

# **The Heart of Dogmatics**

Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck



# Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie

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Christine Axt-Piscalar, David Fergusson, and Christiane Tietz

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Bruce R. Pass

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in Herman Bavinck

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in memoriam  
Alan Hohne (1942–2011)





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I don’t think a day has gone past in which I have not thanked God for the remarkable privilege of undertaking this research and I am glad to share the fruits of my work with a wider audience. Reading Bavinck closely has reminded me of the precious truth that in life and death, in the present and the future all is ours and we are of Christ and Christ is of God. May these extended musings redound to his glory.

Bruce R. Pass  
Brisbane, Australia

## Introduction

In the introduction to his expansive account of Herman Bavinck's doctrines of revelation and inspiration, Jan Veenhof hinted that a systematic analysis of Bavinck had not yet been written.<sup>1</sup> In the fifty years since Veenhof's monograph appeared, Bavinck scholarship has progressed considerably, yet a case could be made that a properly systematic analysis of Bavinck's theology is still lacking. Subsequent studies have largely focused on a single doctrine or aspect of Bavinck's thought. Sijtse Meijers investigated the relationship of objectivity and existentiality in Bavinck.<sup>2</sup> John Bolt explored the theme of the imitation of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Sydney Hielema examined the eschatological orientation of Bavinck's soteriology.<sup>4</sup> Ronald Gleason considered the significance of the mystical union in Bavinck,<sup>5</sup> and Dirk van Keulen built on Veenhof's earlier work on Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture.<sup>6</sup> The reasons that an account of Bavinck as a systematic theologian has not been forthcoming are, however, not difficult to discern.

When Rolf Bremmer and Jan Veenhof wrote their monographs, Bavinck scholarship was still in its infancy. The first doctoral theses did not appear until the 1950s, largely because the focus of attention in the Netherlands had shifted toward another figure. In the year following Bavinck's death, Karl Barth published the second edition of his *Römerbrief* and as it did in other countries, this work created a sensation. In the words of Gerrit Berkouwer, "[w]e wondered what else, outside of an earthquake ... could be felt in such a dynamic and

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- 1 Commenting on Rolf H. Bremmer's *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), Veenhof writes "De betekenis van Bremmers boek is vooral daarin gelegen, dat het Bavinck als theoloog tekent tegen de achtergrond van en in zijn ontmoeting met de contemporaire nederlandse theologie en aldus een levendig beeld ontwerpt van het historische décor van Bavincks dogmatische arbeid ... De gang van Bremmers betoog is nl. niet door systematische maar door historische gezichtspunten beheerst." Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie. De openbarings- en schriftbeschouwing van Herman Bavinck in vergelijking met die van de ethische theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten and Schipperheijn, 1968), 7.
  - 2 Sijtse Meijers, *Objectiviteit en existentialiteit: een onderzoek naar hun verhouding in de theologie van Herman Bavinck en in door hem beïnvloede concepties* (Kampen: Kok, 1979).
  - 3 John Bolt, "The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck" PhD University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology, (1982).
  - 4 Sydney Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption" ThD thesis Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, (1998).
  - 5 Ronald Gleason, "The Centrality of the *Unio Mystica* in the Theology Of Herman Bavinck" PhD thesis Westminster Theological Seminary, (2001).
  - 6 Dirk van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek: schriftbeschouwing en schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2003).

alarming way.”<sup>7</sup> In the Dutch context, Barth’s reception was influenced by the conviction that he represented a healthy corrective to Neo-Calvinism. Neo-Calvinism still had devotees among those who were unconvinced of the merits of Barth’s vision,<sup>8</sup> yet Bavinck was largely remembered for his public career and contributions to education. Streets and schools had been named in his honour throughout the Netherlands and there was abiding scholarly interest in Bavinck’s contribution to pedagogy.<sup>9</sup> As a theologian, however, Bavinck was a figure whose profile had largely slipped into the long shadows of the previous century.<sup>10</sup> Even the centenary of Bavinck’s birth was passed in virtual silence.<sup>11</sup>

The 1950s, however, saw a renewal of interest in Bavinck, especially among Dutch Americans.<sup>12</sup> Bavinck had visited the United States twice, once in 1892 *en route* to a world Presbyterian Council in Toronto and again in 1908 to deliver the prestigious Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. On both occasions, Bavinck received a warm welcome in the institution that would become Calvin Theological Seminary and his writings gained wide acceptance through the commendation of Benjamin B. Warfield and Geerhardus Vos.<sup>13</sup> Bavinck’s works were read in Dutch by those who could and his thought was mediated

7 Gerrit Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology: Movements and Motives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 40.

8 Bavinck’s immediate legacy was complicated by the competing factions of the *Gereformeerde kerken* in the late 1920s. Throughout the 1930s, Klaas Schilder and Herman Dooyeweerd, would maintain that a modified version of Neo-Calvinism was the more desirable alternative. The discussion, however, focused largely on Kuyper to the exclusion of Bavinck.

9 In the generation following Bavinck’s death, several studies were published on this aspect of Bavinck’s thought. Fr.S. Rombouts, *Prof. dr. H. Bavinck, Gids bij de studie van zijn paedagogische werken* (’s-Hertogenbosch-Antwerpen: Malmberg, 1922); J. Brederveld, *Hoofdlijnen der Paedagogiek van Dr. Herman Bavinck, met Critische Beschouwing* (Amsterdam: De Standaard, 1927); L. van der Zweep, *De Paedagogiek van Bavinck* (Kampen: Kok, 1935); Cornelius Jaarsma, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936); L. van Klinken, *Bavinck’s Paedagogische Beginselen* (Meppel: Boom, 1937).

10 For a fine-grained analysis of the broader intellectual currents of this period, see Harinck, “Twin Sisters with a changing character: how Neo-Calvinists dealt with the modern discrepancy between Bible and natural sciences,” in Scott Mandelbrote/Jitse Van der Meer (ed.), *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 346–60.

11 Harinck, “Herman Bavinck,” in G. Harinck/H. Paul/B. Wallet (ed.), *Het gereformeerde geheugen: protestantse herinneringsculturen in Nederland 1850–2000* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2009), 437–8.

12 Bavinck’s legacy in Northern America was also complicated by controversy over the issue of common grace, which would result in an ecclesial rift and the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America in 1924. Cf. Bolt, “Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck’s Reception and Influence in North America,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38:2 (2003), 273–80.

13 For further details of Bavinck’s life and times, see Valentijn Hepp, *Dr Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921); Rolf H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966). The best English-language biography is James Eglinton’s *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*

to the broader Reformed community through Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*,<sup>14</sup> which became a popular textbook in many seminaries. By contrast, Barth remained little-known in the United States until English translations of his works began to appear in the 1930s and thereafter his reception among evangelicals was shaped by Cornelius Van Til's scathing critique.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the first doctoral theses on Bavinck were written by the Dutch diaspora.<sup>16</sup> The greatest impulse to Anglophone interest in Bavinck would, however, come some fifty years later in the form of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society's publication of Bavinck's *magnum opus*.<sup>17</sup>

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(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), which makes extensive use of Bavinck's diaries and other archival material.

14 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932).

15 Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1946). For the Dutch origins of Van Til's antipathy toward Barth, see Harinck, "How Can an Elephant Understand a Whale and Vice Versa?" The Dutch Origins of Cornelius Van Til's Appraisal of Karl Barth," in Bruce McCormack/Clifford Anderson (ed.), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 13–41.

16 Anthony A. Hoekema, "Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant," ThD thesis Princeton Theological Seminary (1953); Bastian Kruithof, "The Relation of Christianity and Culture in the Teaching of Herman Bavinck," PhD thesis University of Edinburgh (1953); Sarel Petrus van der Walt, *Die wysbegeerte van dr. Herman Bavinck* (Potchefstroom, 1953); Eugene Heideman, *The Relationship of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959).

17 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vol.; Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 2003–08). Prior to the completion of this project, only shorter works were available in English. The following list of publications available prior to the translation of *Reformed Dogmatics* is derived from the bibliography compiled by Willem de Wit. "Herman Bavinck Bibliography," wjdw.nl (blog), February 19, 2013, <https://wjdw.nl/2013/02/19/herman-bavinck-bibliography/> (accessed 30.11.2017). Bavinck, "The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations," in *Alliance of the Reformed Churches throughout the World Holding the Presbyterian System, Proceedings of the Fifth General Council, Toronto 1892* (Toronto: Hart & Riddell, 1892), 48–55; "Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3:10 (1892), 211–12; "The Future of Calvinism," *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5:1 (1894), 1–24; *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–09, Princeton Theological Seminary* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909); "Calvin and Common Grace," in W.P. Armstrong (ed.), *Calvin and the Reformation: Four Studies* (New York: Revell, 1909), 99–130; "Christological Movements in the Nineteenth Century," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 68 (1911), 381–404; "The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands," *Princeton Theological Review* 8:3 (1911), 433–60; "The Virgin Birth of Our Lord," *Bible Magazine* 1:1 (1913), 50–61; "Death," and "Fall, The," in James Orr (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (5 vol., Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 2.811–13, 1092–94; *Mental, Religious and Social Forces in the Netherlands: a general view of the Netherlands* (Commercial Department of the Netherlands Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce at The Hague, 1915); "Christ and Christianity," *Biblical Review* 1:2

The publication of *Reformed Dogmatics* kindled a global interest in Bavinck and has given rise to further translation projects in English and other languages.<sup>18</sup> Major works by Bavinck have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, German, Indonesian, Portuguese, and Russian.<sup>19</sup> This wider availability of Bavinck's writings has in turn renewed scholarly interest in Bavinck. A string of doctoral theses has appeared in close succession,<sup>20</sup> historical studies have

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(1916), 214–36; *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after receiving access to the table of the Lord* 2nd edn; (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1922); *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); *Biblical and Religious Psychology* (Protestant Reformed Theological School: n.p., 1974); *The Doctrine of God* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977); *The Certainty of Faith* (St. Catharines: Paideia, 1980); “Common Grace,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989) 38–65; “Herman Bavinck on Scripture and Science,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27:1 (1992), 91–5; “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27:2 (1992), 220–51; “Christianity and the Natural Sciences,” in Jitse Van der Meer (ed.), *Facets of Faith and Science* (4 vol.; Lanham: University Press of America, 1996), 47–52; *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); “Herman Bavinck on the Covenant of Works,” in Howard Griffith/J.R. Muether (ed.), *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline* (Greenville; Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 169–85. For the most exhaustive and up to date bibliography, see <https://sources.neocalvinism.org/bavinck/> (accessed 15.6.2020).

18 Older English translations have been updated and reissued. Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2019); *Philosophy of Revelation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2018). Other works have been translated into English for the first time. Bavinck, *Christian Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).

19 [https://sources.neocalvinism.org/bavinck/?tp=other\\_lang](https://sources.neocalvinism.org/bavinck/?tp=other_lang); <https://www.neocalvinism.org/research-projects> (accessed 12.12.19).

20 Brian Mattson, “Restored to our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*,” PhD thesis University of Aberdeen (2008); Eglinton, “Trinity and Organism: towards a new reading of Herman Bavinck’s organic motif,” PhD thesis University of Edinburgh (2010); Timothy Shaun Price, “Pedagogy as theological praxis: Martin Luther and Herman Bavinck as sources for engagement with classical education and the liberal arts tradition,” PhD thesis University of Aberdeen (2013); Wolter Huttinga, “Participation and Communicability: Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the relation between God and the world,” PhD thesis Kampen Theological University (2014); Cory Brock, “Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck’s Appropriation of Schleiermacher,” PhD thesis University of Edinburgh (2017); Nathanael Sutanto, “Organic Knowing: The Theological Epistemology of Herman Bavinck,” PhD thesis University of Edinburgh (2017); Bruce R. Pass, “The Heart of Dogmatics: The Place and Purpose of Christology in the Theological Method of Herman Bavinck,” PhD thesis University of Edinburgh (2018); Jessica Joustra, “Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue on the Imitation of Christ,” PhD dissertation Fuller Seminary (2019); Dmytro Bintsarovskiy, “God Hidden and Revealed: A Reformed and an Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” PhD thesis Kampen Theological University (2019); Ximian Xu, “Theology as the Wetenschap of God: Herman Bavinck’s Scientific Theology for the Modern World,” PhD thesis University of Edinburgh (2020).

begun to examine the reception of Bavinck in the twentieth century,<sup>21</sup> and the potential use to which Bavinck's thought might be put has increasingly come to the attention of contemporary theologians.<sup>22</sup> As illuminating as these more recent studies have proven to be, none of them has provided the kind of systematic account of Bavinck as a theologian, or better, an account of Bavinck as a systematic theologian, that Veenhof identified as lacking some fifty years ago. That is, what has not yet appeared is the kind of global reading of Bavinck comparable to Berkouwer's *Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*.<sup>23</sup>

This study attempts to make a preliminary contribution toward such an end by examining Bavinck's conceptualisation of a theological system. There is pressing need for an analysis of this element of Bavinck's thought. Although Bavinck's theological epistemology has received considerable attention,<sup>24</sup> Bavinck's concept of a theological system remains largely unexplored. Moreover, inattention to this has abetted the confusion that surrounds the question of what comprises the centre of his theology. While some readers dispute the presence of a centre,<sup>25</sup> others identify the covenant of grace,<sup>26</sup> salvation history,<sup>27</sup> grace restoring

21 Ryan Glomsrud, "Karl Barth as Historical Theologian" in D. Strange/D. Gibson (ed.), *Engaging with Barth* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 100–11; John Vissers, "Karl Barth's Appreciative Use of Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45:1 (2010), 79–86; Ximian Xu, "Appreciative and Faithful? Karl Barth's Use of Herman Bavinck's View of God's Incomprehensibility," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 13 (2019), 26–46.

22 Carl Trueman, "Foreword," in *Engaging with Barth*, 15; Michael Allen/Scott Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015); Oliver Crisp/Fred Sanders (ed.), *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017): 27–8, 49–50, 61, 65, 68, 180, 203–07.

23 Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* trans. Harry Boer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

24 Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck and Thomas Reid on Perception and Knowing God," *Harvard Theological Review* 111:1 (2018), 115–34; Arvin Vos, "Knowledge according to Bavinck and Aquinas" part 1, *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015), 9–36; Pass, "Herman Bavinck and the Problem of New Wine in Old Wineskins," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17:4 (2015), 432–49; David Sytsma, "Herman Bavinck's Thomistic Epistemology: The Argument and Sources of his Principia of Science," in Bolt (ed.), *Five Studies in the Thought of Herman Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2011), 1–49; K. Scott Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism, the Logos Principle, and Sola Scriptura," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010), 359–90; Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 229–300.

25 Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 125; Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 49; Michael Allen, "Dogmatics as ascetics," in *The Task of Dogmatics*, 204.

26 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant*, (Clover: Full Bible Publications, 2007), 57, 198, 214.

27 Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 246, 286–8.



nature,<sup>28</sup> or the mystical union as the centre of Bavinck's theology.<sup>29</sup> Each of these proposals, however, disregards what Bavinck himself explicitly identifies as the centre of his system. A case could be made that lack of clarity over the structure of Bavinck's thought has fuelled the ongoing disagreement over the character of his material dogmatics. While some readers draw attention to Bavinck's affinity with post-Enlightenment thought,<sup>30</sup> others place heavy accent on premodern commitments.<sup>31</sup> Still others acknowledge the presence of both modern and pre-modern idioms yet disagree over whether these "mutually allergenic"<sup>32</sup> elements yield a conceptually disjointed result or form a coherent synthesis. Bavinck's concept of a theological system sheds considerable light on the relation in which modernity stands to orthodoxy in his writings, as Bavinck's conceptualisation of system is strongly influenced by a coterie of modern thinkers.

This study seeks to take the necessary preliminary steps toward a systematic account of Bavinck's thought by analysing Bavinck's conceptualisation of a theological system. It will be argued that Bavinck's system is conceptualised in terms of a central dogma from which all other doctrines derive. Bavinck makes it clear on multiple occasions that this is the case. For example, in the opening chapter of *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck writes, "there is only one dogma, one that is rooted in Scripture and that has branched out and divided in a wide range of particular dogmas."<sup>33</sup> The difficulty, however, is that it is not easy to identify which dogma functions in this capacity. On the one hand, Bavinck's conceptualisation of a derivative theological system is a strongly attenuated one. That is, Bavinck's maintenance of Scripture as the formal principle does not allow much room for the material principle of his system to exercise a great deal of control. On the other hand, Bavinck is not consistent in his identification of which doctrine lies at the centre of his system. In order to resolve this difficulty, Bavinck needs to be read extensively, carefully, and charitably. Nevertheless, in spite of these complications, there is good reason to think that the doctrine that lies at the centre of Bavinck's system is Christology.

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28 Heideman, *Revelation and Reason*, 196; Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 355; Bolt, *The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck* (Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 155.

29 Gleason, "The Centrality of the *Unio Mystica*," 4–46.

30 Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 252–5.

31 For example, "Bavinck's account of the way we come to know is 'largely a reproduction of Aquinas's account of sensible representation.'" Vos, "Knowledge according to Bavinck and Aquinas" part 1, 9.

32 Adam Eitel, "Trinity and History: Bavinck, Hegel, and Nineteenth-Century Doctrines of God," in *Five Studies*, 101.

33 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.93.

The christocentric character of Bavinck's thought is widely acknowledged,<sup>34</sup> yet precisely what it means to describe Bavinck as a christocentric theologian has never been explored in any detail.<sup>35</sup> In part, this is perhaps to be attributed to the imprecision with which the descriptor "christocentric" is used and the intuition that this imprecision has become a hindrance to the term's meaningful use. Christocentric, nevertheless, is an entirely appropriate descriptor for Bavinck's conceptualisation of a theological system. Yet what must be established is the relation in which Christology stands to the other loci and the degree to which these doctrines stand in a derivative relationship to Christology. To this end, this study will take the form of an extended exegesis of a programmatic statement that appears in the third volume of *Reformed Dogmatics*. It might well be asked why this statement first appears in the third volume, if indeed it is programmatic. This is a question that we will consider in the course of our investigations, but at the outset we would suggest that the reason this statement does not appear until the third volume is that when Bavinck penned the Prolegomena, he simply had not yet arrived at a settled decision on the place Christology should occupy in his system.

The reasons for this hypothesis will be presented in the course of our investigations, but let us first consider the content of this statement. In the third volume of *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck writes,

The doctrine of Christ is not the starting point (*uitgangspunt*), but it is indeed the centre (*middelpunt*) of the whole system of dogmatics. All other dogmas either prepare for it or are inferred from it. In it, as the heart of dogmatics, pulses the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity. It is the *μυστήριον εὐσεβείας* (1 Tim 3:16). The whole of Christology has to proceed from here.<sup>36</sup>

With this statement, Bavinck articulates with remarkable precision not only which doctrine comprises the centre of his system but also how it functions

34 Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 356; Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 11, 295; Bolt, "Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam," 268; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 114–5, 171; Hans Burger, *Being in Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 89, 96; Gleason, "The Centrality of the *Unio Mystica*," 98.

35 Marc Cortez, "What does it mean to call Karl Barth a 'christocentric' theologian?," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60:2, (2007), 1–17; Ronald J. Feenstra, "Creation and method: critical essays on Christocentric theology," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 18:1 (1983), 231–2; Richard A. Muller, "A Note On 'Christocentrism' and the imprudent use of such terminology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68:2 (2006), 253–60.

36 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* 4th edn; (4 vol.; Kampen: Kok, 1928), 3.254; cf. *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.274.

in this capacity. Taken individually, each phrase is a portmanteau. Taken as a whole, it comprises a dogmatics in outline. In attempting to understand what this statement means, we shall examine each clause in turn, exploring its conceptual origins and tracing out its implications for Bavinck's system.

The first chapter will take up the theme of the relationship between Christology and dogmatics, which is introduced by the phrase, "*The doctrine of Christ is not the starting point, but it is indeed the midpoint of the whole system of dogmatics.*" Bavinck's concept of a dogmatic system will be examined first. This exploration leads directly to a significant aspect of Bavinck's theology, which has received sustained attention in the recent literature, namely, the organism. The ubiquity and importance of the organism is well-documented,<sup>37</sup> but its function as an organising principle has not been fully explored. As the organism is a recurring feature in Bavinck's theology, considerable space will be given to examining the idealist background of the organism and the formal properties that it presupposes. An analysis of the distinction between the centre (*middelpunt*) and the starting point (*uitgangspunt*) of the system then follows. As will be argued, this distinction is indicative of a shift in Bavinck's thinking as to which doctrine comprises the centre of his system and how it should function in that capacity. It will be argued that the position outlined in the third volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* forms something of a mediating position, the methodological implications of which shall form the substance of much of our subsequent reflection.

The second chapter considers the relationship between Christology and religion which is illustrated in the next portion of the statement, "*In it, as the heart of dogmatics, pulses the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity.*" Although our principal interest is Bavinck's use of the heart and lifeblood metaphor and the relation in which it places Christology to religion, it is first necessary to consider another concept that Bavinck elsewhere identifies as the lifeblood of dogmatics, namely, mystery. The concept of mystery not only clarifies what Bavinck means when he states that the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity "pulses" through Christology as the heart of dogmatics, but offers much grist for the mill with regard to the relationship between orthodoxy and modernity in Bavinck's thought. Although this issue will be discussed more directly in the third chapter, our analysis of the heart and lifeblood metaphor illumines the peculiarities of Bavinck's mode of dogmatic *ressourcement*. While Bavinck repeatedly has recourse to the organism to account for the various relations he seeks to suspend, this modern construct is put in service of an essentially pre-modern concept of religion.

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37 See especially Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 250–69; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*; Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

In the third chapter, we will turn our attention to Bavinck's material Christology. It is relevant to note that there are few very detailed analyses of this doctrine. Brian Mattson and Hans Burger offer chapter-length discussions of Bavinck's Christology,<sup>38</sup> but neither of these studies pursues what Bremmer rightly identified nearly sixty years ago as its distinguishing feature, namely, development.<sup>39</sup> Particular attention shall be devoted to this theme, but our analysis of Bavinck's material Christology will begin with the claim, "*It is the μυστήριον εὐσεβείας (1 Tim 3:16). The whole of Christology has to proceed from here.*" Bavinck's articulation of a christological starting point counts as one of the most important methodological statements in his entire *oeuvre* and holds implications for the coordination of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the real and the ideal, and time and eternity. The implications of this statement will be traced through Bavinck's account of the deity and humanity of Christ in order to prepare the way for a discussion of the relationship of orthodoxy and modernity in Bavinck's thought. Some reflections will then be offered on the significance that Bavinck's Christology holds for the so-called "Two-Bavincks" debate.<sup>40</sup>

38 Burger, *Being in Christ*, 87–139; Mattson, 157–201. Chul Won Suh also offers an apt summary. Chul Won Suh, *The Creation-mediatorship of Jesus Christ: A Study in the Relation of the Incarnation and the Creation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982), 192–203.

39 R. Bremmer, *Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 251.

40 The "Two-Bavincks hypothesis" refers to a general reading of Bavinck, which draws attention to apparently irreconcilable tensions in Bavinck's thought and orientation toward the world. Accordingly, the orthodox, confessional Bavinck is perceived to be at odds with a more philosophically inclined alter-ego that became increasingly attracted to the impulses of modernity. David VanDrunen, "'The Kingship of Christ is Twofold': Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms in the Thought of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45:1 (2010), 162; Bolt, "Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam," 264–7; Henk Vroom, "Scripture Read and Interpreted: The Development of the Doctrine of Scripture and Hermeneutics in Gereformeerde Theology in the Netherlands," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28:2 (1993), 363; Malcolm B. Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Boosey and Hawkes, 2007), 49–59; Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 108–11; Heideman, *Revelation and Reason*, 177–9; Valentijn Hepp, *Dr Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921), 317–18. Several recent studies have challenged this reading, emphasising the synthetic character of Bavinck's thought. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck's Reformed eclecticism: On catholicity, consciousness and theological epistemology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70:3 (2017), 310–32; Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 38; Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 18; Van den Belt, *Authority*, 250; Harinck, "Something that must remain, if the truth is to be sweet and precious to us: The Reformed Spirituality of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003), 250, 254. It is important to note when considering this question that disagreement over the relationship between orthodoxy and modernity in Bavinck has a long pedigree. During his own lifetime, Bavinck was embroiled in the controversy surrounding Jan Netelenbos' doctrine of Scripture. Hittjo Kruswijk, *Baas in eigen boek? Evolutietheorie en schriftgezag bij de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1881–1981)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2011), 96–9. Shortly

The fourth chapter turns to what is perhaps the most provocative element of Bavinck's programmatic statement: "*All other dogmas either prepare for [Christology] or are inferred from it.*" In order to ascertain precisely what this means, we shall consider three doctrines which are said to derive from Christology, namely, bibliology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Our concern here is not to offer a comprehensive account of these doctrines, but rather to establish the precise manner in which these doctrines are christologically determined. In the course of our analysis, the importance of the aforementioned distinction between midpoint and starting point will emerge more clearly into view. Christological derivation involves little more than christological exegesis in Bavinck's material bibliology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. However, the relation in which these doctrines are ordered one to another is governed by an overarching concept of continuous incarnation. Our principal concern here is whether this more metaphorical concept of incarnation threatens to displace Christology as the centre of Bavinck's system. This in turn will lead us to consider whether the doctrine that stands at the centre of Bavinck's system might not in fact be a highly psychologised yet christologically focused concept of revelation.

The fifth chapter surveys the results of the preceding chapters before considering the potential that Bavinck's conceptualisation of a christocentric system of doctrine might hold for contemporary projects of theological *ressourcement*. In so doing, we will draw on the writings of John Webster (1955–2016), whose critical appreciation of Bavinck marks him out as the ideal touchstone for assaying the merits of Bavinckian retrieval. While the kinship between these two thinkers can easily be demonstrated, it is not difficult to identify points at which Webster diverges from Bavinck. Specifically, there are pronounced differences in the way Webster and Bavinck move from Scripture to system. Following a detailed analysis of these differences in Webster and Bavinck's respective conceptualisations of the theological task, we shall offer some reflections on how these differences might inform a project of Bavinckian retrieval and where Bavinck's conceptualisation of a system of dogmatics may require revision.

It is hoped that that the resultant portrait of Bavinck as a christocentric theologian will make a positive contribution to subsequent attempts to understand Bavinck as a systematic theologian. It is also hoped that this analysis will generate fresh approaches to Bavinck's legacy both on the historical-analytical and the systematic-constructive domains. The aim of this study will be fulfilled, however, if it merely enhances the explanatory power or clarifies the results of

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after his death, opposing sides laid claim to Bavinck in support of their differing views of the inspiration of Scripture at the 1926 synod of Assen. R. Bremmer, *Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 379. A similar disagreement raged in Dutch-speaking circles in the early 1980s as to whether Bavinck was a fundamentalist. Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 168.

extant studies. Given that significant areas of Bavinck's thought remain largely unresearched,<sup>41</sup> the results of this study might be fruitfully used to discern the structure of Bavinck's thought in other theological subdisciplines. The long-awaited publication of *Gereformeerde ethiek*, for example, opens up a significant area of Bavinck's thought for which his christocentric conceptualisation of a system of doctrine holds special relevance. If indeed, if in dogmatics God descends to us and in ethics we ascend to God, it could be anticipated that Christology functions not only as the centre of Bavinck's dogmatics but also of his ethics.<sup>42</sup> Toward this goal, let us consider what Bavinck means when he asserts that Christology is not only the centre but also the heart of dogmatics.

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41 Bavinck's parliamentary speeches, for example, are highly significant for an understanding of his approach to social ethics. *Handelingen der Staten-Generaal: Eerste Kamer* (1919–1920) March 5 pp. 571–4; (1918–1919) March 13 pp. 243–6; (1917–1918) April 11 pp. 311–13, April 15 pp. 363–4, July 19 pp. 755–7, 765–6; (1916–1917) April 25, pp. 496–8, May 15 pp. 618–24; (1915–1916) April 27 p. 416, May 26 p. 434; (1914–1915) December 29 p. 105, January 29 p. 147, June 10 pp. 312–13, June 10 pp. 324–8, June 11 pp. 338–9; (1913–1914) January 7 pp. 119–22, March 20 pp. 484–5, March 21 p. 499; (1912–1913) March 12 pp. 432–4; (1911–1912) December 29 pp. 126–8, April 25 pp. 495–7.

42 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde ethiek* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij KokBoekencentrum, 2019), 47; cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 22.



# Christology and dogmatics

## Introduction

The question of *what* one was actually writing was unquestionably the most pressing question facing anyone bold enough to compose a multi-volume dogmatics in the twilight of the nineteenth century. Christian thought lay in a *Grundlagenkrise*. The critical theory of Immanuel Kant had wrought a seemingly irreparable separation of faith and knowledge, the unity of which formed the basis of the conception of theology as *scientia Dei*, and attempts to bridge this ever-widening gulf were stymied by developments in historiography and the natural sciences.<sup>1</sup> For Herman Bavinck, a recent graduate of the University of Leiden and pastor of a *Christelijke gereformeerde* congregation in Franeker, the outlook for the discipline was bleak. In an article written in 1881, Bavinck would write,

The discipline of theology at the moment presents a motley and confused scenario to its practitioners. The figure it cuts in the sphere of the sciences is in many respects pathetic. The impression it gives to the uninitiated is hardly flattering. It is the oldest of the sciences, but it appears the youngest and least practised. One knows so little of whichever and whatever it might be. Concerning its essence and object, principle and method, the most divergent opinions prevail and if one considers any one subject from its sphere, one encounters the same disarray. This is most clearly to be seen in dogmatics. Up to the present day there is still no agreement on the name it should be given, the subject matter with which it deals, the source from which it draws, the standard by which everything should be tested, or the method according to which it should appropriate its subject matter, and it does not look as if it will arrive at the desired unanimity anytime soon.<sup>2</sup>

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when Bavinck embarked on writing his own contribution to this genre, he would devote an entire volume to answering methodological questions.

Matters of Prolegomena are accorded expansive treatment in *Reformed Dogmatics*, so expansive perhaps, that the dense argumentation at times occludes its most salient feature. *Reformed Dogmatics* is a dogmatics that correlates theology to the other sciences and takes pains not to overlook the challenges they pose. It is also a church dogmatics, a dogmatics written for the church and one

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1 In the Netherlands, the crisis was particularly acute. Chantepie de la Saussaye, *De crisis: kerkelijke tijdsragen* (Rotterdam: Wenk, 1868); Allard Pierson, "Ter uitvaart," *De Gids* 40 (1876), 185–249.

2 Bavinck, "Gereformeerde Theologie" *De Vrije Kerk* 7:11 (1881), 497.



which draws heavily on its tradition. Yet pre-eminently, *Reformed Dogmatics* is a christocentric dogmatics. Its four volumes are conceptualised as a system within which Christology functions as its centre. *Reformed Dogmatics*, however, was neither Bavinck's first nor last word on the concept of a theological system. It is certainly the great landmark in Bavinck's *oeuvre*, but methodological convictions are more clearly articulated in a number of publications which predate the appearance of the first volume in 1895. Moreover, the place and purpose of Christology was a subject that would continue to occupy Bavinck well after the publication of the final volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* in 1901.

In this first chapter we will trace the development of Bavinck's concept of dogmatics as a scientific system of the knowledge of God. In so doing, we will encounter an important philosophical construct, namely, the organism. The importance of the organism is difficult to overestimate not only because Bavinck repeatedly has recourse to the organism in the formulation of individual doctrines, but also because the organism yields the formal properties which determine the basic structure of Bavinck's system. The most important of these is the concept of a fundamental principle, which, when applied to dogmatics as a scientific system, is synonymous with the concept of central dogma. Bavinck's affirmation of the notion of central dogma remains stable across his theological writings. However, his convictions concerning which doctrine should comprise the central dogma of a theological system did not. In Bavinck's earlier writings the knowledge of God is said to form the central dogma of his theological system. His later writings, however, plainly indicate that Christology fulfils this role. Yet articulating precisely how Christology functions in this capacity would prove an elusive goal. Bavinck's later writings especially deliver an intriguing portrait of a Reformed theologian, who was convinced that the solution to the *Grundlagenkrise* of the nineteenth century lay in Christology, yet was never quite able to articulate the precise form this solution should take.

## Dogmatics as a scientific system

Although perhaps less familiar today, the term dogmatics was common currency at the end of the nineteenth century. In Bavinck's usage, dogmatics denotes a very specific sub-discipline within theological encyclopaedia. While apologetics, symbolics, and ethics all find their place within Bavinck's concept of the broader field, dogmatics distinguishes itself from these other sub-disciplines both materially and formally. For Bavinck, dogmatics is, and can only exist as, the scientific system of the knowledge of God and all things in relation to

God.<sup>3</sup> With this pithy definition, Bavinck identifies the definitive characteristics of dogmatics. Materially, dogmatics is the knowledge of God; formally, it is a system. What Bavinck understands under these terms, however, warrants closer scrutiny.

That dogmatics is the knowledge of God does not necessarily dispute the characterisation of theology as *sapientia*, but rather stakes a double claim over and against the Kantian assertion that it is necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.<sup>4</sup> In describing dogmatics as the knowledge of God, Bavinck seeks to affirm that God is not merely an object of faith but also an object of knowledge. The further qualifier, “scientific” (*wetenschappelijk*), indicates the specific type of knowledge that dogmatics exemplifies. The qualifier scientific distinguishes lower, empirical knowledge from the higher, rational knowledge that is constructed from sense data, perceptions, and representations.<sup>5</sup> Bavinck writes,

In every area there is a difference between ordinary, everyday, empirical knowing and true, advanced, scientific knowledge. Every human has some empirical knowledge of the sun, moon and stars, but this knowledge is a million miles removed from the scientific knowledge of the astronomer. The former only knows the *facta*; the latter the *rationes*.<sup>6</sup>

3 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1.38; cf. *Gereformeerde dogmatiek* 1.13; *De wetenschap der heilige godgeleerdheid*, 30.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

5 Bavinck classifies mental acts according to their higher and lower functions. The lower function embraces sensation (*gewaarwording*) and perception (*waarneming*). The difference between these mental acts is the difference between hearing and listening. It would, for example, comprise the difference between hearing millions of droplets of water and listening to the ocean. The former act is passive, whereas the latter is active. Perception yields representations and empirical apperception, thus bringing the subject into relation with the causes of phenomena. The higher function of the mind Bavinck describes as thought (*gedachte*). The difference between perception and thought lies in the difference between representation (*voorstelling*) and concept (*begrip*), or else the difference between sensible intuition/observation and understanding (*kennis*). Thought can be subdivided into the acts of understanding (*verstand*) and reason (*rede/weten*), and knowledge (*kennis*) and concept (*begrip*). Whereas reason consists in discursive thought, understanding is the possession of knowledge. A similar contrast is in view between knowledge and concept. A crucial element of Bavinck's taxonomy is that *kennis* stands both above and below reason. *Kennis* can refer either to the possession of knowledge that is pre-cognitive or post-cognitive. Therefore, there are three ways in which the subject might acquire *kennis*: faith, reason, and intuition (*aanschouwing*). Bavinck, *Beginnselen der psychologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1923), 88–129. These distinctions are crucial for an understanding of the relationship in which faith is placed to reason. We shall return to these in chapter two in our exploration of Bavinck's concept of religion.

6 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.615.