

# Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Subject of Education as seen in Two Public Addresses

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The names of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck are often spoken together because of their connection to the Free University of Amsterdam and Dutch Reformed theology. This institution was founded to provide a place for the arts and sciences to flourish under the banner of Christ. On the 20th of October, 1880, one of Abraham Kuyper's dreams was fulfilled when he delivered the inaugural address for the Free University. Kuyper is well known for his ability as an orator, and perhaps his most famous quotation comes from this address. At the height of the speech he said, "there is not one square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"<sup>1</sup> Christ's domain over all spheres of creation would set the tone for much of the work he would perform throughout the rest of his career.

Although Herman Bavinck is perhaps less known for his oratorical ability than Kuyper, his written material suggests that he too was often given to public lectures.<sup>2</sup> This article will bring together two similarities between these two Reformed thinkers. In particular it will analyze what they said about education in two

1. Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty (1880)" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 489.

2. For examples of these lectures in printed form, see Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Science and Religion*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

public addresses: Kuyper's inaugural at the Free University in 1880 will be compared with Bavinck's Stone Lectures given at Princeton in 1908. The topic of education and the Christian was one that occupied both of their minds and often their writings. It is therefore one that is well worth examining.

What should be said at the opening of a university that has long been a dream and now has become a reality? The title of Kuyper's address was "Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring" ("Sphere Sovereignty"). James Bratt notes that the English translation of this phrase is rather ambiguous. It could mean "sovereignty in its circle, referring to the pluralistic ontology Kuyper unfolds in the text. But it can mean just as well sovereignty in our circle, spelling out a pluralistic sociology and epistemology which Kuyper also argues for but which does not have ontological warrant."<sup>3</sup> Whichever meaning may be appropriate, Kuyper takes this opportunity to explain why sphere sovereignty is so important to his understanding of what the Free University should be. He says in his opening remarks:

You expect me, then, to tell you how the school we are introducing fits into the Dutch garden, why it brandishes the liberty cap on the tip of its lance, and why it peers so intently into the book of Reformed religion. Let me link the answers to all three questions to the one concept of "sphere sovereignty," pointing to sphere sovereignty as the hallmark of our institution in its national significance, its scholarly purposes, and its Reformed character.<sup>4</sup>

Kuyper then divides the remainder of his address into three categories accordingly: national, scholarly, and Reformed. Since we are dealing specifically with the topic of education in these public addresses, we will examine only section two concerning the scholarly purposes.

3. James D. Bratt, introduction to "Sphere Sovereignty (1880)" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 462.

4. Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty (1880)," 464.

Since sphere sovereignty is the driving principle behind what Kuyper is doing in this piece, it may be best to begin with a definition of sphere sovereignty: “For Kuyper, society was made up of various spheres such as the family, business, science, and art, which derived their authority not from the state, but directly from God, to whom they were accountable.”<sup>5</sup> The phrase “sphere sovereignty” that he used to describe this system was first coined at this inaugural address and later expounded in the Stone Lectures that he delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898. With this definition in mind, Kuyper viewed the state as the leading sphere, or the “sphere of spheres, which encircles the whole extent of human life.”<sup>6</sup> In his structure, the state has to be the leading sphere because the state sets the boundaries of the other spheres in law.

Viewing the state as the supreme power or “sphere of spheres” may seem rather stifling in a twenty-first century context involving the spread of democracy. Kuyper did allow for some means of checks and balances to be in place so that this power of supremacy was not overtly abused by the state. One of these checks was by means of education. He said on this October day that, “Among the means that God has granted nobler peoples to defend their liberties, scholarship often stands at the forefront” (475). Kuyper takes the Apostle Paul as a chief example of how education leads to liberty:

Among the spokesmen of the Holy Spirit the man of Tarsus was the academically trained, and it was from the Pauline treasure chest, not from the mystical John nor the practical James, that Luther drew the freedom of the Reformation. I well know that learning can betray liberty and has done so more than once, but this was despite and not by virtue of its sacred mission. In its authentic form God sent it to us as an angel of light. (475)

5. Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper’s Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 154.

6. Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty (1880),” 472; hereafter cited in text.

Although Kuyper's metaphor of Paul's academic training being the gateway through which the Reformation was born may be bit of a stretch, his point that education can serve as light to grant freedom from captivity is no less profound. Clarity of thought, Kuyper believes, is the means by which truth can be found in each sphere. "To be able to think of something that is, and thus to be able to put together in our reason what is mirrored in our consciousness, is an honor bestowed by God on our human existence. To possess wisdom is a divine trait in our being" (476).

Since he is founding a Christian university, one may expect Kuyper to argue at this point in his address that the knowledge coming out of his school would be the guiding light that grants liberty to the other spheres. Yet, he is not so presumptuous. Rather, he maintains that scholarship should remain sovereign in its own sphere and should "not degenerate under the guardianship of Church or State. Scholarship creates its own life sphere in which truth is sovereign" (476). Scholarship (or education) is vital to the concept of sphere sovereignty because it creates a sphere in which truth reigns supreme. Although the sphere of scholarship is separate from that of the church, this does not lead to a search for truth simply for its own sake. The search for knowledge and attainment of wisdom should end in "adoration of the only wise God" (476). Thus scholarship should ultimately lead back to God who is sovereign over all spheres of life.

For Kuyper, another practical application of sphere sovereignty in relation to scholarship pertains to the state: "What influence should the sphere of the state have over the sphere of learning?" The state is unique in that it administers justice and also "defines its sphere of justice" (477). Kuyper makes it clear that learning should never be merely a servant of the state. When scholarship becomes a tool of the state it becomes little more than a means of propaganda. In Kuyper's construction the state does not pour knowledge into the university, but rather the university disseminates knowledge to other spheres of life.

Kuyper believed that the scholarship that would arise from the Free University was necessary for multiple reasons. First, the

sphere of the state had seen fit to allow such an institution to exist. Although he believed that Christ was sovereign over all spheres, he did not argue that therefore all people groups of the country should by default support a Christian university. He said in this speech:

“When Jews and Roman Catholics are compelled to contribute to the support of a theological faculty that in fact is and must remain Protestant, is not the sense of justice offended? So when the law of the land recognizes our right to have our own institution, and the Sovereign of the land—as we have just heard—takes our free, unencumbered institution under the protection of justice, then does not a university supported by the people themselves offer a beautiful prophecy for learning and national life?” (478)

Because such an institution as the Free University was able to exist under the laws of the state, Kuyper believed that Christians should make to most of that opportunity by supporting the flourishing of scholarship in all fields of knowledge.

## HERMAN BAVINCK AND EDUCATION IN THE STONE LECTURES

Herman Bavinck delivered the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1908 some thirty years after the opening of the Free University of Amsterdam and ten years after Kuyper had delivered his Stone Lectures in 1898. The collection commonly referred to as Bavinck’s Stone Lectures consists of ten lectures. The preface to the 1908 edition notes that only six of them were actually delivered at Princeton.<sup>7</sup> The lectures center primarily around the role of revelation in various fields of life such as philosophy, nature,

7. See preface to Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909, Princeton Theological Seminary*, trans. Geerhardus Vos, Nicholas M. Steffens, Henry E. Dosker (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908). Another interesting caveat noted in the preface is that Drs. Gerhard Vos and B.B. Warfield prepared the manuscript of the lectures and saw the book through the press.

history, religion, Christianity, religious experience, culture, and the future.

Like Kuyper, Bavinck also makes use of the term “sphere sovereignty,” but not nearly to the same extent as does Kuyper. As noted above, for Kuyper, sphere sovereignty was the driving principle that led him to influence culture for the name of Christ. For Bavinck, however, it seems that sphere sovereignty is more of a tacit Reformed Principle<sup>8</sup> underlying his work. Early in his lectures he writes, “Although God is immanent in every part and sphere of creation with all his perfections and all his being, nevertheless, even in that most intimate union he remains transcendent. His being is of a different and higher kind than that of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Just a few pages later, in a rather Kuyperian fashion, Bavinck again refers to this idea of spheres when he speaks of the place of Christianity within history:

. . . the desire has reasserted itself in modern theology and philosophy to do justice to this central fact of universal history, and to trace on all sides the lines of connection established by God himself between revelation and the several spheres of the created universe.<sup>10</sup>

There are at least two points to notice about this quotation. First, as the central fact of universal history to which he refers, is the place of Christianity in the unfolding of history. Bavinck seems to follow the pattern set out by Kuyper in which the creation mandate is a universal order to rule over creation. Second, Bavinck acknowledges God’s working in several different spheres, and he insists at the same time that God remains sovereign over these spheres by his providence.

8. The term “Reformed Principle” is a reference back to the third section of Kuyper’s inaugural address which bears this title. See Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty (1880),” 480–90.

9. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 22.

10. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 24.

When referring to a recent return to philosophy and religion, Bavinck notes how this return is taking place in all spheres: “It is not peculiar to this or that particular branch of learning, but manifests itself in the spheres of history, jurisprudence, and medicine, as well as that of natural science; its influence is no less strong in literature and art than in religion and theology themselves.<sup>11</sup> Again, in this case the use of the term “sphere” is more of a passing, implicit principle than an overarching theme. From these examples one can see that sphere sovereignty seems to be an underlying principle in what Bavinck is doing in *Philosophy of Revelation*, but it is not the driving force of what he has to say about education as it is for Kuyper.<sup>12</sup>

As stated earlier, the primary aim of this paper is to examine Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s understanding of education in these two public lectures. As the title of Bavinck’s lectures suggests (i.e., *The Philosophy of Revelation*), his lectures were not primarily about education but rather about his understanding of revelation. He achieves his purpose in a twofold manner. First, he shows that much philosophical thought from the Enlightenment to his day effectively undermined any absolute belief in revelation. Second, he demonstrates how the reality of revelation in Christianity distinguishes it among other religions and philosophies. Hence he claims: “With the reality of revelation, therefore, Christianity stands or falls.”<sup>13</sup> Bavinck applies this principle to the topic of education and argues that revelation, properly understood through the lens of Christianity, will lead one to a better understanding of revelation. Therefore, even though the primary purpose of his Stone Lectures is

11. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 30.

12. Surprisingly, the word “sphere” appears quite often in *The Philosophy of Revelation*, especially in the first half. However, these usages are generally similar to what has been noted above—sphere sovereignty is not a dominant theme. Cf. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 45, 86 (sphere is used three times on this page), 98, 99, 107, 129, 130, 149, 169, and 195. It is interesting to note that there is no reference to “sphere” in the latter third of the lectures.

13. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 20.

to present Christianity's view of revelation, the concept of education does play a major role in this work, albeit indirectly.

Education is a major topic of Bavinck's larger corpus. He published three books specifically on this topic.<sup>14</sup> One of the first principles underlying Bavinck's philosophy of education was that education is not the final answer for how to better the individual or society. He saw this view as more of an unfulfilled enlightenment ideology. He says in his lecture, "All culture, whatever significance it may have, just as all education, civilization, development, is absolutely powerless to renew the inner man. For it always works externally, and does not penetrate into the heart of man."<sup>15</sup> Education stands as an external force that can work towards change, but it is not ultimately the catalyst that can cause inner change as this belongs to the role of Christ in the human heart.

In *The Philosophy of Revelation* Bavinck's primary encounter with education comes in the tenth lecture, "Revelation and the Future." In this chapter Bavinck is pessimistic about modern man's blindness concerning his own goodness. He says that modern man "can conceive nothing more wonderful than this beautiful world. . . . He is in his own estimation no mere creature, but a creator and redeemer of himself and society" (272). Bavinck is too well aware of the depravity of man to believe that education can somehow serve

14. Herman Bavinck, *Handleiding Bij Het Onderwijs in den Christelijken Godsdienst* (Guide to the Teaching of Christian Religion), 1st ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1913), *De Nieuwe Opvoeding* (The New Education) (Kampen: Kok, 1928), *Paedagogische Beginselen* (Pedagogic Principles) (Kampen: Kok, 1904). Unfortunately, none of these books have been translated into English. The closest that the English reader may come in accessing these works is through Jakob Brederveld, *Christian Education: A Summary and Critical Discussion of Bavinck's Pedagogical Principles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Smitter, 1928). This anonymous translation of Brederveld's *Hoofdlijnen der paedagogiek van Dr. Herman Bavinck: met critische beschouwing*, Voor onderwijs en opvoeding 25 (Amsterdam: De Standaard, 1927), provides select translations and a critical discussion of Bavinck's *Paedagogische Beginselen*. See also Cornelius Richard Jaarman, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1935).

15. Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 263; hereafter cited in text.

as a savior of society. Although he knew education in itself cannot renew the inner man, he was also aware of the important role that education plays in society. He writes, “Education is of far too great importance for the future of humanity to be abandoned to caprice or chance” (277).

One must work backwards, so to speak, to deduce what Bavinck is actually saying about education in this particular chapter. Given the chapter’s title, he makes an implicit prediction as to where the current state of what he calls the “modern man” (271) will lead if the path of ignoring revelation is followed further—nowhere good. If it is valid to infer that Bavinck believes the opposite of the position that he attributes to the modern man, then there are several points he makes implicitly about education that are worth noting.

First, his understanding of human depravity and the need of a redeemer are crucial to Bavinck’s educational philosophy. In his estimation the modern man does not view himself as a “mere creature, but a creator and redeemer of himself and society. More and more he becomes his own providence” (272). In broader terms the placing of man as his own redeemer has replaced Christ, the preeminent and only redeemer who is able to transform society.

Closely tied to the above ideas, Bavinck also writes that an evolutionary understanding of the human race as perpetually improving has led to a false understanding of the role of education in society. The belief that man has “evolved himself from the smallest beginnings” leads to the belief in the “grand and mighty man” (272). Having an overestimation of the ability of man, apart from Christ and revelation, leads only to man as the source of redemption. Bavinck goes on to explain that when the constant improvement of mankind is the *telos* of humanity, this view will eventually lead to a utilitarian society. He sees the ramifications of this utilitarianism as being racial manipulation, restriction of marriage to the mentally and physically capable, and eugenics of many brands.

With this framework in mind, Bavinck approaches his longest direct treatment of education in these lectures. He writes that the

modern man will base his view of education upon “genetic psychology” (278). He links this to a naturalistic, evolutionary view in which man must first become one with his surroundings and then must understand that the soul of man “is cognate with the souls of the animals and plants and all creatures” (278). Bavinck relates this view to education in that modern man must move away from giving attention to the training of the soul and from learning fixed dogmas. Education in the future will place the child and his or her peculiarities at the center:

The child is born good, for there is no hereditary sin; every defect in the child is only a hard shell, which contains the germ of virtue, which as such has the right not to be eradicated, but to be trained . . . if the child is not good in later life, then it has been a victim of its parents and teachers, and upon them lies the guilt. (279)

From this quotation one can gather that Bavinck did not accept a position on education in which a child is an empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge by the world. There must be some type of training present for the child to learn appropriately.

Although Bavinck focuses much of his attention on how what he terms the “doctrine of evolution” (280) has altered the modern man’s understanding of pedagogy, he ultimately decides that this is but one cog in a worldview within which the “conception of world and life has been formed under the influence of Christianity” (281). It seems that Bavinck’s argument concerning education in this instance is that, when it is removed from a Christian framework, it will begin to unravel. Thus he states that if there is to be a reformation in pedagogy, “it cannot be satisfied with a mere change in the system of education; it must proceed to a total rebuilding of society” (281).

Much can be gathered from this position in which a Christian framework is vital to understanding education. Much of what Bavinck has said about education in these pages could most likely be applied to other fields, or spheres, as well. He chooses to examine how an evolutionary framework apart from Christianity

would result in a fundamental shift in how education is practiced. To be exact, there would less of a focus upon fixed dogma, the development of the soul, and eternal matters. The focus would shift to a utilitarian mindset in which the goal of mankind is the improvement of the human race.

## COMPARISON AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Sphere sovereignty may be an underlying principle at work in Bavinck's thought at the time, but, as we have noted, it does not take center stage as it does for Kuyper. This is evident in that Bavinck saw the Christian tradition and beliefs of the church not as a separate sphere from education but as one that was indispensable for a proper view of education. Although education may appear as a separate sphere, it is intricately connected to a larger picture of how Christianity transforms various social systems. Bavinck makes the case that the educational system would hardly resemble its current state were the influence of Christianity removed. There does not appear to be as strong of a division between the relation of knowledge to the church and the academy as there is in Kuyper.

Perhaps the most important contribution Bavinck made to this discussion on education is with respect to whether his prophecies of "Revelation and the Future" have come true. First, regarding his opinion that an evolutionary framework will lead to genetic psychology taking the center stage, in a post World War era it seems unlikely that society would accept all forms of eugenics *prima facie*. His discussion here may have more relevance to biomedical ethics than to pedagogy. Second, Bavinck is correct that education today has less of a focus upon the development of the soul and upon the integration of the heart, mind, and soul. Bavinck pictures a distorted world in which "gymnastics, sports, and all kinds of play ought to take up a large . . . part in education" if this course of thought is followed (280). In the faulty world he imagines, theology, philosophy, and literature will be replaced by "natural sciences" that will allegedly further mankind. Bavinck is correct that, in most educational systems today, utilitarian ends (although

it is usually greater individual salary rather than the greater productive good) drive the direction of education.<sup>16</sup> He offers an excellent counterbalance for a world that has forgotten the meaning of what it means to be an educated person. He is correct that the human race can never be improved to a perfect state as long as sin exists in a fallen world.

Bavinck's prediction concerning an overemphasis on individuality is also quite relevant. He states that, in the future, "They [i.e., parents and teachers] have to bow to the superiority of the child; a child is only another name for majesty" (279). His picture of the future is one in which autonomy and individual choice are society's top priorities.

Both Kuyper and Bavinck seem to sense the urgency of incorporating Christian teaching into one's worldview. Kuyper expresses his gratefulness that the state has allowed for such an institution to exist. On the other hand, he speaks to the bleak outlook that lies ahead if the modern man is separated from the Christian faith. Additionally, both of these figures are aware of the importance that education in the faith as well as education through the lens of faith plays in society. In Kuyper's view, scholarship serves as a sphere by which truth can be found in other spheres of life. For Bavinck, scholarship is still able to bring truth to the forefront, but it also brings light to the soul of the individual and to society. It is perhaps best to conclude with Bavinck's own thoughts on this subject:

Christianity is as religion much more than a matter of feeling or temperament; it embraces the whole man, all humanity, and the totality of the world. (279)

For education to be reformed it must involve a renewal of the heart, mind, and soul.

16. Numerous studies written in the last decade bemoan the decline of the arts in university settings in favor of more profitable industries such as sciences and engineering.