

Dr. Herman Bavinck 1854-1921

Theologian of the Word¹

By Johan D. Tangelde

When I reflect on my spiritual pilgrimage, Reformed thinkers come to mind who became my mentors. The Dutch theologian Dr. Herman Bavinck heads the list. I was introduced to his theology through his magisterial work, the four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906-1911), a gift from a generous host at whose place I stayed for a weekend during my studies at the Free University of Amsterdam. And over the years I have added to my Bavinck collection. He wrote not only on theology, but also on Christian politics and education, creation versus evolution, psychology and the family. His works are still relevant for the fierce spiritual battles raging in the 21st century. Writing at the turn of the last century, he stated: "...the twentieth century... [will] witness a gigantic conflict of spirits... between the old and the new worldview." Bavinck foresaw the conflicts between the powers of darkness and the Kingdom of God we witness today.

BAVINCK'S BACKGROUND

Herman Bavinck's father was a devout Secessionist minister, who lacked a complete formal theological education; however, he was well versed in Reformed theology. When Herman finished high school (gymnasium), he wanted to study at the university in Leiden. But his father urged him to study at least for one year at the Theological School in Kampen. Herman's decision to study in Leiden, a centre of modernism, grieved many Secessionist leaders. Some believed that Jan Bavinck compromised both school and church by letting his son go to Leiden. But father and son persevered. Herman proved to be a brilliant and diligent student, known for his piety. Although he experienced liberalism as an enemy of Biblical Christianity and a challenge to his faith, he stayed true to the Scriptures.

In 1880, he successfully defended his thesis "The Ethics of Zwingli" and was granted the doctor of theology degree (*cum laude*). He accepted a call to the Christelijke Gereformeerde church (Christian Reformed) in Franeker. He served the congregation for a year and a half. His expository sermons were well received and church attendance improved. His sermons indicated that he had discovered the transformative power and reality of the Gospel. He was a born teacher and speaker. He knew how to express his thoughts in concrete form. At the age of 28 he was appointed as professor of the Theological School in Kampen. He taught dogmatics, encyclopedia of sacred theology, ethics and philosophy. Twenty years later he moved to the Free University in Amsterdam to succeed Dr. Abraham Kuyper as professor in dogmatics. In 1900 he became the editor of "de Bazuin." The articles he penned revealed his skill as a writer well versed

¹ Originally published in *Christian Renewal*, January 29, 2001.

in his subject. He was unafraid of controversy. He said about his journalistic work that whoever desires rest and peace should not become involved in the tense and busy life of the press.

Bavinck was a brilliant scholar; yet a humble man with deep feelings and a tender heart. He had an impressive knowledge of modern philosophical and religious trends as well as of the history of ideas, both Christian and non-Christian. He is one of the few 19th century Reformed theologians whose works are still studied and discussed today. He had a deep love for the Lord, His Word and His church.

Students of Bavinck's theology realize that he grieved over the divisions and the constant struggles in the church. In 1888 he delivered a remarkable address entitled "The Catholicity of Christendom and Church." It showed his broad vision of the church. He said that she "is one, and without exception comprises all believers from all nations, from all ages and from all places." Bavinck spoke of the church's captivating beauty. And he said that a Christian who isolates himself within the narrow circle of his own congregation or conventicle does not understand true catholicity and will never experience her power and comfort in his own life. A Christian cannot be narrow of heart and mind with respect to the Lord's church.

Bavinck warned against separatist and sectarian inclinations and against the temptation to turn away from public life. Although he spoke movingly about the catholicity of the church, he still remained thoroughly Reformed. He didn't hesitate to engage in dialogue to show opponents of the Christian faith why their arguments were wrong and unpersuasive. He was the first Secessionist scholar who was able to contribute on the national level. He did not become embroiled in polemics. He despised slogans. He spoke truth in love, and was always respectful. His aim was to convince his opponents of the truth of the Gospel and to do justice to their work. The latter must have made an impact as on April 26, 1906 he was inducted as a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences in recognition of his great scholarly work. In 1911 he was elected Senator. The latter act recognized his respected stature in Dutch society.

BAVINCK'S INFLUENCE

Dr. Bavinck became known beyond the Dutch borders. In 1892 he addressed the Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System, which met in Toronto. He also traveled to the United States to meet with the famous Prof. Dr. B.B. Warfield and other scholars. In 1908 Bavinck made his second trip to the United States. He was invited to deliver the Stone lectures at the Princeton Seminary. These lectures, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, were reprinted in 1953.

Bavinck left a lasting legacy with the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in North America. His most popular work in English has been his one-volume summary of his dogmatics, *Our Reasonable Faith*, which reflects his devout walk with the Lord. It was first published in 1956 and has been reprinted in a paperback version several times. It has been widely used in evangelical schools. Another booklet by Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, has been translated into English (Paideia, 1980). His dogmatics have not yet been translated in their entirety. The recently

founded Dutch Reformed Theological Translation Society is involved in the translation and publication of the complete set.²

One of Bavinck's leading disciples was Dr. Louis Berkhof, professor of systematic theology and president of Calvin Theological Seminary from 1926 to 1944. Berkhof relied heavily on Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* in his well known *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth). Dr. Henry Zwaanstra comments that in this work Berkhof often rearranged materials taken from Bavinck's volumes and occasionally introduced a new division of the material. Berkhof was also dependent on Bavinck for the names of most of the theologians he mentioned and the scriptural references cited. Through the publication of his *Systematic Theology* Berkhof became an internationally recognized Reformed theologian. It is still being used in conservative Reformed and evangelical schools until the present. And it has been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and Portuguese. In other words, through Berkhof's popular work the theology of Bavinck had a great worldwide influence.

ORGANIC INSPIRATION

Bavinck was first and foremost a "Verbi divini minister," a servant of the powerful and authoritative Word of God. He was well aware that the Bible confronts modern man with many questions. Some have suggested that Bavinck questioned the authority of Scripture. He never did. But he did contribute to a new understanding of the organic inspiration of Scripture. He said that often Christians think that the Bible suddenly dropped from heaven. He pointed out that belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture does not negate the role of human beings in its formation. Hence, he spoke about the differences in style among the authors, their natural gifts and life's experiences. Yet, he constantly emphasized the normative relevance of Scripture for every sphere of life, including science.

Inspiration extends to all parts of Scripture. It is the Word of God. Bavinck commented that it is "for that very reason also the Word for the family and society, for science and art. Scripture is a book for all humanity, in all its ranks and classes, in all its generations and nations ... It speaks in the language of common discourse, understandable to the simplest folk, clear for the educated and the uneducated alike. It uses the language of perception, which will always continue to have its place alongside that of science and the academy ... It is old, without ever aging; it always remains young and fresh; it is the language of life." Bavinck declared that the Scripture demands submission and recognition.

QUEEN OF THE SCIENCES

Theologians tend to be influenced by fashionable trends. Modern academic theologians try to avoid basing their arguments on the distinctive claims of Scripture. Although Bavinck was well versed in the modernist trends of his time, he did not succumb to their lure. He was a theologian of the Word. And what he said about theology should serve as a reminder for today's academic theologians. In 1899 he stated in a speech that a doctor in theology is a servant of the church.

² This four-volume set, *Reformed Dogmatics*, was fully translated in 2008. See hermanbavinck.org for more information.

His work consists of searching the Scriptures defending its truth, the training of men aspiring to become pastors, the perfecting of the saints in the building of the body of Christ. He wholeheartedly embraced the historic Reformed position: the Sacred Scripture is the source of theology. The Lord spoken! This is the starting point of all theology!

Bavinck was a Reformed theologian, whose dogmatics were rooted in the 16th century Reformation. According to him, no confession was as Biblical, broad, and truly catholic as the one of the historic Reformed churches. Theology is more than a discussion of church, religion, etc. In theology the church discovers her treasures. Without theology the church cannot exist. Bavinck was convinced that the Reformed churches needed an independent Reformed theology. Because, he said, "a church without a theology is a body without a head." But without faith theology cannot exist.

For Bavinck, theology was still the queen of the sciences. He fiercely resisted the secularization of theology, which was already an issue in his time. Theology is born in the faith of the church and has the knowledge of God as its content. The fear of the Lord is its key element. "Theology is speaking about God, through God and to God." It is a positive science, the knowledge of God in the face of Christ the Sent One of the Father. Religion and theology are like Mary and Martha, both are needed in the household of faith. Without the knowledge of God, there is no real life. This knowledge must be continually broadened and made clearer, and if necessary, cleansed through the Word. For this task theology is God's ordained instrument.

The study of theology is sacred work, a priestly service in the house of the Lord, a consecration of heart and mind to the glory of God. The church's and our personal confession of faith is thoroughly theological - a confession of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Doctrine, therefore, is nothing but the unfolding of what God has revealed to us in His Triune Name and sealed in baptism. Whether he addressed theologians or politicians, Bavinck was always the theologian. For example, at the 1891 Christian Social Congress, he spoke about the general Biblical principles and their practical implications, which can offer a solution for social questions.

PREACH THE WORD

Bavinck confessed that the sermon was the most important part of the worship service. The preaching of the Word of God is the determinative mark of the church by which each congregation is formed. The sacraments are subordinate to the Word. They are without value on their own. They are nothing less and nothing more than the visible Word. Protestant churches are the churches of the Word. Jesus rules through the Word and the Spirit, and especially through the spoken word. Bavinck had little patience for pastors who did not study. The congregation has the right to hear the Word of God explained. When the pulpit wants to regain its power, the preacher must be a student of the Word, search it in all its riches and depth, in its unity and diversity.

Bavinck said that we know so little about the Scripture. There are still so many hidden treasures never enjoyed as yet by the congregation. Pastors are treasure hunters. The pastor who dares to come with a sermon without diligent and proper preparation has not trembled before the

majesty of the Word! In other words: The study of the Word is the pastor's primary duty. Congregations and pastors do not forget Bavinck's message to the churches! Congregations should not be satisfied with sermonettes, stories and anecdotes. Bavinck urges pastors to hasten, so that when the Son appears, we can say to Him that we have kept His Word and have not denied His name, and that we know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Herman Bavinck did much for the renewal of Reformed theology. He was a great theologian with a childlike faith, a disciple of Christ, a willing student of the Word and a master teacher. After his death, his scholarly contributions, his broad interest in culture, his staunch support for Christian education and politics, and his defense of the Reformed faith were duly noted. But many spoke also about his modesty, sincerity, tolerance and meekness; a Christian scholar whose ambition was to live to the honor and glory of his God.