



Bavinck on the doctrine of general special revelation

As we noted in our previous articles, the introductory volume to Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is wholly dedicated to "*the first things that must be said*" (*prolegomena*). Bavinck begins by treating a number of formal and foundational topics that are of first importance to the whole enterprise of Reformed theology. Unless the foundations for theological study are carefully laid, the house of theology will be unstable and liable to dissolution. Especially within the context of theology in the modern era, which has drunk deeply of the spirit of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the Reformed theologian may not ignore the challenges to the basic tenets of historic Christian theology that are evident in more recent philosophy and science. Bavinck engages these challenges in a careful and penetrating manner throughout his introductory volume.

According to Bavinck, dogmatics is one of the four major divisions of theology whose unique aim is to summarize the teaching of the Word of God in conformity with the confessions of the churches. The task of dogmatics is to serve the people of God by providing a faithful summary of the teaching of divine revelation, and to do so in the awareness of alternative viewpoints. In addition to its positive task, dogmatics also has a polemical task, namely, to defend the dogmas of divine revelation against distortion or corruption. Furthermore, Bavinck argues that dogmatics, like the theological enterprise in general, is a legitimate science. As is true of all sciences, dogmatics has three "foundations" or *principia*: one, the reality or object that theology aims to know or understand (its "principle of being," *principium essendi*); two, the external medium or instrument through we may gain knowledge regarding this reality (its "external principle of knowledge," *principium cognoscendi externum*); and three, the internal or subjective apprehension of what may be known about this reality (its "internal principle of knowledge," *principium cognoscendi internum*). Though this language is rather technical, Bavinck's point is that theology is possible only upon the conviction that the Triune God of the Scriptures exists, that the Triune God has revealed himself to his image-bearers, and that the Triune God's revelation is able to be apprehended by faith.

Due to the fundamental importance of the doctrine of revelation to the dogmatic enterprise, the remainder of Bavinck's introduction offers an extensive treatment of the doctrine of revelation in general, and the inscription of special revelation in particular. Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of revelation and its apprehension concludes his introductory volume, and is of primary importance to an appreciation of his dogmatics. Unless we have a clear understanding of the reality and nature of God's revelation of himself in relation to the creation, theology will have an uncertain foundation or will seek to base its claims upon human experience rather than the truth of divine revelation. The doctrine of revelation is, therefore, of first importance and belongs to the indispensable dogmas that Reformed theology needs to affirm and articulate in the most careful manner.

The idea of revelation

Before Bavinck addresses the traditional distinction in Reformed theology between "general" and "special" revelation, he presents a case for the integral role of the idea of revelation in all religions. A doctrine of revelation is not unique to the Christian religion, "*but is a necessary correlate of all religion*" (RD I:284). Unless the claims of religion are merely an illusion, they require the conviction that God exists, that he has revealed himself in some manner, and that humans are capable of knowing him through that revelation.

Though the conviction of the certainty of God's revelation was a characteristic feature of Christian theology throughout the history of the church, Bavinck acknowledges several modern challenges to the idea of revelation. In the period after the Enlightenment, the emergence of "Deism" presented a serious challenge to the historic Christian doctrine of revelation. Though Deism took a variety of forms, and did not openly reject the idea of revelation altogether, it tended to subordinate revelation to human reason. The ultimate source and standard for the determination of truth, also in the arena of theology, could no longer be divine revelation, since revelation itself requires examination and testing by the universal truths that reason alone is able to ascertain. In the nineteenth century, various efforts were made to restore the doctrine of revelation in the face of the assault of the Enlightenment and its assertion of the pre-eminence of reason. However, in the theology of liberalism, whether represented by Schleiermacher or Ritschl, the orthodox doctrine of revelation was replaced with a view that emphasized the revelation of the divine through human consciousness and life-experience, rather than the communication of doctrine. Additional revisions of the doctrine of revelation include the "speculative rationalism" of Hegel, who identified the Absolute with the universal idea or ideas that are basic to all Christian dogmas, or the "naturalism" of modern science that opposed the independent existence of a transcendent and personal God who communicates through revelation with his creatures. In these modern theological, philosophical, and scientific developments, the idea of revelation has been subjected to a series of challenges whose cumulative effect is a loss of conviction regarding the reality and possibility of a traditional doctrine of revelation.

While Bavinck exhibits a considerable grasp of these challenges to the Christian idea of revelation, he argues that they do not constitute an insuperable obstacle to an orthodox conception of revelation. The Christian faith stands or falls with the fundamental convictions that the personal and Triune God of the Scriptures exists, that he has taken the initiative in communicating with his image-bearers, and that humans are able to come to know the truth respecting God on this basis. For example, the claims of "naturalism," which amount to a denial of God's transcendence or any fundamental distinction between Creator and creature, render impossible the very notion of a divine revelation. Even though the challenges to the Christian idea of revelation may seem formidable, Bavinck maintains that they betray a kind of dogmatic prejudice that is itself incapable of being demonstrated. Christian theologians are free, therefore,

"to do their work positively, not speculatively. They do not dictate to God whether and how he may reveal himself but listen to what God himself has to say on the matter."

(RD I:300)

General and special revelation

In order to set the context for the doctrine of Scripture, Bavinck offers an exposition and defense of the traditional distinction between "general" and "special" revelation. The Triune God's revelation of himself in Scripture presupposes the reality of his self-disclosure through the creation as his handiwork, and his wise and powerful superintendence of all history.

Bavinck notes that the distinction between general and special revelation is one that has characterized Christian theology from its inception. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, the more common language is that of "natural" and "supernatural" revelation. This language betrays a "dualistic" tendency to separate these forms of divine revelation, and to grant an inordinate place to human reason, which is believed to retain its power to interpret rightly natural revelation in the development of a "natural theology." In the tradition of Roman Catholicism, it is argued that all humans have the ability to ascertain a number of "preambles to faith," such as God's existence and nature, on the basis of natural revelation alone. Though these "preambles to faith" require supplementing by those truths that may only be derived from "supernatural revelation," they presuppose not only the reality of natural revelation but the ability of all human beings to know a number of basic truths about God and his will. Contrary to this view, Bavinck affirms the Reformed consensus that the mind of the "natural" human being is so darkened by sin and unbelief that it requires the additional provision of special revelation. Special revelation not only reveals what God

has already made known through general revelation, but it also enables its recipients to see with renewed insight what is manifest through the creation itself of God's everlasting power and wisdom.

In his evaluation of the Roman Catholic conception of "natural" revelation, Bavinck also objects to the traditional use of the language of "supernatural" revelation. This language fails to reckon with the sense in which all revelation is through and through "supernatural" in its origin and meaning. A proper view of divine revelation must begin with the Triune God's act of creation itself, and then proceed to consider all of God's works in creating man in his own image and in realizing his purposes throughout the whole course of history from creation to consummation.

"All that is and happens is," says Bavinck, "in a real sense, a work of God and to the devout a revelation of his attributes and perfections."

(RD I:307)

Whether the subject be the covenant relationship between God and man before the Fall into sin, religion or the worship and service of the truth of God, morality or the norms for proper human conduct in obedience to God, a theistic worldview, a firm conviction in the ultimate triumph of God's purposes in history — all of these subjects presuppose a kind of "supernaturalism" in which the Triune Creator and Lord of all creation makes himself known to his creatures through the *media* of his works. For Bavinck, it is most important to view God's revelation in an "organic" manner. No illegitimate separation may be posited between God's works as Creator or as Redeemer. Nor may we disconnect general and special revelation, which form an integral unity as they disclose the inseparability of God's purposes in creation and redemption. All revelation is mediated through what God himself first created and makes serviceable to the disclosure of his will and purpose. In a remarkable statement, Bavinck observes that all revelation is accordingly

"an act of grace; in it God condescends to meet his creature, a creature made in his image. All revelation is anthropomorphic, a kind of humanization of God. It always occurs in certain forms, in specific modes."

(RD I:310)

Despite Bavinck's strong emphasis upon the importance and comprehensiveness of general revelation, he notes that, apart from special revelation, such revelation is insufficient in three important respects. First, whatever limited knowledge of God's existence and attributes of goodness and justice may be derived from general revelation, it leaves us *"absolutely unfamiliar with the person of Christ, who alone is the way to the Father"* (RD I:313). Special revelation is needed to address human beings in their need as sinners for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. Second, the knowledge obtained through general revelation is at best *"meager and inadequate,"* and at worst *"uncertain, mingled with error, and for far and away the majority of people unattainable"* (RD I:313). And third, the insufficiency of general revelation is confirmed by the study of the history of religion. At no point in the history of religion, a history that attests to the irrepressible presence of God's revelation of himself through his works, do we find a single people who were content with a merely natural religion. The universal desire for another, special form of revelation, attests to the limitations of general revelation for a complete disclosure of God's will and purpose. Nevertheless, the universal disclosure of the Triune God through all of his works in creation and history constitutes the basis for the universality of religion in human life. All of God's image-bearers are inescapably aware of their obligation to know and serve the living God. The study of the history of religions confirms the truth of general revelation, and provides a point of departure for any presentation of the truths of special revelation.

At the close of his treatment of the doctrine of general revelation, Bavinck returns to the importance of this means of revelation for a proper appreciation of special revelation and the purposes of God in redemption. We should not regard special revelation in isolation from its close connection with general revelation.

The Triune Redeemer is also the Creator of all things, and in his purposes of his redemption nothing of the original integrity and goodness of creation is set aside. Commenting on the relation between these two forms of revelation and their inter-connection, Bavinck argues that the

"rich significance of general revelation comes out in the fact that it keeps nature and grace, creation and re-creation, the world of reality and the world of values, inseparably connected. Without general revelation, special revelation loses its connectedness with the whole cosmic existence and life."

(RD I:322).

Contrary to the kind of dualism between the sacred and the secular, the world of grace and the world of nature, that has marked Roman Catholic theology, Reformed theology recognizes that "(n)ature precedes grace" and "grace perfects nature," just as "reason is perfected by faith" and "faith presupposes nature." When general revelation is affirmed, and the work of God's "common grace" properly acknowledged, Reformed theologians are able to acknowledge "all the truth, beauty, and goodness that is present also in the pagan world," while at the same time avoiding the Pelagian error of ascribing this to the inherent goodness of the creature. The organic relationship between general and special revelation reminds Reformed believers that they are not ultimately "strangers" in the world God first created good.

Such believers are able to "see the God who rules creation as none other than the one they address as Father in Christ."

(RD I:321)

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