

A Spiritual Feast:

A review/commendation of Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vols. 1 & 2
(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, 2004)

We should be extremely grateful to the Dutch Reformed Translation Society for their work in bringing this important, stimulating publication to an English readership. First, a brief word about the contents of these volumes. After a useful introduction to Bavinck by John Bolt, volume one, *Prolegomena*, covers the nature and method of dogmatic theology, the historical formation of dogma including Lutheran and Reformed dogmatics, and the distinct “principia” (foundations) of theology. This includes the “external” *principium*: revelation as general and special, and the nature, inspiration, and attributes of Scripture; and the “internal” *principium*: faith. Here one finds helpful, nuanced discussions of revelation and history; the incarnation, language, and the Bible; and the relationship of Scripture to confession in the task of theology. In volume two, *God and Creation*, the greater portion is devoted to the doctrine of God. Under this heading we find sections on the knowledge, names, and attributes (incommunicable and communicable) of God, with a separate, lengthy discussion of the Trinity. We also read here of the divine counsel and decree, which forms an entrance to the doctrine of creation. Parts four, five and six cover the creation of Heaven and Earth, the image of God, and providence, respectively. There is much here that will delight and edify the reader. Both volumes (volume three has been released as well) are presented very attractively in hardcover, with a bibliography and Scripture, name, and subject indexes. All of Bavinck’s own footnotes have been retained and updated in form, and the subparagraph numbers of the 2nd Dutch edition (and following editions) have been included in this edition. Both are excellent editorial decisions which render the final product that much more useful.

In a review of this length I cannot hope to provide a justly comprehensive picture of the contents, let alone the virtuosity, of these volumes. Any portion of these volumes could be extracted and examined here with great profit. In fact, for fuller analysis of Bavinck’s work that is still very useful I commend the reviews of Geerhardus Vos.¹ Instead, having noted its contents I’d like to give you some reflections on Bavinck’s commitments as a way of commending his work to the whole readership of *New Horizons*. Yes, that’s right: this reviewer is hopeful Bavinck will eventually become familiar not only to ministers and teachers but to all OPC households!

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was an extraordinarily astute, knowledgeable man with a depth of commitment to his God and a fervent love for the gospel and the Church that is palpable on these pages. Some of the more doxological portions of the *Dogmatics* could be compared favorably with similar passages from Augustine and Calvin. What especially impressed me, however, as I moved methodically through these tomes was Bavinck’s *integrity*. When faced with a challenge to the Reformed faith as he understood

¹ Originally published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, they are reprinted in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1980), pp. 475-84, 485-93.

it, Bavinck did not simply content himself with repeating and resting in slogans, or treat his counterparts with trite dismissals of their work. Instead, he seems to have learned from everyone he read, even as he often ultimately provided a penetrating, devastating critique of their arguments. His integrity as a theologian is most evident, however, in the way his doctrine of Scripture comes into contact with the hard questions of exegesis: he refuses to gloss over the truly difficult questions which every careful reader of Scripture meets, and yet will not allow these difficulties to throw into question what he recognizes the Scriptures to clearly teach. Bavinck has an informed understanding of the problems and challenges of exegesis, yet he does not revel childishly in the ambiguities that a “not-yet-sight” faith inevitably encounters. At least in this context, his commitment to Scripture as *principium* actually *functions* – it has “teeth” – in the nuts and bolts of exegesis. Here he has much to teach us.

At the same time, for all its considerable virtues, Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* is of course not the last word on Reformed theology. In fact, later generations have offered important corrections and modifications of his work, and future generations of Reformed theologians will no doubt continue to do so. For example, on the relationship of revelation, reason, and knowledge Cornelius Van Til represents an internally-consistent corrective to the relevant sections in volume 1 (and portions of volume 2) in Bavinck. Also, many of Bavinck’s intuitive redemptive-historical insights are developed and given much more coherent expression in the later work of Geerhardus Vos and in the work of those who have followed his lead in biblical theology. At the same time, the careful reader of these two volumes recognizes that neither Van Til’s nor Vos’s contributions can be fully appreciated without a good handle on Bavinck’s system. Indeed, they both seem to have drunk very deeply at the well of Bavinck even where they correct or develop his ideas.

A careful study of Bavinck could hardly be more timely. In his day, the light of Reformed theology had nearly gone out in his land. The first great step toward its recovery, as Vos recognized in his review of Bavinck, was careful historical study of the great texts and figures of the Church, not only sixteenth and seventeenth-century theologians but the patristic and medieval fathers as well. This study, abundantly evident in Bavinck’s *Dogmatics*, provided the necessary perspective on how and where Reformed theology had lost its way. The threat he recognized as a nineteenth-century Reformed theologian was twofold: the emerging experiential, consciousness, and rationalist theologies of Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Kant on the one side; and the more proximate Lutheran and Pietist challenges on the other. If the truth claims of the Reformed faith were directly subverted in the former, it was the very integrity of the Reformed tradition as such that was at stake in the latter. This historical study helped, then, to clarify just what it meant to be Reformed in theology and, inevitably, this brought Bavinck back to the careful, meticulous exegesis of the text of Scripture itself. When it came to the Reformed theologians he recognized that the need was to be fully and humbly informed by the fathers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but not to reproduce or “repristiniate” them simplistically. Thus Bavinck’s historical study of the catholic, Reformed tradition did not substitute – nominally or functionally – for exegesis (something prevented by his Reformed doctrine of Scripture) but instead drove him, as it

should have, to the authoritative text of Scripture itself. And this is one reason why Bavinck is so timely: a constant interplay of Scripture, confession, and contemporary context which always resolves in an unabashedly dependent resting in the testimony of the Word of God. Bavinck has much to say to us regarding what qualifies as a Reformed theology of justification, or creation, or inerrancy, or the very concept and method of exegesis and theology – each of these press home the question of the distinctive integrity of the Reformed tradition, and thus recall Bavinck’s own concerns. And what does he teach us? Many things, but at least this: for Reformed theologians the risky temptation in opposing error is to relinquish much in order to protect much. This was not an option for Bavinck, who repeatedly gives expression to the unity of the Reformed faith, and brings this unity to bear on the questions with which the Church is confronted. Indeed, as Bavinck’s great cross-Atlantic counterpart, Benjamin B. Warfield, also understood, for all the important ideas held in common with other traditions, the Reformed faith needs to be sharply distinguished not only from gross error but also from every form of inconsistent Calvinism. Thus, in the challenges to Reformed theology posed today by varieties of postconservatism on the one hand, and of panconfessionalism on the other, one could justifiably note the eerie similarity to challenges in Bavinck’s day, and hope that we will learn much from his robust defense and commendation of the Reformed faith in its unity. In this respect Bavinck’s careful interaction with the theology of Julius Kaftan in volume 1 is especially instructive.

I noted above that Bavinck has not given us the last word in Reformed theology. It should be added that, in my view at least, ongoing work in systematic theology will not advance much if it neglects to wrestle honestly and frequently with the gems in this great work (most of which are, in my view, to be found in volume 3), and, in doing so, return over and over in its pursuits to the meticulous task of exegesis as Bavinck faithfully did. The student of Bavinck will find that patient pondering over the *Reformed Dogmatics* is a spiritual feast. It is that kind of theology that deepens and enriches the faith of a people for whom “faith turns into wonder; knowledge terminates into adoration; and their confession becomes a song of praise and thanksgiving. Of this kind, too, is the knowledge of God theology aims for. It is not just a knowing, much less a comprehending; it is better and more glorious than that: it is the knowledge which is life, ‘eternal life’ (John 17:3).”² For these reasons and many others, this is truly a publication event worthy of rejoicing. We can hope and pray that this will encourage the kind of theological work for which Bavinck is so greatly revered – the constant commitment to patient exegesis, the responsible and informed interaction with history, the churchly sensibility, and the keen perception into the concerns and needs of the present time. These are the classic priorities of Reformed theology, and they – and we – are deepened and advanced in Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*.

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² These are the closing words of volume 1, on p. 621.