

Herman Bavinck:  
Profile of a Reformational Pioneer

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***Herman Bavinck:***  
***Profile of a Reformational Pioneer***

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## Author's Preface

Originally I intended to publish this small book earlier, but, due to war circumstances, only now did it become possible for it to see the light. Actually, this delay has an advantage, for it will soon be the twenty-fifth anniversary since Bavinck's demise in 1921.

It seems to me that Bavinck's person and work no longer receives the appreciation he deserves from our current generation. I believe that the climate within our Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) church world would be much healthier if we were more familiar with Bavinck's teachings and if we were to have writings available that are equally clear and decisive as Bavinck's were, but also equally modest and respectful in the manner divine truths are explained. He approaches the mysteries of God almost with fear and trembling while avoiding intellectualism.

In these times in which reason threatens to dominate and emotions are suppressed, we can learn much from this humble academician. It would provide me much satisfaction if this simple writing would contribute to returning Bavinck to the centre of attention.

In addition to this abridged account, I plan to publish a larger work with the same publisher in which, apart from this biography, a generous selection of his theological works will also be offered.

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A. B. W. M. KOK

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## Chapter 1

### The Person of Bavinck<sup>1</sup>

In his Foreword to *Collected Essays of Dr. Bavinck*<sup>2</sup> published by his brother, the Rev. C. B. Bavinck in 1921, the latter wrote that brother Herman had a brief revival during his serious sickness, in which his powerful work ethic was reawakened. He even discussed with his publisher a new plan to write a brochure as soon as possible in which he would point the Reformed/*Gereformeerde*<sup>3</sup> people of The Netherlands to the enormous seriousness of the times and to awaken them to unity and faithfulness. He thought it incomprehensible that even prominent leaders had no eye for the demands and dangers of the new time we were about to experience after World War I (1914-1918).

I am tempted to search for the answer to the question what Bavinck actually would have said and against what he wanted to warn. Though I have my suspicions, I consider it wiser not to spell them out and to restrict myself to what Bavinck actually wrote.

Some time after his death, people from various quarters claimed that in personal discussions or at confidential gatherings he had said things that deviated sharply from what he wrote in his books. The oral Bavinck was said to be much freer about all sorts of

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<sup>1</sup>This translation contains footnotes from both author and the translator. Those from the translator are marked with a “ \* “ at the beginning.

<sup>2</sup>\*Original title: *Verzamelde Opstellen van Dr. Bavinck*.

<sup>3</sup>\*The Netherlands is the happy paradise of a plethora of Reformed denominations, all of which have the Dutch terms for “Reformed” in their names. However, the Dutch have two terms for “Reformed,”: “*Hervormd*” and “*Gereformeerd*.” In this translation, I use “Reformed” only for the former traditional state church, the mother of them all, unless the text refers to all of them together. I use “*Gereformeerde(e)*” for the denominations with which both Bavinck and his contemporary, Abraham Kuyper, were associated.

issues, for example the relationship between Christianity and science, than the Bavinck we know from his books.

Fortunately, those voices soon fell silent and it is to be hoped that the time will soon be behind us for good in which all sorts of unproven oral claims make the rounds that would damage Bavinck's reputation for honesty.

### *His Moulding Influence*

With joy, but simultaneously with a certain degree of sadness, I take up the task of giving a concise description of the life and work of Bavinck. After my brochures about Gomarus and Bilderdijk,<sup>4</sup> I sense the difference between writing about men with which one has had no personal contact and about a person one has known not only but whom one has admired and loved.

Later, I learned to see even deeper the moulding influence that radiated from him and how deep a trail he left in my own life. I consider it a privilege to have been his student for some years. I have enjoyed his excellent lectures, have had confidential discussions with him, have heard him preach, have attended conferences and other get-togethers in his company such as student festivities, dinners and teas. We were fanatical and would hear no evil about him. He simply could do nothing wrong and wore, as it were, a halo.

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<sup>4\*</sup>Throughout this book names appear of Dutchmen not known outside their borders. I do not further identify them. Those who need to know more about them, can do online searches.

We had the same experience with him at the Free University in Amsterdam as others did in the Seminary in Kampen. Reverend H. W. Laman of Kampen wrote,

Bavinck was our idol. We liked all of our profs to various degrees, but Bavinck was our hero. We loved him, not because he was so amazingly friendly, for he was always the professor, though without any professorial pedantry. He was easily approachable, but he did remain the professor; that came just natural for him. He was accessible for an amicable chat in the popular professorial corner.

Nevertheless, it was not the same as with the others; sometimes he could be amazingly absent minded so that we would all fall silent. But we loved him more than all the others, love with a high degree of admiration. He was our Bavinck!!! That said it all.

#### *His Humility*

Bavinck was not only universally erudite, an exceptional orator, a superb lecturer, and a productive publisher, but also—and this is not the least of the reasons that he was so irresistibly popular—an amiable, modest and godly person. Already his writings carry the stamp of his pious heart. Especially those who knew him personally were impressed with his child-like true spiritual life. Bavinck was one of those people from whom emanated an uplifting and ennobling influence on all who associated with him. He indeed considered his neighbors and associates as more excellent than himself.

Professor F. W. Grosheide once wrote,



Whoever was in touch with Bavinck *had* to like him. Always amiable and modest. Always tending to think good of everyone, always prepared to help. He would never be ostentatious about what he knew or what he could do. Always ready to acknowledge the merits of others.

His humility was all the more striking because it is a virtue for which the Reformed are not particularly known. Rather, the Reformed need warnings against conceited glory and against self-satisfied pride. That Bavinck sensed that himself is clear in his essay “The Worship Service,”<sup>5</sup> where he wrote,

Those who confess Jesus Christ, particularly the members of our church, need constantly to be confronted with the lesson not to adopt a superiority complex but to be fearful. Let humility be your garb.<sup>6</sup>

And then he proceeds to sing a song of praise to the virtue of humility:

Humility, it is correctly said, is the garment that fits us; it is the only thing that covers us, the only thing that adorns us. Whoever takes it off, for whatever the circumstances, throws off his most beautiful adornment. Humility must be our attire, whether at home or on the road, whether at weddings or funerals. In order to develop this Christian humility, it will be good and even necessary to pay attention to how far we are still lacking and how we can protect ourselves against empty boasts.

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<sup>5</sup>\*Original title: “*De Predikdienst.*”

<sup>6</sup>\*Is this warning a sign of the effectiveness of Kuyper’s campaign to elevate the “*kleine luyden*” or “little people” among the Reformed? Could Kuyper have gotten more than he bargained for? The same warning has been hurled at the Kuyperian immigrant community in Canada by its own members as a confession in later years.

He also praises humility in other writings as, e.g., in that delicate book *The Certainty of Faith*,<sup>7</sup> where already at its beginning he comments,

More than anywhere else, with respect to the certainty of faith, there is here on the one hand a need for a child-like humble spirit and on the other, an honest and open mind in order to understand the religious life in its deepest dimension as well as to cleanse it from all untruth and error.

### *No Scholastic*

A dogmatician faces the danger of analyzing the truths of faith in a cool rational manner and to reduce it to barren scholasticism. At that point, dogma is reduced to lifeless abstraction and intellectualistic splitting of hair. However, Bavinck—and here he fully agrees with Kuyper—has warned against the glorification of the mind and pleaded passionately for the place of the faith. In a sermon he preached, he jubilates, “The monopoly of the mind has come to an end; emotion reclaims its rightful place; faith has for now won the victory over the idolatry of matter and the captivity to the senses.”

This dogma gripped his soul as the power of the truth of God; with fear and tenderness did he approach that truth. He feared hasty, premature conclusions and allowed mystery to stand for things meant to remain hidden.

He valued the standpoint of the other, would extract the valuable in it and bring it to light and would accompany him as far as

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<sup>7</sup>\*Original title: *De Zekerheid des Geloofs*.

possible. Occasionally he had to be prodded to explain his own point of view and to defend it. So it would happen that many in good faith thought Bavinck agreed with them, while they actually had made the mistake of talking too much and not listening carefully enough. Bavinck, it needs to be said, was a good debater. When necessary, he would deal with arguments with such power that in every round he would come down with increasingly heavier sledgehammers, but he would not resort to this method very easily. He had need of the serene quiet of peaceful argumentation and feared the pain that he might unintentionally inflict during a debate. He preferred to let truth speak for itself; he lived more in the sphere of the objective than in the subjective.

Prof. Grosheide commented on this situation as follows:

It wasn't that he allowed others to walk all over him or that he could accept everything. Oh, no, then you had to see Bavinck in his full power. It would not happen all that often, especially not in his final years. But when he would fully allow himself to let go on a subject that fully preoccupied him and he was completely sure of his issue, if he believed he *had* to, then he would enlist all the power of his eloquence; he would win over everything and everyone.

#### *A Harmonious Personality*

Bavinck was a harmonious person, at one with himself. From whichever side you would view him, he was consistent all over. He was one of the best orators in the country. There was a time that he would be the main speaker at almost every important memorial event. How calmly he would speak and control his

subject, how he composed his lecture systematically and how transparent through the entire performance! How he could penetrate to the core of things and make it clear to everyone! In scholarly circles, on the pulpit, at popular meetings—everywhere people would listen to his inspiring word with almost bated breath and become deeply impressed with the depth of his view and the clarity of his presentation.

Reverent Gispen once wrote about Bavinck's eloquence:

What is so indescribably captivating and attracting in Professor Bavinck is his simplicity, the clarity, the accurate description of ideas and the logical flow of his arguments. His style is not like the exuberance of wild ocean waves, but smooth and level, clear and transparent, more like a soft, flowing stream in which his thoughts playfully follow the current. He penetrates his subject from the ground up and in its entire scope, which enables him to speak about it easily and intelligibly to others. Even when he improvises, what he puts on the table is not only warm, but even well done.

*Wide in Outlook and Strict in Life*

In Bavinck we possessed a rare man well founded in scholarship, a jewel. He was a star of the highest quality for Calvinistic scholarship in our country. His name and work were mentioned with respect even among other circles and had a good reputation far beyond our borders. His well-thought-out studies even now continue to serve as an arsenal against attacks on the truths and doctrines of Christianity. He was so unusually well read that his mighty spirit did not only sum up an enormous amount of literature but also digested and incorporated it! He was a man

wide in outlook and generous in spirit, decisive but simultaneously not narrow-minded; Reformed, but first of all Christian.

He wanted to be and remain a child of the Secession,<sup>8</sup> but at the same time—and here's where the tension in his life and the cause of much suffering showed up—stand in the middle of culture. He wanted to research and understand the cultural life from all sides and from there cast the beams of God's light.

At the same time he had an open eye to the danger of gaining in breadth at the expense of losing the depth of life.<sup>9</sup> That is the reason he never tired of pointing the congregation to their calling to a narrow walk of life; he himself practiced what he recommended for others. He was no proponent of a double morality as if what was law for the simple Reformed people did not apply to a man of knowledge and scholarship.

In his writing about the Christian poet Bilderdijk, he had no desire to sum up his flaws, his sins and his weaknesses. He was even prepared to take into account ameliorating circumstances. Nevertheless, his verdict stood:

For a genius, the laws of morality and justice hold as they do for any other person. And when such a specially favoured person appears on the scene as a witness and defender of the truths of God, then the demand for the sanctifying power of that truth to be visible also in his own life, thought and work, is not unfair. If Bilderdijk had represented the apostolic admonition to resist the sin of the flesh better, his word

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<sup>8</sup>\*A schism from the mother church in 1834.

<sup>9</sup>See Chapter 3.

would have been more powerful, his influence greater and his personality would have made a nobler impression.

Bavinck left a noble impression precisely because his life harmonized with his preaching.

### *Bavinck and Kuyper*

Kuyper died a year before Bavinck. Both men were dogmaticians; both have contributed enormously to the revival of Reformed theology. They returned to the forgotten basics of the national Reformed theology, but not merely to reprimatinate so much as to restore the destroyed fundamentals in association with the Reformed confession and to continue its development according to the demands of the time. They can properly be named the fathers and founders of the revived study of Reformed theology in our country. No doubt Bavinck would even be more prominent if he had not stood next to or in the shadow of the mighty Kuyper.

There are similarities and differences between the two. Kuyper was a militant figure; Bavinck was more irenic in nature. Rather than avoiding conflict, Kuyper would provoke it, while Bavinck would only attack after every attempt to avoid it had failed. Kuyper was feisty in his approach and had the gift of leadership. Bavinck was not suited for politics, but, rather, fit better in the study, the pulpit, the conference or congress. Kuyper was more original and had a more sparkling spirit; Bavinck was broader and more erudite.

Dr. T. Hoekstra expressed the differences in this way:

In keeping with his predisposition and, perhaps, also in connection with his dogmatic conviction, Bavinck felt more akin to Aristotle than to Plato; he was an Aristotelian. Kuyper was more Platonic in spirit; Bavinck more the man of clear definitions. Kuyper, the man with sparkling ideas; Bavinck would build on and from historical data; Kuyper operated with speculative ideas based on intuitive thoughts. Bavinck was primarily inductive; Kuyper, mostly deductive.

Bavinck definitely was no coward, but rather good natured, a sensitive spirit who preferred appreciation to combat. Of course, such a nature has its shadow sides. You might wait too long before you take to the battle and allow the right moment to simply pass by; appreciation becomes one-sided, while the criticism comes off too meager.

Bavinck would not easily overcome what he once said with respect to Kuyper,

I will not deny that in the midst of the battle heat, the blows would be delivered too sharply, and that after the gun smoke had lifted, it was not always possible to distinguish friend from enemy.

In general, the two men appreciated each other.<sup>10</sup> Kuyper almost always expressed his highest pleasure in Bavinck's publications. Bavinck, on his side, in his lecture "Christian and Neutral Politics"<sup>11</sup> expressed on behalf of the entire Anti-Revolutionary Party their deep-felt gratitude and warm tribute to the rock-solid

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<sup>10</sup>Both men had their flaws. The few times they collided would lead sometimes to a temporary cooling. Dr. Hepp speaks extensively about the relationship between them.

<sup>11</sup>\*Original title: *Christelijke en neutrale staatkunde*.

conviction, the exceptional talent, the indefatigable dedication and the heroic courage with which Kuyper clarified and promoted the party's principles for thirty years, organized it, led its meetings and animated everyone with enthusiasm.

In his *A Quarter of a Century*<sup>12</sup> a few pages appear on which Kuyper is honoured in such a striking manner and in such beautiful language that I wish to quote a part of it, while also demonstrating Bavinck's style:

I will honour heroic courage where I find it. I will honour Kuyper in Thorbecke, when he attacks the Conservatives; in Multatuli, as he chastises the *Droogstoppels*<sup>13</sup> in outrage and defends the cause of the oppressed Javanese;<sup>14</sup> in all the heroes of our generation who, in whatever area of culture, broke with the power of custom and tradition and who spoke up in the consciousness of their calling and according to the voice in their heart, because they could not keep silent. I will honour him in the prophets and apostles, in the martyrs and reformers who, more even than the power of humans, withstood also the powers of darkness. Allow me to also honour him in the men of the Reveille and the 1834 Secession, in Bilderdijk and Da Costa, in de La Saussaye and Van Oosterzee, in Groen van Prinsterer and Keuchenius, and also in him who, more than all of them, may be considered the bearer of the banner of Calvinism. Only he who senses the power of tradition, how it subconsciously turns us into its servant, dominates us and

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<sup>12</sup>\*Original title: *Het vierde eener eeuw*.

<sup>13</sup>\*A personalized name for a class of Dutch colonialists that may be described as daft, whining, duplicit, religious, and hypocritical.

<sup>14</sup>\*Javanese are the inhabitants of the island of Java, a major island in the then Dutch colony of Indonesia.



makes us its captive, can appreciate the faith and the courage it takes to break that power. Anyone who subjects himself to tradition can definitely expect a very pleasant and easy life, but he who goes counter to his age, especially against the spirit of the age, and declares, "I can and may do no other," must count on derision and contempt from his contemporaries. Not even the chief editor of "*De Standaard*,"<sup>15</sup> no less than Bilderdijk, Da Costa and Groen, will be spared vilification from his opponents and, unfortunately, not even suspicion and misunderstanding from his fellow travelers. But such, then, are the men who do not merely write history but shape it, who save the stream of life from silting up and from the quagmire of stagnation, and who are always restored to honour by their descendants. Furthermore, all these men have no other weapon in their struggle than the power of the word. The depth and certainty of their convictions has turned all of them into eloquent orators. Bilderdijk has highlighted the muscularity, the tremendous power and the inexhaustible riches of our language in his vigorous songs. Da Costa convinced them with his colourful Eastern expressions, with the glow of Old Testament prophecy. Groen van Prinsterer sculpts his thoughts in marble blocks of style, independence and solid as a rock. But the language of *The Standaard* has surpassed all that of its predecessors in its elasticity of movement, in vivid impression, in ornate pictures, in dramatic action, in animating, compelling power. Its style consists of sentences that, like light weaponry, quick and agile, cheerful and full of courage, with song and music, approach the enemy,

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<sup>15</sup>\*I.e., Kuyper himself.

whether attacking or defending, moving ahead or retreating, but always prepared and preferring to find themselves in the middle of the bustle of war.

*Study His Works!*

It is my heart-felt hope that through the reading of this simple biography many will again study Bavinck's works. The younger generation threatens to forget Bavinck altogether. The negative criticism of some seniors does nothing to awaken their love of and appreciation for this great theologian.

So many books of lower quality are being written and read. We impoverish ourselves voluntarily when we ignore Bavinck's noble treasures and leave them unused.

*About Him*

Shortly after Bavinck's death an *In Memoriam* appeared from the pen of Pastor J. H. Landwehr. In October, 1921, Dr. V. Hepp began his biography of Bavinck. He started off with high quality, but it is a pity that only one chapter of the promised book saw the daylight. Would this capable scholar not be able to continue the work that started so well? In this year of 1946 it is already 25 years since Bavinck's passing and we are still waiting for a complete biography. Many readers are still longing for a sequel to that first chapter.

## Chapter 2

### The Life of Bavinck

#### *A. Youth and Student Life*

The man who later would occupy a prestigious place at the Theological School at Kampen, was born on 13 December, 1854, at Hoogeveen, a week after the school's opening. His father, Jan Bavinck from Bentheim, Germany, was the pastor of the Christian Separated Church there, while simultaneously lecturing at a training school for pastors. Bavinck Sr. had a reputation as a capable theologian with deep knowledge of dogmatics. He was however so modest and thought so little of himself and his gifts, that he did not dare accept the appointment to the Theological School. He preferred to withdraw himself into isolation and keep in the background. That he became increasingly prominent in the life of the church in spite of himself, was due purely to this outstanding gifts.

The young Bavinck's mother was a totally different kettle of fish with a totally different personality. In contrast to her quiet, hesitant and reticent husband, she was very sociable, decisive and plucky. Thus the two complemented each other nicely. Their marriage was harmonious, for, however much they differed from each other, they were united in sincere piety and a simple way of life.

In Herman we find something of both parents. He represented a happy mixture of both.

Herman received his elementary education in Bunschoten in the province of Utrecht, where Bavinck Sr. moved after a stay of six years in Hoogeveen. When Herman was seven years old, the family moved to Almkerk in the southern province of North Brabant. Here Herman attended the well-known Hasselman Institute. This institution with its classical orientation, was of a high standard so that several pastors of that time received an excellent preparation there for their further education. Hasselman, the owner of the institution, soon recognized that Herman was someone with exceptional talents.

His parents also had high expectations of him and gave their Herman a careful and genuinely Christian upbringing. Another son wrote,

They gave us few direct warnings, but both of them influenced us indirectly through their genuine piety and their devout walk. Father did so also through his mysticism, his communion with God and his prayer that made such a deep impression on them as children, while father's clear head saved them from all sickly excesses. Mother contributed through her simplicity, truth and level headedness.

It is thus no wonder that Bavinck frequently remembered his parental home with deep gratitude. As an adult he wrote *The Christian Family* in which he declared the upbringing in a Christian family superior to any other. The family is not of human making; it is a gift from God and full of life. Upbringing in a Christian family carries a unique character of its own. No school or any other institution involved in the rearing of children can replace the family or compensate for it.

Everything in a family contributes to the children's upbringing: the father's handshake, the mother's voice, the older brother, the younger sister, the suckling in the crib, the sickly darling, the grandparents and the grandchildren, the uncles and aunts, the guests and friends, the ups and downs of prosperity and poverty, feast days and days of mourning, Sundays and work days, prayer and thanksgiving at the dinner table together with the reading of God's Word, the morning and evening prayers. Everything plays its part in upbringing from day to day and from hour to hour, without plan or intention, without method or conscious system that was intentionally designed ahead of time. Everything radiates the atmosphere required for upbringing without prior analysis or calculation. A thousand nullities, a thousand trivialities, a thousand futilities—they all have their effects. It is life itself that brings up children, a rich, inexhaustible, comprehensive, wide life. The family is the school of life, because it is its source and hearth.

### *High School*

Bavinck was almost sixteen when his father sent him to a special grammar or high school in Zwolle in 1870. Under the leadership of the highly competent Dr. E. Mehler, this school had an exceptional reputation. Bavinck Sr. had experienced the drawback of an education of poor quality so acutely that he wanted to spare his son from it and thus carefully chose the best education for him.

Though the course took four years, young Bavinck took his final exam after three years, proof that he had studied hard and was

exceptionally gifted. One of his class mates testifies that Herman excelled in knowledge, diligence and simplicity, so that he was generally popular with both teachers and students. That student wrote, "I have never seen him angry. He never had an issue with anyone of us. He was one of these students whom one will remember all his life, no matter how far social views differ."

In Zwolle Bavinck did his profession of faith at a mere eighteen years. From childhood on he walked the way of the Lord and loved his Saviour dearly. Over against his dormitory mates he was a closed book and did not say much about his faith life. However, his reticence was not because of a false shame, but it sprouted out of his sober character. He never and nowhere ever was ashamed of the Gospel, but was throughout his life a courageous and fearless witness of the Christian truth. It could not be otherwise, for he had confessed his faith with his whole heart and full conviction and declared his "Yes" deeply moved with holy seriousness.

#### *Student at Leiden*

It was time for Bavinck to enroll as a student at the Theological School. Now he could once again move into his beloved parental home, for his father was now a pastor in Kampen. Later he reported that he was deeply indebted to the teachings of lecturer Steketee. This professor was the first to awake in him a passion for the study of philosophy. Steketee was a profound and deep spirit, who devoted himself especially to studying the classics, a man of rich knowledge, broad development and tender faith life. With his dying lips he testified, "I die in the faith of Augustine, Calvin and Pascal."

However, with his philosophical orientation, Bavinck desired a more scholarly education than the Theological School of that day could offer and wanted to know more about modern theology. That's why his heart pulled him to Leiden, which at the time was the bastion of modern theology and had gained a high standing in the scholarly world. And so he went back to that old and famous university to hear the renowned professors Scholten and Kuenen. It was taken ill of Bavinck Sr. that he allowed his son to study at a university where the theology it promoted was in direct opposition to the Reformed worldview. He was accused of entrusting his son to the mouth of lions. The firm answer of the father, who in other circumstances could sometimes be wavering and timid, was that he fully trusted the grace of his God, who would protect His child. That faith was not put to shame. The young Bavinck would experience difficult times and had to fight a heavy struggle of faith,<sup>16</sup> but later he could declare with humble thanks to God that, in the vortex of the hurricane of opinions and systems, his faith was not torn away. Naturally the members of the Christian Reformed Church<sup>17</sup> came closer together. They were three: Bavinck in theology and Semitic studies, Nieuwhuis in natural science and Lucasse in law. It was not as if he socialized only

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<sup>16</sup>This is clear from the letters he wrote to this friend Snouck Hurgronje shortly after his departure to Leiden, which afford us an insight in his inner life. On the one hand, he agrees that Leiden gave him a broad background. He hopes to always acknowledge that gratefully. He credits Leiden especially for his ability to try to understand his opponent. On the other hand, Leiden also frequently threatened to seriously impoverish him. First the students and then the churches became the pitiable victims of Leiden's Modernism. He wrote,

If the former come out of a pious family, they will not only meet a deep crisis at the academy, in which their religious conviction and their love for the pastoral office will be threatened, but an even greater difficulty awaits them when they transition from the school to the church, from the academy back to life, from theory back to the practical. In many cases they are no longer able to preach, because they do not believe. Often they have nothing to preach about, because the power and the glory of the Gospel had been taken away from them through the critical method. They can no longer witness, because they were shocked in their child-like faith in the words of the Apostles...."

<sup>17</sup>\*Not to be confused with the North American denomination with that name.

with members of his own church. He was too idealistic and too broad of vision to lock himself into a narrow little circle and with full confidence he joined the student corps. The spirit in the student world, however, was at such a low level that after a few days of orientation, he withdrew.

### *Scholten and Kuenen*

Since about 1850, the spirits of the Netherland's young were charmed in Leiden by the spread of Modernism that swung the controlling scepter in both scholarship and church. In 1848, Scholten had published his book *Leer der Hervormde Kerk in hare grondbeginselen*,<sup>18</sup> which Bavinck later dubbed as “a modern dogmatics under the Reformed banner.”

Modernism denies all wonders and special revelation with determination. According to the judgement of modernists, the new natural and historical scholarship had undeniably proved that any talk of an order of things beyond or above nature is absolutely to be rejected, which also naturally extends to the realm of the spiritual. Revelation is restricted to creation and maintenance. There is no special or particular divine revelation. God reveals himself in all that is created, in all His works, in nature and in history, and, above all, in the man Jesus, who demonstrates for us true religion in both his life and death. Scholten wanted to differentiate between ground principles and the dogma of Reformed theology, “but by using the former he critiqued the latter away so that eventually he was left with nothing but a monistic and deterministic system.” He claimed to be developing

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<sup>18</sup>\*The English title might be translated as “*The Foundations of the Dogma of the Reformed Church.*”



Reformed doctrine, but constantly undermined the Church's teaching.

This Modernism was conjoined with critique of the Holy Scripture. Scholten's conceptions made this clear, as he progressively advanced in his Scriptural criticism and increasingly broke with the ancient Christian truths. But this emerged especially in the works of the man who, next to Scholten, served as leader of modern theology, namely professor Abraham Kuenen. His works in the fields of the Old Testament and the religion of Israel were all based on a hyper-critical standpoint. Prophecy is not due to supernatural impulse, but is the product of natural human development.

#### *The Necessity of Special Revelation*

Later, Bavinck would maintain with strong insistence the necessity of special revelation over against this Modernism. To be sure, general revelation is very valuable, but it is insufficient for humans as sinners. It knows nothing of grace and forgiveness. Sin requires something different from general revelation, something that has a variety of relationships with the general, but that nevertheless is essentially, in form and content, to be distinguished. It addresses our fallen race and thus needs to be a revelation of grace. That special revelation is God's reaching out and God's coming to mankind.

The book of this special revelation is the Scripture. In Scripture, it is always God who reaches out to humans. He creates them in His image. He calls them after the fall. He saves Noah; He elects Abraham; He gives His laws to Israel. He calls and empowers the

prophets. He sends His Son. He withdraws His Apostles; and He judges the living and the dead.

All that is the reason Bavinck cannot stand it that the organism of Holy Scripture is violated by the dissecting knife of criticism and he constantly defends the majesty and glory of the Scripture in his works.

In an impressive concluding word at the celebration of the Centennial Feast of The Netherlands Bible Society in 1914, he would plead for the necessity and the elevated nature of “this best of all books” with these words as if carried away:

We cannot imagine how poor this world would be, were Scripture suddenly ripped out of our midst with all of its influences and effects. After all, it is the Bible, and only the Bible, that discovers for us not only the human heart but also the heart of God. No philosophy and no scholarship tells us who or what is God, but only the Scripture.

Knowledge of self and knowledge of God go together. The same book that gives us knowledge of the human race as we truly are, also gives us witness as to the essence of God. It demonstrates for us in word and deed that that being is holy and righteous, but also gracious and merciful as well as great in compassion. With the inner movement of this compassion did He come to us from on high to give light to those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death in order to give them knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins and to direct their feet on the path of peace.

And thus Scripture brings in Him, who is the fulcrum of the ages, God and human all in one, the bonds of reconciliation and the restoration of the disturbed community.

In the cross of Christ we have the solid guarantee and the sure pledge that the love of God is no mere sound, but reality, a power that controls the history of humanity and the world.

### *The Fading of Leiden's Flourishing Period*

Bavinck did not know Scholten during the latter's period of strength. When Bavinck came to Leiden, the once celebrated scholar was already going downhill, so that the young student did not derive much from Scholten's lectures. He had greater admiration for Kuenen. Though he did not accept Kuenen's Scriptural criticism, he appreciated his scholarly method and his objective rendering of the opinion of others. Bavinck himself would later follow his teacher in this regard.<sup>19</sup> He also had high regard for the professor as a person, so that he occasionally referred to his noble character in his correspondence and had his portrait hanging in his study for many years.

In general, the education he received at Leiden University was less than expected; many professors disappointed him. It had passed its more flourishing period; the Theological Faculty lived off its past glory. The students complained about its one-sided approach in which there was a definite break with tradition, while the constructive element remained too much in the background.

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<sup>19</sup>\*I found the same thing to be true of Professor Gerrit E. Berkhouwer, who later came to occupy Bavinck's chair and whose series *Studies in Dogmatics* I always found refreshing for the same reason in the context of a much more doctrinaire Calvin Theological Seminary of my days there (1962-1965). See our memoirs: *Every Square Inch: A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 1, p. 209, on the Boeriana page of this website.

Dr. Hepp, Bavinck's successor, expansively passed on these complaints that he derived from the Student Almanac of 1876. I borrow the following quotation:

With regard to the Old Testament, the time during which the various books were written, the progress in the development of Israel's religion was determined and pointed out, how the result was a break with earlier tradition. All of that was very much needed and done with exceptional sharpness. But they intentionally failed to select passages in which the true beauty in Israel's prophecies and songs could be heard; that simply did not happen. The origin and development of the Psalms were made clear. The time when various Psalms were written in the course of Israel's religious development was determined, etc. etc. Absolutely, no superfluous work. But how in those songs the real religion speaks that would thrill the emotions of the singers, and, through them even awake in us the glow of higher passion—all of that is largely ignored.

### *Friendship*

As student, Bavinck always worked hard. It speaks for itself that a student who thirsts after knowledge not restrict himself fearfully to studying for final exams. He attended lectures in various disciplines that were not required of him. For example, besides Theology, he also took in Semitic Literature. At that time there was another student with exceptional gifts who had also registered at the university, a young man, who would later become a famous expert in Eastern languages, namely Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. These two gifted students became friends;

they regularly worked together and remained closely related to each other their entire lives.

The two did differ from each other theologically, for Hurgronje was not orthodox in his orientation, but they were united in simplicity, in modesty and seriousness of life.<sup>20</sup> During vacations they wrote each other regularly and only fourteen days before Bavinck's death, Professor Hurgronje stood at this death bed. They took their final exams in theology within two days. Hurgronje was the first. Of course he passed, but, though everyone expected it, he received no special distinction. The following day Bavinck took his exam and passed it "*cum laude*." He was so indignant that his friend was not similarly honoured that he, deeply incensed, refused to accept his distinction and stormed out of the room. This, of course, brought great consternation.

This small example not only proves the strength of his sense of justice, but also how hot headed he could be. Most of the time he would totally control himself so that he appeared unmoved and calm, but he would demonstrate later that he could be surprisingly furious and emotional in ways not expected of him.

### *As Preacher*

As student the young Bavinck would regularly attend the Christian Reformed Church where J. H. Donner was a respectable preacher who captivated his audiences by the excellent content of his sermons rather than by his external gifts. After his final exam, Bavinck occasionally preached in this church. However, he

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<sup>20</sup>Bavinck wrote, for example, "I can only regret that so far we are so immensely far from each other in principles and in worldview. In spite of that, I retain my heart-felled friendship and warm interest in you, despite this great difference in insight and conviction."

preached his first sermon end July, 1878, in Enschede. For someone like Bavinck, this was an important event. He himself wrote,

Making a sermon was no trifling matter for me. I did succeed at the end. My text was I John 5:4—“This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” Delivering it was not as difficult as I had expected. I was very calm and composed. Thus I was happy that I had done it, for I overcame herewith the greatest obstacle. Nevertheless, there was a sense of dissatisfaction in the sense that I felt less inspired than I had expected. I did not speak with the feeling I had hoped for, while the thought always to be so short from the ideal constantly bothered me. Anyway, it went alright and I have plenty reasons for being grateful.

Already during his student years his preaching made a deep impression on large crowds that would congregate in the church. What this fiery young preacher promised for the future! His audience was electrified. That voice, those sober gestures, that imposing figure, his entire sanctified personality, his powerfully rich content—everything worked together to bring this dense crowd under his magical influence.

One of the enthusiasts who heard him in Leiden was the then current preacher Rev. J. van den Linden. He wrote,

There were several professors and students in the church while the young Bavinck delivered the good confession, towing his audience along with these wonderful words from Paul in Galatians 2:20—“The life I live in the body, I live by

faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

I could easily share the glorious segments of his mighty and gripping words, how he would sketch the riches of a hero in the faith like Paul over against the poverty and emptiness of the world’s most esteemed with his wonderful, “Christ has loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

J. H. Landwehr, another pastor, heard him preach about another text in Leiden that Bavinck would later quote frequently, because that word sketched the profound riches of this congregation with these striking words from I Corinthians 3:21-23—

So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

Landwehr made this remarkable and moving report on this service,

How gloriously was the great privilege of the congregation sketched first in eloquent words: “Everything is yours.” And then, as only Bavinck could do, laying everything at the feet of the congregation. After this, the intimate relationship between the congregation and Christ: “You are of Christ.” And then finally that amazingly elevated conclusion: “And Christ is of God.”

It was a September evening. The sunlight was receding and the serving custodian had lit the gas lamp on the pulpit. There he stood, Bavinck, in the glow of the lamplight that

created a magical atmosphere with the congregation listening more and more attentively. The conservative people of Leiden began to rise up from their pews. It was a mass of people who seemed inclined to crowd more and more around the pulpit. And yet, it was still, mouse-still..... I will never forget that moment. And when the “Amen” echoed through the building, an audible sigh rose up from the entire congregation.

Bavinck’s fame as preacher soon spread across the whole country, so that a stream of preaching invitations came his way. He accepted very few, because he wanted to use all his time for study purposes. He wrote his friend Hurgronje,

I am not complaining about these invitations, for it is often very useful for ourselves to participate in practical life. Furthermore, the thought to serve the needs of others contains a rich comfort. We are not born, as I read recently in Zwingli, to live for ourselves but to become all things to all people.

#### *His Graduation*

Of course, his further study at Leiden progressed smoothly. He completed his study in five years and graduated on June 10, 1880, on basis of a dissertation *De Ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli*. Although this work did not reach the height of his later publications, already this early fruit of his thought forces admiration from his readers, especially when it is realized that he worked on this dissertation a mere eight months. We find the later Bavinck already here in the objective rendering of Zwingli’s thoughts, in the clear style and the contemporary relevance.



Bavinck was particularly interested in the ethical principles of the Zurich reformer:

Though replaced by Calvin and standing in his shadow, Zwingli is and remains the first to declare the principles and to define the general outlines of Reformed theology, even if by no means with the mental power of the Genevan reformer. His immense relevance is not so much in theological acumen as it is with respect to practical social life.

Bavinck goes far in his appreciation of Zwingli and says among other things, “None of the Reformers have shown the ethical power of the faith as clearly as has Zwingli.” On page 122, he wrote,

Perhaps none of the Reformers have understood it better than Zwingli that Christianity is a yeast that penetrates the entire society, the salt of the earth, a power that does not rest till it rules the world.

The question is whether in his later life Bavinck continued to stand behind all the utterances in his dissertation. In 1909, he was to present a lecture about John Calvin, in which he expressed his judgement that Calvin brought the Reformers Luther and Zwingli into a higher union and that there has been no Reformer with a wider view and broader horizon than the Reformer from Geneva. There was in Calvin, as in Zwingli, a powerful social pull that turned all his work into a rich blessing for all of society.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>See also Bavinck's *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk (The Catholicity of Christendom and Church)*, 1888, pp. 31-32. Here he writes,

In the propositions that accompanied his dissertation, he rejects the customary distinction that Luther only rejected in the liturgy what is prohibited in the Scripture, while Zwingli included also all that was not commanded.

His seventh proposition states that the Secession of 1834, measured by the Reformed principle, was right and necessary.

The nineteenth declares: “The analytical method of preaching is preferred to the synthetic.” The last one is worthy of mention: “Direct involvement of the state must be kept as minimal as possible. The ideal is not for the state to do everything, but that everyone in the state fulfills his task.”

## **B. The Franeker Pastorate**

After Bavinck had done his final exam at the Theological School and was declared eligible for a call, he soon received a call from the church in Franeker. He wrote to his friend Hurgronje that Franeker was quite a large congregation as well as quite a difficult one for an inexperienced candidate. In addition, he continued, going into practice made him shudder; he would much rather turn it down, but felt that he could no longer withdraw himself and sacrifice duty for his own taste. He accepted the call and was

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Calvin has researched the effect of sin broader than Luther and deeper than Zwingli. That is why the grace of God is more limited with Luther and poorer with Zwingli than with Calvin. Here, in the powerful spirit of the French Reformer, re-creation is not a system that complements the creation as with Rome, not a religious reformation that keeps the creation intact as with Luther, and even much less a new creation as with the Anabaptists, but a joyful message of renewal to all creatures. Here the Gospel comes to its full essence, to genuine catholicity. \*For further details about these distinctions, consult his article “Nature and Grace” found close by on this same website page.

installed by his father on March 13, 1881, with the text from Isaiah 52:7—“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’”

In the second service that same Sunday he assumed his office with a sermon about I Thessalonians 2:4—“We speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.”

Dr. Hepp wrote some details about this installation and entry that are of significance for understanding Bavinck as a person:

Someone in Franeker told me that during the installation Bavinck sat sort of hidden in a heavy coat, constantly just staring ahead of himself. The office he was about to accept weighed so heavily on him that he did not dare to look up. Even when his father addressed him, he retained the same posture. Now one of the elders gave him a push and Bavinck understood. He took off his coat and from now on looked at his father, who recommended him to the love of the congregation with special insistence. In the evening he also had a difficult moment. He walked back and forth in the council chamber. The brothers became worried, but the father explained softly to them that he would soon get over it. This nervousness to preach, the so-called “preaching fever,” remained with him throughout his Franeker time. Usually he would vomit Sunday mornings and ate little or nothing for the rest of the day.

No wonder that the mother, who understood her son's nervous disposition, during a social time in the home of one of the elders after the evening service, urgently requested especially the mothers in the congregation to take good care of her Herman.

This maternal concern stood in relationship with the fact that Bavinck entered the manse as a bachelor. A certain couple lived on the floor below and took care of the young preacher, while he himself lived upstairs.

It speaks for itself that an idealistic and conscientious man like Bavinck would carry out all the aspects of his office with faithfulness and precision. The Franeker church had experienced a difficult time before Bavinck's arrival; it had its share of difficult people. But the preaching of the new pastor was at such a high level that the criticism soon faded and the church would fill up completely every Sunday. Undoubtedly, he would give the congregation the very best in form and content that he could muster.

From his later writings it becomes clear how high a level he would demand from a pastor and how high regard he had for the pulpit. Allow me to give you one citation. In his famous lecture, "Eloquent Oratory,"<sup>22</sup> he addressed seminary students as follows:

The word, gentlemen, will simultaneously be your sword and your shield, both weapon of attack and defence. Your power will be all the greater and your influence all the wider the more you handle that weapon with skill. All the other spiritual

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<sup>22</sup>\*Original: "De Welsprekendheid."

gifts will be of greater glory to the extent the word is expressed in a more powerful and enthusiastic manner. “Servants of the Word,” of the Divine Word, shall be your name of honour. With that you will be endowed with a power greater than that of kings and other rulers of the world. You will be the master of the world and master of emotions. He who rules the spirit is stronger than one who conquers a city.

According to him, Dutch pulpits were not currently blessed with an abundance of good, powerful speakers, let alone orators.

These days orators are found more outside than inside the walls of the churches. Speakers, convicted and gifted speakers, are currently found among all ranks and classes, among all sorts of groupings and orientations. They captivate the populace and lure it from the churches to lecture halls.

After reminding his audience of a statement from Schopenhauer, namely that writers can be divided into three classes: first, those who write without thinking, the largest class; then those who think while writing, also numerous; and finally those who have been thinking before they begin to write, extremely few, Bavinck commented—and here he is very sharp--:

That classification can be adopted for public speakers as it stands. Even the orators on the pulpit are no exceptions. Perhaps the classification holds here with more power and substance than anywhere else. Bombastic voice, resounding speech, stretched tone, empty sentences and flattering terms all have to combine to make up for what is lacking in solid content and genuine study. This is even more amazing

because the preacher of God's Word must declare, a conviction which forbids him in the strongest sense to ascribe to Scripture something different from what it actually says. The text is often used as a mere hook on which the shabby rag of private or popular opinion is hung. Allegory, spiritualizing, mystical or deeper meaning, a truth behind the truth—these are the tools of the art by which the preacher reconciles his own thoughts with those of Scripture. This does not require study, only ingenious cleverness, unlimited fantasy, a fair measure of brutality and an easy-going conscience.

Such preachers do book success, even more than the Sophists. Perhaps you dare to answer the question why Moses held the snake by the tail and not by the head, with the “profound” notion that the head was already crushed in Paradise (Genesis 3:15). Or perhaps, without batting a mystical eye, you interpret the men of the Samaritan woman as the five books of Moses (John 4:18, especially :17-18). Or, further, you see in the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca a foreshadowing of how Christ marries His bride, the congregation (Genesis 24). If this is how you dare proclaim the Word of God, then you will not lack success.

Bavinck regarded lecturing as a matter of the whole person, but the voice in this context takes first place.

A good voice is a precious gift. It is the echo of the mind, the expression from our inner breast.... It is an invaluable privilege for a speaker when he has received a clear, powerful voice.... The voice is a fine musical instrument;

fortunate is he who can play it well and elicit from it the most beautiful of tones. But it is equally possible to speak or sing or play with a distorted, false, disharmonious voice. The highest art is to control the voice fully, to express its deepest soul and every emotion, every diversity of emotion even. All of that is possible, for the human voice is as rich as the heart and as language. It is the most beautiful, the finest of music; there is not a tone in all of nature that I cannot utter. It can rumble like thunder and howl like a hurricane. It can foam like a mountain stream and murmur like a brook.

Bavinck was a cultured man who valued good form without being its slave. He was always dressed properly, not faddish, but in clothing that was fully in harmony with his personality.

A good appearance befits the general culture, which is then adjusted to the special case of having to appear in public as a speaker. Be a well-bred person in your family, in your daily life, in your social contacts, and it will require a minimal effort to be the same in the pulpit.... There is nothing irrelevant in your presentation. Head and body, eye and eyebrow, hand and foot, even clothes, they all together need to express what is happening in our souls and said by our mouths.

### *Complaints*

In 1883, an article by Bavinck about the church service appeared in *De Vrije Kerk*. He wanted to be fair, but had to admit that anyone whose fame rested on his pulpit manners and the quality of his sermons will find an abundance of reasons for complaints. It was his opinion that the current preaching level was beneath the

style of his day and was not up to his standards. For the pulpit to regain its power, then that is where the remedy is to be sought. That can and will happen when preachers once again devote themselves to studying the Holy Scriptures. He regarded the most important deficiency in preaching to be the fact that it is not derived from Scripture and is not baptized with its spirit.

Undoubtedly thinking back to his Leiden days,

There is currently no lack of Scriptural research; the prolegomena or introductory subjects have the most prominent place in academia. But that is not genuine research. This method yields much knowledge about and regarding Scripture..., but it does not teach anything about the richness and depth of Scripture itself, or about its unity and diversity. This results in vain preaching. Then our preaching lacks the power and authority it needs and that can only be derived from the Word of God on which it is based. Our preaching may be a piece of art, resplendent with smart architecture and poured into splendid form, but it will nevertheless be poor, because the eternal thrust of the words of God is lacking. The study of Scripture itself is therefore the first and most important requirement for the preacher. It needs to be regular, continuous, unceasing study of Scripture, even without necessarily using commentaries, but with a clear view and a prayerful heart that is open to the teachings of the Holy Spirit, with a devout, receptive soul and with a sanctified and cleansed conscience.

Since Bavinck's passing we have made tremendous exegetical progress and our professors have given us excellent materials.



The fruit of that labour comes to light in current preaching that often deals with the more obscure parts of Scripture, but Bavinck still complains:

Sadly, we still know so little of Holy Scripture. We understand a mere pittance of its content. There are still treasures hidden in it that the congregation has never fathomed. We have merely touched it here and there and that with already eighteen centuries behind us, while the times are rushing towards the end! We must make haste in order to understand the signs of the times when the Son of Man comes and explain it in the light of prophecy. We must be able to say that we have saved His Word, have not denied His Name and know Him and the power of His resurrection and communion in His suffering. All of us, but especially the teachers, have to make their contribution to this.

Bavinck arrived in Franeker at a time when many regarded the Church as antiquated. The leading elite would pass it by with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulder, while its members comprised the ordinary people, Kuyper's "*kleine luyden*."<sup>23</sup>

The times have changed in this regard. The awareness of the church has deepened and the church is once again in society's centre. It displays its power, raises its voice and refuses to be marginalized. But with Bavinck we constantly meet complaints about the sad condition of the church. According to him,

The days that the pulpit is power have passed. Church attendance is slowly decreasing among modernists not only

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<sup>23</sup>\*The standard Kuyperian term for "the little people," the masses.

but also among the orthodox in most places. Interest in the church and the desire to hear a sermon is slowly diminishing. There are thousands who are totally estranged from the church, who never cross its threshold and whose number increases daily.

In *Hedendaagsche Moraal*,<sup>24</sup> his complaints about the moral life of his time and about the aversion of many to the church sound even more somber:

There is no longer a question of higher interest or idealistic principle; everything turns around women and money. Utilitarianism and egoism are the strongest motives that control people's behavior.... Almost everything that bubbles up from our elites confirms the word that our time fears scenes and scandals but secretly does not back away from every vice and misdeed.

As to aversion to the church, his judgement is equally sharp:

Who of our politicians, professors, academics, teachers, military officers, lawyers, medical doctors, artists, authors, civil servants, musicians or merchants still attend church? Who among them still cares about the church? Indeed, who among them is not ashamed of Christianity and religion or who still allows the Name of God or of Christ to pass his lips except as a swearword? And what can be expected of the moral progress of a nation that has such leaders?

*Growth*

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<sup>24</sup>\*An English translation of the title might be "Contemporary Morality."

It was in such a time that Bavinck became a preacher in Franeker. A tender nature such as his could not but suffer from the indifference and coarseness of the people. But he will also have been conscious of his holy calling to serve the Church of Christ with his gifts in order to conquer the place for Christian scholarship to which she has a right.

The preacher and the congregation got along fine with each other. Bavinck was irenic by nature so that it was not difficult to remain good friends with him. He felt right at home in Franeker, even though, as he wrote his friend, he would not spend all his life in the far north of the country. Well, he did not have to fear that fate!

Every preacher who takes his high office seriously, struggles with the depressing feeling to fall so far short from the ideal. A person like Bavinck must often have been weighed down by the oppressive feeling of inadequacy in his official work. At least that's how he writes:

The most difficult part of my work is to forever lift myself up and to stay at the ideal height of my faith and confession. Oh, always to have to deal with the holy, constantly to be called upon to prayer and thanksgiving, to admonition or to console! And then so often incapable to live into the constantly changing circumstances, that hits hard. It creates a feeling of dissatisfaction and not infrequently of indifference. I understand now better than before how a deeply unholy, numb and hypocritical heart can exist under the robe of a clergy.

Another part of this same letter gives a remarkable peek into Bavinck's inner life. It appears after all that Leiden has had greater influence on him than he himself was aware of and that he had to free himself more and more from historical criticism. His spiritual life goes through a positive development so that he increasingly becomes "*Gereformeerd*."<sup>25</sup> This part of it is too interesting not to repeat it in his own words:

I no longer express the many premature judgements of yesterday. I have developed more respect and more piety for the faith and related works of the centuries; I have become more modest in my opinions and have somewhat deviated from the proud perspective to test everything by my own intellect and reason. I am learning more and more what is implied in the principle of faith—which I never forsook—and how it impacts in every direction. I am more convinced than ever that the Church of Christ, of which I am merely a simple member, has its own life that is very different from all other areas of life, and thus has also its own confession, world-and-life view as well as its own scholarship, in principle at least. This does not mean I simply accept the old, try to grasp the "naïve," and satisfy myself with hollow phrases. Definitely not! But through research, including research into the history of our *Gereformeerde* church, I have come to realize that what I used to dismiss as hollow phrases, were that by no means. Perhaps, just like my previous letter, this sounds strange to you. All of this is mostly meaningless to you, but for me this is the life of the soul. Basing ourselves on different principles we grow further and further away from

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<sup>25</sup>\*"Reformed," specifically referring to the denomination Kuyper had a hand in and in which I, the translator, was baptized.

each other as we extend the lines and their consequences  
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Studying was the love of his life and therefore we hear him complain about having so little time for it. His congregation is large and his official duties required much time. He is jealous of his friend, who is becoming a colossus of scholarship, while he feels himself impoverished. “This reduces one’s love for study. One is left losing oneself in trivialities such as reading newspapers and magazine articles that contribute nothing.” (Sometimes Bavinck could make sharp comments without noticing it.)

Nevertheless, he found time for writing articles in *De Vrije Kerk*. In 1882 he was appointed its Chief Editor and published a new edition of the famous theological work entitled *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1625) that contained a brief summary of Reformed doctrine and with which famous Reformed Leiden scholars such as Polyander, Walaens, Thysius and Rivetus, were associated.

### *Farewell*

It was to be expected that Bavinck would not stay long in Franeker. He was there for only a year when the church of Amsterdam called him. He declined that call, but it was a different case with the appointment of lecturer at the Theological School by the General Synod of the Christian Reformed Church at Zwolle in 1882. It was not like him to act gravely and to keep the

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<sup>26</sup>The reader should by now have observed how the correspondence he conducts with his bosom friend Snouck Hurgronje is a precious resource for Bavinck’s life. How it must have smarted him that they moved farther and farther away from each other in faith and confession! However, the friendship and mutual appreciation remained intact.

congregation in suspense, while he really had already made his decision. The congregation knew soon that, though his leaving might be difficult for him, he would accept the appointment. He was very happy with the appointment and regarded it as an answer to prayer. According to the minutes, the Council of the Franeker church expressed their happiness with this appointment, because it believed that his great gifts of scholarship would be used as a blessing for the entire denomination. Nevertheless, “a great sadness fills our hearts together with that of the entire congregation and even outside the congregation, that we will soon see our beloved teacher with his glorious preaching, his serious and tender moving among us, leave.”

How close the tie was between them and how painful the farewell, was apparent from an emotional and heart-felt letter in which he wrote,

The congregation was very attached to me. Old and young, rich and poor, inside and outside of the congregation, everyone regretted my leaving. It gripped me sometimes and led me to ask myself whether my desire was pure and genuine. I am happy that I spent more than a year and a half in a congregation and have gotten to know the congregation in every sort of wrongdoings, yes, but also in their deep piety and their noble sense of the good and true.

The moment of farewell took place on October 8, 1882. The audience filled the church to the rafters, and was deeply moved as it listened to a sermon on Jesus’ prayer for His disciples in John 17:17—“Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth.” Bavinck’s life was about to enter into a new period.

### *C. Professor at Kampen*

Many courses were placed on the shoulders of the young professor. To begin with, the theological-- dogmatics, ethics and encyclopedia. To those were added literary courses.

On January 10, 1883, Bavinck started his new career with a lecture entitled "The Science of Holy Theology."<sup>27</sup> With great decisiveness he pointed to the Holy Scriptures as the only source of theology. The Bible is the principle out of which theology emerges, the seed from which it germinates. Actually, everything we know about God is found in the Holy Scriptures. Allow me to share a small part of this majestic clear-as-crystal lecture:

He who rejects the Holy Scripture as the beginning source, as the only source of knowledge for theology, and gives room to reason or feeling next to or in place of it, to confession or concilium, destroys the science of theology, misunderstands the character of the dispensation in which we live, actually attacks the work of Christ Himself and...transitions from the Reformed terrain to that of the Roman Catholics. For this is exactly what separates our Protestant confession from that of Rome: The Word is complete. The revelation of God has been given completely to us and has been learned completely by His emissaries. Christ is there and His work is completed. He is the Head of the congregation. Similarly, the Word of which He is the content, is completed; It is sufficient.

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<sup>27</sup>\*"De Wetenschap der Heilige Godgeleerdheid."

A bit further on he continues,

The Bible is for the theologian what nature is for the natural scientist. Just as the natural scientist who wants to derive the laws of nature from speculative *a priori* will surely stray, so the theologian who goes to another source will lose his way. The Word is theology in a nutshell; all its truths are contained in it, even though theologians need to apply themselves with the same degree of energy and exertion as scientific truth in nature are researched, gathered and arranged. It is a labour, moreover, not of one theologian nor of one generation, but of the Church of all the ages.

I know, these are familiar sounds to us. We must, however, not forget that at that time many theologians no longer stood on the solid ground of God's infallible Word. Scriptural criticism brought the spirits in confusion and was the cause for many losing their faith. Together with Kuyper, Bavinck once again led the church and theology back to the Scripture. It is in this light that we must understand the deep joy of the *Gereformeerde* people when the genial Kuyper and the profound Bavinck stood in the breach as champions of the truth and the divinity of Scripture. For that time, it was a new sound.

No wonder then that reason was a popular subject of discussion and that the press was particularly appreciative in her opinions. Abraham Kuyper also was very pleased with this oration and wrote in his paper *The Heraut* that it had hardly ever happened to him that he could read something with almost complete unanimity from beginning to end. "It was," he jubilated, "refreshing to read this. Here is a faithfulness with respect to the confession of Dordt



that refuses to deviate, but just as much the spirit of Dordt that does not cut off the further development of theology.”

Turning to the students, the new lecturer declared that he comes to them with joy and heart-felt devotion and that they can count on love from his heart, on his passion and diligence in order to lead them into the temple of holy, divine theology. It will be his goal to create in them a love for theology, the most beautiful of all sciences, love for the Church that provides them this theological greenhouse, love above all for God. “My task is heavy, but so is yours. Much will be expected from you and constantly more demanded. You will need to work hard, exerting all your strength. I count on you, on your devotion, on your love and on your dedication.”

Even though he shuddered sometimes at the thought of all that was laid on his shoulders, he began his task with passion and courage. In the future it would show that the young scholar was entering a happy and blessed period of his life.

#### *A Great Lecturer*

Bavinck turned out to be a born professor, a lecturer of the first order who knew how to express his rich thoughts in crystal clear language. The rector of my gymnasium, Dr. J. vanden Valk, who held Bavinck in high esteem, wrote in *De Ster*: “He was a fine lecturer whose manners spilled over even on the most uncultured, immodest and indiscreet student. His students carried some of his prestige, something that is the most delightful element of teaching, this spiritual reproduction.”

More than anyone else he awoke in the students a love for theological scholarship and for the Church of Christ. He held them accountable for the motto they themselves had written on the banner of their corps: “*Fides quaerit intellectum,*” meaning “Faith seeking knowledge” or “Faith striving for understanding.” He trusted that they wanted to be theologians that were knowledgeable of God, priests who would elucidate Him and prophets who would proclaim Him.

In a time when the Reformed worldview was held in contempt and considered totally irrelevant, Bavinck returned to John Calvin and rediscovered the wealth and depth of the traditional Reformed truth. So he was prominent amongst those who promoted the revival of *Gereformeerde* thinking and life. He saw through the emptiness and poverty of Modernism, the Ethical movement in its half-heartedness and its inadequacy, while he opened the eyes of many to the treasures that lay hidden in *Gereformeerde* doctrine.

He was *Gereformeerde* in a positive way and accepted the antithesis in every area of life, but he also throughout his life cautioned against “church-ism,” against locking yourself up in your own church institute and to isolate yourself from the other children of God. Even the church that confesses the truth in its clearest form needs the help of other churches to protect itself from becoming one-sided. The *Gereformeerde* Church is not the only revelation of the holy universal Christian Church. Bavinck wrote this already in 1888 in *The Catholicity of Christendom and the Church*,<sup>28</sup> and would repeat the same thought later:

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<sup>28</sup>\*Original title: *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk.*

As not a single church, however orthodox, represents the universal Church, so not a single confession, however cleansed by God's Word, may claim to represent the full universal Church. Every denomination, sect or cult that views itself as the only Church of Christ and considers itself as the exclusive possessor of the truth, shrivels up and dies away as a branch torn from its stem. The one holy universal Christian Church, now only an object of faith, will come only when the Body of Christ has reached its full maturity.

In 1894 he writes in *Common Grace*:<sup>29</sup> "Calvinism does not claim that it is in itself the only one and that it is the total truth."

Bavinck was not only against a small minded, self-sufficient and "church-ish" spirit, but he also warned constantly against a pietistic contempt for culture and an unhealthy asceticism. His motto: "Christianity is too universal to be ascetic."

Hence, with his broad view he constantly sought the relationship between the specifically *Gereformeerde* and that of the universal Christianity as well as the relationship between the specifically Christian and that of humanity in general. This explains his emphasis on common grace and on the cultural value of Christianity. Dr. Geesink, who was totally of the same spirit with him, wrote,

The cosmos-denying pietistic spirit that is blunted in its artistic appreciation, that puts the stamp "worldly" on everything that enriches life, even on the most noble creations of art and on the most useful discoveries of

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<sup>29</sup> \*Original title: *De Algemeene Genade*.

technology, is, as he saw it, of Anabaptist spirit, not Calvinistic. It is, moreover, a sinful assault on God's goodness that is expressed in all that Calvin dubbed His "common grace."

Bavinck always regarded the *Gereformeerde* confession as the purest expression of truth in spite of his appreciation of other approaches and his consciousness of the relativity of human knowledge. Calvinism remained for him, as Geesink expresses it, the Christianity of wide choice. Nor does he overlook the specific difference between the *Gereformeerde* and other versions of the faith as an antithesis between subjection to God's special revelation as described in the Scripture and breaking that subjection. That antithesis cannot be overcome by some sort of synthesis. When he is accused of ignoring that difference and this antithesis because of his attempt to attract rather than repel, this is for him a painful misinterpretation, which, having a clear conscience, he rejects as undeserved.

These last comments point to a reproach Bavinck often had to face. He often vacillated too much and should have been more positive in his statements. People would point to Abraham Kuyper, who would give clear and definite answers to questions to which Bavinck might respond to with an "I don't know." To be sure, sometimes Kuyper would be forced to rescind a hasty answer, but the people prefer that to being left in uncertainty. The ordinary people preferred the aggressive lines of Kuyper to the wavering and uncertain Bavinck.

I will not deny that occasionally Bavinck would go too far in his appreciation of his opponent and sometimes overly careful. When you open any of his books anywhere, you can read page after page and ask with amazement how it was possible that Bavinck promoted such an opinion? Read on and you will realize that all that time Bavinck was busy explaining the position that he would at the end reject.<sup>30</sup> His own position was not always in even balance with the perspective of his challenger and thus sometimes came off too sober for our feelings. But we must not forget that Bavinck intentionally wanted to describe that other standpoint as objectively as possible and that he feared cheap solutions. He would never say or write anything without thorough research. He needed to be able to give a full accounting for his writing. This, too, was for him, a man of tight conscience, a Christian obligation.<sup>31</sup> He was too learned and too scientific to give answers that the people might eagerly hear but for which he could not fully hold himself accountable. Dr. F. W. Grosheide hit the nail exactly as far as I am concerned:

Bavinck was a scholar in the full sense of the word. He would go his way conscientiously and carefully, sometimes perhaps too carefully. He carefully weighed the pros and cons and was determined to do full justice to that. No

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<sup>30</sup>\*This approach had long arms from Bavinck's years at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam via Hepp through Prof. Gerrit Berkouwer to Prof. Louis Smedes at Calvin College until it reached me. See J. Boer, *Every Square Inch—A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 1, pp. 175, 219. [www.SocialTheology.com/boeriana.htm](http://www.SocialTheology.com/boeriana.htm) (Boeriana page on this website).

<sup>31</sup>I recently read a sermon from Rev. J. C. Brussaard about Matthew 12:30 and Mark 9:40, entitled "A narrow conscience; a generous heart" ("*Een nauw geweten en een ruim hart.*"). Jesus demands principial decisiveness and, at the same time, generous appreciation. For ourselves, we can never be more precise and conscientious enough (Matthew 12:30). But when it comes to our neighbor we must always be most generous of spirit and appreciative (Mark 9:40). "When it comes to this, we all urgently need a general conversion from proud self-satisfaction to humble neighbourly love. The saddest is that some who are easy on themselves but with respect to outsiders pretend to wrap themselves in a haze of exaggerated strictness when it comes to faithfulness to principles, even though that is no more than a mere smoke screen." Bavinck strove after these two demands.

opponent will ever complain that he was misunderstood by Bavinck or unjustly treated.

What followed the above by Grosheide may certainly be applied in this context: “This was connected with the fact that Bavinck had a special sensitivity for the seriousness of the times. He was concerned with whatever had even the slightest connection to Christianity; he could not miss it in the struggle against sharp unbelief.” This also accounts for his supple attitude towards the Netherlands Christian Student Association.<sup>32</sup> He did not dare break all contacts with this Association, even though the General Synod had expressed a negative judgement.

#### *Scholarly Education*

Bavinck always studied hard, but especially during the early years of his professorate. He hardly allowed himself time for vacation and recreation. There was so much to be done. He was not content with negatively opposing false theories, but strove for reformation of scholarship on basis of its own principle.

By going back to John Calvin and taking into account, though not without critique and reservation, the development of more recent scholarship, *Gereformeerde* theology has contributed to the liberation from the rigid deep freeze that had overcome scholarship since around 1750.

The Theological School blossomed under Bavinck. Its level was improved by the broadening and deepening of instruction and adopting a more scholarly character.

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<sup>32</sup>\*Original: Nederlandsche Christelijke Studentenvereniging.”

Already during his Kampen period he published *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, his four-volume *magnum opus* of about six hundred pages each. The first edition of this magisterial work was completed in 1895-1900; the second, revised and enlarged edition appeared during the years 1906-1911, while a few years prior to his death there appeared a third, unedited edition. In this work, Bavinck proved himself in his full strength. He surveys the almost interminable terrain of this specialty area with the view of a maestro and is through and through at home in the literature of the field.

Dr. T. Hoekstra spoke at his funeral:

The great value of Bavinck's *Dogmatics* is that he took his starting point from and connected with the Reformed of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reproduced Reformed/*Gereformeerde* dogmatics in our contemporary language and determined his position with respect to the new dogmatic and philosophical schools of thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The publication of Bavinck's *Dogmatics* brought great joy in *Gereformeerde* circles. Kuyper was so full of praise that he wrote in his *De Heraut*,

We look up to the heavens to thank our God, who through such a robust man lit such a light of thought, who shone the pure light on His Word and gave him resilience, perseverance and clarity in order to pour it into such a smart form.

That publication is not the only one. This sturdy worker gave to our people an astounding number of books, among them also of popular nature. It seems as if it took no effort on his part, but at the time he was working on his dissertation, he wrote to his friend, "To write a book is no small thing; to have the courage for it says something. Fortunately, getting a degree forces one to take on a subject. Without that, I would not do it but would go into hiding to study for myself."

*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*

In 1888 Bavinck delivered his lecture "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church." What a delight it is to read this brilliant lecture and to follow its author along his elevated route! The catholicity of the Church confessed by all Christians, assumes the catholicity of the Christian religion. It is founded on the idea that Christianity is a world religion that, independent of country and people, of place and time, embraces every nationality, controls all people and can sanctify all that is created. In our time so productive of heresies and schisms, the maintenance of the catholicity of the Church and of the universalism of Christianity is very important.

Bavinck first sketches the teachings of Scripture on the subject:

The catholicity of the Church as the Scripture draws it out for us and the early Church demonstrates for us, is movingly beautiful. Anyone who locks himself in the narrow circle of a little church or conventicle, does not know it and has never in his life experienced its power and comfort. Such a person shortens the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Spirit. He cheats himself out of spiritual



treasures that cannot be compensated for by meditation or devotion, while it impoverishes his soul. But he who looks outside of himself over that innumerable multitude that has been purchased from every people, every land and in every age through the blood of the Son; who feels the powerful reinforcement of the faith and the wonderful consolation in suffering by knowing himself to be at one with that entire struggling Church, which is being gathered from the beginning till the end of the world out of the entire human race, such a person cannot be of narrow heart or remain narrow in his inner self.

In the second place, he traces how the catholicity of Christianity and the Church have been understood by the Church throughout its history. The awareness of the unity of the Church was inconceivably deep and strong in the early years. Separation from the existing church amounted to separation from Christ Himself. If the Church was not your mother, God could not be your Father.

Rome, which especially calls itself "Catholic," has changed the character of New Testament catholicity. The Christian principle of catholicity that cleanses and sanctifies everything, is replaced by a dualism that always places the supernatural next to the natural, or, better put, the transcendent *above* the natural. According to Rome, Christianity is wholly absorbed in the Church. Everything outside the Church is unconsecrated terrain. Thus the Church's assignment is to position itself over and influence the entire culture, state, society, science and art; to subject it all to the church. But this scheme denies real catholicity in the sense that Christianity itself must penetrate everything as a leaven. The

Reformation came to a collision with this powerful Roman system at almost every front. But while for Luther the Bible is only the source of salvific truth, for Calvin the Scripture is the norm for the whole of life. Not only the church, but also the home and school, the society and the state are placed under the influence of the Christian principle.

This new perspective of the catholicity of the Christian religion brought another doctrine of the church along with it. The Church, identified by Rome with the transcendent, and thus above people, infallible institute, is once again interpreted by the Reformation in the New Testament sense of a gathering of true Christ believers, as the people of God.

This change in the doctrine of the Church brought with it a very difficult and most important question to the fore: How far can a church wander away from the truth and still remain a true Church of Christ? How is it possible to safeguard the catholicity of the Church and simultaneously maintain the strict character of the truth?

Protestantism recognized the need for the very weighty distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith. A certain degree of elasticity in the purity of preaching the Word must be tolerated on the Protestant standpoint, for without that, nearly all fellowship would be impossible and sectarianism to the worst degree would be encouraged. In addition, the Reformation was averse to forcing conscience. No one will be saved through a religion that he considers false. The Protestant perspective makes an inquisition impossible.

Then Bavinck searches for an answer to the question what obligation the catholicity of Christianity and Church imposes on us today. After the Reformation, the Roman Church remained standing alongside the Reformed churches. She has risen from her fall, but continues along her perverted ways. She tied the catholicity of Christianity and Church to a specific place and person: Where the Pope is, there is the church.

And the Reformation? Sadly, she soon lost her youthful spirit and refreshing strength, so that a little more than a century later this mighty movement ground to a halt. Though the Reformation was universal in its view, she did not succeed in leavening the culture. Art, science, philosophy, political and social life have never rightly absorbed the principles of the Reformation. In the Catholic Church it ended up in a light-avoiding Jesuitism and among Protestants in a world-avoiding Pietism. For the most part, contemporary culture develops outside the framework of Christianity and Church. However much good can be said of some sects and their leaders, the real true Catholicism of Christianity is lacking. An unfree, ascetic perspective on the world and culture dominates all sects. Amongst all these approaches there may be assaults on various segments of culture, but not on the centre; on the ramparts perhaps, but not on the fortress itself. There is no mighty imposing struggle of the entire Church Militant against the world as a Kingdom under its own general, but, rather, a guerrilla war in which the enemy receives a weakening blow here and there, but nothing like victory. We may reject the results of unbelieving scientists, but we do not present a reformation of science based on our own principles. This situation has much Christianity in it, but it is not the true, full version of it.

The catholicity of Christianity and Church forbid us to be a mere sect and to retreat into the isolation of the inner chamber. To be sure, the Kingdom of Heaven is not of this world, but it is obligated to serve all and everything. It is exclusive and does not tolerate an independent or neutral king of the world alongside it.

As Bavinck approaches the end of his lecture, the heat of the fire within this prophet intensifies. You would have to have known Bavinck to imagine how he will have shouted it out jubilantly:

Over against all this, faith has the promise of conquering the world. That is the catholic faith not tied to a specific time or place, nation or people. It can enter in all situations, ally itself with every form of natural life; is fit for all times; useful in all things; relevant under all circumstances; free and independent, for it challenges nothing except sin and promises cleansing from all sin in the blood of the cross.

And then the conclusion:

If we so understand the catholicity of our Christian faith, then we cannot isolate ourselves church-wise and, in isolation from the one, universal Christian Church, seek our salvation in the pitiful state in which many churches exist in our century.

### *Battle against Petty Narrow-mindedness*

I have dwelt at length on this lecture and have summarized the main points in Bavinck's own words, because here we have his characteristic views. Would these perspectives not still be worthy of support in our own time?

Bavinck all too often found in his circle a false separatism or isolationism, cutting oneself off from the circles of the faithful outside of our own denomination and a narrow-minded repudiation of all culture. This annoyed him and influenced the choice of his subjects. It is clear enough in a letter to his friend Hurgronje in which he wrote about this lecture,

As you read this lecture do not forget that it is meant to serve as the only medicine for the separatist and sectarian tendencies that our church sometimes displays. There is so much narrow mindedness and pettiness among us. The worst of it is that it even passes for piety.

### *Common Grace*

In 1894 he treated another burning topic in his rectoral oration, namely “Common Grace.”<sup>33</sup> Here, too, he goes back to John Calvin, who regards the denial of God’s gifts and thus ingratitude towards God as a denial of all the true, the good and the beautiful that can be observed in the humanity outside of Christ. Therefore, in association with and appeal to Scripture, he distinguishes between general and special grace, between the work of the Spirit in all creatures and the Spirit of sanctification that is only reserved for believers. God has not left sin with all its destructive effects to itself. He had and retained also after the fall a purpose with His creation. He intervened between the two with his general grace, that may not renew inwardly but that does resist and suppress the effects of sin. It is from this general grace that all the good and true that we observe even in the fallen human race, originates.

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<sup>33</sup>Later, Kuyper would develop this doctrine more broadly in his *De Gemeene Gratie*.

For our day, the doctrine of common grace also has great meaning:

The organic spheres of human life originate from creation; they exist because of common grace and they derive their authority and power not from the mercy of Christ but from the grace of God. True, Christ has been anointed King over Zion and He is the head of the congregation; all power in heaven and on earth has even been given Him and all things have been laid at His feet. However, sovereignty in the family, state and society descends directly from God down to the creature. According to *Gereformeerde* principles, the state as well as the family and society, have their own power and their own authority conferred on them by God. The Church stands next to those spheres with its own authority conferred by Christ.

*Professor and Preacher*

The students were enthusiastic with this young lecturer, who overshadowed all the others. How they relished it when he, the man with such universal perspective, surveyed all of life and demanded that every terrain be subjected to God's ordinances, who also made the honour of God the end goal of scholarship.

Dr. B. Wielinga, one of those who followed Bavinck's lectures and became an enthusiastic disciple of the beloved maestro, writes,

God treated him with great favour in everything—a comprehensive scholarship, a wonderful receptivity, a clear style that carried everyone along, a soul-stirring voice. It appeared as if all the gifts met in him. Even with his external appearance he awoke in us an enthusiastic veneration so

typical of students. I frequently have to think back how during the early morning lecture in dogmatics, when we sometimes attended with empty stomachs, his voice and presentation would make my eyes tear, but which I easily hid from my busily-writing neighbour.

His lectures naturally always drew many students. Under his magical wand he brought life to the most barren. He lived along with the students, pleaded their interests and could tolerate and understand the youth with their peculiarities.

He also preached frequently in Kampen. Long before the beginning of the service the church would be filled with a mighty throng. Even people with totally different perspectives would come and listen. Time and again the crowd would be deeply impressed because of his humble prayer and his enthusiastic preaching. T. Hoekstra writes,

Who does not remember his sermon about John 8:23—“You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.” Or from Luke 1:79 about Christ who shines “on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Or about the exaltation of Christ in Philippians 2—who was given a “name that is above every name...that every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth...?”

But he also preached in places outside Kampen. Someone heard him preach once in Amsterdam during his Kampen years and gave the following review:

Bavinck was to preach in Amsterdam. Oh, every church building was too small, but we have never seen the *Nieuwe*

*Kerk*<sup>34</sup> so full. And as the young professor, still at the beginning of his career, begins to speak and open up the Scripture, we hear, “‘Time is money,’ according to the world, but I say to you, ‘Time is grace.’” And then he proceeds to explain John 9:4—“‘As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work.’ These are words of tremendous gravity and of rich meaning.”

Bavinck was mild in his critique of the sermons of his students. He is alleged to have said once, “The professors are more sympathetic in their critique of student sermons than the students themselves, for the professors are already accomplished preachers, but the students need to still learn preaching.”

At the same time, he could also be sharp. Pastor Landwehr tells us that Bavinck once made this comment on a proposed sermon, “Mr., burn that sermon, for then I can be sure that it will not cause a problem in the congregation.”

### *Church Union*

It was during his Kampen period that attempts were made to joining the Christian Reformed Church (1884) and the Netherlands *Gereformeerde* Churches (1836); or, better said, the churches of the Secession (1836) and of the *Doleantie* schism (1886).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>\*The Nieuwe Kerk is the large “new” church built on the Dam Square near the *Keizersgracht* next to the Royal Palace in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>35</sup>\*For details of that history go to the article on *Doleantie* on Wikipedia and a series of others sites.



At first Bavinck was not particularly in favour of the *Doleantie* schism and he hesitated to unify the children of schisms. It was definitely not his initiative. However, once his objections were overridden and he clearly saw the necessity of joining the two, he was decisive in his support and defended the proposals to melt them together courageously and vigorously.

Of course, such a radical move would run into difficulties. During an 1889 synod held in Kampen, Bavinck pointed with great seriousness at the calling of the churches to unite. Landwehr, who attended this synod, writes,

I can still picture Prof. Bavinck standing in the middle of the brothers. His short sentences penetrated their souls like arrows. He became so passionate that he even stomped with his foot on the ground, a gesture that normally was totally foreign to him. It was a powerful emotional plea to convince Synod to adopt the proposal. It was breathlessly silent in the church, but the majority would not change its opinion.

It was not till 1892 that the unification took place and his powerful attempts were crowned with success. He modestly kept himself in the background at that united synod, but his influential presence was a powerful catalyst for the union to succeed.

#### *Attempts at Unity in Education*

Less successful were his attempts to create unity for the training of pastors. He did not see his ardently desired ideal, for which he fought with great passion, come to fulfillment. That became a painful disappointment for him and caused him much suffering.

The attempts failed no less than five times. At the General Synod of Arnhem in 1902 a solution was sought in the unification of both institutions that would simultaneously serve as the school of the churches and as a university faculty. The proposal of Bavinck and his supporters was adopted and it appeared that the solution to this painful issue had come. However, because the minority found the decision unpalatable, out of fear for the damage that might result in terms of rest and peace in the churches, Synod adopted an alternative proposal from Pastor van Schelven. It declared that, under the prevailing circumstances, it did not consider it advisable to unify the Theological School and the Theological Faculty of the Free University.

Bavinck was deeply saddened and felt he should let go of the school. When he was offered a professorship at the Free University of Amsterdam for the third time, he accepted the position without qualms. It was no easy choice for him, for the Theological School had the love of his heart and he was aware that this step would be misjudged and that he would lose the sympathy of many children of the Secession. However high the cost may have been for him, he never regretted it and knew he was following God's leading.

In *Blijven of Heengaan?*<sup>36</sup> he explains himself. Currently, he writes, after working on it for almost fifteen years, we are no further now than we were at the beginning. It almost seems as if in this matter the churches suffer from a plague. According to his perspective, the right son of the Secession is not he who

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<sup>36</sup>Possible translation of the title: *Stay or Go?*

continues to plead for an unchanging situation, but, rather, he who as a wise man pays attention to have the School adjust to the new circumstances to which the providential guidance of the Lord has brought us in our fatherland during the last twenty-five years.

The conclusion is moving:

The days wherein we live are much too serious for us to continue to waste our strength in mutual quarrel or even endanger the unity of our confession. Let then School and Faculty live next to each other, contend with each other in mutual appreciation, each according to its gift, run after the prize of the call of God, which is above in Christ Jesus. Perhaps, one day we all together will learn to admire in this sad history the depth of the ways of God, Whose thoughts are often totally different from ours.

With that, Bavinck and his family<sup>37</sup> left for Amsterdam. Many students followed him and similarly left the Theological School. It is there that he started the second great period of his life, working almost as long there as he had at Kampen.

#### *D. Professor in Amsterdam*

On December 17, 1902, Bavinck delivered his inaugural lecture about *Godsdienst en Godgeleerdheid*.<sup>38</sup> He clearly exposed the close relationship between knowledge and life. We are not given theology for purposes of idle speculation, but it intends to nurture

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<sup>37</sup>On July 2, 1891, Bavinck married J. A. Schippers. In 1894, a daughter was born, who married G. Ruys in 1918. Bavinck survived to experience the birth and baptism of his grandson in 1920.

<sup>38</sup>\*Possible translation of title: "Religion and Theology."

a knowledge that, because its content is the only true God and his Anointed, and as such engenders life and feeds it. Theology is not philosophy, not metaphysics, not speculation, but a positive science: Knowledge of God in the face of Christ, the one sent by the Father.

As if enraptured, he said:

Religion, the fear of God, must therefore constitute the drive that motivates all theological research. It must be the heartbeat. A theologian is someone who submissively speaks about God, because he speaks out of and through Him. The practice of theology is a holy task; it is a priestly service in the house of God; it is divine service, a service to God in His temple; a dedication of mind and heart to the glory of His Name.

That he had not yet forgotten his earlier deep disappointment is clear from the words he addressed to the Directors of the Free University: “However much I suffer deeply that I did not join your institution along another path, I have accepted your appointment with complete boldness.”

#### *Popularity in Amsterdam*

I have often heard it said that Bavinck spoke with more conviction in his lectures in Kampen than he did later in Amsterdam. I am in no position to judge that, but this I know: I do not understand how he could have been more inspiring than when I heard him in Amsterdam. I still see him entering the University with his friendly “Good morning.” I see him ascend the lecture podium. After a short, sober prayer from the heart, he would immediately begin.

The words flowed out of his lips a good half hour. His gazing eyes that seemed to see something in the distance, were often turned to the outside. That was real lecturing—not the dull reading of a written text but an eloquent address. We all had the four volumes of his *Dogmatics* in our rooms. That would have been good enough for the final exam, but no one even considered staying at home from his lectures.

I remember some of his lectures vividly. Once, when the subject was the Person of Christ, he would point to Kalthoff, who would mock Christian professors, not entirely without justification. Christ, according to Kalthoff, would be described differently from one university to another but nevertheless was promoted as the way, the truth and the life. Indeed, scholars arose who saw Jesus burdened with negative inheritance who suffered from epilepsy, paranoia and hallucinations. We could tell from Bavinck's voice that it pained him deeply to say such things about his Saviour. But the next hour during which Christ was described according to the Scriptures and the confession of the congregation—moving, wonderful! After such a lecture it would remain quiet for some time in the classroom before the storm of the usual loud student chatter would break loose.

In *Fraternitas*, the student paper, an editor gave his impressions in this striking way:

I don't know whether he felt inspired by the thirty or more students, who in admiration took their seat before him and wrote down everything he had to say, but I don't believe so. Rather, I suspect that his environment, especially the tasteless lecture room with its colourless benches, were

often a hindrance to his elevated spirit and that his joy came more from his subject, to which he could fully give himself and be engrossed in. He would place his hands on his hips. The many wrinkles on his huge forehead would pull themselves together as it were into one straight line pointing upwards. He would turn his head sideways and his eyes seemed to peer through the windows into the outside. But in reality, his soul saw another, higher world, where all dualisms and contradictions that tear up human as well as Christian life, are dissolved, and in which Christ, the Reconciler of all things, and God are all in all. None of us could fully understand what his spirit saw in that world and rejoice in it. But that it inspired him was apparent from the fact that he became even more eloquent. His words flowed forth from his lips like an irrepressible stream. The analysis of the problems morphed into poetry. The lecture turned into a sermon. His entire body was singing.

What he saw during such moments he would immediately share with us. He would witness about that wonderful, invisible world, thoughts, ideas, *logoi* in such a way that none of us will ever forget; it will remain an indestructible life-long inheritance. It will constitute the best content of our preaching, guide us and point us to the way when we will also embark on the path of scholarship. Or it will serve us as guidance in the care of souls and nurture us when our own spiritual and scholarly lives come to confront difficulties and questions.

*His Inspiring Preaching*

During his first years in Amsterdam, Bavinck preached frequently, but later he seldom appeared before the congregation. I remember that once I walked across half the city to hear him in a church in a distant suburb. He movingly spoke about Hebrews 9:11-12, about Christ, who once through His own blood entered the Holy of Holies and in so doing brought about an eternal deliverance.

It once happened that the pastor who was to lead in the service was suddenly prevented and Bavinck, after some resistance, agreed to lead the service. Secretly we students hoped that such occasions would happen more frequently. For then we would hear not some cold rationalistic argumentation, but a warm, enthusiastic word that would penetrate the hearts of the congregation. How could it be otherwise, when Bavinck considered it a huge mistake that in much meditational literature, the emotional, the experiential aspect would almost be totally lacking. He once wrote, "There is an important element in the preaching of Erskine that currently largely is lacking. The spiritual knowledge of the soul is missed in the devotional literature that is marketed today." Would he ever be surprised if he knew what kind of "meditational" pap the people are fed these days!

### *His Public Life*

Even more than in Kampen, Bavinck participated actively in the public life of Amsterdam and did much to enlighten our people in various cultural sectors. Apart from the publication of the always relevant academic orations, such as *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*,<sup>39</sup> which went through a second printing, one

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<sup>39</sup>\*A translation of this title might be "Christian Worldview."

must mention a list of a respectable number of works: *Magnalia Dei*, *Bilderdijk als denker en dichter*,<sup>40</sup> *Het Christelijk Huisgezin*,<sup>41</sup> *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring*,<sup>42</sup> and various books in the fields of pedagogy and psychology.

In his *Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck published his Stone Lectures that were delivered in the USA.<sup>43</sup> This is one of the best books he wrote. His goal was to search out the idea of revelation as to form as well as content and then to find its relationship to the totality of our knowledge and acts. Our theorizing has always needed such scholarship. Bavinck the thinker strove after this partially to maintain the uniqueness of Christianity, but, and this is the other side of the coin, to also accord it a central place in the conception of the whole world and to seek the connections in every direction that were laid by God Himself between revelation and the various sectors of creation. He played an especially important role in the natural sciences. He delivered an authoritative word at many congresses of natural scientists and demonstrated that natural science cannot be separated from the worldview of the researcher. "As soon as sciences like geology, paleontology, biology or anthropology are brought to the table, the weight of belief and unbelief becomes clear."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>\*A translation of this title might be "*Bilderdijk as Thinker and Poet.*"

<sup>41</sup>\*A translation of this title is "*The Christian Family.*"

<sup>42</sup>\*A translation of this title is *The Philosophy of Revelation*. The reader is urged to go to the "Bavinck" section on this very page of this website, where he will find much information on this topic.

<sup>43</sup>In 1908, he made his second journey to America. Upon his return home, he gave lectures about America. I heard him speak on the subject in Rotterdam. The only thing I still remember is that he spoke with appreciation about Methodism. To be sure, he had objections and found Methodists to be one sided, but when he attended one of their prayer meetings, where these pious people were on their knees before God in fiery pleas, he concluded that we Reformed are similarly one sided, too rationalistic and would do well to adopt some of their mystical experiences.

<sup>44</sup>See his wonderful book *Christelijke Wetenschap (Christian Scholarship)*.



Natural scientists had great respect for Bavinck and listened with attentive ears whenever he would unpack for them his favourite theories, with devotion even. One of them wrote:

He did not speak in boastful sentences or with pseudo erudition, manners that he loathed, but he pointed us in holy seriousness to the weakness and deficiency of our human ability and knowledge. He emphasized the impossibility for us to create a complete system of Christian natural science even to the best of our abilities as well as to the difficult study and the long time that would be required to develop such a system. He cautioned us about the uselessness of premature conclusions arrived at logically at your desk, and reminded us of the urgent demand that we ourselves research nature, to the fact that Scripture is not a textbook for natural science, to the relative value of the work of those of other persuasions, but above all to the truth of God's revelation in Scripture and in nature. Dig deeper; be honest! That was Bavinck's life lesson for us.

### *Bavinck at Congresses and Conferences*

To congresses and conferences, societies for young and old, men and women, intellectuals and ordinary people—he was invited everywhere. If he could find a way, he would usually agree to come.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Once, when he was to give a lecture in a provincial city somewhere, he spoke about a subject that was related to faith and science. There were a number of unbelievers who came to check out whether this erudite scholar would be as firm and unyielding in the faith as was that stiff and uncompromising Abraham Kuyper. It was unforgettable, the manner by which he attacked pseudo-science and unbelief. His audience was breathless, when he demonstrated how little science actually knew and how it had to acknowledge in field after field: "We don't know."

Finally, he reached his climax and indicated that there is a mystery about how unbelieving scholars have exhausted themselves for ages, on which they have concentrated all their powers, that renders them fearful and weighs them

At the Congress for *Gereformeerd* Evangelism held in 1913 in Amsterdam, he drew the broad outlines for this subject in a major paper. As a report has it, he pressed on his audience with glowing words the distress of cities disintegrating in unbelief. The falling away is so great; the circumstances so extremely serious that the bull has to be taken by the horns. The example of Jesus Christ and the commandment of God should force us into action. There may be disagreements about methods, but, in the face of exceptional circumstances, we need to take exceptional measures.

### *In Politics*

Politics did not draw his heart. Still, he did not dare withdraw himself from the political arena, since he was called to it. He occupied a prominent place especially during the time of Kuyper's premiership. He was chairman of the Central Committee. In 1905, he presented a lecture to the Meeting of Deputies on the subject of "Christian and Neutral Politics." As member of the Upper Chamber he performed important tasks. Here he was the point man for the area of education and presented many important reports. Even the liberal press wrote, "What an excellent speaker is the representative of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, Dr. Bavinck!"

### *Community Participation*

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down, but that they *must* solve if they are ever to claim victory—something they will never achieve: the great mystery of Life and of Death.

Then he stopped for a moment and began to sketch in the simplest of ways the childlike unwavering faith that even over against those deep questions of Life and Death, through the grace of God in Christ, we may say in triumph: We know!

He also devoted his strengths to social life. At the First Christian Social Congress he masterfully drew the lines along which action in the social sphere should follow. Since then he constantly was involved in difficult social problems and shone his light on them. The women's issue drew his attention especially. On the Second Christian Social Congress he delivered a popular lecture about "Occupational Work of the Married Woman." He proved to oppose co-education. There is no problem in the primary school, but around age thirteen boys and girls begin to differentiate both psychologically and physically. We happen to live in a male-dominated society that does not take into account the peculiarities of the woman. According to him, co-education does not protect the interest of women.

He lectured in detail about the women's issue under the title, *The Woman in Contemporary Society*.<sup>46</sup> This book shows that in this area of concern he definitely did not belong to the conservatives. The woman, he writes, has awakened and strives for personality and freedom. She herself developed an aversion for the one-sided upbringing she received in the past. She wants no longer to be a house drudge and no longer accepts the passive role that was her earlier lot.

He ends his book with these supportive words:

As long as it is led along the right path, the further development after which the contemporary woman strives, will not be an obstacle to her function in the family. A "learned" or "intellectual" woman does not in any way have to be a poor housekeeper. There is even less reason to fear

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<sup>46</sup>\*Original title: *De Vrouw in de Hedendaagsche Maatschappij*.

such a development if the Christian side of the women's movement not only resists their false theories, but also recognizes her rights and dignity and is taught and led in accordance with the principles of the Gospel.

Bavinck was a proponent of women's suffrage in the Church. Women are members of the congregation just as much as men are. She is just as interested in good preachers, elders and deacons. The Church impoverishes itself willfully by not making good use of the strengths and talents of women.<sup>47</sup>

### *Pedagogue and Psychologist*

We need also to remember Bavinck's pioneering work in the area of education, because of which in government circles he became the obvious man to serve as chairman of the Board of Education.

He recognized the importance for our teachers to study Pedagogy and supported the development of Pedagogy as a science to be taught on the basis of Christian principles to make it serviceable and practical for Christian education. So he performed pioneering work here as well. He laid the solid foundation and drew the main contours in his *Paedagogische Beginselen*,<sup>48</sup> so that what Calvin's Institutes was for subsequent dogmatics, Bavinck's book was for Christian Pedagogy. Even in Catholic circles Bavinck's pedagogical works drew attention as can be seen in the highly appreciative article of Father S. Rombouts.

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<sup>47</sup>We have not made much progress at this front. Dr. B. Wielinga wrote in *De heraut* of April 19, 1942: "Even now, almost halfway the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on basis of a few texts that experts interpret differently, in some important aspects of church life the woman is kept immature."

<sup>48</sup>\*An English translation of the title might be "*Pedagogical Principles*."

At his death, an article in *Paedagogisch Tijdschrift* said among other things,

He was loved because of his great simplicity. Then there were his warm-heartedness in human relations, clarity in his advice, accomplishments as a scholar, expertise in the areas of psychology and pedagogy, but especially his great expertise in laying the foundation for the Christian school movement. How deep did Christian education conquer his heart and how he promoted the relationship between lower and higher education! At each pedagogical Course for Christian Education he was the popular and inspiring lecturer who possessed the great gift of treating the most difficult subjects for his students in the simplest manner, so that all loved his precious, scholarly and eloquent word.<sup>49</sup>

In this context, we must also pay attention to his two books *De Opvoeding der rijpere jeugd*<sup>50</sup> and *De Nieuwe opvoeding*,<sup>51</sup> while we should not fail to mention his studies in the field of Psychology, with which he so excellently served Christian education. In his *Beginnelsen der Psychologie*<sup>52</sup> and *Bijbelsche en Religieuze Psychologies*<sup>53</sup> he also offered materials of much value, though in this discipline especially Bavinck's theories became subject to critique in later years and other directions were followed. However, the man who often told his students, "I do not

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<sup>49</sup>Dr. S. O. Los draws attention to Dr. Bavinck in the former's *Moderne Paedagogen en Richtingen (Modern Pedagogues and Schools of Thought)*, Chapter 3: "Fundamentele Paedagogen (Fundamental Pedagogues). I also remember that little book of J. Brederveld: *Hoofdlijnen der Paedagogiek van Dr. Herman Bavinck met critische beschouwing (The Contours of the Pedagogy of Dr. Herman Bavinck with Critical Comments)*, Amsterdam: Drukkerij De Standaard, 1927.

<sup>50</sup>\*An English translation of the title might be "The Upbringing of the Mature Youth."

<sup>51</sup>\*An English translation of the title might be "Contemporary Upbringing."

<sup>52</sup>\*An English translation of the title might be "Principles of Psychology."

<sup>53</sup>\*An English translation of the title might be "Biblical and Religious Psychology."

demand that you solve this question, but I do require that you begin by stating the problem correctly,” was well aware that he did not have the last word in this discipline.

### *The Problem of War*

World War I broke out in 1914. Bavinck’s sensitive spirit was tortured by the painful question of war. He recorded the results of his thoughts about that problem in a brochure, “The Problem of the War.”<sup>54</sup> Later he comes back to this topic in his “The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life.”<sup>55</sup> His conclusion: Legal order or justice cannot be maintained in this evil world without force and punishment cannot be maintained and, at its most extreme, excludes the right to war. A nation may sometimes face times when there is no way out apart from war. When a war is declared clearly and solely for the maintenance of justice, the citizens can join the battle with a clear conscience and still practice the virtues required for the imitation of Christ on the battlefield.

Bavinck let out some somber sounds during WW I, but he maintained hope for the future and saw surprising rays of hope even during the war. It was still 1916 that he gave his famous lecture “The Victory of the Soul.”<sup>56</sup> A tremendous switch, he said, had taken place in popular opinion. After the almighty rule of materialism in the previous century, the liberating word has resounded: The soul is victorious. There is reason for joy in that, after this intellectualistic period in the schools, moral upbringing, the formation of character and the practice as well as the strengthening of the will have powerfully come to the fore again.

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<sup>54</sup> \*Original title: “Het probleem van den Oorlog.”

<sup>55</sup> \*Original title: “*De Navolging van Christus en het moderne leven.*”

<sup>56</sup>\*Original title: “*De Overwinning der Ziel.*”

## **E. End of Life and Funeral**

Thinking enriches the life of our human race, but it is also a source of pain and sorrow. During the last years of his life, the man who had constantly been aware of the limits of knowledge and the relativity of all ideas and formulas, was pained by various problems that remained insoluble to him.

Though his health left much to be desired, in 1920 he attended the Synod of Leeuwarden. He was not a man who relished attending synods. Nor did he continue to give the kind of intense leadership in church life as he did previously. However, this should not be exaggerated, for he still had great influence, especially during the “reconciliation Synod of 1905.” At this time the Netelenbos issue was on the agenda. He shrunk from the treatment of the subject and would have helped save Netelenbos if this had been at all possible. He realized, however, that he deviated too seriously to be able to save his position.

At this Synod, Bavinck was reporter for the proposals of nine regional synods regarding the Confession. They were all of the opinion that the churches, with an eye to the needs of the time, had to work on the development and expansion of the truth embedded in her confessional documents. The Committee was of the opinion that a further formulation and expansion of some points in the Confession was necessary, in view of the fact that the discussion about it was no longer at the level required and no longer addressed the needs of the time. At issue were the articles about the divine inspiration and authority of the Holy Scripture, the

true and the false Church and that of the office of the Government.<sup>57</sup>

He also spoke up when there was an attempt to warn church members against three specific things frequently done. He was opposed to creating a list of sins and calling some of them by their names, while other sins—for example, profiteering during the depression years—were just as terrible.

Bavinck returned home before the end of the Synod, for he did not feel well. At first it looked as if there were hope for healing, but before long a tightness of the chest set in along with shortness of breath due to a heart disorder. He was bedridden for many months. The end came on July 29, 1921, when he was taken up into glory.

### *Funeral*

A great crowd of men and women gathered at the East Cemetery<sup>58</sup> in Amsterdam on Tuesday August 2, 1921, to witness Bavinck's funeral. It was a scorching summer day when Free University students carried the coffin to the graveside. The first to speak was Dr. J. Th. De Visser, Minister of Education, who represented the Government. He delivered a striking message about how Bavinck had been a great promoter of education in our country, particularly for Christian *Gereformeerd* education. The speech of this Reformed Christian statesman, who himself was

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<sup>57</sup>How little came out of all these plans for reform! It is incomprehensible that even the *desire* for review and expansion of the Confession seems no longer alive in our churches.

<sup>58</sup>\*Dutch name: "Oosterbegraafplaats."



one of the most eloquent speakers in the country, was so appreciative and sensitive that I reproduce it here:

This highly gifted man has served the interests of education in a most excellent way. Especially during the second part of his life, he stepped out of the quiet study in order that our people in all their groupings might harvest the fruits of his scholarship and faith.

By way of numerous scholarly studies he gave inspiring information. In the Upper Chamber he was recognized and honoured as an education specialist. He enjoyed high respect as member of the Royal Academy of the Sciences. But he performed the most practical work as chairman of the Board of Education. He was the natural leader here for various reasons. Thus it is with great gratitude that I memorialize his willingness to take on the staff of leadership in his hands. There it rested in good hands. And when during the last years there has been such lively debate about reforming our educational system, for much of this we can thank Bavinck. If you love our educational system, then do not forget the first chairman of the Board of Education.

But his influence was deepest in the area of Christian pedagogy. It has long been realized that Christian education requires its own pedagogy that is founded on its own unique psychology. But where was the man who could provide that? Bavinck turned out to be that man. He laid the foundation and did so in unsurpassed form that characterized all his books. And he did this for all sorts of circles, ranging from the most highly developed down to the rural young men's

societies in both lectures and talks. No effort was too great for him. No wonder that his influence was so extensive—with *Gereformeerden* and Reformed as well as among the orthodox and the liberal Ethicals he was held up as *the* authority in this field. Among Christian education and Christian teachers' conventions he was this man. No congress was held, no association was founded without Bavinck being considered its spiritual father. He was always prepared, because he understood that Christian education, especially now because of its content, had to assure a place for itself in the hearts of our people. Whenever this happens, the honour and thanks goes first of all to Bavinck, who put us on the right track.

And if I now raise the question to what source this mighty influence that flowed from Bavinck into every societal sector can be attributed, the answer is undoubtedly to his thorough scholarship, his deep insight, his wide wing span, his logical reasoning and his mastery of form. And no less to his rock-like faith, his meticulous walk, his being Christian in both word and deed. But above all, credit must go to his harmonious personality sanctified by Christ. As his robust built as it were found its counterweight in the tenderness of his voice, so also the strength of his confession found its counterweight in the love in his heart. His sense of honour was constantly tempered by his simplicity; his enthusiasm, by his wisdom. Anyone seeing and hearing him would either treat him with high respect and reverence or follow him as a master. This man had no enemies and that says something in our country for someone who challenges the status quo

and is not ashamed of his Saviour. That is a gift reserved only for a select few.

Here, at this graveside, we thank God that He equipped Bavinck with this charisma and we thank the man who has just left us behind, that with this charisma he has blessed our nation until he was exhausted. We honour his memory the best when we offer ourselves to the service of God's Kingdom and our fatherland through self-denial. We can do this, for whoever leaves us, God's faithfulness remains.

*Speech by Dr. R. H. Woltjer*

After de Visser's speech, Prof. Dr. R H. Woltjer, the Rector of the Free University, spoke, honouring the memory of this star of the University. Yes, Bavinck was among us as a flower in the garden of Christian scholarship; so was his word, his voice, his friendliness; so have we been privileged to enjoy his engaging personality, his fine spirit, his comprehensive insight, his many-sided knowledge, his enchanting eloquence. Such enjoyment cannot be described adequately. You see, what we have loved in Bavinck first of all and what we therefore miss first and foremost is that rare power of his rich personality to attract. Nevertheless, though this indescribable aspect may be the first that hits us in Bavinck, that is not of the essence. He is first and most of all from beginning to end the Christian, the *Gereformeerde* theologian, by inclination and perspective, philosophical; but first of all, theological; that is his centre, is what governs everything else, even if that sometimes is obscured behind many philosophical, psychological and pedagogical views. *De Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* remains his master piece.

*Speech by Dr. T. Hoekstra*

Professor Dr. T. Hoekstra spoke in his capacity as the Rector of the Theological School and reminded his audience about the years 1883-1902, the period during which Bavinck's abilities increasingly developed when he helped train hundreds of men for the sacred office. His most important contribution at the Theological School was that he considerably raised the level of scholarship and through his lectures in Dogmatics, Ethics, *Historia Revelationis*, History of Philosophy, Psychology and Aesthetics created a treasury of knowledge in his disciples.

Secondly, another significant contribution of Bavinck as professor at the Theological School was that, through his example, he taught his disciples to preach. Nowhere did he preach as much as at Kampen. How did he captivate? He towed listeners along by his eloquence, but, most importantly, he grabbed us in our souls through his constant preaching about the richness of God's grace that we, destitute sinners, have been given in Jesus Christ. The Gospel of God's grace in Christ was always the main component of his preaching. Never did he deliver a sermon in which his Saviour was not glorified.

In the third place, Bavinck's walk was also an example, while through word and deed he recommended a tender life within narrow confines for God. He constantly gave strong emphasis to the piety of the walk and the holiness of life. He was great in comprehension, deep in the power of thought, wide of perspective, roomy of heart, but narrow in his life. What he

tolerated in and endured from others, he would not tolerate and endure for himself.

### *A Peaceful Departure*

Pastor J. D. van der Munnik of Leeuwarden paid Bavinck several visits during his sickness. During one of these visits, he asked whether Bavinck still had anything to say to our *Gereformeerde* constituency. I already pointed out earlier on that his brother also remembers this scene in which Bavinck answered, "Yes, if God allows, I would want once more to take up my pen to warn Christians and to point to the difficult times that are awaiting the Church of Christ." It was, explains van der Munnik, peace, full peace in his heart.

Other visitors were also struck by Bavinck's readiness to die. Only faith in his Saviour gave him rest and his hope for the future. He longed to pass on and be with Christ.

He remained the thinker to the end. Dr. Hepp visited him shortly before his going and met him during a moment of consciousness. With gasping voice the sufferer said, "Life is strange; dying, even stranger." According to Hepp, "The thinker in him had not yet died. The man who had struggled with so many problems, now struggled with the problem of dying. He was sure of the outcome. He knew that he would go to Jesus, but the how of it preoccupied him."

Previously he had said to entertain a wish, but he knew it would not be fulfilled. He would love, after having entered the heavenly

glory, to return to earth just once more to witness of its glory to all of God's people and even to the world.

*To God the Honour*

As the coffin descended into the grave, the emotional crowd sang from Psalm 71--

His Name receive eternal praise!  
Let people always praise Him .  
Let the world follow up my songs  
With Amen and Amen!<sup>59</sup>

This is the conclusion: Thanks to God for the rich blessing given to Church and school, to the people and the fatherland in this precious life, in this unusually gifted thinker, in this sensitive child of God, great in knowledge and scholarship, small in child-like faith. To Him alone be the glory!

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<sup>59</sup>\*This is a versification from an older Dutch Book of Psalms. It is my translation of the original:

Zijn naam moet eeuwig eer ontvangen!  
Men loov' Hem vroeg en spa,  
De wereld hoor' en volg' mijn zangen  
Met Amen, Amen, na!

How vividly I remember the congregation, including this young boy, singing this song with a similar depth of emotion that still touches me 70 years later. It can be sung to the original melody and can be heard on U-tube.

## Chapter 3

### Samples from His Publications

The sentiment “The style is an expression of the personality” applies especially to Bavinck. The characteristics include sobriety, simplicity and clarity—that’s Bavinck all over. He was not an exceptional stylist; he does not surprise with grabbing images or sparkling choice of words. In this respect, Kuyper, who captures his audience with his sparkling style and flowery images, far surpasses him. Bavinck simply did not allow himself time to consider form at any length, to seek new images and to carefully refine his style.<sup>60</sup> But with Bavinck both the style of reasoning and of writing were crystal clear. He was a master at treating the most complicated issues with great clarity. In our own day, scholars sometimes express their theories to ordinary people in such incomprehensible and complicated form that, I fear, very few understand their speeches. Bavinck has demonstrated that scholarship and clarity, depth and simplicity can go together.

With him one runs the danger of simply glancing over deep issues, for it all seems so normal and intuitive. Superficial natures think sometimes that Bavinck offers his solutions too easily. He, however, gave the people the results of his struggles; he did not take his readers into the kitchen, where the spices are prepared behind the scenes with extreme care. He was one who ploughed deeply but who preferred to offer no solution and accepted the

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<sup>60\*</sup> Neither did Kuyper. Having translated quite a bit of Kuyper, I can assure you that he just naturally and, often, carelessly, cobbled his lengthy sentences together without much consideration. It just bubbled up from his flamboyant personality.

accusation of carelessness rather than offer unprepared spices. When you listen to him attentively, you are pulled up to life's high mountain tops; wide vistas are opened for you and deep insights.

We live in a period of business-like efficiency, where people aim directly at their goals without detours. That is the reason Bavinck's style appeals more to the current generation than the somewhat old fashioned, loquacious, oratorical style of Kuyper.

Landwehr noticed that Bavinck had a special love for the sermons of the young Des Amorie van der Hoeven. This will not surprise you if you have read them. In a published article Bavinck mentions him by name and writes,

It is said of Amorie van der Hoeven, as it is of the ancient sophist Favorinus, that even those who don't understand one word of Greek, relished his reading Homerus to them. People in church were already edified by van der Hoeven when he finished reading the words of the opening Psalm.<sup>61</sup>

### *Augustine*

In my choice of a few passages from Bavinck's works, I did not think only of the style but also about the content. First, a quotation from his *Dogmatiek*. Of all the thinkers of both earlier and later periods, Bavinck had the highest regard for Augustine. That is the reason I chose a part in which he highlights the significance of

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<sup>61</sup>\*"De Welsprekendheid," a lecture Bavinck delivered to students of the Theological School at Kampen on November 28, 1889. <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl/hb/broch/hbwelspr.html>. \*The title is given up to ten meanings on the internet. I, the translator, settle for "Rhetoric," the art of eloquence.



this Christian philosopher. We can clearly identify the climax of the section, where he summarizes all the foregoing in one single paragraph:

Thus Augustine became the most significant for later dogmatics. He dominates the subsequent centuries. Every reformation returns to him and to Paul. For every doctrine he has devised a formula that is then accepted by everyone and repeated time and again. His influence reaches out to all Churches, sects and cults. Rome appeals to him for her teachings of Church, sacrament and authority; the Reformation felt affinity with him in the doctrine of election and grace; Scholasticism based its further development on the precision of his observation, the sharpness of his mind, the power of his speculation. Thomas of Aquinas is reputedly the best commentator on Augustine; his mysticism found support in his Neo-Platonism and religious enthusiasm. Roman and Protestant piety derived strength from his writings; ascetics and Pietists find nurturing and support in him. Augustine does not belong to one single Church, but to all Churches together. He is *Doctor Universalis*. Even philosophy can ignore him only at its own disadvantage. More than any other church father, he is still enjoyed because of his beautiful enchanting style, his precise, exact, most individual but simultaneously general-human way of expressing himself. He is the most Christian and the most modern of all church fathers; he is the closest to us. He has replaced the aesthetical worldview with the ethical; the classic with the Christian. We owe our best, deepest and richest thoughts in dogmatics to him. Augustine was *the* dogmatician of the Christian Church.

## *Faith Overcomes the World*

Bavinck has published only one sermon. He preached it on Sunday, June 30, 1901, when President Kruger from South Africa visited Kampen along with his retinue, and attended the service where Bavinck was preaching. He did not literally preach as quoted below, for he was not bound to paper and often would preach off script. In his lecture *De Welsprekendheid* he wrote the following about the use of a manuscript: “Any speaker who is bound to his manuscript and keeps his eyes constantly in one direction or on one point... weakens the impression of his words and will not reach the desired level of eloquence.”<sup>62</sup>

The text he preached from was the same as that of his first sermon—“This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (I John 5:4).

Faith, the victory over the world! When we first hear this word, the thought might easily arise in our hearts that John is poking fun of our misery, that he has no idea of the power of the world and has little conception of the nature of faith. If he really intended to equip us for the struggle against the world, why did he not name the knowledge that would give humanity control over all the works of God’s hands? Why did he not name the mighty skill that embodies the highest and most beautiful in the resistant world of the material? Why did he not mention something about the glory and greatness of humanity and speak only of the faith that he has in common with only a few individuals? It is the world of sin and injustice, of destruction and death, that must be

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<sup>62</sup>Pp. 60-61.

overcome. Whatever laurels science has earned on its terrain, never has she liberated even one single human soul from guilt and brought it before the face of God without terror. Whatever pleasure art has inserted in human life, never has it provided any creature the one comfort by which one can live and die gloriously. All those weapons, placed in human hands, are derived from that world and also pass away with that world. But the faith of which John speaks, tells us of other victories. It has a complete history behind it, beginning with the lost paradise and then continuing from generation to generation. Allow just a few of those heroes of faith pass by your spirit for just a moment! By faith Noah has....Acknowledge then history as witness to the world-overcoming power of faith!

### *Modernism and Orthodoxy*

In 1911 Bavinck's powerful lecture, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," was published. This is one of the most brilliant lectures he ever delivered. I continue to keep it nearby and read it time and again. It brought the entire theological world into commotion. It was discussed at the Conference of Modern Theologians. One of them, Pastor A. Binnerts, challenged it in a brochure entitled "*Neo-Gereformeerd and Modern Theology.*"

Dr. B. Wielenga once wrote, "As far as I know, no one has ever painted the significance of the new culture and changed world for Christianity so broadly and magisterially as this history expert". Here follows a characteristic portion from this lecture:

Christian theologians and philosophers derive the ground for the faith in the wonderful power of God's grace. Likewise, even today we can also derive it from nowhere else but such a revelation is to be distinguished from its general counterpart and is of a special character. That distinction, though not first or foremost, comes from the way they came to us, in the natural or supernatural way, whereby God brought them to us. It lies first of all in their contents where the two principally differ from each other. General revelation that comes to us in nature, in history, in our own hearts and conscience, does give us a certain awareness of God's goodness, but even more of His justice and anger, of His incomparable greatness and majesty or, according to the word of Paul, His eternal power and divinity. Poets and philosophers today preach it as loudly as possible: For a few individuals life may be pleasant, but for the great majority it is difficulty and sadness, misery and suffering. Natural science and history bring little change. They may increase knowledge and improve life's circumstances, but they cannot provide us any assurance of God's love; creation preaches no loving God.

Neither are we assured of the above by the witness of our conscience or the experiences of our hearts, for as long as they derive their existence from general revelation, they accuse us rather than free us from guilt; they themselves are in need of reconciliation. The necessity of a special revelation is negatively proven nowhere more strongly than in the fact that all who deny it and who have to be content with the content of revelation in nature and history, lose the right and honesty to continue to believe in God's fatherly

love, in spite of His strictness and greatness. History testifies to this throughout the ages, but expresses it with even greater clarity and power in these times, wherein the knowledge of the immeasurability of the universe and the heartlessness of nature make such a deep impression on us that no descriptions are left over for God except general terms such as “the Absolute,” the “Original Mover” of all things, the life underlying all life and the power underlying all power. The faith that leans only on that, no longer dares to boldly and emphatically talk of God’s love. It is no longer capable of confessing and witnessing; its vocabulary is impoverished not only theologically but also in preaching and praying at the death bed of the sick. It has to do with a few general vague ideas and moves about, constantly burdened with fear of knowledge. In contrast, faith immediately achieves solid ground under its feet as it leans on a special divine revelation, which comes objectively in the Person of Christ and subjectively in the witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of people. That’s when the love of God is poured out into our heart by the Holy Spirit, Who is given to us along with the assurance that no scholarship or culture, no immeasurable universe and no remorseless powers of nature can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>63</sup>

*All Is Yours, because You Are of Christ*

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<sup>63</sup>That Bavinck also could be humorous becomes clear in his speech to the rector at the end of his talk the next year (pp. 45-46). One more example. In *Blijven of heengaan?*, page 35, he writes, “Recently some said in connection with the education question, ‘Even if the entire world would go along, I stand pat.’ Then he casually adds, ‘But he did not say, which foundation he would then still have under his feet.’”

In conclusion, I adduce a section from his little book *The Certainty of Faith*. I selected this piece for various reasons. It expresses the breadth of his view, but also his fear that the slogan “all aspects of life for Christ” become a hollow one and do damage to personal spiritual life. Indeed, everything is yours—his most beloved idea—but you must first personally belong to Christ. Here as well he clearly says that the promise of God is the ground of our being God’s children. Here is the closing part of this rich little book:

While Christians of earlier days forgot the world for their own sake, we run the danger of losing ourselves in the world. Currently, we are out to convert the entire world, to conquer every aspect of life, as it is called, for Christ, but we frequently fail to ask whether we ourselves are truly converted to God and whether in life or in death we are Christ’s. That question is the central point; it may not be banned out of our personal or church life under the excuse of pietist or methodist petty narrow-mindedness. What would it profit a person, if he gained the entire world, even if for his Christian principles, if he lost his own soul?

But this does not mean that the meaning of the Christian religion be restricted to the saving and salvation of a few individual souls. The situation is then also completely different for him, who, in agreement with the Scripture and with the confession of the Reformation, does not attain to faith till the end but at the *beginning* of his salvation history; who does not *strive after* the faith but *lives out* of the faith; who does not work in order to believe, but believes in order to work.

Such a Christian person has found his resting point in the promise of God's grace in Christ; the foundation of his hope is solid, for it lies outside of him, in the Word of God that never wavers. He does not constantly have to research the reality and solidity of that foundation on which the structure of his salvation is built. He is a child of God, not because of all kinds of experiences of the soul, but on basis of the promises of God.

Being assured of that, he is now free to look around him and to freely enjoy all the good talents and endowments along with the perfect gift that descends from the Father of lights. Everything is his, because he is of Christ and Christ is of God. The entire world becomes the material with and in which he carries out his life's duty.

The religious life certainly has its own content and independent value. It remains the centre, the heart, the hearth from which all his thoughts and acts emerge, where they are inspired and warmed. There, in communion with God, he steels himself for his labour and puts on his belt for the struggle.

But this hidden life of communion with God is still not the totality of life. The prayer room is indeed the inner chamber, but it is not the entire house in which he lives and moves. The spiritual life does not exclude family and society, the social and political, art and scholarship. That life is definitely distinguishable from the other elements and far surpasses it in worth, but there is no irreconcilable opposition between them. Rather, the spiritual is the power that equips one for

the faithful fulfillment of our earthly calling and puts its stamp on all of life as a service to God.

Reconciled with God, he is also reconciled with all things. Because he confesses the Father of Christ, the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, he can neither be narrow of heart nor in his inner life. Priest in God's temple, he is king over all the earth. Because is a Christian, he is human in the full and true sense of the word. He loves the flowers that grow at his feet and admires the stars that glitter high above his head. He does not despise the arts, which are a precious gift from God. Neither does he rail at scholarship, which is equally a gift from the Father of lights. He believes that all creation is good and none of it reprehensible, since it has all been received with thanksgiving. He neither labours for success nor works for wages. He does what his hands find, seeing its purpose in the commandment while unconcerned about the future. He does good works before he thinks about it and produces fruit before he realizes it. He is like a flower that unconsciously spreads its delightful scent around itself. In one word, (s)he is man or woman of God, equipped for all good work. And because life for him is Christ, to die would be his gain.

The life of Bavinck had Christ as its content. His passing therefore was his entry into eternal glory.





