

Bavinck's Use of Reformed Sources

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Herman Bavinck had a profound knowledge of the history of theology in general and of the Reformation and Reformed Orthodoxy in particular. This chapter addresses the question of whence he derived this knowledge and how he appropriated it in his own context. I will discuss four characteristics of Bavinck's appropriation of the Reformed sources: (i) his conviction that Reformed theology is genuinely catholic yet supreme, (ii) his desire to actualize the Reformed tradition by applying its texts to his own context, (iii) the mediated character of his knowledge of the Reformed tradition, and (iv) his rather ambiguous attitude towards Reformed Orthodoxy. Some concluding observations shall then follow.

1 Catholicity and Supremacy

Bavinck saw Reformed theology as an expression of the one catholic or universal Christian faith. He connected Reformed theology with other traditions and thus his approach was essentially irenic. Nevertheless, he also presented the Reformed position as the climax of the historical development of theology and as biblical theology in its purest form. Immediately after the publication of the final volume of *Reformed Dogmatics*, he wrote in *De Bazuin* that notwithstanding the term "Reformed" in the title of his work, he had no intention of presenting an exclusively Reformed view. Rather, his intention was to present the biblical and, therefore, catholic faith of Christianity:

The Reformed doctrine is nothing but the biblical, the Christian doctrine; the presentation of the treasure of truth as it is laid down in Scripture. Drawn from Scripture and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in history, it must start to blossom and develop before our eyes into dogmatics, without artificiality or coercion. Hence it is also the theology that our time needs.¹

¹ Herman Bavinck, "Dogmatiek," *De Bazuin* 49, no. 17 (April 26, 1901): [2].

This tension in Bavinck's appropriation of the Reformed sources is typical of his work. Bavinck always looked for the broader connections yet at the same time he was convinced that the Reformed position is the best there is. In *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*, Bavinck claims that "no confession, no matter how refined by the Word of God, is identical with the whole of Christian truth. Each sect that considers its own circle as the only church of Christ and makes exclusive claims to truth will wither and die like a branch severed from its vine."² In the same work, however, he also indicts all the others—Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, Lutherans—for an explicit or implicit dualism and for annulling the true catholicity of Christianity. Indeed, "[o]vercoming this dualism completely was the task appointed to the reformer of Geneva ... it is Calvin whose labors completed the Reformation and saved Protestantism."³ For Bavinck, therefore, Reformed theology is intimately related to all other theologies but it is also better than the rest.

This tension between catholicity and supremacy also appears in his lecture for the commemoration of Calvin's four-hundredth anniversary, in which he typifies Calvin as the Aristotle and Aquinas of the Reformation:

Calvin was not the Plato or Augustine, but the Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas among the Reformers. But still, he did much more than merely repeat the sayings of his predecessors. He collected and united the scattered stones, he rounded off the ideas of the Reformation, he filled up the gaps, avoided one-sidedness, curtailed exaggeration, and with French sagacity and clearness, brought out union in the confession of truth.⁴

This lecture was delivered in London and entitled "The leading ideas in Calvin's *Institutions* [sic]," and was translated into English for this purpose by Bavinck himself. The Bavinck Archive contains a Dutch original and two English translations, one of which is in Bavinck's own handwriting. The other translation, which he probably used when he delivered the lecture in London, was most likely prepared by Ada Corah, a young lady from Birmingham who had spent three months with the Bavincks in Amsterdam.⁵ Perhaps the way in which Bavinck characterizes Calvin is also how Bavinck thought of his own

2 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," translated by John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 250–1.

3 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 237.

4 Manuscript 'De hoofdedachten van Calvijns Institutie', met ingevoegde vertaling, 'The leading ideas in Calvin's Institutions', The Bavinck Archive, 178.

5 James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 251.

endeavors. Bavinck also did more than repeat the tradition and attempted to bring together the ideas of others to a synthesis.

2 Application and Actualization

Bavinck appropriated Reformed sources by adjusting their content to the needs of his time. He was a careful student of historical theology but he also had his own agenda and applied what he found in the sources in a very particular way. This was part of the theological program of neo-Calvinism. In his article on "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands," Bavinck wrote that Abraham Kuyper, "the powerful champion of Reformed principles", did not confine himself to "a mere repristination and slavish imitation of the old Reformed models. He does not produce a new theology, but reproduces the old in an independent and sometimes in a free manner."⁶ Kuyper, according to Bavinck, was thus neither a champion of theological novelty nor an advocate of a *theologia perennis*:

The various Reformed doctrines to him are not loosely connected loci communes, but, being most intimately related; they form one world of ideas, one strictly coherent system. This system, with its firmly drawn, clear lines of thought, reproduced from the writings of the best Reformed theologians, he endeavors to accredit and recommend to the children of our age, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine.⁷

This attitude, it could be said, was not only typical for Kuyper. It also expresses Bavinck's own ideal regarding the appropriation of the Reformed sources. Sometimes Bavinck explicitly expressed his desire to go beyond the Reformed sources, as he did in his review of the Dutch translation of Calvin's *Commentary on Acts*:

Of course, it does not provide everything that we now, in our time, would want from a commentary on this book of the Bible. So many years and centuries have passed since Calvin wrote this work. And in the meantime,

⁶ Bavinck, "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands," translated by Geerhardus Vos, *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3 (1892): 226.

⁷ Bavinck, "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands," 226. In the Dutch translation which was published two years later this appraisal of Kuyper is missing, perhaps because Bavinck did not find it necessary for his Dutch audience. See also the quote from the Dutch article below, footnote 16.

the interpretation of the Bible has not stood still. We must therefore arrive at independent, scholarly explanations of Scripture that meet the height of our times. But as long as we have not made that progress, we can profit from the treasures of the past. And among the interpreters of Scripture from the previous ages Calvin stands at the pinnacle.⁸

Again, the explicit reference to the needs of his own context is striking. This sense of urgency and the desire to relate biblical theology to his own time in a critical dialogue with the Christian tradition is typical of Bavinck. He did not want merely to copy the tradition and he recognized that Calvin was not up to date. Therefore, Bavinck aimed at systematizing and independently reproducing Reformed theology. Nevertheless, it is not always easy to discern what is traditional and what is new in Bavinck's contribution to the Reformed tradition.

To cite one example, Bavinck used traditional Reformed terminology for the creation of his own theological epistemology. In *Reformed Dogmatics* he applies the Reformed Orthodox concept of the *principia* of theology as *scientia* to God's revelation. The works of God's hands thus comprise the external principle of a general or universal knowledge of God. The corresponding epistemological receptivity of the human mind comprises the internal principle of this knowledge. Both are connected to the *Logos*, by which the external world without and the laws of thought within are organically connected:

The created world is thus the *principium cognoscendi externum* of all science. But that is not enough. In order to see we need an eye. "If the eye were not related to the sun, how could we see the light?" There must be correspondence, kinship between object and subject.⁹

Accordingly, the world displays the divine *Logos* through which all things were made. Human beings, having been created in the image of God, can, therefore, discover the wisdom of God that is displayed in creation. The same *Logos* that shines in the world also sheds light in our consciousness. In this way, Bavinck gives his general epistemology a theological foundation. For this idea, Bavinck most probably depended on Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–74), the

8 Bavinck, "Review of *De Handelingen der Apostelen uitgelegd door Johannes Calvijn* (Kampen: Kok, 1899)" in *De Bazuin* 48, no. 31 (August 3, 1900): [3–4].

9 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* 4th edn 4 vol. (Kampen: Kok, 1928), 1: 207. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–0), 1: 233. Bavinck quotes Goethe in German: "War' nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, wie könnten wir das Licht erblicken?" Cf. J.W. von Goethe, "Zur Farbenlehre" in J.W. von Goethe, *Goethes Werke*, 14 vol. (Munich: Beck, 1982), 13: 324.

father of Ethical Theology. As early as 1884, Bavinck wrote that, according to Chantepie de la Saussaye, reason can be described as the ability to recognize the *Logos* in the world because of our natural relationship to the *Logos*.¹⁰

This rather free application of the Reformed tradition sometimes raised questions in Bavinck's own circles. In 1896 Bavinck spoke at a pastors conference in Groningen. The six theses, which were published beforehand, provide an example of the way in which Bavinck used Reformed terminology to make a particular point in and contribution to his own context. In the theses Bavinck stresses that all knowledge and all human science rests on God's revelation, as it is embodied in the whole cosmos. He also underlines that theology is organically related to the other sciences, maintaining an independent status due to special revelation and he intones that all human knowledge is rooted in God's archetypal knowledge:

1. Since the Divine Being is infinitely superior to all creatures and therefore in Himself unknowable to all creatures, all knowledge and all human science rests on God's conscious and free revelation.
2. The content of this revelation, taken in the broadest sense, has its archetype in the *scientia libera* in the consciousness of God; rests on the basis of the *decreta* in the will of God; is embodied in all that exists as creation, outside of God's Being through His will—that is, in the cosmos—and for all these reasons forms one organic whole.
3. All human science has that cosmos, i.e. that content of revelation, as its object and is, therefore, objectively connected in all its parts in an organic way; while subjectively, too, this organic connection of all science is demanded and confirmed by the unity of the human spirit.
4. Just as in all God's works diversity goes hand in hand with unity, so too the organic unity of science does not exclude the diversity of its parts; and theology in particular occupies a separate and independent place in the organism of science, especially by virtue of the special revelation that became necessary because of sin.
5. As a science, theology is of course distinct from the knowledge of God, which is the share of all believers; it is not practiced by the Church as an institution but as an organism; and its practice requires the application of a scholarly method; the designation of which belongs to the task of Christian philosophy.
6. The characteristic of Reformed theology lies in its theological character, and therefore places a demand on its practitioner to maintain this char-

¹⁰ Bavinck, *De Theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye: Bijdrage tot de kennis der Ethische Theologie* (Leiden: Donner, 1884), 79.

acter throughout its field, especially also in the various *loci* of dogmatics (e.g., election, justification, regeneration, baptism); the more so because the anthropological (Christological, soteriological) point of departure leads to all kinds of errors as history shows.¹¹

Here, Bavinck's use of Reformed terminology and presentation of his ideas as self-evidently flowing from the Reformed tradition is plain. Expressions like "archetype in the free knowledge (*scientia libera*)" of God, the decrees of his will and "special revelation that is necessary because of sin" all belong to the standard Reformed vocabulary. And the term "Divine Being" (*goddelijk wezen*) would not at all sound strange to those acquainted with the first article of the *Belgic Confession*.¹² Bavinck, however, appropriates these terms from the Reformed tradition in a specific way by linking them to his epistemological views. A newspaper report of the conference summarizes one of Bavinck's answers during question-time:

Indeed, not only theology, but all science that we have, is based on revelation. Why? Because all science in every field has to do with the revelation of God. God created everything through the Logos; that is, God created after having thought.... All things are founded on the thoughts of God; in a flower, in an animal, the thought of God is inlaid.¹³

Bavinck thus argues that science is about penetrating what God has thought regarding the things that he created. He connects this with his fundamental conviction about the relationship between creation and redemption: Christ did not come in a new human nature but assumed human nature as it was originally created. Grace restores nature—the incarnation does not introduce a new substance into creation. Bavinck even goes so far as to state that "spoken with respect: creation was God's first incarnation."¹⁴ Although Bavinck

11 Bavinck, "Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie" in *De Heraut* (October 25, 1896), 983. Cf. Henk van den Belt, "Overcoming the World: Bavinck on Faith and Knowledge," in *Unio cum Christo* 7, no. 2 (2021): 31–2.

12 The last thesis especially fences off Reformed theology from alternative positions that Bavinck typifies as anthropological, Christological. With regard to the latter, he probably has in mind the emphasis of the theologians of the so-called Groningen School, according to which "the essence of Christianity does not consist in doctrine, but in the Person of Christ". Bavinck, "Recent Dogmatic Thought," 214.

13 Bavinck, "Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie," 983.

14 Bavinck, "Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie," 983.

does not repeat this bold expression elsewhere in his theological works,¹⁵ it plainly conveys his desire to connect God's general revelation in the works of his hands with God's special revelation in Christ.

As such, this lecture also provides a good example of Bavinck's use of the organic principle in his trinitarian epistemology. There was quite a bit of discussion about this at the conference, especially from Thomas Bos (1846–1916), a minister in the Reformed Secessionist congregation in Bedum, Groningen. Bos and his congregation had joined the Union of the *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* in 1892, but he had objected to some Kuyper's doctrines at the synod of 1896 and had published these objections a year later.¹⁶ Bos was one of the curators of the Theological School in Kampen, so there is a sense in which Bos speaks as Bavinck's boss. And according to the report in *De Heraut*, Bos raised objections to almost all of Bavinck's theses. He wanted to make a stronger distinction between revelation and creation and emphasized that theology is independent of the other sciences. For Bos, the relationship of theology to the sciences is not organic, because theology has God for its object and the other sciences the cosmos. Moreover, he objected to Bavinck's thesis that theology is not practised by the church as an institution, but by the church as an organism. This distinction, according to Bos, is unscriptural. He also provocatively asked whether theology was safer at the Free University or at the Theological School. The criticism of this village-pastor expressed a concern about the Kuyperian influence on Bavinck.¹⁷ Bos picked up on the way Bavinck appropriated Reformed sources in a very particular way, actualizing and applying them to current issues. Bos's concern was thus that, under the influence of Kuyper, Bavinck overemphasized general revelation and downplayed the unique character of theology which derives from special revelation.

The fact that Bavinck presents his epistemology in typical Reformed terminology makes it rather difficult to discern the gap between the Reformed tradition and Bavinck's own views. Bavinck undoubtedly believed that his epistemological ideas were in line with the Augustinian and Calvinian tradition and he presents his appropriation of these sources as self-evidently flowing

15 Bavinck's use of the incarnational analogy in his bibliology, ecclesiology, and eschatology is nonetheless noteworthy. See Bruce R. Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 131–66.

16 Thomas Bos, *Negen dogmatische onderwerpen, op eenvoudige wijze voor het Gereformeerde volk verklaard en verdedigd* (Leiden: Donner, 1897). The topics were election and reprobation, calling, regeneration, faith, justification, being saved and being lost, Word and sacraments, baptism, and the church.

17 Tensions between the Kampen Theological School and the Free University of Amsterdam lay in the background of the debate.

from the tradition. Yet he wanted to update the Reformed prolegomena and apply it in his own context. And Bavinck's epistemology is a typically modern appropriation of the Reformed tradition, with its broadening of the concept of revelation and application of the incarnational analogy to creation. And because Bavinck was revered as an authority in his own circles, his views were often just accepted as a faithful representation of the Reformed position in the new context. But the rare moments of controversy and dispute—such as the debate with Thomas Bos in Groningen—reveal that the legitimacy of this appropriation was less self-evident than Bavinck suggested.

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck often first summarizes the Reformed view as the pinnacle of the historical development and then smoothly and unnoticeably moves forward to his own application of the tradition. One must be aware in these cases that it is difficult to discern where the historian of theology ends and where the systematic theologian begins. In general, it is not so easy to interpret the parts of Bavinck's writings where he sympathetically summarizes the views of others. This is particularly the case when he makes these slight emendations to the Reformed tradition. Precisely for this reason it is important to assess the specifically historical claims carefully.

For instance, Bavinck applies the classical notion of the *sensus divinitatis* and the *semen religionis* to his view of general revelation and then extends both to the work of the Holy Spirit in other religions. He states that in the past, founders of non-Christian religions (such as Mohammed) were considered enemies of God and under the influence of the devil. Bavinck thus applies the notion of common grace not only to what is true, good and beautiful in creation but also to what is true, good, and beautiful in pagan religions:

[A]n operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace is discernable not only in science and art, morality and law, but also in the religions. [...] The founders of religion, after all, were not imposters or agents of Satan, but men who, being religiously inclined, had to fulfil a mission to their time and people and often exerted a beneficial influence on the life of peoples.¹⁸

This departs from traditional Reformed theology. In traditional Reformed theology the notion of general revelation and of the sense of the divine mainly served as an argument that all humans beings are without any excuse for their

18 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1: 291; cf. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 319. See also Henk van den Belt, "Religion as Revelation? The Development of Herman Bavinck's View from a Reformed Orthodox to a Neo-Calvinist Approach," *The Bavinck Review* 4 (2013): 9–31.

sins and unbelief. Of course, Bavinck does not deny this but he also turns the argument around and connects the rise of the Islam to the Holy Spirit. It would be very difficult to find any confessionally Reformed author before him who made the same claim. Yet this claim, just like his epistemology, flows from the neo-Calvinist emphasis on common grace and general revelation.

In any case, Bavinck does not merely repeat and summarize his Reformed sources; he adjusts them to what he saw as the needs of his time. And Bavinck was aware that he was doing this. Bavinck writes at the end of his article "Theologische richtingen in Nederland," a Dutch translation of his previously published "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands":

For almost a century, Reformed theology has been left without academic practice. It is now suddenly faced with all kinds of mighty problems, which in the past did not exist for it at all or in a much simpler form. It must be transferred into this century and applied to the various questions which are now being raised from all sides. Other movements, which have successively appeared in our fatherland, have turned out to be powerless to turn back unbelief and to preserve faith itself. They also drifted on the current and did not possess the power of resistance that is needed against both revolution and evolution. May it then be given to the Reformed Churches to give birth to a theology, which on the one hand preserves the treasure of the past, but on the other hand also recognizes the rights of the present and puts belief and knowledge back in the right relationship to each other.¹⁹

Bavinck could, nevertheless, have been a bit more explicit and open about the process by which this adaptation obtains. Too often he gives the impression that he is just reiterating traditional Reformed theology. One must, therefore, keep in mind Bavinck's own theological agenda when considering the appropriation of his Reformed sources.

3 The Mediation of the Reformed Tradition

In the foreword for the Leiden *Synopsis of Purer Theology* which he edited during his pastorate in Franeker, Bavinck wrote that "the same principles of

19 Bavinck, "Theologische richtingen in Nederland," *Tijdschrift voor Gereformeerde Theologie* 1 (1894), 187–8. The original English version ends with a lengthy appraisal of Kuyper quoted in part above. These final paragraphs are replaced in the Dutch publication by this briefer and more general statement.

doctrine that have been confessed by the *Ecclesia Reformata Separata* (Seceded Reformed Church) in our country for a long time, are beginning to revive outside of her too in these days,"²⁰ thus connecting his edition of the *Synopsis* with the recent Kuyperian revival of Reformed theology in the Netherlands. In a letter written to his friend Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936) Bavinck reflects explicitly on the influence of the *Synopsis*:

Some time ago I accepted the responsibility for the sixth edition of the *Synopsis purioris theologiae* of Walaeus and his colleagues that was recently published by Donner. I did this to study Reformed theology a bit at the same time. I am better versed in it now than before. And it has had quite an influence on my own theological perspective: in my view, a positive one. Perhaps you are of a different opinion. I see clearer than before that between (let me use terms that are familiar to me) Reformation and Revolution on every domain in both principle and method, in the view of God, humankind, world, etc. every mediation (*Vermittlung*) or reconciliation is impossible. If I do anything, I think about this issue now. I am considering the principles (*Prinzipienlehre*) of theology. I have to get this somewhat settled first. Before I ever embark on some publication of my own, I have to know what I want and where I stand. Previously I did not know that and I did not learn that in Leiden either. It is really time for me to come to grips with this.²¹

Apparently, the young pastor in Franeker still wanted to get more acquainted with the Reformed tradition. The years immediately following his studies at Leiden were thus the most formative in this regard. These are the years in which he lectured on systematic theology and on ethics, writing the manuscripts that led to the publication of *Reformed Dogmatics*, gaining a profound knowledge of the sources of the Reformed tradition. Bavinck's acquisition of a more intimate knowledge of Reformed theology was thus inspired by Abraham Kuyper's retrieval of Calvinism. Yet it is not so easy to reconstruct how he exactly gained his knowledge of these sources.

20 Johannes Polyander, André Rivet, Antonius Walaeus, Antonius Thysius, *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae, disputationibus quinquaginta duabus comprehensa*, ed. Herman Bavinck, 6th edn (Leiden: Donner, 1881), VI–VII. For a translation, see Henk van den Belt and Mathilde de Vries-van Uden, "Herman Bavinck's Preface to the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*," *The Bavinck Review* 8 (2017): 101–14.

21 The quotation is from a letter from Bavinck dated March 7th, 1882. Jan de Bruijn and George Harinck, ed., *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875–1921* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 100.

The way in which Bavinck refers to his sources, especially in *Reformed Dogmatics* but also in *Reformed Ethics*, suggests dependence on, or at least use of, secondary as well as primary sources. In general, we see two different kinds of references: either a direct quotation in the main text (often with some commentary) or a list of references. In a sense, this resembles Bavinck's use of Scripture.²² Sometimes there is just a list of important prooftexts, and only occasionally does Bavinck offer commentary on them. To give one example, in the section on providence in *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck refers to Calvin 9 times. On 7 occasions, the reference forms part of a list, which includes Augustine, Aquinas, Zwingli, Zanchius, Polanus, the *Synopsis*, and many other (mainly Reformed Orthodox) sources. There are two places however, in which he refers exclusively to Calvin and both are interesting.

In the first, Bavinck states that God's providence extends to all creatures and then writes, "what is small or large to Him who is only great? In the context of the cosmos that which is small is as important in its setting as that which is large, as indispensable and as necessary, and often of even greater significance and of weightier consequence."²³ The footnote suggests that this is a quote from Calvin cited in Paul Henry's *The Life and times of John Calvin*. Yet on the page to which Bavinck refers, Henry expresses his amazement that Calvin should be concerned with all kinds of goings on in Geneva:

We read with astonishment essays, in his hand-writing, on questions of pure administration, on all kinds of matters of police, and on the modes of protection from fire; as well as on legal proceedings, instructions for the inspector of buildings, for the artillery superintendent, and the keepers of the watch-towers; all which shows that, to powerful minds, the little is, in its place, as important and necessary as the great; because that all things are equally little and equally great in their presence, as before the eye of God.²⁴

The reference, therefore, is to Calvin's concerns rather than God's providence. Though Calvin undoubtedly also believed that everything whether large or

22 See the essay by Koert van Bekkum in this volume.

23 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2: 606. In the Dutch 'Him' is capitalized and refers to God. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* 2: 566.

24 Paul Henry, *The Life and Times of John Calvin*, trans. Henry Stebbing, 2 vol. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 1: 358. Cf. Henry, *Das Leben Johann Calvins des Großen Reformators, mit benutzung der handschriftlichen Urkunden, vornehmlich der Genfer und Züricher Bibliothek, entworfen, nebst einem Anhang bisher ungedruckter Briefe und andere Belege*, 3 vol. (Hamburg: Perthes, 1835–44), 2: 67.

small is in God's hand, that is not what Henry says. This mistake indicates that Bavinck in this case depended on a rather loose reference in a secondary source – perhaps from one of his annotations about the book – to make his point rather than on a primary source.

The second reference is an extensive French quotation from Calvin's, *Contre la secte des libertins*. Reflecting on the relationship between God as the primary cause and free created agents as secondary causes, Bavinck says that they are not mere instruments, but “genuine causes with a nature, vitality, spontaneity, manner of working, and law of their own.” Thereupon follows a reference to Calvin, without further introduction:

Satan and evildoers are not so effectively the instruments of God that they do not also act in their own behalf. For we must not suppose that God works in an iniquitous man as if he were a stone or a piece of wood, but He uses him as a thinking creature, according to the quality of his nature, which He has given him. Thus, when we say that God works in evildoers, that does not prevent them from working also in their own behalf.²⁵

Here, Bavinck is influenced by Auguste Lecerf's *Le déterminisme et la responsabilité dans le système de Calvin* (1895). He has the same quote and some other similar references and the line of interpretation is very similar. Yet Bavinck does not mention Lecerf at all.

Both of these examples also illustrate a more general point, namely, that when Bavinck relates his own position explicitly to one of his Reformed sources, he often is simultaneously assessing the interpretation of that quote by others. In other words, the line between primary and secondary sources is blurred in Bavinck's historical reflections. Here, it is important to note that Bavinck's access to the primary sources is often mediated by other works, and Bavinck often summarizes the Reformed position in his own words and lists the relevant sources rather than quoting them. For example, in *Reformed Dogmatics* there are 73 references to the Leiden *Synopsis*, but most of them are part of a list including references to other works. Most commonly, he only refers to an entire disputation or to one or more theses within a disputation.²⁶ It would be interesting to know what procedure Bavinck followed when compiling these lists. Did he have all the sources on his desk? Or did he rely on

²⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2: 614.

²⁶ Van den Belt and De Vries, “Herman Bavinck's Preface,” 106.

anthologies, such as Heinrich Heppes *Reformed Dogmatics*, merely copying the *Belegstellen* for a certain point he wishes to make?²⁷

Another consideration is that Bavinck often wrote summaries of the books he read. An example of this procedure can be found in a manuscript in the Bavinck Archive, where Bavinck writes about the deepest ground of faith: "I do have grounds for my faith, but not for my last and deepest ground, which would otherwise not be the deepest. The only question is: where is that ground? What you call my subjectivism is nothing but the assertion of agreement between what the Holy Spirit reveals in reason and conscience and what he revealed through the apostles."²⁸ At first glance, this seems to be the voice of Bavinck himself, writing in first person. A more careful look, however, reveals that he is summarizing a public letter of Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920) which addressed the views of Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811–85).

Scholten was the leading figure of Dutch liberal (or modern) theology. After a brief professorate in Franeker, Scholten taught dogmatics at the University of Leiden from 1843. Together with the Old Testament scholar Abraham Kuenen (1828–91), he led the modern wing in the Dutch Reformed Church, characterized by a historical critical approach of Scripture and an anti-supernatural stance. Both were Bavinck's teachers when he studied in Leiden. Scholten had a profound knowledge of the Reformed tradition and connected Spinoza's philosophy to the Reformed doctrine of predestination in a kind of ontological determinism. In the third edition of Scholten's magnum opus, *The Doctrine of the Reformed Church*, Scholten refuted Chantepie de la Saussaye criticisms in a lengthy preface, to which Chantepie de la Saussaye subsequently responded in his public letter.

One of the points Scholten raised in the preface had been the latent subjectivism in Chantepie de la Saussaye's theological position. Chantepie de la Saussaye founded his faith in Scripture on the human and, therefore, subjective—even mystical—conviction that these words were divine. Chantepie de la Saussaye had stated that we "cannot prove our right (to believe); we cannot indicate a foundation for our final and deepest foundation. We have no other right than this, that God gives us to believe these

27 For example, in the section on providence, Bavinck includes a quote from Johannes Wollebius (1589–1629) which is found in Heinrich Heppes anthology: "Providentia Dei causas secundas non tollit sed ponit" (God's providence does not cancel but posits secondary causes). Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2: 574; cf. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2: 614.

28 "Manuscript, eerste zin 'L.R. 82. Israels geest, leven, streven is in d. Bijbel uitgedrukt," Bavinck Archive, 244. The letters "L.R." in the archive entry refer to Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Leven en rigting: vier voorlezingen over godsdienstige vraagstukken van dezen tijd* (Rotterdam: Tassemeijer, 1865).

things, and thereby enjoins us to confess them.”²⁹ According to Scholten, this implied gross subjectivism because anyone who thought himself inspired would have the right to express unbridled fantasies as divine oracles on the same ground. In his public letter, Chantepie de la Saussaye responded that what Scholten called “subjectivism and mysticism in its full force, is nothing else than the assertion of the correspondence between what the Spirit reveals in reason and conscience ... with what according to Scripture was revealed by God’s ambassadors, the prophets and apostles.”³⁰

The relevance of this background is that it shows that Bavinck was just copying and reiterating Chantepie de la Saussaye in preparation for his critical engagement with Chantepie de la Saussaye’s theology. In his *The Theology of Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye* (1884),³¹ Bavinck actually rejects these views with reference to these same passages. Specifically, Bavinck refutes the implication that the ultimate foundation of faith is not Scripture but the witness of the Spirit:

This testimony of the Holy Spirit has a different place for [Chantepie] de la Saussaye than in Reformed Theology. For him it is not only an instrument for, but also the basis of faith in Holy Scripture. [...] Belief in *theopneustia* and the authority of Scripture now rests on the perfect harmony between Scripture and conscience, between the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the conscience and in Scripture, between the needs and demands of conscience and the facts of revelation. [...] In this way a dangerous transition has been made and the center of gravity has completely shifted from the Scriptures to conscience.³²

Thus, it would seem that manuscripts such as this have to be handled with care because they do not necessarily convey Bavinck’s own views.³³ It also

29 Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, ‘Bijdrage tot kenschetsing van den strijd in de Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk’ in *Ernst en vrede: Maandschrift voor de Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk* 2 (1854), 284. Quoted by Jan Scholten, *Voorrede tot de derde uitgave van De leer der Hervormde Kerk* (Arnhem: Kemink, 1853), 8 n. 1.

30 Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Openbare brief van D. Chantepie de la Saussaye aan J.H. Scholten, naar aanleiding van de voorrede van den 3en druk van De leer der Hervormde Kerk* (Arnhem: Kemink, 1855), 59–60.

31 Bavinck, *De Theologie van Prof. Dr. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye: Bijdrage tot de kennis der Ethische Theologie* (Leiden: Donner, 1884).

32 Bavinck, *Theologie van Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 55–6.

33 All the same, some further comments are necessary on this specific topic. Although the quote “what you call my subjectivism” is not Bavinck speaking in the first person, Bavinck comes rather close to Chantepie de la Saussaye in his own later reflections on

demonstrates that in his assessment of the Reformed tradition—even with regards to essential elements like the authority of Scripture and the witness of the Spirit—Bavinck was simultaneously in discussion with contemporary theological voices.

The relation between the manuscript in the archive and the monograph on Chantepie de la Saussaye is also representative of the way in which Bavinck prepared himself for the task of writing inasmuch as it shows how Bavinck would compile quotations and summarize what he was reading.³⁴ So, when we relate Bavinck to the Reformed tradition, we should not only compare his views with the sources to which he refers but also try to find out how the sources reached him, either firsthand, via anthologies, or through scholarly secondary sources.

4 Bavinck and Reformed Orthodoxy

Finally, it is important to notice that Bavinck had a particular view on the relationship between the Reformation and subsequent developments in Reformed theology. In this regard, he was influenced by scholars in the Schleiermacherian stream, such as the Swiss theologian Alexander Schweizer (1808–88) who identified the Reformed doctrine of predestination as the material principle of the Reformed theology, and Heinrich Heppe (1820–79), who was critical of the later development of Reformed theology. Undoubtedly Scholten also

the authority of Scripture and the witness of the Spirit. In the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895) Bavinck asserts that a Christian can only explain why he believes with a reference to Scripture as the final ground of faith. “But if the next question is ‘Why do you believe that Holy Scripture is the word of God?’ a Christian cannot answer.” Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1: 559; cf. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 591. According to Bavinck, the soul’s bond with Scripture is mystical in nature. Bavinck then refers to the discussion between Scholten and Chantepie de la Saussaye in a footnote. Although Bavinck does not replicate Chantepie de la Saussaye’s position that the human conscience is the ground of faith and pays more attention to the proofs for the authority of Scripture than the father of the Dutch Ethical theology did, he definitely seems to have moved in this direction between 1884 and 1895. This example, therefore, illustrates that the line of division between what Bavinck deemed to be acceptably Reformed sometimes shifted over the years.

34 The manuscript of *Reformed Ethics* suggests a similar procedure. And perhaps we should be more cautious about these sources given the warning of Coenraad Bernardus Bavinck (1866–1941): “The legacy of my highly esteemed, late brother, contains many manuscripts, as could be expected. Of all these, he explicitly said that they should not be published after his death”. Coenraad B. Bavinck, “Voorrede bij den tweeden druk,” in Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de christelijke religie naar gereformeerde belijdenis*, 2nd edn (Kampen: Kok, 1931), [8].

influenced the way in which Bavinck assessed the Reformed tradition but the influence of his favorite Leiden professor, Abraham Kuenen (1828–91), might even have been the strongest, as we see that Bavinck applied the historical-critical method in his reception of the history of Reformed theology. Bavinck had an eye for the continuity between the intentions of the earlier generation of Reformers and the intentions of the post-Reformation Reformed Orthodox divines. Yet Bavinck was also aware of important discontinuities in method and content across these periods.

The claim made by Willem J. van Asselt in his *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, that Bavinck “saw no break between the use of scholastic method and the ‘simple treatment of dogma as we find it in Calvin’”³⁵ cannot be substantiated. On the contrary, Bavinck writes that when the scholastic method surfaced toward the end of the sixteenth century, the interest in the simple treatment of dogma as we find it in, among others, Calvin, had already been lost.³⁶ In his survey of the development of Reformed dogmatics he writes that its positive maturation “reached its zenith and at the same time its terminus” in the confessional statements of the seventeenth century.³⁷ In that century, the decline of Reformed theology began on account of the influence of mysticism, Rationalism, Arminianism and Cartesianism, and by 1750, Reformed theology everywhere had fallen into decay.³⁸ Perhaps Bavinck’s view of the development of Reformed theology after its confessional codification can best be summarized by the claim in the *Certainty of Faith* that the joyful note of assurance “echoed on into the time of the Canons of Dordt. But then gradually it weakened, and uncertainty and fear entered the language of faith. The faith of the sixteenth century became the orthodoxy of the seventeenth. People no longer confessed their beliefs, but they only believed their confessions.”³⁹

A careful comparison between the first and second editions of the *Reformed Dogmatics* helps us understand how Bavinck’s reception of Reformed Orthodoxy developed over the years. There are not many new references to Reformed Orthodox sources but Bavinck’s additions often nuance the traditional view.

35 Willem J. van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 25.

36 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 180.

37 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 183.

38 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 183, 189.

39 Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catherines: Paideia Press, 1980), 61. In the second version and in *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck mentions the name of Alexander Schweizer for this quote, without mentioning an exact reference. Cf. Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, ed. Henk van den Belt (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2017), 171; *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 106.

Discussing the doctrine of providence, for instance, Bavinck explains why it is a mixed article that can also be known from general revelation. He then proceeds to emphasize the difference between viewing providence as a mixed article and the Christian belief that divine providence is a source of consolation and hope. Yet in the second edition of *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck adds a further comment that Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89) was correct “in closely linking faith in providence to faith in redemption. In the case of the Christian, belief in God’s providence is not a tenet of natural theology to which saving faith is later mechanically added.”⁴⁰ Is this an implicit point of critique? Some of the representatives of Reformed Orthodoxy held a view similar to the one Bavinck would seem to reject. Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617–66), for instance, asserted that the heathens first had to be turned to humanity—belief in one God, in providence and in his revelation—before turning them to Scripture and the gospel.⁴¹ Hoornbeeck thus regards providence as a tenet of natural theology. The insertion of the Ritschlian correction to this view would suggest that Bavinck’s views on Reformed Orthodox doctrine of providence had shifted somewhat between the publication of the first and second editions of *Reformed Dogmatics*.

This is also confirmed by the way Bavinck often uses the term ‘mechanical’ to characterize the position of the Reformed Orthodox when he assesses it negatively. Bavinck’s contrast of a mechanical view of the inspiration of Scripture with an organic view of the same provides a good example. Another example is Bavinck’s criticism of pietism. Bavinck asserts that Reformed pietism connected assurance of salvation to faith “from the outside, mechanically, by special revelations.”⁴² In the secondary literature the term ‘organic’ has recently attracted much attention.⁴³ It has even become one of the main lenses through which Bavinck’s theology is assessed. In light of that emphasis, it is important to realize that the organic-mechanical distinction was rather

40 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2: 594.

41 Johannes Hoornbeeck, *On the Conversion of Indians and Heathens: An Annotated Translation of De Conversione Indorum et Gentilium* (1669), ed. Ineke Loots and Joke Spaans (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 39–40.

42 Bavinck, *Certainty*, 44, 85.

43 Eglinton connects Bavinck’s organic motif to his Trinitarian doctrine of God. “One may say that for Bavinck, a theology of Trinity ad intra requires a cosmology of organicism ad extra.” James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 68. Bruce Pass draws attention to the derivation of the organic motif from its use in German idealism. Pass, “Trinity or German Idealism? Reconsidering the Origins of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 76, no. 1 (2023): 56–70.

common in the Dutch context and that ‘mechanical’ was used in particular to criticize the Reformed orthodox doctrine of inspiration. Thus, Scholten writes that the whole Scripture was identified with God’s Word “in accordance with this mechanical representation of the biblical *theopneustia*.”⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Bavinck claimed that the mechanical view failed “to do justice to the activity of the secondary authors.”⁴⁵ He acknowledges that the term “organic inspiration” is misused to reject the special guidance of the Spirit in the writing of Scripture, but also warns against the mechanical notion of revelation that “detaches the Bible writers from their personality, as it were, and lifts them out of the history of their time. In the end it allows them to function only as mindless, inanimate instruments in the hand of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁶ Bavinck would have been familiar with these terms not only from Scholten and the Ethical theologians who responded to Scholten but also from someone like Isaïc da Costa (1798–1860) who wrote that in the process of inspiration he assumes an “intimate organic operation” by the Spirit and not a “mere mechanical, external influence” or an “immediate literal inspiration.”⁴⁷ The metaphors of a machine and a living organism were typical of the context of the Industrial Revolution. It might be true that Bavinck elaborated on the term “organic” in his own creative way but it is hardly unique. The use of mechanical in any case is often a denominator of his criticism of Reformed Orthodoxy.

In general, Bavinck seems to have become less positive about Reformed Orthodoxy in the second edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. There are, nevertheless, some instances in which he returns to the traditional terminology of Reformed Orthodoxy where he had previously departed from it. One example of this is his discussion of the doctrine of God. In the first edition Bavinck rejects the common distinction between communicable and incommunicable divine attributes and expresses his preference for the term “virtues,” which resemble God’s names:

The word attributes is the least preferable, because it always makes one think of a being to which attributes are added; the name of virtues, on the other hand, finds support in Scripture itself. [...] In each of God’s virtues

44 Jan Scholten, *De leer der Hervormde Kerk in hare grondbeginselen: Uit de bronnen voorgesteld en beoordeeld* (Leiden: P. Engels, 1848), 1: 75.

45 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 430.

46 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 431.

47 Da Costa writes this in the context of the acceptance of a literary interdependence of the four gospels. Isaïc da Costa, “Recensie van J. J. van Oosterzee, *Het leven van Jezus, eerste deel, eerste en tweede stuk* (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1846),” *Algemeen letterlievend maandschrift* 45 (1847), 370.

both his absolute supremacy above and his kinship with the creature are discernible; every attribute is incommunicable in one sense and communicable in another.⁴⁸

In the second edition, these paragraphs are rewritten. The critical remark about the term attributes is deleted and the common distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes is reintroduced. Bavinck also adds a group of attributes that reveal God's perfection and blessedness.⁴⁹ This example shows that Bavinck continued to reflect on the older Reformed terminology and did not always distance himself further from Reformed Orthodoxy in his later years.

Nonetheless, in Bavinck's later works there are fewer references to Reformed Orthodox sources than in earlier ones. This might be partially due to the fact that Reformed Orthodox divines had little to say about disciplines like psychology and pedagogy, which attracted so much of Bavinck's attention. In works like *Beginnselen der psychologie*, *Paedagogische beginselen*, and *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck is mainly in conversation with contemporary authors. Even in *The Wonderful Works of God*, Bavinck sticks to the Bible and confessional statements, mentioning the Reformers in passing, but none of the Reformed Orthodox. For Bavinck,

These older works, incidentally, are no longer of our time. The difference in language and style, in frame of mind and manner of speech, make them strange to us. [...] We are children of a new time and live in a different era. And the desire to maintain these older forms, and to persist with the old simply because it is old, is troublesome and pointless. But not only is this desire useless, it also contradicts our own confession. It is precisely because the Christian faith is the recognition of a work of God a work that began in the dawn of time and continues in this era—that its essence is a fruit of the ages, while its form is the fruit of this age. However much good Francken's *Kern*, Marck's *Merg* and Brakel's *Reasonable Service* affected in former days, they can no longer be brought to new life. They do not speak to the younger generation, and they involuntarily give rise to the thought that Christianity no longer fits in this present era.⁵⁰

48 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1st edn, 4 vol. (Kampen: Bos, 1895–1901), 2: 101–02.

49 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2: 136.

50 Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession* (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), xxxii. The references are to Aegidius Francken (1676–1743), Johannes à Marck (1656–1731), and

This is quite a statement for a theologian who cited the *oude schrijvers* (as the more pietistic authors of the Dutch Further Reformation were often called) so extensively in the first edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. This statement also sheds light on Bavinck's often discussed book-sale. Valentijn Hepp writes that after finishing the second edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck only worked on dogmatics in preparation for his classes. "Some years before his death he even got rid of the most important dogmatic works, including especially the older Reformed theology, 'because,' he told me, 'I don't do that anymore.'"⁵¹ This cannot mean that Bavinck did not do dogmatics anymore; plainly he did.⁵² But it might imply that Bavinck was no longer interested in Reformed Orthodoxy because he felt that it did not really meet the needs of the time. Bavinck's later discomfort with Reformed Orthodoxy should not be overlooked or ignored.

5 Conclusion

In summation, Bavinck regards the Reformed tradition as truly catholic yet supreme. He held that Reformed theology should be biblical in the first place, meet the needs of the present time, and not merely reprimatinate older views. This agenda, however, complicates Bavinck's relationship to the Reformed tradition. While Bavinck is a faithful student of historical theology, he also applies what he finds to his own context and implements his own theological agenda. This can be seen in the way he clothed his constructive theological contribution to modern issues like epistemology or the history of religions in traditional Reformed terminology. In his own day, this sometimes raised serious critical questions and left his audience with the feeling that they did not exactly know where Bavinck stood. In part, this is because Bavinck would often summarize the history of dogma (presenting the Reformed position as its rather natural pinnacle) but then smoothly and unnoticeably proceed to

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), the works referred to are Aegidius Francken, *Kern der christelyke leere* (Dordrecht: J. van Braam, 1713), Johannes à Marck, *Het merch der christelyke godtsgeleertheit* (Amsterdam: Gerardus Borstius, 1705), which was À Marck's own translation from the original Latin: Johannes à Marck, *Christianae theologiae medulla didactico-eleumaticae* (Amsterdam: Gerardus Borstius, 1690), and Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Redelyke Godts-dienst* (The Hague: Cornelis van Dyck, 1700).

51 Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921), 317–18.

52 Cf. Bavinck, *The Foremost Problems in Contemporary Dogmatics: On Faith, Knowledge, and the Christian Tradition* ed. and trans. Gert de Kok and Bruce R. Pass (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2024).

his own re-appropriation of the tradition. Yet in part it must also be attributed to the fact that Bavinck's reception of the Reformed tradition is often filtered. Finally, Bavinck maintained an ambiguous attitude towards Reformed Orthodoxy. Bavinck often expressed a lack of enthusiasm about Reformed Orthodox theology because he felt that it did not really meet the needs of his own time. Bavinck's appropriation of the Reformed sources can, therefore, be most adequately summarized in his own words in the preface to *The Wonderful Works of God*: "Thus, there is an urgent need for a work that takes the place of these works of the fathers and brings forth old truth in a form that corresponds with the demands of this era."⁵³

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53 Bavinck, *Wonderful Works of God*, xxxii.

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