

# Overcoming the World: Bavinck on Faith and Knowledge

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## Abstract

After a short biographical introduction, this article argues that Herman Bavinck's Reformed theology displays his appreciation for the catholicity of the church. This attitude appears most strongly in his interest in epistemology. For Bavinck, faith and knowledge form an essential unity. He intends to avoid subjectivity while incorporating the modern epistemological turn to the human subject. This is his most original and most important contribution to theology. According to Bavinck, faith overcomes the world by viewing it as God's fallen creation on its way to final restoration through Christ's redemption.

The appendix offers the first English translation of thus far unnoticed theses on faith and knowledge.

## Keywords

*Herman Bavinck, neo-Calvinism, theological catholicity, Christian epistemology, general revelation, subjectivity*

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**T**he only printed sermon by Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), who died one hundred years ago, is on the “victory that overcomes the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).<sup>1</sup> It is one of his favorite texts, often quoted by him to underline the calling of a Christian to serve God in this world. Bavinck’s theology helps us to reflect on and to shape a Christian worldview. The way in which faith gains the victory, however, is not by a pure antithesis. Bavinck acknowledged that this present world is occupied by the prince of darkness, but he maintained nevertheless that the world is God’s good creation that once again will be restored to its original destiny. Therefore, the way to overcome the world is by faith that acknowledges that the world belongs to God.

One of the most striking ways in which Bavinck developed this fundamental insight was by connecting human knowledge with divine revelation and by assessing epistemological issues from a theological viewpoint.

## **I. Biography**

Herman Bavinck was born on December 13, 1854. His father, Jan Bavinck (1826–1909), was a pastor in the Reformed church, which originated from the Dutch Secession. As a teenager he was sent to the Hasselman Institute, a school close to Almkerk, where his father pastored at the time and where the students and teachers conversed in French. The fact that Jan Bavinck—and other leading figures of the Secession—sent their children to this Reformed boarding school illustrates a positive attitude toward culture, as James Eglinton highlights in his critical biography.<sup>2</sup>

Bavinck decided to study theology at Leiden University, where the radical liberal theologian Jan Hendrik Scholten (1811–1885) was one of his teachers. Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891), one of the founders of the historical-critical method, made such an impression on Bavinck that the latter always had a portrait of him in his own study. Though Bavinck disagreed with the presuppositions and conclusions of higher criticism, he learned much from its methodology. The correspondence with his friend, the Arabist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), provides a glimpse into Bavinck’s thoughts

<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs: Leerrede over 1 Joh. 5:4b, uitgesproken in de Burgwalkerk te Kampen den 30sten Juni 1901* (Kampen: Kok, 1901). For an English translation see Herman Bavinck, “The World-Conquering Power of Faith,” trans. John Bolt, in John Bolt, *Bavinck and the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 237–54. A translation is also offered by James Eglinton in *Herman Bavinck on Preaching and Preachers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 67–83.

<sup>2</sup> James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 47.



**HERMAN BAVINCK**

1854-1921

and feelings. Shortly after completing his studies, he wrote, “If everything were as calm and as peaceful internally, as it is externally around me—I would be truly happy.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1881, Bavinck became a pastor in Franeker in one of the congregations of the Secession and accepted an appointment by the synod of these churches as professor at the theological school in Kampen after only one year in the ministry. Next to dogmatics and ethics, he also taught philosophy, Greek, and theological encyclopedia. In Kampen he married Johanna Adriana Schippers (1868–1942); their marriage was blessed with the birth of a daughter, Johanna Geziena Bavinck (1894–1971).

Initially, Bavinck had to lecture so much that he was hardly able to publish, although he did organize his lessons such that he could use the material for publication. After the first ten busy years, he managed to write *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895–1901), his *Principles of Psychology* (1897), and a complete manuscript only recently rediscovered and published as *Reformed Ethics* (2019). He further published some of his lectures, such as *The Certainty of Faith* (1901) and *Creation or Development* (1901), and even a meditative booklet, *The Sacrifice of Praise* (1901). He ends this encouragement for young adults who have publicly professed their faith and been admitted to the Lord’s Supper with an eschatological vision:

From the throne in the midst of heaven, through all creation, into the depths of the abyss, only one voice will be heard: Christ the Lord! And all creatures together, shall bow the knee for Him, Who was deeply humiliated and died on a cross, but is also highly exalted and is set on the throne on the right-hand of the Father. What a future, what a spectacle! All creation on its knees before Jesus!<sup>4</sup>

In 1902, Bavinck moved to the Free University in Amsterdam, where he occupied the chair of dogmatics, which had become vacant after Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) became prime minister. In Amsterdam, Bavinck published in the field of psychology and pedagogy, including works titled *Pedagogical Principles* (1904), *The Education of the More Mature Youth* (1916), and *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (1920). He also dealt with a difficult issue in the Reformed churches regarding the relationship between baptism

<sup>3</sup> Jan de Bruijn and George Harinck, eds., *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875–1921* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 56. Eglinton is currently working on a translation of this correspondence.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 49, trans. Gilbert Zekveld, www.SpindleWorks.com, November 2, 2008, sources.neocalvinism.org/.full\_pdfs/bavinck\_sacrifice\_of\_praise.pdf (English translations of Bavinck follow printed translations but are at times modified by the author); Herman Bavinck, *De offerande des lofs: Overdenkingen vóór en na de toelating tot het heilige avondmaal* (’s-Gravenhage: Verschoor, 1901), 120.

and regeneration in a booklet titled *Calling and Regeneration* (1903), adapted from a series of articles in the periodical *De Bazuin*. The tensions over the question of whether infant baptism is based on presumptive regeneration grew after 1892, when the churches originating in the Secession (1834) and those initiated by Kuyper's *Doleantie* (1886) merged. In Amsterdam, Bavinck also published a revised edition of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906–1911) and wrote a summary titled *Magnalia Dei* (*The Wonderful Works of God*, 1909).<sup>5</sup> For some years Bavinck chaired the Anti-Revolutionary political party and was a member of the Senate. He died on July 29, 1921.

## II. *Catholicity*

Bavinck's magnum opus, *Reformed Dogmatics*, is relevant not only because of its content but also because of its method. He starts the discussion of every *locus* with the biblical data, immediately followed by a historical survey of the topic's treatment by church fathers, in medieval theology, during the Reformation, and in Reformed orthodoxy. Notwithstanding his high view of Scripture, he sees the Christian tradition as "the means by which all the treasures and possessions of our ancestors are transmitted to the present and the future."<sup>6</sup> In his surveys he also offers a fair presentation of the positions of those theologians—either Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or liberal—with which he disagrees. He always looks for a connection and discusses the position of his opponents with a certain mildness, representing the positions of others as well as possible and appreciating elements of truth in them. Sometimes this is confusing, because it is not always entirely clear how he relates to these alternative positions. In his description of the theology of others, he can be so congenial that it seems as if he himself agrees with them. Even during his lifetime this attitude sometimes led to criticism.<sup>7</sup> He commonly ends the discussion of a *locus* with a convincing argument for the Reformed position as the purest expression of the catholic faith, applying traditional Reformed theology to the questions of modernity. Therefore, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, even when his specific position on a *locus* is colored by his own context, Bavinck offers many relevant references to the sources, a clear summary of the theological development, and, especially, a great

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 1:492; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 4th ed., 4 vols (Kampen: Kok, 1928–1930), 1:525.

<sup>7</sup> Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 189.

example of an irenic method. Bavinck can be polemical, but he is also always searching for possible connections with his opponents. This method and the underlying attitude are nurtured by the conviction that all truth is God's truth.

Bavinck always maintained a strong interest in biblical studies. Reflecting on the institution of the Pontifical Biblical Commission by Leo XIII in 1901, he expressed his concerns that so many questions raised by modern research into the Bible remained unanswered from the orthodox side. "If in any field we have neglected our vocation and lag behind our opponents, then it is in the field of biblical studies."<sup>8</sup>

Rejecting a mechanical view of inspiration that detaches the authors of Scripture from their personalities and their historical contexts, he advocates an "organic" view of inspiration. This means that the Holy Spirit leaves room for the human side, not only in the process of inspiration but also in the remaining character of the text of Scripture. The whole Bible is the word of God and God-breathed, but it is also vulnerable and given to us in the humble form of inscription. Just as the eternal Word of God took on the form of a servant, so also the written word of God has the form of a servant in the Bible.

Bavinck's theological method is intertwined with his appreciation for the catholicity of the church and of theology and his view of the relationship between the Reformed confession and Christian theology in general. After the publication of the final volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck writes that—despite the name *Reformed*—he is concerned not with exclusively Reformed views but with the catholic faith of Christianity. In his poetic prose:

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 in dogmatics, without artificiality or coercion. Then it is also the theology that our time needs.<sup>9</sup>

In an address as rector of the Kampen Theological School he develops his views in *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church* (1888), interpreting this attribute of the church qualitatively. The church is not catholic because of her quantity—her presence in all times, in all places, and for all peoples—but because of her message of the restoration of creation through its redemption. Here Bavinck rejects all forms of dualism—Rome's disjunction of the

<sup>8</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Bijbelstudie," *De Bazuin* 50.5 (January 31, 1902).

<sup>9</sup> Herman Bavinck, "Dogmatiek," *De Bazuin* 49.17 (April 26, 1901).

natural and supernatural, Martin Luther's view of the two kingdoms, and the pietistic focus on individual salvation—and stresses the importance of the gospel's reforming and renewing power to deliver creation from the dominion of sin and Satan.

In the Reformed worldview “the Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity. There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized.”<sup>10</sup> The world is God's world. Evil is an occupying enemy without any legal rights. God so loved this fallen world, the cosmos, that he sent his only Son, who was its co-creator, to redeem it and to start its glorious re-creation. Finally, God's grace will restore paradise lost to its original destiny and display the glory of God. That eschatological perspective encourages the Christian to live courageously, already participating in the new creation. Christians should not withdraw into solitude. Because of the general validity of truth, the Reformed church should never become sectarian.

The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in the world be subservient to it. ... Faith has the promise of overcoming the world. That faith is catholic, not restricted to any time, place, nation, or people. It can enter into all situations, can connect with all forms of natural life, is suitable to every time, and beneficial for all things, and is relevant in all circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

This qualitative view of catholicity, on the other hand, enables Bavinck to include all elements of truth into his theological system. All truth is God's truth, just as the one universal church comes to expression in several churches that are more or less pure, the one universal truth comes to expression in the various confessions. No confession “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 withers and dies like a branch ripped from the tree.”<sup>12</sup> For Bavinck the Reformed confession, as it is derived from Scripture as its source and has developed historically under the guidance of the Spirit, represents divine truth in its purest form. Still, because of the universality of the truth—and the catholicity of Christianity and the church based on it—Bavinck freely makes use of the riches of other traditions and confessions as well. Bavinck's catholic attitude is the

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<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 238; Herman Bavinck, *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk: Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 Dec. 1888* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 248–49; Bavinck, *Katholiciteit*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 250–51; Bavinck, *Katholiciteit*, 49.

underlying motive of his interest in the questions and problems of philosophy and especially of epistemology. His most original contribution to theology—the connection of special and general revelation or of faith and knowledge—is rooted in his conviction regarding the catholicity of Christianity and the church. Therefore, we will now focus on Bavinck’s epistemology.

### III. *Epistemology*

Bavinck’s interest in epistemology already appears in his earliest writings. The very first article he wrote right after his dissertation is titled “The Knowledge of Faith,” in which he succinctly presents the thoughts that are only fully developed in his *Reformed Dogmatics* and his Stone Lectures on *The Philosophy of Revelation*.<sup>13</sup> Faith and knowledge form an essential unity. Believing does not exist without knowing and vice versa. Knowledge is gained not only from mere perception but also by the use of hypotheses that guide and direct research. The great scientists have always dared to draw far-reaching conclusions from the available data and formulated hypotheses that were later proven. In his enthusiasm, Bavinck even calls God “the Hypothesis of all hypotheses,”<sup>14</sup> an expression that does not occur in his later works.

What he elaborates on in his later works is the difference between faith and knowledge, explaining that it lies not in their degrees of certainty but in the different characters of their objects and in the different subjective faculties of the soul that are related to them. “The object of believing is invisible, moral, spiritual, and the object of knowing is visible, sensual, physical.”<sup>15</sup> Still, for both faith and knowledge the object and the subject must be related to each other; they necessarily correspond. In his later writings he will show how faith is related to special revelation and knowledge to general revelation and how the process of gaining certainty is similar in both spheres.<sup>16</sup>

In his article he offers a pointed analysis that knowledge also is based on faith, for instance, on the belief in the trustworthiness of our senses. “Knowing is the result of investigation. And to investigate, we need faith

<sup>13</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, Stone Lectures, 1908 (1909; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> The article was republished posthumously in a volume edited by his brother Coenraad Bernardus Bavinck. Herman Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” in Herman Bavinck, *Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren* (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 12; reprinted from *De Vrije Kerk* 6.11 (1880): 510–27.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> See the references to the *Reformed Dogmatics* below. His later works, especially *Christian Worldview* (1904) and *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1909), elaborate on this parallel.

that the object of investigation exists, that our sense organs do not deceive us, that we will be able to gain knowledge by investigating. Without that faith there is no research and no science.”<sup>17</sup> The basic trust in our existence and the reality of the world around us remains axiomatic. Though such existence cannot be proven, rejecting this spontaneous realism would plunge us into the abyss of doubt and uncertainty. “As creatures we stand on the foundation of creation, we therefore can only know by experience; we can only *re-think*.”<sup>18</sup> (In Dutch “to think” is “nadenken,” literally “to rethink,” or rather, “to think after.” The Dutch original has “*nadenken*”; the italics emphasize that all our thoughts are *afterthoughts*, thoughts thought *after* God has thought them.) Later, Bavinck will develop this idea by defining all human knowledge as the re-thinking of God’s thoughts. Our mind does not invent the truth; it bears witness to the truth that comes to us from outside. It does not produce truth, but it reproduces, reconsiders, and reflects on it.<sup>19</sup>

### 1. Reformed Ethics

A similar connection between the certainty of faith and the certainty of knowledge appears in Bavinck’s recently published manuscript *Reformed Ethics*. In the context of a paragraph on “Assurance and Sealing,” probably originating from 1884 or 1885, he offers some thoughts on general epistemology. First, certainty concerning ourselves lies in our self-consciousness. “That I am I is a matter of faith. Likewise, that I exist. I can’t help it. Anyone who doubts that, who doubts whether his ego is and exists, cannot be logically refuted, but is ill, must be healed. Doubt is a soul sickness.”<sup>20</sup>

Next, certainty regarding the existence of things outside of us, that is, of God and the world, rests on testimony. The existence of God, the principles of science, for instance, in mathematics, are immediately evident, unprovable. “Certainty concerning the existence of all things is possible only through faith, the acceptance of the witness that my *I* itself, or God, or the sensual things, or the spiritual world, or others, give in my consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, certainty in science is possible “objectively through evidence, through logical reasoning, but subjectively because knowing always includes

<sup>17</sup> Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:587; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* 1:556.

<sup>20</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 1:379; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht: Kok Boeken-centrum, 2019), 255.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:380; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 255–56.

immediate awareness of that knowledge. When I know, I also at the same time, know that I know.”<sup>22</sup> These brief thoughts draw a parallel between knowledge and faith, between the witness of God’s general revelation in creation to our consciousness and the witness of special revelation in Scripture to the heart.

Taking his starting point in human self-consciousness brings Bavinck close to the position of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and the Dutch Ethical theology. On the one hand, Bavinck intentionally avoids the relativizing subjectivity of this Schleiermacherian position, but—and this is typical for his benevolent approach to modern theology—he also accepts the importance of the human subject when one’s deepest convictions are at stake. In his inaugural address in Kampen, “The Science of Holy Theology” (1883), he criticizes Schleiermacher for being too mystical but acknowledges an element of truth in his position by noting that Reformed orthodox theology has a *principium externum* (external principle) in Holy Scripture and a *principium internum* (internal principle), the Holy Spirit, who makes the things pertaining to God’s kingdom known to us.<sup>23</sup>

Bavinck’s development of his Christian epistemology is one huge attempt to avoid the subjectivity that somehow was part of the structure of his theology, a subjectivity that he expresses by saying that “at bottom, therefore, all certainty about myself and things outside of me is a belief in my own consciousness, in myself and the content of myself.”<sup>24</sup> His epistemological reflections reveal how, already this early in his career, he incorporates the modern epistemological turn to the human subject.

## 2. Reformed Dogmatics

In the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895), in the prolegomena, Bavinck uses the Reformed orthodox terminology of the *principia*, the principles or—as the English translation has it—the foundations of theology as a structuring principle. Related to divine revelation in Scripture, the *principium externum*, is human faith, the *principium internum*. That he also equates this internal principle with the Holy Spirit or the witness of the Spirit is one of the unclaritys in his dogmatics. How Bavinck develops this theological concept is crucial for his Christian epistemology. Bavinck uses the Aristotelian notion of *principia*, Christianized in medieval scholastic theology and

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:381; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 256.

<sup>23</sup> Herman Bavinck, “The Science of Holy Theology,” in *On Theology: Herman Bavinck’s Academic Orations*, ed. and trans. Bruce R. Pass (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 36; Herman Bavinck, *De wetenschap der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1883), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:381; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 256.

reshaped in Reformed orthodox theology, to relate dogmatics to the other sciences by showing how faith and knowledge are intertwined.<sup>25</sup> Bavinck even uses the concept of the *principia* to connect epistemological and theological certainty. This quest for certainty is one of the driving forces behind his theological thought, and how he develops his Christian epistemology here is his most original and perhaps most important contribution to theology.

In his assessment of the *principia* in science Bavinck first argues that the starting point of all human knowledge is perception. With our senses we perceive certain characteristics of an object and that perception creates an image in our consciousness. This neurological process raises the question of the precise relation between the image in our brains or consciousness and reality. Post-Kantian philosophy poses a hardly bridgeable gap between the object itself and its subjective representation. Still, according to Bavinck, “there is no reason to doubt that in the representations we have a faithful, ideal reproduction of the objects outside ourselves.”<sup>26</sup> The human mind, however, is not content with these faithful reproductions because trustworthy sensory perception is not yet knowledge, which results from reflecting on the observations, forming concepts, and drawing conclusions. Although in these higher activities of the mind we may seem to run the risk of losing the connection with the solid ground of empirical reality, the opposite is true.

It seems strange, even amazing, that, converting mental representations into concepts and processing these again in accordance with the laws of thought, we should obtain results that correspond to reality. Still, one who abandons this conviction is lost. But that conviction can, therefore, rest only in the belief that it is the same *Logos* who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two. Only on this basis is science possible.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, skepticism is untenable because it leads to the philosophical position of solipsism.<sup>28</sup> In a sense, Bavinck blames modern epistemology for this inherent tendency and claims that only faith in the creative activity of

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<sup>25</sup> Compared to his Reformed orthodox sources, Bavinck is typically modern in this aspect of his theology; see Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 229–300.

<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:228; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:202.

<sup>27</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:231; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:205.

<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere he agrees with Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) that if there is no real existence behind the phenomena and all objects depend on the observing subject, then “all science would run aground on the reef of illusionism and solipsism.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:544; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:514.

the divine Word (*Logos*) can bridge the gap between objective reality and subjective knowledge and offer certainty that this knowledge is trustworthy. In creating the world and human beings in his likeness and image, God organically linked being and thought together in a mutual correspondence.

Next, Bavinck connects these epistemological observations to theology by claiming that in every science there are three *principia*. God as creator is the *principium essendi* (principle of being). All created things originate from his free knowledge of them that depend on his decree to create them. God reveals this knowledge in the works of creation: “The world is an embodiment of God’s thoughts.” With a reference to the Belgic Confession, Bavinck calls the world a beautiful book in which the creatures are like the letters.<sup>29</sup> The world is not a book with blank pages on which we write down our interpretation of reality; rather, it is God’s own handwriting that we can read. Thus, the created world is the *principium cognoscendi externum* (external principle of knowledge) of all human knowledge and science. Still, this is not enough: we also need a receptive organ to be able to read God’s book. Bavinck illustrates this with one of his favorite quotes from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): “If the eye were not sun-like, how could we see the light?”<sup>30</sup> Knowledge would be impossible without correspondence between object and subject. This correspondence is guaranteed by creation. “The same Logos, who shines in the world, must also let his light shine in our consciousness.”<sup>31</sup> Reason, the intellect, originating from the Logos, recognizes the Logos in creation, and thus it is the *principium cognoscendi internum* (internal principle of knowledge) of general knowledge. Bavinck presents not only a Christian but even a Trinitarian epistemology: “So, in the final analysis, it is God alone who from his divine consciousness and by way of his creatures conveys the knowledge of truth to our mind—the Father who by the Son and in the Spirit reveals himself to us.”<sup>32</sup>

Bavinck connects these insights regarding the correspondence between the mind and reality on the level of knowledge with the correspondence

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<sup>29</sup> Belgic Confession 2. The letters mentioned in this medieval metaphor were originally handwritten and sometimes beautifully illustrated.

<sup>30</sup> “Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, wie könnten wir das Licht erblicken?” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:205. The English translation has “filled with sunshine,” but that does not convey the correspondence expressed in the German word *sonnenhaft*. The poem has different versions in Goethe’s work; Bavinck quotes from “Zur Farbenlehre.” In his discussion of the innate knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei insita*), Bavinck makes a similar remark: “It cannot be denied, after all, that for us to see we need both the light of the sun (objectively) and our eyes (subjectively).” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:70; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 2:41.

<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:207.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:233; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:207.

between object and subject on the levels of religious experience and of saving faith. Just as in science, also in religion, external and objective revelation corresponds to internal and subjective revelation. “Both *principia* are most intimately related, as light is to the eye and the design in the world to human reason.”<sup>33</sup> The *semen religionis* (seed of religion) corresponds to the revelation of God in nature and history.

On a third level, special revelation in Christ and Scripture also corresponds to a special internal revelation. This revelation may never be disconnected from the external and objective revelation in Christ and Scripture, but the *principium cognoscendi externum* in Scripture must also correspond to a *principium cognoscendi internum*, which is defined in various ways by Bavinck either as faith or as the illumination or the witness of the Spirit or even as the Spirit himself.<sup>34</sup>

God is always the *principium essendi*. The *principium cognoscendi externum* differs: in science it is the created world; in religion it is God’s self-revelation in the works of creation and history; and in Christianity it is God’s revelation in Scripture. The *principium cognoscendi internum* also differs: in science it is the human intellect; in religion it is the human receptiveness for the divine, what John Calvin calls the *semen religionis*; and in Christianity it is faith.

Similar thoughts are expressed by Bavinck in a lecture held at a pastors’ conference in Groningen in 1896. In the theses, which were published beforehand, Bavinck stresses not only that all knowledge and all human science rests on God’s revelation, as it is embodied in the whole cosmos as God’s creation, but also that theology is organically intertwined with the other sciences, maintaining an independent status due to special revelation.<sup>35</sup> According to Bavinck, all human knowledge starts with God’s archetypal knowledge. As the reporter summarizes one of Bavinck’s answers during the discussion:

Indeed, not only theology, but all science 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.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:279; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:253.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:88, 213, 565, 609; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:64, 185, 533, 577.

<sup>35</sup> The appendix to this article offers the first English translation of these theses, which have remained largely unnoticed thus far because they were only published in the announcements and reports of the conference in *De Heraut* and *De Bazuin*.

<sup>36</sup> “Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie,” *De Heraut* 983 (October 25, 1896).

Bavinck argues that science is about penetrating what God has thought about 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; Christ's 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."<sup>37</sup> Though Bavinck does not use this bold expression elsewhere in his theological works, it does convey his deep desire to connect God's general revelation in the works of his hands with God's special revelation in Christ, of whom the Scriptures witness.

Bavinck's Christian epistemology connects the creative thought of God with the re-creative after-thoughts of human beings. In a sense, there might be an intellectualistic and even Platonist flavor to this emphasis on reality's display of eternal divine ideas. Yet, Bavinck's Platonism is congenial with the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions, and it takes a radically Christianized form, especially when he links the embodiment of God's archetypal knowledge in creation with his redemptive work in the incarnation of Christ. Although that does not always come to the fore in his epistemological considerations, we should not forget that Bavinck is deeply aware of the present fallen state of creation and the necessity of redemption: redemption is the liberation of fallen creation from the powers of evil and its restoration according to God's original intentions that will only be revealed eschatologically in the coming kingdom of God.

#### **IV. *Spirituality***

To counterbalance an intellectualistic impression of Bavinck's epistemology, it is important to notice that he connects his epistemology with the certainty of believers regarding the Christian faith and with the assurance of salvation. As we have seen, in the *Reformed Ethics* he places the epistemological considerations in the paragraph on the assurance of salvation by the sealing of the Spirit. There he explains—referring to the practical syllogism—that the real problem of assurance in the later Reformed tradition lies in Christians' desire to conclude from the present marks in their lives of true faith that they have been eternally elected and will be eternally saved. "So, the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. The Dutch disclaimer "met eerbied gesproken" might indicate that Bavinck acknowledges that this expression is improper. I have not found this expression in his published works and, of course, this is just an unauthorized newspaper report.

question became: Is the present fixed and firm enough to carry the edifice of assurance for the past and the future?”<sup>38</sup> If assurance depends on the present, on the experience of faith, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and the witness of the Holy Spirit, then the question shifts from knowing if we are elect to knowing if our faith is correct. To escape this difficulty Bavinck offers an extensive exegetical survey of the biblical meaning of the sealing with the Holy Spirit, which he saw as a special step or stage in the development of a Christian’s life. By the sealing of the Spirit, God gives us the pledge of our future glory so that we gain assurance of salvation. Every Christian immediately receives on believing the Spirit as a seal. However, “although he is thus assured and sealed in an objective sense, he only becomes actually assured and sealed when the Holy Spirit works so powerfully in the believer that he infallibly knows: I am a child of God.”<sup>39</sup> Again the relationship between objective truth and subjective knowledge of the truth is striking. In Bavinck’s later printed works, these reflections on the sealing by the Spirit disappear as he becomes more critical of pietistic tendencies in his own tradition.

In his booklet *The Certainty of Faith* (1901), Bavinck takes a different approach to the problem of assurance, connecting it more intimately with certainty regarding the Christian faith as such. Certainty in general differs from truth. Truth is the correspondence of thought and reality, a relationship between the content of our consciousness and the object of our knowledge. Certainty is not a relationship but a state of the knowing subject, a complete resting of the spirit in the object of its knowledge. The certainty of faith is different from all forms of scientific certainty because our deepest conviction is not the result of evidence. This certainty is weaker than scientific certainty in the objective sense. Scientific certainty rests on rational grounds; the certainty of faith on revelation and authority. The subjective power of the certainty of faith, however, is much stronger than that of scientific certainty. Religious convictions are the deepest and most intimate of all because they are rooted in the heart. “And with at least as much right as Descartes posited his *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) the believer can say: *credo ergo sum, ergo Deus est* (I believe, therefore I am, therefore God is).”<sup>40</sup> This bold statement is not intended to make the existence of God depend upon human faith; rather, it clearly conveys that faith and

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:375; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 252.

<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:395; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 266.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia, 1980), 30; Herman Bavinck, *Geloofszeekerheid*, ed. Henk van den Belt (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2016), 41.

knowledge are structurally resemblant, as are epistemology and theology, and that our certainty regarding the existence of ourselves and the world is rooted in faith in God our Creator.

In the chapter titled, “The Way That Leads to Certainty according to Holy Scripture,” Bavinck rejects the two alternatives of an objective demonstration and a subjective retreat. Although it is not wrong for Christians to argue rationally for their faith, all evidence is insufficient and of limited value. However, starting from experience cannot lead to certainty either because all experiences presuppose faith, and we cannot derive truth from religious feeling; we need an objective standard.

Therefore, according to Bavinck, the way that leads to certainty starts with the gospel and the appeal that it makes to the human conscience. The gospel does not demand anything or require anything of us; it is the opposite of law. It has no condition at all but is a matter of pure grace. It asks only for our trust, our faith, and nothing else. The gospel perfectly corresponds to the idea that our highest good lies in communion with God. In faith the sinner, aware of being lost, surrenders completely to God’s grace in Christ. The gospel’s moral influence is insufficient to produce faith. A new heart and a renewed will are gifts of God. “Just as knowledge can only occur when the known object and the knowing subject correspond to each other, so true knowledge of God is possible only through faith, which He Himself quickens in our hearts.”<sup>41</sup> From the center of trust in Christ, the believer is also bound to Scripture, because in one and the same act of faith the believer embraces Christ who is portrayed in the Scriptures and the Scriptures themselves.

In the second edition of *The Certainty of Faith* (1903), Bavinck adds that the bond of the soul with the Scriptures has a mystical character but is not irrational and ungrounded. Here he acknowledges an element of truth in the criticism of Benjamin Warfield on the lack of apologetics that he discerned in the first edition of the booklet and in the Amsterdam school in general.<sup>42</sup> In the addition Bavinck explains his disagreement with those who merely

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<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 80; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 85.

<sup>42</sup> In the second edition Bavinck takes notice of Warfield’s “friendly and instructive review.” Herman Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok 1903), 5; cf. Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 20. See Benjamin B. Warfield, “A Review of [Herman Bavinck,] *De Zekerheid des Geloofs*,” (1903), in John E. Meeter, ed., *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, 1973), 2:106–23. In his thorough assessment of the discussion between the two theologians, Gijsbert van den Brink concludes that Bavinck yielded to some secondary issues but did not accept the more prominent role for evidence advocated by Warfield. Gijsbert van den Brink, “On Certainty in Faith and Science: The Bavinck-Warfield Exchange,” *The Bavinck Review* 8 (2017): 81.

emphasize the subjective certainty of the Christian religion and in the meantime surrender its objective truth.

Returning to his main argument on the unity of faith in Christ and in Scripture, Bavinck writes that faith is not the source of knowledge but the soul's organ to recognize the truth. "It is the bucket, with which the believer draws the water of life from the well of God's Word."<sup>43</sup> Then he again relates these thoughts on the relationship between faith and Scripture to his epistemological insights.

In all perception and thought, agreement between subject and object is required. It is not enough that the sun shines in the sky; a human also needs an eye to behold that sun by its own light. It is not enough that the visible world is the embodiment of thought; man also needs a mind to search out these thoughts and absorb them into his consciousness. Similarly, the believer is nothing other than a normal human being whose eye has been opened again to eternal and heavenly things, whose heart has again learned to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>44</sup>

From the certainty of faith, Bavinck turns to the assurance of salvation, which he does not relate to the sealing of the Spirit as a particular step in the development of a Christian's life and experience; the certainty regarding the Christian faith is rather intertwined with the assurance of salvation. "It is characteristic of knowing that it is not only fully assured of its object, but at the same time also of itself. If we know something, know it well and for sure, we at the same time, spontaneously and immediately, know that we know it."<sup>45</sup> Just as knowledge excludes all doubt about itself and does not gain certainty by reasoning, reflection, or logical conclusions, so also faith brings along its own certainty. Assurance is essential for the Christian life; it cannot be obtained by self-reflection; the eye of the soul should not be turned inward. Those who cling to the promises of God trust in his grace, are his children, and receive the Spirit of adoption. The booklet ends with a description of the Christian's life that results from this happy assurance. The hidden life of prayer and fellowship with God is the center that determines all his thoughts and actions. This spiritual life does not exclude but includes the family, society, business, politics, art, and science. It is distinct from these and of much greater value, but does stand irreconcilably opposed to them. Rather, it is the power that enables a faithful fulfillment of the earthly vocation and stamps the whole as service to God. The kingdom of

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<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 83; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 83–84; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 87–88.

<sup>45</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 84; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 88.

God surely is like a pearl, more precious than the whole world, but it is also like a leaven that leavens the entire batch of dough. Faith is not only the route to salvation but also the victory that overcomes the world.<sup>46</sup>

There might be an intellectualistic stance in Bavinck's theological philosophy, but his deep spirituality helped him to avoid cold intellectualism. There might also be an optimistic flavor in his theology. The neo-Calvinist project was characterized by its broad vision of culture, where God's common grace was discerned and interpreted as a sanctifying power for the whole of life, including education, politics, art, science, and technology. This view made it possible for Reformed Christians to see their earthly life as a calling. Participation in culture is obedience to God. Bavinck's longing for the victory of the truth sparked an all-too-positive interpretation of renewed religious interest in European culture.

The neo-Calvinist flavor of his theology must be understood as a reaction to pietistic tendencies in the legacy of the eighteenth century. There is a certain tension in Bavinck's writings between this neo-Calvinist ideal and his pietistic sympathies. He was critical of the legacy of Puritanism and the writers of the Dutch "Further Reformation" (*Nadere Reformatie*) on assurance, but he still appreciated the core of this spirituality. Even in *The Certainty of Faith*, he acknowledges the value of the pietistic concentration on the inward relationship with God. "While Christians in earlier days forgot the world for the sake of themselves, we run the risk of losing ourselves in the world." Eagerness to conquer every sphere of life should not replace the awareness of the necessity of true conversion.<sup>47</sup>

Sometimes he distances himself from the neo-Calvinist ideal and warns against its dangers. In a preface to the Dutch translation of the sermons of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine (1905), he writes, "It seems as if we no longer know what sin and grace, what guilt and forgiveness, what repentance and regeneration mean. We know them theoretically, but we no longer know them in the awesome reality of life."<sup>48</sup> One of his students, Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth (1898–1963), recalled him remarking at a conference in 1918:

How much progress have we made! How much more do we have scientifically and culturally than the older generation of the people of the Secession! But in one respect these people were ahead of us: they still knew what sin and grace meant, while we

<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 95–96; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *Certainty*, 94; Bavinck, *Geloofszekeerheid*, 95.

<sup>48</sup> See the translation in Henk van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck on Scottish Covenant Theology and Reformed Piety," *The Bavinck Review* 3 (2012): 175.

seem to be in danger sometimes—with all our increased knowledge and cultural insight—of forgetting that one thing.<sup>49</sup>

A too-optimistic expectation that our faith will conquer the world may make Christianity vulnerable to being conquered by the world instead. Bavinck's eschatological perspective encourages the Christian to live courageously, already participating in God's new kingdom, while still living in this present evil world. Participation in God's new creation through union with the risen Savior, however, is not the same as unrestrained participation in present culture, although the Christian has a calling there as well.

## V. *Doxology*

Bavinck, brought up in the mildly pietistic, though culturally engaged, climate of the elite among the Dutch Seceders, and immersed in modernity in liberal Leiden, was driven by a longing to grasp the truth. Convinced that all truth comes from the Father of lights, he not only taught and studied dogmatics and ethics from a Reformed perspective but also assessed the unity of the truth by developing a Christian epistemology, connecting faith and knowledge, or special and general revelation. The main elements of this contribution to theology are his convictions 1) that Christianity is truly catholic, because its message is universal, 2) that believing does not exist without knowing and vice versa, 3) that for both faith and knowledge the object and the subject correspond, 4) that—even on the general level—ultimately the Father reveals himself to us by the Son and in the Spirit, and 5) that, therefore, our knowledge is a rethinking and reconsidering of God's thoughts displayed in creation to our mind.

In his later works, such as *Christian Worldview* (1904), *Christian Science* (1904), and *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1909), Bavinck develops these ideas more fully into a Christian perspective on the world and an apologetic analysis of general revelation.<sup>50</sup> In any case, Bavinck's epistemological contribution to theology is the result of a lifelong struggle to grasp the unity of the truth.

The connection between special and general revelation or faith and knowledge has been underestimated in the twentieth century. Understandably, the

<sup>49</sup> Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth, "Ter gedachtenis van Dr. Herman Bavinck," *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 10.24 (1954): 185.

<sup>50</sup> Space does not allow us to elaborate on these publications or to discuss the secondary literature. For further reflection, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

abuse of natural theology to defend Nazism and apartheid led to a strong critique of general revelation in creation and history. The concepts should therefore not be used in a naive or uncritical way. Nevertheless, in the context of the twenty-first century the importance of understanding faith as a perspective that allows the Christian to recognize God's hand and wisdom in creation and to discern the struggle against the powers of darkness that occupy the universe and corrode humanity in history can hardly be exaggerated.

Secularizing powers tend to wipe away everything that reminds us of him in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Christians in the present cultural context are understandably glad if they can just survive. That, however, will turn out to be an illusion when anti-Christian powers fully burst forth. We need more than survival. The only way forward is to realize that faith is a "victory that *overcomes* the world."

Bavinck's theology is characterized by the desire to make everything subservient to the glory of God. It has a doxological character. For him, dogmatics was "a song of praise to all God's virtues and perfections, a song of worship and thanksgiving."<sup>51</sup> His desire to connect faith and knowledge, special and general revelation, stem from his passion for the unity of the truth. All truth is God's truth, and the whole world is a theater of his glory. The stage is occupied by the prince of this world, but the believer knows that this power is illegal, and that—notwithstanding the prince of darkness, the father of lies—the light of God will overcome all darkness and the truth will unmask lies and errors.

The Holy Spirit not only seals the salvation of the individual Christian but also bears witness to the truth. As Bavinck states in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, the doctrine of the *testimonium Spiritus sancti* (witness of the Holy Spirit) may seem to make the Christian, and especially the Protestant position, vulnerable, but in fact it is

the triumph of the foolishness of the cross over the wisdom of the world, the triumph of the thoughts of God over the deliberations of man. In this sense the testimony of the Holy Spirit has outstanding apologetic value. This is the victory that overcomes the world, namely our faith.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Rolf H. Bremmer, "Herman Bavinck," in *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands Protestantisme* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), 1:43. Bremmer does not mention the source of this quote.

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:600; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1:570.

Thus, the Christian can sing: “This is my Father’s world: O let me ne’er forget, that, though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.”<sup>53</sup> According to Bavinck, faith overcomes the world by viewing it as God’s creation, though fallen, still on its way to final restoration because of Christ’s redemption.

## Appendix

Theses for the Provincial Groninger Reformed Preachers’ Conference:<sup>54</sup>

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* (decrees) in the will of God;<sup>55</sup> 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, that is, 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; its subject is not the church as an institution but as an organism;<sup>56</sup> and its practice requires the application of

<sup>53</sup> The hymn was written by Maltbie D. Babcock in 1901.

<sup>54</sup> “Provinciale Groninger Gereformeerde Predikantenconferentie” (1896).

<sup>55</sup> In Reformed orthodox theology the distinction between God’s archetypal knowledge as Creator and the ectypal knowledge that he shares with his creatures was quite common. For an introduction and discussion, see Willem J. van Asselt, “The Fundamental Meaning of Theology: Archetypal and Ectypal Theology in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Thought,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64.2 (2002): 319–35. The Reformed orthodox also copied the medieval scholastic distinction between God’s necessary knowledge (*scientia necessaria*), by which he knows himself, and his free knowledge (*scientia libera*), which is based on his free decree to create and govern the creation.

<sup>56</sup> The distinction is derived from Kuyper. In the background stands the discussion about the right place for theological study and training, either the theological school of the churches

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 character 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.

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of the Secession in Kampen or the Free University in Amsterdam. Bavinck strongly advocated a merger of the school with the university in Amsterdam. He defends that by claiming that teaching theology is not the task of the church as an institution in an isolated theological seminary but of the church as an organism, and it therefore should take place in a broader university.