



Herman Bavinck: A sketch of his life

In my office at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, there are two portraits of Reformed theologians whom I admire and seek to emulate in a small, limited way in my work as a professor of doctrinal studies or systematic theology. One of the portraits is a well-known sketch of John Calvin in his library. The other is a print of the Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, which was taken at the height of his labor as a professor at the Free University in Amsterdam in the early years of the twentieth century. Though it is generally agreed that John Calvin is the leading theologian of the Reformed tradition, Herman Bavinck is not a figure who is often regarded as of comparable significance. My decision to hang a portrait of Bavinck, which faces from one end of the room the sketch of Calvin on the other, reflects my conviction that no theologian after Calvin in the Reformed tradition comes closer to his stature than Bavinck. Though there may be theologians in the Reformed tradition that are Bavinck's peer, this often-overlooked theologian deserves to be ranked with only a few theologians whose approach and contributions to Reformed theology are, to use an often-undeserved expression, "*larger than life*."

My admiration for Bavinck as a theologian partly explains my decision to embark upon a series of articles in *The Outlook*, which will describe Bavinck's life and legacy as a Reformed theologian and consider a number of the important themes of his theology. However, I also gladly accepted the editor's suggestion that I write this series at an auspicious time for reconsidering Bavinck's legacy. The year of our Lord, 2008, will witness, D.V., the publication of the fourth and last volume of Bavinck's greatest work, *Reformed Dogmatics* (orig.: *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*). Translated by John Vriend and skillfully edited by John Bolt of Calvin Theological Seminary, this English translation of Bavinck's dogmatics, which is published by Baker Academic and represents the most ambitious project of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, is an accomplishment that holds great promise for Reformed theology. At last, students of Reformed theology will have Bavinck's dogmatics available to them in English as a model of Reformed theological scholarship at its best.

The year 2008 is also an important year for commemorating Bavinck's legacy, since it marks the 100th anniversary of his delivery of the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. These lectures, which were originally published in Dutch, German and English with the title, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, focus upon one of the primary themes of Bavinck's theology and confirm his reputation at the time as a leading Reformed theologian. In addition to the completion of the English edition of Bavinck's dogmatics, a conference on Bavinck will be held at Calvin Theological Seminary in September under the sponsorship of a number of Reformed seminaries. The time is ripe, therefore, for the Reformed community in North America to (re)acquaint itself with Bavinck. The purpose of my articles is to contribute in a small way to such a reacquaintance with and commemoration of Bavinck's work as a Reformed theologian.

In order to introduce this series on Bavinck's contributions as a Reformed theologian, I will begin in this article with a brief sketch of his life and most important writings. I will offer an overview of Bavinck's dogmatics and also treat some of the most important themes that recur throughout his theological writings.

Early life and education

Herman Bavinck was born at Hoogeveen, the Netherlands, in the province of Drenthe, on December 13, 1854. His father, Rev. Jan Bavinck, was a well-known and respected pastor in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk* (Christian Reformed Church). This denomination was originally

formed in 1834 as a result of the *Afscheiding* or "Separation" from the *Hervormde Kerk*, the state Reformed church of the Netherlands that had become increasingly liberal and estranged from the Reformed confessions. The earliest leaders of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, pastors like Albertus Van Raalte (Holland, MI) and Hendrik Scholte (Pella, IA), stemmed from this seceding church tradition. Herman was the second of seven children born to Jan Bavinck and his wife, and was the oldest of the boys.

Biographers of Bavinck uniformly describe Herman's father, Jan, as a modest and unassuming pastor, who tended to underestimate his own considerable abilities. While the elder Bavinck was a student in seminary, he was asked to teach classes in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Later he would commit to his son the completion of his revision and editing of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (6th ed., 1881 [1625]), a Latin edition and collection of the writings of some of the greatest theologians in the early Dutch Reformed tradition. When the churches of the secession of 1834 established a seminary in Kampen in 1854, Rev. Jan Bavinck was a natural candidate for appointment as a professor, but he declined the appointment and remained in the pastorate. Bavinck's mother, Gesina Magdalena Holland, was by all accounts a natural complement to his father, being more outspoken and aggressive in manner than her husband. The home in which Herman was raised was characteristic of many of the churches of the secessionist tradition. Though the Bavinck family was not poor, they were of modest means and unpretentious in manner. According to the testimony of his son, Rev. Jan Bavinck was a fine preacher, clear and simple in his presentation of the gospel, almost mystical in his deep personal devotion to the Lord and the people of the congregation whom he served. Bavinck's lifelong devotion to the Lord and service to the church as a theologian represent a fitting testimony to what he had been taught by word and example through his parents.

Bavinck's earliest formal education took place at Bunschoten, where his father had moved when Bavinck was still an infant. At the age of seven he enrolled in Hasselman Institute, a private school of excellent reputation in Almskerk in the province of Noord Brabant. At this early stage in his education, he already exhibited considerable academic ability. At the age of sixteen, Bavinck was enrolled in the "gymnasium" in Zwolle, a boarding school that was in many respects comparable to a North American college. Bavinck managed to complete the normal four year program at Zwolle in three years. While at Zwolle Bavinck expressed his desire to attend the University of Leyden for his seminary training. The University of Leyden was perhaps the most liberal, and certainly the most academically prestigious, of the Dutch universities at the time. The faculty at Leyden included such renowned theologians as Kuenen, Scholten and Rauwenhoff, who were known for their repudiation of a confessional Reformed theology and advocacy of an "ethical" and "critical" reinterpretation of the Christian faith. Despite his desire to attend Leyden, Bavinck's parents and others prevailed upon him to commence his studies at the seminary of the Christian Reformed Church in Kampen. However, Bavinck's desire for a full university training at an institution widely renowned for its outstanding scholarship compelled him to transfer to Leyden, much to the displeasure of his parents and many others who feared that he would be unable to retain his convictions and confession under the pressure of a Leyden education.

Bavinck began his studies at Leyden at the age of twenty and was able to complete his studies by 1880 with the degree of Doctor of Theology, having written a dissertation on the topic of *The Ethics of Zwingli*. Bavinck distinguished himself at Leyden as an exceptional student, and was granted the doctor's degree "with honors," an achievement that was ordinarily not granted to students upon the completion of their studies. During his study at Leyden, Bavinck learned much from his teachers, but also faced many challenges to his personal confession and convictions. To one of his close university friends, he confided that

"I have learned much at Leyden, but also unlearned much."

Though his personal views were not shared by his professors, Bavinck earned their admiration and would even be offered at a later stage in his life a professorship at the University. While at Leyden, Bavinck became a close friend of fellow student Snouck Hurgronje, who later became a distinguished Semitic scholar at Leyden. Despite substantial differences of conviction, Bavinck maintained his friendship with Hurgronje throughout his life. In course of his studies, Bavinck

excelled in language studies, becoming proficient in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabian in addition to his previous mastery of Latin, French, English and German. The influence and impact of his Leyden education are evident in the breadth and excellence of Bavinck's later scholarship as a professor at the seminary in Kampen and then at the Free University in Amsterdam.

The Kampen years

Upon the completion of his studies at Leyden, Bavinck entertained the idea of further study but was persuaded to enter the ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. After submitting to an oral examination by the faculty at Kampen, Bavinck became a pastor of a church in Franeker for a short period of two years. During his pastorate, Bavinck proved himself an eloquent and gifted preacher as well as sympathetic pastor. Bavinck's pastorate in Franeker was of immense benefit to him in preparation for his later teaching ministry, as he became personally acquainted with and more adept in his interaction with the people of the churches among whom he served throughout his life.

While in Franeker, Bavinck was twice offered and declined an appointment to teach theology at the Free University in Amsterdam. However, in 1882, when the general synod of the Christian Reformed Church invited him to fill the vacant chair in dogmatics at the seminary in Kampen, Bavinck accepted and began his labor on January 10, 1883, with an inaugural address on "The Science of Sacred Theology." This address was well received throughout the churches, and even captured the attention of Abraham Kuyper, who reviewed it in *De Heraut* (Jan. 21, 1883), observing that "*I have hardly ever read a treatise with such undivided attention, from start to finish, as this inaugural.*" With this inaugural address, Bavinck embarked upon a twenty year period of productive labor at Kampen. Early on he met and married Johanna A. Schippers, a woman who proved to be a gifted partner throughout his life. One of his Leyden professors, Kuenen, aptly remarked at the time that "*Leyden is Scholten as Kampen is Bavinck.*" Much loved by his students for his modesty, unusual eloquence, and extraordinary breadth of knowledge and reading, Bavinck produced during his Kampen years his most important contribution to theology, the *Reformed Dogmatics* in a first edition of four volumes (1883-1901). He also produced a steady stream of brochures and studies, and was much in demand as a speaker in a wide diversity of academic and popular settings.

Among the works Bavinck produced during this period, in addition to his earlier dissertation and the critical edition of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, were the following: *The Theology of Dr. Chantepie de la Saussaye* (1884); *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church* (1888); *Eloquence*, a treatise on the art of public speech (1889); *Principles of Psychology* (1897); *The Sacrifice of Prayer* (1901); and *Creation or Evolution* (1901). In addition to these more academic works, Bavinck also produced a great number of shorter essays and articles, serving for a period with Kuyper and Rutgers as an editor of *The Clarion* (*De Bazuin*), the denominational paper of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken der Nederland*), the union denomination of the churches of the Secession of 1834 and the churches of the "Doleantie," a further secession from the Dutch Reformed Church that took place in 1886. During this period, Bavinck also made in 1892 the first of two trips to America. While in North America, he gave an address to the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System in Toronto, Canada. He also took the occasion to visit with his close friends Geerhardus Vos, who was at the time professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, and also H. E. Dosker, who was a professor of theology at Hope College. He also took the opportunity to visit Princeton Theological Seminary to make the acquaintance of professor B. B. Warfield.

Professor at the Free University

During the struggle that took place in the 1880's to unite the churches of the Secession (1834) and the churches of the Doleantie (1886), one of the most disputed issues was the question of church control over the teaching of theology and the preparation of students for the ministry. Most of those who stood in the line of the Secession of 1834 wished to maintain the principle of church-control, whereas those who stood in the line of the Doleantie under Kuyper favored the principle of "free study" or the location of the discipline of theology in a university setting. Bavinck, who participated significantly in the process that led to the union of these churches in 1892, was something of an anomaly in his own tradition, since he was sympathetic to the idea that theology should be pursued

in a university context so as to encourage the most rigorous academic and "scientific" approach. This preference provides an explanation for Bavinck's decision, upon the fourth occasion of an appointment in dogmatics to the Free University, to accept the appointment in 1902. Much to the disappointment of the supporters of the seminary in Kampen, Bavinck assumed the post at the Free University as Abraham Kuyper's replacement (Kuyper had been asked by the queen to organize a cabinet for the Dutch government). And so Bavinck began another important phase in his life, now as professor of dogmatics at the Free University. His teaching at the Free commenced on December 17, 1902, with an inaugural address on *Religion and Theology*.

Bavinck's work at the Free University continued the labor he had begun at Kampen. During this period of his life, he revised and published a second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906-1911). Even though he assumed a formidable challenge as Kuyper's successor in the area of dogmatics, he enjoyed the same reputation with his students at the Free University as he had earlier at Kampen. During this period, Bavinck visited America for a second time, principally to deliver the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1908, when he was also privileged to visit with President Theodore Roosevelt who shared with Bavinck his pride in his Dutch heritage. However, there is evidence of some shift in Bavinck's scholarly interests during this later period of his teaching. As he described it to his friend Dosker,

"As I grow older my mind turns more and more away from dogmatic to philosophical studies and from these to their application to the practical needs of life about me."

The titles of many of Bavinck's works during this period reflect this shift of attention and interest. Another shift in Bavinck's work is evident in his increasing withdrawal from direct engagement in church affairs. Never comfortable in church settings that involved fierce conflict or disagreement, Bavinck sought to disengage himself from direct involvement in church matters and gave his attention to the Christian school movement in the Netherlands and to a number of pressing social issues of the period. In many of his later writings, Bavinck attempted to offer a broad philosophical and pedagogical basis for the pursuit of excellence in the cause of the Christian schools at every level, including the university.

Among the works of particular importance to this period of his life are the following: *Calling and Regeneration* (1903); *Principles of Education* (1904); a second, revised edition of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906-1911); *Our Reasonable Faith* (1909; Dutch title: *Magnalia Dei*), a compendium of his more extensive dogmatics; *The Education of the Adolescent* (1916); *The New Education* (1917); *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1919, including the Stone Lectures of 1908); and *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (1920). During this period of his life, Bavinck also addressed a number of social and political issues, such as the question of women's suffrage, which he favored, and the question of *Christianity, War, and the League of Nations* (1910). Bavinck's intellectual interests were wide-ranging, from traditional theological and philosophical topics to a broad range of social, cultural and political questions. His reputation is evident from the accolades he received from friend and foe alike, his knighting by the queen as a member of the Order of the Dutch Lion, his membership in the First Chamber of the States General, and his membership in a number of prestigious scientific societies.

Bavinck's life within God's providence was concluded rather unexpectedly, at a time when he was still engaged in a variety of academic, political, cultural and church settings. After offering an eloquent address on the floor of the synodical meeting of the Reformed churches in Leeuwarden, Bavinck suffered a heart attack from which he first rallied but never fully recovered. After a prolonged period of illness, Bavinck "fell asleep" in the Lord on July 29, 1921. Among the poignant memories recorded of visits with Bavinck at the time is one of Bavinck's words in reply to the question whether he was afraid to die: *"my dogmatics avail me nothing, nor my knowledge, but I have my faith, and in this I have all."*

Characteristic features of Bavinck's work

In order to complete this biographical sketch of Bavinck's life and work, I would like to conclude with a few summary observations regarding Bavinck.

Though it is difficult from the point of view of historical distance to capture the person of a figure like Bavinck, the profile that emerges from his contemporaries and biographers is that of a son who was in many ways like his father. Bavinck was by all accounts an exceptionally gifted person, particularly in the area of his scholarship. However, he seems to have exhibited a reserve and modesty throughout his life that belied his ability. Like his father before him, he was as likely to underestimate his ability as overestimate it. In his dealings with others, especially in his engagement with the views of others, even of those with whom he strongly disagreed, Bavinck was always courteous and respectful, perhaps to a fault. Wherever possible, he would acknowledge the partial truth expressed by others even though he could not finally concur with their viewpoint. Consequently, though he was ultimately uncompromising in his convictions or confession as a Reformed theologian, Bavinck was nonetheless often respected by contemporaries who were not at all sympathetic to his viewpoint.

Since we are primarily interested in Bavinck's scholarly and theological labor, there are several outstanding qualities of his work that are worthy of note. One of these qualities stems from what we have noted about his person, namely, his sympathetic treatment of the views of others. Throughout his writings, Bavinck exhibits a meticulous care in representing alternative positions. Before he critically engages a position with which he disagrees, he is at great pains to represent it in the best possible light and to acknowledge whatever insight it might express. He also resists the temptation to arrive prematurely at a conclusion. In his dogmatics, for example, Bavinck evidences an extraordinary familiarity with the discussion of theological topics throughout the history of the church. When he addresses a theological topic, he takes account of the spectrum of opinion throughout history and among the most diverse confessional communions (whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox). Only after a thorough canvassing of the biblical, historical and confessional discussion of any particular topic does he arrive at a conclusion of his own. And even then he resists the temptation to be inappropriately "dogmatic" about the position he personally espouses. There is a reserve, even tentativeness, about Bavinck's theological work that has sometimes been criticized as too concessive or uncertain. Some even argue that in this respect Bavinck's work may have unwittingly contributed to some of the theological declension that would later occur among the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Whether this is a fair judgment or not, it is no doubt the case that Bavinck looked with disfavor upon any theological method that was too hasty in arriving at conclusions or too arrogant to allow for the possibility of correction or improvement. The qualities of meticulous and catholic scholarship, painstaking research and consideration of all the possible answers to a question, characterize Bavinck's work in an exemplary way.

It has been suggested, not implausibly, that Bavinck's theology reflects a kind of "duality" that corresponds to his personal biography. Bavinck is at once the faithful son of the "Secession" of 1834 and the scholar who deliberately chose to study at the most liberal university in the Netherlands, a university that had felt deeply the brisk winds of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. On the one hand, Bavinck endeavoured to adhere faithfully to the authority of the Scriptures and the subordinate standards or confessions of the Reformed churches. On the other hand, he read widely and engaged sympathetically the best of modern theological scholarship and culture. One could characterize Bavinck as, in these respects, a "man between two worlds." In a remarkably revealing passage in an essay on the nineteenth-century liberal Protestant theologian, Albrecht Ritschl, Bavinck himself expressed something of this tension in his thought and life:

Therefore, whereas salvation in Christ was formerly considered primarily a means to separate man from sin and the world, to prepare him for heavenly blessedness and to cause him to enjoy undisturbed fellowship with God there, Ritschl posits the very opposite relationship: the purpose of salvation is precisely to enable a person, once he is freed from the oppressive feeling of sin and lives in the awareness of being a child of God, to exercise his earthly vocation and fulfill his moral purpose in this world. The antithesis, therefore, is fairly sharp: on the one side, a Christian life that considers the highest goal, now and hereafter, to be the contemplation of God and fellowship with him, and for that reason (always being more or less hostile to the riches of an earthly life) is in danger of falling into monasticism and asceticism, pietism and mysticism; but on the side of Ritschl, a Christian

life that considers its highest goal to be the kingdom of God, that is, the moral obligation of mankind, and for that reason (always being more or less adverse to the withdrawal into solitude and quiet communion with God), is in danger of degenerating into a cold Pelagianism and an unfeeling moralism. Personally, I do not yet see any way of combining the two points of view, but I do know that there is much that is excellent in both, and that both contain undeniable truth.

The catholic breadth of Bavinck's understanding of the biblical, Reformed faith required that he critically engage modern theology with the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Mediator of creation and redemption. Like his contemporary, Abraham Kuyper, Bavinck could not be satisfied with an approach that did not seek to bring all things captive to the obedience of Christ. Nor could he be content with the idea that any dimension of truth is separable from the Truth that is in Christ, to whom all things in heaven and on earth are subject.

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