

Pearls and Leaven

Bavinck as Pastor (1880–82)*

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Upon completing his doctoral studies in 1880 and before he accepted the call from the Secession Christian Reformed Church to teach at its Theological School in Kampen in 1882, Bavinck served for two years as the pastor of a Christian Reformed congregation in Franeker, Friesland. Though brief, Bavinck’s pastoral work at Franeker was memorable. The church’s immediate history under its two previous ministers was troubled and characterized by division; under Bavinck’s care, the congregation experienced healing and flourished. After reviewing the minutes of the church’s consistory as well as those of the supervising classis, Bavinck biographer R. H. Bremmer notes that they bear consistent witness that “under Bavinck’s ministry the congregation of Franeker noticeably experienced God’s blessing.”

As one example of Bavinck’s pastoral heart, Bremmer passes on the story of someone who experienced it firsthand when he was a young man. After Bavinck’s death in 1921, the man recalled his compassion for those who had physical and developmental disabilities. Bavinck visited the home of an “elderly woman whose two daughters were practically crippled, spoke with difficulty, and lived in circumstances of poverty; the mother was also not very neat. The two sisters expressed a desire to become members of the congregation and after a conversation with the consistory were gladly welcomed to the Table of the Covenant.” Even when hindered from coming to church for Sunday services because of indisposition,

* This vignette is taken from the first chapter of my forthcoming *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Crossway, 2015). The source of the quotations is R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* [Herman Bavinck and his contemporaries] (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 42, 38.

“they were brought to the church by ambulance and sat near the pulpit where they listened attentively and gladly.”

Recalling this time in his youth forty years earlier, the man reported that this “small tableau” made a significant impression on the young people of the church. He adds that “it was precisely here, with and by means of these simple people whom the world despised as ‘of no account,’” that Bavinck called on his congregation “to re-fashion themselves in the salvation that is found in Jesus.”

Viewed from the vantage point of our thankfully more compassionate treatment of persons with disabilities today, one cannot help thinking that this must have been rare in Bavinck’s day. By the standards of any age it provides a wonderful window into Bavinck’s Christian and pastoral heart.