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The Missional Character of the (Herman and J. H.) Bavinck Tradition[1]

John Bolt (bltj@calvinseminary.edu), Calvin Seminary

Because the word "missional" has come to mean so many different things to different people, it needs to be clearly defined. The importance of this was impressed upon me when I stumbled across this curious claim by an evangelical seminary (Biblical Seminary in Philadelphia): "Why we teach 'missional theology' rather than 'systematic theology.'"[2] The explanation stated that "missional theology is not 'theology of (foreign) missions'; it's exploration of the character of God, who is a God on a mission." The contrasting approach, it was suggested, is to "present God as 'a philosophical concept' to be analyzed." The conclusion: "So, at Biblical, we ask, 'so why should we teach theology as though it is a branch of philosophy?'"

Now I am committed to the proposition that good theology equips God's people for mission and that the primary mission of the church and of Christian believers is to bring the gospel, the good news that Jesus saves and reigns, to the nations. At the same time, I am convinced that the formulation I just summarized is not helpful and even potentially confusing.[3]

Let us leave aside the sloppy caricature of "God as a philosophical concept to be analyzed." Even Hegelians, who come as close to

1. Adapted from a lecture delivered on 18 October 2012 at the "Doctrine for Proclamation and Mission" Bavinck Conference held at Calvin Theological Seminary. I have retained some of the characteristics of the oral presentation.

2. From the website of Biblical Seminary in Philadelphia, http://goo.gl/kpsmCf (accessed 5 September 5, 2012). The rationale was written by Dr. Todd Mangum and dated 6 December 2011. The quotations that follow are taken directly from this short statement.

3. For much of what follows I am deeply indebted to an unpublished paper by my former CTS student Gayle Doornbos, "*Missio Dei*: 'A New Theology for a New Day?' Explorations in Contemporary Missiology."

this as anyone, don't really think of God as a pure concept only to be analyzed. The Hegelian self-determining God who is *becoming* is more like an article of faith tied to religious experience of a mystical sort (*Geist der Ganze?*) than the final product of logical analysis. (Hence the reliance on images and metaphors among Hegelians.) And while it is true that theology must be about God, is it also true that the most or best we can say about the character of God is that "God is on a mission"? And while it is true that theology should not be taught "as though it is a branch of philosophy," what happens when theology is torn loose from its metaphysical foundations?

That brings me to my definition of "missional" which I will set up with a few preliminary claims:

1. As an adjective, "missional" should not be the primary or exclusive defining notion for a good theology; i.e., it cannot be a *substitute* for "systematic" theology.

2. The first and most important criterion for a sound theology must remain *fidelity* to the *truth* about God. The task of theology as a science is to make truthful statements about God: statements that correspond to who God truly is.

3. The term "mission" should not be predicated of God and of God's people in a univocal way (e.g., "we must join God's mission for the world"). With respect to God, "mission" refers to the intra-trinitarian notion of sending, the sending of the Son by the Father, and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. With respect to the church, "mission" refers to the dominical command to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:18–20).

Therefore, I want to consider the adjective "missional" not to define the *content* of theology so much as to indicate the *result* or *consequence* of a particular theology; namely, its *impact* or *effect*. In other words, starting with the premise that the content of theology is not in the first place to be decided by whether it is *missional* but by whether it is *true*, then we can ask whether a particular formulation of that theological truth content contributes to the effective mission of the church's task in bringing the gospel to the world. (Incidentally, it is my firm conviction that we continue to do systematic theology because we need to be contemporary, to communi-

cate effectively in *our* age, and to equip the church for its mission *today*.) I therefore define "missional theology" thus:

A missional theology understands the task of systematic theology to consist of providing comprehensive and contemporary summaries of the Christian truth about God with a view toward assisting the church in effectively fulfilling the Great Commission in our day.

The one additional preliminary note I need to make here is that a theologian or a theology may qualify as being "missional" explicitly or implicitly. My claim—and there is no surprise here—is that Herman Bavinck's theology is *implicitly missional* while J. H. Bavinck's is more *explicitly* missional. It is what they strongly have in common that leads me to speak of the missional character of the Bavinck tradition. I will develop my case by answering a series of rhetorical questions.

1. The opening illustration you used seems to locate mission in the doctrine of God rather than in ecclesiology. Is that right? Was this a conscious change, and, if so, when and why did it come about?

Yes, this is exactly what happened. In a nutshell, the change came about sometime after 1920 thanks to a perfect-storm confluence of anti-colonialism, missiological upheaval, and the breakout of neo-Orthodox theology (i.e., Karl Barth). From the 1500s through the late twentieth century, the major European powers—Spain, Portugal, Britain, the Netherlands, France, and Germany—acquired, exploited, maintained, and eventually released territories in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. With India's independence from Britan in 1947, Indonesia's independence from the Netherlands in 1949, the Congolese declaration of independence from Belgium in 1960, and Algeria's independence from France in 1962, the European colonial period effectively came to an end. But the seeds of anti-colonial and anti-imperial attitudes go back into the late nine-

teenth century thanks to the work of anti-imperialists like Joseph Schumpeter,[4] Thorsten Veblen,[5] and J.A. Hobson.[6]

The World Mission Conferences, beginning with Edinburgh in 1910, gradually moved from using language like "missionary work" and even speaking without embarrassment about "colonialism" and extending "God's Kingdom" along with "(Western) civiliation," to the quite different notion of "keeping abreast of God's mission."[7] This shift moved the topic of missiology from ecclesiology to the doctrine of God. The addition of anti-imperial notes to the missional chorus is apparent as early as the Jerusalem Conference of 1928 which repudiated "any symptoms of a religious imperialism" and "fixed ecclesiastical forms which derive their meaning from the experience of the Western Church."[8] Much of this came to a fairly definitive conclusion at the Missionary Conference of Willingen (Ger-

4. Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) was an Austrian-Hungarian-American economist and political scientist whose essay on imperialism ("The Sociology of Imperialism," in Schumpeter, *Imperialism and Social Classes* [New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1951]), according to John H. Kautsky, "is generally and rightly considered one of the most spophisticated theoretical contributions to the subject to come from the pen of a non-Marxist." (Kautsky, "J. A. Schumpeter and Karl Kautsky: Parallel Theories of Imperialism," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* V/2 [May 1961]: 102.) General information obtained from "Joseph Alois Schumpeter," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2008); Encyclopedia.com (28 September 2012), http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3045302351.html.

5. Thorsten Veblen (1857–1929) was an American economist and sociologist who taught at the University of Chicago, Standford, and the University of Missouri. He proposed a Darwinian social-evolutionary view of economic history. His critique of imperialism was that it was wasteful and thus doomed. Information obtained from "Thorstein Veblen," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968); Encyclopedia.com (28 September 2012), http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3045001301.html.

6. John Atkinson Hobson (1858–1940) was an American economist whose work *Imperialism: A Study* (1902) helped sow "the seeds of two of the most powerful ideologies of the 20th cent.: Keynesian economics, and the Leninist interpretation of imperialism." John Cannon, "John Atkinson Hobson," *The Oxford Companion to British History* (2002); Encyclopedia.com (28 Sept. 2012), http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O110-HobsonJohnAtkinson.html

7. Wolfgang Günther, "The History and Significance of World Mission Conferences in the 20th Century," *International Review of Missions* XCII, no. 367: 525.

8. Günther, "History and Significance," 525; citing the *Report of the*

many) in 1952 where the final statement explicitly ties the church's mission to the very nature of the triune God:

> The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God himself. Out of the depths of his love for us, the Father has sent forth His own beloved Son to reconcile all things to himself . . . On the foundation of this accoplished work God has sent forth His Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. . . . We who have been chosen in Christ, reconciled to God through Him, made members of His Body, sharers in His Spirit, and heirs through hope of His Kingdom, are by these very facts committed to full participation in His redeeming mission to the world. . . . "As the Father has sent Me, even so send I you."[9]

Missio ecclesiae now derives directly and solely from the *missio Dei.*

That now brings us to Karl Barth (and Emil Brunner).[10] After World War I, the growth of secularism in Europe led Emil Brunner to accent the need for a new apologetic missionary methodology that would build a bridge from the church to a world that had moved beyond Christendom.[11] According to Brunner, pursuing the "relationship between the 'natural human' and the word of God, the church had to locate the 'point of contact' between the two."[12] For Brunner, the church, as the bearer of the gospel message, needs to look for "points of contact" to make it understandable to the world. There are five assumptions underlying Brunner's plea: (1) God created the world; (2) the world is fallen and needs redemption; (3) God still addresses the fallen world (Belgic Confession, art. 2); (4) God calls a new people to himself (Abraham); (cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q & A 54); (5) God sends his "called out" people into the world as *missionaries*. For our purposes it is very important to note

Jerusalem Conference of the IMC, vol. 1, 480–86.

9. Cited by Günther, "History and Significance," 525–26.

10. The compressed narrative that follows borrows heavily from John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

11. Emil Brunner, "Die Bedeutung der missionarischen Erfahrung für die Theologie," in *Die deutsche evangelische Heidenmission Jahrbuch* 1933 der vereinigten deutschen Missionskonferenzen (Hamburg: Selbstverlang der Missionskonferenzen, 1933).

12. Emil Brunner, "Die Frage nach dem 'Anknüpfungspunkt' als Problem der Theologie," *Zwischen den Zeiten* 10 (1932): 506.

that Brunner's call was at odds with the growing anti-imperial, anti-colonial mood that also affected the World Mission Conferences. It perpetuated the notion that the Western/Christian world had a message for the non-Western/Christian world that the latter needed to accept for salvation. This smacked of superiority and cultural as well as religious imperialism.

But that was not the reason for Karl Barth's decisive and derisive "NEIN!"[13] Though the Barth-Brunner debate was in the final analysis a missiological debate, Barth's objections were concentrated on the doctrine of God. To posit the possibility of a knowledge of God that is independent of his relationship to us in Christ, independent of his particular act of reconciliation, says Barth, locates "the constitution of that relationship external to God himself" and has "the pernicious consequence of cleaving God from his act." Over against this, Barth insists that God is who he is in his act. "The essence of God which is seen in His revealed name is His being and therefore His act as Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[14] David J. Bosch captures the significance of Karl Barth for a new understanding of mission:

> Throughout, the Barthian influence was crucial. Indeed Barth may be called the first clear exponent of a new theological paradigm which broke radically with an Enlightenment approach to theology. . . . It was here [IMC Willingen, 1952] that the idea (not the exact term) *missio Dei* first surfaced clearly.[15]

It is this confluence of anti-colonialism, missiological second-thoughts, and Barth's revisionist understanding of the doctrine of God that brought us the result of Willingen.

2. How important was this shift in shaping missiology in the second half of the twentieth century?

Very. Contemporary missiological literature is filled with the language of *missio dei* as the ground of all mission. Influential mis-

13. Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London, G. Bles, The Centenary Press, 1946).

14. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) II/1:241.

15. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

siologist David Bosch's language has frequently been quoted by others: "In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God."[16] Bosch then quotes with approval Jürgen Moltmann's restatement of the church in mission: "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."[17] Bosch concludes: "To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love."[18]

Bringing it closer to home to my own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, the following statements from the CRCNA website (crcna.org) reflect a similar, though not necessarily identical, understanding.

Christian Reformed Home Missions: "Christian Reformed Home Missions follows God's lead in the movement of the gospel in North America."

Christian Reformed World Missions:

> We value faith in God and passion for God's mission in the world.
>
> We mirror the Father's desire to reach the lost.
>
> We obey Jesus' command to be His witnesses, proclaiming the gospel to all peoples.
>
> We depend on the Holy Spirit's power to transform individual and community life through interaction with the triune God.

World Renew (formerly CRWRC):

> World Renew, compelled by God's passion for justice & mercy, joins communities around the world to renew hope, reconcile lives, and restore creation.

I call attention to these statements not to start an ecclesiastical rumble but to highlight the pervasiveness of the link between "God's mission" and the church's mission in current missiological literature and mission practice at the denominational level.

16. *Transforming Mission*, 390.

17. Citing Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 1977), 64.

18. *Transforming Mission*, 390.

As I now move to a theological critique of this popular emphasis, I want to make it very clear that I enthusiastically support the mission impulse behind the language and in no way want to deny that mission is a work of God the Holy Spirit who equips Christ's disciples to go out and "make disciples."

3. Is there a problem with this notion that God is a missionary God and we are to join in God's mission?

Yes there is. Let me spell out three important issues.

1. *The language is confusing*. The word "missionary" can refer to *someone on a mission* or to *someone who is sent*. God the missionary God as the ground and model of our missionary character cannot mean that God is being sent; so we who are missionaries following God's lead must be people on a mission. To keep the analogy intact we must understand our missionary identity as those who are on a mission rather than those who are sent. Two important consequences, two major losses, follow from this move. First, without the sense of divine command that sends us, we lose the clear motivation given in Scripture itself. Second, the well-defined mission of Matthew 28:18–20 is lost and replaced with an expansive definition of mission as "all kingdom work." We only *participate* in "God's kingdom mission," and it is left up to us to discern what it is that God is doing in the world.

2. *Epistemic humility*. It is very difficult for us to know exactly what God is doing in the world. That knowledge is mostly hidden to us. We can see the providential and redemptive tapestry of God's work only in part, in broad general terms, and often only in retrospect. Since the ambiguity of events in our own life is an integral dimension of both spiritual discipline and pastoral care, there is a danger of short-circuiting spiritual growth when we pronounce too quickly on what exactly God is doing. Besides, let us not forget that God judges as well as blesses; do we really want to pronounce with certainty that God is doing such and so, here and there? Let me illustrate this with an example of two influential twentieth-century theologians, Hendrikus Berkhof and Jürgen Moltmann.

In *Christian Faith* Berkhof posits a direct analogy between the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in human persons (sanctification)

and in the structures of society.[19] "Structures, too, can be sanctified by God, that is, be made serviceable. They can promote or obstruct freedom and love." Concretely, this has happened when we arrive at [structures] that "as much as possible allow the transmission or at least room for the purposes of God's holy love" (511). These would include equality before the law, separation of executive and judicial powers, compulsory education, universal franchise, freedom of religion and press, and care for the handicapped (515–16). So, according to Berkhof, the Christianizing of society, the socially democratizing and individualizing, and the desacralizing, scientific-technological emancipation from nature is what God has done and is doing in history. As he writes in his *Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, "The liberating and transforming power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is at work everywhere where men are freed from the tyranny of nature, state, color, caste, sex, poverty, disease and ignorance."[20]

Moltmann has a quite different understanding. He condemns the very thing that Berkhof celebrates. He sees the secularization, emancipation, and scientific-technical mastery of Western civilization as the problem since it has resulted in a life and death struggle for the creation itself. "[Today] the de-divinization of the world has progressed so far that the prevailing view of nature is totally godless, and the relationship of human beings to nature is a disastrous one."[21] Rather than seeing humanity as the crown of creation and the Spirit's work in sanctification as one of liberating humanity from its bondage to nature and its ills, Moltmann reverses the order. "[T]he human being is not the meaning and purpose of evolution. The cosmogenesis is not bound to the destiny of human beings. The very reverse is true: the destiny of human beings is bound to the cosmogenesis" (196). To be fair, Moltmann then adds: "Theologically speaking, the meaning and purpose of human beings is to be found in God himself, like the meaning and purpose of all things." However, the God in whom all meaning and purpose is to

19. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 505; hereafter cited in text.

20. (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 102.

21. *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures, 1984–85 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 98; hereafter cited in text.

be found is a panentheistic God who not only "dwells in the world," but "conversely, the world which he has created [also] exists in him" (98). Since "the kingdom of glory is the indwelling of the triune God in his whole creation" (183), salvation is to be found in re-divinization of nature as a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. A "mechanistic domination of the world" ethic has to be replaced with the idea of "an ecological world community" [egalitarian, co-operative, reciprocal] in which "the earlier [i.e., pagan] matrifocal symbols of the world are pregnant with promise for the future, because they once again 'give us something to think about'" (320).

In response to both Berkhof and Moltmann, and others who search to see what God is doing in the world, perhaps the first affirmation of the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) is appropriate:

> Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.

To keep our focus here, remember that we are answering the third question I posed to myself: what is the problem with this notion that God is a missionary God and we are to join in God's mission? Having claimed that the language is confusing and lacks epistemic humility, I come to my third reason for objecting.

3. *The Boundaries between the Church and the World become blurred.* The formulation "God is a missionary" all too easily loses the necessary redemptive focus on the work of Christ and thus blurs the distinction between the church and the world. This is the easiest point to document because the traditional understanding of a redeemed people called out from the world and then sent into the world by their Lord to make disciples of the nations required a clear line between church and world, and it is this very line that the emphasis on the *missio dei* sought to overcome. Now a crucial distinction is made between "mission" and "missions," and "the primary purpose of the *missiones ecclesiae* can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to be service to the *missio Dei,* representing God in and over against the

world, pointing to God. . . ."[22] In this scenario, the world does not consist of lost people who need to be called out of it and constituted as a new people of God, the first fruits of all creation. Instead, God is seen as pouring out his love on the world in general and the church's task is to discern God's missionary work and join in. Instead of obeying her Lord's command to go out into the world and make disciples, the church now snoops around the world to find out what God is doing. Think of it: in this scenario, the church no longer recognizes that she herself is the place where God's Word and Spirit are at work gathering and equipping a people who have been given a mission to call the world to come home to God; instead it is the church that must come home to the world.

4. But doesn't Herman Bavinck also derive an action plan for Christian discipleship from the very trinitarian being of God? What's the difference?

Yes he does indeed. Bavinck defines the essence of Christianity in trinitarian terms: "The essence of the Christian religion consists in the reality that the creation of the Father, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God, and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God."[23] According to Bavinck, the being of creation reflects the triune Being of God: "Just as God is one in essence and distinct in persons, so also the work of creation is one and undivided, while in its unity it is still rich in diversity."[24] Furthermore, since all creatures bear the unmistakable stamp of the Trinity, "we can be convinced that our investigation of reality fails to penetrate to its core and comes to its proper conclusion unless we come to the confession of the triune God."[25] The emphasis is on God's works: ". . . [A]ll the works of God *ad extra* are only adequately known when their trinitarian existence is recognized" (*RD*,

22. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.

23. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–08), 1:112 (#35); 2:288 (#220); hereafter *RD*. Cf. Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, trans. John Dolfin (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1922), 71; Bavinck, *Het Christendom* (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912), 23, 62; Bavinck, "Het Christelijk Geloof," in *Kennis en Leven* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 95–97.

24. *RD*, 2:422 (#255).

25. *Kennis en Leven*, 105 (translation mine).

2:333). Stated differently, "the thinking mind situates the doctrine of the Trinity squarely amid the full-orbed life of nature and humanity. The Christian mind remains unsatisfied until all of existence is referred back to the triune God, and until the confession of God's Trinity functions at the center of our thought and life" (*RD*, 2:330). The Trinity, according to Bavinck, is a complete and perfect system, the "origin, type, model, and image of all other systems." He thus lauds the fact that Abraham Kuyper in his explication of the Anti-Revolutionary Party program sought to root all human life, theologically, morally, juridically, socially and politically, in the very trinitarian being of God.[26]

5. What then is the real difference between the Bavinck tradition and the twentieth-century emphasis on *missio Dei*? Aren't both rooted in the Trinity?

Yes they are. However, there is a real difference between grounding the church's mission in the *missio Dei* as an *attribute* of God and Bavinck's appeal to the Trinity as the "origin, type, model and image of all systems." The difference can be summed up with two words: *revelation* and *analogy*. When Bavinck applies trinitarian language to worldly realities he is speaking analogically. He is most definitely not bringing creational/worldly realities into the very being of God himself. The Trinity as the system which is the model for all systems is *analogically* possible because all reality is rooted in *revelation*. "The world itself," he writes,

> rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation, the secret of all that exists in all its forms. . . . The foundations of creation and redemption are the same. The Logos who became flesh is the same by whom all things were made.[27]

26. *Kennis en Leven*, 59. The essay from which this is quoted is "Het voor en tegen van een dogmatisch systeem," translated into English by Nelson Kloosterman, "The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System," in this issue of *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014): 92. Kuyper's elaboration of the program of the Dutch Calvinistic Political Party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party, is found in *Ons Program*, 4th rev. ed. (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, n.d. [1901?]), which was first published in 1879.

27. *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909, Princeton Theological Seminary* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 27; hereafter cited in text.

It is this analogical, trinitarian perspective rooted in revelation that is the foundation of the Bavinck tradition's missional character. I will take a closer look at this tradition by first considering Herman Bavinck, and then his nephew, the missiologist, J. H. Bavinck.

6. So then, if not the doctrine of God and the Trinity, what is an appropriate ground for our missional thinking? Ecclesiology?

In part, yes. But I want to start with prolegomena (in particular, the doctrine of revelation) and anthropology. In his 1908 Stone Lectures, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (and the title is significant: it is a *philosophy of* revelation), Bavinck attempts to "trace the idea of revelation, both in its form and in its content, and correlate it with the rest of our knowledge and life" (24). The missiological significance of this should be obvious: missionaries come with the gospel message about God's saving work in Christ. If this message is to have any chance of being understood, the content must have some connection to the knowledge of God that people already possess as God's image bearers living in his world. In other words, we see here Emil Brunner's "point of contact." Building on the Reformed tradition's convictions about God's general revelation to all people, Bavinck first of all insists that our theology of revelation must not restrict itself to Scripture.

> The old theology construed revelation after a quite external and mechanical fashion, and too readily identified it with Scripture. Our eyes are nowadays being more and more opened to the fact that revelation in many ways is historically and psychologically "mediated." (22)

Bavinck is acknowledging here that theology must take into account the way in which God's revelation to Israel was not something *de novo*; Israel's religious practices had parallels with those of her contemporaries. This meant taking the new disciplines (in his day) of the history and psychology of religions seriously, in spite of the way in which many scholars misused them: "[In spite of significant problems; e.g., explaining Israel solely in terms of its neighbors] . . . these historical and psychological investigations are in themselves an excellent thing" (23).

Bavinck's contention that Israel's religious practices—including covenant, circumcision, sacrifices, and the priesthood—have much in common with those of her neighbors is rooted in anthropology.

The religious practices of Israel's neighbors (and of all people) arise from the fact that they are God's image bearers living in God's creation. God is present to them; they cannot avoid or evade responding to God. Biblical revelation does not drop out of the sky; God comes to Abraham, to Moses, to post-exilic Jews in the days of Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, to the Greeks and to barbarians, to Frisians and to native peoples everywhere, and calls them to himself in language they can understand. To demonstrate the truth of this—his *philosophy* of revelation—Bavinck argues from the wondrous mystery of human self-consciousness. As we become self-conscious, three things are revealed to us: our self, the world, and God; and all three are gifts:

> In consciousness our own being, and the being of the world, are disclosed to us *antecedently* to our thought or volition; that is, they are *revealed* to us in the strictest sense of the word. (75)
>
> In self-consciousness God *makes known* to us man, the world, and himself. (79)
>
> [Self-consciousness is a *gift*] it is received on our part *spontaneously*, in unshaken confidence, with *immediate assurance*. (62)

7. This is great philosophy, but how does it affect the content of theology in a missiological way?

In each locus of theology Bavinck begins by calling attention to the *universal* reality of human religious longing and practice as an entry point for his discussion of a biblical approach. In this way he provides a natural bridge ("point of contact") for Christians to communicate their faith to unbelievers and seekers. As an example, consider the opening sentences of his chapter on Christ's Exaltation:

> The death of Christ, the end of his humiliation, was simultaneously the road to his exaltation. In all religions and philosophical systems, one encounters the idea, expressed more or less consciously, that death is the road to life. People saw this phenomenon in nature, where day follows nigh and an awakening in the spring occurs after a winter of hibernation or dormancy. (*RD*, 3:421)

It is this *methodology*, placing the content of Christian biblical, doctrinal, theological truth in the context of universal human religious desiring and longing that gives Bavinck's theology its missiological cast.

8. But you spoke of the "Bavinck tradition." How does J. H. Bavinck fit into this pattern?[28]

Let me begin with a brief biography. Johan Herman Bavinck (1895–1964) was the nephew of Herman Bavinck. He served as missionary to Indonesia 1919–1926 and again from 1929–1939. He then returned to The Netherlands to become the Professor of Missiology for the *Gereformeerde Kerken Nederland* at the Theological University in Kampen and at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His two works best known in the Anglophone missiological world are *Introduction to the Science of Missions* (1954) and the posthumously published *The Church between Temple and Mosque* (1966). In our context, also deserving of mention is his *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (1947).

There is renewed interest today in J. H. Bavinck as a missiologist, both in Europe (The Netherlands) and in North America. Some of his works in Dutch have been republished in new editions, and Eerdmans has recently published the *J. H. Bavinck Reader*.[29] Of the four major divisions in the *Reader*, I want to highlight the third section (chs. 3–6) which is a translation of Bavinck's *Religieus besef en christelijk geloof* (1949; *Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith*).

Religious Consciousness was published in the aftermath of World War II. The war put final nails in the coffin of Christian cultural confidence, and Bavinck wrote eloquently and presciently about the rise of alternate spiritualities as people sought to find some meaning in the midst of chaos. The book was written as a call to mission activity—a call issued in hope. To get at Bavinck's message, first of all a reminder from his uncle about consciousness "[Self-consciousness is a gift] it is received on our part spontaneously, in unshaken confidence, with immediate assurance" (*Philosophy,* 62).

28. For more on this point, see Gayle Doornbos's essay in this same issue: "We Do Not Proceed into a Vacuum: J. H. Bavinck's Missional Reading of Romans 1," *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014): 61–75.

29. Trans. James A. De Jong, eds. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

In the opening chapter of *Religious Consciousness* (ch. 3 in the *Reader*), Bavinck addresses the problem of religious consciousness in an age that no longer lives by the consciousness of the Christian religion:

> . . . [T]he question of religion has been taken up by our generation once again and with irresistible force. . . . When they realize that they have been caught up in the great and fatal events of history, they experience this as their struggle with the inevitable, with the fate that mercilessly tosses them on paths that they had no voice in choosing. They experience their humanity as something tragic, mysterious, confining, compelling, liberating, and conflicting. They recognize the problem of solitude versus community as a religious problem, as a tension, as insoluble conflict. In short, they feel that their entire lives in all their relationships and circumstances exist in a thoroughly perplexing reality. . . . Contemporary people certainly understand that they are pressed forward by a totally factual world, but they no longer experience this as a process in which they are willingly involved because it no longer accords with the sentiments of their hearts; much more, they submit to it as a kind of fate, such as they clearly witnessed in the terrible circumstances of those who have died. (*Reader*, 146–47)

In Bavinck's judgment, this means that, although the forms of Christendom have passed, religious consciousness has not disappeared at all.

> We now face the necessity of giving a further account of what we understand by "religious consciousness." We have already seen that this religious consciousness is a rather persistent force that can continue operating even after the connection with a given religion has ceased. In our western world there are countless people who no longer call themselves Christian but who are still definitely sustained by that undefined something that we have designated as religious consciousness. (*Reader*, 148)

Bavinck then sets forth what he calls five "magnetic points" of religious consciousness. These universal and permanent markers of human religious experience are the following:

1. The experience of totality (we are part of a cosmos).

2. A sense of a religious norm (we are responsible).

3. A Connection with Higher Power (we know God exists).

4. The craving for deliverance/salvation (we are in trouble).

5. The course of life as a tension between action and fate (we are free and bound).

I do not have the time to explore each one in detail. A brief comment on each will have to suffice.

The first magnetic point is the experience of totality (we are part of a cosmos). Modern secularism challenges this claim. Bavinck quotes Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, "Once one said God when one looked upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman" (*Reader*, 146). However, two world wars and a sense of fatalism about science and technology have led many—"religious" as well as "non-religious" people—to desire and search for "more." Bavinck gives a number of descriptive examples (William James) to show that the sense of totality is still very present in the modern world. He quotes an ancient Japanese philosopher who in response to the question, "What is life?" replied: "It is like a boat. The emerging dawn discloses it as it makes its way on the sea, quickly rowing away. Then, on the heaving waves no trace of can be found that it ever passed that way" (*Reader*, 155).

The second magnetic point is a notion of norm, the awareness that we are responsible. Bavinck judges this to be universal and provides Western (Plato, Immanuel Kant) as well as non-Western examples to prove his point (Indian *Rita* and *dharma*; Chinese notions of *Dao* and *Li*; and Islam's submission to the will of Allah).

The third magnetic point is connection to a higer power, the awareness that God, however understood, exists. He provides examples from myths and living religious traditions to show that these forces (Force) are to be venerated and placated. Bavinck concludes:

> Thus, we find a universal development in human history of the awareness that this world and all that happens in it is intimately connected to the mysterious, supernatural world of the gods. Something of that mystery, of that divine force, is found in everything that exists. People know in every moment of their existence that they are connected to higher powers that they can never fully understand, before which they tremble with fear, and that nevertheless draw them to themselves with magnetic power. (*Reader*, 183)

The fourth magnetic point concerns the craving for deliverance: we know we are in trouble. Human beings differ about the problem from which they need deliverance but not that they need it. Bavinck refers to two distinct Indonesian mythical traditions about death. The first portrays death as coming from the hostile Night power who gave humans "short-term breath" instead of "enduring breath"

or eternal life. Within the same tribe, however, there is a story of a "long liana or tropical vine that provides access to heaven. . . . It made possible fellowship between gods and human beings." In prehistoric times uninterrupted traffic took place between heaven and earth, but "alas, due to some fatal accident that connection was broken and the liana was severed. Earth was left to its own destiny," leaving only a few priests to have contact with heaven (*Reader*, 183–84). To these mythical views we can add the classic cycle of "birth-death-rebirth" found in countless religious traditions, past and present. Bavinck also discusses the variety of visions of salvation provided by religious traditions.

The fifth and final magnetic point is the sense that life courses between action and fate: we sense that we humans are both free and bound. Examples abound, and Bavinck cites ancient and modern authors to make the point from the Greek notion of fate to the modern claims of German Romantic poet of freedom, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

Concluding Question: What is the payoff of showing the missional character of the Bavinck tradition in its doctrine of revelation and its understanding of humanity's ineradicable religious consciousness?

In addition to paying attention to the history of redemption as revealed in the narrative of Scripture from creation to consummation as a missional resource (e.g., as seen in the work of Michael Goheen), this provides us with a perspective on human religious experience that yields a rich treasure of resources for evangelistic apologetics. The Bavinck tradition gives us a great set of tools; it provides a framework within which to do theology in general and missiology more particularly.