

Pearls and Leaven

Bavinck Tributes

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It is a measure of a theologian's greatness to see what other recognized "great minds" say about him. In this "Pearl and Leaven" entry we consider what three Reformed giants said about Bavinck as a theologian and, then, what another said about his preaching.

Abraham Kuyper

When the first volume of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* was published in 1895, Kuyper penned the following paragraphs of praise in his weekly journal *De Heraut* (*The Herald*):

The Calvinists in this country and all over the world may give themselves in to high-pitched gratitude, now that a theological work has been published, that will lift up our Reformed theology from decay, and restore her place of honor within the realm of science, a work that was lacking in this country, as well as in England and America.

The thread of our theological development had already been broken in the first half of the eighteenth century, and not just with Vitringa,¹ but partly already with à Marck² the worm of rationalism had penetrated,

1. This is a reference to Campegius Vitringa (1659–1722), author of *Doctrina christiana religionis, per aphorismos summatim descripta*, 8 vols (Arnheim, 1761–1786).

2. This is a reference to Johannes à Marck (1656–1721), author of *Compendium theologiae christianaee didactico-elencticum* (Groningen: Fossema, 1686), and *Christianaee theologiaee medulla didactico-elenctica* (Amsterdam:

without generating any other reaction than reprimand, fed with mysticism and pietism.

Hodge's accomplishment in America [his *Systematic Theology*] was quite something, and it should neither be denied nor forgotten that he did his best to defend Reformed dogmatics apologetically over against all kinds of philosophical, heretical and naturalistic objections. We recognize this gratefully, but he did not deal with the principles. He painted the façade anew, but did not alter the basis.

That is why we could not progress, simply because we constantly needed *principles*, and then, because we could not find them in our own home, gathered them from the neighbor.³

There are a number of very interesting details in Kuyper's tribute. The first is the "damning with faint praise" reference to Charles Hodge and the Princeton approach to theology. This is likely the first of the many published claims to follow that posited a great gulf fixed between Princeton and Amsterdam.⁴ Second, Kuyper summarizes the objection he has against Hodge by resorting to his favorite methodological term: "principles."⁵ Stated differently, the contrast between the Amsterdam and Princeton understanding of theology is that the former operates from a metaphysical base similar to that of Protestant orthodoxy⁶ while Hodge's *Systematic Theology* presents theology as an inductive science in which the

Wetstenios, 1716).

3. *De Heraut*, June 16, 1895; translated by George Harinck.

4. Though this list is very long, it is gratifying to note that the sharp edges of this contention are being modified by more recent scholarship. See Owen Anderson, *Benjamin B. Warfield and Right Reason: The Clarity of General Revelation and Function of Apologetics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005); Paul Helseth, "Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); David P. Smith, *B.B. Warfield's Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

5. Giving the English translation of the second volume of Kuyper's three-volume, *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* the title *Principles of Sacred Theology* was an inspired choice; it captures the heart of Kuyper's (and Bavinck's) understanding of theology and its *principia*. (See Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, translated by J. Hendrik De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954 [1898]).

theologian must “ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relation to Him. These facts are all in the Bible.”⁷

The third observation has to do with Kuyper’s dismissal of the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy as being shaped by rationalism and therefore nothing more than “restitution, fed with mysticism and pietism.” Bavinck’s judgment is much kinder. The proof can be found in the cumulative “Combined Name Index” at the end of volume 4 of the English translation of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*. Campegius Vitringa, dismissed by Kuyper, receives many citations by Bavinck; only Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin (in that order!) receive more.⁸

Geerhardus Vos

Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) and Herman Bavinck came from two families that shared a common geographical and church background. “Their fathers were born in the county of Bentheim, close to the Dutch border in German and were members of the German Old Reformed Church (*Altreformierte Kirchen Deutschlands*)—a denomination closely related to the Seceder Church in the Netherlands.”⁹ Though their paths separated when the Vos family immigrated to the United States in 1881, the men remained life-long friends.¹⁰ Undoubtedly because of his superior facility in the Dutch language, Vos reviewed the first two volumes of

6. See Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:406–50.

7. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888[1871]), 1:11.

8. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed., John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–08), 4:827–28, 835–36, 884–85, 888–89.

9. George Harinck, “Herman Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 20.

10. For more on this friendship and numerous fascinating parallels between the two men, see Harinck, “Herman Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos.”

Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* as they appeared. I want to highlight a couple of paragraphs from each of Vos's reviews to underscore Bavinck's historical method, his careful scholarship, and Vos's take on the famous Princeton versus Amsterdam discussion. The first comes from Vos's review of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, volume 1:

The historic and dogmatic parts are so adjusted in Dr. Bavinck's book, that the former invariably serves the latter instead of interfering with it. The author nowhere unites the two mechanically; he endeavors throughout to place his own doctrinal conviction in the light of the historical movement of the doctrine.

Another commendable feature in this dogmatic handbook is a great caution of statement. While positive in all essential matters, and nowhere avoiding committing himself, Dr. Bavinck practices moderation and self-restraint on subordinate points. His work is free from what has harmed dogmatics in the past, perhaps, more than anything else: the inordinate desire to furnish a definite, precise answer to all minute and abstruse questions.¹¹

Vos points out that Reformed theology rejects the epistemological rationalism of innate ideas and insists on the primacy of the senses in human knowledge. However, this conviction is not meant in the sense of Locke's empiricism. "The essence of their gnosiology was," he writes,

that the human mind always receives the first impulse for acquiring knowledge from the external world. But the nature of the intellect is such, they held, that in this being impelled to work, it forms of itself involuntarily the fundamental principles and conceptions which are certain *à priori*, and therefore deserve to be called *veritates æternæ*.

And then follows the conclusion that might surprise some who see a large gulf between Amsterdam and Princeton:

This, it will be observed, is the same theory of knowledge that has been set forth in this country by the late Dr. McCosh.¹²

11. *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 7 (1896): 357.

12. *Ibid.*, 358.

I am also including here a quotation from Vos's review of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, volume 2, because the review pleased Bavinck a great deal. When he announced publication of the fourth volume, he wrote: "Among the announcements and reviews of the first three volumes no word was more pleasant to me than Prof. Vos's of Princeton," and he quoted the following passage:

What has impressed us most is that, while Dr. Bavinck's standpoint is that of a thorough Calvinist, yet in reading him one is conscious of listening not so much to a defense of Calvinism as to a scientific vindication of the Christian world-view in its most catholic sense and spirit. This is far from saying that the work is not also a vindication of the Calvinistic theology. But it is so in the indirect and for that reason all the more telling way of showing how perfectly easy and natural it is to build on the foundations of the Reformed principles a system of Christian thought which by its very largeness of grasp and freedom from theological one-sidedness becomes the most eloquent witness to the soundness and depth of the principles underlying it. No higher commendation of Calvinism is conceivable than that it lends itself to being made the basis of a structure of truth so universally and comprehensively Christian in all its lines and proportions.¹³

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield

Benjamin Warfield reviewed another Bavinck classic, *De zekerheid des geloofs* (*The Certainty of Faith*) in 1903.¹⁴ He seems to concur with Bavinck that "certitude as to the truth of the gospel is never to be attained except along the path of personal saving faith. And just like knowledge, faith does not come to certitude regarding itself by logical reason. . . . [Rather] certitude flows to us immediately and directly out of faith itself; certainty is an essential

13. G. Harinck, "Herman Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos," 29–30; cf., H. Bavinck, "Dogmatiek," *De Bazuin* 26 (April 1901). The original text by Vos is quoted from his review of Bavinck's *Dogmatiek*, vol. 2, in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 10 (1899): 694.

14. *The Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 138–48; page references in square brackets in the text are to this review. Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: Kok, 1901), translated as *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharine, Ont.: Paideia, 1980).

quality of faith, it is inseparable from it and belongs to our nature” [141–42]. At the same time, Warfield is not satisfied with what he perceives to be a shortchanging of the role of “evidences” in Christian apologetics.¹⁵ Notwithstanding what Warfield refers to as his “confusion of mind as to the exact sense in which the word certitude is to be taken here and there” [142], he does conclude his review with this strong affirmation:

We must not close without emphasizing the delight we take in Dr. Bavinck’s writings. In them extensive learning, sound thinking and profound religious feeling are smelted intimately together into a product of singular charm. He has given us the most valuable treatise on *Dogmatics* written during the last quarter of a century – a thorough wrought out treatise which we never consult without the keenest satisfaction and abundant profit. And the lectures and brochures he from time to time presents an eager public are worthy of the best traditions of Reformed thought and Reformed eloquence. Not least among them we esteem this excellent booklet on “the certitude of faith.” [148]

Nicholas Steffens

Our final tribute comes from Nicholas Steffens, a prominent minister in the Reformed Church in America, who wrote the following about Bavinck’s preaching during the latter’s visit to America in 1908:

Calvinism is not dead wherever it has representatives such as our dear brother. And the pulpit need not complain of sterility whenever such men mount it who are conscious that as preachers they are ministers of the divine Word. We are particularly elated that his sermons are so clearly understandable, which is so intimately tied to their sublimity and certifiable truthfulness. In our opinion, his sermons were precisely what people expect Reformed sermons to be. That proclamation of the Word must be the result of healthy exegesis is never forgotten. His introductions were excellent, and their connection with what followed

15. For a helpful overview of the ongoing discussion between Bavinck and Warfield see Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2008), chapters 5 and 6; cf. idem., “Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the *Autopistia* of Scripture,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (April 2010): 32–43.

was such that the text was so contextualized that the subject treated became clear as crystal. The division of the material left nothing to be desired, and the sermon's application, while not made in older style, was in no way neglected. Mind, heart, and will all found a place in the preaching of our guest. This is as it should be wherever God's Word is proclaimed. We hope that the preaching of Dr. Bavinck will be a great blessing to all who had the privilege of being among his listeners.¹⁶

16. Nicholas M. Steffens (1839–1912) received his theological training at the Kampen Theological School of the Secession Churches where Bavinck's father, Jan Bavinck, was among his teachers. He immigrated to the United States in 1872, served German-speaking and Dutch-speaking congregations in the Reformed Church in America, taught at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, MI (1884–95, 1903–12), and at the Presbyterian Seminary in Dubuque, IA (1895–98, 1900–03). He was editor of *De Hope*, the Dutch language weekly for RCA members at the time of Bavinck's visit in 1908. His descriptive account of Bavinck's preaching is excerpted from his column "Wekelijksche Budget" (weekly assessment) which appeared in *De Hope* 41, no. 51 (10/13/1908): 4. The translation was provided by James A. De Jong.