

## Book Review

Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, annotated edition, edited by Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, foreword by James P. Eglinton, adapted and expanded from the 1908 Stone Lectures presented at Princeton Theological Seminary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2018).

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), the Dutch Reformed master of dogmatics, gave the 1908 Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. This new edition of the *Philosophy of Revelation* is not only an adapted and expanded version of the 1909 English publication, but also an improved translation. In addition, this edition is annotated by the editors, Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, with helpful editorial and explanatory notes.

Bavinck's essay is a work of philosophical theology on the necessity of revelation for knowing not only God but also the world and man. This book elaborates in detail the fundamental ideas expressed by Bavinck in his magisterial study of 1904, *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing* (23). He takes as his starting point dogmatic reference points established by faith. Yet, rather than a study in a dogmatic theology of revelation, this essay's methodology is that of Christian philosophy, which is a philosophical reflection conceived and practiced in dynamic union with faith's reference points. Put differently, Bavinck's concern here is that of fundamental theology, justifying and expounding the relationship between faith and philosophical thought regarding metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Bavinck seeks to show how, in faith's knowledge conferred by revelation, there emerge certain truths providing the scaffolding necessary for, *inter alia*, a Christian understanding of nature (70–91), history (92–116), religion (117–141), religious experience (164–191), and culture (192–212). He demonstrates throughout this rich book the necessary metaphysical, epistemological and ethical presuppositions demanded by the Christian faith

and its corresponding doctrine of revelation (26–69, 204–12). Bavinck summarizes his conclusion:

[R]evelation is the starting point (*uitgangspunt*) of the inner unity of nature, of the human race, the unity of history, and is also the source of all laws—the laws of nature, of history, and of all development. The ideas and norms which govern religious, ethical, and social life, and appear in the self-consciousness and the thought of humanity, are the products of this revelation of God (*zijn aan die openbaring Gods te danken*). (240)

Bavinck's thesis is: "With the reality of revelation, therefore, Christianity stands or falls" (20). What, then, is revelation? Bavinck reaffirms the orthodox idea of revelation with its fundamental distinction between the modes of special and general revelation (23–25, 185). General revelation is God's revelation of himself to all men in and through the works of creation (66). Regarding this revelation, God reveals himself to all men at all times and all places such that men, in principle, may know something of God's existence, his attributes, and his moral law (Rom. 1:20; 2:14–15). Special revelation is about God revealing himself in and through salvation history, a history that runs through the events and people of Israel, culminating in the concentration point of that history in Jesus Christ, who is the Mediator and fullness of all revelation (24, 163, 209–10, 241). Jointly constitutive of God's special revelation are its inseparably connected words (verbal revelation) and deeds, intrinsically bound to each other because neither is complete without the other; the historical realities of redemption are inseparably connected to God's verbal communication of truth. However, there is also an interdependency between general and special revelation, both coming with divine authority. "General revelation leads to special revelation, and special revelation points back to general revelation. The one calls for the other, and without it remains imperfect and unintelligible. Together they proclaim the manifold wisdom which God has displayed in creation and redemption" (25). Furthermore, biblical revelation has epistemic priority over general revelation, according to Bavinck, surpassing

general revelation, disclosing “the greatness of God’s heart,” while general revelation itself “makes known to us the power of his mind” (25, 23).

Bavinck claims that the implications of this distinction, particularly its significance for the whole of human life, have never been thought through philosophically. Hence, the distinctiveness of Bavinck’s work, *Philosophy of Revelation*, is to give a philosophical account of “the idea of revelation, both in its form and in its content, and *correlate it with the rest of our knowledge and life*” (22, emphasis added). Indeed, Bavinck argues, “revelation . . . extends to the uttermost ends of creation.” He explains,

[Revelation] does not stand isolated in nature and history, does not resemble an island in the ocean, nor a drop of oil upon water. With the whole of nature, with the whole of history, with the whole of humanity, with the family and society, with science and art it is intimately connected. The world itself rests on revelation; revelation is the presupposition, the foundation (*gronslag*), the secret (*geheim*), of all that exists in all its forms. . . . Together with all created things, that special revelation which comes to us in the Person of Christ is built on these presuppositions. The foundations of creation and redemption are the same. The Logos who became flesh is the same by whom all things were made. (24–25)

Revelation is not only the foundation of all existence but also the knowledge of that existence in all its unity and diversity (26–69). In this connection, Bavinck answers the fundamental question: What must the world, including man, be like in order that man may know it, in order that knowledge of that world be possible at all? “For how can it be explained that man through his senses can observe the world, and through his intelligence can know and understand it? Whence the wonderful correspondence of knowing and being? What is the basis of the belief that the conception and the thought in the human brain are no imagination and no hallucination, but correspond with the reality? What is the ground for the harmony between subject and object, the ego and the non-ego?” (89).

In his answer to this last question regarding the harmony between knowing and being, Bavinck breaks with the egocentric predicament of

philosophical modernism, in which the isolation of the self and the world from each other are taken as the epistemic starting point. In this view, the individual is an enclosed consciousness containing ideas in the mind that are the direct object of our conscious awareness and from which inferences are drawn about what the real world must be like. Bavinck criticizes epistemic modernism as being unable “to reinstitute the inward connection between [ideas and reality].” It is doomed to failure. He adds, “The mind, having once shut itself up in the circle of representations, is unable to free itself from this self-constructed prison. . . . Representations gird it about on all sides, and nowhere is access open to reality; for no inference can be drawn from thinking to being; from the representations, there is no bridge to reality” (51–52).

By contrast to epistemic modernism, Bavinck’s starting point is the revelation in our self-consciousness of the pre-established harmony between knowing and being, the reality of our ego and the world. “In consciousness, our own being and the being of the world are disclosed to us antecedently to our thought or volition; that they are *revealed* to us in the strictest sense of the word” (63). “Whosoever here does not believe shall not be established” (59). Furthermore, disclosed to our self-consciousness is not only man’s “own existence and of the reality of the world,” but also “the reality and personality of God” (65). Bavinck develops this point about the correlation among self-consciousness, world-consciousness, and God-consciousness. Man “does not invent the idea of God nor produce it; it is given to him and he receives it.”

Of course, Bavinck does not ignore the distortion, misinterpretation, and rejection of that revelation, not only in the other religions but also in atheism. Regarding the former, says Bavinck, “without revelation, religion sinks back into a pernicious superstition”; absent “the pure knowledge of God,” the true character of man, nature, and history is disowned as a result of “vain speculations of the mind and a darkening of the heart.” He adds, “Hence, religion is, not only with reference to its origin and essence but also with reference to its truth and validity, founded in revelation.”

Regarding atheism, he says, "Atheism is not proper to man by nature, but develops at a later stage of life, on the ground of philosophic reflection; like skepticism, it is an intellectual and ethical abnormality, which only confirms the rule." That is, "By nature, in virtue of his nature, every man believes in God. And this is due in the last analysis to the fact that God, the creator of all nature, has not left himself without witness [Acts 14:17] but through all nature, both that of man himself and that of the outside world, speaks to him. . . . In self-consciousness, God makes known to us man, the world, and himself" (66).

Bavinck does not think that this pre-established harmony between knowing and being, our epistemic faculties and reality, guarantees our epistemic infallibility. However, it does give us a place to stand epistemologically in virtue of their "origin in the same creative wisdom . . . one and the same Reason," the Logos of God (66–67). "On this firm theistic foundation, finally, there is room for belief in the progress of science and realization of the ideal of truth. There is some degree of warrant for the assertion that truth *is* not but *becomes*" (67). Read in context, Bavinck means to provide a justification for the growth in knowledge of the truth about nature, history, culture, religions, and its corresponding epistemic justification. Arguably, Bavinck presupposes the distinction between truth and justification, between the conditions that make a statement true and the conditions under which I come to know that it is true.

Bavinck is a realist about truth but also an epistemic realist about the truth-attaining capacity of the human mind. Says Bavinck, we cannot "find the truth apart from the reality." For a realist about truth this means that a statement is true if and only if what it asserts is in fact the case about objective reality; otherwise, it is false. Hence, Bavinck's point, "We do not create the truth, and we do not spin it out of our brain; but, in order to find it, we must get back to the facts, to reality, to the sources." Thus, "truth is bound to reality and finds its criterion in correspondence with reality" (68). Furthermore, the condition under which I come to know that something is true is not merely the intellectual assent to propositional

truth, but also truth as it is experienced. “Reality is intended to become truth in our consciousness and in our experience” (68).

Bavinck extends epistemic realism over all the domains of thought, including religion and morality. “Man does not produce truth by thought (*denkende*) in any domain, and certainly not in religion, but by inquiry and study he learns to know the truth, which exists independently of and before him. Therefore, religious experience is neither the source nor the foundation of religious truth; it only brings us into union with the existing truth. . . . It is not the least merit of Christianity that it includes such a harmonious whole of representations, which reconcile subject and object, man and world, nature and revelation” (189–90). Now, although propositional truth is an indispensable dimension of truth itself, according to Bavinck, existential truth, which is the fruit of conversion, is also indispensable. In his religious epistemology—namely, how truth is authenticated (that is, lived out, practiced, carried out)—truth cannot be reduced to propositional truth, to being merely believed, asserted, and claimed. This is because faith’s knowledge of God “is at the same time *cognitio* and *fiducia*, a trustful knowledge and a knowing trust.” That knowledge is born in our heart in connection with assenting to the truth of propositions, binding us irrevocably to them, bearing “witness in our hearts as to the religious representations which existed outside and before us” (190). In sum, existential truth, which is the fruit of conversion, “is a turning back to God, but at the same time a coming to one’s self” (204). In sum, “a true philosophy [of revelation] gives full satisfaction both to the demands of the intellect and to the needs of the heart” (69).

Bavinck is also a moral realist. His metaphysics of morality embraces the idea of a culture-transcendent Moral Law, a natural law, whose normativity presses down upon the conscience of man, obliging him to obedience (206). This moral law is grounded in the eternal law of God, in the Godhead. “God alone is the source (*oorsprong*) and thus also the guarantee of the reality of the moral law (*zedewet*), of the objectivity of duty, the ethical vocation, and destiny of man. Insofar as this is the case, all ethics

is also heteronomous” (206, 208). However, Bavinck insightfully distinguishes here: heteronomy of the moral law is not unrelated to man’s good, because man freely internalizes the truth of the law, which consists of norms related to his good; otherwise, there would be nothing but a form of self-alienation (206–7). Thus, the moral law is not only written on the heart of man, bearing witness in the inmost recesses of the heart, but also must be effectually at work in man himself, so that the whole person becomes “good in intellect and will, heart and conscience” (207). Therefore, “The heteronomy of law and the autonomy of man are reconciled only by this theonomy” (208).

Finally, Bavinck makes clear that his perspective of creation revelation is not only Christocentric but also eschatological. Here is Bavinck’s theology of hope. “God is creator: he is further the *reconciler* of all things” (240). That is, “For God is the creator and redeemer, but also finally the *restorer* and *renewer* of all things” (241). Revelation provides an anchor with regard to the future, “not only for our thought but also for our whole life and action” (238). The Christian faith’s hope for the value of human life “is inseparably connected with the future.” He explains, “If the world at the end of its development is dissolved in a chaos [see Bertrand Russell’s 1903 essay, ‘A Free Man’s Worship’], or sinks back into everlasting sleep, the value of personality, of religious and ethical life, and also of culture cannot be maintained” (238). Bavinck’s eschatological perspective leaves us with a positive vision that Christian revelation is life affirming. That is certainly good news for modern man.

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