and redemption are intimately linked.<sup>6</sup> It will be argued that Mattson's reading of Bavinck is not only correct, but also that viewing Bavinck's theology through this framework successfully links God's *telos* for nature and grace in a way that overcomes the deficiencies in Kuyper's construal.

---

*Evaluations of Non-Christian Philosophy*, ed. Jacob Klapwijk, Sander Griffioen, and Gerben Groenewoud (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992), 169–90; Walter Campbell Campbell-Jack, "Grace Without Christ?: The Doctrine of Common Grace in Dutch-American Neo-Calvinism" (PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Bavinck uses throughout his work the traditional nomenclature of "covenant of works" (*foedus operum*) employed by classic Reformed theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries. He stresses, however, that in order to mitigate any confusion, the "works" referred to in the title do not imply any notion of legalistic salvation by works or the attainment of merit for eschatological blessedness on the basis of human action. Rather, "works" refers to the notion that the covenant conditions of remaining faithful to God's prohibitions and obedience to the mandate to fill creation with God's image and have dominion over it was graciously supplied by God at humanity's creation. The reward of eschatological blessedness and life would be humanity's so long as they persevered in the grace given them by God throughout the probationary period. For this reason, Bavinck says another valid name for the covenant would be the "covenant of nature" (*foedus naturae*). This author prefers the term "covenant at creation" or the "creation covenant," however remain consistent with Bavinck's usage the term "covenant of works" will be employed. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), II:567, 570.

For Bavinck is it not enough the “grace restores nature,” but rather that “grace repairs and perfects nature,” and this concept of the latent perfectibility of nature is what holds Bavinck’s whole nature/grace relationship together.

This study will begin by briefly surveying the inconsistencies alleged in Kuyper’s thought already mentioned, before turning to examine how Bavinck’s starting point allows him to avoid Kuyper’s pitfalls. Regarding Bavinck’s theology, it will be essential to the task of surveying his covenantal anthropology by beginning first with his understanding of the Creator-creature relationship. Basic to the divine-human relationship is the notion of “covenant,” which sets at creation a specific eschatology towards which the cosmos is oriented from the beginning. This forms the necessary backdrop for understanding Bavinck’s doctrine of the *imago Dei* and the “covenant of works,” to which this study will turn. As Mattson highlights, for Bavinck included in the notion of *imago Dei* is not simply what humanity *is* at their creation, but also what they must *become*.<sup>7</sup> Such a destiny of humanity detailed in the covenant of works serves as a limiting principle for how one is to understand the nature of redemption: grace in restoring and perfecting nature does not return creation to the pristine conditions of its beginning, but rather but rather leads it into the beatitudinal perfection for which it was designed. Therefore, nature and grace are united in a singular *telos* of God.

### **I. Kuyper’s Inconsistencies on the Nature/Grace Relationship**

Abraham Kuyper’s famous doctrine of common grace provides for him the basis to secure the legitimacy of human cultural endeavors seen for much of Christian tradition to exist on a lower level of importance than spiritual life. Put into terms familiar to the discussion, Kuyper’s common grace serves to unite the realms of nature and grace, creation and redemption—or at

---

<sup>7</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 4.

least such is Kuyper's intention.<sup>8</sup> Seeking to purge all traces of dualism that separates the spiritual from the material is a hallmark of Kuyper's work. The system Kuyper draws up, however, has been criticized for inconsistencies which serve to undermine this very goal of unity he sought between the realms of nature and grace.

The question for Kuyper, ultimately, is whether God's work of common grace, restraining sin's effects and bestowing gifts on humanity in general, bears an independent *telos* from God's work in providing and applying particular grace to the elect. Throughout much of his work, Kuyper sees common grace as serving and supporting that which God is accomplishing in particular grace, moving history forward and giving "the church on earth a place to stand."<sup>9</sup> In not a few places, however, Kuyper insists that common grace "bears a purpose all its own."<sup>10</sup> What Kuyper intends to accomplish by this is not to secure some sort of "neutral" territory for Christians and non-Christians to work alongside each other with the effects of sin minimized, but rather to show that God's purposes for his creation precede and are not superseded by sin and the need for redemption.<sup>11</sup> The natural is not of a lesser value than that which is supernatural. However, once the two are split apart, bearing separate *teloi*, Kuyper faces difficulty bringing them back together again.<sup>12</sup> Zuidema argues that Kuyper feels compelled to make such a move because he defines particular grace too narrowly.<sup>13</sup> While this is an important observation, a more foundational problem is that Kuyper begins too late in the biblical narrative. By asking "what remains?" of creation's integrity after the Fall and positing it as somehow standing

---

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. Van der Maas (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), I:263-71.

<sup>9</sup> Kuyper, *CG*, I:546.

<sup>10</sup> Kuyper, *CG*, 301-2, 346-47; cf. Abraham Kuyper, *De Gemeene Gratie*, 4th ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1939), II:632, III:124.

<sup>11</sup> Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action," 54.

<sup>12</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Baker Academic, 2001), 19; cf. Campbell-Jack on the dualism inherent in conceiving of two forms of grace. Campbell-Jack, "Grace without Christ?," 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action," 53.

independently from God's work of election and redemption culminating in Christ and the church, Kuyper lapses into viewing redemption as a mechanical insertion and not in organic relation to God's original work of creation.<sup>14</sup> By beginning with a more robust "protology" Bavinck is able to better hold together the organic unity between nature and grace.

## II. Bavinck's Doctrine of Creation

For Bavinck, any doctrine of creation, which includes anthropology, must begin with a proper conception of the Creator-creature distinction.<sup>15</sup> The Creator alone is the "sole, unique, and absolute cause of all that exists."<sup>16</sup> Further, the Creator determines the nature of all relations with the creature. Bavinck's the doctrine of creation is intimately linked to the doctrine of the Trinity. God's unity-in-diversity *ad intra* makes creation possible and sets the pattern for its existence and trajectory by determining the nature of God's relation to it.<sup>17</sup> God as eternally one-in-being bears no dependence on anything outside himself, and yet his diversity of persons makes possible God's creation of and personal relation with something beyond himself. Additionally, God's unity-in-diversity *ad intra* demands likewise a unity-in-diversity of all God's works *ad extra*. All that the Father does in creation, the Son and the Spirit participate in, and likewise for the works of the Son and the Spirit.<sup>18</sup> From this, Bavinck argues, God's Trinitarian being is the

---

<sup>14</sup> This, despite Kuyper's expressed concern that particular grace unfolds throughout history organically out of the arena of common grace. Kuyper, *CG*, 288–89.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, 407.

<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:407.

<sup>17</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, 332.

<sup>18</sup> Bavinck stresses that the Trinitarian Persons share in every divine action not through accomplishing different tasks, but through origination of different causes within a unified act. Bavinck is worth quoting at length on this: In God, "there are three persons, each of whom performs a task of his own in that one work of creation. Not in the sense that the creation is mainly attributable to the Father and less so to the Son and Spirit, nor in the sense that the three persons work independently side by side, supplementing each other's work and constituting three separate efficient causes of creation...While there is cooperation, there is no division of labor. All things originate simultaneously from the Father through the Son in the Spirit. The Father is the first cause; the initiative for creation proceeds from him. Accordingly, in an administrative sense, creation is specifically attributed to him. The Son is not an instrument but the personal wisdom, the Logos, by whom everything is created...And the Holy Spirit is the

archetype for creation's ontology, for all God's works reflect and reveal his being.<sup>19</sup> Knowledge of God is always analogical, or ectypal as Bavinck states, and therefore while it is true knowledge accurately reflecting the object of perception, it in no way exhausts its reality and is always dependent on accommodation.<sup>20</sup> Creation bears a similar ectypal ontology in that as God's creation it must reflect who he is: unity-in-diversity.<sup>21</sup> The one and the many are related organically in manner revelatory of the Triune God.

This not only provides Bavinck's famous solution to the problem of the one and the many, but it highlights for him the very purpose of creation. As Bavinck argues, "the world finds its idea, its principle (*archē*), and its final goal (*telos*) in the triune being of God," which is nothing less than "the revelation of God's perfections."<sup>22</sup> Highlighted, therefore, in the Creator-creature distinction is the fact that as separate from the Creator, creation is not eternal; it has a beginning and exists in history, and therefore it bears a trajectory—it is moving towards a goal. For Bavinck this goal is the revelation and manifestation of God's glory. Creation does not perform its revelatory function in moving toward that goal statically but dynamically. Not only does creation reveal and manifest God's glory in its static existence, but by design it bears the latent capability of escalating to higher levels of revelation and manifestation in its development across time.<sup>23</sup> From the beginning creation was to move ever increasingly towards this

---

personal immanent cause by which all things live and move and have their being, receive their own form and configuration, and are led to their destination, in God." Bavinck, *RD*, 422–23.

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, 422–23.

<sup>20</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, 107–10.

<sup>21</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 45; cf. 55: "Ontologically, the particulars that make up the whole of the cosmos are diverse, distinct and independent, yet are connected and mutually influencing. This unity and diversity is 'ectypal' and therefore analogous to the intratrinitarian unity and diversity; created things do not enjoy perichoretic union, they do not 'mutually indwell' each other. Nonetheless, they do, each together, form an 'organic' whole."

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, 425, 439.

<sup>23</sup> That creation, while pronounced "good" by God at the beginning, bears the capacity and mandate to attain to a "higher blessedness" in no way implies that creation was ontologically less than good or deficient to attain to its goal without the intervention of some foreign element of grace, as the Roman Catholic doctrine of the donum

eschatological goal.<sup>24</sup> The implications of this, as Mattson argues, is that, for Bavinck, from the beginning there can be no dualism between nature and grace. All the work of God throughout history must be an organic outworking of attaining this purpose, or else creation would cease in its revelatory function of displaying God's unity-in-diversity. Therefore, God's work in both creation and re-creation cannot be unrelated.

The preceding forms the necessary backdrop for Bavinck's anthropology, for as Bavinck argues, "Creation culminates in humanity where the spiritual and material world are joined together."<sup>25</sup> Humanity, Bavinck holds, is the bridge between heaven and earth. They are described at their inception in Genesis 1:26-27 as created in God's image, and thus while all creation manifests God's glory (Ps. 8:1, 19:1, 50:6, 89:5, 97:6; Rm. 1:20), humanity stands as the pinnacle revelator of God's glory. "Image," Bavinck argues, "tells us that God is the archetype, man the ectype," the supreme picture of his likeness within creation. Humanity bears a unique relationship to the Creator among all his creation, and, as such the rest of creation is bound up with humanity's destiny.<sup>26</sup> This is according to both their essence, as material and spiritual beings, and function as covenantal creatures made for dominion over creation in order to lead it

---

superadditum holds. It is for this reason, for Bavinck, that the stress on the organic unity of creation must be emphasized, for creation bore within itself latently or structurally all that was necessary to attain to its eschatological goal. What develops across time, specifically at the hands of humanity, is an ethical or directional work of drawing out creation's divine-revelatory latencies through obedience to God's covenant commands. Bavinck, *RD*, II:572.

<sup>24</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 60. Mattson argues that "eschatological" in no way implies for Bavinck a spiritual or heavenly future unrelated to earthly creation. To say that from the beginning creation bore an inherent eschatology is simply to say, in light of the organic union of creation and its destiny, that creation is oriented towards a future "natural" state of blessedness contained potentially in its nature from the beginning.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:511. Bavinck elsewhere argues, "Man is a rational animal, a thinking reed, a being existing between angels and animals, related to but distinct from both. He unites and reconciles within himself both heaven and earth, things both invisible and visible. And precisely as such he is the image and likeness of God" (II:556). Additionally, he says, "Thus man forms a unity of the material and spiritual world, a mirror of the universe, a connecting link, compendium, the epitome of all of nature, a microcosm, and, precisely on that account, also the image and likeness of God, his son and heir, a micro-divine-being (*mikrotheos*)" (II:562).

<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:561.

in development of greater glorification of God.<sup>27</sup> These two themes, essential ontology and functional role of covenant head, therefore, form the pillars of Bavinck's understanding of the *imago Dei*, which in turn bears the key to the proper construal of the relationship between nature and grace.

### III. Bavinck's Covenantal Anthropology

Thus far it has been shown that for Bavinck the Creator-creature relationship is central to understanding the nature and purpose of creation. In turning to Bavinck's doctrine of humanity in particular, this is seen paradigmatically in his understanding of the covenantal nature of all divine-human relationships. As there is an infinite distance between God and humanity by nature of being, then if a relationship is to be had between the two, it must take to shape of God's condescension, self-revelation, and determination of the conditions whereby the two parties might fellowship. It is unilateral, wholly gratuitous, and yet characterized by bilateral expectations—a description which is nothing less than a biblical understanding of covenant.<sup>28</sup> Further, because humanity as God's ectypal analogue is determined by God to mirror his Trinitarian unity-in-diversity essence, all human relations with each other and the inanimate creation are likewise characterized by covenant—that is, all relationships are characterized by moral norms and mutual dependence and submission.<sup>29</sup> What this means is that the primordial covenant of works is paradigmatic for all human relations, accounting for the structure of the

---

<sup>27</sup> In light of this, Bavinck summarizes the nature by which humanity is to lead creation towards its greater glorification of God: “we can say that culture in the broadest sense is the purpose for which God created man after His image...God's image had been granted to man so that he might in his dominion over the whole earth bring [culture] into manifestation.” Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 207.

<sup>28</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:569-570.

<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:569.

human person that renders this covenantal life possible and providing its permanent direction—that is, why such relations exist in the first place.

The covenant of works reveals the “state of integrity” which characterized Adam and Eve’s prelapsarian condition.<sup>30</sup> In the Garden of Eden God created humanity in his image and gave them the command to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it,” and to refrain from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or else face the punishment of death (Gen. 1:28, 2:17). In this state, Adam and Eve possessed original righteousness whereby they could successfully fulfill God’s commands and, in doing so attain the reward of eternal life afforded by the tree of life. Likewise, they could also fail in this endeavor and fall from this provisional state of grace.

For Bavinck, this classical Reformed doctrine draws several implications.<sup>31</sup> First, humanity’s state of integrity reflects their natural condition of being under God’s moral law according to general revelation and given God’s particular command through special revelation.<sup>32</sup> Thus, even before the Fall the material and spiritual are conjoined in the realm of

---

<sup>30</sup> The covenant of works is not universally accepted by Reformed theologians today. For a contemporary critique of its enduring value, see John H. Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload in Reformed Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29.1 (1994): 12–41. For a strong defense of the biblical grounds for retaining belief in the covenant of works, see Craig G. Bartholomew, “Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenantal Deconstruction,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 30.1 (1995): 11–33; John Bolt and Richard Muller likewise argue that the covenant of works bears an important pedigree in Reformed thought and should be retained. John Bolt, “Why the Covenant of Works Is a Necessary Doctrine: Revisiting the Objections to a Venerable Reformed Doctrine,” in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 171–91; Richard A. Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29.1 (1994): 75–100; Finally, for a biblical theology of the covenant of works, along with a grammatical-historical defense of its biblical grounds, see William Dumbrell’s argument and Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum’s argument: William J. Dumbrell, *Creation and Covenant: An Old Testament Covenant Theology* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2013), 1–58; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 177–221.

<sup>31</sup> As Bolt points out, Bavinck highlights the fact that the covenant of works did not originate with Reformed theology, but “dates back to the church fathers and Augustine.” Bolt, “Why the Covenant of Works Is a Necessary Doctrine: Revisiting the Objections to a Venerable Reformed Doctrine,” 175; cf. Bavinck, *RD*, II:567.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:567.

nature, which undermines any claim that spiritual realities pertain only to God's work of grace.<sup>33</sup> Second, humanity from the beginning bore an eschatological destiny for which they were created, which is different from their initial condition only quantitatively and not qualitatively. His aim in arguing this point is to undermine the Roman Catholic notion of *donum superadditum*, which views humanity as requiring an added gift of God's supernatural grace in order to raise up to the highest levels of beatitude—a doctrine rooted in a “Neoplatonic metaphysic” that construes grace in a dualistic hierarchy above nature.<sup>34</sup> In Bavinck's understanding, rather, humanity's ability to attain beatitudinal goodness comes in their natural state which presupposes their identity as God's sons and daughters, that is, their identity rooted in grace. Thus, after the Fall, whatever God's economy of grace accomplishes through Christ, it cannot be seen as separate or higher than nature but in organic unity with it.<sup>35</sup> Finally, humanity's ability in their natural state to keep God's command is intimately linked to humanity's essence as created in God's image.<sup>36</sup> After the Fall, humanity remains human and God's covenant of works is not abrogated. Rather, just as the image of God remains in an ontic sense within humanity, so the covenant of works remains and determines the nature of God's covenant of grace.<sup>37</sup> This raises the question, “What, for Bavinck, is entailed in the *imago Dei*?”

#### **IV. Bavinck on the *Imago Dei***

Throughout the Christian tradition, considerable debate has been had regarding both the nature of the *imago Dei* and the impact sin has on whether humanity remains in possession of or an

---

<sup>33</sup> As Bavinck argues, humanity in its natural state in which they were covenantally bound to obedience, works were never ground for merit, but rather gifted on the preconditions supplied by grace. Therefore, nature and grace were never separate dispensations regarding humanity's eschatological destination. "In that way, really everything that God initially grants to man in creation or in re-creation becomes grace." Bavinck, *RD*, II:544.

<sup>34</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 118; cf. Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 46; Bavinck, *RD*, II:544, 570.

<sup>35</sup> Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 49.

<sup>36</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:572.

<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, III:226.

expression of the image of God after the Fall. Anthony Hoekema provides a helpful framework for understanding the different approaches when he describes various understandings as seeing the image as either a noun, a quality or capacity humanity possesses, or a verb, that is a function one performs or a relation in which one participates.<sup>38</sup> To frame his language more in line with Bavinck's understanding, Michael D. Williams provides perhaps a better nomenclature, seeing the *imago Dei* as consisting of both structural (ontic) and functional (ethical) realities.<sup>39</sup>

Bavinck is wary of any approach that isolates one sense to the exclusion of the other.<sup>40</sup> He rejects two purely structural approaches, Pelagian "naturalism" and Roman Catholic "supernaturalism."<sup>41</sup> Each view the image as a capacity for attaining eschatological blessedness—one in a wholly natural way leading to an evolutionary view of human destiny, and the other wholly supernatural leading to a strictly spiritual view of human destiny. Both underestimate the effects of sin on the *imago Dei*, and both lead to a misconstrual of the nature/grace relationship, the first folding grace into nature and the second dualistically separating them apart in a Neoplatonic hierarchy. Rather, Bavinck holds that the *imago Dei* bears both structural and functional qualities, encapsulated in his understanding that humanity *is* the image of God, and do not merely bear the image.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 63; cf. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> Michael D. Williams, "First Calling: The Imago Dei and the Order of Creation—Part I," *Presbyterion* 39.1 (2013): 43.

<sup>40</sup> No doubt there are traces of anachronism in this statement. Anthropologies which took exclusively functional-relational approaches did not seriously gain popularity until Barth. However, it is clear that Bavinck's position rules out such conceptions, for he is adamant that, "the whole being is image and likeness of God, in soul and body, in all human faculties, powers, and gifts. Nothing in humanity is excluded from God's image; it stretches as far as our humanity does and constitutes our humanness." Thus, for Bavinck, the image cannot be anything less than humanity's ontic makeup, though it certainly is more. Bavinck, *RD*, II:561.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:534-548.

<sup>42</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:533.

Implicit in this is also the rejection that the *imago Dei* is only functional, as some Reformed thinkers subsequent to Bavinck have held. Karl Barth rejects any *analogia entis*, that is any relation of being between humanity and God, which leads him to define the image as the interpersonal I-Thou relations between individuals because it images God's I-Thou confrontation with humanity.<sup>43</sup> Klaas Schilder follows suit, arguing that humanity's nature makes possible the functioning of the image, which is the covenantal "office" for which humanity was created. Humanity image God to the extent that they are obedient to God's covenant commands of obedience to God and dominion over his creation.<sup>44</sup> G. K. Berkouwer, like Barth and Schilder, rejects the ontic qualities of the image of God, arguing that such qualities should be located in humanity's essence as human.<sup>45</sup> The *imago Dei* presupposes these, yet it itself is not a noun but a verb: humanity images God in its function of representing God among creation.<sup>46</sup> The problem with each of these in light of Bavinck's view is that while they each rightly capture what humanity is *for* and is to increasingly *become*, their construal of nature and grace locates the *imago Dei* strictly in the realm of grace, thus lapsing into the dualism Bavinck seeks to guard against.

As previously mentioned, for Bavinck the *imago Dei* is the whole person, in both its structural and functional qualities.<sup>47</sup> Not only is the rooted in the fact that "God himself, the entire deity, is the archetype of man," who is subsequently the ectype of God in his entire being,

---

<sup>43</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010), III/1:195, 198; cf. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 49–52.

<sup>44</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Heidelburgsche Catechismus: Zondag 1-4*, 2nd ed. (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1947), 253–54; cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 55.

<sup>45</sup> Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 114–18; cf. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:554.

but also this is rooted in humanity's covenantal role.<sup>48</sup> Humanity was created for the covenant of works, for ever increasing development of that which is supplied in latent form at creation.<sup>49</sup> The *imago Dei* is both a static, structural reality, and a dynamic, functional calling. Thus, "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-splendored richness when man's destiny, both for this life and the life to come, is included in it."<sup>50</sup>

All of this gives Bavinck the framework for articulating the nature of what remains of the *imago Dei* in light of sin and the Fall, which in turn determines the nature of God's work in the realm of grace. Bavinck sees passages such as Gen. 5:1, 9:6; Acts 17:28; I Cor. 11:7; and James 3:9<sup>51</sup> indicating that the image of God is retained after the Fall, and therefore the image is inseparable from human nature: "To the extent that, even in the state of sin, man remained man, to that extent he has preserved remnants of the image of God..."<sup>52</sup> However, it is clear that a rift takes place at the Fall, leading Bavinck to affirm the classic Reformed articulation of the image in its broader and narrower sense. Sin corrupts and distorts the structural integrity of the *imago Dei* in humanity, but it does not destroy it. Human faculties which were once oriented towards covenant faithfulness and obedience are now twisted away from God's glory towards sin. Humanity continues to image God in a broad sense in the retention of these faculties, because humanity is able to do things analogically similar to what God does. However, as the structural

---

<sup>48</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:554.

<sup>49</sup> "Belonging to that humanity is also its development, its history, its ever-expanding dominion over the earth, its progress in science and art, its subjugation of all creatures. All these things as well constitute the unfolding image and likeness of God in keeping with which humanity was created." Bavinck, *RD*, II:577.

<sup>50</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:564. Bavinck argues that this covenantal-eschatological element is necessary for a right conception of the fullness of the idea of the *imago Dei*: "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 its full extent" (II:550).

<sup>51</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, II:550.

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck, *ORF*, 210.

qualities of the image are bent away from their proper ends, humanity no longer images God in the narrower sense of fulfilling their functional role as God's covenant representatives. What is lost, therefore, is "the spiritual wholeness or health of man," that is, humanity's ability to relate rightly to God, bringing a rift between humanity and their eschatological destiny.<sup>53</sup>

This rift between the broader and narrower senses of the *imago Dei*, what humanity is and what they must become, is not permanent. God's work of redemption, the arena of grace throughout history, addresses this tension in the narrative. How will God's covenant with humanity be fulfilled and his purposes for his creation come to their eschatological destiny? Through his work in the covenant of grace, God's purposes culminate in Christ's incarnation as the divine-human *imago Dei par excellence* and his work of redemption whereby he united broken humanity to himself in order to both repair and perfect the *imago Dei* in them.<sup>54</sup> The covenant of grace fulfills the covenant of works, not merely in the sense that Christ is obedient to God's moral law where Adam failed, but also that Christ attained for humanity the reward Adam lost.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, the oft-cited maxim of "grace restores nature" is incomplete. The fuller rendering, as Bavinck stresses, is that "grace repairs and *perfects* nature," which is central to how he views the unity between nature and grace.<sup>56</sup> Grace does not simply lead creation back to its prelapsarian integrity, but rather leads it forward to its *telos*: "Grace does not remain outside or above or beside nature but rather permeates and wholly renews it. And thus nature, reborn by grace, will be brought to its highest revelation."<sup>57</sup> Grace achieves what was set in nature from the

---

<sup>53</sup> Bavinck, *ORF*, 210.

<sup>54</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 204.

<sup>55</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, III:278.

<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, *RD*, III:226, emphasis added; cf. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 105.

<sup>57</sup> Bavinck, "Common Grace," 59–60. Mattson therefore concludes, "Here one begins to see why Bavinck is so animated by the doctrine of the covenant of works, claiming that it 'must never be surrendered.' It is valuable because it provides a basic theological rationale for the Neo-Calvinist vision: the bringing of all of life under the eschatological, perfected Lordship of Christ. Creation (including family, state, society, art, scholarship; in a word,

beginning, thus revealing the organic unity between the two. Mattson is therefore correct to argue that Bavinck's covenant anthropology, with its included vision of the eschatological destiny of creation, is vital to a proper understanding of Bavinck's entire theology.<sup>58</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion: Kuyper Revisited**

At the beginning of this study it was highlighted that Kuyper's conception of the union between nature and grace was weakened by the theological weight his doctrine of common grace was made to bear. In order to give a value and legitimacy to the realm of nature, Kuyper emphasized in places an independent *telos* for God's work with common grace that threatened to unhitch nature from grace. Particular grace brings redemption from sin, and common grace allows creation's purposes to continue on the course of development throughout history, and these two works of God stand apart despite Kuyper's insistence that they are organically related.

As was shown, Bavinck's conception does not suffer from such potential duality. Common grace for Bavinck plays much more of a secondary role in his theology. After the Fall, God's common grace on all of his creation is what accounts for the retention of much of nature's original integrity, albeit in a shadow form, which includes the *imago Dei* in its broad sense in humanity as whole. God's purposes in this, as was seen, is the preservation of the conditions whereby the covenant of works set at creation still stands in authority over God's creation, while also still anticipating humanity's eschatological destiny. Common grace preserves the realm of nature in such a way that the realm of grace might rise up from within it in order to restore nature's full integrity and lead it into its promised state. Common grace does not allow for

---

culture) cannot be treated with contempt if it was always intended ('from the beginning,' as Veenhof emphasizes) to share in eschatological glory, whether through Adam or Christ." Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 105.

<sup>58</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 6.

greater development of creation for its own sake, but strictly for the fulfillment of the covenant of works, which is provided in the covenant of grace.<sup>59</sup>

For Bavinck, any construal which simply sees grace restoring nature is incomplete. A proper understanding of the biblical narrative must include grace both restoring and perfecting nature, the basis for which is found in his covenantal anthropology. This subsequently raises several implications that demand further investigation yet lay outside the bounds of this study. For instance, how does Bavinck's understanding of the broad and narrow sense of the *imago Dei* impact one's understanding of the nature of the antithesis which separates regenerate from unregenerate humanity? And, how does this influence the nature of co-participation in the public square? Additionally, does Bavinck's view lessen the severity of humanity's total depravity, as he has been accused of, and is such compatible with his understanding of God's sovereign election?<sup>60</sup> Finally, does such an intimate relation between nature and grace and humanity's organic unity open the door to universalism, despite Bavinck's work to safeguard against it? These are important questions for a theological formulation that continues to attract, now more than a century after its formulation.

---

<sup>59</sup> "This *gratia specialis*, however, can be fully appreciated only when it is viewed in connection with its prevenient preparation from the time of earliest man onward...For a time the *gratia specialis* dug a channel for itself in Israel, only to flow out into the deep, wide sea of humankind, which had been maintained and preserved for it by the *gratia communis* [common grace]...The two, special and common grace, separated for ages, once again combine. And thus united, henceforth make their way together among the Christian peoples of the world." Bavinck, "Common Grace," 44.

<sup>60</sup> Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 163.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance. Vol. III/1: The Doctrine of Creation: Part 1. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010.
- Bartholomew, Craig G. "Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenantal Deconstruction." *Calvin Theological Journal* 30.1 (1995): 11–33.
- Bavinck, Herman. "Common Grace." Translated by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen. *Calvin Theological Journal* 24.1 (1989): 35–65.
- . *Our Reasonable Faith*. Translated by Henry Zylstra. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956.
- . *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Berkouwer, G. C. *Man: The Image of God*. Translated by Dirk W. Jellema. Studies in Dogmatics. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962.
- Bolt, John. "Editor's Introduction." Page I:11-22 in *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt, Translated by John Vriend, By Herman Bavinck. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- . "Why the Covenant of Works Is a Necessary Doctrine: Revisiting the Objections to a Venerable Reformed Doctrine." Pages 171–91 in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*. Edited by Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006.
- Campbell-Jack, Walter Campbell. "Grace Without Christ?: The Doctrine of Common Grace in Dutch-American Neo-Calvinism." PhD Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1983.
- Dumbrell, William J. *Creation and Covenant: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*. Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2013.
- Gentry, Peter J., and Stephen J Wellum. *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- Gleason, Ronald Nelson. "The Centrality of the Unio Mystica in the Theology of Herman Bavinck." Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001.
- Hielema, Sydney Jacob. "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption." Th.D. Thesis, Wycliffe College, 1998.
- Hoekema, Anthony A. *Created in God's Image*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994.
- Klapwijk, Jacob. "Antithesis and Common Grace." Pages 169–90 in *Bringing Into Captivity of Every Thought: Capita Selecta in the History of Christian Evaluations of Non-Christian Philosophy*. Edited by Jacob Klapwijk, Sander Griffioen, and Gerben Groenewoud. Christian Studies Today. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992.

- Kuyper, Abraham. *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*. Edited by Jordan J. Ballor and Stephen J. Grabill. Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. Van der Maas. Collected Works in Public Theology. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016.
- . *De Gemeene Gratie*. 4th ed. Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1939.
- Mattson, Brian G. *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Muller, Richard A. "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel." *Calvin Theological Journal* 29.1 (1994): 75–100.
- Pass, Bruce. "The Question of Central Dogma in Herman Bavinck." *Calvin Theological Journal* 53.1 (2018): 33–63.
- Schilder, Klaas. *Heidelburgsche Catechismus: Zondag 1-4*. 2nd ed. Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1947.
- Stek, John H. "'Covenant' Overload in Reformed Theology." *Calvin Theological Journal* 29.1 (1994): 12–41.
- Van Til, Henry R. *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*. Grand Rapids, M.I.: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Veenhof, Jan. *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*. Translated by Albert M. Wolters. Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2006.
- Williams, Michael D. "First Calling: The Imago Dei and the Order of Creation—Part I." *Presbyterion* 39.1 (2013): 30–44.
- Zuidema, S. U. "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper." Pages 52–105 in *Communication and Confrontation: A Philosophical Appraisal and Critique of Modern Society and Contemporary Thought*. Toronto: Wedge Pub. Foundation, 1972.