

Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, Volume One
Herman Bavinck
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Dr. Bavinck is known to the readers of this Review by his articles on "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands," and "The Future of Calvinism." The appearance of this first volume of a *Dogmatics* from his hand marks an important step in the revival of Calvinism, which has been the most prominent feature of the religious life in Holland for a few decades past. The author himself has told us in the articles referred to that the Calvinistic type of theology never died out entirely, not even in the darkest period of the history of his country. It continued to live in a practical, though not, perhaps, in its purest and most vigorous form, among the pious people. A more or less lively doctrinal interest being inseparable from all Calvinism, the Free Churches, organized since 1834, have loved and revered and taught the Reformed truth as they have known and reproduced it from the writings of the old theologians. But this study lacked for a long time the scientific impulse which alone can make the revival of the old productive of new developments. It was not until the influence of Dr. Kuyper began to make itself felt in Reformed circles that a purely theological interest awoke, and the doctrines which lived in the hearts of the people became the object of earnest scientific study. Two features have from the beginning characterized this movement. In the first place it has displayed a high degree of historic sense. The break in the theological history of Calvinism was keenly felt, and it was recognized that only historical study could restore the continuity. In the second place this historical enthusiasm for the old Calvinism did not blind men to the fact that with a mere reproduction of the seventeenth-century theology little would be gained. There has been a conscious effort to develop further the Calvinistic principles, and to shape the Reformed dogma to a form suitable and congenial to the consciousness of the present age.

Dr. Kuyper's Encyclopædia (noticed in the number of this Review for April, 1895) was the first mature fruit of this movement. It is fitting that next to this comprehensive work, covering the whole field of theology under its formal aspect, the center and heart of theological science should receive adequate treatment. And this it has most certainly found at the hands of Dr. Bavinck. By providing this *Dogmatics* he has deserved well, first of the Reformed of his own country, but hardly less, in the second place, of all students and lovers of Calvinism elsewhere.

Before giving a brief review of the contents of this first volume, we wish to note some of the more general characteristics of the author's work as a whole. The union of the historic and dogmatic interests is perceptible everywhere. Dr. Bavinck evidently likes to approach a subject from the historic point of view. Most frequently the positive discussion of a point is led up to by a review of the previous development of theological opinion in regard to it. Nor is this review confined to the Reformed period; the patristic and medieval theology receive equal attention. In the Preface the author explains to us the motives which have led him to this mode of treatment: "not only the believer, but also the dogmatician, has to profess the communion of saints. It is only together with all the saints that he can understand what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and know the love of Christ. . . . Further, in this communion of saints lies a source of strength and great consolation. Dogmatics is not in great esteem at the present time. . . . Hence, sometimes, according to the saying of Groen van Prinsterer, a sense of isolation is inseparable from its pursuit. Under these circumstances it is gratifying to be able to appeal to the testimony of past generations. . . . Men like

Irenæus, St. Augustine, Thomas, do not belong to Rome alone. They are *patres* and *doctores*, to whom the whole Christian church stands under obligation. Among Protestants there is often too little acquaintance both with what they have in common with and with what separates them from Rome. The revival of Romanist theology under the auspices of Thomas makes it more than ever necessary for Protestants to come to a clear understanding of their relation to Rome.”

The historic and dogmatic parts are so adjusted in Dr. Bavinck’s book, that the former invariably serves the latter instead of interfering with it. The author nowhere unites the two mechanically; he endeavors throughout to place his own doctrinal conviction in the light of the historic movement of the doctrine. Sometimes there is in this even a slight flavor of eclecticism, but it is an eclecticism born out of a profound respect for history. As much as is possible and consistent, the various sides of a question represented by various tendencies are made to contribute their good elements to the final formula. It must be said, however, that the author never fails to place upon the united elements the impress of his own individuality. We feel that every view presented has been made his own by earnest and sympathetic study.

Another commendable feature in this dogmatic handbook is a great caution in statement. While positive in all essential matters, and nowhere avoiding committing himself, Dr. Bavinck practices moderation and self-restraint on subordinate points. His work is free from what has harmed dogmatics in the past, perhaps, more than anything else: the inordinate desire to furnish a definite, precise answer to all minute and abstruse questions. While some readers may here and there be disappointed because, on account of this and the preceding characteristic, the author’s own opinion is not always stated with sufficient emphasis and definiteness to be easily ascertained, we have no doubt that the suggestive and stimulating quality of his work and its value as a book for students have been considerably enhanced thereby.

This first volume contains the Introduction and the Principia of Dogmatics. In the former, Dr. Bavinck discusses the name and conception of dogmatics, the place of dogmatics in encyclopedia, the method of dogmatics, the division of dogmatics, the history and literature of dogmatics. Dogmatics is defined as “the scientific system of the knowledge of God, which concerning Himself and all creation as related to Himself, He has revealed in His Word to His Church.” In seeking to avoid the usual extreme, that of constructing a whole theological encyclopedia, the author has, perhaps, sinned somewhat *in defectua*. We are rapidly told that dogmatics by common consent is assigned to systematic or dogmatic theology, which embraces also ethics, symbolics, history of dogma, and elenctics. In regard to the distinction between dogmatics and ethics, the author concludes that there is none in principle. Ethics has no *principium* of its own, being based throughout on dogmatics. The paragraph on the method of dogmatics is an interesting illustration of the author’s skill in building up his own view on the foundation of a judicious criticism of a number of one-sided views. Successively the opinion is discussed, of those who would make the dogmatician dependent on the Bible exclusively, without reference to the development of the doctrine in the church, of those who would make him base his system on his own personal convictions, and of those who would have him derive it from the confessional deliverances of his church. It is shown that a good dogmatics has to reckon with each of these three elements. Among other arguments the consideration is adduced that abstractions, *universalia* do not exist in reality. As there are particular trees, men, sciences, so religion and theology are nowhere found in the abstract, but only in a definite community. The

higher unity lies in the future as an ideal, the realization of which Christ is preparing, not apart from, but by means of the existing churches and their dogmatic progress. The best way to hasten its coming is to strive after the purest possible expression of the theology of one's own church. But the pedagogical and historical importance of confessional tradition should not be confounded with the authority of a *principium*. The latter belongs to the Scriptures alone. In every science tradition is required to bring the pupil up to the point of development attained at the present moment, in order that his independent labors may begin from that point onward. So in dogmatics also, the dogmatic tradition is indispensable, but the Scriptures remain the only *principium*. In the chapter on the Division of Dogmatics, the work between the general and the special part is so divided that the task of the former is to establish *why*, that of the latter *what*, the dogmatician believes. Since theological encyclopedia has developed into a separate science, the discussion of what concerns theology in general can no longer claim a place in dogmatics. In another respect still the author wishes to limit the general part of dogmatics. As will be seen below, he excludes from it on principle the discussion of all the historical and natural evidences of revelation. The history and literature of dogmatics are given in 81 pages, and even so, Dr. Bavinck has found it impossible, owing to the comprehensiveness of the subject, to do more in many places than mention names. Here and there also his sketch passes over imperceptibly into a history of theology in general, or even of the church. On the other hand, a somewhat fuller treatment of the period associated specifically with the development of Reformed theology would have been highly acceptable to many. As a matter of interest we notice the sketch of the History of Theology in America, on pages 135-139.

The *principia* of dogmatics are first discussed in general. God is the *principium essendi* of theology. The self-revelation or self-communication of God is the *principium cognoscendi*, which is to be distinguished again as *externum* and *internum*, otherwise called *verbum externum* and *internum*, *revelatio* and *illuminatio*. Next comes a chapter discussing the *principia* in science, which under the head of Rationalism, Empiricism and Realism, are successively reviewed. Rejecting the old form of the theory of *ideæ innatæ* and firmly insisting upon the indispensableness of outward experience to all knowledge, the author also recognizes the existence of *a priori* truths, of which the mind becomes conscious in the very process of acquiring knowledge from without. The Reformed theologians in opposing the Cartesian form of the *ideæ innatæ*, and in speaking of the mind as *tabula rasa*, did not mean this in the sense of Locke's empiricism. The essence of their gnosiology was, that the human mind always receives the first impulse for acquiring knowledge from the external world. But the nature of the intellect is such, they held, that in thus being impelled to work, it forms of itself involuntarily the fundamental principles and conceptions which are certain *a priori*, and therefore deserve to be called *veritates æternæ*. This, it will be observed, is the same theory of knowledge that has been set forth in this country by the late Dr. McCosh.

After the *principia* in science the *principia* in religion are discussed. The true idea of religion is to be derived from the description given in the Scriptures. "This method can be objected to by those only who hold the categories of true and false inapplicable to religions, because knowledge of the supernatural is impossible. . . . But knowledge is an essential element in religion." Objectively, religion is identical with the revelation of God and consists in the covenant; subjectively there is a large element of truth in Schleiermacher's definition which places its essence in the sense of absolute dependence, although Schleiermacher committed the twofold error of making this sense of dependence terminate upon the universe, and of limiting it to feeling. If not the essence, creaturely

dependence is certainly the foundation of all religion. The seat of religion lies not in the intellect, nor in the will, nor in the feelings exclusively, but in the center of man's life. While science, morality, art, belong each to one of these faculties, religion embraces the whole man. In explaining the origin of religion both the historical and psychological methods have failed for the simple reason that they have attempted to explain the phenomena of religion apart from God. All religions presuppose the existence and the revelation of God. Dr. Bavinck very pointedly remarks that science and philosophy have no right to construe the idea of revelation *a priori*, and afterwards to distort the historical and religious phenomena passing under the name of revelation in order to make them harmonize with such *a priori* construction. Revelation in its most general sense, as the correlate of all religion, is every activity proceeding from God intended to place and keep man in that specific relation to Himself which is called religion. It is to be regretted, we think, that the author has let this general definition influence his idea of supernatural revelation in the Christian sense to such an extent as to subsume under the latter all redemptive acts, thus making it virtually synonymous with redemption. "Revelation," he says, "coincides with all works in nature and in grace. It embraces the whole of creation and redemption." This seems to us to obliterate the distinction between creative and redemptive acts of God in so far as they address themselves to the consciousness of man, and in so far as they concern his subconscious being. Both in the interest of clearness and of adherence to the accepted terminology we would prefer the more limited use of the term which Dr. Bavinck disapproves of as too narrow. It is true that "the spiritual miracles still continue during this dispensation." But these spiritual miracles are distinguished from miracles, properly so-called, precisely by this, that they constitute no revelation; that, being mystical in their character, they do not present objective knowledge of God to our consciousness. Dr. Bavinck, himself, does not consistently adhere to his wider definition, for in discussing the three special forms of revelation—theophany, prophecy, and miracles—and in reviewing the scriptural data for these, he considers even the last-mentioned under the aspect of revelation proper only. Only in so far as objective self-disclosures of God in Christ are to be expected at the parousia is there any reason for maintaining that revelation is as yet incomplete, and accompanies the renewal of the cosmos at its end as well as at its beginning. Still it is of the greatest importance to emphasize the essential difference between the first stage of redemption in which it was accompanied by objective disclosures of truth, and the present stage during which this is no longer the case. The insidious manner in which this fundamental difference is made away with by many writers of the present day makes it all the more desirable to mark the distinction in words, and in every attempt to do so the term revelation will naturally suggest itself. We agree, however, with Dr. Bavinck in his complaint that dogmatics, on the whole, still lacks a clear and well-defined conception of revelation, and that theologians differ in regard to everything pertaining to it. This is strong language; but there certainly is great and pressing necessity for dogmatic enlightenment on this point.

We are sorry that we have not sufficient space at our disposal to review in detail the chapter devoted to the Holy Scriptures. It is admirable; and we have read it with the greatest pleasure. The futility of the attempts to minimize the extent of inspiration out of regard for the claims of criticism is well exposed by the remark that the critical attacks do not concern the periphery, but the center of revelation. It is freely acknowledged that the old theology framed too mechanical a conception of the process of inspiration. This is not granted, however, by way of concession, on the ground that a mechanical inspiration would offend the dignity of man, and is therefore inconceivable in itself. There is nothing derogatory to man in his sustaining the same relation towards God as a child usually sustains towards

its parents, or a servant towards his master. The simple truth is that the Bible itself shows us God condescending to clothe His Word and make it as it were incarnate in the peculiarities of human nature. But the organic view should never be held to the detriment of the divine authorship of the Scriptures. As Christ, notwithstanding His incarnation and the weakness and contumely inseparable from it, nevertheless remained free from sin, so Scripture is *sine labe concepta*. Strikingly true and well worth quoting are also the remarks on the moral significance of the war waged against the divine origin of the Bible. "If the Scriptures be the Word of God, then this opposition is not accidental but necessary and easily explainable. The Bible being the description of the revelation of God in Christ must awaken the same antagonism as Christ Himself. Christ came for a κρισις into the world and has been set for the falling and rising of many. . . . Even so the Scriptures are living and active, quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. The Bible has not been inspired merely, it is inspired. . . . The Holy Spirit after the act of inspiration does not withdraw . . . but continues to bear and animate the Word, to bring its contents in numerous forms to the heart and conscience of man. The Holy Spirit through the Word wages a perpetual warfare against the physical man. Christ has borne a cross, and the servant is not more than his master. The Bible is the servant of Christ and shares in His reproach. It provokes the enmity of sinful man." Finally, Dr. Bavinck points out the misleading character of the assertion that the critics allow the Bible to speak for itself, whilst the orthodox view is lacking in respect for the Scriptures, forcing upon them an *a priori* hypothesis. This *a priori* hypothesis is simply the testimony which the Bible gives to its own origin and nature. The critics show as much respect for the Bible as would be shown to a man if we declared the statements wherewith he introduces and makes himself known to us an *a priori* hypothesis, and insisted upon investigating his previous record and family antecedents before receiving him. Whatever may be thought as to the advisability of such a proceeding, all will agree that every appeal to respect for the stranger as justifying it would be a ludicrous pretense. This kind of criticism, which refuses to hear the Bible concerning itself, actually treats it as a stranger. It no longer bows to the authority of the Scriptures. As to letting them speak for themselves, that is a mere figure of speech.

The last chapter is devoted to the *principium internum*. The historico-apologetic, the speculative, and the ethico-psychological methods of giving a foundation to faith are rejected as unsatisfactory. The first of these is unsatisfactory because Christianity assumes the darkness of man in his psychical condition, and by submitting to this darkened judgment, would involve itself in contradiction. The miracles and prophecies of Scripture need so much defense in the present day that they can no longer serve as arguments. In order to prove anything apologetics would first have to master the whole of biblical introduction and a number of other sciences before it could even make a beginning of unfolding the truth. This long approach would, moreover, remain inaccessible to the plain people, who would thus be kept dependent on a sort of intellectual and for that reason all the more unbearable clericalism. And, finally, after all, this method would yield only *fides humana*, such as would always remain liable to be shaken by more recent and thorough investigations. Though some of these statements are made without any qualification, and might consequently produce the impression that the author is opposed to apologetics on principle, it appears from the other passages that this is not his meaning. His arguments are directed against apologetics as a foundation of faith and as an introduction to dogmatics only. The discussion of the ethico-psychological method is interesting for the lucid criticism it contains of the neo-Kantian views.

Dr. Bavinck's own view is that the *principium internum* of religion and theology lies in faith founded

on the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. The name “faith” is preferred to designate the receptivity of man for revealed truth, because it belongs to the sphere of consciousness in distinction from other terms, such as regeneration, etc. It draws attention, moreover, to the analogy between the method of obtaining knowledge in other departments and in the religious sphere. Faith is the foundation of knowledge everywhere. To believe is natural, normal, purely human. The ground of Christian faith lies exclusively in the testimony of the Holy Spirit. And this testimony of the Holy Spirit rests absolutely upon itself. The old Reformed theology did not identify it with the illumination of the Holy Spirit whereby the mind is enabled to discern the *notæ* and *criteria* of Holy Scripture. This Dr. Bavinck considers a weakening of the old position to be found only with such later writers as F. Turretin, Amyraldus, Molinæus. The testimony of the Holy Spirit should be viewed as analogous to the subjective predisposition which in every sphere adjusts man to the objective world, physical, vegetative, sensitive, intellectual, ethical, religious. Scripture explains all these adjustments as the work of God. In their lowest forms they appear as mere instinct. But in intellectual, moral, religious life they assume the form of *ratio*, *conscientia*, *sensus divinitatus*, and bear an active character, for which reason they deserve the name of testimony. This general testimony of the human mind to truth furnishes the basis and analogy for the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the specific sense. Just as the moral law is *αυτοπιστος*, and to the question why one submits to its authority no further answer can be given, even so the Scriptures are *αυτοπιστος*. “To the question Why do you believe the Bible to be the Word of God? the Christian has no answer to give.” He may appeal to the *notæ* and *criteria*, the majesty of the style, the sublimity of the contents, but these in reality are not the grounds of faith; they are simply the qualities and characteristics which believing reason has afterwards discovered in the truth.

Dr. Bavinck is fully aware of the objections to which this view seems to lie open. To the charge of subjectivism, he replies by showing that this can be brought with equal weight against unbelief as against faith. The *a posteriori* arguments of unbelief are just as much afterthoughts as the apologetic proofs for Christianity. Faith as well as unbelief is rooted in the personality of those who defend them. And, considered in this light, the arguments in favor of Christianity are as good and forcible, to say the least, as those arrayed against it. “The case of religion, theism and the Bible is by no means as desperate as science has endeavored to make us believe.” It should also be remembered that the testimony of the Holy Spirit, though not common to all men, is common to all Christians. There is no dogma in regard to which there is such universal agreement. Dr. Bavinck thinks further, that Calvin and the Reformed theologians have too one-sidedly referred this testimony to the authority of the Scriptures alone, and separated it too much from the more general aspect of saving faith, thus giving it sometimes the appearance almost of a special revelation. In point of fact it is most intimately connected with the whole religious life of the believer. Its central truth is the assurance that we are children of God. And in regard to the truth as a whole, historical, chronological, and geographical data can never as such become its object. Even the facts of salvation, as bare facts, do not fall under its scope. No believer is assured in a scientific sense by the testimony of the Holy Spirit of the supernatural conception and the resurrection of Christ. The only thing of which we are assured is the *divinitas*, but then the *divinitas* of all truths which the Bible reveals to us. The testimony is not confined to ethico-religious truth in the narrower sense. The predicate of *divinitas* with which it invests them belongs to facts and actions as well. And Calvin especially has pointed the right way in connecting the Spirit’s testimony with the Bible’s doctrine concerning itself. The Holy Spirit makes us recognize freely and spontaneously what authority the Bible everywhere vindicates for

itself, it will be seen that in this manner, according to Dr. Bavinck, it is after all the divine authority of the whole of Scripture that is established by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. To be sure he denies that the *inspiration* of the Bible is its object. But is not, according to this view, inspiration indirectly guaranteed, because it is inseparable from the *divinitas*? And the same must be said of the historical character of the facts of salvation in a scientific sense. Hence it will be observed that Dr. Bavinck does not degrade the testimony of the Holy Spirit to a cloak of license, for covering loose views on matters of historical criticism. On the contrary, he makes it bear witness to a Bible infallible in all its parts.

The volume closes with a discussion of the relations between faith and theology. The good right of theology to mold the truth in scientific forms is strenuously insisted upon. The danger of falling into extreme scholasticism is present in all sciences, in jurisprudence, e.g., as much as in theology. Metaphysics and religion cannot be separated. Attempts to effect such a separation have a semblance of success only because they make away with large parts of the gospel. Some content themselves with the New Testament, others with the Gospels, still others with the Sermon on the Mount, or even with a single text. St. Francis of Assisi regulated his whole life according to Matthew 10:9, 10; Tolstoi finds the kernel of the gospel in Matthew 5:38, 39; Drummond seeks in the love of 1 Corinthians 13 the *summum bonum*. Though the Christian dogma is not the product of Greek philosophy in the Harnackian sense, yet it has just as little originated without the aid of Greek philosophy. The church fathers, however, in resorting to philosophy in order to give scientific form to the truth, were perfectly aware of what they were doing. Calvin saw in philosophy a *præclarum donum Dei*. And so all Reformed theologians have judged. The real *principium cognoscendi internum* of theology is not faith as such, but believing reason, the *ratio Christiana*. In regard to a point at present in dispute among the Reformed in Holland, Dr. Bavinck holds that the cultivation of scientific theology is not the task of the church as an institution, and does not pertain to the offices which Christ appointed. Believers have a richer and fuller life than that displayed in the church. The church as an organism, as the body of Christ, apart from every instituted form, is the true subject of theology.

We have as much as possible made Dr. Bavinck speak in his own words, even where no exact quotations are given. Thus the reader will receive a better idea of the wealth and depth of dogmatic thought stored up in this work than otherwise would have been possible. The inaccessibility of Dutch literature to the majority of English readers will be all the more regrettable if the publication of this volume should prove the earnest of a renewed activity in the field of dogmatics whereby Holland shall regain her old place of honor as the scientific stronghold of Calvinism.