

# **Two Letters from J. H. Gunning, Jr. to Herman Bavinck Regarding Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volumes 1 and 2**

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## **Introduction to the Two Letters from J. H. Gunning, Jr.**

Johannes Hermanus Gunning, Jr. (1829–1905) was one of the most influential Protestant theologians in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. He was a representative of the so-called “ethical theology” (*ethische theologie*) developed by Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874).<sup>1</sup> For him theology could not be based on rationalistic grounds, whether modern or orthodox, but had to take its starting point in an experience of rebirth that was effected by Christ. Gunning met La Saussaye at the end of 1855 and became his most important pupil. During his time as a pastor in The Hague (1861–

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\* Leo Mietus introduced and annotated J. H. Gunning's two letters to Herman Bavinck. Allan J. Janssen provided the English translation of the Dutch text of the letters.

<sup>1</sup> The word “ethical” as a translation of “ethische” is linguistically correct but connotatively confusing, because it leads the English reader into the field of morality. As the description that follows indicates, “ethische” has nothing to do with morals but with experiential, existential faith. The reader should think “existential” when the term “ethical theology” is used in this introduction.

1882), Gunning developed his own ethical theology in debate with such modern and orthodox contemporaries as Allard Pierson and G. Groen van Prinsterer, who was the leader of the Dutch Antirevolutionary Party. Both were his personal friends. Later he was also a friend of A. Kuyper, but became unable to accept Kuyper's domineering personality, and their friendship dissolved in 1878.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently Gunning tried to stay in contact with other representatives of the Reformed (Gereformeerde)<sup>3</sup> school of thought, such as A. F. de Savornin Lohman, Ph. J. Hoedemaker, and Herman Bavinck. In the early 1880s Bavinck was the rising star at the theological school in Kampen to which he had been appointed in 1882 at the age of twenty-seven.

In 1884, an exchange of letters between Gunning and Bavinck appeared in the magazine, *De Vrije Kerk* [*The Free Church*].<sup>4</sup> These letters constituted the beginning of a correspondence that Gunning and Bavinck would conduct until 1903, dealing with theological topics with which they were engaged. The letters published in 1884 were primarily about theological method. Bavinck believed that ethical

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<sup>2</sup> See L. Mietus, *Gunning en Kuyper in 1878. A. Kuypers polemiek tegen Het Leven van Jezus van J. H. Gunning Jr. Een theologie-historische bijdrage*, 2nd ed. (Velp: Brochurereeks Bond VEG, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Trans. note: The Dutch term "Gereformeerde" presents both the translator and the English reader with particular difficulties. The word means simply "Reformed," but in the Dutch ecclesiastical context, the word sometimes refers to that branch of Reformed churches that broke away from the larger, national Dutch church. Bavinck and Kuyper were theological leaders in this church. However, at other times, the word refers to a theological perspective, one usually connected with historic Reformed theology. In that case, the word can refer to members of the larger *Hervormde* (also "Reformed") church. The reader is left to sort out the particular nuance from the context.

<sup>4</sup> See J. H. Gunning, Jr., *Verzameld Werk* (GVW, abbreviation of the *Collected Work of Gunning*) 2:153–69. The letters from Bavinck to Gunning can be found at <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl>. *De Vrije Kerk* was a journal of the Secession Christian Reformed Church (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk), formed by a break from the national Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlands Hervormde Kerk) in 1834. The Theological School in Kampen provided training for ministers of this church.

theology was strongly influenced by F. Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whereby not Scripture but the believer’s experience had become primary. Gunning defended himself against this criticism and in the same year published the little book, *Jezus Christus, de Middelaar Gods en der menschen* [*Jesus Christ, Mediator Between God and Humanity*], as an answer to Bavinck’s volume, *De theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye* [*The Theology of Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye*], in which he had criticized ethical theology.<sup>5</sup>

In the years preceding the Doleantie (1886),<sup>6</sup> it was primarily A. Kuyper, who fiercely battled ethical theology in his weekly newspaper, *De Heraut* [*The Herald*]. Apparently that opposition did not hinder Gunning from writing letters to Bavinck, whom he viewed as one of the most important and valued representatives of the Reformed school of thought. It is striking that Gunning wanted to engage primarily in a substantive debate about theological matters that had, through the conflicts with Kuyper, increasingly determined the theological and ecclesiastical agenda. Included were topics such as the infallibility of Scripture, which Kuyper had made the opening foray in his battle with ethical theologians; the partisan conflict that Kuyper had occasioned within the national Reformed [Hervormde] Church, and Calvin’s doctrine of election that Kuyper had extensively examined in *De Heraut*. Already in 1880, Gunning had let Kuyper know in an open letter that Calvin’s doctrine of predestination could

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<sup>5</sup> J. H. Gunning Jr., *Jezus Christus, de Middelaar Gods en der menschen: naar aanleiding van Dr. H. Bavinck “De theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye”* (Amsterdam: Höveker, 1884); Herman Bavinck, *De theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye* (Leiden: Donner, 1884). See *GVW*2:171–258.

<sup>6</sup> The Doleantie, led by Abraham Kuyper, was a second secession from the national Dutch Reformed Church. Six years later, in 1892, many (but not all) congregations of the Secession Christian Reformed Church joined with Doleantie churches to form a new denomination, called Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

no longer simply be reiterated in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The religious core of that doctrine was essential, but Calvin's elaboration of it in terms of the doctrine of eternal election and reprobation had to be critically revised. In his pamphlet entitled *From Calvin to Rousseau*, Gunning showed how he wanted to reinterpret Calvin's doctrine of predestination.<sup>8</sup>

After 1888, Gunning was less involved with the consequences of the Doleantie and the activities of Kuyper. He did show in his brochure, *De prediking van de toekomst des Heeren* [*The Preaching of the Future of the Lord*], that the church struggle was partly a consequence of the fading expectation within the church of Christ's return.<sup>9</sup> Without that perspective, the struggle on behalf of one's own group and church becomes more important, and mutual love fades.

After Gunning went to Leiden in 1889, he first taught the discipline of "philosophy of religion." But already in 1891 he came to the conclusion that his viewpoint as a believer could not be harmonized with the "unbiased" character of the science of religion. Gunning became more and more convinced that his theology could not in fact be united with the modern scientific method employed in the comparative study of religions, and he switched disciplines with his colleague, C. P. Tiele. According to Gunning, a believing professor cannot teach about the Christian religion from a general scientific viewpoint, for then one places oneself above the faith. In 1892, he held a debate about this point with Bavinck, who believed that in 1876, in connection with the reform of the theological faculty [in public universities],

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<sup>7</sup> J. H. Gunning Jr., "Het ethisch karakter der waarheid" IV, *GVW* 2:71.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Gunning Jr., *Van Calvijn tot Rousseau* (Rotterdam: Otto Petri, 1881); see *GVW* 3:450–56.

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Gunning Jr., *De prediking van de toekomst des Heeren* (Utrecht: Breijer, 1888); see *GVW* 2:339–82.

the Dutch government had clearly made room for a philosophy of religion [to be taught] “in a positive Christian spirit.”<sup>10</sup> But Gunning no longer saw any validity in the notion that the “reasonability” of the faith could be demonstrated by the discipline of philosophy of religion.

During his years in Leiden, Gunning sought occasional contact by letter with Herman Bavinck, who had still been under consideration as the successor of the deceased modernist theologian L. W. E. Rauwenhoff—Gunning’s predecessor in Leiden.<sup>11</sup> So in 1895, he responded immediately to the appearance of the first volume of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*). Gunning received a copy from Bavinck and was very impressed. After an initial letter, a second followed, in which Gunning articulated his praise and criticism even more extensively. The same thing happened when the second volume of the *Dogmatics* appeared in 1897.<sup>12</sup>

From Gunning’s letters it seems that he chose especially those topics that were at issue between himself and the Reformed school of thought: the authority of Scripture, Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, and the problem of the divided church. These topics would also continue to occasion profound engagement in Dutch Protestant theology after Gunning had left the scene.

In addition, it is striking that Gunning explicitly esteemed Bavinck as a representative of the Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) trend. That this respect was mutual appears from the fact that Bavinck was present in 1899 at Gunning’s retirement as professor in Leiden.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See *GVW*, 2:455–92. Bavinck wrote about this in “Godgeleerdheid en godsdienstwetenschap,” *De Vrije Kerk* 18 (1892): 224.

<sup>11</sup> See R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 66.

<sup>12</sup> The first edition of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* [in references hereafter: *GD*] was published by J. H. Bos in Kampen.

<sup>13</sup> See R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), 106–8.

Gunning wrote the letters that are published below on the occasion of the appearance of the first two volumes of *Reformed Dogmatics*. In the past, these letters have been published not at all or only partially by R. H. Bremmer in his studies on Bavinck. The letters that were chosen are those in which Gunning most extensively engages Bavinck's work after he had closely studied the volumes.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, virtually all the letters Bavinck wrote to Gunning are lost, because at the end of his life Gunning destroyed most of the letters he had received. In the Bavinck Archives at the Historical Documentation Centre for Dutch Protestantism (HDC) of the Free University in Amsterdam, eleven letters from Gunning to Bavinck are preserved.<sup>15</sup> Another letter belonged to a private collection.<sup>16</sup> One

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<sup>14</sup> With respect to spelling and punctuation, the letters have not been adapted or abbreviated, though notes for clarification have been added. The letters are preserved in the Bavinck-archief, which is governed by the HDC of the Free University of Amsterdam. Gunning sent four letters to Bavinck about the *GD*: on 05/16/1895 and 08/28/1895 on the first volume; on 10/13/1897 and 12/22/1897 on the second volume. Bremmer published a portion of the letters of 1895 (see *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 104–05; however, he published nothing from the letters of 1897.

<sup>15</sup> The following letters are kept in the Bavinck Archives: Correspondence, file 2: letters 09/26/1884, 10/14/1884; file 3: postcard 05/11/1892, letters 06/22/1892, 06/24/1892; file 4: letters 05/16/1895, 08/28/1895; file 5: letters 10/13/1897, 12/22/1897; file 6: letter 12/18/1902; file 7: letter 12/02/1903. For the bibliographical data, see A. de Lange, *J. H. Gunning Jr. Een leven in zelfverloochening*, vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 252 (correspondence, nr. 5). Portions of eight letters are published by Bremmer, *Dogmaticus*, 91–93, 99–100, 104–7. Gunning's last letter to Bavinck is published by A. de Lange, *J. H. Gunning Jr. Brieven en brochures uit zijn Leidse tijd (1889–1899)* (Kampen: Kok, 1984), 153.

<sup>16</sup> The date of this letter is 12/19/1888. It belonged to W. J. Gunning (1917–2009), who was a great-grandson of Gunning. He offered the letter to P. L. Schram in 1983, who wrote about this in a letter on 08/23/1983 to A. de Lange. This letter to Bavinck is not preserved in the Schram Archives of the HDC. A copy is preserved in the Gunning Archives, at the library of the University of Utrecht, *Gunning 38 C 50, Addenda op het archief van J. H. Gunning Jr. (1829–1905)*.

letter from Bavinck to Gunning has been preserved, which is kept in Paleis het Loo National Museum Foundation in Apeldoorn.<sup>17</sup>

## The Two Letters from J. H. Gunning, Jr.

### I. Letter from J. H. Gunning, Jr. to H. Bavinck, Dated August 28, 1895, Regarding Volume 1 of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>18</sup>

Esteemed brother!

I have become acquainted with the first volume of your *Reformed Dogmatics*, quickly reading what I knew best, and more closely reading the principled and argued portion. When one has substantive comments about a book, one generally begins with praise and follows with his objections, his “buts.” The opposite is the case with me. I read your book with great delight, agreement, and edification. Hence, I prefer to begin with my lesser and greater objections, in order then to be able to conclude with tribute and with gratitude.

In your rich section on “History of Dogmatics,”<sup>19</sup> I often missed any indication in a number of places of how various schools of thought followed not only *after* each other, but also *from* each other.<sup>20</sup> This is true especially in connection with the description of Schleiermacher’s subjectivism.<sup>21</sup> With respect to the change from

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<sup>17</sup> Brievenalbum Gunning. Bavinck sent a letter on 05/21/1899 (Pentecost) to congratulate Gunning on his seventieth birthday.

<sup>18</sup> See also Bremmer, *Dogmaticus*, 105, where he presents a portion of this letter.

<sup>19</sup> See *GD*, 1:52–139; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (in references hereafter: *RD*) ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8), 1:115–206. Since Gunning refers in his letters to the first edition of the *GD*, in subsequent notes we will retain his original references (eg., *GD* 1:nnn), followed by a reference to the English edition in square brackets [e.g., *RD* 1:nnn].

<sup>20</sup> *GD* 1:104–139 [*RD* 1:165–204].

<sup>21</sup> See *GD* 1:104–05 [*RD* 1:165–66].

*Theo*-logy, as you describe it, to *consciousness*-theology or *consciousness-doctrine*, implemented especially in Schleiermacher, I would rather have seen its meaning described more principally, rather like Frank does in his *Geschichte und Kritik der neueren Theologie*.<sup>22</sup>

(A small matter: you speak repeatedly of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* [*The Doctrine of Faith*]; this title should be his *Der Christliche Glaube* [*The Christian Faith*—a difference that has significance for his conception of doctrine.)<sup>23</sup>

Did Schérer (131) go *further* than Vinet?<sup>24</sup> I believe that, precisely in his orthodoxy, from the outset and through his decided intellectualism, he stood *over against* Vinet, and that in so doing, he in no sense “broke with his past,”<sup>25</sup> but as Astié showed in “les deux théologies nouvelles,”<sup>26</sup> he proceeded step by step, remaining what he was, to arrive through his orthodoxy to his nihilism.

You would not maintain that *the* Church doesn't exist in this world (23), as you keep in view the Epistle to the Ephesians—that there is no *religio naturalis*—and keeping in mind your own correct

<sup>22</sup> Fr. H. R. von Frank, *Geschichte und Kritik der neueren Theologie, insbesondere der systematischen, seit Schleiermacher* (Erlangen und Leipzig: Deichert, 1894).

<sup>23</sup> *GD*, 1:105, 197 [*RD* 1:165, 265]. It bears notice that Bavinck did *not* correct this in the second edition of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*; the English translation makes the correction and provides the title, *The Christian Faith*.

<sup>24</sup> *GD* 1:131 [*RD* 1:194]; E. Schérer (1815–89) was a student of A. Vinet (1797–1847). Together with T. Colani (1824–1888), he represented the modernist party in the French Réveil (the so-called Strasburg theology), which wanted to recognize the historical-critical approach to the Bible.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck's formulation (*GD* 1:131 [*RD* 1:194]).

<sup>26</sup> J. F. Astié, *Les deux théologies nouvelles dans le sein du protestantisme français. Étude historico-dogmatique* (Paris: Ch. Meyrueis et Cie, 1862), 79ff. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye published the Dutch translation in 1866, mostly from the hand of A. W. Bronsveld: *De theologie des verstands en de theologie des gewetens in het Fransche protestantisme*, etc.



indication (278) that revelation restores the original-natural, so that both assertions are, in my opinion, less felicitous *formulations*.<sup>27</sup>

Your arrangement of the *Dogmatics*, in *its difference between* what you are rejecting and what I readily maintain in following Calvin's line, viz., a Trinitarian arrangement, is not clear to me. The description on pages 50–51 does not offer a distinctive arrangement: but *to the extent that* you indicate one, it appears to me, to my satisfaction, still indeed to be Trinitarian. When the dogmatician, as you rightly say on page 31, reproduces the thought of the Church, then there Nicea is standing as the glorious declaration that in her first general life-formulation the Church has confessed the Triune God.

I heartily agree in large part with your doctrine of Holy Scripture. But it does not quadrate<sup>28</sup> with the title "*Reformed*" *Dogmatics*, because it ignores the doctrine of the *scientific infallibility* of Holy Scripture. It is not to be tolerated *morally*, now, after the conflict, which was promulgated for nearly twenty years by the school of thought that calls itself exclusively "Reformed" ("Gereformeerde") and has as its main organs of communication the magazines known as the "Heraut" [Herald] and "Bazuin" [Trumpet], by someone who is functioning as a Reformed (Gereformeerde) [theologian], to leave this point aside.<sup>29</sup> What is the case? The "Reformed" ("Gereformeerden") not only defend that scientific infallibility (i.e., the absence of any historical mistake in Holy Scripture), but they also call

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<sup>27</sup> *GD*1:23, 278 [*RD*1:84, 360]. Gunning was referring to Bavinck's opinion that there are no universal things (*universalia*) such as *the tree*, *the religion*, *the science*, and *the church*. Gunning criticized the justification of the pluriformity of churches as postulated by Kuyper (see note 39 below). In Gunning's opinion it was a misleading excuse for the guilt that Christians bear in dividing the one church.

<sup>28</sup> Gunning used the verb "quadreeren," which is unfamiliar in Dutch. It means "to correspond," "to agree" like the English word "quadrate."

<sup>29</sup> The *Heraut* was the newspaper of Kuyper and his followers, the *Bazuin* of the Secession Christian Reformed Church, to which Bavinck belonged. This church united with Kuyper's churches in 1892. They formed the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands).

our position, which denies that infallibility on the basis of Holy Scripture itself, *immoral*. Indeed, because when the Lord Jesus was speaking of “Moses” he was referring to the Pentateuch as whole, therefore the opinion that we share, e.g., with Delitzsch—that the Pentateuch as we have it is a product of the historical development of Israel until the Babylonian captivity<sup>30</sup>—was [seen as] a “slap in the holy face of the Savior”—an “assault” on God’s infallible Word.<sup>31</sup> In this manner, the dogmatic definition in your context has far surpassed that of pages 361 and 362.<sup>32</sup> Therefore they are no longer sufficient for that context. For they are fully endorsed, e.g., by me and others who stand guilty of the attitude just mentioned (described literally in that way) vis-à-vis the Savior. To say that these accusations are not officially expressed by the Reformed churches q.t.,<sup>33</sup> doesn’t help, since this is merely incidental. Your denomination confesses this in *reality*. If I, for example, attracted by its confession of the Triune God and the Confession of our Fathers, wanted to join it, because this point of contention has shifted in the popular mind to the *moral* sphere, I could not and should not refrain for the sake of honesty

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<sup>30</sup> For Delitzsch’s view, see *GVW* 2:229. Delitzsch did not belong to the modernist school of thought.

<sup>31</sup> Gunning is alluding to, among other things, Kuyper’s attack on J. H. Gunning III, *De kritische beschouwing van Israël’s geschiedenis* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink, 1885). In it, Gunning’s son maintained that Moses could not be the author of the Pentateuch. Kuyper opposed this position as being an attack on the “person of the Lord Jesus” (see *De Heraut* [3/8/1885], no. 376). Kuyper also spoke of an “immoral tendency” on the part of Gunning III, because the latter believed that a Pentateuch that did not come from Moses was nevertheless still “God’s Word” (see *De Heraut* [3/29/1885], no. 379). See further *De Heraut* (4/12/1885), no. 381, where Kuyper copiously cites from a document from the Hague elder G. J. Thierry, who made mention of “this assault on God’s Word.” In Dutch it is usual to write the letters of the father’s name with ‘z.’ (= son) after the surname, when the son bears the same forenames as his father: J. H. Gunning J.Hz. Here we are following the English style of writing the name with a number, J. H. Gunning III.

<sup>32</sup> *GD* 1:361–62 [*RD* 1:445–46].

<sup>33</sup> Lat. *quod testor*: something to which I testify.

from disclosing that on the basis of Holy Scripture I denied the scientific infallibility of Holy Scripture. If people then admitted me as a member (which, I believe, would *not* happen), then they would characterize their own preeminent Ministers in fact as slanderers of their brothers and *nevertheless* leave them undisturbed. Certainly your church would not commit such acts of characterlessness. They would not admit me, but thereby would express their adherence to the doctrine of scientific infallibility. It *really* does belong to their dogmas.

Well, in that situation, honored Brother!, for a prominent dogmatician of the “Reformed” church it is just as impermissible to be content with expressions like those on pages 361 and 362 as it should have been morally impermissible for a dogmatician shortly after Nicea to withdraw behind vague expressions like those, e.g., of a person like Eusebius.<sup>34</sup>

My objections, as far as I recall, are herewith concluded. They are, however, far outweighed by my heartfelt, delighted agreement with the entirety of your book. I owe a great debt to your work, amazed as I am by your clarity and the congeniality of expression, for your enormous breadth of reading, which surpasses my own by a *long* way, and for the unity of scholarly precision with warmth of faith in your presentation. With sincerity I say along with you (201) that *knowledge* is first, because we believe *God’s* own revelation, and that “God said” (Lat. *Deus dixit*; 499) is the first principle (Lat. *primum principium*) of everything.<sup>35</sup>

Your discussion of the “first principles” (Lat. *principia*)—Rationalism, Empiricism, realism, and of the essence, seat, and origin of religion—has convinced me once again that the “philosophy of religion” *within the discipline of theology* is an absurdity, and that what

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<sup>34</sup> GD 1:361–62 [RD 1:445–46]; Gunning was referring to Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263–339) who was present at the Council of Nicea.

<sup>35</sup> GD 1:201, 499 [RD 1: 268, 590].

is true in it easily finds a place either in connection with the discussion of the *principia*, or (as I would prefer to do) in connection with the doctrine of God the Father.<sup>36</sup>

Supposing that I possessed the gifts required for writing a dogmatics, and that I wanted to do it, then for me the doctrine, or better, the expectation, of the Kingdom of God, would be placed at the forefront. Not in the sense that you rightly reject, as that idea emerges with Ritschl or Van Oosterzee,<sup>37</sup> but in the sense of Aristotle's statement that "what comes last in reality comes first in thought."<sup>38</sup>

My discussion of your book was not intended to teach you something. For I feel—do me the honor of believing the simple uprightness of this statement—that I am very much your inferior. Nor did I intend that you should enter into discussions with me about these points. You certainly have other things to do. But I wanted to give you a concrete indication of how highly I value your work.

May our God strengthen you in body and soul to complete this work, and further to perform all that your weighty vocation demands of you.

Believe me with warm honor and affection,

Your fellow brother J. H. Gunning.

Grossgmain near Reichenhall (Austria), August 28, 1895<sup>39</sup>

N.B. What I mentioned in this letter on page 5, viz., that I would prefer to move *much* of what you present in this first volume to the

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<sup>36</sup> The postscript at the end of the letter picks up these comments.

<sup>37</sup> For Gunning's criticism of Ritschl's depreciation of the Christian expectation of the future see *GVW* 2:581 n 16. For his criticism of the notion of a "Kingdom theology" advocated by J. J. van Oosterzee, see *GVW* 1, 566 n 4.

<sup>38</sup> See *GVW* 2:586. The text comes from Aristotle's *Physica II*, 360 (261a, l. 13f.)

<sup>39</sup> Every summer during the 1890s, Gunning stayed at the estate "Gnadenheim" of Helene Alsche at Grossgmain in Bavaria (Germany). He performed physical work there (see J. H. Gunning III, *Herinneringen uit mijn leven*, 2nd ed. [Amsterdam: H. J. Spruyt, 1941], 191).

Dogmatics *itself*, is also the opinion of a recent Dogmatics that I found was not mentioned in your historical overview, viz., in *Etude sur l'oeuvre de la redemption*, by Jules Bovon, professor of the Free Church of Canton de Vaud (Lausanne).<sup>40</sup> This book rests on Vinet's individualistic viewpoint, but has many beautiful portions. I own it; if you would like to become acquainted with it, I will gladly make it available to you.

## **II. Letter of J. H. Gunning, Jr. to H. Bavinck, Dated December 22, 1897, Regarding the Second Volume of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics***

Honorable and esteemed colleague!

During the Christmas break I have been able to read the second volume of *Reformed Dogmatics*. It was enjoyable for me, often edifying, almost everywhere a rich education. I am astonished by the breadth of your reading, which is at least ten times broader than mine; and I heartily rejoice that the remarkable series of writings coming from the Reformed context has been expanded by you in such an honorable fashion. May our God place his immense blessing upon this truly beautiful book!

Pages like 68–70 possess a radiance (Fr. *rayonnement*), as does your discussion of the will of God (202ff.).<sup>41</sup> I read with profound agreement your entire perspective of the holy Trinity, “the mystery of Christianity, the heart of religion,”<sup>42</sup> especially your instruction about the personality and divinity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The first volume of this work of J. Bovon appeared in 1893 with Bridel at Lausanne. On Bovon, see Bremmer, *Dogmaticus*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *GD* 2:68–70 [*RD* 2:99–103].

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Bavinck, *GD* 2:312 [*RD* 2:333].

<sup>43</sup> See Bavinck, *GD* 2:285–89 [*RD* 2:311–14].

Your arrangement of the divine attributes (136–37) appears to me to be too clever, too abstract, not sufficiently one inclusive whole.<sup>44</sup> In connection with this discussion, no matter how elegant it is, I watched you cross the boundaries, or repeatedly discuss the same attribute. But how could this be otherwise? Also the arrangement that I follow—(1.) those attributes of God that relate him to created reality in general; 2. those involving his relationship to the entire world of humanity; and 3. those indicating his relationship to the sinful and redeemed world of humanity—*that* arrangement also appeared to me, in connection with this discussion, to suffer the same shortcoming, although it appears to me simpler and more organically integrated than yours. All of this means that I actually have no objection to following the lack of order in Article 1 of our Confession.<sup>45</sup> Your discussion of God’s simplicity is, I think, fruitful and beautiful.<sup>46</sup>

I heartily agree with your view regarding the counsel of God, with regard to the general perspectives and the predestination that leads to salvation.<sup>47</sup> I cannot do the same with the logical corollary, the doctrine of reprobation in its Calvinistic meaning. This is not at all because I would not in fact believe this reprobation with trembling, in accordance with God’s Word. But because that same Word forbids me to *complete* my “system” prior to the complete factual victory over sin. According to God’s Word, I think, for God’s children the light alone is light and the darkness is dark to them.<sup>48</sup> The Word is a lamp for *my feet*, a light upon *my path*, both are sufficiently illuminated by this lantern that I am carrying, but not the shrubbery and ditches on the side of that path; I see only that I must avoid them, but I do not fathom, measure, or probe them. On page 360 you say:

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<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *GD* 2:136–37 [*RD* 2:99–103].

<sup>45</sup> Here Gunning is referring to the Belgic Confession of 1562.

<sup>46</sup> See Bavinck, *GD* 2:140–45 [*RD* 2:173–77].

<sup>47</sup> Bavinck discussed the counsel of God in *GD* 2:313–85 [*RD* 2:341–405].

<sup>48</sup> For the same expression, see *GVW* 3:456 (*Van Calvijn tot Rousseau*).

“Faith and good works, we know, are not the cause of election; . . .” and I say “Amen.” Yet you continue, “. . . but neither is sin the cause of reprobation, . . . .”<sup>49</sup> This “*but neither*” is unimpeachably logical, but I deem this logic to be forbidden for me because it is not found in the sphere of the *eu-angelion*. I certainly know that people say: “sin is not the efficient but the sufficient cause of reprobation *but nonetheless* the cause of this reprobation lies only in God’s sovereign good pleasure.” However, this “but nonetheless” appears to me not to be a conclusion arising from humility that bows to the mystery (although it presents itself in good faith as such), but to be a violent forcing of the series of thoughts to a conclusion, because one will not resign oneself to live with an inconclusive series [of thoughts]. In my opinion Calvin is to be excused (relatively speaking) for this, but we are not. Calvin, to be sure, for he was the *head of a group*. The pluriformity of the Church is a sin, is against the Lord’s will, even if it is historically necessary as a result of sin.<sup>50</sup> Whoever takes the lead in the formation of such organizations needs sharp and firm lines, clear boundaries for the people and for his own sound understanding. Without a short, concise, crystal clear answer to every objection he cannot *govern*. The rich variety of viewpoints in Holy Scripture would give a foothold to various troublesome liberties among the followers; thus the head must provide *solid lines* to the left and the right. This was Calvin’s view: “Yet I shall be content to have provided godly minds with a sort of index to *what they should particularly look for in Scripture concerning God, and to direct their search to a sure goal.*”<sup>51</sup> Consequently, “if there is eternal election, then there is

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<sup>49</sup> Bavinck, *GD* 2:360 [*RD* 2:385].

<sup>50</sup> Gunning rejected, e.g., Kuyper’s justification of ecclesiastical pluriformity. See *GVW* 2:566, 604.

<sup>51</sup> “At ego velut indicans propo suisse contentus, ero, quo monitae piae mentis *quid potissimum in Scripturis de Deo investigandem sit, norint, et ad certum ejus inquisitionis seopum dirigantur* (*Institutes* 1.10.1; trans. Battles; emphasis in Gunning).

also eternal reprobation, both prior to and independent of the faith and the unbelief of human beings”—that is logical, a child can grasp it; with that the people of God can be clearly, quickly, and unarguably separated from heretics with whom to debate would make the governance of the church impossible. I do not say that this is a *conscious action*; no, but the *instinct* of the church ruler presses in that direction. Still what is to be excused with *him* (presuming the sinful condition of pluriformity has been accepted) is not the case with *us*. We should acknowledge that in Holy Scripture *two* series of expressions exist, whose sacred connection indubitably *exists*, but which is beyond our logic. Namely *A*: the person believes and is saved because in free, sovereign grace God has elected him. *B*: the sinner is lost *not* because God has so destined him, but because of his unbelief. God clearly destined and acted so that one’s unbelief by virtue of hardening would attain its paroxysm<sup>52</sup> (Pharaoh, etc.) *now that it once existed*, but except for Satan’s temptation (whose fall itself was in turn also not explained), there is no reason given for that unbelief other than the misuse of human freedom.

For Calvin’s *bilateral* dogma it would be necessary that both groups of humans be presented in Scripture as *personae nuda*e, without quality, but that happens *nowhere*. Those whom God will look upon are qualified as pure in heart, as those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness who will be satisfied, etc. Not *because* of that hunger, not *because* of the faith (the *praevisa fides* of the Remonstrants was rightly rejected at Dordt<sup>53</sup>), but that hunger and thirst are *present* (these do not arise *afterward*) in a connection that is too great for me to understand: it is *grace*. Also in connection with the reprobate, e.g., in the series of texts that you supply,<sup>54</sup> the wicked

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<sup>52</sup> Paroxysm: greatest intensity, e.g., of an illness.

<sup>53</sup> See the Canons of Dordt 1.9.

<sup>54</sup> In *GD* 2:379, lines 4–5 from bottom [*RD* 2:401, lines 7–8 from top].



quality is in the same way present *along with*, still here a causal connection is clear for every unbiased reader, namely, that reprobation is not the cause but the consequence of evil. I stop at this point, without seeking to obtain in this lifetime a logical connection. In fact, I am in good company. There is One other, who, by virtue of his illogical juxtaposition of two contradictory terms, would also have to be called a “half” if one but *dared* (Matt. 18:7).<sup>55</sup>

Elsewhere,<sup>56</sup> should not the word “emanation” be replaced with the phrase “the *truth* of what is indicated by emanation”? Generation is not emanation, not even with Origen, let alone in Holy Scripture.

In connection with the existence of angels, when you mentioned “especially the Reformed,”<sup>57</sup> I thought of Calvin who personally expressed himself frequently about the angels. In his letters he often admonishes confessors in difficult circumstances to be aware of the presence of angels, and on his deathbed he says once more to the Genevan authorities, “I testify to you before God and his holy angels,” etc. I seem to remember that Stähelin notes this in his biography.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, these are but a few small matters, noted in passing. I must in conclusion thank you for the beautiful development of the doctrine of the covenant of works. My earlier, unwise rejection of that truth had already been dispelled by Dr. Kuyper. You have not only confirmed me in that, but you have clarified the full truth for me. Certain theosophical speculations, e.g., about the original sexless-

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<sup>55</sup> Based on the passage, Gunning was referring to Jesus. Gunning and his fellow theologians were called “halves” by Kuyper.

<sup>56</sup> *GD* 2:401, 14 lines from bottom [*RD* 2:420, 10 lines from top].

<sup>57</sup> *GD* 2:429 [*RD* 2:450, “Especially the Reformed tended in this connection to sin more by defect than by excess.”] Here Bavinck made some critical remarks about the worship of angels. He appreciated the Calvinist sobriety on this point.

<sup>58</sup> E. Stähelin, *Johannes Calvin. Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*. Part 2 (Elberfeld: R. L. Friderichs, 1863), 370f.

ness of Adam, I had already abandoned as something not in agreement with biblical sobriety.<sup>59</sup> But you have made me aware of a deeper motive for countering this error with regard to the God-given destiny of natural life.<sup>60</sup> (I remain a vegetarian out of firm conviction, but on other grounds that have nothing to do with asceticism or the devaluation of the natural; but this is not relevant.)<sup>61</sup>

I laid the book down with gratitude, with increased esteem for the author, and with deep longing for the next volume. But I imagine that I will often pick this volume up again. Until now when my students have asked me for suitable manuals for dogmatic studies, I have recommended to them Calvin's *Institutes*, the edition of Scholten's *Dogmatics* by La Saussaye Sr., and the *Dogmatics* of J. T. Beck. The first two *remain*, but the last one I think I will replace with *your* book when I have to offer advice to young people.<sup>62</sup>

With all my heart I wish you the Lord's blessing for the completion of this work and of all the other labor that rests upon you. I have written these comments because I deem it my duty, in connection with such a highly valuable gift, to give the writer at least a glimpse that someone has read his work attentively. Although whatever comes from your hand will be accepted with pleasure by

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<sup>59</sup> Gunning had been an advocate of the doctrine of the androgyny of Adam in *Blikken* III, 232–35.

<sup>60</sup> *GD* 2:559–61 [*RD* 2:575–76].

<sup>61</sup> As a result of typhus, to which Gunning nearly succumbed in 1875, he suffered a chronic wound in his leg. The ailment was lessened by a diet of vegetables, to which Gunning strictly held since 1879. See the diary of M. J. van Lennep, 1879, 55:4403 (September), 888 (available at <http://vanlennep.nl/dagboeken/>).

<sup>62</sup> Gunning indicates D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Beoordeeling van het werk van Dr. J.H. Scholten over de leer der Hervormde Kerk* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1885). A preface for this edition was prepared by J. J. P. Valetton, Jr. For the dogmatics mentioned by Gunning, see J. T. Beck, *Vorlesungen über christliche Glaubenslehre, herausgegeben von J. Lindenmeijer*, 2 vol. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1886, 1887).

me, you need not reply; however, I will not interpret your possible silence as discourtesy or the like.

So it is with friendly greetings that I remain

Gratefully yours, J. H. Gunning

Leiden, December 22, 1897