

A Brief Response to Mattson’s “A Soft Spot for Paganism? Bavinck and Insider Movements”

J. W. Stevenson

It was with both surprise and gratitude that I discovered that Dr. Brian Mattson had chosen to deal with my thesis in his article “A Soft Spot for Paganism? Bavinck and Insider Movements.” Since I spent considerable time correlating the work of Herman and J. H. Bavinck with the current insider movement discussion, I obviously believe there is much fruit for current issues to be found by exploring their theology and missiology.

At the same time I was quite surprised by the substance of Mattson’s response to my thesis, or, to be more accurate, to Chapter 2 of my thesis.¹ While I appreciate portions of his article, particularly the reflections on Bavinck’s views on grace and nature in relation to other religions, I believe that Mattson has misunderstood and mischaracterized my position. Though I do not intend to give a full reply to all of his criticisms, I will offer three responses that hopefully clarify my thesis in relation to Bavinck and the insider movement.

1. Bavinck should not be used to support insider movements.

Mattson’s apparent impetus for writing his article was his alarm that Herman Bavinck’s thought may be used as support for insider methodology. He writes, “It is simultaneously alarming (to me, at least) that some, apparently, find in his doctrine of common grace a

1. J. W. Stevenson, “Other Religions in the Perspectives of Johan Herman and Herman Bavinck,” in “Johan Herman Bavinck and Contemporary Contextualization Among Muslims: An Evaluation of the Insider Movement,” (MAR thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC, 2011), ch. 2.

sympathetic rationale for an ‘insider’ model of missions” (33). Regarding my thesis in particular, he notes, “I should emphasize that Stevenson himself is not an ‘insider’ advocate; rather, he seems to think that Herman Bavinck is more congenial to ‘insider’ thinking than his nephew, Johan” (34, n. 7). His concluding words further illustrate his concern: “But they [insider advocates] should remove Herman Bavinck’s name from their list of supporters” (43).

What is troubling about this central concern of his essay is simply that nowhere in my thesis do I suggest that Herman Bavinck’s theology can be used to support insider methodology.² In fact, my conclusion is that “*combining the biblical-theological views of Herman Bavinck and Johan Herman Bavinck on other religions with Johan Herman Bavinck’s missiological insights produces sound reasons for rejecting the insider approach to contextualization while cautiously accepting C-4 contextualization accompanied by biblically faithful and culturally appropriate Bible translations.*”³ Thus the burden of my thesis is contrary to how Mattson seems to have read it, and I reiterate that I do not believe that Herman Bavinck’s theology can be used to support insider methodology.

In trying to understand how Mattson arrived at his reading of my thesis, I must note that in Chapter 4 I indicate that J. H. Bavinck’s firm opposition to seeing any other religion as having its fulfillment in Christ is helpful in analyzing the insider movement.⁴ Perhaps Mattson saw this statement as giving credence to the idea that Herman Bavinck’s views—which are formulated slightly differ-

2. While the specifics of the insider movement discussion are not the focus of Mattson’s piece, he either makes a mistake or is nonchalantly offering quite a redefinition of the term “insider movement.” In note 4 he rightly notes that “insider movement” is shorthand for a variety of contemporary approaches in missiology. However, he goes on to conflate “insider movements” with the C1–C6 scale of Christ-centered communities developed by John Travis. Though related, they are not the same, as Chapter 4 of my thesis illustrates. What is more concerning is that he says that he uses the term “insider movement” to refer to C4–C6 contextualization. I have yet to see any missiologist or theologian suggest that C4 is to be included under the insider rubric. C5 is often closely connected to the insider paradigm, but C4—as exemplified in the writings of Phil Parshall and others—has key differences that would render including it under the label of “insider movement” untenable.

3. Stevenson, 5 (emphasis added).

4. Stevenson, 80.

ently on the question of the “longing of the nations”—can be used to support insider movements. That was never the intent of my thesis, nor do I believe that is a fair reading of it as a whole. But if I was not clear, then I must acknowledge that lack of clarity.

2. J. H. Bavinck disagrees with his uncle regarding the “longing of the nations.”

Mattson writes, “Drawing a contrast between J. H. and Herman, he suggests that Herman substantially softened the antithesis between Christianity and pagan religions and, in fact, believed that in at least some respects paganism is a ‘longing for Jesus Christ’” (34). Aside from the fact that nowhere in my thesis do I claim that Bavinck softened the antithesis between Christianity and pagan religions, Mattson fails to respond to the key citations related to the “longing of the nations for Christ.”

Instead, he immediately goes on to suggest that a quote from Bavinck on the status of Muhammad is the citation that I offer for this point. That is simply not the case. I deal with the “longing of the nations” under a different heading several pages later.⁵ Mattson cites a passage that I do not connect to the question of the longing of the nations and then ignores the evidence that I adduce specifically in connection with the issue at hand.

In order to illustrate the point, here is my paragraph concerning Herman Bavinck’s view of the longing of the nations:

Herman Bavinck makes the following statement regarding the longing of the nations for Christ: “One can with some reason speak of an ‘unconscious prophet tendency’ in paganism. In its most beautiful and noble expressions, it points to Christianity. Jesus Christ is not only the Messiah of Israel but also, as the Authorized Version puts it in Haggai 2:7, ‘the desire of all nations.’” Accordingly, he sees within the desire for salvation, a final judgment, and one who will come to restore the world a desire for Christ himself and the salvation and restoration that he provides. Coupled with his belief that “we must take advantage of the truth elements in pagan philosophy and appropriate it,” we see in Herman Bavinck a willingness to admit that while certainly truth is mixed with error regarding salvation, we have in Islam many elements pointing toward salvation in

5. Stevenson, 28–31.

Christ. Thus Islam could—in a limited sense—be seen as preparation for the message of salvation in Christ.⁶

In that paragraph, based on Bavinck’s discussion of Haggai 2:7, I posit that he sees in non-Christian religions a desire or longing for Christ among the nations. This point was worth noting for one key reason: J. H. Bavinck specifically disagrees with his uncle on this point. Oddly, Mattson never seems to acknowledge this in his criticism of my reading of Bavinck, going so far as to say that the disagreement between uncle and nephew is a “mirage” of my own making (41). Nonetheless, after noting that some biblical texts have been understood as saying that there is a “longing of the heathen for Christ,” J. H. Bavinck goes on to say this regarding Haggai 2:7:

H. Bavinck also disapproves of the older translation in his *Systematic Theology* but adds: “The thought which is contained in the expression ‘desire of all nations’ is however entirely scriptural. The heathen hope for the arm of the Lord and the lands wait for the instruction of his servants.”⁷

J. H. Bavinck goes on to question whether that interpretation is correct, noting that other passages (Isa. 11:10; 42:4; 51:5; 60:9; and Rom. 15:12) similarly mention the “waiting of the peoples.” He remarks:

Does all this signify that there is indeed among the heathen an unconscious longing for the great redeemer and king? When these passages are viewed in their context, it becomes clear that they belong to the salvation prophecies which refer to the last days when the Messiah shall have appeared and Israel shall be redeemed and glorified. Then, as a consequence of the glorifying of Israel, there shall be a movement among the peoples and they shall then ask after him who has delivered Israel with so great a salvation. In other words, these passages do not portray a constant attitude of heathenism through all the centuries, but they refer rather to a very particular saving event which shall appear to our wondering eyes in the time of the Lord’s good pleasure. Scripture’s judgment

6. Stevenson, 29. The citations refer to Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 3:240 (hereafter *RD*) in which Bavinck notes that “the desire of all nations” is not an accurate translation of the Hebrew, but he claims that the idea is fully Scriptural. The second citation is from *RD*, 1:318.

7. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), 63–64.

of heathenism gives little reason to speak of a longing for Christ among the nations.⁸

Further, in a paragraph that I cited in my thesis, he argues:

Scripture's judgment of heathenism gives little reason to speak of a longing for Christ among the nations. There is to be sure a thirst for salvation, a search for a savior in practically all non-Christian religions, but the savior is never the one who was crucified. Objectively speaking, no one can come to peace without Christ; all nations have need of him. But this does not mean that all nations of themselves long for and seek after Christ. . . . It is only where the light of God's grace has begun to shine that the heart becomes restless and the heathen begin to ask after the great son of David.⁹

In light of these citations it is clear that J. H. Bavinck disagreed with how his uncle understood the existence of a longing for Christ among the nations. It was J. H. Bavinck's own words that led me to that conclusion. Notwithstanding this difference between them, I still nowhere suggest that this means that Herman Bavinck can be used to support insider methodology.

Perhaps J. H. Bavinck misunderstood his uncle, and perhaps the disagreement is more semantic than substantial. However, by failing to even reference J. H. Bavinck's discussion of his uncle's words, Mattson undercuts his criticism of the disagreement I note in my thesis. In my view, given the substantial agreement on other religions that I posit between them,¹⁰ this one instance of disagreement does not indicate that uncle and nephew would take different views of the insider discussion.

8. *Introduction*, 64.

9. *Introduction*, 64; cf. Stevenson, 60.

10. In terms of listing various agreements that I note in my thesis, consider the following: Muslims are in flight from God (24); general revelation is inadequate for salvation (15); the presence of truth in non-Christian religions is due to general revelation and common grace, and even those elements of truth are distorted (17); they share similar views of Muhammad (27); and they are in "complete agreement on the inadequacy of Islam as a religious system for salvation" (29).

3. Bavinck's theology of common grace does provide a basis from which to address insider movements.

Mattson discusses my citation of a quote from Bavinck about the status of Muhammad. He criticizes the manner in which I quoted Bavinck, suggesting that I “deliberately omitted all references to the Bible and church tradition” (35). He goes on to explain how Bavinck’s view was not novel and that it fits within the mainstream of Christian thought at this point. To that I simply respond with agreement. Nowhere did I suggest that Bavinck’s view was novel, and in that light my lack of citation of every detail of his defense in no way invalidates the summary that was presented.

He also takes issue with three of my conclusions: “First, Muhammad was not an accomplice of the devil. Secondly, even amidst his error the Spirit of God was at work through Muhammad. Thirdly, Muhammad did provide some benefit to the life of the people around him.”¹¹ He writes at length on the problems that proceed from these conclusions, leading to the following statements:

Notice that what is in view here are “elements and forms” rather than material content. When this is compared with his later statement that “for all the *formal* similarity, there exists a large material difference between . . . the apostles of Christ and the envoys of Muhammed,” it is apparent that Bavinck is operating with a form/matter distinction. The “elements and forms” do form a point of unity and contact between pagan religion and Christianity; what makes them divergent is their material content. (39–40)

Mattson makes it appear as if my thesis states or implies that Bavinck saw material similarity or agreement between Christianity and other religions. However, he does not cite my *fourth* conclusion, which immediately follows the three that he quoted:

By looking later in the same volume, we can add a fourth dimension to H. Bavinck’s view of Muhammad: his message, though containing a great deal of formal similarity to Christianity, also is characterized by a great material difference, namely, the lack of the special grace of Christ.¹²

11. Stevenson, 27. Again, Mattson cites these conclusions as if I used them to explicate Bavinck’s view on the longing of the nations. That is simply not the context. I treat the longing of the nations and Muhammad under separate headings.

12. Stevenson, 27; cf. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:343.

Not the difference but the similarity between Mattson's treatment of Bavinck's views and my own becomes clear in the light of this fourth conclusion. Indeed, I specifically note that Bavinck sees formal but not material similarity in Muhammad's message and Christianity. Accordingly, I can appreciate the latter half of Mattson's article regarding Bavinck's view of common grace and the insider movement since I see no fundamental disagreement between it and my presentation of Bavinck.

In fact the article that Mattson references in passing—"How Does Christianity 'Subversively Fulfill' Islam?"—is likely a step in a helpful direction.¹³ Certainly any talk of "fulfillment" or "preparation" among the non-Christian religions can be misunderstood or misapplied, but "subversive fulfillment" may be a helpful way to integrate the theology of common grace found in Herman Bavinck with the missiological insights of his nephew.

Mattson brought up other specific issues with my thesis. Some of them are worthy of further explanation, some of them could have been clearer in my own thesis, and others may have been misunderstood. However, the three responses above hopefully clarify both my thesis and the general criticisms that Mattson offered.

13. Chris Flint, "How Does Christianity 'Subversively Fulfill' Islam?" *St. Francis Magazine* 8, no. 6 (2012): 776–822.