

JOHN BOLT



BAVINCK
on the Christian Life

FOLLOWING JESUS IN FAITHFUL SERVICE

“To use the word *timely* for a book about a nineteenth-century Dutch theologian may seem inappropriate. But in this case the adjective is exactly right. Many of us have wanted to spread the word that Herman Bavinck’s theological perspective can contribute much to a renewal of the church’s life and mission today. Now in this book John Bolt has made the case in a concise and convincing manner!”

Richard J. Mouw, Former President, Professor of Faith and Public Life,
Fuller Theological Seminary

“This obvious labor of love explores an important but insufficiently highlighted aspect of Bavinck’s thought. Leaving virtually no pertinent stone unturned throughout his life and published works, Bolt provides both a full presentation of Bavinck’s views and his own understanding of their continuing relevance for Christian discipleship today. Here is valuable instruction in Bavinck’s thought presented in a way that will also stimulate the reader’s own thinking on the issues raised.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology,
Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Trinitarian, Christ-centered, and culturally engaged, Herman Bavinck immerses us into a vivid vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Bavinck’s rich theological imagination provides a compelling alternative to the many vapid, pragmatic approaches to faith today. John Bolt provides an accessible and illuminating guide to Bavinck’s theology of the Christian life in the most expansive sense: the Christian life of fellowship with God and others, in family, work, and politics. Bolt skillfully navigates these waters in order to open up the treasures of Bavinck for today’s church.”

J. Todd Billings, Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology,
Western Theological Seminary

“Perhaps every generation in the church age could claim a need for Bavinck’s perspective on the Christian life. We can’t let our salt lose its saltiness and our light lose its brilliance—*not now*. Bavinck encourages us in this regard even as we are in the world, not of the world, and sent into the world. In one seamless volume, Bolt shows how Bavinck’s contributions help correct our nearsightedness as we become tethered to his conviction that the Word of God is ever living and ever active in every day.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Glimpses of Grace* and *Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full*

“Never before have I read such a fine and stimulating overview of Herman Bavinck’s life and theology. John Bolt shows clearly why the study of Bavinck is growing worldwide and why this theology is a great help for today’s Christians. Bavinck and Bolt are a great team!”

Herman Selderhuis, Professor of Church History, Theological University of
Apeldoorn; Director, Refo500, The Netherlands

“Not one square inch of nature, work, culture, or history escaped the reach of Herman Bavinck’s expansive Christ-centered worldview. Of the great Reformed theologians, Bavinck is the generous giant, with a heart as wide as his axiom ‘grace restores nature.’ Bavinck’s vision of a sovereign Savior at work in the world, carefully grounded in the gospel, suits him to speak authoritatively on the Christian’s place in this world. This book is a masterpiece from John Bolt, a man who knows Bavinck’s mind as well as anyone.”

Tony Reinke, Staff Writer and Researcher, desiringGod.org; administrator, hermanbavinck.org; author, *Lit!: A Christian Guide to Reading Books*

“Bolt’s portrait of Bavinck and his theology captures the man himself: clear, elegant, biblically saturated, theologically rich, philosophically nuanced, irenic, and aimed at the Christian life. Drawing on a diversity of sources, Bolt not only brings the riches of Bavinck’s mature theology into conversation with current theological concerns, but also applies it to the most practical elements of faith, marriage, family, work, and culture. He ably introduces readers to Bavinck’s vision of the Christian life as part of God’s movement of grace restoring nature and a cosmic redemption aimed at restoring and elevating creation to its intended goal. Most of all, it is a vision of following Jesus out into the world as the Father conforms his children into the image of the Son in the power of the Spirit for the sake of his glorious name.”

Derek Rishmawy, Director of College and Young Adult Ministries, Trinity United Presbyterian Church, Santa Ana, California

BAVINCK

on the Christian Life

THEOLOGIANS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EDITED BY STEPHEN J. NICHOLS AND JUSTIN TAYLOR

Bavinck on the Christian Life:
Following Jesus in Faithful Service,
John Bolt

Bonhoeffer on the Christian Life:
From the Cross, for the World,
Stephen J. Nichols

Calvin on the Christian Life:
Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever,
Michael Horton

Edwards on the Christian Life:
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BAVINCK

on the Christian Life

FOLLOWING JESUS
IN FAITHFUL SERVICE

JOHN BOLT

 **CROSSWAY**
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Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service

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For my children,

Michelle

David (and Kim)

Justin (and Lori)

and grandchildren,

Adrianna, Michaela

Caden, Evan, Charlotte

Jordan, Emily, Olivia, Annika

whose being is one of the great joys of my life

and

whose life of flourishing Christian discipleship is my daily prayer

CONTENTS

Series Preface	11
Abbreviations	13
Preface	15
1 Introducing Bavinck: “A Worthy Follower of Jesus”	21
PART 1 FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING	
2 Created in God’s Image	41
3 The Law and the Duty of Christian Obedience	55
4 Union with Christ	69
PART 2 THE SHAPE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP	
5 Following Jesus	103
6 A Christian Worldview	121
PART 3 THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP	
7 Marriage and Family	147
8 Work and Vocation	159
9 Culture and Education	181
10 Civil Society	205
Concluding Sermon: “The World-Conquering Power of Faith”	235
General Index	253
Scripture Index	263

SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor

ABBREVIATIONS

- Analysis* Bolt, John. *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013.
- "Catholicity" Bavinck, Herman. "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church." Translated by John Bolt. *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220–51.
- Certainty* Bavinck, Herman. *The Certainty of Faith*. Translated by Harry der Nederlanden. St. Catharines, ON: Paideia, 1980.
- "Com. Grace" Bavinck, Herman. "Common Grace." Translated by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 38–65.
- Dogmaticus* Bremmer, R. H. *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*. Kampen: Kok, 1961.
- Dosker Dosker, Henry Elias. "Herman Bavinck: A Eulogy by Henry Elias Dosker." In Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, edited by John Bolt, translated by Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, 13–24. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008. Originally published in the *Princeton Theological Review* 20 (1922): 448–64.
- ERSS Bavinck, Herman. *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.
- Family* Bavinck, Herman. *The Christian Family*. Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman. Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 2012.
- "Gen. Prin." Bavinck, Herman. "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891)." Translated by John Bolt. *Journal of Markets and Morality* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 437–46.

- Gleason Gleason, Ron. *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010.
- Handboekje* Bavinck, Herman. *Handboekje ten dienste der Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland voor het jaar 1894*. Middleburg: Le Cointre, 1893.
- Hepp Hepp, V(alentijn). *Dr. Herman Bavinck*. Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921.
- “Imit. I” Bavinck, Herman. “The Imitation of Christ” [1885–1886] (“De navolging van Christus, I, II, III, IV,” *De vrije kerk* 11 (1885): 101–13, 203–13; 12 (1886): 321–33. ET in *Analysis*, “Appendix A,” 372–401. Page numbers provided in square brackets [] in the notes refer to the pagination in *Analysis*.
- “Imit. II” Bavinck, Herman. “The Imitation of Christ and Life in the Modern World” [1918] (“De navolging van Christus en het moderne leven”). In *Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren*, 115–45. Kampen: Kok, 1918. ET in *Analysis*, “Appendix B,” 402–40. Page numbers provided in square brackets [] in the notes refer to the pagination in *Analysis*.
- Landwehr Landwehr, J. H. *In Memoriam: Prof. Dr. H. Bavinck*. Kampen: Kok, 1921.
- “Moral Infl.” Bavinck, Herman. “The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations.” In *Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System*, 48–55. Proceedings of the Fifth General Council, Toronto, 1892. London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1892.
- PofR* Bavinck, Herman. *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909, Princeton Theological Seminary*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909.
- RD*, 1–4 Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008.
- Saved* Bavinck, Herman. *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit’s Work in Calling and Regeneration*. Edited by J. Mark Beach. Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008.
- Tijdg.* Bremmer, R. H. *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*. Kampen: Kok, 1966.
- Wereldb.* Bavinck, Herman. *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*. 2nd ed. Kampen: Kok, 1913.

PREFACE

Why do people resist the Christian gospel? Is it because Christian claims are unreasonable and a stumbling block for really smart people? Intellectual objections against the faith have been raised since the days of second-century antagonists such as the Greek philosopher Celsus. Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr then, and C. S. Lewis more recently, have responded with thoughtful rebuttals. A good, intellectually honest case can be made for the truth of Christianity. Its doctrines are not irrational.

Our faith seems more vulnerable, however, in the practice of Christian living. Believers and non-Christians are frequently united in denouncing hypocrisy in the church. In the words attributed widely to Benjamin Franklin, “How many observe Christ’s Birth-day! How few, his Precepts!”¹ Christian talk is lofty, the complaint goes, but Christian walk is weak. When Christian lives don’t measure up to the high standards set by the gospel, we might well wonder whether those standards are even possible. Friedrich Nietzsche put it very bluntly: “In truth, there was only one Christian and he died on the cross.”² Christians who might dismiss Nietzsche as a despiser of Christianity cannot, however, dismiss Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s warnings about “cheap grace” and his call for “costly discipleship.”³ In contexts where Christians are a majority, it may be too easy to be a Christian. When “others” live decent and respectable lives, the more radical demands of Christian discipleship—“deny [your]self and take up [your] cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24)—may strike even the most evangelical and orthodox Christian as extreme or fanatic.

¹ This statement is often quoted and can be found on multiple Internet sites, some citing *Poor Richard’s Almanack* (1743). See, for example, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Poor_Richard%27s_Almanack#1743.

² F. W. Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. H. L. Mencken (New York: Knopf, 1918), 111–12 (sec. 39).

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, vol. 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krause (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 37–198.

Under those circumstances, it becomes easy to rationalize “cheap discipleship” by appealing to good, biblical—and particularly Reformed—staples such as total depravity: we all “fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); “I do not do the good I want to” (Rom. 7:19). Not only does this fail the critical test of Scripture itself—“you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48)—it also gravely injures Christian testimony and witness. How the Christian gospel is viewed by non-Christians is directly tied to what they see of Christian conduct. Our Lord himself taught us that his followers would be known by their “fruit” (Matt. 7:20). The challenge cannot be avoided or evaded. Even allowing for overstatement, the following claim by American singer and songwriter Kevin Max ought to disturb all Christians: “The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”⁴

If there is any truth to this claim, it represents a major departure from the witness of the early church. A second-century work, “The Letter to Diognetus,” describes Christians with these words:

They dwell in their own countries simply as sojourners . . . They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time, they surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death, but [will be] restored to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich. They possess few things; yet, they abound in all. They are dishonored, but in their very dishonor are glorified. . . . And those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred.⁵

The church father Tertullian reported that the Romans declared about Christians, “See how they love one another.”⁶ Christian conduct is essential to Christian witness; our walk must match our words.

Aware of this, Christians articulate the need for head and heart and hands to be in sync. The additional wrinkle here is the concern that our

⁴ *Goodreads*, accessed October 10, 2012, http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/739520.Kevin_Max.

⁵ “Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1885–1896; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950–1951), 1:23–30.

⁶ Tertullian, “The Apology,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1885–1896; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950–1951), 3:46 (chap. 39).

words might demonstrate a merely intellectual grasp of Christian truth that does not touch our hearts and is not reflected in the work of our hands. Cerebral Christianity is tied to cold hearts and unwilling hands. This is a complaint most often directed at a Christian tradition like the Reformed, known and respected for its doctrinal rigor, sound theology, and philosophical accomplishments.

When my Calvin Seminary colleague John Cooper and I were graduate students living in Toronto, Canada, in the late 1970s, one evening while riding the streetcar we became involved in a deep philosophical-theological discussion about the soul. In the midst of our animated conversation, a young man sitting in the seat behind us tapped us on the shoulders and said, “If you had the love of Jesus in your heart you wouldn’t have to mess up your heads with all that philosophy.” We thanked him for his concern and tried to point out in the brief time we had that philosophy was one of the ways in which we could honor the lordship of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul told the Romans to be transformed not “by the *removal* of your mind” but by their mind’s *renewal* (Rom. 12:1).

Our young brother’s concern, however, is not to be despised. Intellectualism is a real threat to full-orbed Christian discipleship. Nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) clearly recognized this when he wrote the following about a certain kind of theology:

It gave no scope to the play of Christian feeling; it never turned aside to reverence, to worship, or to adore. It exhibited truth, nakedly and baldly, in its objective reality, without any reference to the subjective conditions, which under the influence of the Spirit, that truth was calculated to produce. It was a dry digest of theses and propositions—perfect in form, but as cold and lifeless as a skeleton.⁷

A generation later, Herman Bavinck echoed Thornwell’s concern and explicitly expressed judgment on his fellow Dutch Reformed churchmen. After his death in 1921, one of Bavinck’s contemporaries indicated that Bavinck was particularly annoyed by church leaders who constantly shouted “Reformed, Reformed,” while their life and conduct stood in sharp contrast to basic Christian morality.⁸ Shortly after World War I, Bavinck

⁷ *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4 vols. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871–1873), 4:34.

⁸ Landwehr, 72.

concluded one of his last essays with sharp criticism of significant economic sins among his fellow Dutch Reformed Church members, sins that “not even the most stringent orthodoxy can make good.”⁹ That he had in mind some of the “world-transforming” followers of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) is clear from a revealing passage in his classic work *The Certainty of Faith* where he singles them out for their penchant to criticize more “pietist” and “other-worldly” members of the Reformed communion:

While these nineteenth century Christians [pietists] forgot the world for themselves, we run the danger of losing ourselves in the world. Nowadays we are out to convert the whole world, *to conquer all areas of life for Christ*. But we often neglect to ask whether we ourselves are truly converted and whether we belong to Christ in life and in death. For this is indeed what life boils down to. We may not banish this question from our personal or church life under the label of pietism or methodism. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, *even for Christian principles*, if he loses his own soul?¹⁰

The question I want to pose at the very beginning of a volume on Herman Bavinck’s understanding of the Christian life is whether this great Reformed theologian, broadly celebrated for his erudition and theological genius, practiced what he preached and taught. How does his theology relate to his ethics? In other words, was his great mind combined with a warm heart for the Lord and a commitment to a life of Christian service? Does his life stand up to the scrutiny of his own theology?

It is my honor and pleasure in the pages that follow to provide the evidence for a positive answer to these queries. The opening chapter is an exploration of Bavinck’s own desire, frequently expressed during the years he was a student at the University of Leiden, “to be a worthy follower of Jesus.”¹¹ Part 1 explores the basis of Bavinck’s theology of Christian discipleship, which can be summarized especially under the rubrics of creation/law and union with Christ. The three chapters of this foundational section are followed by two chapters describing the shape of Christian discipleship in terms of the imitation of Christ and sketching out the contours of Bavinck’s

⁹ *Analysis*, 440.

¹⁰ *Certainty*, 94. The italicized phrases, which are my emphasis, are thinly veiled references to the neo-Calvinist followers of Abraham Kuyper.

¹¹ According to Bavinck biographer R. H. Bremmer, this sentiment appears often in Bavinck’s journal during his student days (*Tijdg.*, 32).

worldview. The remaining four chapters apply this vision concretely in marriage and family, work and vocation, culture and education, and finally, civil society. The volume concludes with Bavinck's only published sermon—on 1 John 5:4b—as a summary statement of triumphant Christian discipleship. My translation of this sermon into English was prepared specifically for this volume. Taken together, the chapters of this volume serve as an introduction to and brief primer of Herman Bavinck's thought.

A few words are in order about the method I used to set forth Bavinck's understanding of the Christian life and the content of both parts of this volume. My method in each chapter might best be described as eclectic. That is to say, I have gathered together a large number of key quotations from Bavinck's large corpus of writings into what I trust will be a coherent narrative. The supporting structural narrative is mine, but it is my desire to let Bavinck's own voice be dominant. Stylistically, this meant using numerous large block quotations, even within single paragraphs. I sought to make the whole, quotations and narrative, as seamless as possible, and if readers occasionally find themselves unsure whether the words they are reading are Bavinck's or mine, I will not be unhappy to cede credit to him. My own thinking has been so profoundly shaped by his that I often find myself repeating his words as my own. Both of us would remind the reader that all glory finally needs to be given to God, whose creation is good and magnificent, whose work of redemption is overwhelmingly gracious, whose revealed truth is glorious, and whose love beyond our wildest expectations. It is the joy of the gospel, the truth of the Word of God, that both he and I appeal to for our own life, work, and words.

The structure of this book is built on an architectural model with part 1 serving as the foundation, part 2 the building's superstructure, and part 3 the various rooms of the building. This structure has Trinitarian analogues. Being created in the image of the triune God is the foundation of the life of Christian discipleship. The building itself, however, is Christocentric; conformity to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is the shape of all genuine discipleship. In a Reformed Christian worldview, discipleship is comprehensive and occupies the full range of human experience: marriage and family, work and vocation, culture and education, and civil society.

When the editors of this series, Stephen Nichols and Justin Taylor, invited me to prepare this volume, I was immediately inclined to accept because the material that follows in this book has been a major part of my

life ever since my graduate-student days at the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto. My dissertation addressed the role of the imitation-of-Christ theme in Herman Bavinck's cultural-ethical ideal,¹² and the person, theology, and continuing relevance of Bavinck for the church today has been my constant preoccupation to this day. Making this available beyond the academy and for the benefit of the broader church and Christians who desire to grow in their faith and Christian walk is something I *had* to do. Herewith, my deepest thanks to the editors and to Crossway for making it possible. Stephen and Justin, along with the competent editorial staff at Crossway, notably senior editor Thom Notaro, also made numerous suggestions for improving my prose, deleting unnecessary details, and clarifying important ideas. All writers should be blessed with such editors. Thank you all.

¹² *Analysis* (see table of abbreviations) is an updated and slightly revised version of my original (1982) dissertation completed at the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto, Ontario.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING BAVINCK: “A WORTHY FOLLOWER OF JESUS”

Photographs of Herman Bavinck—whether the best-known formal headshot or the less familiar pose of the scholar sitting at a desk in his study—portray a serious, perhaps even stern, man. Making allowances for the conventions of Victorian-era portraiture, the impression given by these photographs is clearly still that of a dedicated, determined, focused, no-nonsense man, one not likely given to frivolity or even leisure.

“Serious” is the right word. One might even be forgiven for perpetuating a stereotypical image by describing him as a somber-looking “Puritan.” Familiarity with the secessionist Christian Reformed¹ community his father, Jan, served as a minister and in which young Herman was nurtured would seem to confirm this judgment; it was a community that had separated itself from the National Dutch Reformed Church² out of a double concern for doctrinal orthodoxy and proper worship. Like the Puritans, these devoted Jesus followers were passionate about purity of doctrine and holiness of life. Consequently, they were members of a marginalized community characterized by a certain level of flight from the world.

¹ The official name of this church was *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. This church was formed from a significant secession from the National Dutch Reformed Church in 1834.

² Official name in Dutch was *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*.

One biographer of Bavinck used the term *Kulturfeindlichkeit* (a posture of hostility toward culture) to describe the character of the Bavinck home.³ Bavinck's childhood and lifelong friend Henry Dosker, who immigrated to the United States and eventually became a professor at the Presbyterian Seminary of Kentucky in Louisville, shares this assessment in the following description of Herman's parents:

I knew both the parents of Dr. Bavinck intimately. They were typical of their environment and cherished all the puritanical and often provincial ideas and ideals of the early Church of the Separation. Simple, almost austere in their mode of life, exhibiting something of what the Germans call *Kulturfeindlichkeit*, pious to the core, teaching their children more by example than by precept, the mother uncommonly clear-visioned in her ideas and never afraid to express them, the father diffident, aroused only with difficulty, but then evincing rare power. Such were the parents of Dr. Herman Bavinck.⁴

The Bavinck Home

In recent years, other biographers have disputed the claim that the Bavinck home was largely characterized by a separatist hostility to culture.⁵ These biographers appeal to the description of the family home given by one of Bavinck's own students, J. H. Landwehr, shortly after Bavinck's death in 1921. Landwehr took special note to defend the family from all accusations of legalism and moralism.

A truly Christian spirit dominated in the house of the old pastor. One did not find there command upon command and rule upon rule; but, being bound to the Word of the Lord, there was a Christian freedom that was pleasing to behold. This was the rule in the Bavinck home: simplicity is the hallmark of that which is true.⁶

Another biographer surmises that Valentijn Hepp may have confused this simplicity for cultural hostility and "failed to see it as the way [those who are] genuinely civilized from within express themselves."⁷

The questions that face us here—What was the Bavinck home really

³ Hepp, 14.

⁴ Dosker, 15.

⁵ Gleason, 27; *Tijdg.*, 15.

⁶ Landwehr, 7–8.

⁷ *Tijdg.*, 15.

like? Did its simplicity indicate hostility to all culture or only to certain aspects of Dutch nineteenth-century culture? Did the absence of all legalism suggest a degree of openness to the good aspects of culture?—all these questions and more need not, and likely cannot, be answered with a simple yes or no. Bavinck's close friend Dosker finds him to be something of a riddle: "I will admit at once that in some respects, viewed from the standpoint of his parentage, Dr. Bavinck is a conundrum. He was so like and yet so absolutely unlike his parents."⁸ As Dosker proceeds with a brief description of the elder Bavinck, however, it appears that the father also exhibited characteristics that give evidence of his own ambivalence on the matters of piety and culture.

Jan Bavinck (1826–1909) came from the little German village of Bentheim, near the Dutch border, and was a member of the German *Alt-Reformierten Kirche* (Old Reformed Church), a group known for its piety and strong adherence to the traditions of the Reformed faith as set forth at the Synod of Dort.⁹ Jan was only three years old when his father died, and he was brought up by a courageous and devout Christian widow who "raised her [six] children to love God, to exhibit a Christian character, and to possess biblical honor and integrity as she faithfully instructed her children at home and in the school."¹⁰ In his autobiography, Jan recounted that his upbringing had been rather formal and lacked "the internal life of Christian faith."¹¹ This all changed for him at the age of sixteen when his uncle Harm took him to hear an open-air preacher, Jan Berend Sundag.

As a young man Sundag had become disillusioned by what he deemed the spiritual deterioration of church life in Germany and developed a relationship with Secession leader Hendrick de Cock, who mentored him in the study of theology. Returning to Germany after his studies with De Cock were completed, Sundag tried to rouse the leaders of the church for revival but was rebuffed. Sundag began preaching outdoors and gathered a small following, including Jan Bavinck, who was deeply impressed and eventually led to leave the National Dutch Reformed Church. His childhood longing to become a minister of the Word returned with that step; however, owing to a lack of finances, the path to that goal seemed remote.¹²

The story of Jan Bavinck's path to ministry in the Secession Christian

⁸ Dosker, 14.

⁹ Gleason, 2–4.

¹⁰ Gleason, 5.

¹¹ Gleason, 6.

¹² Gleason, 10–12.

Reformed Church provides an important window into the man and his community. In this denomination, the regional authority is known as the *classis*, equivalent to the presbytery in Presbyterian church government. The *classis* was evenly divided concerning a request from Sundag for assistance in his heavy workload. Sundag had asked for "a candidate from the churches to receive instruction in theology with a view to preparation for service in pastoral ministry." To break the tie vote, the assembly "knelt in prayer and asked the Lord's guidance in casting a lot to decide the matter."¹³ Five candidates had expressed interest in pursuing the study for ministry, and after the lot in favor of proceeding was cast, the group was eventually pared down to two, with Jan Bavinck as one of the two men left standing. Once again, the vote between them was a tie, and a young woman who was working in the kitchen to help prepare the meals pulled out a slip of paper with the lot-determined answer. The answer had been "for" the first time; the name "Bavinck" was chosen the second time.¹⁴ This would not be the last time that Jan Bavinck's "fate" was determined by "lot," and the procedure reflects a profound sense of and submission to God's providential leading in the Seceder community. Humility, even undue modesty, was to characterize both father Jan and son Herman Bavinck throughout their lives and ministries.

By all accounts, Jan was "a dedicated and precocious student."¹⁵ According to Dosker, "he must have been a phenomenal student, and must also have enjoyed considerable earlier advantages, for in the small theological seminary at Hoogeveen, where he went, he took over the classes in Latin, Greek and Hebrew." Later, he assisted in the training of ministerial candidates for the Christian Reformed Church, and when the church decided to establish its own theological school at Kampen in 1854, "the elder Bavinck was the first to be nominated by the General Synod, as one of the professors." Uncertain what to do, Jan once again "made the lot settle the matter and declined the call." Why? Dosker also wonders: "Was it his innate modesty, his underestimate of his own powers, that pessimistic view of things, which ever sees lions in the way, of which his illustrious son also had a share?"¹⁶

The portrait we have drawn thus far shows us a deeply pious man, con-

¹³ Gleason, 11; Hepp, 11.

¹⁴ Gleason, 12.

¹⁵ Gleason, 12.

¹⁶ Dosker, 14–15.

cerned about the welfare of the National Reformed Church, attracted to revivalist preaching, and profoundly submissive to God's leading. We also see someone who is himself well educated and committed to teaching for an educated ministry. Furthermore, though he shared the pietistic sympathies of his Christian Reformed colleagues in ministry, and his preaching included the typical emphases on introspection and warnings about God's judgment, his son C. B. Bavinck (1866–1941) reported that his "father's clarity of mind preserved him from sickly excesses."¹⁷

In short, Jan Bavinck was a man characterized by a healthy piety and openness to the best of human learning and culture. We find confirmation of this openness in the elder Bavinck's response to Herman's declared intention in 1874 to study theology at the modernist University of Leiden rather than at the Christian Reformed Church's theological school at Kampen, a move that scandalized the church: young Herman's father and mother both finally supported this move. In response to criticism, father Jan confessed, "I trust in God's grace which is powerful enough to protect my child," adding that "the best church teachers had often obtained their learning from pagan schools while they were upheld by the prayers of godly parents."¹⁸ Bavinck's biographer R. H. Bremmer characterizes the mother as "definitely not narrow."¹⁹

Bavinck's Secession Roots

Our portrait of the Bavinck home thus far places it decidedly within the circle of the theologically conservative and culturally marginalized Christian Reformed Church community that had seceded from the National Dutch Reformed Church in 1834. Since Herman Bavinck's piety and commitments cannot be understood apart from his upbringing in this community, we need to take a longer look at it. The *Afscheiding* or Secession of 1834 was an ecclesiastical protest against King William I's reorganization of the National Dutch Reformed Church in 1815–1816 and the perceived indifference by the national church to the Reformed orthodoxy established at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619). As the locus of ecclesiastical authority moved away from the local congregation to ecclesiastical boards appointed by the king and overseen by a State Department of Religion, protesters and

¹⁷ Hepp, 22; *Tijdg.*, 15.

¹⁸ Landwehr, 9.

¹⁹ *Tijdg.*, 15.

dissenters led by the Rev. Hendrik de Cock, Reformed minister at Ulrum, Groningen, came to the conclusion that "Separation and Return"²⁰—separation from the National Church and a return to the teaching and polity of Dort—were necessary. The opening sentence of their declaration reads as follows:

We, the undersigned Overseers and members of the Reformed Congregation of Jesus Christ at Ulrum, have for a considerable time noticed the corruption in the Netherlands Reformed Church, in the mutilation or denial of the doctrine of our fathers founded on God's Word, as well as in the degeneration of the administration of the Holy Sacraments according to the ordinance of Christ in his Word, and in the near complete absence of church discipline, all of which are marks of the true church according to our Reformed Confession, Article 29.

When the Ulrum church's pastor was suspended by the state church boards for what the declaration describes as "his public testimony against false doctrine and polluted public worship services," the church's consistory appealed to classical, provincial, and synodical boards of the church, but to no avail. Requests to have their case heard and adjudicated were routinely denied, and instead the church was called to repent and to submit without qualification to the National Church authorities.²¹

What especially led the protesters to the conclusion that "the Netherlands Reformed Church is not the true but the false Church, according to God's Word and Article 29 of our confession" was the persecution of the dissenters by the civil authorities.²² Ministers were forbidden to preach and were arrested; the Seceders were forbidden to gather in public for worship, and they had their goods confiscated and soldiers billeted in their homes. Not until 1869 did the civil authorities grant the Christian Reformed Church full legal status.

Even this brief overview suggests the appropriateness of the characterization given in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, including the term "Puritan." The Christian Reformed Church community of the nineteenth century was a dissenting community that had separated itself from the Na-

²⁰The official declaration of separation was given the title "The Act of Secession or Return." An English translation is available online at <http://www.gcc-opc.org/docs/DeCock.dir/scaneva.htm>.

²¹All this is spelled out in the "The Act of Secession or Return."

²²Article 29 of the Belgic Confession provides the following characteristic of the "false church" that the Seceders understandably applied to their own situation: "[The false church] persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry."

tional Church, was preoccupied with purity of doctrine and holiness of life, insisted upon church discipline and a biblically based polity, and occupied a marginalized position out of step with the mainstream of Dutch culture and society. Thanks to the prominent role played by father Jan Bavinck in this church, Professor Hepp's judgment that the Bavinck home shared the characteristic Christian Reformed hostile attitude to culture (*Kulturfeindlichkeit*) seems very plausible at first sight. Nonetheless, two important qualifications temper this impression—the first about the Bavinck home and the second about the character of the Secession itself. We have already considered the first one; now we shall examine the second.

The Secession was not a unique or brand-new phenomenon in the Dutch Reformed Church but shared important commitments with a long history of pious ecclesiastical dissent. Neither concern for theological and confessional orthodoxy nor opposition to the polity arising from a close alliance between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities was born in the nineteenth century. Dissatisfaction with the dominant Dutch Reformed Church can be traced back much farther.

The Reformed Church became the preferred religious body in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, a major shift from the time of the very first Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at Emden in 1571, when the persecuted Reformed Christians constituted themselves as "Reformed Churches under the cross" (*kruiskerken*). From the outset, the Protestant Reformation faced severe opposition in the Low Countries from the civil and ecclesiastical authorities under control of Roman Catholic Spain. As the religious struggle for freedom of worship and conscience merged with a civil struggle for political freedom from the autocratic rules of Charles V, and especially Phillip II (1566–1648), it was the Calvinists who provided the backbone of support for the revolt led by William of Orange. Calvinist preachers provided the ideological perspective that considered the Netherlands the New Israel led by God out of the bondage houses of Spain and Rome.

Though the civil authorities welcomed the support and assistance of the Calvinists in this struggle and accepted the "establishment" of the Reformed faith, they also protected heterodoxy within the church and dissent outside of it by careful civil control of the church. The triumph of orthodox Calvinism over the Arminian Remonstrant party at the Synod of Dort proved to be a shallow and short-lived victory. The new church order adopted by

the synod gave civil authorities key roles in approving or rejecting minister's calls to churches, provided for state funds to pay minister's salaries, controlled the theological education in the state universities, and required consultation with civil authorities before national synods could be called. Even at that, neither the National Estates General nor the majority of the provinces approved the Dort Church Order because they were not satisfied with their influence in ecclesiastical matters. The precious little autonomy the Dutch Reformed Church enjoyed was still too much for the authorities.

The Dutch Reformed Church of the seventeenth century, usually described as the Dutch "Golden Age," had acquired freedom from religious persecution and been granted legitimacy and power by the civil authorities, but this acceptance was not accompanied by great spiritual renewal and vigor. On the contrary! Complaints by preachers about worldliness and moral turpitude—drunkenness, licentiousness, blasphemy, profanation of the Sabbath, and so forth—abound in the literature of the seventeenth century. To make matters worse, there was a perception of a cold and dead orthodoxy in those churches that were still concerned about sound doctrine. Rationalism and intellectualism ran roughshod over piety and religious experience. Conditions were ripe for a pietistic reform movement that eventually came in the revival known as the *Nadere Reformatie*: "Further Reformation" or "Second Reformation."

This Dutch revival and reform movement was influenced by English Puritanism and German pietism. The Second Reformation's roots, however, ran earlier and deeper in the religious life of the Low Countries in such figures as Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293–1381) and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), author of *The Imitation of Christ*. The spirituality of the Second Reformation was strongly centered on the person of Christ, emphasized the need for a "new birth" or regeneration, and stressed the morality of following Christ. The term "Second Reformation" is closely linked with the famous Reformation slogan *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est* (the Reformed Church must always be reforming). Behind this slogan was the desire—similar to that of the Anabaptists—that the Reformation be carried to its logical conclusion. A correct *understanding* of Scripture, the church, the sacraments, and so forth, was essential, but it was not enough. The Holy Spirit's power for a new and holy life—in the individual and the community—had to be included in a true reformation. The Second Reformation was about rebirth, but above all, about sanctification and holy living.

For this reason, the conventional caricature of Puritanism in general, and pietism more particularly—namely, that it represents an individualistic, ascetic, otherworldly, and anticultural Christianity—is definitely not applicable to the Second Reformation. The emphasis upon repentance, conversion, a living, active faith and the practice of piety, and the progressive reformation of the life of individuals was matched by a concern for the progressive reformation of the church and of society. The writers of the Second Reformation—commonly called *de oude schrijvers* (the old writers)—were not only familiar to the Dutch Seceders of the nineteenth century; they were also much read and well loved. Bavinck himself expressed appreciation for the best of this tradition of spirituality, especially the strong emphasis on sin and grace. In an illuminating foreword to a volume introducing the Scottish preachers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine to a Dutch audience, Bavinck writes favorably about the deeply religious and practical character of the Scottish preaching, reflected in its emphasis upon personal conversion. Here is how he characterizes it:

It constantly moves between the two poles of sin and grace, law and gospel. It descends, on the one hand to the depths of the human heart, unsparingly removes all covers and pretenses used by men to insulate themselves from the holiness of God, and exposes them in his poverty and lowliness before the face of God. On the other hand, it also comes to those men, thus made contrite in spirit, with the promises of the Gospel, unfolding its riches from all sides and applying them to all circumstances of life.

He then adds a brief lament about the devotional literature of his own day:

[In current literature] the spiritual understanding of the soul is missing. It seems that we no longer know what sin and grace, guilt and forgiveness, regeneration and conversion are. In theory we know them well, but we no longer know them in the majestic reality of life. For this reason the devotional literature of previous times always leaves a different impression than that of the present. Because, although we stand at some distance from it and its form is antiquated, it is and remains natural, in the true sense of the word, while that of the present, when it deals with the soul, seems unnatural and artificial. We feel, when we read the old writers, that we are offered a piece of life; it is reality itself, that we are privileged to view.²³

²³ Herman Bavinck, introduction to *Levensgeschiedenis en werken van Ralph en Ebenezer Erskine*, by R. Erskine and E. Erskine (Doesburg: J. C. van Schenk Brill, n.d. [1905–1906]), 5.

Bavinck clearly appreciated the old writers, but he found fault with those in his community whose otherworldly mysticism had led to a withdrawal from society. Bavinck articulated his concerns in a magisterial address on the catholicity of the Christian church and the gospel, where he chided such folk, including those who fled the Netherlands to avoid persecution and oppression:

Satisfied with the ability to worship God in their own houses of worship, or to engage in evangelism, many left nation, state and society, art and science to their own devices. Many withdrew completely from life, literally separated themselves from everything, and, in some cases, what was even worse, shipped off to America, abandoning the Fatherland as lost to unbelief.²⁴

Bavinck's address then indicates that he understands and even appreciates the strong desire to be faithful to Jesus's call to discipleship, but he still complains that otherworldly mysticism "is missing the full truth of Christianity. It is a denial of the truth that God loves the world. It is dedicated to conflict with and even rejection of the world but not to 'the victory that overcomes it' in faith."²⁵

Here we see Bavinck distancing himself from some in his communion who responded to the social and cultural upheavals of the day by withdrawing from the conflict. He, by contrast, was committed to engagement, as is evident from his stated reason for studying theology at Leiden: "I had completed my studying at the gymnasium [preparatory school for university] and harbored a strong desire to further my studies at Leiden in order to become acquainted firsthand with modern theology."²⁶ Because his parents had just moved to Kampen, they pleaded with him to study for one year at the theological school there. Bavinck acquiesced, but his "desire to obtain a more scholarly training than the Theological School was able to provide" remained, and, evidently with parental approval, he entered Leiden in September 1874.²⁷ This sets the stage for the Leiden period, a time in Bavinck's life worthy of an extended look.

²⁴"Catholicity," 246. Here Bavinck is referring to the 1840s emigration of the Secession ministers, Rev. Albertus Van Raalte and Rev. Hendrik Scholte, to Holland, Michigan, and Pella, Iowa, respectively. These emigrations led to the founding of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

²⁵"Catholicity," 246–47.

²⁶*Tijdg.*, 20.

²⁷*Tijdg.*, 20, 22.

Bavinck's Leiden Struggles

As Bavinck took leave of his parents on September 23, 1874, he was aware that the journey he was beginning would challenge his faith. He had publicly professed faith a year earlier, on March 30, 1873, in the Christian Reformed Church of Zwolle, the city where he received his gymnasium education. Biographers speak of his active participation in the life of the Zwolle congregation.²⁸ Now, as he departed for Leiden, he expressed his own anxieties in his diary: "Shall I remain standing [in the faith]? May God grant it."²⁹

At the time Bavinck enrolled at Leiden, its theological faculty was internationally renowned for its scholarship and its decidedly modernist orientation. The anchors of this faculty were Johannes Henricus Scholten (1811–1885) in dogmatic theology and Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891) in Old Testament, but Cornelis P. Tiele (1830–1902) in the academic studies of religions and the philosophers Lodewijk W. E. Rauwenhoff (1828–1902) and Jan P. N. Land (1834–1897) provided a solid complement. The modernist theology that Bavinck faced was empiricist and decidedly antisupernaturalist but, at the same time, committed to a new synthesis between modernity and the Christian religion. Scholten attempted this by creating a new theological system in which the classic Reformed emphasis on God's sovereignty was recast into a monistic and panentheistic determinism. God was thought of as the all-determining power present in all things. Scholten still identified true religion with the spirit and principles of Jesus, who is our example because he is the one man who was completely controlled by the spirit of God.

I have briefly sketched the salient characteristics of the 1834 Secession and its affinities with the history of Dutch pietism and introduced the modernist theology taught at the University of Leiden because they are the two constitutive influences on Bavinck's life. Jan Veenhof, for example, speaks of these two factors as the two poles that dominate Bavinck's life.³⁰ A. Anema, one of Bavinck's colleagues at the Free University, once characterized Bavinck as a "Secession preacher and a representative of modern culture," concluding:

That was a striking characteristic. In that duality is found Bavinck's significance. That duality is also a reflection of the tension—at times the

²⁸ *Tijdg.*, 19.

²⁹ *Tijdg.*, 22.

³⁰ Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 108.

crisis—in Bavinck’s life. In many respects it is a simple matter to be a preacher in the Secession Church, and, in a certain sense, it is also not that difficult to be a modern person. But in no way is it a simple matter to be the one as well as the other.³¹

Others who knew Bavinck well made similar observations.

Of utmost importance in this matter is the virtually unanimous testimony of witnesses that Bavinck remained true to his Seceder and pietist roots even though the pressure from the teaching he received at Leiden must have been great. His contemporary Abraham Kuyper, who also studied at Leiden from 1855 to 1862 and sat under the same professors as Bavinck, reports in his autobiographical essay “Confidentially” that he and a class of Leiden students once broke into wild applause when a professor denied the bodily resurrection of Christ. Not only is there no record of similar behavior on Bavinck’s part; it is simply unimaginable. In fact, Bavinck firmly defended his community and the legitimacy of its ecclesiastical dissent at the time of his doctoral examination at Leiden on June 10, 1880. Before the liberal “establishment” of the Dutch Reformed Church and the chief representatives of modernist theology, Bavinck defended the following proposition: “Measured by the standard of Reformed principles (art. 38 and 39 [sic!] of the Belgic Confession), the Secession of 1834 was both justified and necessary.”³²

Bavinck meant articles 28 and 29, which define the marks of the true church in distinction from the false church. Though his time at Leiden was in many respects a difficult struggle, Bavinck’s own prayer was answered: he remained standing and his church community was greatly relieved. This relief is palpable in a written review of his Leiden dissertation published in the Christian Reformed journal, *De vrije kerk*. The author recalls Bavinck’s decision to study at Leiden as a risky venture and expresses gratitude that it turned out well.

We are grateful to God that this wager—for that is indeed what it always is—turned out so well. So many young people from Christian homes when placed in such an environment are literally lost morally and religiously, later becoming skeptics and even enemies of God’s people and opponents of God’s truth. With Dr. Bavinck, thanks be to God, that was not the case.

³¹ Ibid.

³² H. Bavinck, *De ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1880), 182.

We have it on good authority: All those years he was in Leiden, his conduct was irreproachable and his study habits were exemplary. What is even more important, he remained true to Reformed principles and faithful to his church communion.³³

After he completed his study period at Leiden in 1880, Bavinck candidly acknowledged his struggles and even spiritual impoverishment as a cost of his time at Leiden: "Leiden has benefitted me in many ways: I hope always to acknowledge that gratefully. But it has also greatly impoverished me, robbed me, not only of much ballast (for which I am happy), but also much that I recently, especially when I preach, recognize as vital for my own spiritual life."³⁴ Bavinck, nonetheless, retained his close ties with the Christian Reformed Church by preaching frequently in its congregations. His first student sermon, delivered on July 21, 1878, had 1 John 5:4b as its text: "This is the victory that overcomes the world—our faith." Bavinck loved to preach on this text, and it was the text of his only published sermon, preached on June 20, 1901, in Kampen, with South Africa's president Paul Kruger in the audience.³⁵

Although it is evident that Bavinck retained his orthodox Calvinist piety and theology while at Leiden, its professors did influence him, especially in matters of method and approach. The scrupulously careful, historical-empirical approach of J. H. Scholten and, especially, Abraham Kuenen had a lasting effect on him. Bavinck's well-documented genial and fair-minded approach to opponents may have been influenced by personal qualities but was also strengthened, if not learned, at Leiden. "If I have one thing for which to be thankful to Leiden," he wrote his friend Snouck Hurgronje, "it is this: to attempt to understand the opponent."³⁶

Bavinck as Churchman and Professor

Jan Veenhof contends that Bavinck never distanced himself from his ecclesiastical and spiritual background, but always considered himself a "son of the Secession."³⁷ Veenhof speaks of Bavinck's "life-long attachment to the spiritual climate of the older separated churches, marked by a deeply

³³ Hepp, 84.

³⁴ Hepp, 84.

³⁵ *Tijds.*, 34n66; the translated text of this sermon is reproduced as the conclusion of this book.

³⁶ Hepp, 84.

³⁷ Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 95.

existential and, occasionally one-sided pietistic self-examination, but nonetheless truly Reformed experience of the great realities of sin and grace."³⁸ Further support that Bavinck remained a true son of the Secession is his tireless devotion and labor for the Christian Reformed Church. Upon completing his doctoral studies he accepted the call to the Christian Reformed congregation in Franeker, Friesland, a charge he served from 1880 to 1882. Though brief, Bavinck's pastoral work at Franeker was memorable. The church's immediate history under its two previous ministers was troubled and characterized by division; under Bavinck's care, the congregation experienced healing and flourished. After reviewing the minutes of the church's consistory, as well as those of the supervising classis, Bremmer notes that they bear consistent witness that "under Bavinck's ministry the congregation of Franeker noticeably experienced God's blessing."³⁹

As one example of Bavinck's pastoral heart, Bremmer passes on the story of someone who experienced it firsthand as a young man. After Bavinck's death in 1921, the man recalled Bavinck's compassion for those who had physical and developmental disabilities. Bavinck visited the home of an

elderly woman whose two daughters were practically crippled, spoke with difficulty, and lived in circumstances of poverty; the mother was also not very neat. The two sisters expressed a desire to become members of the congregation and after a conversation with the consistory were gladly welcomed to the Table of the Covenant.

Even when hindered from coming to church for Sunday services because of indisposition, "they were brought to the church by ambulance and sat near the pulpit where they listened attentively and gladly." Recalling this time of his youth forty years earlier, the man reported that this "small tableau" made a significant impression on the young people of the church. He adds that "it was precisely here, with and by means of these simple people whom the world despised as 'of no account,'" that Bavinck called on his congregation "to refashion themselves in the salvation that is found in Jesus."⁴⁰ Viewed from the vantage point of our thankfully more compassionate treatment of persons with disabilities today, one cannot help

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁹ *Tijdg.*, 42.

⁴⁰ *Tijdg.*, 38.

thinking that this must have been rare in Bavinck's day. By the standards of any age it provides a wonderful window into Bavinck's Christian and pastoral heart.

Bavinck's short time at Franeker is also noteworthy for two decisions he did *not* make. We have just noted that he was a faithful and effective pastor. At the same time, he also missed the academy and lamented the busyness of pastoral life that got in the way of his passion for studying. In a letter to his Leiden friend Snouck Hurgronje, Bavinck comments on his busy workload but also acknowledges that he "wastes considerable time" and does not understand why. Even when he manages to carve out some time for study, he complains that he "doesn't feel like it," and that his passion for studying was diminishing.⁴¹ At the risk of doing diagnosis from a distance, this sounds like a clear case of mild depression arising from the tension between his pastoral calling and his frustrated sense of calling to be a theologian.

Under those circumstances, a call in February 1882 from a large Christian Reformed congregation in Amsterdam, at double the salary he was receiving in Franeker, would have been a powerful attraction. Keeping in mind that Abraham Kuyper had just founded the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880, a move to Amsterdam would have given Bavinck ample opportunity to refuel his passion for studying and exercise his academic skills. And still, Bavinck took only two weeks to decline the call; he did not feel free to leave.⁴²

During the same month he also received an inquiry from the Board of the Free University of Amsterdam about the possibility of an appointment to a faculty position in hermeneutics and New Testament exegesis. This was the second time Kuyper's school beckoned him; prior to its official opening in October 1880, Bavinck had been invited to become one of the charter faculty as a professor of Old Testament and Semitic literature. He had declined then, writing in his diary, "If I had accepted, I would have only done it for Kuyper's sake and attachment to his glory." The second time around he expressed his willingness to consider the offer but also indicated that his deep love for the Christian Reformed Church and concern for the well-being of its theological school gave him pause, particularly because the church herself desired improvement in the theological education of

⁴¹ *Tijdg.*, 40.

⁴² *Tijdg.*, 38–39.

its pastors. In his response to the president of the Free University's Board, he wrote, "I love my church and would prefer laboring to build it up. The flourishing of her Theological School is close to my heart; there is much there that calls urgently for improvement." Bavinck then observed that the synod of the Christian Reformed Church was committed to such improvement; he also noted that at the upcoming synod meeting (August 1882), he anticipated receiving an appointment to teach at the theological school. Tellingly he added, "There is not much about the place that is attractive but I am drawn to it out of concern for the well-being of the church I serve." Acknowledging that he might end up being disappointed, Bavinck declined the Free University offer until it became clear what his place would be in the Kampen theological school.⁴³

The synodical appointment did come on August 24, 1882, and was accepted. In the light of our earlier glance at the life of Herman's father, the following notes from the elder Bavinck's autobiography are a noteworthy postscript. He observed that he (in 1854) and his son (in 1882) were both twenty-eight years old when appointed by the synod of their church—in each case meeting in the Dutch city of Zwolle, near Kampen—to teach at the theological school of the Christian Reformed Church in Kampen. "I gave thanks to God," he wrote, "that my son—not as my successor but as my substitute—took the place that I had not dared to accept because of my lack of faith."⁴⁴

Bavinck remained at Kampen for twenty years, eventually hearkening to the call of the Free University to come as a replacement for Kuyper, who at this time was occupied as prime minister of the Netherlands. Bavinck's departure was not a matter of diminishing concern for his church; if anything it reflected the opposite. The Christian Reformed Church came into being thanks to a secession from the National Dutch Reformed Church in 1834. Fifty years later, in 1886, Kuyper led another dissenting group out of the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, a group known as the *Doleantie* (from the Dutch verb *doleren*, "to mourn"). Though both groups dissented from the national church because of perceived doctrinal and practical departures from the tradition of Reformed confessional orthodoxy, there were significant theological and ecclesiastical differences between the two groups. For our purposes, we need to shine the spotlight on the theological education

⁴³ *Tijdg.*, 34.

⁴⁴ *Tijdg.*, 34.

of ministers. Kuyper and his followers wanted a "scientific" theological education provided at a Christian university such as the Free University of Amsterdam. The Christian Reformed Church, however, had established its own theological school or seminary at Kampen and regarded theological education as the responsibility of the church.

None of this would have mattered much if the two groups had simply gone their separate ways. But in 1892, a major church union took place between a large part of the 1834 Secession church and the 1886 *Doleantie* church, forming a new denomination, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. Now the question of theological education and ministerial training became an urgent practical matter. To make a long story short, despite Bavinck's important mediatorial role, the two groups were unable to come to an agreement. Instead of joining the two faculties of Kampen and Amsterdam into one institution as Bavinck desired and had worked hard to accomplish, the two schools would continue, business as usual.

For our purposes here it is important to note that Bavinck's proposal faced opposition from both sides of the church: Christian Reformed leaders who wanted at all costs to preserve theological education under the wing of the church, and *Doleantie* leaders such as Kuyper who insisted on a scientific theology situated in the university. Over against the leaders of his own church, Bavinck insisted that theology as the study of God must be related to other areas of human knowledge and that a university is thus a fitting place for a theological faculty. In the years that the two groups were "courting" prior to union, Bavinck emphasized the latter point to his own community. After the union of 1892, however, having been stung by the ferocity with which Kuyper and his lieutenants rejected his proposals for a unified theological education, Bavinck began to highlight the important role of the church in theological education. In the midst of the heated debate taking place in the Union Church in the late 1890s, Bavinck wrote an important, eighty-page brochure, *Het recht der kerken en de vrijheid der wetenschap* ("The right of the churches and the freedom of science/scholarship"). Here's how he framed his own understanding of the debate: "In 1896 it had to do with the right and freedom of the discipline of theological science. Now in 1899 it appears to me that it has to do with the right and freedom of the churches."⁴⁵

It is undoubtedly true that Bavinck's move to Amsterdam provided

⁴⁵Gleason, 256.

significant personal and professional benefits and his subsequent labor at the Free University was enormously productive. At the same time, we would not do the man justice if we did not take into account that he also made the move for the benefit of the church. Committed as he was to a solidly academic theological education, he went to the Free University as one who insisted that theology serve the church and be framed by the church. That was a note he believed needed to be included and played, perhaps even fortissimo, in the score of Kuyperian higher education. Good theology, not to mention good theologians, needs the church. In the foreword to the first edition of the *Reformed Dogmatics* (1895), Bavinck put it this way:

The dogmatic theologian no less than the ordinary believer is obliged to confess the communion of the saints. How wide and long, how high and deep the love of Christ is. A love that surpasses all knowledge can only be grasped with all the saints in communion. It is first of all in and by means of their fellowship that a theologian learns to understand the dogmas of the church that articulate the Christian faith. Above everything else, the communion of the saints provides empowering strength and superb comfort.

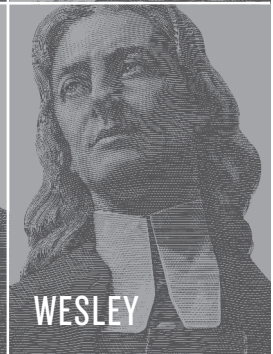
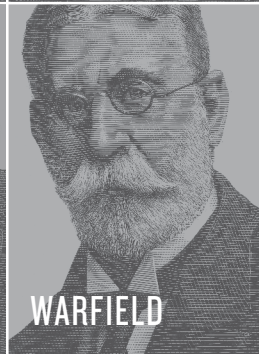
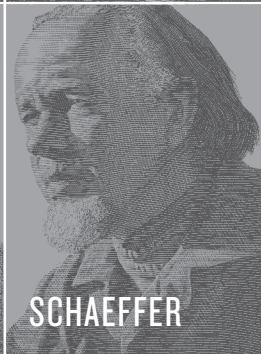
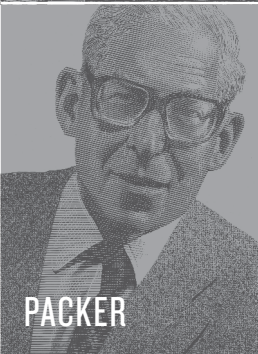
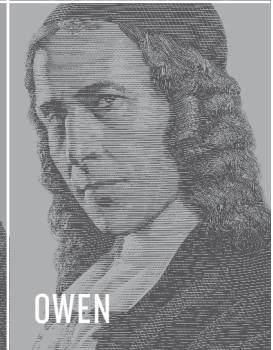
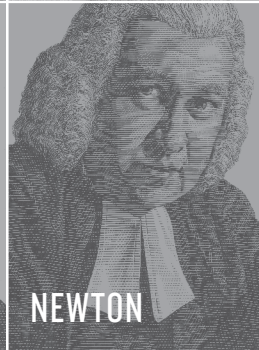
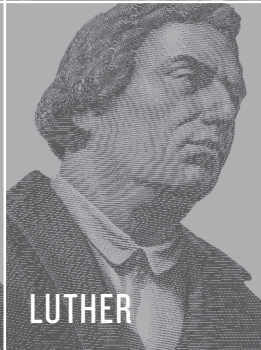
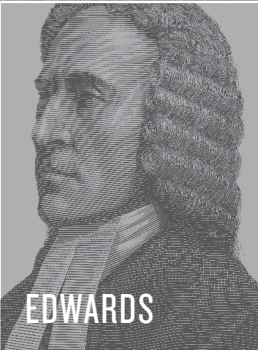
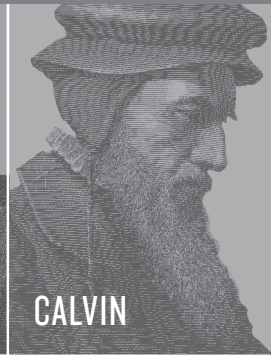
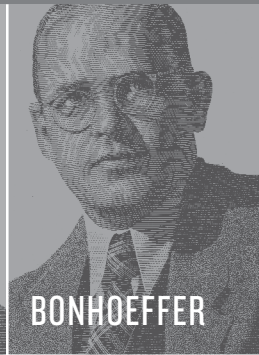
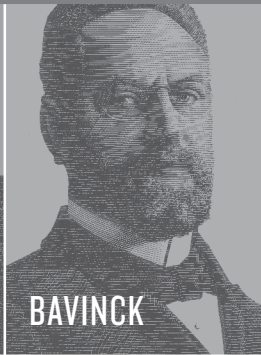
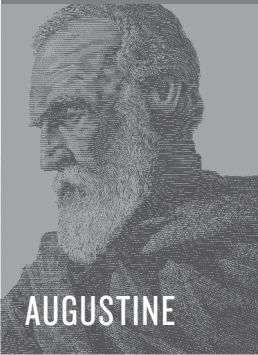
On that note we conclude our biographical sketch. Bavinck was a man of deep piety and great learning who faced head-on the challenges posed to Reformed orthodoxy by modernity without forsaking his devout, pietist roots. We will have occasion to consider additional biographical details in the next five chapters, including his career as a theologian and his involvement in Dutch politics, as we explore the range of his theology and foundational ideas about the Christian life. Biographical details about Bavinck's political involvement will be included in chapter 6.

PART I

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