

## **Working with the Grain of Nature: Epistemic Underpinnings for Christian Witness in the Theology of Herman Bavinck**

*Steven J. Duby (sjd72@st-andrews.ac.uk)*

*PhD student, St Mary's College, University of St Andrews*

Against theological liberalism's siphoning from Christian theology all things particular and installing in their place a generalized, allegedly more accessible and amiable approach to the Christian religion, a number of authors have underlined the particularity of the Christian faith and the disparity between it and the religious disposition of the unbeliever. For example, in his account of the human experience of faith, Karl Barth construes the *imago Dei* as a "capacity for God," a "conformity" of the human person to God, or a "point of contact for the Word of God" and contends that in the wake of the fall the image is not merely "destroyed apart from a few relics" but rather "totally annihilated." For Barth, there is no human aptitude for receiving God's self-revelation that is antecedent to the actual proclamation of the gospel and the naissance of saving faith. With Barth, it is well to emphasize that sinful humanity will only rebuff Christ and his gospel without the interior, efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. Yet, unlike more traditional Reformed theology, Barth's description of the radically disjunctive character of the word of God seems at times to embellish the dissonance between the cognitive condition of the unbeliever and the pronouncements of God's revelation. In Barth's view, there is, apparently, little place for nature in the infrastructure of saving faith, little of pre-kerygmatic human

religiosity or religious thought that carries over into the life of the Christian believer.<sup>1</sup>

Another example of the aversion to nature and noetic continuity in respect of embracing the Christian faith is found in the program of Stanley Grenz and John Franke. Following the “linguistic turn,” these authors aver that, while there is a “certain objectivity to the world,” this is not the objectivity of the world “as it is” and “existing outside of, and coterporally with, our socially and linguistically constructed reality.” Instead this objectivity is “the objectivity of the world as God wills it to be” and “what God wills is not a present but a future reality.” Hence, in pursuing justification for Christian theological claims, we cannot have recourse to an objective, neutral court of appeal but instead must suggest that the Christian faith, by virtue of its doctrines of the Trinity and the *imago Dei*, rises above the others in setting forth a “helpful vision of the nature of the kind of community that all religious belief systems in their own way and according to their own understanding seek to foster.”<sup>2</sup> With Grenz and Franke it is well to acknowledge the reality of cultural influence on religious beliefs and to be wary of placing Christian theology under the tribunal of fallen reason. However, their proposal overstretches by foregoing the mind-independent reality of the present world, undermining our responsiveness to the external world and thus our creatureliness, and reducing human noetic solidarity to the idea of community. Furthermore, there is no small irony in their disparaging human noetic solidarity only to prop up “community” as the unifying motif of all religious thought

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, G. T. Thomson, and Harold Knight (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2009), I.1, 238–40. To be sure, later in *Church Dogmatics*, Barth can write that, under the lordship of Christ, “man remains the man he is. His own nature and thinking and willing and feeling, both in general and in detail, is not lost” (I.2, 276). I am grateful for comments from Cornelis van der Kooi and John Webster pointing out that there is a measure of development and diversity in Barth’s thinking on this matter.

2. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 53–4.

and the neutral desideratum for the evaluation of theological claims.

In light of this thread in recent theology, this essay will explore ways in which Herman Bavinck's theology might help to illumine the intellectual condition of the unbeliever and the cognitive dynamics of Christian witness and, subsequently, to shape and galvanize the church's obedience to the Great Commission. In Bavinck, one discovers both a measure of reservation about universal rationality and a thoroughgoing awareness of the corruption of the human mind under sin, but both of these are moderated by the wisdom of ordinary experience, set in dogmatic context, and thereby kept from exaggeration. To substantiate this proposition and to begin to glimpse its ramifications for Christian mission, we will consider several elements of Bavinck's theology, particularly his expositions of "natural realism," the *imago Dei* with reference to nature and grace, general and special revelation, and faith and reason.

## **Nature and Noetic Continuity in Bavinck's Theology**

### ***Natural Realism and Christian Witness***

In his epistemological ruminations, Bavinck makes a number of incisive statements about the viability of human knowledge. He marks that one's coordination of object and subject in scientific endeavors governs one's perspective on the character and legitimacy of human knowledge. Both rationalism and empiricism go astray here: "In both cases and in both directions, the harmony of subject and object, of knowing and being, is broken."<sup>3</sup> Bavinck refuses either to incarcerate human knowers within their own

3. "In beide gevallen en naar beide richtingen wordt de harmonie van subject en object, van kennen en zijn verbroken." Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing: Rede bij de overdacht van het Rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op 20 October 1904* (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1904), 13.

minds or to bind human inquiry to the physical realm. Neither the despondence of radical subjectivity nor the insipidity of materialism is acceptable to him. On the one hand, he vitiates rationalism because, in its attempt to amplify the sufficiency of the mind, it severs the mind from reality, its *magister* and proper source of content, and thus devolves into idealism and metaphysical antirealism.<sup>4</sup> Thus he writes:

[M]an is never, in any area, autonomous but everywhere and always dependent on the nature surrounding him. . . . Just as with our own hands we prepare food and clothing while nevertheless deriving the materials for them from nature outside of us, so with our intellect we also receive the material from without. Here, too, the intellect is an instrument, not a source. Idealism equates the organ of knowledge with the source of knowledge, as it were making the eye into the source of light, deducing the thought from the process of thinking. (*RD*, 1:217)

Although Bavinck focuses here on the mind receiving its material content from without, he also rejects the Kantian position that one can neatly distinguish between matter and form at this point and can safely locate the formal aspect of knowledge within the mind itself (*RD*, 1:215, 225). For him, neither the material content nor the formal structure of human knowledge should be attributed solely to the mind; instead, both are informed adventitiously by reality itself. Hence rationalism and its outworking in idealism are contrary to experience:

By nature we are all realists, including, even in practice, the idealists themselves. . . . [Idealism] does not explain how and why every human automatically and spontaneously gets to ascribing objectivity and independent reality to the things perceived, instead of viewing them purely as inner states of consciousness. (*RD*, 1:217)

Because of its sharp division between thought and world, idealism ought to concede that the world, even the human subject himself or herself, is simply an illusion. However, instead of contentedly recreating in the playground of subjectivity, idealists, not least Hegel, move from rational thought back into the sphere of

4. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:214–17; hereafter referenced as *RD*.

objectivity. The hard separation of thought and world gives rise to an identification of thought as the world, as the proper object of human consciousness, and, instead of resisting this separation, idealism eventually asserts that rational thought does indeed produce the world. What began as dissociation from reality morphs into reification. Yet, Bavinck opines, absolute thought cannot “produce being in all its fullness and riches. The living world cannot be explained from that sterile abstraction” (*RD*, 1:218). For him, holding that our impressions of the world are distinct but not separate from the world retains the externality or objectivity of the world as well as the potential objectivity of human thought and hence enables discrimination between truth and illusion. The idealist, however, foregoes the externality of the world, amalgamates truth and illusion, and cannot filter out the latter. In the end, Bavinck says, rationalism and idealism are undone by a simple distinction between objects as the *cause* of our impressions and concepts on the one hand and our sensory and intellectual apparatus as the *condition* or *occasion* of our impressions and concepts on the other (*RD*, 1:218–19).

Bavinck also takes issue with empiricism because, in its concentration on the sensible world, it excludes the supersensible from the field of knowledge. The *that* and the *how* of the features and operations of the world are accessible to us, but the *what* and the *why*— things of the noumena in general—are evicted from the house of scientific inquiry. From here it is a short distance to materialism: the reduction of the mind itself to matter. Though emphatic about the mind’s deference to the outside world, Bavinck repudiates the doctrine of the *tabula rasa*, insisting on the active disposition of human apprehension and knowledge. There are not merely senses that passively receive data but rather conscious persons who receive impressions *through* the senses, persons preemptively furnished with the necessary and foundational truths of logic according to which scientific findings are assessed and utilized. In his view, empiricism runs aground on the reality and exigency of the immaterial and, by means of an untenable conception of science itself, needlessly precludes scientific investigation of causation, essence, and teleology (*RD*, 1:219–22).

If philosophy from Descartes to Bacon has gone astray, it is to the life of the common person that we must turn in order to reorient ourselves: *primum vivere, deinde philosophari*. For Bavinck, therefore, ordinary experience precedes philosophical sophistication, and in ordinary experience the human person is certain of the mind-independent reality of the world and the general reliability of his or her perceptions of the world. This “natural certainty” is neither inferred nor demonstrable but an immediate and spontaneous attendant of perception itself. The representation of things in the mind “points directly back to reality. As representation it includes the essential distinguishing mark indicating that it represents that reality ideally” (*RD*, 1:223). For the realist, the “world is, in an ideal sense, given in the representations of itself. It does not deny the distinction that exists between representation and the thing but at the same time maintains the inseparable connection between the two because it takes the representation as it presents itself” (*RD*, 1:223–24). Bavinck calls such mental representation of an object a “faithful ideal reproduction of the object outside of us” (*RD*, 1:227). Although the object and the perceptual image are distinct, and although the mind has an active bearing in generating the image, modern philosophy’s “ever-growing gap between a thing and its representation,” which precludes verifying the accuracy of the representation by comparing it to reality, is untenable. In every instance of perception there appear neural processes for the formation of a representation of some object, but these processes do not cause the representation. For, Bavinck writes, these neural processes are purely physical phenomena, while the representation is a “psychic mental act” (*RD*, 1:227–28). Hence the two are of a different order, and the former cannot cause or sufficiently explain the latter. Indeed, the neural modifications do not precede and ground the consciousness. For the neural modifications and perception are concomitant, and perception is itself a psychic mental act. “Accordingly,” Bavinck writes,

the object of perception is not any phenomenon within myself but the thing outside myself. The mind that sees the object is the same mind that forms the representation. Both of these are psychic acts. There is

therefore no reason to doubt that in the representations we have a faithful, ideal reproduction of the objects outside ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

Against idealism, there is no need or possibility here for an extrapolation from thought to existence; likewise, against empiricism, there is no need or possibility of grounding this certainty in scientific demonstration.<sup>6</sup> Rather, natural certainty, a certainty of self-evidence and faith, is inextricably woven into human life and study. Therefore, any epistemology that “does not explain the cognitive faculty but instead destroys it and, failing to understand cognition, turns it into an illusion, is judged by that fact” (*RD*, 1:223). Once more against idealism, the *veritates aeternae* of logic and argumentation are not embedded in the mind according to the doctrine of innate ideas. Instead, the human person from the inception of life encounters external reality and, by way of a God-given innate disposition to acquiesce to certain principles and to form certain notions, finds himself or herself automatically and spontaneously bound to the laws of thought. Because the intellect is bound to the body and thus to the cosmos, experience of the world activates the intellect’s compliance with and deployment of the laws of thought. In addition, the logical or essential dimension of objects in reality governs the nature and scope of the intellect’s abstractive endeavors. Thus, ratiocination is less creative than responsive. In Bavinck’s words, “Observation is the source of all real science” (*RD*, 1:226). Yet, once more against

5. *RD*, 1:228. Cf. Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 15–16: “Als wij de wereld buiten ons waarnemen, dan zijn de gewaarwordingen en voorstellingen, die wij daardoor ontvangen, niet het voorwerp van onze kennis, maar zij zijn de kennis zelve, die wij door waarneming onmiddellijk van de dingen buiten ons hebben verkregen.” (If we perceive the world outside us, then sensations and representations, which thereby we receive, are not the object of our knowledge, but they are the knowledge itself, which we have obtained by immediate observation of things outside us.)

6. Bavinck regards Aristotle as “the first to see clearly that knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) is in the final analysis built on indemonstrable self-evident truths” (*RD*, 1:224). Evidently, Bavinck situates the necessary truths of reason too under the notion of natural certainty. Apparently, then, natural certainty respects the existence of the world, our apprehension of the world, and the principles of logic, to which, upon encountering the world, we begin to adhere.

empiricism, while the mind must never lose contact with reality, it has its own nature and operations and must never be barred from pondering the ideal and discerning the essence of things (*RD*, 1:223–33). Thus Bavinck urges that, because the divine Logos has authored both external reality and the human mind and thereby established an “organic connection and correspondence between the two,” the human mind is able to apprehend universals in things. Universals exist *in rebus* (though not *ante res*) and, by virtue of the light of nature, which may be taken as the active intellect in its participation in the divine light or Logos or as “the fund of general concepts” accumulated by the active intellect, are apprehensible to us (*RD*, 1:231–33).

At first glance, it may seem that such ruminations are far removed from the task of Christian witness, but a moment’s consideration suggests otherwise. We have noted that Grenz’s and Franke’s description of theology in *Beyond Foundationalism* is pervaded by a commitment to linguistic constructivism. This is not unlike the idealism contested by Bavinck a century ago; it appears to be, roughly, idealism with a linguistic tilt. Here, then, is a recent account of human knowing in relation to Christian theology that distances communities of human persons from a shared and knowable external world. If taken seriously, the forfeiture of the past and present external world, of our generally reliable apprehension of the world, and of our connection with others on the basis of inhabiting and knowing that world together discourages Christian witness. For cross-cultural interaction would, at least in theory, have no reference to extra-mental reality, no reference to an objective course of history in which Christ was crucified and raised from the dead. The persuasiveness of the Christian message would suffer, for it would, again at least in theory, announce not so much the objective action of God in Christ in the first century but the Christian community’s linguistic constructs, which, though thought to be somehow informed by God himself, are nevertheless humanly manufactured. Furthermore, while we have reason to doubt that anyone would actually allow a theoretical endorsement of systemic social construction to govern his or her daily life, it is well to acknowledge that the phenomena of contemporary technology



supply new opportunities and temptations for endeavoring to construct one's own world. With the advent of Facebook, online religious communities with online worship services, and the like, one can play virtual creator and strive to detach oneself from objective reality. At this point, the pertinence of Bavinck's epistemology becomes even clearer. All persons are dependent on and cognizant of the external world and are bound by God through nature to view that world according to certain rational principles. Perhaps for many who are doing evangelism throughout the world this will seem rather obvious (and that would be in keeping with Bavinck's point in sketching natural realism). Nevertheless this provides indispensable theoretical grounding for the evangelistic mission of the church. With the help of Bavinck's conception of natural certainty, we may, with greater confidence and resolve, call unbelievers to face the reality of sin and death and call them to trust in the objective action of God through Christ in the Spirit in history.

### ***The Imago Dei and the Nature-Grace Relation***

If the material considered up to this juncture has the appearance of general, pre-dogmatic reflection, one need not look far in Bavinck to ascertain that his understanding of the work of God as Creator and Redeemer, together with various related theological themes, nurtures and presides over his view of human knowing. Though Bavinck's coordination of nature and grace has been duly noted as an integrative theme in his work, it is germane to outline its essential features once more here in order to trace how this coordination bears on the cognitive dynamics of Christian witness. One helpful pathway into his cartography of nature and grace runs through his treatment of the *imago Dei*.

In Bavinck's rehearsal of the history, there have been, broadly speaking, two major perspectives on the image of God. The first is a naturalistic perspective in which the image of God consists in a childlike innocence or neutrality with freedom of choice for the attainment of perfection before God. The second is a supernaturalistic perspective predominant in Roman Catholic theology. According to Bavinck, there are two seminal theological

commitments underlying Roman Catholic supernaturalism: (1) the construal of the state of glory as a condition in which believers transcend the state of nature and reach a *visionem Dei per essentiam* and (2) the doctrine of meritorious good works funded by infused grace granted in baptism. With these theological implements in hand, supernaturalism ventures that nature, or the condition of being a human creature of God and as such obeying God, is insufficient to outfit human persons for their beatific *telos*. Given the inadequacy of nature and natural human righteousness, God bestowed upon Adam a *donum superadditum*, the image of God, by which Adam was brought into a state of grace and equipped for meritorious works unto the achievement of deification. With the fall, this supernatural gift was lost and humanity became dependent upon the reinstatement of supernatural grace in baptism, by which one can again pursue meritorious works en route to physical participation in the divine nature (*RD*, 2:539–42).

Bavinck catalogs several criticisms of this supernaturalistic portrayal of the image of God and the life and destiny of the Christian believer. First, it neglects the continuity of the state of glory with our present enjoyment of communion with God, which is characterized by Christ's mediation and by an ethical (rather than physical) conformity of the human person to God. Second, in Scripture the state of glory contrasts less with our original condition than our fallen condition. Christ has acquired for us the same blessings which Adam also, by obedience in the sphere of nature, would have acquired for himself and his descendants. Third, that fallen persons journey to the state of glory by way of the state of grace does not mean that prelapsarian humanity had to take the same road. Even if fallen humanity were now in fact obliged to arrive at its beatific destiny by means of a *donum superadditum* and merit of condignity, it is incorrect to apply this economy to Adam in his original state. While it is true that the image of God restored for us is none other than the image enjoyed originally by Adam, and while the spiritual blessings that Christ obtained for us are none other than what Adam himself would have obtained by obedience, this correspondence does not signal that Adam in his original state was to receive a *donum superadditum* to animate his

obedience. For Bavinck, such a theological maneuver “transforms everything into grace and so ensures that there is no longer any grace at all” (*RD*, 2:544).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, after this hyperextension of grace, Roman Catholic theology only emaciates grace by means of meritorious good works: *posse ex Deo, velle ex homine*. Against Roman Catholicism’s merit theology, Bavinck states that the possibility of Adam obtaining eternal life by obedience is underwritten not by merit *ex condigno* but by merit *ex pacto*: merit regulated by the covenant of works in which Adam’s obedience *per se* would not be adequate to the spiritual blessings he might obtain but would be considered as such according to the covenantal arrangement. Fourth, the notion of the *donum superadditum* leads Roman Catholicism to an unbiblical distribution of humanity into three tiers (the natural, preternatural, and supernatural) and to a reduction of original sin to the loss of the *donum superadditum* and a return to the natural state. Bavinck views this formulation as a devolution of the biblical sin-grace ethical antithesis into an unbiblical nature-grace metaphysical antithesis. Fifth, the matter of original righteousness being both natural and amissible is not alleviated by the notions of preternatural and supernatural righteousness, for on Rome’s view one can still lose natural righteousness and yet remain a human being. Even for Rome natural righteousness is an accidental property. The true function of the *donum superadditum*, then, is to address the Catholic matter-spirit antithesis according to which human beings must overcome the defect of physicality. Sixth and finally, just as the superadded gift was allegedly granted to Adam prior to the fall in order to elevate him above nature, so in Catholic thought it is dispensed now by the church, a point which yields the unfortunate implicate that grace is qualitatively the same before and after the fall. Here Bavinck is simply arguing that, if there were grace before the fall, it seems odd that it should be identical to the grace that appears after the fall. Indeed, inasmuch as grace is “the essential element in Christianity,” this means that, in a sense, Christianity existed before the fall. It means also that, in the grace proffered by Christianity,

7. Nature and grace are distinct but not inimical as are sin and grace.

the atonement is merely incidental (*RD*, 2:542–48). Thus in Bavinck's sixth criticism he objects to both the constancy of grace before and after the fall and to the supernatural character of that grace.

In Bavinck's positive account of Protestant and, in particular, Reformed reflection on the image of God, he earnestly maintains that the image respects human nature itself rather than only a supernatural state and that in redemptive history there is an opposition not between nature and grace but between sin and grace. In other words, nature itself does not elicit grace. It is sin that, on supposition of God's will for some still to partake of eternal life, elicits the reparative power of grace. The human predicament, then, is not physical but ethical.

Bavinck narrates that, perceiving the intensiveness of our sin and corruption, the Reformers spurned the notion that in the fall the natural qualities of humanity remained untainted even as the supernatural gifts such as immortality were abdicated. Instead, in the despoliation of the *imago Dei*, humanity underwent a holistic corruption indicative of the image belonging to the very nature of human persons. Yet the Protestants did not regard the image as absolutely necessary or inamissible in human nature. They did not discard the distinction between the substance of the human person and divine gifts bestowed upon the human person, between natural and supernatural attributes. Rather, they opposed the Roman Catholic characterization of this distinction wherein there are two essentially different planes of human existence, one natural and the other supernatural, and wherein being human and being Christian are incommensurable. Hence, the Reformation theologians positioned the image of God within human nature and judged that its infirmity entails the infirmity of human nature itself. The Reformed especially upheld the image of God in its broader and narrower senses, that is, in respect of the natural qualities of humanity as well as the supernatural gifts. After the fall humanity abides in the image of God and yet has "lost the primary content of the image of God (i.e., knowledge, righteousness, and holiness) and only regains these qualities in Christ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10)" (*RD*, 2:550).

In Bavinck's view, this union of the substance of the human person and the supernatural gifts prevents antagonism between nature and grace. Although increased righteousness does not emerge automatically from human nature and may be called a gift of God's grace broadly conceived, the Reformed urged that Adam's original righteousness was natural and could not lie above his humanity. Original righteousness belongs to the "normal state" or "health of a human being" and hence is natural (*RD*, 2:551). Thus the corruption of the *imago Dei* and original righteousness does not entail the annihilation of human nature altogether but does entail the loss of its integrity. The reception of Christ's righteousness by faith secures for us a benefit that belongs (albeit accidentally) to human nature itself. From here, Bavinck invokes Holy Scripture, observing that the biblical text knows nothing of original righteousness being overridden by supernatural righteousness. By nature human beings were granted communion with God and required to obey God. In Scripture there is no double morality stratified for different classes of persons; with his one holy law God claims each of us and each of us *in toto*. This universal divine claim undermines the notion that God bestows upon some a supernatural grace and holds them to a higher ethical standard. Therefore, since one cannot place original righteousness above human nature, one must place it within human nature. Indeed, while Rome itself teaches that original righteousness is properly conceived as supernatural righteousness, it does acknowledge that natural righteousness is amissible. The Reformed repudiated the concept of supernatural righteousness, but there is in fact agreement between Rome and the Reformed concerning the existence of a righteousness both natural and amissible. Thus the Roman Catholic objection to Protestant formulations of the *imago Dei* is misguided. In reality, Rome's construal of original righteousness as supernatural righteousness is contoured to facilitate a Neoplatonic depiction of human destiny. By contrast, the Protestants rejected this rendition of the end of humanity and determined that the loss of original righteousness does not entail the loss of substance or nature but does entail the loss of natural moral qualities and of humanity's "health and harmony" (*RD*, 2:548–53).

Though Bavinck credits Protestantism in general with a theological breakthrough in the doctrine of the image of God, he judges that in Lutheranism this breakthrough could not reach its full flowering. For the Lutherans tended to relegate the image to the moral quality of righteousness so that human nature itself is segregated from the image and the image is entirely lost in the fall. This, Bavinck writes, severs the connection between nature and grace. For, when God accomplishes our salvation, his grace undertakes to restore not our nature but only a certain quality alongside of it. In contrast, the Reformed preserved the connection between substance and quality, nature and grace, by recognizing the *imago Dei* in both its broader and its narrower senses. Broadly considered, the *imago* respects the whole person and his or her nature; narrowly considered, it respects humanity's original righteousness and ethical conformity to God. In the broad sense the *imago* has been corrupted by the fall, and in the narrower sense it has been lost by the fall. Therefore, according to the Reformed view, the restoration of the *imago* heals the whole person even as it has to re-create humanity's righteousness before God. Nevertheless, the union of the substance of the human person and the gifts of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness is not to be mistaken for a triumphalism about the *imago Dei*; these gifts were not originally fully actualized but were meant to be cultivated by Adam in time. Indeed, only with God's providential assistance could Adam have done so (*RD*, 2:553–54, 558).

In sum, against Roman Catholicism, Bavinck insists that the destiny of the elect is not such that God must bypass or combat human nature in order to lead humanity to that destiny. The image of God is not a superadded gift calibrated to transcend nature; rather, it is imparted to humanity in its creation and belongs to its nature. Accordingly, inasmuch as grace pursues the soundness and flourishing of the image, it does not subvert nature but restores it and facilitates its proper fulfillment. Hence Bavinck dissolves the nature-grace antithesis and replaces it with the sin-grace antithesis. Against the Lutheran theologians, he clarifies that the image of God concerns not merely humanity's righteousness before God but the substance of the human person as well as the amissible qualities

such as righteousness and immortality. Therefore, redemption is neither against nature nor adjacent to nature; it respects human nature itself.

In relation to the epistemic aspect of Christian witness, Bavinck's identification of the aim of divine grace as the restoration and perfection of nature significantly entails that God's saving work is received by means of a faculty of human nature, namely, the mind in its fiduciary *habitus*, and that this natural faculty is thereby sanctified and perfected. To be sure, the darkness of the human mind and the initiatory character and immediacy of regeneration preclude claiming that the application of redemption in its entirety must come through the checkpoint of human consciousness and reason. Nevertheless, that God does not endeavor to overthrow human nature serves as a theological backdrop to persuasive verbal proclamation of the gospel. For it assures us that, in the proclamation of the gospel, God means to address our intellect. He intends, by the working of the Spirit, not to deactivate human reason but to purify it. At this point we may recall that, for Bavinck, human persons even after the fall successfully employ their apprehensive and dianoetic capabilities. This fact, paired with God's intention to restore human nature in all its dimensions, encourages evangelists, pastors, and laypersons to share the gospel in the knowledge that their articulation of it is, in the hand of God, an instrument of great exigency for the salvation of others. Precisely how Bavinck relates the restorative work of God to the human intellect is the subject of the next two sections.

### ***General and Special Revelation***

The significance of the nature-grace relation for the cognitive dimension of proclaiming and hearing the word of the gospel is elucidated in Bavinck's treatment of revelation. According to him, while Roman Catholics devise a nature-grace dualism in respect to revelation, and while Lutherans, Anabaptists, and Socinians disparage the sphere of nature and general revelation, Reformed theologians hold that it is vital to reiterate the compatibility and complementarity of nature and grace vis-à-vis revelation. To

accomplish this, Bavinck carefully plots the distinctions between natural and supernatural revelation and general and special revelation. The natural-supernatural distinction concerns not the origin of revelation, which is always supernatural, but the manner of revelation. Rightly construed, natural revelation denotes God's self-disclosure *per naturam*, that is, self-disclosure through the ordinary realities and processes within nature and history. Supernatural revelation denotes God's self-disclosure *extra naturam*. The *extra* here does not imply that God's self-revelation is located outside of the created order and its history or that we must transcend our creatureliness in order to receive it. Rather, it indicates that this mode of revelation is not given merely by means of the ordinary course of the natural world and its history. In the case of this supernatural mode of revelation, God still does not present himself immediately to the creature (*finitum non est capax infiniti*) but employs creaturely means such as physical appearances in Old Testament theophany or human speech in the prophetic word. In his supernatural revelation, God's self-presentation is a divine act answerable to divine omnipotence and as such is extrinsic to the ordinary course of nature and history. According to Bavinck, both natural and supernatural revelation are found in nature and grace, and both occur before and after the fall. In Eden, God revealed himself not merely by the beauty of nature but verbally as well. After the fall, God's self-revelation obtains in creation and the ordinary course of history and is not replaced by supernatural revelation. In the postlapsarian estate divisions sever communities of human persons from one another, and thus there arises the distinction between general and special revelation, which distinction respects not the origin or manner of revelation but the availability or audience of revelation. General revelation is God's self-revelation available to all human persons. Special revelation is God's self-revelation available to only certain human persons. Both general revelation and special revelation may be either natural or supernatural. On the one hand, Bavinck suggests, God's discourse with Adam and Eve in Genesis 2–3 was supernatural, but given their place as the first humans and the transmission of this discourse via tradition, this revelation was accessible to all persons



and is therefore an instance of general revelation. On the other hand, Jesus's physical death on the cross occurred without any extraordinary divine action and was therefore an instance of natural revelation, but it was accessible only to a small group of persons in the first century and thus belongs in the field of special revelation (*RD*, 1:303–12, 355–57).

Bavinck utilizes the general-special distinction as he identifies continuity and discontinuity in divine revelation throughout redemptive history. To him, it is obvious that the fact of revelation is unchanged by the fall: God continues to reveal himself in creation and supernaturally as well. Furthermore, general and special revelation have God as their common author and content. God is always the subject, the one revealing himself, and the object, the one whom the revelation reveals. To be sure, because of the fall, special revelation distinctly focuses on the grace of God according to the need of fallen persons. Yet the *telos* of revelation remains the same: the perfection and flourishing of human beings for the glory of God. Because this perfection includes the human mind, and because the human mind is dark and dull under the power of sin, special revelation addresses the intellect. It does not address the intellect only, but, precisely because the aim of special revelation is soteriological and doxological, it must drive home cognitive content to remedy the falsehood of sin (*RD*, 1:310–11, 340–46, 350).

In God's common grace, general revelation even after the fall yields some knowledge of the truth of God among human persons. In pagan religion there remain certain elements of truth preserved by "an illumination by the Logos, a working of God's Spirit."<sup>8</sup> In fact, Bavinck surmises, when Christianity is seen to affirm whatever truths are present in paganism, Christianity may even be called "paganism's fulfillment."<sup>9</sup> However, general revelation admits of a

8. Bavinck lists a number of biblical texts in support of this: Genesis 6:17; 7:15; Psalm 33:6; 104:30; Job 32:8; Ecclesiastes 3:19; Proverbs 8:22ff; Malachi 1:11, 14; John 1:9; Romans 2:14; Galatians 4:1–3; Acts 14:16, 17; 17:22–30.

9. At various points Bavinck qualifies this and confirms that Christianity does not naively assume the tenets of pagan philosophy. To counter the shortcomings of religion and philosophy outside the sphere of special revelation,

twofold inadequacy. Objectively, it is inadequate because it tells nothing of the sinner's greatest need, namely, the grace of God and its historical enactment in the triune missions. Subjectively, it is inadequate in three ways. First, whatever measure of effort fallen persons invest in attaining to the knowledge of God, the mind is still warped by sin and susceptible to suppression and distortion of spiritual truth. Second, when one examines the loci of general revelation, one cannot escape the uncertainty overshadowing one's consideration of them. Ultimately, uncertainty about knowledge of God is abated only by the *autopistia* of Scripture and the internal testimony of the Spirit. Third, too few human beings have the time and resources required to scrutinize these loci and with scientific attentiveness extract all that can be known of God through them. The limitation of direct study, then, is overcome only by the accessibility and disseminative advantages of testimony that are given in Holy Scripture. At the same time, the import of general revelation is not lost. For with the guidance of verbal revelation in Scripture, believers are able to exegete general revelation and make use of it in sharing the gospel. They can commandeer Christian insight into general revelation and forge a link between the unbeliever's knowledge of God and his attributes in general revelation, however stifled or flaccid this may be, and the revelation of God in the gospel. "No one escapes the power of general revelation." Again: "General revelation preserves humankind in order that it can be found and healed by Christ and until it is." In this sense (and only in this sense), Bavinck judges, natural theology serves as a *praeambulum fidei* (RD, 1:321–22). Subjectively, the knowledge of God in special revelation is acquired by the believer first and then he or she can rightly understand general revelation. Yet, objectively, nature precedes grace. The knowledge of God presented in general revelation precedes the knowledge of God presented in special revelation. Therefore, in bearing witness to Christ, we may build on the unavoidable testimony of nature as we

God has provided "andere kenbron in de autoriteit" (another source of knowledge in authority) and faith as "tijdelijk medicijn" (temporary medicine) for fallen reason. *Christelijke wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1904), 13–15.

seek to communicate the gospel (*RD*, 1:304–5, 312–14, 318–22, 577–90; 2:74–76; 4:33–34).<sup>10</sup>

Added to Bavinck’s discussion of general and special revelation is his description of the *cognitio Dei insita*. Christian theology, he writes, has repudiated various philosophical accounts of innate ideas. There are no preformed truths embedded in the mind which need not be informed but only occasioned by sensory experience. The mind is not privileged to be a source of truth in its own right and hence is never independent of the world. We cannot deduce or distill from the materials of the mind a clear knowledge of God. In light of this conviction, Christian theologians have been happier to speak of an inborn capacity or disposition to form certain ideas upon encountering and perceiving objects in the world. “God in no respect causes humans to enter the world as adults but lets them be born as helpless infants in need of care. . . . Yet, concealed in those children is the full-grown adult of the future. And this is true intellectually, ethically, and religiously as well” (*RD*, 2:71). Thus, the *cognitio Dei insita* denotes humanity’s natural aptitude to become spontaneously aware of God’s existence and ultimacy upon experiencing the world as a locus of God’s self-revelation. While we are bound to objective revelation in the spheres of nature and grace, the doctrine of the implanted knowledge of God reminds us that human persons automatically and inexorably arrive at some knowledge of God without coercion and without scientific intentionality or proof.

Against the theory of innate ideas, Bavinck argues that human beings still arrive at this knowledge of God “mediately, by the interior impact of revelation upon their consciousness.” Against empiricism, “this revelation of God speaks so loudly and so forcefully and meets with such resonance in everyone’s heart that it can be called uniquely appropriate to, and incretated in, humans” (*RD*, 2:72). Revelation in the created order precedes human consciousness of God. God “exerts revelatory pressure upon

10. On a related note, Bavinck also insists on receptivity and gratitude among believers for non-believers’ progress and findings in science. See *Christelijke wetenschap*, 31–32.

humans” and thus adventitiously activates our innate capacity for knowledge of God. “While the ‘seed of religion’ is indeed inherent in humans, it takes the whole field of human life to make it germinate and grow” (*RD*, 2:73). In this connection, the implanted knowledge of God can broadly be characterized as acquired knowledge of God. Still, God gifts us with innate ability to receive and appropriate his revelation and leads us to an awareness of God without compulsion or argumentation. This *cognitio Dei insita* is thus noetic and apprehensive rather than dianoetic and discursive. It is less specific and elaborate than the *cognitio Dei acquisita* and is therefore less subject to doubt and debate. Humanity always seeks by protracted study and reasoning to journey to the acquired knowledge of God, but we always carry with us the implanted knowledge of God and are therefore able and willing to participate in cross-perspectival dialogue and debate. If Bavinck’s formulation of natural realism depicted a material noetic solidarity with respect to perception of the world as well as a formal noetic solidarity with respect to the laws of thought, then here he expands material noetic solidarity to include apprehension of God as well (*RD*, 2:63–76).

This alcove of Bavinck’s theology contains a number of clarifications and implications for Christian witness. That both natural and supernatural revelation occurred before the fall suggests that the supernatural and verbal revelation of the gospel inscripturated and expounded in the biblical text and proclaimed by the church is suitable to human nature. The revelatory mode of the gospel does not impose upon us the task of asking unbelievers to become other than what they are as human beings; rather, it urges us to call unbelievers by faith to shift back toward true humanity as creatures living not by bread alone but by every word of God. This is corroborated by the continuity of the authorship, material content, and *telos* of general and special revelation. While the fall occasions an emphasis on grace in special revelation, the goal remains the same: human thriving to the praise of God’s glory. Just as divine speech before the fall proceeded through the rational mind to affect the whole human person, so too special revelation runs through the head to the heart, urging the importance and usefulness of well-ordered verbal witness on the part of evangelists, missionaries,

pastors, and laypersons. Finally, general revelation and the *cognitio Dei insita* encourage us that in attesting the grace of God in Christ we build from and leverage unbelievers' consciousness of God under the aspects of his supremacy and righteousness. While this consciousness is deformed by sin, it abides as a rudimentary religious point of contact with which we may connect in the missionary activity of the church. Just how the human mind, or reason broadly conceived, relates to the immediate aim of this missionary activity, the inception of faith in Christ among those estranged from God, is taken up in the next section.

### ***Faith and Reason***

Bavinck's coordination of faith and reason is replete with insight for Christian witness in the modern world, but we confine ourselves to four observations here. First, in Bavinck's view, reason and faith are not placed in entitative juxtaposition: these are not two discrete *things* existing alongside one another but are distinguished as faculty and disposition or faculty and act. Reason is not the source of truth but in faith apprehends that truth which is presented to it. This is the first step toward debunking the faith-reason antithesis in which faith and reason are concerned with utterly incommensurate strata of reality or are openly hostile to one another, the former being concerned with imaginative projections of felt human needs and the latter with facts and truth. For, if in this case there are not even two different faculties at all, then there are certainly not two different faculties at odds with one another. Indeed, that faith is a *habitus* of the mind, or reason broadly defined, entails that faith is not the end of serious reflection but rather that it has an intrinsic propensity toward theological study. Second, faith is original and natural to humanity, not a superadded gift. In all the spheres of thought, faith with its immediate, indemonstrable certainty proves to be the bedrock upon which further inquiry and reflection take place. By faith we consent to the first principles basic to human thought and interaction and basic to scientific investigation. "[B]elieving as such is so far from being inimical to human nature and the demands of science that without

it there cannot be normal people and a normal science” (*RD*, 1:568; cf. 564–68, 616–17).

To be sure, faith as certain knowledge of creaturely things and faith as certain knowledge of heavenly things differ in respect to their objects, their relationships to their objects, their bases, and their origins. The former concerns belief in the external world, specific objects in the world, the general reliability of our perception of the world, and the laws of thought whereas the latter concerns the revelation of the grace of God in Christ. The former is related to its objects immediately, while the latter is related to its object mediately. In other words, faith as certain knowledge of creaturely things relates to creaturely objects *per se* while religious and saving faith relates to its spiritual object through created media *sub specie revelationis Dei*, even if such knowledge is still noetic rather than dianoetic and includes personal appropriation of that which it apprehends.<sup>11</sup> The former is based on firsthand experience while the latter draws its material content from testimony. The origin of the former lies in the interface of human nature with external reality while the origin of the latter, though not against nature, is not nature (as this is now corrupted) but the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, even religious faith is original and natural to humanity and must now be given as a gift to human beings only incidentally and on account of sin (*RD*, 1:568–71; 4:100–1).

Third, saving faith is apprehensive of cognitive content. When Bavinck distinguishes between historical faith and saving faith, he insists that they are different in essence as well as degree. However, he adds, the knowledge of historical faith is materially constant even when it is taken up in saving faith. The change consists in that the knowledge of historical faith becomes esteemed as the truth of God vital to one’s eternal well-being. “The knowledge and assent inherent in historical faith, which were sometimes a person’s intellectual property at an earlier stage, are later grafted onto saving

11. At this point, Bavinck clarifies that the physicality of the life and mission of Jesus does not entail that religious faith is related immediately to its object, for its object is not Jesus’s words and deeds in themselves but rather these as media of the grace of God (*RD*, 1:568–69).

faith as onto a new root and as a result draw better nourishment from them” (*RD*, 4:126–28). Finally, when the Holy Spirit works faith in the human person in regeneration, illumination, and the internal call, he does not bypass or supplement the determinate content and meaning of the word of God written and preached. For Bavinck, while Lutheranism tends impersonally to enclose the Spirit in the word by saying that the Spirit works *per verbum*, and while the Anabaptist tradition tends to imply that the Spirit works *sine verbo*, the Reformed strike the right balance in asserting that the Spirit works *cum verbo* to bring salvation to human beings. The Spirit adds nothing to what Christ has provided but only administers what Christ has already provided (John 16:13–15). The Spirit implants new life, enables us to perceive the spiritual truth and consequence of the gospel, and leads us to heed the external call in faith. The regenerative work of the Holy Spirit is immediate in the sense that the Spirit directly affects the fallen heart and will without operating through our consent or affecting the mind and assigning to the mind the task of reforming the heart and will. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit does not discard the word of Christ as the instrument of our salvation. Furthermore, this work is called irresistible in the sense that it is effectual, not in the sense that it circumvents reason and coerces the unbeliever into the kingdom of God.<sup>12</sup>

Bavinck’s account of faith and reason possesses a number of resources for the church’s missionary endeavors. His construal of the relationship between the two suggests that Christians need not hesitate to deliver the gospel to the intelligentsia of our own culture and of others. Faith is a disposition or operation of the mind and, though saving faith is supernatural in origin, it demands of no one a suspension or stifling of increased rationality. Though the gospel confronts the warping of rationality under sin, it appeals to reason and invites the agreement of it as well as the heart. As in the exposition of the *imago Dei*, that faith is original to humanity assures the missionary that they seek not the introduction of

12. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:382–85; 4:80–4, 457–60; Herman Bavinck, *Roeping en wedergeboorte* (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903), 188–245.

something alien to humanity but rather the recovery of something truly and profoundly human. The importance of Christianity's factual, historical content to saving faith reminds us that evangelism must be both doctrinally faithful and intelligible to the hearer. This reinforces the value of theological education for Christian mission and the consequence of conscientious articulation in sharing the gospel with others. The same is verified by the way of the Spirit's activity in guiding persons to Christ. The Spirit acts to bind the unbeliever to the word of the gospel and does not undertake his own program of salvation. Hence we are responsible to enunciate the gospel with intelligence and care even as we trust that the efficacy of this lies not in our power but belongs to the Spirit who glorifies Christ and opens the heart hardened by sin.

## Conclusion

As the contemporary church in dissent to both atheism and religious pluralism seeks to be faithful to Christ and the mission that he established for his disciples, it is crucial that we observe the wisdom of our spiritual and theological forebears. To give Bavinck a place in this undertaking is to gain a theological erudition sated with good judgment and useful in grounding and enlivening the evangelistic mission of the church. Bavinck's rendition of natural realism substantiates that all humanity is connected to a shared reality and a shared assemblage of rudimentary rational principles and that we therefore have epistemic traction for intercultural dialogue and witness. His account of the *imago Dei* in relation to nature and grace authenticates that the application of salvation does not deactivate nature and reason but rather presupposes and rehabilitates them. His sketch of general and special revelation and the *cognitio Dei insita* assures us that Christian witness links up with a knowledge of God that is already present among unbelievers. Finally, his configuration of faith and reason prods us to take seriously the congeniality of Christian belief and logical thought and to practice diligence in articulating the gospel with doctrinal fidelity. To the extent that we allow theological acuties such as these in Bavinck's thought to inform the mission of the church, we



Steven J. Duby

will grow in discernment and fortitude in proclaiming the gospel, and our witness will become more conducive to the divine work of bringing human beings to see “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).