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HERMAN BAVINCK (1854-1921)
A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Dogmatics: A Progressive Science?
by Cameron Clausing

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Introduction

In an interview with economist, Russell Roberts, John Maynard Keynes' biographer, Robert Skidelsky, stated, "Economics is not a progressive science."¹ By this Skidelsky was asserting that economics, unlike physics or chemistry, is not a science in which the body of knowledge has seen growth on a macrolevel. One wonders if this provocative comment about the science of economics could be made about the theology as a science. To what extent is theology a progressive science? To what extent does the body of knowledge grow?²

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) was unequivocal in his assertion that the science of dogmatics includes a progressive quality. In one article Bavinck asserted that dogmatics has a characteristic of "being progressive and striving for perfection."³ For the contemporary reader this statement does not seem to be radical. The obvious appeal, at least in the Reformed tradition, that the church is *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* is taken for granted. There is a sense in which the church is striving for perfection. However, the assertion that dogmatic theology is progressive in nature was a particularly new concept in theological studies. Accepting Bavinck's assertion, this essay will examine the way Bavinck envisions dogmatics as a progressive science. It will argue that this was an innovative move that was uniquely connected to his nineteenth century milieu and theological method. To sustain this argument, the essay will consider those two aspects. First, I will explore how the Reformed tradition understood the "*reformanda*" sayings in light of Bavinck's cultural milieu. Second, I will examine Bavinck's theological method in light and the nineteenth

1. Robert Skidelsky interviewed by Russell Roberts available at <https://youtu.be/ZRvaxUNDTKY> (October 24, 2010). Roberts has asserted this is where the Skidelsky has stated this. However, this comment is not made in this interview. Nevertheless, in another interview with Skidelsky, Roberts refers to this statement as being made by Skidelsky, and Skidelsky does not disagree with the claim that "Economics is not a progressive science." See: Robert Skidelsky interviewed by Russell Roberts available at <http://www.econtalk.org/capitalism-government-and-the-good-society/> (September 4, 2013).

2. This article is adapted from parts my PhD thesis, "*A Christian Dogmatics does not yet Exist*": *The Influence of the Nineteenth Century Historical Turn on the Theological Methodology of Herman Bavinck* (Edinburgh: PhD Thesis, 2020).

3. Herman Bavinck, "Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014): 64.

century modification of the “*reformanda*” sayings. These two considerations will come together to show that Bavinck’s understanding of dogmatics as a progressive science was innovative even while not being unique to him.

Reformed Tradition and the *Reformanda* Sayings

In a 1911 speech, which was delivered in the aula of the *Gebouw voor den Werkenden Stand* in central Amsterdam, Bavinck argued that “Reformed” was a more helpful moniker than “orthodox,” “Calvinist,” or “neo-Calvinist” (a label which did not exist until 1892 and then was understood as a pejorative term).⁴ Bavinck’s argument was that “Reformed” bears a character of being in a constant state of growing, development, and reform. He states,

The university that brings us together here in this hour does not place itself on an orthodox but on a Reformed basis, and the churches with which its theological faculty is affiliated are not called orthodox but Reformed churches. This name deserves preference far above orthodox and also that of Calvinistic or Neo-Calvinistic. For, on the one hand, within the name Reformed there lies a connection to the past, historical continuity, and maintenance of the Christian confession just as those in the Reformation in like manner cleansed the Holy Scriptures of Roman error. On the other hand, [the name Reformed has within it] the demand and obligation to continually review the doctrine and life of one’s own person and household, and, in addition, our whole environs according to these scriptural and historical principles. [We are] reformed for reform [*Reformati quia reformandi*] and vice versa.⁵

Following Bavinck’s logic, the titles of orthodox or Calvinist cause the theologian to look back without an eye toward moving forward. Bavinck believed that it was incumbent upon the theologian not only to look back but to strive for perfection to progress.⁶ In his thinking, “Reformed” was able to do both. It held onto the past while also looking to the future. Bavinck suggested, “It did not reject all tradition as such; it was *reformation*, not *revolution*.”⁷

4. James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 370n119.

5. Bruce Pass, “Herman Bavinck’s *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*: A Translation”, ed. John Bolt, *The Bavinck Review* 7 (2016), 82; cf. Herman Bavinck, *Modernisme en Orthodoxie: rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het Rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 October 1911* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1911), 16–17.

6. Herman Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 97; Herman Bavinck, “Het voor en tegen,” 64. This is not to say that Bavinck did not defend the titles “orthodoxy” or “Calvinism.” They had utility for different purposes than the ones that Bavinck employed here. “Reformed” indicates the developmental nature of theology.

7. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, Prolegomena, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 493.

The phrase “*Ecclesia semper reformanda*” appears ubiquitously in contemporary theological conversation. It is taken as orthodox that the church is always to be reforming. Over the course of the last two centuries, the Western church has embraced these sayings to the point that even largely unchanging institutions like the Roman Catholic church have had to grapple with their implications. Henri de Lubac, a Catholic theologian and philosopher, stated “The conciliar formula ‘*Ecclesia semper perificanda*’ seems to me as to others ‘much superior to the ‘*Ecclesia semper reformanda*’ which is used so extensively nearly everywhere.”⁸ De Lubac’s observation that the “*reformanda*” statements are “nearly everywhere” in the contemporary context makes sense given that, as Michael Bush points out, it was Karl Barth that popularised them.⁹

Even while Bavinck was living a generation before Barth, one can see the language and thoughts that Barth embodied encapsulated in Bavinck’s language. Bavinck did not use the “*reformanda*” statements frequently, but he saw development in the church’s doctrine and practice. As stated above, for Bavinck, dogmatics was to be “progressive and striving for perfection.”¹⁰ Bavinck argued that the work of a theologian was not to “repristiniate” the past but to “make progress to escape from the deadly embrace of dead conservatism.”¹¹ Thus, Bavinck believed that theological development was a vital part of a constructive project, going so far as to declare in 1881, “a Christian Dogmatic does not *yet* exist.”¹² The reason for this being that, for Bavinck, dogma is not the source of a single theologian or church but the confession of the “Christian Church as a whole.”¹³ There is no ideal theology on earth, for all theological reflection is mixed with both pure and impure elements. Therefore, theological development is necessary.

This understanding, however, is out of accord with how Calvin and the post-Reformation orthodox theologians understood the task of dogmatic reflection. This becomes apparent when considering the historical usage of “*reformanda*” statements. According to Bush, the first and only use of both *reformanda* and *reformata* “in a single context” in the early modern period was by Jerome Zanchius (1516–1590)

8. Henri De Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sr. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 33. Gregory Parker makes an intriguing connection between Bavinck and De Lubac in his “Reformation or Revolution? Herman Bavinck and Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace,” *Perichoresis* 15, no. 3 (2017), 81–95.

9. Michael Bush, “Calvin and the *Reformanda* Sayings,” in *Calvinus sacrarum literarum interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 289.

10. Herman Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 64.

11. Herman Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” trans. Geerhardus Vos, *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5 (1894): 13; Bavinck, “Het calvinisme in Nederland en zijne toekomst,” *Tijdschrift voor Gereformeerde Theologie* 3 (1896): 146.

12. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 94; “Het voor en tegen,” 60.

13. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 94; “Het voor en tegen,” 60.

and this was “to speak of the problem of reformation in the church.”¹⁴ In the case of Zanchius, for a church to be reformed, it needed to have completely removed all vestiges of Roman Catholic practice. As long as the old Roman Catholic ways continued, the church was simply reforming (*reformanda*) and was not truly reformed (*reformata*). It can be seen from this that for Zanchius an “*ecclesia reformata*” was an ideal. It was not impossible though it was difficult.¹⁵

If Zanchius is the only instance of a “*reformanda*” saying being used, then one should not be surprised that it cannot be encountered in Calvin. Nevertheless, one does not need the words to have the concept present in one’s thoughts. Calvin did use the word *reformanda* to discuss the “reforming” of the church. This is easily seen in his short work *De Necessitate Reformandæ Ecclesiæ* (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*). While this is a short work, it helps to show how Calvin used “*reformanda*” in his writing. Near the end of this work as Calvin was appealing for aid from the emperor he wrote, “But if they will not, to what end is the care of reforming (*reformanda*) the church committed to them, unless it be to expose the sheep to wolves?”¹⁶ It is helpful here to see that Calvin is not using this in an adjectival form (i.e. the church as *ecclesia reformanda*) but as a participle. At this point in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin is arguing for the emperor to be active in reformation and he should *reformanda* the church, so that it will be *reformata*.¹⁷ Added to this evidence, one can observe that at the end of Calvin’s life, Beza records Calvin’s encouragement not to change anything about the ordering of the church in Calvin’s farewell address to his company of pastors.¹⁸ So, while Calvin saw that there could be room for improvement, he did not see reformation as an open-ended concept with no goal. For Calvin a church could be reformed and when it was reformed, it was the job of the leaders to keep it reformed.

Exploring Calvin’s own understanding of the *reformanda* saying, Michael Bush has convincingly demonstrated the sayings, as they are now deployed and consequently as Bavinck would receive them in his day, do not emerge until the seventeenth century and the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* and even here the use is not identical with the use in the late nineteenth into the twentieth century.¹⁹ One does

14. Bush, “Calvin and the *Reformanda*,” 291.

15. Bush, “Calvin and the *Reformanda*,” 292.

16. John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), 145.

17. Bush points to other instances of this in his article. See: “Calvin and the *Reformanda*,” 294.

18. Theodore Beza, “Life of John Calvin,” in *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church by John Calvin*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), cxxxi–cxxxiii.

19. The *Nadere Reformatie* (usually translated as the Dutch Further Reformation), was a movement in the Netherlands analogous (while not the same as) the Puritan movement in England around the same time. It took place during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Many of the most influential early modern Dutch Reformed orthodox thinkers come out of the movement chief among them Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). For more on the *Nadere Reformatie*, see Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New

not see a popularisation of the phrase *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* or an equivalent like what is found here in Bavinck until the late nineteenth century and the explosion of the use of *reformanda* sayings does not appear until post-World War II.²⁰ Bavinck's understanding of the church that is always reforming and never definitively reformed would have been a surprising idea for Calvin. One can even observe a divergence in use between Bavinck and that of the earliest examples of the *reformanda* sayings coming out of the *Nadere Reformatie*. For those who first developed the concept of *reformanda* it was tied to maintaining the purity of the church, rather than theological development.²¹ While it cannot be denied that Bavinck saw the idea of *reformanda* to be connected to purity, he pushed it further by arguing that *reformati quia reformandi* means theological development.

This application of the phrase by Bavinck to theological development demonstrates Bavinck's historical situatedness, specifically that he lived in a post-Schleiermacher world. In the generations after Schleiermacher, Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline*, a concise understanding of theology as a scientific discipline in the university, was the road map for the theological faculty in Berlin, and subsequently many other theological faculties throughout Germany and the Netherlands. His text was formative for the study of theology in Berlin which took on a distinctly historicist character.²² Albert Ritschl would call Schleiermacher the theological 'lawgiver' (*Gesetzgeber*), with *Brief Outline* as his legal code.²³ In this work, Schleiermacher calls for understanding theology as *Wissenschaft* and for it to be taken seriously as *Wissenschaft*, for its body of knowledge needed to grow. He claims

If one desires to master a particular discipline in its fullest extent, one must make it one's aim to sift and supplement what others have contributed to it. Without such an effort, no matter how complete one's information may be, one would be a mere carrier of tradition—the lowest rank of all activities open to a person, and the least significant.²⁴

Bavinck too saw theology as a *Wissenschaft*, or in Dutch, a *wetenschap* which implied that theology was necessarily a progressive science. Thus, Bavinck's project implies a system that develops over time. He demonstrated this point at the end of his introduction to the *Leiden Synopsis*, noting not only that there is a renewed interest in the work, but also that the questions addressed in it had changed. Bavinck stated,

York: Peter Lang, 1991), 383–413.

20. Bush, "Calvin and the *Reformanda* Sayings," 290–91.

21. Bush, "Calvin and the *Reformanda* Sayings," 298.

22. Zachary Purvis, *Theology and the University in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 159–160.

23. Albert Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 1, *Die Geschichte der Lehre* 3rd ed. (Bonn: Marcus, 1888–1889), 486.

24. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, 3rd ed., trans. Terrence N. Tice (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 9.

“But times change. The long domination of the *Synopsis* has ended. Another time required something different.”²⁵ Bavinck made the same point even more strongly in the introduction to *Magnalia Dei*. There, when referencing major thinkers in early modern Reformed orthodoxy (i.e. Aegidius Francken, Johannes Marckius, Wilhelmus à Brakel), he stated: “We are children of a new time and live in another century. And it is futile to desire to maintain the old forms, and to desire to retain the old solely because it is old.”²⁶ For Bavinck, a theological system is an organism and theology is *Wissenschaft* and, therefore, it is not beholden to one particular time and place but is constantly growing and developing.

This progressive nature of theology informed his view of catholicity. Bavinck understood catholicity to consist of three things: 1) the church as a unified whole, 2) the church as inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places, and 3) the church as it embraces the whole of human experience.²⁷ As Brock and Sutanto assert, Bavinck made it clear that part of the theologian’s task is to “search for what is true and valid no matter where it is found.”²⁸ Thus, for Bavinck, theological reflection continues to develop. It is not bound to a particular time and place, including the past or even a particular Calvinist or orthodox tradition. Being catholic is more than an appeal to a certain set of doctrines that have once been held and are now held. It is also an embrace of the reforming character of the church. As such, being catholic requires searching for truth in the contemporary Christian experience.

What has been demonstrated thus far, is that Bavinck’s view of church as *ecclesia reformata quia reformanda* meant the church is constantly developing and perfecting her doctrines. She is growing and evolving. The intellectual context in which this concept matured for Bavinck was one in which theology was being established as *Wissenschaft*. By its very nature *Wissenschaft* implied a growth in knowledge. Thus, in Bavinck’s context theology was not a static discipline, but a dynamic one. This concept would have been foreign to Calvin and the early modern Reformed theologians who viewed the church as “reforming” when it was throwing off all vestiges of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. However, as has been shown, for these earlier Reformed thinkers, there was a definite point at which the

25. Herman Bavinck, “Praefati,” in *Synopsis purioris theologiae: disputationibus quinquaginta daubus comprehensa ac conscripta per Johannem Polyandrum, Andream Rivetum, Antonium Walaeum, Antonium Thysium, S.S. Theologiae Doctores et Professores in Academia Leidensi*, 6th ed. (Leiden: Donner, 1881), vi, “Sed tempora mutantur. Transiit etiam Synopseos hujus imperium diuturnum. Aliud tempus aliud postulabat. Coccejus aliique theologi aliam methodum introduxerunt, et Synopsis paulatim in oblivionem abiit.”

26. Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1931), 6.

27. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220; compare with. Herman Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van Christendom en kerk: rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 December 1888* (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1888), 5–6.

28. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Eclecticism: On Catholicity, Consciousness and Theological Epistemology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70, no. 3 (2017): 317.

church was “reformed.” From then on, it was the duty of the following generations to ensure the church stayed “reformed.” This evidence demonstrates part one of my argument: Bavinck’s conception of doctrinal development was innovative, and this was intimately tied to his cultural milieu. The next section will examine Bavinck’s theological method to determine how Bavinck’s understanding of theology as a progressive science required him to engage with his theological method in a novel way.

Bavinck’s Theological Method

Methodology follows epistemology. Bavinck argued this when he says: “A person is not simply alive, but is also aware that he is alive. Within him all of nature, as it were, including himself, attains consciousness. Within him, it seeks its explanation, attempts to discern and behold itself in him.”²⁹ Therefore, the theologian seeks to find the *principium* for theology. The *principium* is always derived from the object that is being studied. The epistemological convictions determine the method for finding this *principium*.

The dogmatician does not have to invent or devise the system and the principium; but by means of serious research, by means of living into what he wants to study and describe, let him attempt to arrive at the discovery of what, out of all those truths, comprises the constitutive, governing basic idea, the innermost driving force, the hidden stirrings, the deepest root.³⁰

To uncover the *principium* of dogmatics, the dogmatician goes to Scripture. However, it is never Scripture in isolation from the church or contemporary concerns. Dogmatics must have an ecclesiastical and provisional character to it. As Barth would counsel young theologians in the future, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”³¹ Bavinck held a similar view that the interaction between Scripture and the church in dogmatics must *always* be done in conversation with the contemporary situation of the theologian. This piece of Bavinck’s methodology allows Bavinck to be grounded in Scripture in conversation with the past but always looking forward, growing, evolving, developing. Dogmatics has a progressive nature to it, it is always “striving for perfection.”³² Each of these elements (Scripture, church, and Christian consciousness) will be looked at in turn. However, what must not be overlooked is that each of these elements is interdependent. Dogmatic reflection takes place with all three of these together simultaneously.³³ There is a unity to the diversity that pertains to theological methodology.

29. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 92; “Het voor en tegen,” 59.

30. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 97; “Het voor en tegen,” 63.

31. Barth, “Barth in Retirement,” *Time* (May 31, 1963) 356.

32. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 97; “Het voor en tegen,” 64.

33. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 100; “Het voor en tegen,” 66.

As Bavinck understood it, post-Kantian religious reflection tended toward a reading of one *principium* in isolation from the other two. Separated from each other, Bavinck argued that the *principia* – Scripture, the church, and individual consciousness – could be considered roughly analogous to a distinct religious movement. He believed that when isolated these elements devolved into a mere rationalism, mysticism, and pietism.³⁴ For Bavinck, Reformed theology maintained a particular ability to overcome this one-sidedness in religion. He argued,

Reformed theologians sought that central point for religion in (as Calvin called it) the seed of religion [*semen religionis*] or sense of divinity [*sensus divinitatis*], and in the Christian religion [*religio Christiana*] theologians went behind faith and conversion to regeneration, which in principle is a renewal of the whole man. When they took a position on this center of man, they saw opportunity to avoid all one-sidedness of rationalism, mysticism, and ethicism, and to maintain that religion is the animating principle of all life.³⁵

A dogmatic system cannot be reduced to merely one piece but must encompass the whole. It cannot be solely rational, mystical, or ethical, but must be all three equally. A dogmatic system must be an organic whole.³⁶

While in Bavinck's estimation the three *principia* correlated to various religious movements (rationalism, mysticism, and pietism), he also connected with three human faculties: mind, feeling, and will. Even though these three faculties exist, Bavinck acknowledged only two faculties in a person: knowing and desiring (will). With regard to primacy, Bavinck wrote that knowledge is the first among equals: "[k]nowledge is primary. There can be no true service of God without true knowledge: 'I do not desire anything I do not know' (*Ignoti nulla cupido*)."³⁷ Bavinck saw a place for feeling in religious reflection, yet he was careful to reject it as a faculty.³⁸ The concern for Bavinck in giving feeling the status of a faculty was that it necessarily takes away from knowing and willing, which he believed had produced disastrous results in modern theology.³⁹

34. Herman Bavinck, "Philosophy of Religion (Faith)," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 26–27; Bavinck, "Philosophie des geloofs," in *Verzamelde opstellen op het gebied van godsdiens en wetenschap* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1921), 10–11.

35. Bavinck, "Philosophy of Religion," 29–30; "Philosophie des geloofs," 14.

36. Bavinck, "Pros and Cons," 95; "Het voor en tegen," 61.

37. Bavinck, *RD* 1, 268.

38. Bavinck, *Beginselen der psychologie* (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1897), 62.

39. Pass makes this same observation in *Heart of Dogmatics* (65). While in contradiction to some of the observations that Cory Brock has made, this point does not diminish the central thrust of his project. Brock has done a masterful job of showing how Bavinck appropriates much of Schleiermacher's structure and questions. However, the evidence seems to point to the need to nuance some of Brock's view regarding "feeling" as a "faculty."

In Bavinck's account, the modern theological trends that followed the lines of Schleiermacher had slipped into subjectivism, which he deemed to be little more than pantheistic mysticism. To safeguard against this, Bavinck contended that one needed to place Scripture as the sole *principium* of theology.⁴⁰ The problematic part of this is that, unlike *principia* in mathematics and physics, in scientific theology there is a subjective work of the Spirit that is necessary to accept this axiom. That is to say, to accept Scripture as the sole *principium* of theology requires a work of the Spirit on the subject. Corresponding to Bavinck's contention regarding the faculties that knowledge is primary in the *principia* of theological methodology, the same could be said of Scripture. For Bavinck, with regard to its nature, Scripture stood above both church confession and individual consciousness. Yet, the apprehension of this requires the subjective work of the Holy Spirit.

This difficulty is highlighted in Bavinck's correspondence with his friend from Leiden and world-renowned Dutch Arabist, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936). In a letter responding to Bavinck's 1883 inaugural address, Hurgronje explained to Bavinck that given Snouck Hurgronje's own commitment to higher critical readings of the Bible, he found it impossible to take Scripture to an absolute and infallible axiom of theology. Ultimately, Snouck Hurgronje contended that while Bavinck had intended the address to be aimed at the theology emerging from Leiden, it "was directed to people with whom you agree."⁴¹ In response to this concern, Bavinck admitted that theology must start with a leap, "but not a *salto mortale*."⁴² Bavinck admitted that his goal was to show the theological character of theology, and he conceded that he and his friend simply start in different spots. Bavinck commented,

This is the difference between you and me (let me speak personally for a moment): you want, through and after research to come to this premise [that is, an *a posteriori* commitment to Scripture], I go forward from there [that is, an *a priori* premise of Scripture] and continue my research. I believe that this must be done if there is ever to be discussion of theology in a real sense.⁴³

Dogma rests on the divine witness, revelation. The pressing question, therefore, for the theologian is, where does one locate divine revelation? Once again Bavinck makes

40. Herman Bavinck, *De wetenschap der H. Godgeleerdheid: rede ter aanvaarding van het leeraarsambt aan de Theologische School te Kampen, uitgesproken den 10 Jan. 1883* (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1883), 10.

41. *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje 1875–1921*, ed. J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 107–108. ("Uwe rede nu was gericht tot met u eensdenkenden, bij wie deze met zoo harde woorden genoemde zaken niet bestreden behoeven te worden").

42. *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 111. "Ze moet dus beginnen met een sprong – maar geen salto mortale").

43. *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 111. ("Dit is het verschil tusschen u en mij [laat me zoo maar eens persoonlijk spreken]: gij wilt door en na onderzoek tot deze stelling komen, ik ga er van uit en ga dan aan 't verder onderzoeken. Ik meen, dat dit laatste moet, zal er ooit van theologie in den eigenlijken zin sprake kunnen zijn").

a connection to the three *principia*. In his estimation Roman Catholicism located revelation in the church, whereas Schleiermacher (or modern theology) found it in the individual. However, according to Bavinck, the Reformed understood Scripture to be the principal location of divine revelation. He argued, “Among Reformed theologians, therefore, the following proposition returns again and again: ‘the principle into which all theological dogmas are distilled is: God has said it.’ [*principium, in quod omnia dogmata theologia resolvuntur: Deus Dixit.*]”⁴⁴ Ontologically, while affirming Scripture’s weak human form, Bavinck still affirmed that Scripture stood far above church tradition and individual consciousness. Nevertheless, methodologically Scripture played a different role. As Bavinck understood the Reformed tradition, when a conflict arose among the three *principia*, Scripture, due to its nature, settled controversies. Methodologically, however, it was the first *principia* among equals. It was the source from which the other two *principia* derive their nature.

When speaking of methodology, the *principium cognoscendi* is revelation.⁴⁵ Conceding the need for both an objective and subjective side to the *principium cognoscendi*, Bavinck called Scripture the *principium cognoscendi externum*. In making this move, Bavinck believed he had safeguarded his project from rationalism, on the one side, which takes human reason to be the sole *principium*, and the mysticism of Schleiermacher, on the other side, which gave ‘feeling’ the pride of place.⁴⁶ This is not to say that Bavinck’s aim was to produce an arid cerebral piety. One can observe a place for mysticism within Bavinck’s methodology in *Reformed Ethics*, an unfinished manuscript he never published, but a work he prepared while writing the first edition of the *Dogmatics*.⁴⁷

For Bavinck, Scripture is the *principium* of theology. As a result, when Bavinck searched for the *principium* of theology, he defaulted to Scripture to find that *principium*: “The source from which all dogmatic truth has sprung forth and continues to spring forth is only Holy Scripture alone.”⁴⁸ The difficulty in accepting this view arises from the concern of circular reasoning: how can a method assume

44. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:30.

45. Bavinck, *Wetenschap der Godgeleerdeid*, 12.

46. Herman Bavinck, *Wetenschap der Godgeleerdeid*, 12 n14. Bavinck cites Charles Hodge in this footnote: “So legitimate and powerful is this inward teaching of the Spirit, that it is no uncommon thing to find men having two theologies, — one of the intellect, and another of the heart. The one may find expression in creeds and systems of divinity, the other in their prayers and hymns. It would be safe for a man to resolve to admit into his theology nothing which is not sustained by the devotional writings of true Christians of every denomination. It would be easy to construct from such writings, received and sanctioned by Romanists, Lutherans, Reformed, and Remonstrants, a system of Pauline or Augustinian theology, such as would satisfy any intelligent and devout Calvinist in the world.” See: Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Theology* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 16–17.

47. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2019), §20; Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 279–88.

48. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 97; “Het voor en tegen,” 63.

the *principium* of the method when it is trying to show what the *principium* of the method is? Bavinck acknowledged this difficulty.⁴⁹ As he understood it and argued, the answer rests in the place from which the *principium* comes. Whereas with other sciences the *principium* of reason arises in the individual person, in theology the *principium* comes from outside the individual.

While Bavinck wanted to maintain Scripture as the *principium* for dogmatics, he also acknowledged that when it was abstracted from all else, Scripture produced a dogmatic system that bore a character which was at best nonecclesiastical and at worst antiecclesiastical.⁵⁰ However, in bringing the church into the conversation, once again Bavinck opened himself to the possible question of where authority ultimately rests. Yet, he remained unequivocal in this contention that “Scripture did not receive its authority from the church but itself, and it must be believed on its own account (*autopistie*), Scripture rests not on the church, but the other way round the church on Scripture.”⁵¹ As Bavinck argued to Snouck Hurgronje, the authority of Scripture is a necessary *a priori* commitment in theology. Thus, for Bavinck, the source of dogmatic truth is not the knowing subject, the church, or subjective faith. The source for truth in dogmatic reflection is objective revelation: it is Scripture.

In sum, Bavinck demonstrated the basis for constructing a dogmatic system. As has been shown above, Bavinck believed that a good dogmatic system was built on three elements: Scripture, the church, and the individual consciousness.⁵² Divine revelation comes from Scripture to the church, and, then, into the consciousness of the individual believer. In order of pedagogy, the church is antecedent to Scripture, yet Bavinck was clear when he stated that “Scripture is self-authenticating [*αὐτοπιστος*], the judge of controversies [*iudex controversiarum*], and its own interpreter [*sui ipsius interpret*]. Nothing may be put on a level with Scripture. Church, confession, tradition—all must be ordered and adjusted by it and submit themselves to it.”⁵³ In

49. Bavinck, *Wetenschap der Godgeleerdeid*, 20.

50. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 98–99; “Het voor en tegen,” 64–65.

51. Bavinck, *Handleiding bij het onderwijs in den christelijken godsdienst* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1913), 41. (“De eerstgenoemde eigenschap hield in, dat de Schrift haar gezag niet aan de kerk, maar aan zichzelf ontleende, en om zichzelf geloofd moest worden (*autopistie*); de Schrift rust niet op de kerk, maar omgekeerd de kerk op de Schrift”).

One could make the argument, and Bavinck acknowledges this, that the actual situation is more complicated than Bavinck makes out. That is there is a mutual relationship between Scripture and the church in the process of canonization in which the church chose certain books and did not choose others to be in the canon. Yet, for Bavinck this would be a denial of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture. Bavinck’s argument is that the church does not choose what is canonical and what is not canonical, but the church acknowledges that which is already canonical. At a purely historical level this argument is made in that while there was list of canonical books circulating in the early church, the church did not have an officially accepted list of canonical books until the Council of Trent (1545–63). This begs the historical question relating to the process of canonization: if the church chose the canon, why does not it produce an officially accepted list until the sixteenth century and that in response to the Reformation?

52. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:84.

53. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:86.

line with the Reformed tradition, Scripture is not solely one *principium* among many for theology but the *principium unicum*.⁵⁴ For Bavinck, this belief is because Scripture is where divine revelation is principally located.

Standing in the line of Reformed theology, Bavinck maintained that it is Scripture, and not the church, that is *αὐτοπιστος*. The confession of the church witnesses to the truth, which is found in Scripture and maintains it, but the confession of the church is not self-attesting. Nevertheless, confessions are not superfluous to Bavinck. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to have a dogmatic system that is devoid of confessions. This is because dogmatics is not a mere recitation of the biblical material, but a “development of the truth of Scripture” and therefore bears “an ecclesiastical and confessional color.”⁵⁵ Confessions are necessary for there to be a truly dogmatic theology.⁵⁶ While Scripture is the *principium unicum*, the theologian’s task is not to repeat Scripture but by means of Scripture “to think God’s thoughts after him.”⁵⁷ The church witnesses to the truth of Scripture. The church has a role that is pedagogical in authority, but the church’s activity is not the ground of faith. As Scripture and the church are *principia* of theology, so also faith is a *principium*. However, it is never its own final grounds. Bavinck argued, “There is a huge difference between subjective certainty and objective truth. In the case of faith or belief, everything depends on the grounds on which it rests.”⁵⁸

Thus, for Bavinck, the church maintained an important role in theological reflection. It is not enough for the church simply to receive the Word of God. The church was given the Word of God “to preserve, to explain, to preach, to translate, to spread, to praise, to defend, in a word, to make the thoughts of God, laid down in Scripture, triumph over the thoughts of humanity everywhere and at all times.”⁵⁹ Therefore, in Bavinck’s view the Word of God prompted the church to action. Confession is the action which is produced when the church encounters Scripture. The church moves from Scripture to confession yet never moves beyond Scripture.⁶⁰

As such, Bavinck contended that there is a place for tradition in theological method: “Tradition is the means by which all the treasures and possessions of our

54. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:159–160.

55. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:54.

56. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 98; “Het voor en tegen,” 64; compare with Herman Bavinck, *RD*, 4:420–21.

57. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:44.

58. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:578.

59. Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, 104. (“Zij heeft integendeel de roeping, om dit Woord Gods te bewaren, uit te leggen, te verkondigen, toe te passen, te vertalen, te verspreiden, aan te prijzen, te verdedigen, in één woord, om de gedachten Gods, in de Schrift neergelegd, overal en ten allen tijde te doen triomfeeren over de gedachten van den mensch”).

60. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:474.

ancestors are transmitted to the present and the future.”⁶¹ This broad definition of tradition makes clear that in a certain sense, all of human society is bound up in tradition; religion no less than the family. Tradition, in Bavinck’s account, allowed a sense of cohesion and identity-building for a group of people. One could go so far as to say that there is no unified society where there is no shared tradition. With this, Bavinck made a provocative move,

The times have changed, and with the times people, their life, thought, and feelings, have changed. Therefore, a tradition is needed that preserves the connectedness between Scripture and the religious life of our time. Tradition in its proper sense is the interpretation and application of the eternal truth in the vernacular and life of the present generation. Scripture without such a tradition is impossible.⁶²

On the surface of this explanation, Bavinck could be accused of a contradiction. It has already been shown that he has put Scripture forward as the *principium unicum*, for Scripture is the *principium* on which all theological reflection is derived. Nevertheless, here he claimed that there can be no Scripture without tradition. Thus, one wonders if Bavinck’s project fails before it even begins because of his inability to provide a coherent account of the relationship between these two *principia*; giving each equal authority, even asserting that there can be no Scripture without tradition.

The accusation would have been substantial, had Bavinck not incorporated the organic motif into his theological methodology. Thus, it is to the organic that Bavinck turned to reconcile this apparent contradiction:

The Reformation recognizes only a tradition that is founded on and flows from Scripture [*traditio e Scriptura fluens*]. To the mind of the Reformation, Scripture was an organic principle from which the entire tradition, living on in preaching, confession, liturgy, worship, theology, devotional literature, etc., arises and is nurtured.⁶³

In Bavinck’s eyes, the three *principia* do not compete against each other because the three are in an organic relationship. Thus, the question is not one of a particular *principium* dominating the other two but of the three being a relationship of mutuality. It could be said that in Bavinck, Scripture bears a magisterial authority and is thus the starting point for theological reflection, yet pedagogically the starting point is the tradition in which the Christian finds herself because that is where she

61. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:492.

62. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:493. Bavinck’s comment here also brings out some interesting connections to historicism. Arguing that there are eternal truths, but that those truths are historically bound and need to be communicated in contemporary language. Once again, this quote is evidence that Bavinck’s context in the nineteenth century turn to history effects how he thinks about theology and theological reasoning.

63. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:493.

learns to read Scripture. No wonder Bavinck claimed, “Scripture without such a tradition is impossible.”⁶⁴

Scripture and the church give theological method its grounding and stability. However, Bavinck still saw a subjective element in theological method. It was this subjective element which provided theology its progressive character. In revelation the Spirit witnesses to Christ. Bavinck argued that the Spirit does this objectively in Scripture and subjectively in the hearts of individual people or Bavinck’s third *principium*, Christian consciousness.⁶⁵ Bavinck noted that this *principium* for theological methodology had become more prominent in the post-Schleiermacher era.⁶⁶ The tying in of Christian consciousness permits a dogmatic system to display its organic character. Just as an organism continues to grow and develop, because it is an organic whole a dogmatic system demonstrates the attributes of growth and development. Christian consciousness as a *principium* goes together with the confession *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. As such, Bavinck wrote that

First, there is no church nor school which fully identifies its view of Christianity with the original Christianity itself. . . . each church and each school distinguishes between the truth that has appeared in Christ and the insight it has, therein, gained and expressed in a fallible manner in its confession.⁶⁷

Thus, he asserted that the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is the confession that at no particular time or place did the church receive all the truth, but that the Spirit is still leading the church into the truth.⁶⁸

Yet, with this turn to the subject, it seems that Bavinck could have left himself open to the charge of subjectivism. If a dogmatic system is constantly growing and developing, what is the place of creeds and confessions, church history and tradition, in the dogmatic system? It could be said that, at least for the purpose of defending Scripture and protecting against heresies, confessions are invaluable. They guard against an overly subjective theological method. Yet even in this construction it could be argued that creeds and confessions are higher than Scripture if they defend Scripture. Nevertheless, Bavinck contended that confessions play a secondary role, and the authority of Scripture is unparalleled: “Scripture alone is the norm and rule of faith and life (*norma et regula fidei et vitae*). The confession deserves credence only

64. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:493.

65. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:506.

66. Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 99–100; “Het voor en tegen,” 65–66.

67. Herman Bavinck, *Het Christendom* (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912), 5–6. (“Ten eerste is er geen kerk en geen richting, die hare opvatting van het Christendom geheel en al met het oorspronkelijk Christendom vereenzelvigt. Wel is waar houdt iedere partij hare interpretatie voor de juiste en verdedigt ze als zoodanig tegen alle andere, maar desniettemin maakt elke kerk en elke richting onderscheid tusschen de waarheid, die in Christus verschenen is, en het inzicht, dat zij daarin verkregen en op gebrekkige, feilbare wijze in hare belijdenis uitgedrukt heeft”).

68. Herman Bavinck, “Pros and Cons,” 100; “Het voor en tegen,” 66.

because and insofar as it agrees with Scripture and, as the fallible work of human hands, remains open to revision and examination by the standard of Scripture.”⁶⁹

Bavinck embraced the epistemological turn to the subject. His critique of the philosophical context in which he finds himself is not that they are too subjective, but rather that they are not subjective enough. In this, Bavinck is careful to maintain an objective principle in his theological method, objective revelation (*principium externum*). Yet, it would seem that Bavinck was self-consciously doing something that he had already done unconsciously: namely, he was maintaining the connection of the subjective and objective principles. It is not the mind, reason, heart, or will that is the *principium internum*, but rather, faith itself.⁷⁰ In view of Bavinck’s own argument, the charge of subjectivism seems unfounded. He argued,

For, in the first place, in no area of knowledge and science is there any other starting point. Light presupposes the eye, and sound is perceptible only by the ear. All that is objective exists for us only by means of a subjective consciousness; without consciousness the whole world is dead for us. Always in human beings an internal principle [*principium internum*] has to correspond to the external principle [*principium externum*] if there is to be a relation between object and subject.⁷¹

While Bavinck sees that modern theology has made the right move in starting in the subject, he believed that the fault lies in making the subject the first principle of theology.⁷² He claimed, “Yes, the whole world, all things, God himself exists for us only in and through our consciousness. Without consciousness, I am dead to the world and the whole world is dead to me.”⁷³

To keep the subjective principle from becoming the first principle and, therefore descending into subjectivism, Bavinck asserts that the *principium internum* is the

69. Herman Bavinck, *RD*, 1:86. It is interesting to note Bavinck’s use of the phrase “because and in so far as” in light of his historical context. The question over confessional subscription loomed large over the history of the Secession church. The issue that surrounded the church in early years was did one subscribe to the Reformed confessions “because” (*quia*) they were in conformity with Scripture or did one subscribe “to the extent” (*quatenus*) that they were in conformity to Scripture. In Bavinck’s description of the confessions, he unites both of these phrases. See: George Harinck and Lodewijk Winkeler, “The Nineteenth Century,” in *The Handbook of Dutch Church History*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 457–60.

70. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:563.

71. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:564. In this one can hear echoes of the debate in which Barth and Brunner would engage in the coming years. Brunner would argue that all humans seek after God in some ways. Barth, on the other hand, argued that humanity’s search for God had no meaning. Thus, all theology must start with the Word of God. See: John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000); Colin Gunton, *The Barth Lectures* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); Paul Nimmo, *Barth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

72. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:565. Interestingly, Bavinck attributes this error to Schleiermacher.

73. Bavinck, “Het dualisme in de Theologie,” *De Vrije Kerk* 13:1(January 1887): 33–34. (“Ja, heel de wereld, alle dingen, God zelf bestaan voor ons alleen in en door middel van ons bewustzijn. Zonder het bewustzijn ben ik voor de wereld en is de gansche wereld dood voor mij”).

illumination of the Spirit or the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. Bavinck can make this claim because while objective revelation is the *principium cognoscendi externum*, it is the Holy Spirit who is the *principia cognoscendi internum*. The Spirit witnesses to Christ in the objective revelation of the Scripture and “subjectively in the very hearts of human beings.”⁷⁴ This assertion guards against subjectivism because God is author of both objective and subjective revelation. The person of the Spirit indwelling the believer gives them a fitting organ for receiving the objective revelation. “God can be known only by God.”⁷⁵ Bavinck maintained that while his theological method was subjective, it did not descend into subjectivism for two reasons: first, the subject is not made the first principle, and secondly, there is a correspondence between *principium externum* and *principium internum*.

Bavinck’s theological method engaged three *principia*: Scripture, the church, and Christian consciousness. These three together allowed for Bavinck to see a stability in theological construction while allowing for development. As Christine Helmer states, “Theology’s lure is eternal truth, while time is its crisis.”⁷⁶ In Bavinck’s thinking, Scripture provides the stability necessary for theology, for it focuses on eternal truth. Consequently, over time the Church’s beliefs are embodied in her creeds and confessions. Bavinck’s argument held that there was a pedagogical authority that creeds and confession hold while Scripture maintained its magisterial authority. Finally, Bavinck saw the place the subjective experience in the theological method. He argued that even if the eternal truths do not change times do, and, thus, the theologian must be willing to reconceptualise their theological systems. It is this element of theology always being in dialogue is the contemporary context that both demonstrates Bavinck’s indebtedness to Schleiermacher and those that follow after Schleiermacher. Taken with his understanding of theology as *Wissenschaft* and the church being *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, it is apparent that he understood theology to be a progressive science.

Conclusion

This essay has set out to show that for Bavinck theology is a progressive science. For him the body of knowledge grew and evolved over time. He understood the *reformanda* sayings in a way that was a shift away from how thinker in the early-modern period would have understood the church as *reformanda*. His theological method also demonstrated a willingness to bring the post-Kantian idea of the subject into consideration when developing theological categories. These two aspects of Bavinck’s thinking together show him to be an innovative thinker. This essay has opened new avenues of research. One interesting area that could be considered in

74. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:506.

75. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:506.

76. Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 11.

the future is space of “affect theory” and Bavinck’s understanding of Christian consciousness for theological systems.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, one wants to be careful in claiming that he is unique. Matt Ridley contends that “Innovation . . . is a process of constantly discovering ways of rearranging the world into forms that are unlikely by chance – and that happen to be useful. The resulting entities are the opposite of entropy: they are more ordered, less random, than their ingredients were before.”⁷⁸ Ridley goes on to show that often time innovations are not unique to one person but multiple people innovate similar things at the same time. Bavinck was not unique to his time. One can count many theologians that were doing comparable projects. Bavinck happened to be one of the few people who identified himself inside an orthodox stream of the Christian tradition as he was doing it. This is what makes his project important.

77. Simeon Zahl’s work in this area could provide a great conversation for those in the Reformed tradition. Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

78. Matt Ridley, *How Innovation Works and Why It Flourishes in Freedom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 2.

