

# The Abiding Significance of Herman Bavinck's Theology\*

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What is the continuing and even abiding significance of the theology of Herman Bavinck? An answer to this question could be to point to the great effect that the English translation of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* has had in the English-speaking world. This four-volume work has launched a sudden and delightful interest in the theology of Herman Bavinck and more broadly in neo-Calvinism as well.

Another sign of this renewed interest is the translation project of the works of Abraham Kuyper. However, I immediately have to note a difference between the name and fame of these two giants in the Netherlands where Kuyper still has a very ambivalent reputation. Of course, Kuyper is the creative genius who was the leader of the neo-Calvinist movement, which initially was regarded as a renewal movement, being almost revolutionary and thus hated by the ruling classes. Nevertheless, his name and fame remain ambivalent, whereas Bavinck almost seems to go beyond the ecclesial and political borders and is acceptable to many more people.

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In view of new releases of Bavinck's works such as one on assurance of faith titled *Geloofszeekerheid*, edited by Henk van den Belt, I will take the opportunity to give a few statements why Bavinck particularly fits as an identification figure in the Netherlands and abroad.

1. Bavinck's theological work is characterized by the programmatic connection between the classical and the modern, or, rather, between the older Reformed theology and contemporary and new challenges. Bavinck did not hesitate to deal with new questions that were brought to the table of theology. At times this fact, together with his openness in doing so, made him suspect in his own circles. For that reason, the name Bavinck must not be identified with restorationism. From a programmatic perspective his name stands for a theology that wants to be loyal to the Reformed tradition, combined with his willingness to look at new questions and developments, and his wish to think for *himself*. This has significance for contemporary theologians in the church as well as in society. We live today and must do it in our own way, and like earlier generations we must sometimes enter new territory. Later, I will have to say more about those new questions and challenges.
2. The name Bavinck represents what a theology has to offer that wants to be inspired by the *broad Reformed tradition*. That tradition is not something that has come to a definitive close. It is not a tradition that is associated with just one "founding father," nor a tradition that takes one teaching as its central doctrine or reduces faith to a number of propositions. It is, rather, an attitude, a "stance," which continues to ask questions in its search for *what must be said in our present context, in our dialogue with the Bible, the traditions, and our contemporary society*,

in the realization that God has not stopped speaking but still speaks. He has spoken—*deus dixit*—and through the Holy Spirit his words are continuously actualized and new. Anyone who wants to speak about God must do so in three words: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These names represent the diverse ways in which God makes himself known. This means that we do not propose that nothing can be said about God; we are not agnostics with regard to the metaphysical. We can say something. In the end we are concerned about what has significance, what serves life and is true. I know that for many the very word “truth” causes alarm bells to ring, but any university that is worthy of that name must be focused on nothing less than what is true and serves humankind.

3. Can the adjective “evangelical” be attributed to Bavinck? To answer this question a short clarification about the meaning of this word in the Dutch context is needed. In the Dutch context, the word “evangelical” has associations different from those in North America. “Evangelical” in Dutch culture has long been identified with renewal movements that exist apart from the bigger Protestant churches and that definitely do not have a solid Reformed profile. Therefore, using the adjective “evangelical”—as we do with the Herman Bavinck Center for Reformed and Evangelical Theology at the Vrije Universiteit—is quite uncommon and it may evoke some mixed feeling, but it is high time to see a change in that attitude. Evangelical spirituality has a widespread influence, and many students who arrive at the university have been affected by it. Are we sufficiently open to this? Do the academic programs and the teachers have an antenna for this reality?

4. For too long church and theology in the Netherlands have sought to protect themselves against the influence of Methodism, Pietism, holiness movements, and evangelicalism on large segments of Dutch Protestantism. This has impaired our pastoral training, since the students hear very little or nothing about the background—both the past and the present—of evangelical spirituality and theology along with the same from the charismatic movement. It should therefore not surprise us that pastors and church boards are extremely concerned and become nervous when they are confronted with these groups, with their rather emotional expressions of their faith and their sometimes poor theology. This influence does not only take place at the intellectual level, but especially in the domain of religious practices, song culture, events, personal piety, and concepts of holiness. What is needed is a “testing” of the spirits, first of all by taking a critical look at ourselves and then also at what we encounter. Many people who have found their place in the church had a formative experience in the evangelical movement. Rather than erecting a barrier, we need places where study can be given to these practices, this way of living one’s faith, the content of the songs, and the form of Jesus-piety. We should do this through a critical approach, but also with an open heart. I would like to add that this element of religious formation, of spirituality, should receive more attention in study programs, however challenging it might be to actually realize this. The connection with a basic attitude of faith is one of the reasons to link a theological center with Bavinck’s name.

So, is it possible to attribute the concept of “evangelical” to Bavinck? Was Bavinck, in fact, an evangelical? Not in the way

historian David Bebbington has characterized evangelicalism,<sup>1</sup> but definitely in another way: Bavinck connected theological reflection with spirituality, with spiritual experience. “Doing” theology and faith go together and are connected. This connection is clearly visible, for instance, with John Owen and Jonathan Edwards. And in this affinity of a spiritually rich theology belongs also Herman Bavinck.

Another element I want to mention is that doing theology in line with Bavinck involves a keen interest in the practices of faith and the communities of faith. Theologians should be dealing with the actual practice of faith, with how our faith is lived and given shape. It is often thought that theology is predominantly a matter of concepts and abstract theories. I remember a statement made by Bavinck, about the assurance of faith, that the quality of our theology becomes manifest at the bed of a patient. What are we able to say when we are faced with the inevitable, when we are at the limits of our human possibilities and, especially, of our impossibilities, our human shortcomings and failings? Here he points to pastoral care.<sup>2</sup>

But the practices that require theological reflection go beyond this. What we need in our time is institutional space and time for reflection on new practices with a religious dimension, such as the song and music culture, film, and ecology, as well as what happens in the multifaceted world of evangelical movements,

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<sup>1</sup> See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–3, where Bebbington identifies four distinct emphases in evangelicalism: “*Conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”

<sup>2</sup> Bavinck, *Geloofszeikerheid*, 31–32.

new churches, and charismatic initiatives, that will always refuse to be institutionalized, but that theologians, nonetheless, should enthusiastically invite to be an occasional partner in dialogue. There is a wide range of free groups, movements, and initiatives that I might refer to as an evangelical subculture. The official theology should not treat this with disdain, even though I put question marks—at times many of them—behind some groups and their implicit theology. However, my theology informs me that God’s Spirit does not want to be constrained by a clearly defined theology, be it of a conservative or a liberal kind.

5. Another aspect of this colorfulness is that the name of Bavinck can easily be associated with an *interdisciplinary approach*. During the last phase of his active life (1910–1921) Bavinck emphasized interdisciplinarity by focusing extensively on pedagogy, psychology, and philosophy. This is not to be seen as an indication that Bavinck was disappointed and had nothing more to say in the theological realm.<sup>3</sup> I would rather argue that this interest in other core disciplines directly results from a fundamental pillar of Reformed theology itself: the recognition of God’s universality. God created the world in such a way that parts of the truth and of reality are revealed in other domains of science. God’s Spirit uses the possibilities and structures of our human creatureliness, and this makes the natural sciences and empirical methods theologically interesting and relevant. This

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<sup>3</sup> See Herman Bavinck, *Als Bavinck nu maar een kleur bekende: Aantekeningen van H. Bavinck over de zaak-Netelenbos, het schriftgezag en de situatie van de Gereformeerde Kerken* (November 1919), ed. George Harinck, Cornelis van der Kooi, and Jasper Vree (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994). English Title: *If only Bavinck would declare his color: H. Bavinck’s annotations on the Netelenbos affair, the authority of Scripture, and the Gereformeerde Kerken* (November 1919).

is the basis for interdisciplinarity and cooperation with biologists, medical experts, etc.

Interdisciplinarity also impacts our views regarding the relationship between the subdisciplines of theology. Bavinck and neo-Calvinism were convinced that dogmatics is the center of theology. Biblical studies and practical theology were considered the mere helpmates of those who had to do the real work: the systematic theologians. This view is incorrect and I, in any case, no longer subscribe to it. The area of biblical studies is not an ancillary branch of scholarship. It is a close partner in the circle of theology as a whole, particularly in its study of the way the old message has traveled—from “old to new readers,” as my colleague Eep Talstra would say.<sup>4</sup> Together with church historians, practical theologians, anthropologists, and (sometimes) medical scholars, theologians should focus on practices, albeit within a theological framework. And this means that the “dogma” of the atheism of method cannot be granted sole reign. Theology finds its unity in the fact that it may, or should, ask questions about God. It finds its value in its concern for truth, over against untruth.

6. A further reason why the name Bavinck is future-oriented is *the breadth of the theological specter that we find with him in his Trinitarian theology*. This is in line with the international new appreciation for Trinitarian theology. It is one of the reasons why his theology is being rediscovered and intensely studied by Anglophone theologians. Christian theology does not speak about God by using just one word, but by speaking with three words, in terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is to say:

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<sup>4</sup> Eep Talstra, *Oude en nieuwe Lezers: Een Inleiding in de Methoden van Uitleg van het Oude Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 2002).

God is involved with the breadth of life, with our creatureliness, the progress of life; God plays a role in the problems of life, the shortcoming, the failures, and trauma.

This has to do with the mission of Jesus as the Son of God and with words such as “atonement” and “redemption.” And, finally, there is the Spirit who already plays a role in all of this, but who certainly also has a place as the One who will renew all life and will complete God’s work in the world. By mentioning the Spirit, we evoke the thought of newness, of surprise, and of an unexpected change for good. To summarize this: This kind of theology cannot be played on one string, even though some try to do so. I believe we should not try to play everything on that one string of the cross, or, as happens in some evangelical groups, only on the single vibration of grace or resurrection, or on the string of the Spirit as a special experience. These are reductions that make the theological instrument too somber, too dangerous, or too optimistic. The baton must touch different strings in order to do justice to the richness and variety of the music, that is to say, the variety of the gospel in the New Testament itself.

7. This brings me to the final point: *the public influence of Christian theology* that is connected with the name of Herman Bavinck. This follows from the previous point. The scope that is given with the concept of the Trinity offers an openness for different themes. I will mention some. Under the theme of creation we find questions concerning the origin of the universe—a mind-boggling, long evolutionary process—together with queries related to the end and to purpose. What does this insight mean for our theology? Or is there only a blind materialistic perspective? For the sake of ourselves and of the next generation of students, we must address the questions of theology and science. The ecological issues are of the same order.

Another question that has everything to do with the public domain is that of the position of the Christian faith in our Western or, more specifically, our Dutch culture. To phrase it in theological language: how do these two orders—the order of the kingdom and that of our life in this world, or the concept of the two kingdoms—relate to each other? What do we who are here on the Continent of Europe say about this now that Christianity is no longer the culturally unifying factor in our European society? There were the lofty ideals of a re-Christianization that were cherished by previous generations. Schleiermacher, Rothe, Kuyper, Bavinck, the representatives of school of ethical theology, Chantepie de la Saussaye, J. H. Gunning, but in the Netherlands also the initiators of a new theology, and Van Ruler—they all supported in some form the ideal of re-Christianization.

The new context raises the question of mission. What is possible when the plausibility structures that for a long time made the Christian faith attractive, have disappeared? A recent publication by Stefan Paas discusses questions like those mentioned above in all their urgency from a missiological perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Another theme in the broad Trinitarian sphere is that of justice and injustice. What does it mean that our world knows so many places where the fundamental rights of people, and even of children, are violated? Does God have a lot of patience with us, or should we say that as human beings we must also have a lot of patience with the God who allows this history to continue? These questions touch on the themes of atonement and redemption, the doctrine of God, and the concrete approach to life that we choose.

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<sup>5</sup> Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

These questions are not new as we already meet them in the Bible. For that reason, the Bible and biblical studies should be a strong component in contemporary theological reflection. God has chosen to meet us on the path of history. The material we have are texts, formed through the course of history and sometimes rather disjointed. In what way does the Bible have authority? These questions are broached in a fine collection of essays that were recently published under the title *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*.<sup>6</sup>

This assumption of public significance may give rise to objections. Should Christians of Protestant Reformed vintage still pretend that their words also have significance for other people? Is this not a claim that can no longer be substantiated from our contemporary culture? Are church and Christian theology not, at the most, part of an alternative culture or counterculture? Stanley Hauerwas, Bram van de Beek, and Stefan Paas are very clear in this respect. We must not overestimate this public influence. Should we not agree with Gerrit de Kruijf that Christians must “think twice” before trying to speak in the public domain? So we must think first as Christians who know the Bible, and in the second place think in the way society thinks.<sup>7</sup>

I want to make two critical remarks with regard to this theory of “thinking twice,” since we may run the risk that the underlying story becomes completely invisible. The distinction can easily lead to a situation in which we speak about values in the public arena, yet these values, such as solidarity, respect, justice, and human dignity, are in

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<sup>6</sup> Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas, and Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, eds., *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion 6 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> See G. G. de Kruijf, *Waakzaam en Nuchter: Over Christelijke Ethiek in een Democratie* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1994). Unfortunately, this publication is not yet available in English.

fact left hanging in the air. These values cannot remain without their embedment, without the story that nourishes them and gives them color and content. What does it mean for the value of goodness and mercy when people in our country no longer know the story of the good Samaritan? When dignity is taken as a loose concept, it can be filled in all kinds of ways. The true sense of dignity can only become clear in the context of a story, a narrative in which Jesus's death on the cross as *mors turpissima*, a shameful death, plays a fundamental role.

In other words, without wanting to force the story upon people, we must realize that we cannot completely forsake the biblical story in the public domain. Love, mercy, justice, dignity, and freedom are concepts that cannot without impunity be detached from their religious roots. They reach into the public domain. They are linked to things that carry these concepts and contribute to humanness.

Furthermore, on the basis of that narrative, we can learn from our encounters with others, even those in other religions. The theory of God's general revelation is part of the repertoire of Reformed theology. I personally prefer to speak of God's universality. The Spirit of Christ cannot be hedged in by institutions or communities and may have affected other communities in a surprising way. This will quite often lead to new insights and the discovery of new elements. There are plenty of historical examples of this, for instance, with regard to the position of women, slavery, or the question of whether social justice is a right or just a matter of charity.

The name Herman Bavinck represents a particular approach to theology. It allows us to deal with questions, in all openness, without fear or apprehension. It allows us to be grateful for all the good things that our own tradition has given us; while being open, without fear or apprehension, to the new things we may discover. A future generation of theologians and students will have to do what others did before them: they must accept accountability and meet the

challenges without being afraid of criticism, adversity, or uncertainty.