

## **An Impenetrable Mystery: Herman Bavinck’s Concept of Regeneration and Its Sources**

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Is it possible to write a dissertation on a dogmatic subject about which the primary source material covers less than 70 pages? When we look to §49 of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*—“Calling and Regeneration”—it looks like it is just a small part of his magnum opus. Nevertheless, this small section is like a stone in a pond: it creates multiple dogmatic and anthropological waves which affect the entire theological pool. When one looks to Bavinck’s in-depth approach to the subject and to his extensive use of a broad range of sources, it becomes increasingly clear that a scientific study on his formulation of regeneration is more than justified.

My dissertation is under the supervision of Jan Hoek, Professor of Reformed spirituality at the Theological University of the Protestant Church in Kampen (PThU). The main question of my study is: What is the concept of Bavinck’s theology of regeneration? And how does he use the dogmatic developments pertaining to regeneration from Reformed theology to modern theology?

The method I use is twofold. First, I examine the theological-dogmatic developments of regeneration from sixteenth-century Reformation to nineteenth-century Dutch neo-Calvinism. Second, I analyze Bavinck’s description of regeneration throughout many of his works, both published materials and unpublished writings found in the Bavinck Archive in Amsterdam.

My study is divided in two parts. The first part is a dogmatic-historical overview on the development of the theology of regeneration from Calvin to Kuyper. The second part is a description and examination of Bavinck's concept of regeneration and its development. More specifically, the former part draws a historical line starting in the Reformation and continuing through Reformed Scholasticism, Puritanism, the Dutch Second Reformation, the German *Vermittlung-theologie*, the nineteenth-century Neo-Kantian and Lutheran theology, modern theology, Dutch Ethical Theology, and neo-Calvinism. The sources that I use—such as Calvin, Dordtse Leerregels (the Canons of Dort), *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, Perkins, Voetius, Maccovius, Van Aalst, Vitringa, Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, Gennrich, Scholten, Muller, and Kuyper—are works to which Bavinck refers most in this section of his writings.

This historical survey has a twofold purpose. First, it gives insight into important developments in the theology of regeneration through almost four centuries. Second, it provides insight into how Bavinck analyzed these sources and historical developments. Again, all the theological works that are examined in this dogmatic-historical overview are of great importance to Bavinck's formulation of regeneration.

Why this extensive overview of historical-theological developments? This broad horizon is the outcome of a profound examination of Bavinck's works focused on his concept of regeneration and his sources.

So we come to the second part of my study—the main part. Upon an initial examination, Bavinck's concept of regeneration seems to contain only a small amount of material: (1) a section in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, (2) articles published in *Calling and Regeneration*, and (3) selections from his various books such as *Magnalia Dei*. Furthermore, we all know that in his context there was the exhaustive discussion about the Kuyperian concept of “Veronderstelde Wedergeboorte” (presumptive regeneration), which doctrine created much debate in the Reformed Churches. But to say regarding these sources, “Here we have the most important materi-

als for describing the concept of regeneration in Bavinck's thought," is much too simple; for, in Bavinck's thought the subject of regeneration is not only greatly important but also highly complex. Additionally, the concept plays an important role in his theological development.

I make a distinction between the younger Bavinck (i.e., the Professor in Kampen) and the older Bavinck (i.e., the Professor in Amsterdam). The younger Bavinck wrote the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* and the short articles on *Calling and Regeneration*. As is evident in these works, the younger Bavinck refers most frequently to Reformed Scholastic theologians and to Reformed theological works. The frame of his concept is worked out like a scholastic *ordo salutis*: calling, regeneration (divided into internal and external calling), faith, conversion, and so forth. However, during this phase the younger Bavinck also wrote his unpublished *Reformed Ethics* manuscript which was found recently in the Bavinck Archive in Amsterdam. In this manuscript we meet a more spiritual and practical approach to regeneration than in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, and we definitely see a clear influence of Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation. For example, we find the question about the foregoing works of the Holy Spirit, like Perkins described.

It is striking that, although the younger Bavinck made an intensive study of the Dutch Ethical Theology represented in works such as *De Ethische Theologie van Chantepie de la Saussaye*, it looks like there is no apparent influence of this theological stream on Bavinck's thought with respect to regeneration. When it comes to the modern theology of Scholten and Bavinck's other teachers, it looks like these influences did not leave a trace in his early publications. But we know from his letters that the young Kampen professor had his interest, vision, and struggles with the broadness of theology, but we do not find these in his early books or manuscripts such as the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, his *Reformed Ethics* manuscript, or his lecture notes (either the collections made by himself or by his students). So we can say, as a preliminary conclusion, that the young Bavinck wants to be a fully

Reformed theologian when it comes to regeneration. The new developments in theology remain in the background.

Then, indeed, things change. Bavinck becomes Professor of dogmatics at the Free University in Amsterdam. He publishes the second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, and in this edition the amount of material on calling and regeneration has more than doubled! It has also been revised. I have studied these additions and revisions in several ways.

First, I have made a close comparison between the first and second editions. The difference is obvious: the text of the first edition is mainly still there in the second edition, but there is a huge increase of material. Thus it is intriguing to discover what the new material covers.

Second, I have examined all his sources listed in the footnotes—more than 220 in this section alone! In distinction from his first edition, Bavinck refers to a very broad horizon of theological sources ranging from Reformation theology and Reformed scholasticism to German Vermittlungs-theologie to modern theology. Additionally, a marginal attempt at an interdisciplinary approach can be detected. For example, Bavinck incorporates insights from the new anthropological science of psychology (James).

But, most importantly, it appears from the second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* that Bavinck made an extensive study of new theological developments concerning regeneration. This development did not occur primarily in relation to the contemporary discussions about “veronderstelde wedergeboorte.” For it appears that that discussion did not interest the older Bavinck. Rather, he became more and more interested in the anthropological dimension of regeneration—a development that suits the way that Bavinck moved from theology to anthropology.

Furthermore, we must note that the anthropological dimension of regeneration which we find in the second edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics* was an important subject of discussion in the neo-Kantian and Lutheran theology of the late nineteenth-century. The older Bavinck refers often to theologians such as Schleier-

macher, Ritschl, Herrmann, and Gennrich, and he frequently references contemporary Lutheran theologians from Germany. Hence it is obvious that the older Bavinck is engaged in an extensive discussion with a broad horizon of theological and anthropological sources. Bavinck's other writings, such as his letters and college notes, confirm this development toward emphasizing anthropology.

My study involves two presupposition. First, recent Bavinck scholarship has demonstrated that, when Bavinck is in discussion with other theological traditions, he does not merely reference and describe formulations from these traditions as concepts to be rejected. Rather, when Bavinck cites from a broad horizon of theological traditions, he quietly attempts to incorporate these streams into his own formulations. Second, when we read Bavinck we must keep in mind that there are several layers in his works. This fact is related to his developments through the years. Also, we must give attention to the diversity of targets within his works; for, in his writings we meet not only Bavinck as a dogmatic theologian but also as an irenic churchman and a philosophical anthropologist. The purpose of each work guides its content, and therefore we must reckon with Bavinck's aims in his various publications.

My ongoing research justifies the following preliminary conclusion: Bavinck has been loyal to the so-called orthodox *ordo salutis*. It is like a frame for his theology of regeneration. He loved the words used to describe regeneration in the Dordtse Leerregels which he cites at the end of his treatment of this topic. But through the years his concept was broadened with anthropological, spiritual, and psychological dimensions. This enrichment comes forth primarily from his engagement with nineteenth-century German theology and his interest in the new insights arising from the new anthropological sciences. But, how deep and how broad his theology of regeneration finally may be, Bavinck says himself: regeneration is an impenetrable mystery.