

# Pearls and Leaven

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In this regular *TBR* feature we not only pick up the theme of the fall 2008 conference but also continue what was begun there: Providing small nuggets of “Bavinckiana”—mostly from his own writings—that illumine the men (i.e., Herman and J.H.) and highlight key themes or historical moments from their careers.

This first *Pearls and Leaven* explains why Herman Bavinck was so fond of the mixed metaphor. The images, of course, come from our Lord’s parables:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it (Matthew 13:44–46 (NIV)).

He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matthew 13:33 (NIV)).

The combination of these images is Bavinck’s favorite metaphor for speaking of the kingdom of God. His point is always that the kingdom of God must be seen as *both* a pearl *and* a leaven and that, most importantly, the kingdom is a pearl first and foremost and a leaven secondarily.

Consider, for example, what Bavinck says in his essay on “Christian Principles and Social Relationships”:

Even if Christianity had resulted in nothing else than this spiritual and holy community, *even if it had not* brought about any modification in earthly relationships, even if, for instance, it had done nothing for the abolition of slavery, it would still be and remain something of everlasting worth. *The significance of the Gospel does not depend on its influence on culture, its usefulness for life today; it is a treasure in itself, a pearl of great value, even if it might not be a leaven.*<sup>1</sup>

And then he adds:

But, although the worth of Christianity is certainly not only and exclusively, and not even in the first place determined by its influence on civilization, it nevertheless can not be denied that it indeed exerts such influence. *The kingdom of heaven is not only a pearl, it is a leaven as well.* Whoever seeks it is offered all kinds of other things. Godliness has a promise for the future, but also for life today. In keeping God's commandments there is great reward. Christianity in its long and rich history has borne much valuable fruit for all of society in all its relationships, in spite of the unfaithfulness of its confessors.<sup>2</sup>

Similar comments may be found in Bavinck's other works. In his 1888 rectoral address at Kampen, for example, he writes: "The kingdom of heaven may be a treasure and a pearl of great price, but it is also a mustard seed and a leaven."<sup>3</sup>

Later in this same address Bavinck faults Pietism for its failure to exhibit catholicity and its tendency toward isolation. He levels a concrete application of this criticism against his own *Afgescheiden* community. This *j' accuse* might turn the ears of CRCNA and RCA

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 144; emphases added.

<sup>2</sup> Bavinck, *Essays*, 141; emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1992): 236.

members in West Michigan a little bit red:

Many withdrew completely from life, literally separated themselves from everything, and in some cases, *what was even worse, shipped off to America* abandoning the Fatherland as lost to unbelief.<sup>4</sup>

Then Bavinck tenders this careful reminder:

Without a doubt, there is a glorious truth to be found in Pietism and all the religious movements akin to it. Jesus himself indeed calls us to the one thing that is necessary, namely, that we seek the kingdom of heaven above all. . . . Faith appears to be great, indeed, when a person renounces all and shuts himself up in isolation. But even greater, it seems to me, is the faith of the person who, while keeping the kingdom of heaven as a treasure, at the same time brings it out into the world as a leaven, certain that He who is for us is greater than he who is against us and that He is able to preserve us from evil even in the midst of the world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 246; emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 248.