

Bavinck, a Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors? A Case Study of Bavinck's Theological Description of Shame¹

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Abstract

Herman Bavinck is not usually associated with the biblical counseling movement. Nevertheless, his formulation of “biblical psychology” provides essential resources for biblical counselors today. This article treats shame as a case study to demonstrate how his biblical psychological account differs from that of secular psychology by providing a more nuanced and biblical approach to shame. He places shame within the organic understanding of sin and considers shame to be caused by the self-judgment of conscience. Hence, depending on the alignment of one's conscience, good shame can provide a positive pedagogy for Christian formation, while false shame can lead one away from God. While the cure for shame is often thought to be its eradication, Bavinck equips pastors and counselors with an alternative model.

Keywords

Herman Bavinck, shame, biblical counseling, psychology, conscience

¹ This article is based on a presentation, “Herman Bavinck on Shame,” given at the Kuyper Conference at Calvin University and Seminary, April 5–7, 2022.

Introduction

Shame has traditionally been associated with Eastern culture, which is assumed to have a different set of moral categories from that of the West. This separation of so-called Western “guilt culture” and Eastern “shame culture” was a result of an influential work by anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1944, who pointed to Christianity and the concept of sin as the cause of the Western development of a guilt-oriented moral culture.² This West versus East dichotomy of guilt and shame has since been discredited by later anthropologists but still looms large in popular imagination. However, today’s influx of social media is creating a global “shame-fame” culture in which shame provides an incentive for consumer behavior, especially among youth.³ In today’s world, shame can no longer be dismissed as an Eastern concept, as “shame-fame” culture is quickly emerging as a malady whose sufferers are in need of urgent pastoral care.

In the field of psychology, shame is often considered a negative and unnecessary emotion, while guilt is seen as having potential benefits in leading to behavioral change. This consensus is reflected in the remarks of psychologists Judy Price Tangney and Donda Dearing, who wrote that “guilt is good, shame is bad,” and although guilt can influence people in a moral direction, shame “does little to inhibit immoral action.”⁴ This message is amplified to the public through influential speakers such as Brené Brown.⁵ Contrary to this trend in psychology and popular consensus, a growing number of Christian authors have challenged this dominant view. In the field of New Testament studies, Te-Li Lau’s recent *Defending Shame* attempted to retrieve Paul’s use of shame rhetoric in Christian formation.⁶ Christian philosopher Greg Ten Elshof has argued for retrieving shame as an essential emotion for

² Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006).

³ For such an analysis from a Christian perspective, see Glenn Russell, “Fame, Shame and Social Media: Missional Insights for Youth Ministry,” *Faculty Publications* 16.1 (January 1, 2017): 30–55.

⁴ Judy Price Tangney and Ronda L. Dearing, *Shame and Guilt* (New York: Guilford, 2002), 136–38.

⁵ For example, Brené Brown’s TED talk on shame and vulnerability has over 60 million views today. Brené Brown, “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED, June 2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability.

⁶ Te-Li Lau, *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

cultivating Christian virtue.⁷ In missiology, Jayson Georges and others have advocated utilizing the concept of shame for contextualizing the gospel in Asian soil.⁸

While we are witnessing a growing literature that re-evaluates the emotion of shame in biblical studies, Christian philosophy, and missiology, theologians remain largely silent.⁹ The theme of shame is also seldom addressed in the literature on biblical counseling. In the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, there has never been an article-length treatment addressing the emotion of shame. Even in Heath Lambert's recent publication *Theology of Biblical Counseling*, the word "shame" only appears sporadically without receiving in-depth treatment. The absence of shame-related research within the biblical counseling movement is peculiar, considering today's increasing pastoral need.

This is where the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch Reformed theologian can shed light on this perplexing emotion of shame. Not only was Herman Bavinck one of the first theologians who attempted to construe a "biblical psychology," but he is also among the rare theologians who have provided theological explanations of the emotion of shame.¹⁰ Contrary to the consensus by secular psychologists who consider shame a negative and unnecessary emotion, Bavinck's "biblical psychology" provides an alternative account by situating shame within the doctrine of sin and providing resources for today's pastors and counselors in analyzing and offering prescriptions for shame.

⁷ Gregg Ten Elshof, *For Shame: Rediscovering the Virtues of a Maligned Emotion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021).

⁸ For a pastoral and missiological approach situating shame and honor as a paradigm for the atonement, see Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016). For a unique approach that situates the atonement as a restoration of God's honor, see Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013).

⁹ Some recent exceptions are seen in the works of analytic theologians such as Eleonore Stump and Thomas McCall. For example, see Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 39–70, and Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 279–338.

¹⁰ Bavinck's treatment of shame is an under-studied area of research. Mary Vandenberg is among the few exceptions, although her understanding of Bavinck's account of shame relies solely upon *Reformed Dogmatics*, ignoring later psychological works that deal more fully with shame. See Mary Vandenberg, "Shame, Guilt, and the Practice of Repentance: An Intersection of Modern Psychology with the Wisdom of Calvin," *Christian Scholar's Review* 50.3 (Spring 2021): 297–313.

I. *Bavinck and Biblical Counseling*

What does Bavinck have to do with the biblical counseling movement born in the cradle of the post-World War II United States? Jay Adams, the founder of the biblical counseling movement, never mentions Bavinck in *Competent to Counsel*, nor has Bavinck's name been mentioned in influential texts on biblical counseling. Nevertheless, the biblical counseling movement and Bavinck's theological project share an essential epistemological foundation. As David Powlison notes, one of the hallmarks of the biblical counseling movement is its commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture and its epistemology, which is shaped by Reformed Protestantism.¹¹ Epistemology and the sufficiency of Scripture also lay at the heart of Bavinck's theology of knowledge, as has been recently retrieved by Nathaniel Gray Sutanto.¹² Furthermore, Bavinck was among the first theologians to engage with the newly developing field of psychology. This is contrary to Roland Fleck and John Carter's historical analysis, which argued that the interaction between Christianity and psychology is a very new and post-World War II development.¹³ Bavinck was well ahead of his time in his attempt to dialogue with the discipline of psychology during its initial stages of growth. In 1897, Bavinck published *Foundations of Psychology* as a sequel to *Reformed Dogmatics* to further develop his discussion of theological anthropology while interacting with different emerging schools within psychology.¹⁴ Most relevant to the context of biblical counseling is his evaluation of "empiricist psychology," which is the model of psychology closest to the way the discipline is understood today.¹⁵ Bavinck recognizes the usefulness of the empirical approach:

The experimental method can be helpful within its limits. It can, for example, explore the conditions under which sensations originate, the duration of elementary psychic

¹¹ David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2010), xvii. Here, "Reformed epistemology" does not refer to Alvin Plantinga's epistemological system but to the traditional Reformed framework of situating epistemology in relation to the doctrine of sin and illumination of Scripture.

¹² For example, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 31 (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

¹³ J. Roland Fleck and John D. Carter, *Psychology and Christianity: Integrative Readings* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 15.

¹⁴ Herman Bavinck, "Foundations of Psychology," trans. John Bolt, Nelson D. Kloosterman, and Jack Vanden Born, *The Bavinck Review* 9 (2018): 1–244.

¹⁵ Bavinck also critiques other strands of psychology, such as Johann Hebert's metaphysical psychology and John Stuart Mill's "associationist" psychology.

events, the limitations of consciousness, the strength or weakness of attention, or the reproduction and association of ideas.¹⁶

Nevertheless, he is strongly critical of its underlying worldview, commenting that “empirical psychology cannot suffice for the right understanding of the psychical life” and therefore “will never be able fully to explain psychical life.”¹⁷ Contrary to secular models of psychology, Bavinck sought to develop a model of psychology that explicates the human heart from the scriptural narrative and humanity’s relationship to God. *Biblical and Religious Psychology* is one of his later works, and it exemplifies this approach of “biblical psychology.”¹⁸ Bavinck writes in the introduction that “the significance which Biblical Psychology has for our study appears thus in the first place from this that Scripture speaks of the same man who still exists, lives and thinks, feels, wills, and acts.”¹⁹ Because of humanity’s universal nature, Scripture can shed light by providing the explanation of the human heart in a way that empirical science cannot. As Nate Brooks has suggested, Bavinck may be considered a “patron saint” of biblical counselors, both in his methodology, which prioritizes the revelation of Scripture, and his material content, which provides explanations of the human heart from the biblical narrative.²⁰

Associating Bavinck with the biblical counseling movement may seem surprising to some due to Bavinck’s strong emphasis on general revelation. After all, it was Bavinck’s dissatisfaction with the sectarianism of his denomination that led him to his studies at Leiden University.²¹ Bavinck sought to construct a philosophy of revelation that maintained the primacy of Scripture while affirming and interacting with scientific truths revealed by the manner of general revelation. As he explains in *Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck attempted to articulate a philosophy of revelation that seeks to

¹⁶ Bavinck, “Foundations of Psychology,” 8.

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 214–15.

¹⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, trans. Herman Hanko (Grand Rapids: Protestant Reformed Theological School, 1974), originally published as *Bijbelsche en religieuze psychologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1920), right before Bavinck’s death, combining two different sources: “Bijbelsche Psychologie,” *De School met den Bijbel / Orgaan van het Gereformeerd Schoolverband* (January 4, 1912–March 5, 1914); “Religieuze Psychologie,” *De School met den Bijbel / Orgaan van het Gereformeerd Schoolverband* (June 11, 1914–April 22, 1920).

¹⁹ Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 8.

²⁰ Nate Brooks, “Herman Bavinck, Patron Saint of Biblical Counselors: How an Old Dutch Theologian Helps Us Make Sense of Biblical Sufficiency” (Convocation Address, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, August 30, 2022). This is one of the rare treatments of Bavinck by a biblical counselor.

²¹ For a detailed account, see James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 59–72.

“correlate the wisdom which it finds in revelation with that which is furnished by the world at large.”²² For Bavinck, all truth is God’s truth because God is the source and origin of the knowledge of the truth.²³ The conservative strand of biblical counseling often critiques this understanding of general revelation. For example, Doug Bookman critiqued such a view as relying upon a “two-source theory of revelation.” For Bookman, the term “general revelation” itself is flawed in that it tends to place scriptural revelation and human empirical knowledge on the same empirical plane as both being sources for “revelation.”²⁴ Wayne Mack has even put into question any extrabiblical insight not derived directly from Scripture.²⁵ However, this is not the case for all biblical counselors. For example, Powlison assessed Adams’s attack on secular psychology as polemical, reductionistic, and at risk of ignoring positive elements within psychology.²⁶ In the interview series titled “The Best of Psychology,” Powlison mentions how secular practices in psychology provide valuable skills, a lived understanding of people, and virtues like patience, which are not erased but transformed by the biblical worldview. He advises biblical counselors to properly locate the continuity and discontinuity between the two practices and not critique psychological “skills” per se; instead, they should evaluate how they are employed according to their underlying worldview.²⁷ Powlison’s approach to discerning the continuity and discontinuity between the two approaches to counseling mirrors Bavinck’s approach to general and special revelation. Bavinck certainly did not hold to the “two-sources” theory of revelation as criticized by Bookman, for Bavinck did not see the two modes of revelation on equal grounds, instead writing, “The knowledge that general revelation can supply is not only meager and inadequate but also uncertain, consistently mingled with error, and for far and away the majority of people unattainable.”²⁸ For Bavinck, Scripture always takes primacy in relation to the sciences, as grace perfects nature, and special revelation perfects general revelation. Scripture

²² Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 26–27.

²³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 209–10.

²⁴ Doug Bookman, “The Word of God and Counseling,” in *Sufficiency: Historical Essays on the Sufficiency of Scripture*, ed. Heath Lambert (Glenside, PA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 48–64.

²⁵ Wayne Mack, “What Is Biblical Counseling?,” in *Sufficiency*, ed. Lambert, 25.

²⁶ Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 156.

²⁷ David Powlison, “The Best of Psychology,” Interview, CCEF, November 2017, <https://www.ccef.org/podcast/best-psychology-david-powlison>.

²⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 313.

provides the basis for the biblical worldview, which functions to critique and evaluate all other scientific systems, including psychology.

It is difficult to tell whether Bavinck would have self-aligned with the biblical counseling movement if he were alive today. His commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture and his critique of experimental psychology may position him close to the biblical counseling approach in its methodology, while his commitment to general revelation and interaction with secular science points to a more integrationist approach. Such speculations are inherently anachronistic, considering how “experiential psychology” was still in its early development stage during Bavinck’s time. Such considerations aside, Bavinck’s commitment to the primacy of Scripture and his early attempts to produce a biblical psychology for diagnosing the condition of the human heart provide essential resources for biblical counselors today. Bavinck’s biblical psychology is especially relevant in the consideration of the phenomenon of shame, an emotion deemed harmful and unnecessary by secular psychologists and seldom addressed by practitioners of biblical counseling.

II. *Bavinck’s Definition of Shame*

Bavinck’s treatment of shame spans his writings, and his understanding of shame went through certain modifications over the years, culminating in *Biblical and Religious Psychology*.²⁹ In her essay “Shame, Guilt, and Practice of Repentance,” Marry Vandenberg quotes Bavinck’s definition of shame from *Reformed Dogmatics*: “an unpleasant feeling that steals over us after we have done something wrong or improper and consists especially in the fear of disgrace.”³⁰ She concludes that “it is unclear what distinguishes guilt from shame in Bavinck’s view.”³¹ However, this statement distorts Bavinck’s view of shame, as it is dependent solely upon earlier sources. In his later work *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, he comes to a developed definition of shame as “a disagreeable, oppressive and troublesome feeling which comes upon us when something improper is seen by us or is done by us. ... It is born out of the fear that our honor and good name shall suffer damage by

²⁹ Bavinck treats shame in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (1898/1910), *Reformed Ethics* (lectures in Kampen, 1883–1902), *Sacrifice of Praise* (1901), *Christian Family* (1912), but most extensively in his later work *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (1920).

³⁰ Vandenberg, “Shame, Guilt, and the Practice of Repentance,” 297; see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3: *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 175.

³¹ Vandenberg, “Shame, Guilt, and the Practice of Repentance,” 297.

others.”³² Hence, over the years, Bavinck’s view of shame seems to have gone through some adjustment, so that the role of external perception (name, honor, and work) receives greater attention. This understanding of shame as involving perception and loss of honor aligns with the contemporary understanding of shame, where one of the distinguishing factors of shame is the devaluation of self-worth due to external perception by others.³³

However, there is one noteworthy difference between contemporary psychology’s understanding of shame and Bavinck’s. While there is no fixed consensus in defining shame, it is broadly agreed that guilt is an emotion that has to do with one’s *act*, while shame has to do with one’s *identity*. In other words, guilt considers “what you have done,” and shame considers “who you are.”³⁴ However, contrary to contemporary psychology, Bavinck does not draw a stark distinction between guilt and shame along the lines of act and identity. For example, in *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, Bavinck writes that shame “comes upon us when something improper is seen by us or is *done* by us.”³⁵ This remark seems to suggest that shame is related not only to perception but also to action. Some may critique Bavinck for the inadequate differentiation between the two emotions in not associating one with action and the other with identity. Nevertheless, Bavinck’s refusal to draw such a sharp line between act and identity derives from his theological understanding of sin.

For Bavinck, humanity is created in the image of God, exemplifying the “unity in diversity” of the Triune God. This theological anthropology is the basis for his “organic motif,” an organizing principle utilized to explain the unity-in-diversity of creation.³⁶ As Sutanto has argued, Bavinck views original sin as an all-pervasive distortion of human nature, which turns the self against God and neighbor, destroying the organic unity of humanity.³⁷

³² Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 86–87.

³³ For example, David Ausubel writes, “Shame may be defined as an unpleasant emotional reaction by an individual to an actual or presumed negative judgment of himself by others resulting in self-depreciation vis-a-vis the group.” David P. Ausubel, “Relationships between Shame and Guilt in the Socializing Process,” *Psychological Review* 62.5 (September 1955): 382.

³⁴ For example, see Brené Brown, “Shame Resilience Theory: A Grounded Theory Study on Women and Shame,” *Families in Society* 87.1 (January–March 2006): 45. For Christian literature utilizing this distinction, see Lewis Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 9.

³⁵ Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 87.

³⁶ See James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif*, NIPPOD edition (London: T&T Clark, 2014).

³⁷ For a treatment of Bavinck’s view of sin as egocentricity that destroys the organic unity of humanity, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Egocentricity, Organism, and Metaphysics: Sin and Renewal in Bavinck’s Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34.2 (May 2021): 223–40. For an analysis of how Bavinck’s organic construal of humanity relates to his understanding of

However, not only does Bavinck see humanity as an organic whole, but he also utilizes the organic motif to speak of sin. Bavinck writes in *Biblical and Religious Psychology* that “sin must be considered organically” as a “body of sin,” a sinful organism, of which sinful thoughts, words, and deeds are its “members.” Sin does not consist of isolated and atomized emotions or behavior but is an organism that includes various emotions and behavior as its members.³⁸ Hence, for Bavinck, one cannot separate guilt and shame as isolated and atomized emotions that operate on their own, as they are both interconnected within the whole organism of sin. Contrary to the psychological distinction between guilt and shame, Bavinck sees an organic unity between the two emotions. Bavinck explicates this organic connection from the fall narrative of Genesis 3, in which both original guilt and original shame were birthed as a consequence of sin.

III. *Bavinck's Explanation of the Origin of Shame*

In the second half of *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, Bavinck outlines what he labels “religious psychology,” a psychology of the human heart as it relates to God. This is where Bavinck analyzes the doctrine of sin from a psychological perspective, paying attention to the movement of the heart. He starts by narrating how sin and different sin-related emotions entered the world in what we might call the *ordo peccatum* or the order of sin. Bavinck starts by posing the question, “What change was brought about by sin in man’s soul and soul-life?” and writes that although Scripture “does not offer a metaphysical answer to the origin of sin, it nevertheless offers a psychological description.”³⁹ Bavinck retells Genesis 3 by explaining how the sinful act of disobedience brought about a decisive change in the human soul.⁴⁰ He outlines the effects of sin as an “opening of the eye” (Gen 3:7) that signals a “total change in their consciousness.”⁴¹ This change in the soul is explained as three consecutive movements. The first was an awakening of the consciousness of guilt. Bavinck explains *guilt* as “a consciousness of the discord” between what Adam “had been (ought to be) and now was.”⁴²

original sin, see Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18.2 (April 2016): 174–90.

³⁸ Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 91.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁰ For a detailed explanation on the change sin brought to human consciousness, see Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 121–70.

⁴¹ Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 86.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Second, this sense of guilt immediately led to a sense of *shame*—a second change in the soul. Bavinck points out how this opening of the eye in Genesis 3:7 was immediately followed by a shameful awareness of nakedness. Where guilt attested to an internal consciousness of the fall, shame was its outward manifestation. This results in the self-judgment of conscience. Third, followed by guilt and shame, the third change in the soul emerged as *fear* toward God (Gen 3:8). Thus, Bavinck outlines the three emotions of guilt, shame, and fear as three new changes in the soul-life of humanity as the result of sin. Bavinck does not distinguish the three emotions as distinct and unrelated but considers the three to be functioning together as an organic whole, where guilt led to shame, shame led to fear, and fear finally led to Adam and Eve fleeing and hiding from the presence of the Lord.⁴³ Hence, contrary to Vandenberg, Bavinck is not conflating guilt and shame or sharply distinguishing the two as isolated emotions; rather, he is situating them within the organism of sin as an interrelated consequence of the fall. Here, Bavinck is not attempting to articulate an all-encompassing model of guilt, shame, and fear. One may experience the three emotions in isolation from each other, and Bavinck admits that the fall narrative does not provide an exhaustive explanation of all human emotions in every situation.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Bavinck provides a paradigmatic case study in which guilt, shame, and fear operate as an organic whole in the context of sin.

IV. Good and False Shame

Another important differentiating factor between Bavinck and secular psychology lies in their different evaluations of shame. While psychologists tend to view shame as a harmful emotion, Bavinck's understanding is more nuanced. Bavinck locates human conscience as the primary moral capacity that causes the emotion of shame. Conscience plays a significant role in Bavinck's ethics, as he devotes a substantial amount of space to it in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, his *Reformed Ethics*, and in a separate journal article titled "Conscience."⁴⁵ For Bavinck, conscience is a self-awareness existing in every human heart, which contains natural principles of religion, morality, and justice. This conscience is the power or activity of self-judgment. This self-judgment of conscience is brought about by "a practical syllogism

⁴³ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁴ In fact, Bavinck goes on to offer a list of biblical examples of shame, including cases where shame arises in nonmoral situations.

⁴⁵ Herman Bavinck, "Conscience," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 113–26.

where God's law provides the major premise, and consciousness supplies the minor premise."⁴⁶ Bavinck understands conscience as the capacity of humans to enact judgment upon themselves according to the divine law written in their hearts. Conscience is not infallible, since conscience, too, is under the influence of the fall. As Bavinck acknowledges, "The supreme norm for our life is the divine law that may echo in our conscience as a voice that is dull and unclear and as though from a distance. Something can be a sin before God that nonetheless is not against our conscience."⁴⁷ Hence, Bavinck points out how there can be an "upright conscience" that works in accordance with the divine law and an "erring conscience" that rather leads one away from God.⁴⁸

Conscience is where Bavinck locates the cause of the emotion of shame. As he writes in *Reformed Ethics*, the function of human conscience "especially manifests itself in shame."⁴⁹ Furthermore, "Shame is a sign of an awakened conscience, that human capacity which pronounces a person guilty and condemns him."⁵⁰ Bavinck also explains how shame manifests itself through physical change (e.g., blushing): "What the conscience does for us inwardly in the soul, shame performs for us outwardly in the body. Shame has been described, not without cause, as the body's conscience."⁵¹ Hence, for Bavinck, shame is a sign and an outward manifestation of the self-judgment of inner conscience.⁵²

Because Bavinck views shame as the judgment of conscience, he can identify a positive use of shame in Christian formation, unlike the modern trend of dismissing shame as being altogether negative. This is because the "minor premise" of one's conscience points back to the "major premise" of divine law. As long as one is aligned with the law of God, the "upright conscience" causes good shame, which protects one from sinning. Bavinck

⁴⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics I: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, annotated edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 166.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, "Conscience," 126.

⁴⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:207–8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:207.

⁵⁰ Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² This positive role Bavinck attributes to human conscience is remarkably different from that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer writes, "Conscience is concerned not with man's relation to God and to other men but with man's relation to himself." Bonhoeffer saw conscience as an individualistic echo chamber of idolatry rather than God's law written in human hearts. In contrast to Bonhoeffer, Bavinck saw conscience as reflecting, though marred by sin, the law of God. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 24.

writes that “the pedagogical value of this feeling of shame is extraordinarily great” and “the feeling of shame protects man also in his contacts with others from all kinds of sins and debauchery, not only in deeds but also in gestures and words.”⁵³ For Bavinck, contrary to psychology and popular consensus, not all shame is bad; it is only bad when it is birthed out of one’s alignment with an “erring conscience.” Bavinck also sees a positive pedagogical side of shame in the fall narrative. Even though shame was birthed out of human rebellion, the existence of shame points to the fact that humans still retained some sense of good and evil, proper and improper, and decent and indecent.⁵⁴

This leads to his discussion of the role of clothing in the second volume of *Reformed Ethics*.⁵⁵ For Bavinck, clothing is a reminder of our fall into shame, and therefore, it ought to humble us instead of making us proud.⁵⁶ Contrary to the Darwinian worldview, which fails to locate the uniqueness of humanity, shame is what distinguishes humans from animals.⁵⁷ Shame proves that humanity has remained human and retained its dignity and honor, even after the fall.⁵⁸ Hence, for Bavinck, the state of *shamelessness* is a far worse degradation of humanity than the state of shame. Bavinck writes that a shameless person is “doubly wounded who silences his conscience, who hardens and sears his conscience, which leads ultimately to living without conscience and without shame!”⁵⁹ This insight is vital in today’s world, where the cure for shame is often understood to be its eradication altogether.

On the other hand, not all shame is good, since not all conscience is aligned with divine law. When the self-judgment of shame is enacted according to the “erring conscience,” it renders “false shame,” which leads one away from God and truth. In *The Sacrifice of Praise*, he names false shame the most powerful force that threatens Christian living.

⁵³ Bavinck, *Biblical and Religious Psychology*, 166.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵ Although Bavinck follows the Reformers in their opposition to adornment and luxury, he also, following Kuyper, considers uniformity of fashion to be a modern curse. For an analysis of Kuyper’s polemics against uniformity in fashion in relation to trends in the Netherlands, see Robert Covolo, *Fashion Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 28–36.

⁵⁶ This view echoes John Calvin’s sermon “Sin’s Nature, Effects, Results, and Remedy,” where he points to God’s clothing of Adam and Eve as a reminder of their sinful condition. See, John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis: Chapters 1:1–11:4*, trans. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 329.

⁵⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: The Duties of the Christian Life*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 347–62.

⁵⁸ Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after Admission to the Lord’s Supper*, trans. Cameron Clausing and Gregory Parker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 118.

⁵⁹ Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 30.

For even when the tribulations and persecutions are over, it continues to work on and makes thousands and ten thousand to fall. ... This false sense of shame places a heavy stumbling block in the way of the confession of the Lord's Name.⁶⁰

Christians can be ashamed of the church as not being powerful, the Bible as being contrary to science, and even be ashamed of Christ and the gospel. This is because “we are afraid that by siding with Christ we will lose entirely our name and honor as a person before others and will become an object of scorn and derision, of abuse and persecution.”⁶¹ False shame arises when one's conscience is not aligned with the law of God but rather with the preservation of one's honor and status in front of others. Nevertheless, Bavinck points out that in an ironic way, even this false shame points us to the image of God because “even in false shame lies the foundation of a darkened understanding that we were once created in the image of God and still have a certain status and honor to preserve.”⁶² Hence, for Bavinck, although shame is a post-lapsarian emotion, it is neither good nor bad by itself. Because shame is a self-judgment of conscience, shame can be good or false, depending on whether one's conscience is attuned to the law of God.

Conclusion

Shame is a pervasive phenomenon in today's “shame-fame” culture. Secular psychology has generally treated shame as a malignant and unnecessary emotion, while biblical counselors have largely remained silent on the issue. Herman Bavinck takes a different approach to shame, starting from the biblical narrative in locating shame within the whole organism of sin. For Bavinck, shame is a post-lapsarian emotion birthed out of the self-judgment of conscience, neither good nor bad by itself. When a Christian's conscience is aligned with the law of God, shame provides a good pedagogy that protects them from sin. Where secular psychotherapy sees the individual conscience as the guide for truth and shame as a harmful obstacle, Bavinck's account locates conscience in relation to God and sees the positive side of shame in reorienting one to the law of God. On the other hand, when one is led by an erring conscience, shame functions as “false shame,” which leads one to seek their own honor rather than God. In Bavinck's biblical psychological account of shame, the cure for shame is not to seek a state of *shamelessness*

⁶⁰ Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 79.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 117.

but rather to seek true shame by aligning oneself with the law of God. In a world where social media perpetuates peer pressure and Christians feel obligated to be in line with the rest of the world, Bavinck's biblical and nuanced treatment of shame provides valuable resources for pastors and biblical counselors today.