

## H. Bavinck

### *Kampen I (1883-1902)*

On January 9, 1883 Pastor Jan Bavinck (President-Curator) and Pastor W.H. Gispen (Moderator of the Synod of Zwolle) inducted the newly appointed docents into their office as “Professor” (*Leeraar*) at the Theological Seminary of the CRC in Kampen. The following day, Herman Bavinck delivered his inauguration speech entitled “The Science of Holy Theology” (*De wetenschap der H. Goodgeleerdheid*).

In this speech, Bavinck in essence gave an introduction to his theological methodology. The talk was not long—one hour—but one of the notations in Bavinck’s diary gives us some insight into a colleague that would prove to be Bavinck’s “thorn in the flesh”—and vice-versa—for the entire time that the two gifted men taught in Kampen. Bavinck’s antagonist was Lucas Lindeboom and the two men could not have been more different, all the while holding to Reformed theology. The tragedy of this relationship is that rather than being able to work harmoniously and pull in the same direction, Lindeboom and Bavinck were quite often at cross purposes.

Both Bavinck and Lucas Lindeboom delivered their inaugural speeches on the same day. What is noteworthy is that there is a rather unusual entry in Bavinck’s diary on January 10<sup>th</sup>. As I mentioned above, Lindeboom was a very talented man as well, but this day was going to be typical of their relationship while they taught in Kampen. Bavinck’s speech lasted an hour; Lindeboom’s, that bore the title “Biblical histories as the irrefutable revelation of God and the indispensable key to science” (*De bijbelsche geschiedenissen de onomstootelijke Godsopenbaring en de onmisbare sleutel tot de wetenschap*), lasted three-and-a-half hours! In his diary, Bavinck commemorated that day with a thick, double stripe under his description of Lindeboom’s excessive time. Immediately after that he wrote, “Bavinck, The Science of Holy Theology, 1 hour.”<sup>1</sup>

Bavinck had had the occasion to speak in Amsterdam in November 1882 and took the time to consult with Abraham Kuyper about a possible subject for his upcoming inaugural speech. Various topics were suggested, but one that spoke directly to Bavinck’s heart was “Dogmatics Always Church Dogmatics.”<sup>2</sup>

On the same day of his inaugural speech, Bavinck wrote to his friend, Snouck, and confided some of his concerns about being such a young professor (Bavinck was twenty-nine). But it seems that some of Bavinck’s fears were not well founded. On January 24, 1883, Abraham Kuyper wrote a glowing report on Bavinck’s inaugural address in his newspaper, *The Herald (De Heraut)*. Kuyper described Bavinck’s speech as real Reformed scientific theology.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Kuyper did not withhold some mild criticism from the young theologian. What was the origin of Kuyper’s criticism? It was for praising Schleiermacher too much in the address, but added that he also believed that this tendency would correct itself.<sup>4</sup>

What is highly instructive for the relationship between Bavinck and Kuyper and between the Theological Seminary in Kampen and the Free University are the two

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<sup>1</sup> Diary, January 10, 1883.

<sup>2</sup> R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten*, Kampen: Kok, 1966), p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> *De Heraut*, num. 265, January 24, 1883.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

churches that lived side-by-side when Bavinck began teaching. Whereas the Separatists (Christian Reformed Church—not to be confused with the CRC in America) broke with the old State Church (*Hervormde Kerk*) there was a movement within the latter headed—among others—by Kuyper. This group came to be known by the untranslatable title of *De Doleantie*. About the closest we can come to a legitimate translation is that these members of the HK were highly vocal about the sad state of affairs, but were not, at that time, prepared to leave but rather wanted to change things from within. This is analogous—in hindsight—to polishing the brass on the Titanic.

The faculty in Kampen was divided over the issue of the Doleantie. As a movement, its initial influence was centered in Amsterdam, but it eventually spread to the entire country of Holland. The theological situation in the State Church had not improved over the years since the Separation. In point of fact, they had worsened. It will be remembered that Kuyper was an ordained minister in the State Church as was Rutgers. 1886 proved to be a turning point in the sense that serious discussions were initiated about either rectifying the rampant liberalism—which did not seem likely—or breaking away from the State Church altogether.

Bremmer correctly writes that from the very beginning Bavinck had a keen interest in Kuyper's struggles and conflicts within the State Church itself.<sup>5</sup> Prior to 1886 when it appeared that a rupture was merely a matter of time, Bavinck had addressed the issue of a Church free from the interference of the State in *The Trumpet*. He pointed out how this freedom was precisely what the CRC longed for and accomplished by separating from the State Church. Borrowing from Groen van Prinsterer's rejection of the Revolution in favor of Reformation Bavinck wrote, "The Revolution must be banished along with all of its unchristian elements. New states of affairs must be created by means of the acceptance and broader application of the principles of the Reformation."<sup>6</sup>

In order to grasp something of the theological nuances that were at play in the debate surrounding the doctrine of the Church during those years, we need to understand something of the matter of "the true church" as it was contained in the Belgic Confession, which comprised one of the confessions in the triad known as "The Three Forms of Unity."<sup>7</sup> The articles 27-29 of the BC address the matter of the Church of Jesus Christ. Article 29 in particular directs attention to the marks or notes of both the true and false Church.<sup>8</sup> In the course of that 29<sup>th</sup> article we are told that the true church is recognized by the marks of the pure preaching of the Word of God, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. From there, the author, Guido de Brès, describes the marks of the true Christian. He concludes with a description of the false church and its detractions from the Word of God and reminds Christians that "These two Churches are *easily* recognized and distinguished from each other" (Emphasis mine).

Historically, de Brès was directing his criticisms against the Roman Catholic Church. Given the dire situation within the State Church, the Separatists had, rightly, taken the

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<sup>5</sup> Bremmer, *HBZT*, 53.

<sup>6</sup> *De Bazuin*, 1884, no. 44.

<sup>7</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, and Canons of Dort.

<sup>8</sup> This is a matter, in my estimation, that North American churches should devote substantially more attention to in terms of denominational standards as well as individuals who are searching for a biblical church to attend and eventually become members of. Of course, so much of modern evangelicalism is almost entirely bereft of any of the truths contained in Article 29, their search being overshadowed by their desire to be entertained or otherwise made to feel good about themselves or to have their self-esteem stroked.

words to apply to an apostate ministry as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bavinck would address Kuyper on this issue—which he did prior to 1884—in a rather extensive article that appeared in the periodical the *Free Church*.<sup>9</sup> Bavinck and Kuyper were both strong personalities and both knew what they wanted and how they wanted to go about accomplishing their goals. Both were also leaders in their respective camps as well as being theologians. For his part, Bavinck was not about to relinquish his strongly-held principles for Kuyper or Kuyper’s name. Conversely, while Kuyper had a great deal of admiration and respect for Bavinck, he sometimes suspected that his younger colleague was not one-hundred-percent “on board” with Kuyper’s plans—which was true. Numerous times the two men criticized each other publicly over matters of church, politics, and theology, but at the end of the day, they were allies.

We should not get the impression that only Bavinck was involved in the developments that came to be called the Doleantie. Bremmer cites instances when the entire faculty in Kampen was invited to Amsterdam to confer with the deputies of the Doleantie. Given Bavinck’s appointments to the FU previously, he was considered a highly valuable contact for Kuyper, Rutgers, and others without that camp. At the same time, the affinities of the high profile leaders of the Doleantie for Bavinck ended up making him suspect by colleagues like Lindeboom. As far as the latter was concerned, Kuyper had Bavinck in his pocket.

Bavinck occupied the unenviable position of being the message or “middle man” between the two parties. He would attempt to listen to the objections his Kampen colleagues and to mollify them. In an article that appeared in *The Trumpet* in 1888, Bavinck accentuated the differences between the Separation and the Doleantie, because at bottom the discussion concentrated itself on the subject of the State Church. The Separatists, Bavinck believed, had made a clean break with the State Church, which meant that they had broken with it as a “body.” The Doleantie was more complicated: they contended that they had broken with the “relation” to the State Church, but not with the “body.” Bavinck concluded, therefore, that “The Separation was a battle for the truth; the Doleantie was a battle for the right of the Reformed Churches. The former was ethical in nature; the latter was juridical.”<sup>10</sup>

On August 14, 1888, the CRC Synod met in the city of Assen and the matter of union with the Doleantie brothers and sisters was on their agenda. For three days they discussed the possibility of union intensely and what the grounds should be for such a union. As might be expect, Bavinck was the spokesman for the group that was more favorable towards unifying with the Doleantie while Lindeboom took the opposite stance. He demanded that the Doleantie break *immediately (onverwijlde)* with the State Church. Barring that, there could be no bona fide discussion about union. This decision was further complicated by the fact that during 1887 and 1888 the tensions sometimes ran high in the small group of faculty members at the theological seminary in Kampen. Little wonder that when it was time to meet in the city of Assen Bavinck and Lindeboom were more opposed than ever to each other.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *De Vrije Kerk*, 1883, no. 9, pp. 542-575.

<sup>10</sup> *De Bazuin*, 1888, no. 31. “De afscheiding was een strijd voor de waarheid, de doleantie een strijd voor het recht der Geref. Kerken. Geene was ethisch, deze juridisch van aard.”

<sup>11</sup> Bremmer, *HBZT*, 58.

Four months later (December 18, 1888) Bavinck would deliver his *cri de coeur* in his first speech as rector of the school entitled *The Catholicity of Christendom and Church*<sup>12</sup> that no doubt was descriptive of the atmosphere of the August Synod meeting, although Bavinck also directed his attention to a number of other theological controversies as well.<sup>13</sup> What were some of those controversies that Bavinck addressed in his position of rector of the theological seminary? Throughout the speech we discover Bavinck speaking about the Dutch Ecclesiastical Ruling that established the State Church, the dangers of withdrawing into a sort of “convent-like” mentality (*de conventikelgeest*), a pessimistic view of the world, narrow-mindedness (which he found in his own denomination), and the ever-present danger of a variety of church splits caused by non-essential, non-fundamental matters.

In such a short sketch of Bavinck’s life, it is next to impossible adequately to describe all that occurred during his years in Kampen, but before we move on I do want to touch on some important matters. First, in 1888 Bavinck delivered one of his finest speeches. It was born of some heated discussions surrounding the possible union with the Doleantie. This is the above-mentioned speech on the catholicity of Christendom and the Church. Even to this day, Bavinck gives us a great deal to ponder with a view to the nature and character of the Church of Jesus Christ. On Dutch periodical, *Actualiteit*, called the work a “classic” and an historical document of prophetic proportions. Whereas that might be a bit of an overstatement, it does provide substantial food for reflection and thought. In terms of what he hoped to accomplish with this particular speech Bavinck wrote the following to his good friend Snouck Hurgronje: “Reflect as you read this speech that it is aimed at being medicine for the separatist and sectarian tendencies that sometimes present themselves in our church (the Separatist CRC—RG). There is so much narrow-mindedness, so much pettiness among us and the worst is that this passes for piety.” In this discourse Bavinck touches on three areas: First, what Scripture teaches about the subject; second, how the Church has understood Scripture throughout the centuries; and third, what obligation Scripture imposes on us today.<sup>14</sup>

1888 proved to be a “full” year for Bavinck for not only was he intensely engaged in preparing his lectures in Dogmatics and working arduously for the union of the CRC and the Doleantie, but also because it was in that year that he met a young woman named Johanna Adriana Schippers, who was the daughter of a ship owner from Vlaardingen. She was almost fifteen years younger than Bavinck but according to Bremmer and conversations that I had with their own child, Johanna Geziena (Hanny)<sup>15</sup>, who lived in The Hague when I was a pastor in Rijswijk, her mother was a friendly, happy woman who was well informed and had her head on straight.<sup>16</sup> Without going into details here,

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<sup>12</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (G. Puchinger [ed.]), (Kampen: Kok, 1968). All quotations from this speech will be taken from Puchinger’s 1968 edition.

<sup>13</sup> For example, approximately twenty years previously the First Vatican Council had declared the infallibility of the Pope and on August 4, 1879 Pope Leo XIII had published his encyclical entitled *Aeterni Patris* that reinstated Thomistic philosophy. Both events widened the gap between Rome and the Protestants. Bavinck delved into this matter in his speech.

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck writes, “Ik heb mij daarom voorgesteld, om bij gelegenheid van de overdracht van het rectoraat op die *Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* you aandacht te vestigen. Laat me in brede trekken u mogen schetsen, *wat de Schrift daar over leert, hoe ze door de kerk in haar historie is verstaan, en welke plicht zij voor het heden ons oplegt.*” (pp. 2-3. Italics mine—RG.)

<sup>15</sup> She was born on November 25, 1894 and was Herman and Johanna’s only child.

<sup>16</sup> Bremmer, *HBZT*, 75. Also personal telephone conversations that I had with Hanny while I was writing my doctoral dissertation on her father.

judging by Bavinck's notations in his diary, even with all the busyness of study and the Church, these were very happy days with his "Johanna."

Apparently, the courtship followed the formalities of nineteenth century Europe and there is a notation in the diary stating that they had taken their first walk alone! On June 4, 1890, Bavinck wrote a letter to Johanna's parents asking them for her hand and heart. In retrospect, she should have asked for all of her—just kidding. The parents answered yes and gave their blessing to the impending marriage. Bavinck was now a professor who was engaged to be married. One can only speculate why Bavinck waited so long before marrying. Bremmer notes that Bavinck was not unaware of the charms of the gentler sex. It was also not the case that Bavinck preferred the unmarried state to the married.<sup>17</sup> It is conceivable that the pressures of preparing lectures, his work for the union of the Church, his ongoing arguments with Lindeboom, and a host of other factors played roles in him not having a great deal of excess time to look for a wife. In addition, living at home with his parents proved to be an excellent arrangement for Bavinck at the time.

The winter of 1890, which was apparently a bitterly cold one, so much so that in addition to the mentioning of preaching engagements and speeches, Bavinck turned into a kind of weatherman making frequent mention of the temperature. The wedding was set for a much warmer time: July 2, 1891. The wedding procession was made up of no less than fourteen coaches. Pastor Sieders, the *pastor loci* in Vlaardingem performed the ceremony and preached from Psalm 25:6-7. After a honeymoon in Paris and Geneva the newly weds returned to Kampen and took up residence with a beautiful house on the IJssel River at de la Sablonièrekade 32, which I passed many times while living in Kampen.

1892 was truly a landmark year because the union between the CRC and Doleantie finally became a reality. That same year Bavinck and Wielenga made a trip to Toronto, Canada and he spoke at a conference of the Presbyterian Alliance of Toronto. One would think that with all the time and energy that was spent effectuating the union of 1892 that the unified churches would pause and enjoy the fruit of their prayers and labors. That was not to be. With the echoes of all the speeches praising the union still fresh in the hearts and minds of those in Reformed Church in Holland, dark clouds began to appear on the ecclesiastical horizon. Throughout the efforts, Bavinck had done his best to remain a mediating figure, which means that you're typically the messenger that gets shot by both sides. In 1889, in the midst of the attempts at unification, Kuyper made it public that he wanted Bavinck to teach at the FU. Bavinck was caught in the middle of the crossfire and via a great deal of political maneuvering he, Wielenga, and others were able to quell the unrest.

It was precisely during this time when letters were flying back and forth between Kampen and Amsterdam and that Lindeboom was pressuring Bavinck so that either staying or leaving was going to be difficult, that we get some interesting insight into Kuyper's character. Being a visionary, Kuyper often ran way ahead of the pack. So far ahead in this case that his actions almost permanently ruined any possibility for union between the two churches. In the aftermath of the CRC Synod in Assen in 1888 when things did not go as Kuyper had wished he wrote a vitriolic, inflammatory article in *The Herald* where he postulated that Assen had thrown down the gauntlet and that it had

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

damaged the possibility of union almost irrevocably (*onherroepelijk*).<sup>18</sup> As great as his insights and efforts were, Kuyper remained a man with clay feet. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and they were able to shed more light than heat on the issue. Otherwise, Kuyper's prediction could have become reality and that of his own doing. In the case of the union, patience—and lots of it—was a precious commodity.

Bavinck declined the appointment to the FU, but Kuyper was an insistent man and in 1893 Bavinck again received an appointment to the FU, this time as professor of Old Testament. To make matters worse, after mountains of letter writing and conversations Bavinck agreed to accept the position and wrote a letter to that effect on January 18, 1894. He was willing to put his project of the *Reformed Dogmatics* aside if the churches would benefit from him doing something else. In place of the *RD*, he would simply publish an abbreviated *Handbook of Dogmatics*. We can all be thankful to the Lord that this is not what happened. Of course, Kuyper didn't expect Bavinck to leave Kampen immediately since there were a number of "loose ends" that needed to be taken care of. But by May 21, 1895 Bavinck was still in Kampen and his desire to move to Amsterdam was rapidly waning. He had not abandoned writing his *RD* and the first volume was due to appear that year. By the 24<sup>th</sup> of May the curators of the FU had accepted Bavinck's wish not to come to Amsterdam after all.<sup>19</sup>

1896 was a sad year for the Bavinck family. Bavinck's brother, Johan Gerrit, who was born in 1872 in Almkerk had been a law student who had completed his doctoral examination in Amsterdam *cum laude*. He promoted with a dissertation entitled *The Calvinistic Principles of the Doctrine of the State*. His illness was only described as one where he coughed up blood. He died at the age of twenty-four. His death, although received in faith, proved a struggle for the family. Bavinck's mother took Johan's death particularly hard—the Bavinck's lost more than one child to early death—and according to Bremmer never really quite rose above it. She died four years later at the age of seventy-three.<sup>20</sup>

Oddly, prior to Bavinck's departure to the FU he, Kuyper, and Rutgers had a major falling out vis-à-vis the school question that swirled around between the unified churches. In historical retrospect, the union of 1892 never quite unified the two churches as Bavinck would have desired. In fact, in each city, village, and town where existing churches were situated the members of the CRC were termed the "A-brothers" and the Doleantie members were called the "B-brothers." Without going into detail here, Bremmer is correct when he judges that the manner in which Kuyper and Rutgers put Bavinck in his place on the matter, even though Bavinck had made a highly acceptable proposal and had written an excellent brochure explaining his position. Kuyper and Rutgers made it crystal clear to Bavinck that they were in charge.<sup>21</sup> This, plus the fact that Bavinck had been quite critical of the outworking of one of Kuyper's highly speculative theological positions cooled their relationship.<sup>22</sup>

Later, Bavinck would also be highly critical of Kuyper's position—and especially critical of the extent to which Kuyper's followers took this doctrine—of presupposed regeneration. Nevertheless, Kuyper fully understood that Bavinck was the best theologian

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<sup>18</sup> *De Heraut*, 1888, no. 558.

<sup>19</sup> Bremmer, *HBZT*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-137.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

in Holland and that it would be quite prestigious both for Bavinck as well as for Kuyper to have Bavinck teaching at the FU. Even the number of letters that Bavinck and Kuyper used to write to each other dropped off significantly, precipitously. On August 25, 1899 Kuyper's wife, Johanna, died at the young age of fifty-seven. Bavinck sent a letter of condolences that contained the word "friend," which fell well short of the way in which Bavinck and Kuyper used to address each other. The extant letters after this one rarely even contain the word "friend." Sometimes, in intense situations, feelings can run very high, even for professors in Theology.

Finally, the years 1895-1901 were truly pivotal, monumental years for Bavinck. The first volume of the *RD* appeared in 1895, followed closely by volume two in 1897, volume three in 1898, and volume four in 1901. How thankful to God we all must be that Bavinck declined his appointment to the FU in 1895 and abandoned his proposed project of writing a mere handbook. In 1909, after he had moved to Amsterdam, he did publish a popular Dogmatics with the title *Magnalia Dei*.<sup>23</sup>

His time in Kampen had been very profitable both for Theology as for the Church of Jesus Christ. Bavinck had labored hard and well in the Kingdom of Christ and Kuyper had attempted on numerous occasions to pull him away to Amsterdam.

### *The Move to the Free University*

Another of Bavinck's biographers, Valentine Hepp, relates that when the man who *was* the Theological Seminary left Kampen that he reflected upon his teaching career there from three different perspectives: What I have *lost*; what I have *gained*; and what I have *kept*.<sup>24</sup>

Under the rubric of what he lost Bavinck mentions his colleague Wielenga in particular. He was a man that had stood by Bavinck in tough times and it is clear that Bavinck took Wielenga's passing quite hard. He ostensibly commented that losing a friend like Wielenga was something that he never quite got over.<sup>25</sup> In terms of what he had gained by accepting the appointment to the Free University was a set of colleagues with whom he felt at home and with whom he knew he would not be arguing and fighting. This taken by itself was an enormous plus in his life. It troubled Bavinck's heart that there was so much suspicion and distrust among some of the CRC brothers and sisters not to mention the tensions that existed at the Theological Seminary itself. Amsterdam would provide him with a fresh start in a certain sense. Finally, Bavinck plainly and simply described what he had kept as "the faith." In the final analysis, when all the lectures were delivered, the meetings for the Church and seminary had been put to rest, all the articles and books had been written, and all was said and done the most important possession that Bavinck had was the gift of his faith according to free, sovereign, and electing grace.

Bavinck's move to the FU also had far-reaching implications for the Theological Seminary in Kampen. It was understood that a representatively large number of students came to Kampen to study theology precisely because Bavinck taught Dogmatics there. Kuyper had tried on several occasions to pull Bavinck away from Kampen as we have

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<sup>23</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*. (Kampen: Kok, 1909). A 2nd edition with extra material that was found on Bavinck's desk after his death was published in 1931 with a letter of introduction by Bavinck's brother, C.B. Bavinck.

<sup>24</sup> Valentine Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, (Amsterdam: W. ten Have, 1921), pp. 299-300.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

seen, but Bavinck had remained faithful to his colleagues and students in the little village of Kampen. By accepting the appointment to Amsterdam great changes were going to be in store both for Bavinck and for the Theological Seminary.

It was a well-known fact that the faculty members and students both were apprehensive with each call that Bavinck received from the FU. When he finally cut the “Gordian Knot” and accepted the position in Amsterdam, the Theological Seminary was thrown into a mini-crisis. When we think of great teachers or well known schools or seminaries our numbers can be skewed. For example, when the FU began the first year only five students were enrolled. As popular as Bavinck was as a teacher the Theological Seminary in Kampen only had fifty-two students at the time of Bavinck’s departure. The mini-crisis occurred when twenty-seven left and followed their beloved professor to Amsterdam, leaving Kampen with only twenty-five students.

### *Bavinck and Amsterdam*

Amsterdam was different in almost every way from Kampen. Whereas Kampen was an almost idyllic rural setting on the IJssel River where the farmers spoke a dialect called “Kampers,” Amsterdam was a metropolitan city offering a wide range of opportunities. Bavinck’s living conditions were more than comfortable in Amsterdam, fitting his position of professor at the FU. Initially he lived in what was known as the “Professors Quarter” of Amsterdam, but within a few years he moved his family to a house previously owned by an Amsterdam patrician at de Singel 62. His new home was in the middle of the city, located near one of the many canals that are ubiquitous in Amsterdam.

His colleagues in Amsterdam were Petrus Biesterveld (1863-1908), who had been one of Bavinck’s students. Biesterveld’s early death was also a great sorrow to Bavinck. Biesterveld was a much loved colleague and likeminded spirit. Biesterveld taught what we call Practical Theology as well as exegesis New Testament.

Frederik Lodewijk Rutgers (1836-1917) was probably the most powerful personality that Bavinck had to deal with in Amsterdam. Rutgers’ father, Antonie (1805-1884), had taught Semitics at Leiden. Frederik Rutgers had also attended Leiden—before Bavinck’s time—and promoted in New Testament. Rutgers was a master at church polity and later played quarterback for the U.S. university that bears his name—that’s not true. I just made that up. It is true, however, that Rutgers’ personality did not make him popular with the students. He was, in a certain sense, as unpopular with the students as Lindeboom was in Kampen. Nevertheless, he wielded a great deal of power and influence and was Kuyper’s right hand man.

Rutgers’ opposite was Gerhard H.J.W.J. Geesink (1854-1929).<sup>26</sup> He taught Philosophy and Ethics. He wrote a thick, one-volume *Reformed Ethics* as well as a detailed four-volume work with the translated title, *The Ordinance’s of the Lord*.<sup>27</sup> His colleagues described him as a man of fine culture, intellectual, who was very easy to get along with—a truly rare combination! Apparently, Geesink had an excellent sense of humor and the Geesink and Kuyper families often vacationed together.

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<sup>26</sup> His parents would have given him more names but they either ran out of alphabet or just got tired.

<sup>27</sup> W. Geesink, *Van ‘s Heeren Ordinantiën*, Vol. I-IV, (Kampen: Kok, 1925<sup>2</sup>). The first volume contains an overview of the created order, a defense of Calvinism vis-à-vis Fatalism, and a description of creation. Volume two discusses material nature, the spiritual realm, and material-spiritual nature. The third volume exposit the first table of the Law of God and the fourth volume contains commandments five through ten of the Ten Commandments.

Herman Huber Kuyper (1864-1945) was Kuyper's oldest son, born while Kuyper was still a HK pastor in Beesd. H.H. Kuyper taught Dutch Church History and the Encyclopedia of Theology. Like Rutgers and his father, H.H. Kuyper was quite at home delving into minuscule questions of church polity. During various General Synod meetings, he played integral roles in the discussions as well as contributing numerous articles. When Rutgers died, the implicit leadership mantle of the General Synods fell upon H.H. Kuyper's shoulders.

All in all, Bavinck was able to work in a fruitful manner with these men, but his influence upon the churches was not the same as it had been in Kampen.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, 1908 was a year filled with joy and sadness. On August 28<sup>th</sup> of that year, Bavinck boarded the ship the *Rotterdam* and sailed for America. According to reports Bavinck liked America and its lifestyle better than he had liked Canada. Valentine Hepp devotes ample time and attention to this aspect in his biography and I plan to do the same in mine. For the present, however, suffice it to say that Bavinck very much enjoyed the American way of life.

No doubt the high point of his visit to America were the Stone Lectures that he delivered at Princeton University entitled *The Philosophy of Revelation*.<sup>29</sup> During his trip to America Bavinck was informed that his dear friend, colleague, and former student, Biesterveld, was seriously ill. Bavinck was able to visit him on December 12<sup>th</sup> and to talk with him briefly and two days later, at the age of forty-five, Biesterveld passed into glory.

The next year, 1909, another "fixture" in the former-Separatist congregation, W.H. Gispen, died as did Bavinck's father, Jan. When Bavinck left Kampen, father Jan, moved with the family to Amsterdam as well. He was eighty-three years old when he died. According to Bremmer, there was a very large gathering of God's people at Jan's funeral.<sup>30</sup> He was buried next to his loving wife and son in the village of IJsselmuiden, which is on the opposite bank of the IJssel across from Kampen.

### ***Bavinck the Politician***

Bavinck had a keen interest in politics almost from the outset of his theological career. For example, during his short stay as a pastor in Franeker, he attended a number of political speeches.<sup>31</sup> It was when he finally accepted the position as professor at the Free University that Bavinck's political activity kicked into high gear. In fact, his arrival in Amsterdam and his political involvement at an intensified level virtually coincided.

In 1901 the young Queen of Holland, Wilhelmina, had appointed Kuyper to be the president of the Council of Ministers for the country. This meant, among other things, that Kuyper would no longer be able to continue his daily leadership activities in the Anti-Revolutionary Party. The ARP did have an official magazine known as *The Standard (De Standaard)* and Kuyper contributed articles from time to time but not in comparison to his previous level of contribution—understandably. Kuyper convinced Bavinck to accept the appointment as "temporary" president of the ARP. Bavinck accepted and served from 1905-1907.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bremmer, *HBZT*, 209.

<sup>29</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Wijsbegeerte der openbaring*. (Stone lectures of 1908 held in Princeton, N.J.), (Kampen: Kok, 1908).

<sup>30</sup> Bremmer, *HBZT*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 37ff.

As relationships go, Bavinck's move to Amsterdam proved difficult as far as he and Kuyper were concerned. Both were highly intelligent men with their own thoughts and views. Bavinck and Kuyper held each other in high esteem, but that did not mean that they always agreed with one another. Near the end Bavinck's tenure in Kampen, shortly after the union of 1892, Bavinck wrote a brochure that he believed would solve how the Free University and the Theological Seminary would function alongside the other disciplines.<sup>32</sup> After Bavinck arrived in Amsterdam and began his political involvement with the ARP it began to appear obvious that these two men had some clear and decided differences. What exacerbated the situation was that Bavinck was often the designated speaker when there was a particular celebration. Shortly after the union of 1892, for example, Bavinck spoke at an occasion honoring Kuyper and he could not find enough superlatives to describe his good friend and colleague.<sup>33</sup> In 1907, Bavinck was named as the master of ceremonies at Kuyper's seventy-fifth birthday. As Bremmer describes the event, the tone was substantially more subdued.<sup>34</sup>

A great deal of Bavinck's political activities focused on a number of Dutch internal affairs that have little—if any—direct application to this short biography. What is worthy of mention, however, is that on September 11, 1911 Bavinck was installed as the president of the First Chamber (*Eerste Kamer*) in the Dutch government, which would be roughly comparable to our Senate. This is noteworthy for a number of reasons not least of which is the fact that it was in this capacity that we find this brilliant theologian bringing his theology to bear on political matters.

Let there be no mistake: Bavinck was not intent on establishing a theocracy in Holland, but he was convinced that the Christian voice should be heard. In point of fact, he had come under the influence of Kuyper's vision of a Calvinistic Revival where every aspect and facet of life heard the Christian voice. Bavinck believed that any nation functioned better, more equitably if it followed Christian principles and practices. After all, isn't God the Creator of the State? Doesn't he know best how the State should be run?

With this in mind, in May 1917 Bavinck made an impassioned speech in the Senate in favor of women's voting rights. One insight into Bavinck's speech will have to suffice. A number of Parliament members from the ARP were in favor of women's voting rights as a *principle*. Bavinck objected to this approach from a Christian perspective stating that giving women the right to vote as a *principle* treated them more like numbers than like people. Bavinck further objected to what he saw as a Darwinian incursion into the ARP mind-set and position on this issue. Not being ashamed of his Christian faith, Bavinck stated unequivocally that both male and female are created in the image of God, Christ was born of a woman, and that there can be no longer any place in society for the denigration of the woman.<sup>35</sup>

Bremmer's comment that it was quite remarkable how Bavinck continually emphasized the spiritual-ethical (*geestelijk-zedelijk*) aspects of the various questions that

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Bremmer, *HBZT*, 118ff. Of particular importance is the animosity that grew between Rutgers and Kuyper in Amsterdam and Bavinck in Kampen.

<sup>33</sup> In a letter from the Bavinck Archives at the Free University to Kuyper (10.28.1897) Bavinck offered—along with thousands of others in Holland according to Bavinck—his best wishes and also expressed his thanks for Kuyper's efforts in the Kingdom. Bavinck took the time to express his indebtedness to Kuyper not only for the "scientific" aspect of Bavinck's theological method but also what Kuyper meant to him in terms of his walk of faith.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 230. He writes, "Nu was Bavincks toon veel gematigder. Het is opvallend hoe sober hij zich uitdrukte vergeleken bij de wierook die kwistig door anderen Kuyper werd toegezwaid."

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

arose in political life.<sup>36</sup> Within that capacity and context, Bavinck repeatedly warned Parliament about the destructive power of sin in the lives of individuals as well as of nations. In fact, it has been said that much of the wording of his addresses to the Senate can be found in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bremmer is right when he says, “The combination of theologian and politician is not as strange as some opine.”<sup>37</sup> I would add to that that if we are going to have theologians speak about political matters today—and I believe that they should—then like Bavinck they are going to have to do their theological homework. They do not have to run for political office, but they should be well grounded biblically in what they say and how they see the scriptures functioning in their respective societies.

Precisely because Bavinck was so well grounded as a Reformed theologian he did not fall into the insidious trap of the Social Gospel or a Jim Wallis approach to God and politics. There was nothing of the “Politics of Jesus” in distinction from the God of the Old Testament nor any notion in the direction of “Jesus was a socialist.” In this regard, Bavinck was less “progressive” when it came to social matters. As a son of the Church, Bavinck saw a continued function for the Church of Christ in aiding those who had true needs. He was opposed to government intervention and a “safety net” that took care of the citizens from “womb to tomb.” His convictions were that the more government intervened into our lives the less morally responsible men became, plus government intervention had the added negative aspect of undermining both individual and family.<sup>38</sup>

In Bavinck’s mind, mercy was the place of the Church and not the State.<sup>39</sup> In 1919, Bavinck delivered his last speech as a member of the First Chamber. A new cabinet was in place under the leadership of Ruys de Beerenbrouck. According to Bremmer, Bavinck’s speech covered a wide range of contemporary topics that faced Holland and the new Prime Minister at the time. It was the post-World War I era and Bavinck made it clear that whether the cabinet was to the Left or Right of center, it should definitely be positive vis-à-vis the Christian principles that had helped govern Holland. He went on to say that irrespective of the topic—marriage, divorce, individual possessions, inheritances, capital punishment, or any other issue that faced the country—the cabinet should keep in mind that the laws of The Netherlands were through-and-through Christian and rested firmly on a Christian foundation.

All in all, Bavinck was a fascinating figure in the political realm. He was an accomplished theologian and brought his theological expertise into the political equation. Moreover, he did not shy away from addressing political issues from a distinctively Christian perspective. On balance, his political activities in Amsterdam were particularly effective. The Anti-Revolutionary Party was blessed during Bavinck’s tenure with a leader who was quite adept at combining principled resolution (*beslistheid*) with “an open eye for the questions of his time.”<sup>40</sup>

### ***What Happened to Theology?***

With regard to Bavinck’s life, some have raised the question: Why did Bavinck stop with theology once he moved to Amsterdam? This is a totally legitimate question, but I

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *Handelingen van de Eerste Kamper der Staten-general*, 5.15.1917.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4.11.1918.

<sup>40</sup> Bremmer, *HBZT*, 242.

personally believe that it is the incorrect one. Without a doubt, there was a shift in Bavinck's emphases once his time in Kampen was over. And it is true that he did not spend much time writing more strictly theological treatises. That shift does not mean, however, that Bavinck lost all interest in theology. Quite the contrary is the case.

What transpired after his move to Amsterdam was more involvement in politics—as we have just seen—as well as the application of his theology to a wide variety of social and ethical issues of his time. Bavinck arrived in Amsterdam as a “mature” theologian. The years between 1892 and 1902 were particularly pivotal. He had worked hard and long on his *magnum opus*, the *Reformed Dogmatics* and during this period the first edition appeared.<sup>41</sup> A couple of comments from his Preface to the first volume are instructive. He begins by pointing out that in 1895, *Dogmatics* was not held in high esteem.<sup>42</sup> In addition, this *Dogmatics* was not going to allocate certain church fathers to the Roman Catholic camp, but, where possible would integrate them into the fabric of the whole.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the volumes would contain *Reformed* material that very closely was associated with the time of the Reformation, especially as it was led by Calvin in Switzerland.<sup>44</sup> Finally, it was Bavinck's intent that his *Dogmatics* would bear the stamp of its time. In addressing both church historical and contemporary matters the over-arching balance would be achieved by rooting the subject matter in the past and working for the future.<sup>45</sup>

My point here is simply this: From the first edition to the second only relatively minor, cosmetic-like changes were made to the *RD*. For example, from the first to the second edition Bavinck's paragraph on the “Method of Dogmatics” was expanded and Bavinck no longer included the notion of innate ideas that was included in the first edition. By and large, however, the *RD* went unchanged. Bavinck was satisfied with what he had written. By the time he arrived in Amsterdam he was not going to make major changes in his four-volume work, but what he did do was to apply his theology to a number of ethical issues.

Moreover, in 1909 Kok published Bavinck's popular *Dogmatics*, which is the *Magnalia Dei* in Dutch<sup>46</sup> (the Great Things of God), but for some unknown reason was published in the English edition under the title *Our Reasonable Faith*.<sup>47</sup> It was also during his Amsterdam time that Bavinck wrote articles on evangelism, foreign missions, aesthetics, ethics and politics, women in modern society, and the imitation of Christ and the modern life, just to mention a few.

He also contributed to a number of theological publications—domestic and international—while in Amsterdam as well. In short, it is same to say that Bavinck by no means became disinterested in or disillusioned with what he had written in the *RD*. He

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<sup>41</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. I (1895), Vol. II (1897), Vol. III (1898), and Vol. IV (1901), (Kampen; J.H. Bos).

<sup>42</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. I, (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1895), p. III.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Bavinck writes, “Maar des te meer stemt het dan tot dank, een beroep te kunnen doen op het bondgenootschap der voorgelachten. Om deze redenen is er aan de patristische en scholastische theologie meer aandacht gewijd, dan anders wel bij protestantsche dogmatici het geval is. Mannen als Irenaeus, Augustinus, Thomas, behooren uitsluitend aan Rome. Zij zijn patres and doctores, aan wie de gansche christelijke kerk verplichtingen heeft.”

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, (Kampen: Kok, 1909). A second, expanded version was edited by C.B. Bavinck and published by the same firm in 1931.

<sup>47</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, (Henry Zylstra [trans.]), (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

had simply completed what God gave him to do in Dogmatics during his time in Kampen and he simply closed the cover on that chapter of his life.

Valentine Hepp gives us some helpful insight. While on his deathbed, Bavinck seemed to anticipate some detractors saying that he had lost his love for theology and had changed his mind on a number of matters. To the contrary, however, Bavinck declared that he took nothing back that he had written.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Last Months*

Prior to his death, the Lord still had a number of enjoyable things for Bavinck to do. In 1918, Hanny married Mr. G. Ruys and Bavinck performed the ecclesiastical part of the wedding in the church on the Keizersgracht on May 14<sup>th</sup>. Bavinck loved Hanny greatly and it wasn't an uncommon sight to see the two of them walking together around five o'clock on the Kalverstraat. And yet, these were also the years when Bavinck's health took a rather sharp decline. The photos that still exist from this time in Bavinck's life testify that he was over sixty-year-old going on eighty. His face looks tired and his mouth is often turned down.

The exact illness that God used as an "exit strategy" for Bavinck is unknown. He had experienced an episode, an attack once while on vacation that caused him shortness of breath. Whatever the case, the sickness began to take a noticeable toll on him. The last entry in his diary was made a little over six months prior to his own death. It was on November 8, 1920 that he wrote, "Monday. 6:30p.m. Dr. A. Kuyper died. Friday, November 12, Dr. A.K.'s funeral."

When we pause and reflect, we are forced to realize that in 1920 and 1921 the Lord removed three theological giants from our midst: Abraham Kuyper, B.B. Warfield, and Herman Bavinck. According to one of Bavinck's student's accounts Bavinck's last few weeks were anything but easy.<sup>49</sup> March 13, 1921 marked the fortieth anniversary of Bavinck's ordination and installation in the congregation in Franeker.

### *"I Have Kept the Faith"*

We noted earlier that Hepp chronicled Bavinck's "inventory" of his life when he moved from Kampen to Amsterdam. Through all the various "storms" of life—academic, ecclesiastical, and personal—Bavinck knew himself to be a child of God. For all his intellectual gifts and acumen he remained a simple man of faith—an ordinary man who was privileged to serve an extraordinary God. In a letter to his friend, Snouck Hurgronje, he opined that whatever you believe is going to come under attack from the world or from Satan and his host. A faith without difficulties and problems is impossible for the believer.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, it is precisely the Christian life and worldview "im Groszen und Ganzen" that must be applied to the entirety of nature and history.<sup>51</sup> It is true, however, that Bavinck's life changed with the advent of World War I. Of course, this is not only true of Bavinck, but of many in Europe as well. What seemed unthinkable became reality

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<sup>48</sup> Hepp, *DHB*, 324.

<sup>49</sup> J.H. Landwehr, *In Memoriam. Prof.Dr. H. Bavinck herdacht door een zijner oud-leerlingen*, (Kampen: Kok, 1921), p. 77ff.

<sup>50</sup> Hepp, *DHB*, 300.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

and World War I made an enormous impression upon Bavinck.<sup>52</sup> He penned a brochure entitled *The Problem of the War (Het Probleem van den Oorlog)* where he commented that the war was a huge embarrassment and challenge since so many had no idea where to place it within the existing categories of “our reasonable, moral, Christian worldview.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, once again, we find Bavinck in this brochure returning to the foundation of faith. He remarks that the faith of the Christian’s heart is far stronger than all our reasoning abilities and all our evidences. Faith has a purpose in spite of the world and all its irrationality.<sup>54</sup>

### *Death and Burial*

Bavinck’s pastor during his illness was Dr. B. Wielenga. He records for history that when he would visit Bavinck during his sickness he would ask him this: Dr. Bavinck, what shall I pray? Bavinck’s answer was always, “Thanks, thanks for everything!”<sup>55</sup> Accounts point us to the fact that during this time Bavinck was especially comforted by the psalms, Psalm 16 in particular, and his beloved wife. On May 21<sup>st</sup>, Johanna wrote, “Herman deeply saddened and troubled.” But she also mentioned Psalm 86, which was one of Herman’s favorites; one that he had the congregation sing often when he preached. On June 2<sup>nd</sup> Herman said to his wife that all the psalms are beautiful, but especially Psalm 103. At 4:30a.m. on July 29<sup>th</sup> Bavinck’s earthly struggles ended. He died in his sleep in full peace and assurance. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, Bavinck departed from the Singel 62 for the last time. This time he left in his burial coffin, which was carried by his students.

It was different than Kuyper’s funeral where thousands lined the streets. If Kuyper had his thousands, Bavinck had his hundreds. At the gravesite people, friends, colleagues from Kampen and Amsterdam, students, and church people paid their last respects. His old friend, Snouck, was present as a representative from Leiden University. Wielenga had gone on vacation, so Pastor Brussaard from Bloemendaal performed the ceremony. Brussaard had the gathered crowd sing another of Bavinck’s favorite psalms: Psalm 84:6.<sup>56</sup> At the end of the ceremony Brussaard gave the sign and Bavinck’s coffin began to descend into the grave. Spontaneously, those present began to sing Psalm 72:11.<sup>57</sup> The Reformed in Holland had just committed the body of its greatest and one of its noblest sons into the earth. As the cemetery emptied it was clear that God had closed an important chapter in the history of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, but more than that, he closed the chapter on a theologian that would be counted among the greatest and most gifted among the Reformed.

### *Assessment of Bavinck as a Theologian*

In light of the way I ended the previous section, it is evident what my assessment of Herman Bavinck as a theologian is. I was first introduced to him by Dr. Roger Nicole

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>53</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Het Probleem van den Oorlog*, (Kampen: Kok, 1915), p. 28.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>55</sup> Cited by Bremmer, *HBZT*, 268.

<sup>56</sup> The English translation reads, “The LORD his goodness has revealed: he is to us a sun and shield, for he bestows renown and favor. And when the upright seek his face, the LORD will not withhold his grace; his faithfulness endures forever. O LORD of hosts, how blessed is he who puts his hope and trust in thee.”

<sup>57</sup> “The king, whose name we are professing, shall like the sun endure. In him all nations find their blessing; make thou his throne secure! Blessed by the LORD, for he so glorious alone does wondrous things. O God, in all the earth our chorus with ‘Amen, Amen’ rings.”

when I was his Byington Teaching Fellow at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. My senior year I took an overload course entitled Introduction to Theological Dutch. I was the only student in the class so the chances of getting called on were pretty high. It was during this time that Nicole had me read Bavinck. Each page at that time took a lot of concentration and about one hour to complete. But even at that time—and with Nicole’s encouragement—I saw that this was a man who was well worth the effort to read. In September 1975 our family moved to Amsterdam where I studied at the FU until 1977 when I received a scholarship to switch schools, so our family moved to Kampen. I took the reverse steps that Bavinck did. While in Kampen three of our six children were born and one is buried there.

My time in Kampen was spent, by and large, studying Herman Bavinck. There was preparation for oral exams called *tentamens* that covered modern theology, but my heart always returned to Bavinck. I was hooked and whenever I had free time I could be found pouring over the pages of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. My volumes are worn, torn, used, and full of underlining, highlighting, and comments. I go back to them weekly. In my estimation, Bavinck is the most outstanding theologian that Holland produced. That he has often stood in the shadow of Kuyper is, in a very real sense, unfortunate. For all of his gifts—and he was definitely a very gifted man—Kuyper had a speculative side that proved to be the downfall of a number of his followers, especially in the realm of presupposed regeneration of covenant children.

Bavinck, on the other hand, presents us with a balanced, non-speculative *Reformed Dogmatics* that should not only be read, but *consumed* by professors, pastors, students, and laymen alike. It is that valuable. What characterizes all of Bavinck’s writings are the following: First, he was an excellent exegete and was thoroughly at home with the biblical languages, Latin, German, French, and English.

Second, each paragraph in the *RD* contains exquisite sections on the history of dogma that provides the reader with great insights into the development of doctrine in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Third, most sections also contain explanations of both the philosophical underpinnings that had influenced theology as well as an understanding of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century culture.

Finally, there is an even-keeled discussion of Reformed theology that is simply unsurpassed in terms of depth of knowledge and expertise of presentation. I have reviewed the English translations of the *RD* presently available and if you have not read that review I would direct your attention to it. My pithy advice is that if you have not yet purchased these volumes that you do so immediately because you will return to them time and again.

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