

“Created Over a Second Time” or “Grace Restoring Nature”? Edwards and Bavinck on the Heart of Christian Salvation

Dane C. Ortlund (daneortlund@hotmail.com)
Bible Publishing Director, Crossway

Man must be converted twice, first from the natural to the spiritual life, and thereafter from the spiritual to the natural life.

—Johann Cristoph Blumhardt

Perhaps the two thinkers being most significantly re-appropriated and re-appreciated in current evangelical theological discourse are Jonathan Edwards and Herman Bavinck. Barth has certainly been on the receiving end of a surge of interest of late, as has Calvin with the recent celebration of his five hundredth birthday. Others too could be mentioned as enjoying fresh stage time such as B. B. Warfield to whom there has finally been devoted a synthetic explication of his thought;¹ Charles Hodge, whose relation to Scottish Common Sense Realism and alleged rationalism is being hotly discussed;² Cornelius Van Til, whose

1. Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010); note also the forthcoming volume by the same author, *Warfield on the Christian Life: Living in Light of the Gospel*, Theologians on the Christian Life (Wheaton: Crossway). See also the recently published dissertation by David P. Smith, *B. B. Warfield's Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship*, Evangelical Theological Society Monographs (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), which debunks reductionistic views of Warfield's alleged “dictation” theory of inspiration.

2. Along with Smith's work mentioned in the previous footnote, see, e.g., Paul Kjos Helseth, *“Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010); Paul C. Gutjahr,

presuppositionalism continues to gain advocates in the conservative reformed world;³ and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to whom much recent secondary literature has been devoted.⁴

But Edwards and Bavinck stand out uniquely, especially among conservative Reformed theologians presently being rediscovered.⁵ It is not a difficult case to make for Edwards, whose three hundredth birthday in 2003 brought a steady stream of study of him in the later years of the twentieth century to a climactic explosion. Bavinck has received much less attention, but the translation into English of his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* between 2003 and 2008 is drawing an increasing amount of attention to his thought, and rightly so.⁶ Richard Gaffin suggests that the *Reformed Dogmatics* is “the most important systematic theology ever produced in the Reformed tradition.”⁷ My own reading of Bavinck has been impressed with the unusual integration of disciplines in his work, especially the twin disciplines of dogmatics and exegesis. For Bavinck, exegesis and doctrine, text and truth, the descriptive and the prescriptive, what it meant and what it means, were vitally wedded and mutually reinforcing.

Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. E.g., John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*, American Reformed Biographies (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

4. Among which the most acclaimed has been Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

5. Both now have extensive bibliographies dedicated to them. On Edwards, see M. X. Lesser, *Reading Jonathan Edwards: An Annotated Bibliography in Three Parts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). On Bavinck, see Eric D. Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008); and, for works since 2008, note the annually published “Bavinck Bibliography” in *The Bavinck Review*.

6. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008); hereafter referenced as *RD*. Ron Gleason wrote a dissertation on Bavinck which will be mentioned below. Gleason also produced the first major English-language biography of Bavinck: Ronald N. Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

7. From the back cover of *Reformed Dogmatics*.

On which Edwards would wholeheartedly agree! Nor is that the only similarity between the two. To be sure, Edwards is an American from the eighteenth century and Bavinck a Dutchman from the nineteenth and into the twentieth, and the two ought not to be overlaid in a simplistic or reductionistic way. Yet both are staunchly Reformed thinkers who are nevertheless not shy about questioning long-held categories and assumptions, blending a massive vision of God, unapologetically Calvinistic soteriology, profound saturation in the biblical text, penetrating insight into the psychology of religion,⁸ and a heart for the church, to name a few similarities.⁹

It is therefore striking to note that when it comes to delineating the very heart of Christian salvation, there appears at first glance to be a fundamental difference. Edwards tends to speak of salvation as *the implantation of something completely new*. Bavinck prefers to speak of salvation as *the healing of what was there, though marred through sin*. Edwards emphasizes discontinuity between one’s past and what one now is as a believer, while Bavinck emphasizes continuity. For Edwards, salvation is cast most frequently in terms of regeneration; for Bavinck, in terms of restoration.¹⁰

8. For Bavinck this was true especially of his later years; e.g., see Herman Bavinck, *Bijbelsche en religieuze psychologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1920); note also *RD*, 3:556–64; “Psychology of Religion,” in Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 61–80.

9. Similarities of more trivial significance could be proliferated. One that has struck me is the way both reject faith as an “instrument” in justification, seeing such a way of casting things as too mechanical; faith rather, is the actual uniting with Christ (Edwards, “Justification by Faith Alone,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19, *Sermons and Discourses, 1734–1738*, ed. M. X. Lesser [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001], esp. 160) or receiving of Christ (Bavinck, *RD*, 4:221–22). Cf. Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 100–1; William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 102.

10. Bavinck, chronologically later than Edwards, interacts with select features of Edwards’s thought in the *Dogmatics*. See *RD*, 3:100, 109–10, 121–22,

After clarifying briefly both Edwards's and Bavinck's descriptions of the heart of salvation in their own words, I will suggest four ways in which the two thinkers can be reconciled. This will lead to a brief trio of ways in which what has been unearthed in this paper can be instructive for the church today.

Jonathan Edwards

We must restrict ourselves in what follows to a handful of representative statements from Edwards and then from Bavinck on salvation.

One need not range far and wide in the Edwards corpus to get a sense of the programmatic importance to him of regeneration in making sense of the Christian life. The new birth, and its concomitant spiritually awakened taste buds, find their way into many of his sermons and treatises. We will focus here on the way Edwards highlights the radical anthropological discontinuity introduced in the new birth between what one was and what one now is.¹¹

In the 1723 sermon “A Spiritual Understanding of Divine Things Denied to the Unregenerate”—the title of which captures so much of the heart of Edwards's theology—the New England pastor

350, 463, 534; 4:159; cf. Bavinck's historical assessment of Edwards's role in North American Calvinism at 1:201–2.

11. The question of whether Edwards's theology of the “new sense of the heart” is essentially continuous or discontinuous with one's pre-regenerate state has been heavily debated among Edwards scholars since Perry Miller's “Jonathan Edwards on the Sense of the Heart,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948): 123–45. I do side with those, such as Paul Helm and David Lyttle, who emphasize discontinuity; see Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9–10. Yet I cannot enter the debate here. More importantly, among interpreters of Edwards who share his supernaturalistic convictions and basic theology of original sin and regeneration, there is general consensus that there is something more going on in conversion and the new sense that accompanies it than simply a non-transcendental “perception” or “apprehension,” as Miller put it. Finally, compared with Bavinck, Edwards is clearly emphasizing discontinuity.

writes that the Christian is so revolutionized that “he is become quite another man than he was before.”¹² His new spiritual knowledge “is so substantial, so inward, and so affecting, that it has quite transformed the soul and put a new nature into the man, has quite changed his very innermost principles, and has made things otherwise, even from the very foundation, even so that all things are become new to them.”¹³ In a nutshell, “he is a new creature, he is just as if he was not the same, but were born again, created over a second time.”¹⁴

Such a description of salvation is not, for Edwards, anomalous. Speaking in *Religious Affections* of the new nature wrought in regeneration, he writes that “’tis the power of a Creator only that can change the nature, or give a new nature.” For this reason the biblical portrayals of salvation indicate “a change of nature: such as being born again; becoming new creatures; rising from the dead; being renewed in the spirit of the mind; dying to sin, and living to righteousness . . . a having a divine seed implanted in the heart; a being made partakers of the divine nature, etc.”¹⁵

This fundamental change is a theme that echoes throughout *Religious Affections*. The explanation of the first sign of authentic affections is especially pertinent. “The true saints only,” says Edwards, “have that which is spiritual; others have nothing which is divine, in the sense that has been spoken of. They not only have not these communications of the Spirit of God in so high a *degree* as the saints, but have nothing of that *nature* or *kind*.”¹⁶ Edwards then goes to one of his favorite texts in describing Christian salvation: John 3. “Christ teaches the necessity of a new birth, or a being born of the Spirit, from this, that he that is born of the flesh, has only

12. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 14, *Sermons and Discourses, 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 81.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, *Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 340.

16. Ibid., 203.

flesh, and no spirit (John 3:6). They have not the Spirit of God dwelling in them in any degree.”¹⁷ In short, the “gracious influences which the saints are subjects of . . . are entirely above nature, altogether of a different kind from anything that men find within themselves by nature.”¹⁸

Edwards appeals to John 3 again in his treatise defending the orthodox doctrine of original sin, again reiterating the vast change required in salvation. Commenting on John 3:6 (“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”), Edwards writes that Christ’s language here indicates

that what is born in the first birth of man, is nothing but man as he is of himself, without anything divine in him; depraved, debased, sinful, ruined man, utterly unfit to enter into the kingdom of God, and incapable of the spiritual divine happiness of that kingdom: but that which is born in the new birth, of the Spirit of God, is a spiritual principle, and holy and divine nature, meet for the divine and heavenly kingdom.¹⁹

What is needed, Edwards goes on to say, is “a renovation, a change of mind, a new heart, etc. in order to salvation.”²⁰

In a 1739 sermon he describes the divine wrath awaiting the impenitent: “Thus are all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life.”²¹ Salvation, according to Edwards, involves being brought to a “new, and *before altogether unexperienced* light and life.”

17. *Ibid.*, 203–4.

18. *Ibid.*, 205.

19. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 279–80.

20. *Ibid.*, 280. This anthropological metamorphosis is given extended treatment late in *Original Sin*, 365–69.

21. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 22, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 411.

A Christian is fundamentally new. “Persons after their conversion often speak of things of religion as seeming new to them; that preaching is a new thing . . . that the Bible is a new book: they find there new chapters, new psalms, new histories, because they see them in a new light.”²² When Conrad Cherry writes that Edwards’s view of conversion “is grounded in the conviction that an immense chasm exists between nature and grace,” Cherry places Edwards in seemingly stark contradiction with Herman Bavinck, to whom we now turn.²³

Herman Bavinck

In Ron Gleason’s 2001 dissertation on Bavinck,²⁴ he notes that no fewer than three major monographs on Bavinck argue that “grace restoring nature” is the center of Bavinck’s thought.²⁵ That is,

22. From “A Narrative of Surprising Conversions,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4, *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 181.

23. Cherry, *Theology*, 58. Cherry elsewhere says: “In the Spirit’s supernatural or saving influence . . . nature is not simply assisted. Man is now given a basis from beyond himself” (32). For more secondary literature exploring Edwards’s insight into and emphasis on the new birth and the discontinuity it introduces into the convert’s life, see Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards: Morality and Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1973), esp. 23; Robert W. Jenson, *Jonathan Edwards: America’s Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 66–73; Cherry, *Theology*, 30, 37–38, 56–70; George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 157–58, 286; Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), esp. 47–75; William J. Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 124–28; Dane Ortlund, *A New Inner Relish: Christian Motivation in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), passim.

24. Ronald N. Gleason, “The Centrality of the *unio mystica* in the Theology of Herman Bavinck” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001). I am grateful to Dr. Gleason for sending me his dissertation.

25. The three works are: E. P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: van Gorcum & Comp. N.V., 1959); Jan Veenhof, *Revelation en Inspiratie: De Openbarings- en Schriftbeschouwing*

the grace of God in the gospel saves a fallen race and a fallen cosmos not by scrapping them and starting over but by restoring them to their true design and purpose. My own reading of Bavinck confirms this. Christian salvation is the re-establishing of the goodness of creation. In Bavinck's words, "grace does not abolish nature, but affirms and restores it."²⁶ "[T]he form (*forma*), given in creation, was *deformed* by sin in order to be entirely reformed again in the sphere of grace" (*RD*, 2:574).

In an 1888 essay on Albrecht Ritschl's theology, Bavinck wrote:

[W]hereas salvation in Christ was formerly considered primarily a means to separate man from sin and the world, to prepare him for heavenly blessedness and to cause him to enjoy undisturbed fellowship with God there, Ritschl posits the very opposite relationship: the purpose of salvation in Christ is precisely to enable a person, once he is freed from the oppressive feeling of sin and lives in the awareness of being a child of God, to exercise his earthly vocation and fulfill his moral purpose in this world.²⁷

Bavinck went on in that essay to say, "Personally, I do not yet see any way of combining the two points of view, but I do know that there is much that is excellent in both, and that both contain undeniable truth." Over the rest of his long career, however, Bavinck would continue to wrestle with this question and move into a position that carried forward Ritschl's non-separatistic, world-affirming impulse without any of his de-supernaturalizing baggage.

In the *Reformed Dogmatics*, and a smattering of other smaller works, we find Bavinck's mature thinking on this question. In a

van Herman Bavinck in vergelijking met die der ethische theologie (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn N.V., 1968); John Bolt, "The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck" (PhD diss., Toronto School of Theology, 1982). Gleason himself argues that union with Christ is "the true 'hub' around which [Bavinck's] theology turns." "Centrality of the *unio mystica*," 1.

26. Herman Bavinck, *De algemene genade: rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theologische School te Kampen op 6 Dec. 1894* (Zalsman, 1894), 48; quoted in Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. Albert M. Wolters (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 2006), 17.

27. Herman Bavinck, "De Theologie van Albrecht Ritschl," *Theologische Studiën* 6 (1888): 397; quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 8.

crucial statement he says: “Grace serves, not to take up humans into a supernatural order, but to free them from sin. Grace is opposed not to nature, only to sin. . . . Grace restores nature and takes it to its highest pinnacle, but it does not add to it any new and heterogeneous constituents” (*RD*, 3:577). Christian salvation is not the adding of something new so much as it is the subtracting of that which is corrupting. “The re-creation is not a second, new creation. It does not introduce any new substance into it, but it is truly ‘reformation.’”²⁸ Bavinck is keen throughout the *Dogmatics* to clarify that the Roman Catholic notion of “supernatural” grace is thus misleading. “Grace only works ‘supernaturally’ because it takes away the incapacity deriving from fallen nature and restores the capacity to do good deriving from original nature” (*RD*, 3:578; cf. 2:545, 573–76). Thus even when discussing regeneration, which is arguably that aspect of salvation that lends itself most readily to discontinuity between the pre-conversion and the post-conversion state, Bavinck writes: “Regeneration, in a word, does not remove anything from us other than what, if all were well, we should do without, and it restores to us what we, in keeping with the design of our being, should have but lost as a result of sin” (*RD*, 4:93).

Bavinck therefore speaks of the Christian as the one who is most fully human. “A priest in the Lord’s temple, the believer is therefore king of the whole earth. Because he is a Christian, he is a man in the full and truest sense.”²⁹ This restorative project is, moreover, a work of the triune God: “Christ did not come only to restore the ethical-religious life of man, and to leave all the rest untouched as though this had not been corrupted by sin and did not stand in need of restoration. No, the love of God, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit extend as far as sin.”³⁰

28. *RD*, 3:578; see also Herman Bavinck, “John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of His 400th Birthday, July 10, 1509–1909,” trans. John Bolt, *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 68, commenting on Calvin’s thought.

29. Herman Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs* (Kampen: Kok, 1901), 103; quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 30. Bavinck sees this view (of the Christian as the true human) in Calvin; see Bavinck, “John Calvin,” 70.

All this flows out of Bavinck's relentless aim to recover the doctrine of *creation*, which he found neglected in much of the conservative Dutch reformed church a century ago. Again and again he spoke of Christian salvation in terms of "creation regained."³¹ "The whole re-creation, as it will be completed in the new heaven and the new earth, is the fruit of the work of Christ" (*RD*, 3:380; cf. 451–52). Christ is "the author of the re-creation of all things" (*RD*, 3:338). Salvation is re-creation because salvation is simply the elimination of sin—now, in its condemnation; progressively, in its power; and one day, in its entire presence. Thus for the individual, in the new birth "the continuity of the self, their entire human nature with all its capacities and powers, is maintained." Bavinck then connects this re-creation and the elimination of sin to the cosmos: "when the re-creation removes sin from creation, it does not deprive it of anything essential. . . . For sin is not part of the essence of creation; it pushed its way in later, as something unnatural and contrary to nature. Sin is deformity. When re-creation removes sin, it does not violate and suppress nature, but restores it" (*RD*, 4:92).

This focus on the neglected doctrine of "God's *good* creation"³² is related to Bavinck's insistence on the inherent goodness of created matter, especially the human body. This comes through, for example, when he makes the striking statement that "creation, incarnation, and resurrection are the fundamental facts of Christianity and at the same time the bulwarks against all error in life and doctrine."³³ All three of these, we note, introduce or re-introduce blessed human corporeality into the world. The glorious physicality of these three events is explored in depth elsewhere in

30. Bavinck, *De algemene genade*, 47; quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 20.

31. I draw the phrase from Albert M. Wolters' excellent book, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

32. John Bolt, editor's introduction to ch. 8, in *RD*, 2:406.

33. Herman Bavinck, *Calvin and Common Grace*, trans. Geerhardus Vos (New York: Westminster, 1909), 3.

the Bavinck corpus. Regarding the resurrection, for example, he argues that Jesus’s physical resurrection is a definitive statement from God about the goodness of the original created order: “The bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead is conclusive proof that Christianity does not adopt a hostile attitude toward anything human or natural, but intends only to deliver creation from all that is sinful, and to sanctify it completely.”³⁴ Bavinck even connects regeneration with bodily redemption (*RD*, 4:93–94). Elsewhere he draws out the corporeality and earthiness of the final judgment (*RD*, 4:701).

All this is not to say that Bavinck saw redemption as the restoring of Eden such that we are placed once more in the precarious position into which Adam was placed—which Bavinck would describe, in his thoroughly Reformed way, as discharging the covenant of works such that the probationary period of the Garden ended and eternal life was given to Adam. No, “Christ does not merely restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not just at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete.”³⁵ For Bavinck, the grace of Christian salvation, grace that “repairs and perfects nature” both on the individual and the cosmic level, does not replace but restores the goodness of creation (*RD*, 3:226).

Toward a Reconciliation

How then shall the two be reconciled? This is not a matter of who is “right” to the exclusion of the other so much as it is an effort to ask how these different descriptions of salvation might be wisely and fruitfully integrated. I will suggest four avenues of reconciliation. These are suggestive rather than exhaustive. As we

34. Herman Bavinck, *De offerande des lofs: overdenkingen voor en na de toelating tot het heilige avondmaal* (Gravenhage: J.C. De Mildt, 1907), 52; quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 21.

35. *RD*, 2:573; Veenhof emphasizes this point in *Nature and Grace*, 24–26.

make these attempts at reconciliation, we should resist any temptation to impose a forced harmonization onto the two thinkers. If, after the dust settles, there remains legitimately irreconcilable strands of theological difference between Edwards and Bavinck, historiographical integrity compels us to submit to that.

1. Bavinck and Edwards *did* say what the other emphasized. The first thing to be said is simply a caution to restrain ourselves from exaggerating the distance between Edwards's emphasis on discontinuity and Bavinck's emphasis on continuity. For they are just that: emphases.

Consider Edwards's exploration of the *restorative* nature of salvation in a 1739 sermon:

Christ, in coming down upon the children of men and dispensing his benefits to them, does actually refresh, revive and restore them as the rain doth the mown grass. Thus he restores poor, fallen man after he was cut down to the ground and there seemed to be no hope of his recovery. Whoever should have looked upon him then, while he remained in his fallen state, before God revealed his manifest design, would have pronounced his case past all hope and would have given him over for lost.

But Christ comes down from heaven on this fallen, miserable creature and gives life from the dead. He restores that which Satan had cut down. He heals that mortal wound that he had given. . . . He restores the image of God after it had been wholly defaced. He restores spiritual life after it had been wholly extinct. He restores to God's favor. He restores, and much more than restores, to the former state of happiness, for he brings to a better paradise and a more excellent state of honor and an higher degree of communion with God.³⁶

Conversely, Bavinck spoke not infrequently of the categorical *newness* of what is introduced when one is born again.

In regeneration the Holy Spirit does not merely by the Word illumine the intellect but also directly and immediately infuses new affections into the will. (*RD*, 3:580)

36. Edwards, "Like Rain upon Mown Grass," in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, 310. See also "The Subjects of a First Work of Grace May Need a New Conversion," in *ibid.*, 190; *Charity and Its Fruits*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 253–54.

By faith Christ or his Spirit is the author and origin of new life in those who are called (Gal. 3:2; 4:6) so that now they are very different, new, and spiritual people. The old has gone; all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17). (*RD*, 4:50)

Regeneration . . . consists in dying to the “old man” that must not only be suppressed but also killed and in the rising of *a totally new person* created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.³⁷

Having received [the] Spirit, believers have become very different. They have become new, spiritual people. (*RD*, 4:89)

There is a very great difference between the natural and the pneumatic. (*RD*, 2:564)

And so on.³⁸ This is not to obliterate the distinction between Edwards and Bavinck. The two often sound quite different in articulating the heart of salvation.³⁹ But we must be careful that in our cherry-picking of statements from each thinker we do not give the impression that this is all that either said about salvation.

2. The second avenue of reconciliation is to remember the different historical contexts of Edwards and Bavinck.

37. *RD*, 4:72 (emphasis added). Bavinck is here describing specifically the Reformed view of regeneration, but he seems (as elsewhere throughout the *Dogmatics*) to be aligning himself with this view.

38. Note esp. Aart Goedvree, “An Impenetrable Mystery: Herman Bavinck’s Concept of Regeneration and Its Sources,” *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 128–32, though even Goedvree acknowledges the relative brevity of Bavinck’s treatment of calling and regeneration (p. 128). One might expect to find material relevant to the present essay in a series of articles by Bavinck in *De Bazuin* (“The Trumpet”) in 1901–1902, translated as *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit’s Work in Calling and Regeneration*, ed. J. Mark Beach, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008). But the material here does not directly address the questions we are raising; rather, the book deals with issues concerning the timing of regeneration and what can be said concerning the spiritual state of infants and children.

39. Even Bavinck’s chapter on “Calling and Regeneration” closes by driving home once more that even regeneration is not something categorically new, but a return to the good created order: “At the same time,” he says, “according to Scripture, regeneration does not exist either in a totally new second creation. In not a single respect does it introduce any new substance into the existing creation.” *RD*, 4:92.

Edwards, for his part, spent much of his life seeking to stem the tide against an encroaching Arminianism that elevated the ability of man and softened the need for a radical, divinely wrought work of God on the human heart. Edwards engages Arminianism head-on in his *Freedom of the Will*.⁴⁰ One thinks also of Edwards's engagement with John Taylor in *Original Sin*. Edwards was arguing against Taylor's diminution of both the nature of sin and the grace required to counteract it, so an emphasis on the change required was of course natural and appropriate.⁴¹

Also, Edwards did much of his writing in the midst, and in the wake, of revival. When he wrote of the utterly new change that takes place in the new birth, he had in mind not least those many instances of spurious conversion which were giving the Great Awakening a bad name. Edwards was not speaking in pure theoretical abstraction when he wrote in *Religious Affections* that "if there be no great and remarkable, abiding change in persons, that think they have experienced a work of conversion, vain are all their imaginations and pretenses, however they have been affected."⁴² He had in mind specific instances of the very thing against which he is here warning. Whether it was the Spirit-quenching Charles Chauncey's on one side or the Spirit-abusing James Davenport's on the other, Edwards was insistent on being a clarifying voice for authentic conversion. Such conversion, Edwards reiterated, involves something radically and vitally new—neither the fleshly stoicism of the Chauncey's nor the fleshly enthusiasm of the Davenport's was an authentic work of the Spirit.⁴³

40. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *The Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). Cf. Jenson, *Jonathan Edwards*, 53–57; Allen C. Guelzo, "Freedom of the Will," in *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 118–20.

41. See Clyde Holbrook's introductory comments in *Original Sin*, 68–70.

42. *Religious Affections*, 340.

43. Philip Gura, following Perry Miller, chalks up Edwards's theology of the "new sense of the heart" to the influence on Edwards of contemporary philosophies such as the Cambridge Platonists and Lockean empiricism—which is surely right to a point, but Gura emphasizes philosophical influence to the

Bavinck’s battle was different. He was combating, on one front, continental Roman Catholicism; on another front, the two-kingdoms perspective of Lutheranism; on yet a third front, Pietism and Methodism.⁴⁴ All of these, despite their differences, tended to dichotomize Christian salvation in such a way that nature and grace—what we are by virtue of creation and what we are by virtue of redemption—were kept overly separate.⁴⁵ Time and again in his writings, therefore, Bavinck locks horns with this wrongly bifurcated view of the nature of the Christian. “It is really impossible,” writes Veenhof, “to disengage Bavinck’s own views on nature and grace from his dignified but incisive polemics.”⁴⁶ To take Pietism as an example, Bavinck writes that “never do we find here genuine, true, full reformation; there is only a rescuing and snatching of individuals out of the world, which lies in wickedness.”⁴⁷ We thus find Bavinck writing to a friend concerning “the separatistic and sectarian tendencies that sometimes manifest themselves in our church.”⁴⁸ One sees Bavinck’s rejection of such separatism in the biographical details of his own life—for example, in his decision as a young man to go to school at the University of Leiden rather than the conservative Theological Seminary at Kampen.⁴⁹

In short, while both Bavinck and Edwards would readily ascribe to the universal transcendence of biblical truth, each was definably ensconced in his own historical context, funneling that

neglect of Scriptural influence in Edwards’s theology (which I have argued at greater length in *New Inner Relish*, 109–10, n. 39). See Philip F. Gura, *Jonathan Edwards: America’s Evangelical* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2005), 66–69, 227–38.

44. See Goedvree, “Impenetrable Mystery,” 129. On Bavinck’s engagement with Roman Catholicism see esp. Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 9–14.

45. See Bolt, “Imitation of Christ,” 119.

46. Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 9.

47. Quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 15.

48. Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921), 147; quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 38 n. 34.

49. See Gleason, *Herman Bavinck*, 45–68.

transcendent truth into that particular milieu. Awareness of this helps explain their respective soteriological emphases.

3. In our final two efforts at reconciliation we move to more constructive reflection—not simply explaining the difference between Edwards and Bavinck, but integrating the two. We consider, third, the *scope* that each had in mind in speaking of salvation.

Edwards, in speaking of salvation as totally new, has in mind *the life history of the individual*. The converted Christian has no previous experience of this new “sense of the heart.” Bavinck, in speaking of salvation as restorative, has in mind *the life history of the human race*. The converted Christian is restored to that which he was previously *in his father Adam*. This is not to negate Edwards’s own robust sensitivity to redemptive history, which comes through clearly in his *History of the Work of Redemption*.⁵⁰ It is to say that when Edwards speaks of Christian salvation, he emphasizes that which is new because he is zeroing in on the individual, not thinking of all of biblical history. In comparing the Christian with his past, Edwards has in mind mainly the pre-regenerate state, no further. Bavinck tends to have in mind the original created order in Eden. If we think in terms of the biblical-theological movements of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, we might say that Edwards tends to have in view stages two and three; Bavinck has in view stages one through four.

4. Our fourth and final point is to call in the pervasive macro-structure of the New Testament, the “already/not yet” framework of inaugurated eschatology. By this we understand that in Jesus, the latter-day endtime age has been decisively launched, while the final consummation has not been fully realized. We are now living in the overlap of the ages—the new age has begun, yet the old age has not

50. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 9, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

yet ended. One thinks here especially of Ladd, taken up more recently by Schreiner and, in fresh ways, Beale.⁵¹

Specifically regarding salvation, perhaps Edwards focuses on the already and Bavinck the not yet. Take the motif of resurrection, for example. In *Original Sin*, Edwards says: “To be born again is to be born anew; which implies a becoming new, and is represented as a becoming new-born babes”—and then, in a clarification with which Bavinck may have been uncomfortable—“but none supposes, it is the body, that is immediately and properly new, but the mind, heart, or spirit. And so a spiritual resurrection is the resurrection of the spirit or rising to begin a new existence and life, as to the mind, heart or spirit.”⁵² Bavinck would probably agree with this, yet he would be eager to add that regeneration involves not only being raised spiritually now, but also being raised physically later.⁵³ Edwards would quickly acknowledge the latter, but Bavinck was constantly pushing for a recovery of understanding salvation as restoring the created order, which largely refers to that which is not yet. Even “spiritual redemption from sin,” Bavinck says, “is only fully completed in bodily redemption at the end of time” (*RD*, 4:694).

Perhaps, then, the soteriological rubric of *new creation*, to which both Edwards and Bavinck at times appeal, is uniquely suited to satisfyingly integrate their respective emphases. Salvation introduces something utterly *new*, as Edwards reminds us; yet this something new, as Bavinck reminds us, is itself a restoration of what the human race originally experienced at *creation*. Greg Beale

51. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

52. *Original Sin*, 366.

53. See *RD*, 4:693–98. Richard B. Gaffin helpfully brings both together in *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), where he usefully employs 2 Corinthians 5:7 to explain that we are raised spiritually already (“we walk by faith”) but not yet physically (“not by sight”).

has convinced me that new creation is the most satisfying rubric under which all the other salvific metaphors can be subsumed.⁵⁴ Might the caption of new creation be applied not only in the arena of biblical theology but also in that of historical theology in seeking to reconcile Bavinck and Edwards on salvation?

Could we say, then, that *it is that which is new, which restores*? With Edwards, the grace that floods our lives in the new birth is not reformation but transformation; not more of the same kind, but a new kind; not healing for the wounded, but life for the dead; not medication but resurrection. Yet, with Bavinck, this very newness does not land on us in such a way that we find ourselves bewildered, wondering who and where we are. Rather we experience what Jewel the unicorn discovered in *The Last Battle* at the end of all things in Narnia: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now.”⁵⁵ Regeneration does not add a new category, “a sixth sense,”⁵⁶ but rather is an overhaul of all our senses such that we now employ them as we were originally meant to—“not yet” perfectly, but “already” truly.

In brief: salvation is *new normalcy*. Utter newness; yet also a return to our true home.

54. Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, passim. Similarly William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer Books, 1985), who argues that five motifs that snowball through the whole Bible and are brought to culmination in its last two chapters: the new Jerusalem, the new Israel, the new temple, the new covenant, and the new creation. Dumbrell further suggests that new creation is the theme under which the other four can be subsumed.

55. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 213.

56. A phrase Marsden uses to describe Edwards’s theology of the “sense of the heart.” *Jonathan Edwards*, 96.

Implications for the Life of the Church Today

We close by reflecting briefly on what we can learn in the contemporary Christian church from the tension explored in this paper. Three points present themselves.

1. *Theological balance.* As with so many theological tensions, balance is crucial. Can we receive what both Edwards and Bavinck emphasize, filter it through Scripture, and emerge wiser and deeper Christian leaders on the other side? If we appropriate Edwards’s soteriological emphasis to the neglect of Bavinck’s, we may downplay the image of God in all people, the reality of common grace upon all people, and the presence of ongoing sin in the lives of even the regenerate. If, on the other hand, we receive Bavinck’s emphasis to the neglect of Edwards’s, we may downplay the deadness in sin in which all unbelievers live, the corresponding need for a radical resurrection due to natural depravity, and the availability of the new birth to get us there.

2. *Evangelistic appeal.* As we present the gospel to lost men and women in our teaching and preaching and writing, we are inviting them to become both *new* and *normal*. They are being invited into something totally new, into life itself. Yet they are also returning to their true normalcy. They are becoming human; truly human; fully human. As Bavinck said, “The Christian is the true man.”⁵⁷ Christians are not odd; they are not strange; they are restored to the way humans were created to be—not yet perfectly, but truly nonetheless. To come to Christ, to be born again and made new, is to come home at last. It is to return. Can we not bear this in mind as we have our unbelieving neighbors over for cookouts? We are inviting them to Christ; we are inviting them *home*.

57. Herman Bavinck, *De Bazuin* 41 (Sept. 26, 1902): 41; quoted in Veenhof, *Nature and Grace*, 31. Veenhof comments: “Continually and emphatically, Bavinck insists that the Christian is the true man, is truly human. As directed to non-Christians, this meant: to be truly human, in accordance with your Creator’s purpose, you must have faith! As directed to his fellow Christians, it meant: if you are a Christian, a Christian in the full sense of the word, then you are no peculiar, eccentric human being, but you are fully *human*. To be Christian means to be *human*. It is man’s *humanity* that is redeemed.” *Nature and Grace*, 31.

3. *Future hope.* I am thinking especially of Bavinck's contribution here. Despite the efforts of some Christian leaders today to recover the continuity between our physical existence in this world and that in the next—who knew that N. T. Wright and Randy Alcorn would find in one another such a vocal ally⁵⁸—our Protestant eschatological intuitions continue to encourage us to envision the final future state as one of non-physical, ghost-like floaty-ness. Bavinck helped a generation of Dutch believers to shed an adolescent view of a boring future afterlife floating about in disembodied ethereal existence and to mature into the wonderful biblical vision of God's coming restoration of Eden and renewal of this world, ruled by a redeemed humanity of incorruptible though fully physical bodies, of which Jesus himself is the first installment. Bavinck's vision of a restored cosmos ruled by restored human beings is a word in season to us all. This world, and these bodies, will not be "left behind."⁵⁹ They will be transformed and restored. While on the one hand the new earth will be an arena in which the exquisite delights of perfect, never-ending, and ever-increasing love will be enjoyed (à la Edwards⁶⁰), these delights will be mediated through Eden-like, though glorified, bodies (à la Bavinck⁶¹).

Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards and Herman Bavinck did not agree down to every theological jot and tittle, nor should they be expected to.⁶² Yet in light of the massive overlap between their respective theologies,

58. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008); Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2004). Both seek to recover the earthiness and corporeality of the final future state.

59. Note Benjamin L. Merkle, "Who Will Be Left Behind? Rethinking the Meaning of Matthew 24:40–41 and Luke 17:34–35," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010): 169–79, who rightly argues that those "left behind" in the relevant passages are Christ's followers, not unbelievers.

60. See esp. Edwards, "Heaven Is a World of Love," the fifteenth and final sermon in Edwards's series "Charity and Its Fruits," in *Ethical Writings*, 366–97.

61. See esp. *RD*, 4:715–30.

and the confidence in them that has been justly won in the generations since their deaths, especially recently, it is striking to note their divergent emphases on the heart of salvation. Edwards emphasizes discontinuity, Bavinck continuity. Edwards most often makes regeneration the controlling image, Bavinck restoration.

As we respect their distinct historical contexts, and being careful not to manipulate any artificial agreement, I suggest that both emphases can be integrated. This can be done especially by remembering the distinct individual and redemptive historical lenses through which salvation can be viewed, as well as the already/not yet framework of biblical theology. It is that which is new, which restores. Christian salvation is new normalcy.

62. One interesting point of difference I have come across is Bavinck's resistance to speaking of God's "beauty," leaving this to Roman Catholicism and preferring to speak of God's "majesty" or "glory" (*RD*, 2:254–55). Edwards, as Augustine before him, was comfortable speaking not only of God's beauty but also of divine beauty or "harmony." The transference of such beauty to the elect in salvation might even be argued to be the center of Edwards's theology; cf. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 249–50; Sang Hyun Lee, "Edwards and Beauty," in *Understanding Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to America's Theologian*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113–26.