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HERMAN BAVINCK (1854-1921)  
A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Revisiting Bavinck and the Beatific Vision  
*by Cory C. Brock*

## Revisiting Bavinck and the Beatific Vision

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### Introduction

This current year, 2021, marks the centenary death of Herman Bavinck—a season in which the world lost several superior theologians. With such an occasion, one reflects on the most noteworthy and meaningful contributions of the Dutch theologian with such magisterial influence in the discipline of theology as well as the life of the church. As Bavinck's readership rises in the twenty-first century, it has been common for readers to reflect on the doxological character of his dogmatics, his irenic, catholic spirit that accompanied his catholic theological vision, and his unflinching commitment to biblical and confessional dogmatic logic. In all these ways and in all his efforts, his writing is a typically Godward, theological theology, to borrow a phrase from Webster, where dogmatics proceeds according to its own principia despite the modern turn to *Wissenschaft*.<sup>1</sup>

Bavinck defined his theological project commensurate with the history of Christian theological orthodoxy: theology is the science concerning God. The focus of this definition is on God. God is the object of theology insofar as the theologian desires to know God by means of God's self-revelation, or to "think God's thoughts after him."<sup>2</sup> The first order of theology is to know God according to God's revelation and second to know all things in turn in the light of the knowledge of God. Bavinck believed, "The Christian mind remains unsatisfied until all of existence is referred back to the triune God, and until the confession of God's Trinity functions at the center of our thought and life."<sup>3</sup> Thus, theology is praise to God, and, for Bavinck, the entire point of existence is to abide with the living God and conform the whole of one's self Godward, in intellect, desire, and feeling. Such emphasis on God is apparent even in the introductory pages to his dogmatic project, emphasizing the theological task in the face of nineteenth-century redefinitions.

1. John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11–31. This essay is a republication of his 1977 lecture titled "Theological Theology."

2. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008), 1:588. Hereafter, *RD* with corresponding volume and page number.

3. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:330.

With such a theocentric project like the *Reformed Dogmatics*, among other texts, organized according to the economy of God's revelation in history—the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Spirit perfects—it is unexpected then to see recent critiques of Bavinck, which argue that he uncharacteristically diminished the notion that salvation is primarily to see and experience God. In particular, Hans Boersma argues this point in his otherwise astute, penetrating, and thoroughly helpful work, *Seeing God*.<sup>4</sup> For Boersma, Bavinck is a primary catalyst in undermining the importance of the concept of salvation as seeing God with preference for a material eschatological imagination, and, consequently contributes to the decline of a teleological account of creaturely life. While Bavinck did indeed offer criticisms of a particular reading of the doctrine of the vision of God, Boersma's argument is antithetical to much of Bavinck's overall reception today. As Ragusa states (and a common reading of Bavinck it is indeed): The Trinity "is the architectonic principle of the whole theological and apologetic enterprise of Herman Bavinck. In contrast to those who would deemphasize the Trinity as a matter of secondary importance, Bavinck was self-consciously committed to the triune God of Scripture as the alpha and omega point of his thought."<sup>5</sup> From this foundation, this essay will argue that the Trinity frames Bavinck's eschatological vision. Boersma's argument concludes, *sed contra*, that the Trinity was not the omega point of Bavinck's thought, particularly with regard to Bavinck's eschatological logic. Rather, Boersma resolves, Bavinck undermined the glory of the vision of God by over-affirming material creation in the Parousia of Christ. First, we will consider Boersma's argument in "Sidelineing the Vision of God?". Second, we will examine Bavinck's texts and unveil the fact that this critique is overstated and does not correspond to a careful analysis of Bavinck's corpus in "Revisiting Bavinck."

### **Sidelineing the Vision of God?**

Boersma, in *Seeing God*, cites Bavinck as the catalyst of a neo-Calvinist failure: the concept that instead "of gaz[ing] eternally into the face of God, we will carry our cultural accomplishments over into the hereafter, and also in the eschaton we

4. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). Hereafter, *Seeing God*. In addition to Boersma, Michael Allen follows Boersma's indictment in the likewise helpful book *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). Allen first appeals to N. T. Wright and Rob Bell as examples of "eschatological naturalism" and then states that figures such as these are preceded by the neo-Calvinist tradition. He then turns to Kuyper briefly but maintains Kuyper's eschatological balance and lands on Bavinck, whose normal evenhanded judgments were abandoned, Allen argues, in his overly naturalistic eschatology in *RD*, 4 (see also *RD*, 5–6n12). Allen later states that recovering the *visio Dei* means "reorienting the conversation" on the century-long problem of eschatological naturalism, where Bavinck is one of the instigators in the presented narrative (18).

5. Daniel Ragusa, "The Trinity at the Center of Thought and Life: Herman Bavinck's Organic Apologetic," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 28 (2017): 149.

will be actively engaged in social and cultural endeavours of various kinds.”<sup>6</sup> Of immediate note in this indictment is the dichotomy. For both Bavinck and Kuyper, the dualism manifest in the either/or is unnecessary and disallowed according to their own biblical exegesis. One need not choose between seeing the face of God in the heavenly life and engagement in social and cultural realities in that life. But, before we unpack Bavinck’s holism on this point, we must consider carefully Boersma’s precise argument.

We can take Boersma’s claims presented in the quote above along with others as follows: (1) Bavinck is “sharply critical” of the doctrine of the vision of God;<sup>7</sup> (2) he sacrifices the *visio Dei* to an over-emphasized continuity between the now and not yet with respect to our cultural artifacts in eternity; (3) and he places too much emphasis on being engaged in social endeavors in the eschatological life. Boersma argues that this naturalistic emphasis in neo-Calvinism is more the product of Bavinck’s theology than Kuyper’s, arguing that Kuyper “warmly embraced the doctrine.”<sup>8</sup> Before engaging Boersma’s argument, it is important to note how this reading participates in a much older reading of Bavinck. Eugene Heideman had already identified a “restoration” motif and “glorification” motif in Bavinck’s theology. The former is creation-affirming and the latter creation-negating, as Jon Stanley argues.<sup>9</sup> Heideman perceived a contradiction between the two in Bavinck’s corpus that is eventually overwhelmed by the creation-affirming aspect of the nature-grace relation. Boersma’s argument is similar but applied more acutely to the *visio Dei*. This thesis, however, as it relates to Boersma’s recent argument reading dualism into Bavinck’s eschatology between the beatific vision and the material goods of the eschatological life, does not adequately convey the content of the primary sources. For Bavinck, because the Bible draws no dichotomy between creaturely, earthly life and the glorified, spiritual life in the immediate presence of God, theologians should not either.

Boersma’s more specific claim, that Bavinck undermines the beatific vision, is a narrower doctrinal claim that participates in a broader argument. According to Boersma, Herman Bavinck “sideline[d]” the doctrine of the beatific vision<sup>10</sup> and so “we witness the modern decline of the plausibility structure of a sacramental ontology—and of the corresponding sense that the future telos of created objects is

6. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 33. His first examples of this particular indictment include J. Richard Middleton, N. T. Wright, and Anthony A. Hoekema. When he turns to Bavinck it is difficult to see the direct relationship between Bavinck and these cited figures.

7. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 34.

8. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 33–34.

9. Jon Stanley, “Restoration and Renewal: The Nature of Grace in the Theology of Herman Bavinck,” in *The Kuyper Center Review*, vol 2, *Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 88–89.

10. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 14.

inscribed in their nature.”<sup>11</sup> This is an important claim to investigate. The broader claim beyond sidelining the *visio Dei* is that in Bavinck (1) due to a modernization of the relation between nature/supernature, we witness the undoing of the plausibility structure that nature relates to supernature in a participatory manner or that nature is disassociated from supernature thereby moving towards a natural end at the expense of a supernatural end; (2) that final causation (teleology) is thereby either denied or at least initially undermined. Boersma does state that “it is possible to detect significant elements of a participatory . . . ontology in [his] theology.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, Boersma’s broadest conclusion is that Bavinck undermined teleology, or a teleological account of creation, subverting the classical sense of natures, what Boersma calls the “sacramental metaphysic underlying the Christian tradition.”<sup>13</sup> And, significantly, Boersma states that Bavinck was “out of sync” with the metaphysics of the Christian tradition, evidenced particularly in Bavinck’s moments of critique directed to the doctrine of the beatific vision as well as in some criticisms of neo-Platonic philosophy found in Bavinck’s *RD*.<sup>14</sup> Boersma then uses Bavinck’s critique of the beatific vision to show how Bavinck aided in the undermining of said teleology.

While Boersma does credit Bavinck with elements of a “participatory ontology” within his corpus, he laments the fact that Bavinck “opted mostly to criticize the tradition on this topic.”<sup>15</sup> Boersma, however, does qualify, “I should note that Bavinck did not oppose the notion of the beatific vision per se.”<sup>16</sup> This qualification is maximized a few sentences later, “Although he nowhere denies the future of our face-to-face vision of God, he was clearly not of a mind to dwell on it at any length.”<sup>17</sup> The claim has migrated from asserting that Bavinck is one of two theologians (the other is Balthasar) that caused a decline in the plausibility structure of the world’s participatory relation to God, the concept of final causation, and the subjugation of the beatific vision, to the claim that while Bavinck affirmed the *visio Dei*, he did not write about it enough.

Boersma also states clearly that Bavinck in *RD* 4, argues that the essence of blessedness is “contemplation (*visio*), understanding (*comprehensio*), and enjoyment of God (*fructio Dei*).”<sup>18</sup> Bavinck states the highest end of humanity explicitly, the vision of God, which is for Bavinck, unsurprisingly, beheld in the face of Jesus Christ, and includes the immediate presence of the Triune God in fellowship with his people. Yet, the problem, for Boersma, is that the discussion is “brief” and that

11. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 27.

12. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 27.

13. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 28.

14. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 28.

15. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 27–28.

16. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 34.

17. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 34.

18. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 34; Bavinck, *RD*, 4:722.

it still “remains true that most of Bavinck’s affirmations of the beatific vision are perfunctory.”<sup>19</sup>

Therein, Boersma, in some manner, answers his own objection to Bavinck’s critiques by showing that Bavinck was very specifically critiquing a presentation of the beatific vision per his understanding of the Roman Catholic context of his time. Boersma argues that Bavinck, while affirming the beatific vision, complained against a nineteenth-century Roman Catholic presentation of that doctrine in four ways. Bavinck wanted to emphasize (1) that believers cannot come to know the very essence of God in some manner of deification wherein there is a substantial union with the ontological Trinity; (2) that the natural is not to be elevated to supernature by some super-added gift; (3) that we do not conceive of arriving at the vision of God by condign merit; and (4) that the notion of the beatific vision not leave Christ aside and understand the vision in some sense apart from the coming of Christ. All of these qualifications of the vision of God are unsurprising for Bavinck’s Reformed Protestant theology.

Boersma notes that Bavinck, within these nuances of the doctrine of the beatific vision, discounts the concept of deification if it means that a Christian can see God per the divine ontological essence. Emphasizing the biblical pattern of God’s divine condescension to humanity, rather than human ascension into the divine, Bavinck makes much of the creator-creature distinction alongside a vision of God in the face of Christ, protecting theo-logic from the unbiblical conclusion that human creatures could enter into the essence of God. And Boersma accordingly acknowledges that Bavinck’s critique of the alternate nineteenth-century neo-Thomist scholasticism with regard to a *visio Dei* per God’s essence is “understandable.”<sup>20</sup> While Boersma disagrees with some of Bavinck’s criticisms of the neo-Platonic and Christian synthesis throughout theological history, he seems to register no strong disagreement with any of Bavinck’s conditions except that Bavinck could have talked more about how there are nuances in the Roman Catholic tradition that avoid these pitfalls. Boersma writes of Bavinck’s criticisms of a Roman dichotomy between nature and supernature that “he could have presented a more nuanced portrayal of Catholic teaching.”<sup>21</sup> This is a fair comment. Nevertheless, that is an altogether different note than the claim that Bavinck is one of two modern theologians that participated in the undermining of the beatific vision and participatory ontology. Here, Bavinck critiqued the particular presentation of the *visio Dei* in his own context and according to his reading of the majority tradition of Roman Catholic history with which he disagreed, while simultaneously affirming the doctrine of the vision of God fully.

Bavinck argues in *RD* 4, for example, that “eternal life is our portion here already and consists in knowing God in the face of Christ. . . . Christ is and remains

19. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 34.

20. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 36.

21. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 36.

the way to the Father, the knowledge and vision of God. . . . The Son is the mediator of union (*mediator unionis*) between God and his creation.”<sup>22</sup> Boersma’s complaint then is that Bavinck does not unpack that claim, one with which Boersma registers no disagreement. Boersma laments the fact that in the particular section from which this quote comes Bavinck does not spend significant pages on explaining in a positive way just what the *visio Dei* entails. The real issue then is the problem of not saying enough, and more specifically, not saying enough in one of the eschatology sections of the *Dogmatics*. Yet, Bavinck argued that a primary reason for not speculating into the positive nature of the *visio Dei* in detail is because of his conviction that eschatology must remain a modest endeavor. One can only go where Scripture goes, in his Reformed-theological logic. Scripture does not give positive explanation of the eschatological vision. So, Bavinck writes, “The end of things, like their origin and essence, is unknown to us.”<sup>23</sup>

What we arrive at, according to Boersma’s own argument, is the fact that Bavinck affirmed the beatific vision emphatically and was simultaneously critical of some theological expressions of that vision, particularly the nineteenth-century neo-Thomist understanding present within his own context, as Bavinck understood it. One could claim that Bavinck misunderstood the neo-Thomist presentation of the *visio Dei*. However, that is a separate claim. Bavinck made distinctions between unbiblical ways of rendering the idea and ones more attuned to the logic of Scripture. Did Bavinck fail to understand that there are Roman Catholic presentations of the vision of God that are more attuned to his rendering? Perhaps so. But, Boersma’s original claim is that Bavinck undermines the premodern plausibility structure of participatory ontology by a thoroughgoing critique of the beatific vision and thereby undermines the notion of final causation. While later aspects of the neo-Calvinist tradition may participate in over-materialized eschatologies that downplay the immediate presence of God in the face of Christ as the only hope of humankind and its highest good, neither Kuyper *nor* Bavinck do. In other words, and as Boersma admits, Bavinck was critiquing one stream of theological reflection on the *visio dei*. Yet, it is untenable to move to the claim that Bavinck was deviating from the Christian tradition on this issue in such a manner that he was a significant catalyst in the undermining of a Christian teleology.

Additionally, it is important to note that Boersma’s argument against Bavinck depends on assertions that are not directly derivative of the logic of Bavinck’s quotations. For example, after quoting Bavinck’s claim that in the eschaton there is not a mere passive rest but a communion with God in activity as well, Boersma writes: “Bavinck seems more at ease with an eschaton that continues the regular work week than with an eschaton that celebrates Sabbath rest.”<sup>24</sup> This line is a hasty

22. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:685.

23. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:589.

24. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 39.

generalization and mere assertion that cannot be derived directly from the logic of the quote and gives no attention to the other remarks Bavinck makes about Sabbath rest throughout his corpus. Boersma uses phrases like “Bavinck waxes eloquent” that slant the presentation critically before the reader arrives at the argument disallowing analysis of the quotes themselves. Indeed, Boersma’s final summary of Bavinck’s failure is a psychologism, “Bavinck simply was too much interested in the hustle and bustle of human activity in the hereafter to give any real thought to a positive articulation of the beatific vision.”<sup>25</sup> It is important to note the indefensibility of claiming that a person gave no “real thought” to a concept. Boersma’s presentation of Bavinck as one who affirmed the beatific vision and qualified what he took to be its erroneous expressions manifests the opposite claim: it is no “simple” interest in this-worldly hustle and bustle.

Boersma notes that Bavinck, all in all, “Goes out of his way to underscore continuity rather than discontinuity between this world and the next.”<sup>26</sup> He marks out some of Bavinck’s eschatological theological commitments: that the present world will not be finally destroyed; that salvation includes the union of the material and spiritual; that one must not embrace a one-sided spiritualism; that the end is the city of God renewed and glorified in the presence of Christ; that Sabbath rest in the eschaton does not undermine human activity in the life eternal. For Boersma, these emphases sideline the doctrine of the vision of God “as the ultimate human telos.”<sup>27</sup> However, Bavinck, and Kuyper alike, sought to eschew all dualisms in their theology. Bavinck did not draw a dichotomy between spirit and matter, between seeing God and cultural agency in the eschatological life, but emphasized the one-sidedness of a choice between these poles and we will explore this more below.

Finally, toward the conclusion of Boersma’s presentation of Bavinck, stating that Bavinck over-emphasized the this-worldly character of the new heaven and earth, he, in footnote 89 cites *RD* 4:715 to make the point.<sup>28</sup> Boersma quotes, however, not from Bavinck but from the added editorial summaries in the English version of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. The editor writes, “While the kingdom of God is first planted spiritually in human hearts, the future blessedness is not to be spiritualized. Biblical hope, rooted in incarnation and resurrection, is creational, this worldly, visible, physical, bodily hope.”<sup>29</sup> It is important to note the difference here with what Bavinck says in the chapter that follows this introduction. One can surmise that the editors were drawing their summary from the following quote (and other arguments like it in this chapter) which has a strikingly different accent.

25. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 38.

26. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 39.

27. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 40.

28. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 40n89.

29. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:715.



Since Jesus's advent breaks up into a first and a second coming, the kingdom of God is first planted in human hearts spiritually, and the benefits of that kingdom are all internal and invisible: forgiveness, peace, righteousness, and eternal life. The essence of future blessedness, accordingly, is also construed more spiritually, especially by Paul and John, as a being always with the Lord (John 12:26; 14:3; 17:24; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 4:17; 5:10; 1 John 3:2). But this does not confine this blessedness to heaven. This cannot be the case as is basically evident from the fact that the New Testament teaches the incarnation of the Word and the physical resurrection of Christ; it further expects his physical return at the end of time and immediately thereafter has in view the physical resurrection of all human beings, especially that of believers. All this spells the collapse of spiritualism, which if it remains true to its principle—as in Origen—has nothing left after the day of judgment other than spirits in an uncreated heaven.<sup>30</sup>

Note the balance in the quote above that is absent in the summary that Boersma quoted. There is no dichotomy presented between the goodness of spiritual salvation as “always being with the Lord” and the fact that the incarnation and resurrection materializes the eschatological life. Spiritualism, for Bavinck, is essentially a denial of the resurrection. Yet, the Bible, according to Bavinck's reading, presents a holistic view.

### **Revisiting Bavinck**

In addition to the point just made, we can look to other places to establish Bavinck's understanding of the eschatological vision. Vision is not the only metaphor of Scripture and so Bavinck grabs hold of many images for understanding the holism of God's redemptive work. For Bavinck, rather, “God, and God alone, is man's highest good.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Bavinck begins his magisterial and popular work of theology, *The Wonderful Works of God* (originally titled *Magnalia Dei*), with the following statement. He spends, across so much of his corpus, ample ink declaring that the human creature “cannot be satisfied with what the whole corporeal world has to offer.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, “all men are really seeking after God ... man is an enigma whose solution can only be found in God.”<sup>33</sup> At the high point of his Christology, he overviews the benefits of Christ, which, “are so rich that they simply cannot be calculated or estimated at their

30. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:718.

31. Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 1. Hereafter, *WWG*.

32. Bavinck, *WWG*, 2.

33. Bavinck, *WWG*, 6–7.

just value. They comprehend no less than a whole and perfect salvation. They consist of . . . the granting of the highest good, namely, the fellowship with God.”<sup>34</sup>

Recall our summary of Boersma’s claim: (1) Bavinck undermines the eschatological vision of the face of God; (2) sacrifices the *visio Dei* to a carry-over of our cultural artifacts into eternity; and (3) places too much emphasis on being engaged in social endeavors in the eschaton. Regarding (2), Bavinck, *sed contra*, is similar to Kuyper (in Bavinck’s chapter that Boersma is referring to throughout his argument) stating that although the accidents of the world will indeed perish, the substance of the world will not. Kuyper argues that the individual accomplishments of common grace will fade, but the germ will be reborn.<sup>35</sup> So, Bavinck: “so also this world passes away in its present form as well, in order out of its womb, at God’s word of power, to give birth and being to a new world.”<sup>36</sup> Bavinck does state that this a spiritual renewal and rebirth, cleansing the material from its ethical corruption. In another place, Bavinck gives a more nuanced presentation than the idea that we will carry our cultural accomplishments into the hereafter *simpliciter*: “the new heaven and the new earth will one day emerge from the fire-purged elements of this world.”<sup>37</sup> Regarding (1), Bavinck fully affirms the beatific vision in the face of Christ, as Boersma admits, and this is without considering Bavinck’s corpus as a whole but with focus on a section of *RD* 4. And, regarding (3), it is odd to suppose that for a Reformed theologian, being engaged in social relations in the afterlife undermines the spirituality of that life. Kuyper could not affirm more clearly that social endeavors proceed in the afterlife.

From early in Bavinck’s career he defined the aim of theology as seeking the knowledge of God unto the glory of God. The object of God’s revelation of His own self is the knowledge of God that glorifies God, he argues in *RD* 1.213. Seeking the face of God, which is the object of theology itself, is the current upon which his doxological dogmatics flows throughout his corpus and career. Bavinck does not downplay the beatific vision but critiques doctrinal formulations that sacrifice the creator-creature distinction. Again, while often using other biblical terms and imagery besides sight to describe the eschatological life in the presence of God, the most common of which is “fellowship” or “to dwell” with God, as well as often referring to “communion with God,” each operate within the magisterial metaphors of being at home with God or friendship with God. In *WWG*, after opening his theological handbook by stating that the immediate presence of God is man’s highest good, he appeals at the end to the Old Testament to argue that “fellowship with God is the first and most important benefit of the covenant.”<sup>38</sup> For Israel, there is no

34. Bavinck, *WWG*, 338.

35. Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 1:572.

36. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:717.

37. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:720.

38. Bavinck, *WWG*, 530.

joy except in fellowship with God. The Lord is the rock and fortress, the Shepherd, and the fountainhead of living water—without the presence of God, the people have nothing, he states. For Israel, death could only fully be dealt with when the Lord came to dwell with his people, purge it of sin, and remain with them in the land that he had chosen.<sup>39</sup> All of this hope is fulfilled in Christ's first and second comings. Bavinck emphasizes Christ, having laid the foundation, will bring the Kingdom into completion when he comes.<sup>40</sup> New Covenant believers, then, he states, look forward with great longing to the return of Christ to this world. All hope and expectation are laid before him and with him. Bavinck believes that Christ will return to earth in a "great chariot of victory" through the clouds of heaven, just as he departed.<sup>41</sup> Bavinck does not suppose the Church capable of ushering in this kingdom, but rather that it is fully cataclysmic, according to divine agency alone.

He goes on to express in multiple pages the glory and majesty of Christ's return, subduing Satan, putting an end to the beast of death, wherein Christ is all in all, and his Church with him. For Bavinck, the appearance of Christ is everything, in which the whole of the Kingdom is comprehended. In *WWG*, in fact, he spends very little time explaining the secondary benefits of life in the kingdom, only describing the bounty of material life in one short paragraph.<sup>42</sup> His emphasis within remains on the "immediate presence of God" where "all the citizens in that city share in the fellowship of God."<sup>43</sup> In the final paragraph of the same book, he reiterates: "For all the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem will behold God's face, and will bear his name upon their foreheads."<sup>44</sup> This is the definitive statement of his eschatology in that work.

In *RD* 4, as Boersma points out, Bavinck does indeed address "spiritualism" in the final chapter of his dogmatics. It is important to note however that this appears after two hundred pages of eschatological reflection on a whole host of other topics, which are not addressed in the critique. He makes the point that "this renewal of the visible world highlights the one-sidedness of the spiritualism that limits future blessedness to heaven. In the case of Old Testament prophecy one cannot doubt that it describes earthly blessedness."<sup>45</sup> Again, his point is not to limit emphasis on the presence of God, but to restate the basic exegetical insight that eternal life is not merely spiritual but also physical, as Christ himself is a man. He was addressing the error of denying the material reality of eternal life within his own day. It is odd to use this point to make the claim that Bavinck is a primary catalyst for the undermining of final causation and participatory ontology (particularly when his emphasis is on

39. Bavinck, *WWG*, 530–31.

40. Bavinck, *WWG*, 534.

41. Bavinck, *WWG*, 339.

42. See Bavinck, *WWG*, 548.

43. Bavinck, *WWG*, 548.

44. Bavinck, *WWG*, 549.

45. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:717.

the union and compatibility of heaven and earth as the end of cosmic existence). One can see the nuance in his point in the lengthier version of this quote stated above: “The essence of future blessedness, accordingly, is also construed more spiritually, especially by Paul and John, as a being always with the Lord (John 12:26; 14:3; 17:24; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 4:17; 5:10; 1 John 3:2). But this does not confine this blessedness to heaven.”<sup>46</sup> This cannot be the case as is basically evident from the fact that the New Testament teaches the incarnation of the Word and the physical resurrection of Christ and his people.<sup>47</sup> Again (and it is worth quoting in full),

Scripture consistently maintains the intimate connectedness of the spiritual and the natural. Inasmuch as the world consists of heaven and earth and humans consist of soul and body, so also sanctity and glory, virtue and happiness, the moral and the natural world order ought finally to be harmoniously united. The blessed will therefore not only be free from sin but also from all the consequences of sin, from ignorance and error (John 6:45), from death (Luke 20:36; 1 Cor. 15:26; Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14), from poverty and disease, from pain and fear, hunger and thirst, cold and heat (Matt. 5:4; Luke 6:21; Rev. 7:16–17; 21:4), and from all weakness, dishonor, and corruption (1 Cor. 15:42; etc.).<sup>48</sup>

Yet, attention is not given in Boersma’s critique to Bavinck’s actual point and emphasis:

*Still the spiritual blessings are the more important and innumerable abundant: holiness (Rev. 3:4–5; 7:14; 19:8; 21:27); salvation (Rom. 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:9; Heb. 1:14; 5:9); glory (Luke 24:26; Rom. 2:10; 8:18, 21); adoption (Rom. 8:23); eternal life (Matt. 19:16–17, 29; etc.); the vision of, and conformity to, God and Christ (Matt. 5:18; John 17:24; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4); and fellowship with, and the service and praise of, God and Christ.*<sup>49</sup>

Here, he summarizes his understanding of the benefits of eternal life appealing to the beatific vision as the center as he did in the partial quote mentioned above:

Contemplation (*visio*), understanding (*comprehensio*), and enjoyment of God (*fruitio Dei*) make up the essence of our future blessedness. The redeemed see God, not—to be sure—with physical eyes, but still in a way that far outstrips all revelation in this dispensation via nature and Scripture. And thus they will all know him, each in the measure of his mental capacity, with a knowledge that has its image and likeness in God’s knowledge—directly, immediately, unambiguously, and purely. Then they will receive and possess everything they expected here only in hope. Thus contemplating and possessing God,

46. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:718.

47. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:718.

48. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:720.

49. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:720–721. Emphasis added.

they enjoy him and are blessed in his fellowship: blessed in soul and body, in intellect and will.<sup>50</sup>

None of these examples take into consideration the many other instances where he affirms the beatific vision throughout his corpus. In the other volumes of *RD*, for example, he concludes: Religion aims at nothing less than eternal blessedness in fellowship with God.<sup>51</sup> Prior in *RD* 1, he states that in the heavenly hosts and the blessed, the triumphant Church, the people of God experience *theologia visionis* – a theology of vision where the ectypal theology of the creaturely consciousness is closely aligned with God’s self-knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Bavinck also makes much of gazing and worshiping God in eternal life persistently. When we behold the Kingdom, he exegetes, “the song will flow from our lips: every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. God himself is it Designer and Builder.”<sup>53</sup> In *RD* 1.310, he qualifies the vision of God, arguing that no creature can behold the ontological Trinity, as he is in himself. For this reason, the beatific vision is beheld in the face of Christ. He carries on a similar discussion in the lengthiest treatment of the *visio Dei* in *RD* 2.189 and following. He overviews the history of the doctrine and comes to the following conclusions: “modesty [concerning the doctrine] is certainly in keeping with Scripture. The Bible indeed teaches that the blessed in heaven behold God, but does not go into any detail, and elsewhere expressly calls God invisible. The vision awaiting believers is described by Paul as ‘knowing as we are known.’”<sup>54</sup> Again, “Humanity’s blessedness indeed lies in the “beatific vision of God,” but this vision will always be such that finite and limited human nature is capable of it.”<sup>55</sup> The issue here is not one of “eschatological naturalism”<sup>56</sup> but eschatological modesty. For Bavinck, the theologian must take one’s understanding of the holistic quality of salvation as far as Scripture, but disallow the imagination to over-determine that for which there is no definitive answer.

Consider his explanation of the vision of eternal life in the Old Testament especially and its focus on the holistic character of God’s redemptive work: “Life was not thought of in an abstract, philosophical manner, as a kind of naked existence. By its very nature, life comprised a fullness of blessings: the fellowship of God *first of all*, but then too, the fellowship of His people, and the fellowship of the land that the Lord had given to his people.”<sup>57</sup> In Christ, all is fulfilled. For Bavinck, there

50. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:722.

51. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:269.

52. Bavinck, *RD*, 1:214.

53. Bavinck, “Kingdom of God the Highest Good,” trans. Nelson Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 170. Hereafter, *KGHG*.

54. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:190.

55. Bavinck, *RD*, 2:191.

56. See Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, 8.

57. Bavinck, *WWG*, 529.

is no choice to make between creation and spiritual glorification. Eternal life for humanity includes “unity in his soul and body, unity with God and in harmony with his surroundings.”<sup>58</sup> For Bavinck, fellowship with God, the Immanuel principle, is the entire point of human existence. Yet, one need not draw a dichotomy between fellowship with God and sociality in the heavenly life among fellow creatures and the land. For *Adam* was made to dwell in the *adamah*.

Likewise, in “KGHG,” he argues, the Kingdom of God is the Kingdom *of God*.<sup>59</sup> Christ is the head of this living body. The Kingdom exists unto the glory of God. That is its first purpose. “In the Kingdom of God, God himself is the King-Sovereign.”<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, the goal of the individual is that one’s essence be “reflected in the mirror of [their] consciousness, and that [they] thus become like God, who is nothing but light and in whom is no darkness (1 John 1:5).”<sup>61</sup> In other words, the end of each person is that they be restored by grace to full humanity, to being in themselves the nature that God pronounced over his image-bearers: fully dependent upon God, and without any internal conflict between the law of God and the desires of the personality, to become like God in the presence of God.

For Bavinck, there is no reason to draw a dualistic dichotomy then between heaven and earth. He understood salvation as the union of heaven and earth in the second coming of Christ. To speak merely of heaven without earth or earth without heaven is to miss the biblical emphasis on the eschatological life. Bavinck attempted to derive a balance in the fact of organic union that begins even in the Old Testament: in the covenant with Israel, “Salvation is expected on earth, not in heaven.”<sup>62</sup> That is not stated at the expense of heaven but according to the revelation that heaven will condescend to earth. The Israelites were looking for Messiah to bring the rule of God fully and finally to earth, to a people in a land. In the New Covenant, Bavinck explains, in *RD* 4 even, that Christ is the center of eternal life, and *the final cause* of creation. It is worth quoting him in detail,

Eschatology, therefore, is rooted in Christology and is itself Christology, the teaching of the final, complete triumph of Christ and his kingdom over all his enemies. In accord with Scripture, we can go back even further. The Son is not only the mediator of reconciliation (*mediator reconciliationis*) on account of sin, but even apart from sin he is the mediator of union (*mediator unionis*) between God and his creation. He is not only the exemplary cause (*causa exemplaris*) but also the final cause (*causa finalis*) of creation. In the Son the world has its foundation and example, and therefore it has in him its goal as well. It is created through him and for him as well (Col. 1:16). Because the

58. Bavinck, WWG, 529.

59. Bavinck, “KGHG,” 149.

60. Bavinck, “KGHG,” 149.

61. Bavinck, “KGHG,” 150.

62. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:654.

creation is *his* work, it cannot and may not remain the booty of Satan. The Son is the head, Lord, and heir of all things. United in the Son, gathered under him as their head, all creatures return to the Father, the fountain of all good.<sup>63</sup>

For Bavinck, Jesus Christ is the goal of all human life. It is critical to point out as well, alongside Bavinck's holism, that Kuyper wholly rejects a dichotomy between spiritual and earthly goods in the Kingdom of God. He refuses to contrast the end of beatific vision with the facts of a renewed material order. Bavinck and Kuyper both reject mechanical dualism on this point, desiring an organic vision of the end of all things. There is no reason to dichotomize, in their logic, because the Scriptures do not. As briefly mentioned above, Kuyper uses the "dying of the grain of wheat" as "the pregnant metaphor" for the renewal of the human body, but not only the body. "At the same time" he argues, "we have the indication as to how one day this entire world will die and perish, but in order to bring forth out of its germ a similar, much more glorious world—except that it is purified from all curse and pain . . . the essence itself will emerge in new and more glorious forms." Here, Kuyper is emphasizing the material nature of the world, that is the same as the human body. "The present world which one day will perish before the coming new world, will continue its essence in that new world. That new world will be of the same kind as this old world, and will be able to be explained in terms of it."<sup>64</sup> Yet, what will life be like in this world?

Kuyper displays his Scriptural balance in his commentary on the book of Revelation, where he focuses on the *visio Dei* and life in the Kingdom. He argues that in that city, "The whole reborn humanity stands before God as a holy unity that is athrob with life," and this fully redeemed humanity "does not remain on its knees in uninterrupted worship of God," but it also engages in "new callings, new life-tasks, new commissions." The life of the future age "*will be a full human life* which will exhibit all the glory that God in the first creation had purposed and appointed for the same, but which by us was sinned away."<sup>65</sup> Contra the aforementioned attempt at contrasting the two, Kuyper and Bavinck are theologically unified on this point. And one need not, according to neo-Calvinist logic, separate the resurrection of the body and the shalom of earthly life from the beatific vision as the true end of the human existence. There is no choice to be made between nature and supernature.

## Conclusion

In summation, for Bavinck, Christ is the center of the glory of the Kingdom. It is the vision of God in the face of Christ that we see clearly and immediately in eternal life. And indeed, Kuyper asks: "what end would be served by this bodily existence

63. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:685.

64. Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 1:572.

65. Kuyper, *The Revelation of St. John*, 331–32.

of our Savior if he would be dwelling in nothing else but a sphere of invisible spirits? ... we see ... that a purely spiritual kingdom could fit neither with our confession of Christ nor with our confession regarding our own future.”<sup>66</sup> Bavinck makes clear the eschatological unity of his project driven by Reformation theology and biblical exegesis noting especially that the work of redemption is Christ’s ethical renewal of a corrupted cosmos accordingly:

The Christian religion does not, therefore, have the task of creating a new supernatural order of things. It does not intend to institute a totally new, heavenly kingdom such as Rome intends in the church and the Anabaptists undertook at Munster. Christianity does not introduce a single substantial foreign element into the creation. It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new. It restores what was corrupted by sin. It atones the guilty and cures what is sick; the wounded it heals. Jesus was anointed by the Father with the Holy Spirit to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captive and the opening of prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and to comfort those who mourn (Isa. 61:1, 2). He makes the blind to see, the lame to walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor (Matt. 11:5) ... He was Jesus—that is, Savior. But he was that totally and perfectly, not in the narrow Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Anabaptist sense but in the full, deep, and broad Reformed sense of the word. Christ did not come just to restore the religio-ethical life of man and to leave all the rest of life undisturbed, as if the rest of life had not been corrupted by sin and had no need of restoration. No, the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Spirit extend even as far as sin has corrupted. Everything that is sinful, guilty, unclean, and full of woe is, as such and for that very reason, the object of the evangel of grace that is to be preached to every creature.<sup>67</sup>

66. Kuyper, *Common Grace*, 1:573.

67. Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal*, 24 no. 1 (April 1989), 61–62.



