

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG? HERMAN BAVINCK AS A PASTORAL POLEMICIST¹

by J. Mark Beach

IN CONSIDERING Herman Bavinck Speaks Today, I have entitled my brief address *Can't We All Just Get Along? Herman Bavinck as a Pastoral Polemicist*.

I will attempt to show how Bavinck brought his theological expertise to bear on controversy for the blessing of the church (his pastoral aim) and how he engaged in polemics in a manner targeted to unite, not divide, the churches.

In exploring the idea of Bavinck as polemicist, especially as a pastoral polemicist, engaging in a pastoral polemics, I think it is important to remember a few things about the man. First, he was a true son of the Afscheiding or the Secession (the churches that seceded from the Dutch National or State Reformed Church in 1834), which means, at least in part, that he was the child of an ecclesiastical tradition that, I think, was more representative of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Calvinism than, say, sixteenth or seventeenth-century Calvinism. The Pietism of this later Calvinism brought with it some features and theological accents that did not track exactly with those earlier codifications of the Reformed movement.

Second, we must remember at the same time that Bavinck received a theological education both within but mostly beyond the Afscheiding tradition, studying at Leiden under some of the most gifted theological minds within the Netherlands at that time—learning at the feet of teachers who propagated the very theology that the Afscheiding churches repudiated (he earned his doctorate from Leiden in 1880).

Finally, we need to remember that Bavinck, after a brief pastorate, accepted the appointment to the theological school of the Afscheiding churches (in Kampen). He thus served the churches of his own heritage, and taught there for some 20 years. He subsequently went to the Free University of Amsterdam in 1902 (following A. Kuyper), which placed him in a wider, more strategic academic setting, where he labored until his death in 1921.

1. This speech was first presented at the Herman Bavinck Speaks Today Conference, held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, September 18–21, 2008, on the campus of Calvin College and Seminary.

The reason these facts are important to remember is because Bavinck sought to bring unity to two distinct and independent church-reform movements that had come together in 1892 to form the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). The Afscheiding of 1834 was the first reform movement. The Doleantie (the Lamenting) of 1886, mostly under the leadership of A. Kuyper, was the second reform movement.

This union was a marriage with problems from the start. Kuyper's theology, to oversimplify, was grounded more in seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed writers than in the sixteenth-century codification of Reformed thought—that combined with his own desire to address current problems in a fresh, creative way. Meanwhile, again to oversimplify, the theologians and pastors of the Afscheiding were more influenced by developments in eighteenth-century Calvinism of the Pietist stripe. Thus, the union of these two movements brought with it a collision of theological accents. Like two dogs sniffing at each other—braced, stiff, unsure of the other—they proceeded to try to be churches united. But immediately there were suspicions: an Afscheiding theological faculty in Kampen, and a Doleantie theological faculty at the Free University in Amsterdam; a Reformed theology that had a distinctive eighteenth and nineteenth-century flavor versus a more seventeenth-century style Reformed theology, with its characteristic scholastic aroma; a tradition which at the time was not known for vigorous cultural engagement, a bit isolationist, and struggling to relate a Reformed conception of the sacraments, especially the doctrine of baptism, to a piety that placed more emphasis than before on a narrative of grace, a piety that tended to separate covenant from election, sacrament from salvation, all these emphases over against the new kid on the block in the shape of Kuyper, with his worldview Calvinism, political activism, the university founder, with his own breed of orthodox Calvinism. These traditions now found themselves under one denominational umbrella (the GKN), and in their differences, bordering on divisions, they soon came to be called “A” churches and “B” churches respectively.

In short form, from the outset trouble was brewing over certain theological ideas propagated by Kuyper, namely, his advocacy of four specific doctrines (being influenced by Maccovius): (1) a supralapsarian construal of the divine decrees; (2) eternal justification; (3) presupposed or assumed regeneration of covenant children; and (4) immediate regeneration (i.e., regeneration [in the narrow sense] effected in persons by the Holy Spirit without the use of means, thus unmediated, direct, immediate). These would be the four disputed points that the synod of Utrecht of 1905 would adjudicate, producing what is known as “The Conclusions of Utrecht”—which, we might add, are

Bavinckesque in their formulations, since they, for the most part, reflect the texture and traits of Bavinck's theology.²

But prior to Utrecht, as trouble brewed over Kuyper's formulations and as increasing suspicion was cast over his orthodoxy and that of his followers, Bavinck had felt compelled to enter the fray and offer some corrective analysis to the entire discussion, particularly as this focused on the question of presupposed regeneration and immediate regeneration. He did this by writing a series of forty short articles published in the periodical *De Bazuin* [*The Trumpet*] from 29 March 1901 through 2 May 1902. These articles were later published as a book under the title, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and Regeneration] (1903). They were written shortly after he had taken up the chair of dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1901 (as Kuyper's successor).

Note well: One from Kuyper's own school, the Free University, was subjecting Kuyper to theological scrutiny. Bavinck, the Afscheiding's shining star, challenges the Doleantie titan, Kuyper. It is here, however, where we discover the *pastoral* (not just irenic) Bavinck, for the author of the *Reformed Dogmatics* brings his theological acumen and careful intelligence to bear upon a practical ecclesiastical problem; and he does this in his own conciliatory style. In fact, what Bavinck proceeds to do is to provide a theological education to both sides of the debate, and all are called to abandon one-sidedness. Bavinck's book issues, in effect, the plea for unity. But this isn't an empty plea; it isn't a call to let bygones be bygones, to live and let live. No, it is a call for the Reformed brothers and sisters to know their own Reformed heritage better and to consider the Scripture more carefully.

Let me try to illustrate the pastoral character of Bavinck's polemics. Consider first Bavinck's stated aim in writing his book "Calling and Regeneration," for he tells us that he wishes to bring "greater clarity concerning the doctrine of immediate regeneration," with the aim of facilitating peace in the churches, such that "difference of insight" need not devolve into a disunity of confession. Second, Bavinck takes on Kuyper without calling attention to him. Thus he treated the ideas in dispute, not the man.

But now let us be specific: What about this business of a presupposed or assumed regeneration of covenant children brought for baptism, and this doctrine of an immediate regeneration? Why did the "A" churches dislike these teachings of the "B" churches so much?

2. For an in depth analysis of these issues, see my "Introductory Essay" in Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*, edited and introduced by J. Mark Beach, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), ix-lvi, wherein I explore the issues surrounding and leading up to the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905. A slightly different version of this essay is published under the title "Kuyper, Bavinck, and 'The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905,'" in *Mid-America Reformed Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 11-68.

In blazing a trail through these debates, Bavinck begins by outlining the concern of opponents to the doctrine of immediate regeneration. First, according to the critics, this doctrine, coupled with the doctrine of an assumed regeneration, is said to undercut the call to repentance and the call to a life of faithful obedience. If one is presumed saved, then preaching no longer lays claim upon the human heart. The pulpit is emasculated. Meanwhile, and second, inasmuch as the followers of Kuyper followed him also in embracing supralapsarianism, this tended to turn the gospel into bad news for sinners—a message that is as much a sentence of death as it is an announcement of life. Third, when immediate regeneration is conjoined to the doctrine of eternal justification, the practical effect is to make salvation simply a matter of believers *becoming aware* of a grace that long ago was bestowed upon and effected in them—that over against salvation as a living encounter with God in the call of the gospel. Finally, since immediate regeneration brought with it the notion of a seed of life implanted within the regenerated, a seed that can remain dormant for very many years without germinating and showing signs of life, the interval between regeneration and conversion—the latter being the actual coming of the sinner to faith and repentance—could likewise be very long, with the consequence that those with new life in them can live for many years as though completely dead in sin. This does not encourage a life of piety.³

Such was the criticism. In addressing these matters, Bavinck keeps his arrows sharp, his aim steady, and his emotions in check. He could do that, since he understood the wider context of the controversy better than most of those engaged in it, and brought an arsenal of historical arguments to the field. But more importantly, Bavinck never loses focus on the practical, pastoral, why-we-should-care dimension to the controversy.

This comes out, for example, in responding to Kuyper's advocacy of presumptive (or assumed or presupposed) regeneration as forming the principal ground for the baptism of covenant infants. No, says Bavinck, God's covenant promise forms the principal ground for infant baptism, since the promise is extended to them. Moreover, we make a mistake when we make our "subjective opinion"—even if that opinion is grounded in the divine promise—the ground for the baptism of our children. Yes, he says, we must exercise a "judgment of charity" regarding all baptized members alike (adults and children), and so we regard them as belonging to Christ, as saved (unless they evidence the contrary). But that judgment of charity doesn't form the ground for baptizing the children of believers. Besides, we must admit that baptism is administered to persons who fail to show (or fail eventually to exhibit) the fruits of faith and repentance, who do not walk in God's ways. There is chaff among the wheat, and assuming

3. H. Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903), 7–17.

the regeneration of all covenant infants does not make it so. Their regeneration cannot be proved—at least not while they are children—in any case. Bavinck characterizes this view as traversing a terrain of guesses.

But, for Bavinck, the practical, pastoral focus also has to do with the pulpit and preaching. Pastorally it is a mistake to emphasize the work of God's grace in such a way that the call to respond to that grace is diminished or diverted. Look at the OT prophets, look at John the Baptist and Jesus—each and all of them called *covenant people* to faith and repentance. Indeed, it is a mistake, in attempting to combat a presupposed regeneration, to vacate the covenant of its saving promises and to reduce the sacraments as empty outward pledges. But it is likewise a mistake to so over-emphasize the efficacy of sacraments and covenant promise as to reduce preaching to an announcement of assurance, to merely a message of comfort which does not call to discipleship. Bavinck's burden is pastoral. Preaching is needed to save the elect. Preaching is needed to bring covenant children to faith. Preaching is needed to call to repentance and warn away from resting in the covenant, as though it were a magic wand that saves us. We must keep regeneration, conversion, and the means of grace closely tied to each other in time. And this is where over-accenting a presupposed regeneration can do practical harm, even if not intended.

Bavinck, in waging these sorts of polemics, displays something of the preacher himself. Bavinck, to his credit, doesn't bash Kuyper's view on this topic; he simply warns us away from what is clearly erroneous in this doctrine, namely that a faith assumption isn't the ground of infant baptism. He bids us to heed the dangers lurking about this teaching, and shows us why we must be careful to avoid these dangers.

Bavinck thus seeks to steer a straight course, to keep all the biblical givens in play, to understand why Reformed theology made different moves at different points in its history and development. He instructs his readers in all these matters.

Meanwhile, for his part, Bavinck doesn't defend the view of some of Kuyper's opponents either, as if baptism means virtually nothing, that is just a general promise to covenant children in general (a shotgun blast aimed in their general direction which might apply to them if they someday repent and believe). Nor does Bavinck plead for the presupposed non-regeneration of covenant children, as if we should bring to the baptismal font children whom we believe to be estranged from Christ, dead in sin, and without the Spirit, and without forgiveness. The Anabaptists assumed their non-regeneration and therefore denied baptism to them. Bavinck rejected that view, as he likewise rejected an agnostic view wherein believing parents bring their infants to baptism with a mixture of hope and doubt, which falls well short of a posture of faith.

Bavinck walks his readers through the complexities surrounding the spiritual state of covenant children, a topic which Scripture addresses meagerly. He also affirms the language of the Baptismal Form, which states that just as the children of believers are without their knowledge conceived and born in sin, subject to eternal damnation, likewise without their knowledge “they can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and endowed with the capacity to believe (what Kuyper calls the seed or faculty of faith),” and so likewise “they can also without their knowledge be strengthened in that capacity by the same Spirit.”⁴

As for immediate regeneration, the doctrine that seemed really to drive the debate, Bavinck shows how the nomenclature is of a later date, but the idea is valid on a fundamental level, as valid as internal calling, for no one dead in sin responds to the gospel unless and until the Holy Spirit gives them eyes to see and ears to hear and makes an unwilling will willing. But Bavinck admits that that does not require that we endorse this idea *in toto*. Like Kuyper, Bavinck is careful to define the biblical and theological usages of the term “regeneration” [narrowly it is the implanting of new life, more broadly it is equivalent to sanctification, and even more broadly it refers to glorification and consummation]. Granting the refined, technical definition of the term, Bavinck shows that the Reformed in their dogmatics always placed calling before regeneration. Though not disagreeing with Kuyper’s treatment of this topic, he properly shows how theological terminology needs to be allowed some fluidity of usage in order to keep a biblical balance—in this case, preaching as a means of grace may rightly be connected with regeneration understood in a certain way. This constitutes, then, what is of principal concern for Bavinck over against Kuyper. Whereas Kuyper is most concerned about what status we regard deceased covenant children, Bavinck is most concerned that we appreciate the different ways that Scripture uses the term “regeneration” and that our theology make room for this diversity of usage.

Again, we detect in Bavinck a desire to instruct the church in its tradition—the aim is to correct unto uniting believers. Given that both the Afscheiding and Doleantie traditions wanted to be true to Scripture, to the Reformed confessions, and to see their views as rooted in the great theologians of the past, his approach brought

4. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008) IV, 532. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno: Dordranceno: Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1892-95), II, 543; idem, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1927), 382; in English, *The Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries. The Hungarian Confession speaks of a “seed of faith” (*semen fidei*) in children (M 422, 3ff.), as does the Bremen Consensus; see Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 214.

helpful and healing perspective to all the contestants/combatants. Also, again, we see his pastoral concern that the pulpit not be compromised because of one-sided theological accents.

So, yes, Herman Bavinck still speaks today. I suggest he speaks to us as a pastoral polemicist in three ways:

First, he did polemical theology well. The work of any good theologian is partly polemical. But how polemics are conducted, to what effect, with what affect, particularly in what such polemics harm or help the community of faith is often the theologian's responsibility. There is no denying that, finally, the matter of truth is at stake, and one on the wrong side of a theological divide can conduct him—or herself well, but still be wrong, while another on the other side of the divide can conduct her—or himself badly, yet still be right. How much better to follow Bavinck's lead and, hopefully, be both right in what we teach and how we act! How much better to aim to bring unity to brothers and sisters, otherwise divided, casting each other under suspicion and censure, by bringing our best to the theological table.

Second, Bavinck did his homework, that is, he brought a wealth of historical understanding (including an understanding of his own unique Afscheiding tradition), along with firsthand knowledge of the Reformed scholastic writers, Calvin, and the catholic Christian tradition to clarify matters, and showed how folks on each side of the aisle had taken missteps. He also went back to the Bible and offered new angles on old texts, such as 1 Cor. 7:14, as well as Jer. 1:5 and Luke 1:15 (texts which we cannot now explore). He brought a fresh perspective on the meaning of the phrase in the baptismal form regarding covenant children as "sanctified in Christ." He certainly is not the first or only Reformed theologian who has done his homework. But Bavinck shows us how we might be engaged, as Reformed pastors and thinkers, in crafting an argument for healing and edification.

Third, Bavinck's pastoral polemics, then, aimed at and issued forth in a plea to the churches: *Can't we all just get along?* His was not, like Barth's polemic with Branner, a verdict issued as a fist-pounding *Nein!*, complete with an "Angry Introduction." His was no divide and conquer approach, with hurt feelings lasting almost a lifetime. No, Bavinck aimed to clarify and unite, to look for the truth in an opponent's view, to appreciate the reason, and to find the burden for a cherished conviction. Nonetheless, he still could subject an error to the judgment of Scripture and a wider confessional and theological consensus.

Indeed, engaging in polemics without a pastoral heart—without the love and patience a pastor is to have toward the flock—might win arguments but forfeit souls. Bavinck still speaks today, I think, because he was faithful in executing the polemical dimension of the theological enterprise *pastorally!* His theology was in service to the church.