

# Herman Bavinck and Augustine on Epistemology

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“THIS ENTIRE DOGMATIC DEVELOPMENT IN EAST AND WEST  
CULMINATED IN AUGUSTINE.”<sup>1</sup>

Herman Bavinck stands on the shoulders of St. Augustine. Even a cursory examination of the full range of his cited materials clearly reveals that Bavinck was immersed in Augustinian studies and that the trajectory of Bavinck’s theology rests on his interpretation of Augustine. In this way it could be argued that Bavinck is a neo-Augustinian writer rather than simply a neo-Calvinist. A thorough examination of Bavinck’s theological concerns as well as his method shows that Augustine is a primary influence in the *Reformed Dogmatics*. Particularly with respect to epistemology, the basic groundwork and prolegomena of Bavinck’s thought, it is Augustine that has shaped the *Reformed Dogmatics*. This is not to say that Bavinck takes Augustine wholesale. Nor does he endorse any one thinker uncritically. Rather he works within the Christian tradition as a whole, a tradition in which Augustine is dominant. As we shall see there is no perfect agreement between Bavinck and Augustine, yet Augustine’s philosophy of knowledge is seminal in Bavinck’s ecclesiology.

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 136.

## EPISTEMOLOGY: THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

With respect to epistemology, Augustine is the perfect conversation partner for Bavinck in the sense that he dealt with contemporary problems in epistemology that had their analogs in modernity. For Augustine, philosophy could not be divorced from theology but was a search for truth. How can we, as finite and mutable creatures, know the infinite and unchangeable God? From the opening pages of the *Confessions*, questions of epistemology consumed Augustine's thoughts. Interestingly, these very questions also drive the prolegomena of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*: "What is truth in the area of religion, and where can it be found?" He goes on to say, "In religion a human witness and human trust is insufficient; here we need a witness from God to which we can abandon ourselves in life and in death. 'Our heart is restless until it rests in Thee, O Lord!'"<sup>2</sup> Here it seems that Bavinck has so appropriated and even internalized Augustine's thought that a citation or footnote to the opening stanza of the *Confessions* is not even needed. Augustine has given Bavinck a language to search for truth. What are the features of this epistemic quest?

"Augustine himself was consumed by this burning love of truth," notes Bavinck. "Admittedly, Augustine accepted two cognitive organs, sense and intellect."<sup>3</sup> Augustine's view of creation and of the body was distinctive in his day. Contra the Manichees and neo-Platonists, he upheld the goodness of the body and the ability of the body in creation to apprehend reality. In Book 10 of the *Confessions* Augustine deals extensively with noetic possibilities and human sense organs as valid receptors of real knowledge. For example, he writes:

I turned my gaze on other things. I saw that to you they owe their existence, and that in you all things are finite, not in the sense that the space they occupy is bounded but in the sense that you hold all things in your hand by truth. So all

2. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:462.

3. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:137.

things are real insofar they have being, and the term ‘falsehood’ applies only when something is thought to have being which does not.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet, for Augustine intellectual assent had priority over sense perception in epistemology. Drawing on the extensive influence of neo-Platonism, Augustine, while he did not denigrate the sense perceptions, upheld the mind as primal to knowing. He writes, “From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses.”<sup>5</sup> Even though the body is good, the intellect carries the weight of the epistemic search. The mind, in fact, is what distinguishes humans from the animals. It leads us into truth and finally into all joy:

The happy life is joy based on the truth. This joy grounded in you, O God, who are the truth, my illumination, the salvation of my face, my God (Ps. 26:1, 41:12). The happy life everyone desires; joy in the truth everyone wants. I have met with many people who wished to deceive, none who wished to be deceived. How then did they know about this happy life unless in the same way that they knew about the truth?<sup>6</sup>

While Bavinck commends the right use of both sense and intellect, he feels that Augustine falls too far into neo-Platonism with its exaltation of the mind. Bavinck was never one for repristination but rather contextualization of the best that Christian philosophy offers throughout history. More specifically, he thought a balance between sense perception and intellectual cognition was necessary; for, after all, he was a man of modernity and scientific progress, and he held that “the created world is the external foundation of knowledge for all science. . . . But that is not enough. The Logos who shines in the

4. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 193.

5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 127.

6. Augustine, *Confessions*, 199.

world must also let his light shine in our consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> The search for truth begins and ends with the Divine Logos who illuminates the external world and our internal perceptions. In his critique of modern science and sundry ways of knowing, he takes up the categories that Augustine develops—sense and intellect—and evaluates his opponents on those grounds. How can we make sense of what has been revealed in creation? The world must not only be perceived but also interpreted. Yet in observing the world it is clear to see that people do not interpret the world similarly. A multiplicity of cultures, religions, and fields of study vie for attention and allegiance.

According to Augustine the Fall had disastrous consequences for the basic principles of cognition. The Fall distorted perception and cognition, and the result was a need for different media in which to communicate thoughts and ideas. What once was lucid has now become obscure and hidden. Ancient philosophy’s quest for wisdom entailed the use of signs, and Augustine locates the origin of both signs and symbols in the Fall of mankind, an event which dislocated human consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Before the Fall there was perfect knowledge and unbroken fellowship. But after the Fall communication and cognition are hampered by sin, and we cannot speak of things in themselves but must employ signs, metaphors, analogies, and symbols. These things are necessary yet imperfect in their ability to forge and maintain civic peace. This is an idea found in Plato as well as Aristotle, namely, that images are not only inferior to rationality but also that they strain our social relationships and cause alienation.<sup>9</sup> The tower of Babel is one of Augustine’s favorite examples of the way in which human sin and symbolic language are inextricably linked.<sup>10</sup> What are we to do?

7. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233.

8. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University California Press, 2000), 258.

9. A discussion of this point, albeit brief, is found in Robin Barrow, *Plato, utilitarianism and education* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 49.

Language, as a system of signs, is potentially the source of both alienation and joy. Joy comes through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that is needed to grant general revelation to all of humanity and special revelation to the elect. The ways in which signs alienate and cause joy is another way in which Bavinck follows Augustine in exploring areas of common grace as well as antithesis. Though fallen humanity can use signs and symbols to create cultures of peace and order, temporally speaking, the common grace given to all humanity is insufficient. The Holy Spirit is needed in the apprehension of signs and symbols to know the Truth that leads to joy. Thus, pneumatology and epistemology go hand in hand for Bavinck and Augustine.

How then are we to regard “pagan” knowledge? And is Christian truth in any way distinctive?

#### SIGNS: COMMON GRACE AND ANTITHESIS

Methodologically, the whole of the *Reformed Dogmatics* follows the form and pattern of Augustine’s major works: *Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *On Christian Teaching*. These works attempt to articulate a vision for a distinctly Christian culture amidst the pantheon of gods and varieties of religions in late Antiquity. Having been immersed in various religions and philosophies, Augustine, on one hand, had to pay homage to their contributions, yet at the same time he drew sharp distinctions between church and culture. Likewise, Bavinck, beginning in the *Prolegomena* and continuing to the very end of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, draws out the tension found in common grace and the accompanying resolution found in the antithesis. Additionally, using juxtaposition as a literary mode, there was very little question for Augustine that the books of the Platonists held treasures of wisdom and were quite learned in themselves. The same held for Bavinck in his search for truth in modernism and scientific inquiry.

10. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 32.

Yet something more is needed—an authority from above that will lead us into objective truth and provide subjective assurance of that truth.

In sharp relief to common grace, Augustine used the antithesis to give Christian doctrine, and its unique way of knowing, primacy over all other religions and their ways of knowing. He writes:

In the symbol of the cross every Christian act is inscribed, to hope for heaven, to avoid profaning the sacraments. . . . The insignificance of the amount of gold, silver, and clothing which that people took away with it from Egypt, in comparison with the wealth that it later attained in Jerusalem . . . is the measure of the insignificance of all knowledge, I mean useful knowledge, that is collected from the pagan books, when compared with the knowledge contained in the divine scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

Thus God has given special revelation to guide and lead God's people into all truth and abundant life. The Scriptures, the written Word of God, capture the historic unfolding of God's redemptive plan in time and space. As Bavinck says, "The Scripture does not give us data to interpret, it is itself the interpretation of reality."<sup>12</sup> Christianity, more than any other religion, gives light and life to pilgrims until the Day when all signs and symbols are done away with and we shall see face to face. But until the Parousia we are left to look through the dim mirror of signs and symbols. Thus the tensions of common grace and antithesis remain as well as a myriad of other problems with "knowing."

One place where this epistemological tension bears significant weight is in ecclesiology. This divide is a philosophical one—one of epistemology and hermeneutics. In the Donatist controversy the same basic questions of epistemology were applied to the sphere of the church. Where is the church? How do we know? To claim that

11. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 66–67.

12. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:354.

Bavinck is a neo-Augustinian theologian requires that we address Bavinck's opposition to Augustine's ecclesiology.

## ECCLESIOLOGY: THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUE CHURCH

B.B. Warfield states:

The problem which Augustine bequeathed to the Church for solution, the Church required a thousand years to solve. But even so, it is Augustine who gave us the Reformation. For the Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

In line with Warfield, Bavinck stands in the Reformed tradition with respect to this difficulty of relating ecclesiology and soteriology. According to Augustine, the church was the locus of salvation, the dispenser of grace, the seat of authority, and the guarantor of Scripture. He believed that the church was the mother of believers.<sup>14</sup> The Reformation owed to Augustine grace, but it had to resolve the problem of the church just as Warfield stated.

Though the Reformation owes much to Augustine, Bavinck claims that Augustine not only laid the foundation for Roman Catholicism but also strengthened it.<sup>15</sup> Thus we must ask: is Bavinck's reading of the Donatist controversy correct? The sacraments as means of grace are certainly at stake, but also the nature of the church, the bride of Christ. Again, this is about how we are to regard the epistemic problem of signs and symbols. As Peter Brown notes:

13. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 321–22.

14. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:138.

15. Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*, ed. J. Mark Beach, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 36.

Augustine's writings against the Donatists betray his increasing absorption of the common stock of ideas available to African Christians—above all, of the idea of the Church as a clearly distinguished group in society, marked out as the sole possessor of a body of 'saving' rites."<sup>16</sup>

It has already been acknowledged that as contingent and fallen creatures, humans are in need of forms and signs and that the church and its sacraments are the signs par excellence by which we come to know the truth. Looking at how Augustine reasons is instructive: he does not quarrel with their use of the Sacraments but appeals to the authority of Scripture for catholic unity.

In his correspondence with the Donatists, Augustine appeals to a Christian unity and holiness that is not based upon the hierarchy of the church or the sacraments but upon Scripture itself:

See the Scripture we share, see where we come to know Christ, see where we come to know the Church. If you hold on to Christ, then why don't you hold on to the church itself? If you believe in Christ because of the truth of the Scripture, although you can read of him, but not see him, why do you deny the church, which you can both read of and see?<sup>17</sup>

He appeals to them as fellow Christians, not as people outside the grace of God. He addresses the Donatists as brothers, pleading with them in love to return to the Church because they are Christians but are not acting as Christians.<sup>18</sup> Augustine does not want schism. His appeal is based in Scripture, not in the nature of the sacraments but in the authority of the Word of God which reveals to us knowledge of Christ and the Church. That is the heart of his argument.

16. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University California Press, 2000), 221.

17. Augustine, *Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173.

18. Augustine, *Political Writings*, 169.



Thus if Bavinck concludes that the Donatists were a legitimate form of Christianity, then is he a Donatist? No. For Bavinck agrees with Augustine that schism is sin and that the Word of God has authority to reveal knowledge of Christ and his Church.<sup>19</sup> Where is the church? Augustine could not conceive of a pure church, one without spot or wrinkle in this life. Rather, he acknowledges that the church is a mixture of wheat and chaff. Though the Roman Catholic church adopted papal infallibility in 1870, it was Augustine who, centuries earlier, contended for catholic unity on the basis of Scripture—a very Reformed practice indeed.

## CONCLUSIONS

Admittedly, Bavinck does not take issue with the concept of the church as institution per se, but rather that it is the sole means of grace and salvation in the world. He emphasizes the organic conception of church, and he upholds the Scriptures as the sole and primary locus of authority for the Christian. Bavinck never divorces the means of grace from Scripture. “Scripture is the light of the church,” he writes,

the church the life of Scripture. Apart from the church, Scripture is an enigma and an offense. Without rebirth no one can know it. . . . Scripture explains the church; the church understands Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

This dynamic is reciprocal, one in which the church and Scripture are inextricably linked. The written set of signs and symbols that communicate God’s revelation gives life to the church through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Yet the issue at hand for Bavinck, throughout the *Reformed Dogmatics*, is the deplorable idea of hegemony. Augustine would certainly defend the notion of Church

19. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 316–19.

20. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:384.

as institution, but so would the neo-Calvinists defend the church as the place that rightly interprets the Word and distributes the grace of God through the sacraments. Indeed, placing authority in the human institution, the cult, and not the Scripture—that is deplorable for Bavinck. So also the notion of institutional coercion that limits the freedom and grace that Scripture and the Spirit together bring must be denounced. This means that, just as Bavinck could rail against Augustine’s use of coercion against the Donatists, so also he could quickly critique Calvin’s persecution of Servetus.

In Tridentine Roman Catholicism—a hierarchy that promulgates papal infallibility—there is but a semblance of unity. In Reformed Christianity it is the Scripture that brings life and freedom. “It [Scripture] alone,” writes Bavinck, “is able to maintain the freedom of the Christian; it is the origin and guarantee of religious liberty as well as of our political freedoms.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, for both Bavinck and Augustine alike, the Word is only correctly interpreted by the elect under the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. This is a very high view of the church wherein, apart from the Spirit-led interpretation of the Scripture through the church, the book is but a fog and can only condemn us. And if in the end it is the coercive aggregation of power that Bavinck is worried about, Augustine has the same reservations. Augustine undoubtedly maintained a skepticism about the human condition with its deep inclination toward hubris, a skepticism incompatible with papal infallibility. Ostensibly, Augustine did not live long enough to devise a polemic against the First Vatican Council of 1870.

In the end the doctrine of the church is really an epistemology of the church, an outworking of the *principium cognoscendi* of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, a practical application of the philosophy of knowledge. Regarding epistemology in general—its content and method—it is clear that Bavinck relies heavily on Augustine. And while on the surface Bavinck is troubled by Augustine’s doctrine of the church, a close reading of the letter to the Donatists shows that Augustine was the Reformer of the church in his day. Hence what

21. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:479.

Bavinck writes about Augustine holds true, perhaps even more than we can fully comprehend:

He is the universal teacher. Even philosophy neglects him to its own detriment. And because of his fascinating style, his refined, precise, highly individual and nevertheless universally human way of expressing himself, he more than any other church father, can still be appreciated today. He is the most Christian as well as the most modern of all the fathers; of all them he is closest to us.<sup>22</sup>

22. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:139.