

HERMAN BAVINCK ON CATHOLICITY¹

by Barend Kamphuis

Introduction

CATHOLICITY is a very important theme in the theology of Herman Bavinck and, I believe, one of his most important contributions to Reformed theology today. In this article I will provide an analysis of his Kampen Rectoral address of 1888, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,”² along with Bavinck’s elaborations of the theme in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. I will conclude with a few comments about the continuing relevance of Bavinck’s view of catholicity.

1. “The Catholicity of Christianity and Church” (1888)

Bavinck delivered his famous address on catholicity at the Theological School in Kampen on December 18, 1888. This was an exciting time for the Christian Reformed Church (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*), the church that supported the Kampen school. Only two years earlier (1886), Abraham Kuyper had led another group out of the National Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*)—the so-called *Doleantie*—and both Kuyper and Bavinck wanted a union of the two churches they served. But there was strong opposition to the union, especially in Bavinck’s church. In this context, Bavinck had two concerns: sectarianism and a dualism that separated the Christian life from the life of the world outside the church.³ Bavinck sensed a close connection between the two: both lacked an awareness of genuine catholicity. Sectarianism failed to respect the catholicity of the church; dualism did not honor

1. This is an expanded version of an earlier essay: B. Kamphuis, “Herman Bavinck on the Catholicity of Christianity and Church,” in L. J. Koffeman (ed.), *Christliche Traditionen zwischen Katholizität und Partikularität/Christian Traditions between Catholicity and Particularity* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009), 149-155.

2. H. Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk. Ingeleid door drs. G. Puchinger* (Kampen: Kok 1968 [1888]); English translation by John Bolt “The Catholicity of Christianity and Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220-251; the quotations that follow are from the English translation and will be indicated in parenthesis within the text with the 1968 Dutch version placed in square brackets thus (pp[pp]).

3. For more about the context of Bavinck’s address see R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, (Kampen: Kok 1966), 46-62; G. Puchinger in H. Bavinck, *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk, Ingeleid door G. Puchinger*, v-xii.

the catholicity of the Christian faith itself. The title of Bavinck's address was chosen carefully and it moves seamlessly back and forth between the catholicity of Christianity and that of the church.

In his Introduction, Bavinck defines the catholicity of the church with the church fathers in terms of three basic meanings: 1. "the church as a unified whole in contrast to the dispersed local congregations that make up the whole and are included in it"; 2. "the unity of the church as inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places"; 3. embracing "the whole of human experience." He adds: "This catholicity of the church...presupposes the catholicity of the Christian religion. It is based on the idea that Christianity is a world religion that should govern all people and sanctify all creatures irrespective of geography, nationality, place and time" (221 [2]). This conviction—that the church's catholicity is rooted in the catholicity of the Christian faith itself—is Bavinck's basic thesis and, in the first (biblical-theological) section of his lecture, he argues that God's revelation in the Old Testament is already catholic: "Here we encounter an *inner catholicity*, a religion that encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life" (222 [4]). The New Testament displays a similar catholicity. In addition, the OT prophets promised that this religion would not be limited to Israel for ever: eventually all peoples would be blessed with the offspring of Abraham.

This promise is fulfilled in the catholicity of the church in the New Testament where we see the same thing: God loves the world, the cosmos. God desires to save the world, the sinful world under the power of sin. That is why he gave his Son, the One by whom the world was made. All things will be reconciled with each other through the cross of Jesus Christ. That is the catholicity of Christianity.

The unity and catholicity of the church is immediately linked with this catholicity of Christianity. "It follows directly from the unity of God himself, from the unity of the divine mediator between God and humanity, from the unity of the Spirit, from the unity of truth, from the unity of the covenant and the unity of salvation" (226 [10]). Bavinck considered this catholicity of the church to be breathtaking in its beauty and noted: "Whoever becomes enclosed in the narrow circle of a small church or conventicle does not know it and has never experienced its power and comfort" (227 [10]).

Furthermore, Bavinck's contention that maintaining church discipline doesn't conflict with catholicity is remarkable. He argues the contrary: the catholicity of the church reveals itself in discipline. The church has the calling to deal with everything that disturbs the unity and catholicity of the church. That is what happens where there is heresy because heresy violates the catholicity of the church. Church discipline is a serious, prayerful effort of the church to bring back the sinner into the community, and so to save its catholicity.

Bavinck continues his address by considering how the catholicity of Christianity and the church has been interpreted historically. The

New Testament gives evidence of two tendencies with respect to its view of the world: 1. The world is in the power of sin. 2. God wants to save this world. In the history of the church the first tendency has been much stronger than the second. In order to substantiate this claim, Bavinck points to the emergence of asceticism, and also to Roman Catholic dualism of nature and grace. Bavinck perceives in these phenomena the abandonment of Christianity's catholicity and, consequently, the church's own catholicity. Bavinck detects this especially in the contention of the Roman Catholic Church that there is no salvation outside it.

According to Bavinck, the Reformation, and Calvinism in particular, did justice to the catholicity of Christianity: the church, the family, the school, the society, the nation were all put under the power of the Christian principle. But justice was also done to the catholicity of the church: "The church, outside of which there is no salvation, was detached from all formal institutions and located in the invisible realm of mystical union with Christ" (238 [24]). Even heresy became a vague concept, according to Bavinck: "The name 'Christian' may not be denied to heretics as long as we acknowledge their baptism" (241 [27]).

In the last chapter of his booklet, Bavinck discusses the challenge given to the Reformed churches of his day by the catholicity of Christianity and the church. He warns against dualism. Though it may have been overcome in theory, he believes that it nevertheless often exists in practice. He contends that this is the case in Pietism, because Pietists keep as far from the world as possible. "Whether withdrawing from the world in Pietist fashion or attacking it and seeking to conquer it by force in Methodist fashion, what is missing here is reformation in the genuine, true, full sense of the word. Instead, individuals are rescued and snatched out of this world—the world that lies in wickedness—there is never a methodic, organic reformation of the whole cosmos, of nation and country" (246 [34]).

In this case, too, neglect of the catholicity of Christianity and neglect of the catholicity of the church go together. "The sense that separation from the church is a sin has all but disappeared. One leaves a church or joins it rather casually" (247 [36]). Bavinck warns against the endless schisms that threaten Protestantism. "By breaking the unity of doctrine and the church, Christians do violence to the communion of saints, deprive themselves of the Spirit's gifts of grace..." (247 [36]). But he doesn't believe in mere external unity, either. In fact, "no matter how harmful the ongoing divisions have been for the unity of church and doctrine, the consequences to Christianity itself have not been unqualifiedly negative. They testify to the vitality of the Christian faith, to its power in a people, a power that still moves thousands" (249-50 [38]). We have to maintain the catholicity of faith and church. It is impossible for us as churches "to shut ourselves off from the one, universal Christian church and in

isolation to seek salvation for the sorry circumstances in which many churches of our age find themselves” (249 [38]).

We see that in this address the catholicity of Christianity is primary. Where catholicity of Christianity is maintained, the church will also be catholic; similarly, where the catholicity of Christianity is lost, there is no room for the catholicity of the church. In Bavinck’s view, dualism leads to sectarianism.

2. Catholicity in Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck elaborates upon the view of catholicity he had set forth in his Rectoral address. He repeatedly underscores the catholicity of Christianity; a few examples will need to suffice.

A very striking example occurs at the beginning of the section dealing with the doctrine of revelation.⁴ In the first sentence, Bavinck says that “the history of religions is the proof that the concept of revelation is not only integral to Christianity and occurs in Holy Scripture, but is a necessary correlate of all religion.”⁵ Bavinck appeals to the unanimity in this respect of all religions and all peoples and contends that all religion implies a relation to God and therefore must be based on God’s revelation. That leads him to the far-reaching conclusion that “all religion rests on revelation.”⁶

Bavinck goes even further. With an appeal to the science of religion, he states that “the idea of redemption in a general sense is characteristic of all religions.”⁷ But for a doctrine of redemption, a doctrine of God (a theology), an anthropology and a soteriology are needed, and in these three areas revelation is indispensable. For example, saviors are necessary for salvation (soteriology). Then Bavinck writes, “This belief in saviors is also universal and can rest only on revelation.”⁸

How should we evaluate this argument? Is this a plea for natural theology, for a knowledge of God that is attainable without revelation? Of course not, because Bavinck’s point is that revelation is necessary. Is it pluralism, the idea that every religion has its own way to God? Whoever is acquainted with Bavinck’s theology, knows that in no way is he a pluralist. He is an exclusivist: only in Jesus Christ is there salvation. What is central here, for Bavinck, is the idea of the catholicity of Christianity. In Christianity and only in Christianity do we receive what all religions, all human beings, are

4. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, edited by John Bolt, translated by John Vriend, 4 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-08), I, chapters 9-12, pp. 283-85.

5. *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 284.

6. *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 286.

7. *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 286.

8. *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 287.

searching for: knowledge of God, redemption. Christianity is not a sectarian doctrine, incomprehensible for normal human beings. Rather, it supplies what everyone, knowingly or unknowingly, is longing for: a relation with God, salvation for soul and body.

My second example of Bavinck's elaboration on the catholicity of Christianity is taken from his Christology.⁹ For Bavinck, the incarnation is "the central fact of the entire history of the world."¹⁰ The history of the world points to Christ and traces of that fact can be found in the religions of the nations. That is why he can say concerning the doctrine of mediatorship, "Holy Scripture does not stand alone but is supported and confirmed on all sides by ideas concerning such a mediatorship in the religions of all peoples."¹¹ This is the same theme as in his doctrine of revelation. At this point Bavinck gives many examples of such ideas of a mediatorship in various religions: "The ideas of incarnation and apotheosis occur in virtually all religions."¹² His striking conclusion is: "One can with some reason speak of an 'unconscious prophetic tendency' in paganism. In its most beautiful and noble expressions, it points to Christianity. Jesus Christ is not only the Messiah of Israel but also... 'the desire of all nations.'¹³ Again, Bavinck gives expression to his belief in the catholicity of Christianity. The gospel is intended for the entire world, for the totality of humanity. To be truly Christian is to be truly human.

Bavinck returns to this subject in his discussion of the denial of the true and perfect human nature of Christ. He states that this always stems from a certain dualism, which assumes that matter is by nature sinful. Bavinck rejects this dualism: "If even one essential constituent in the human nature of Christ is excluded from true union and communion with God, there is an element in creation that remains dualistically alongside and opposed to God ... Then God is not the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Then the Christian religion is not truly catholic."¹⁴

Bavinck thus connects the catholicity of Christianity with Christology, a remarkable move in view of twentieth century developments in theology. Karl Barth uses Christology to maintain the particular character of Christianity over against all religions. For Barth, "Christological concentration" means starting with the unique event of God's revelation in Christ. In Bavinck we see a totally different starting point: Christ as the desire of all nations. Bavinck

9. See also my article "Chalcedon in Kampen," *Theologia Reformata* 48 (2005):29-30

10. *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 274.

11. *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 238.

12. *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 239..

13. *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 240. Bavinck borrows this expression from the old Dutch translation of Haggai 2:7. He adds that this translation may be incorrect, but that the idea expressed in it is completely scriptural.

14. *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 298.

accents the catholicity of Christianity here, not its particularity. Bavinck's Christology is a broad Christology, at the start, but also in its elaboration: all elements of creation are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. In Bavinck's Christology, the catholicity of Christianity is primary.

But what about the catholicity of the church? Bavinck deals with this issue in volume IV of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, in a short paragraph about the attributes of the church. Here Bavinck opposes the Roman-Catholic view of catholicity, because of its external character. Positively, he sees the meaning of the catholicity of the church in the character of Christianity as "a world religion, suited and intended for every people and age, for every class and rank, for every time and place."¹⁵ Christianity has an international and cosmopolitan character, and Bavinck judges that the Reformed churches have shown respect for this catholicity of the church through their different confessions in different countries and through the international character of the Synod of Dordt.

Once again, Bavinck derives the catholicity of the church from the catholicity of Christianity as a world religion. He also continues his opposition to sectarianism as he did in 1888. What is remarkable is how brief his treatment is of catholicity and the other attributes of the church. His engagement with the Roman Catholics is much longer than his own positive contribution. In my judgement, this betrays an uncertainty in Bavinck's ecclesiology. With that comment we begin our evaluation in the last section of this paper.

3. The Relevance of Bavinck's "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church"

"The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church" is a fascinating address. We see the young Herman Bavinck feeling a strong sense of responsibility for the church he served and, we can say, taking on the attitude of a prophet. He has an important message and he wants that message to be understood.

The relevance of Bavinck's address should not be sought in his reflections on the history of church and theology. In these reflections, he draws his lines very strongly and sometimes questionably. For example, his claim that only Calvinism does justice to the catholicity of the church is itself not a very catholic judgment. As I see it, the significance should be sought at two points, both of which are also characteristic of his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

First, Bavinck pleaded courageously against sectarianism and separatism. I say "courageously," because with that plea he opposed the approach of many people in his own circles. Bavinck was

15. *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 323.

convinced of the necessity of an ecumenical attitude, and he linked that conviction with the catholicity not only of the church but also of Christianity itself. This plea continues to be of great value in our time.

At the same time, I also need to say that this plea has its weakness. Bavinck does not succeed in connecting his clear view regarding the catholicity of the church with an equally clear view regarding the unity of the church. He fails to clarify what is involved in an alternative to “external unity.” This is also characteristic of Bavinck’s treatment of the church in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. There are numerous tensions what he wrote about the relationship between the “visible” and “invisible” church, between the church’s pluriformity and its unity, between the external and the internal. R.H. Bremmer speaks of two lines in Bavinck’s ecclesiology. On the one hand, Bavinck is convinced about the rightness of the *Afscheiding* of 1834 and the origins of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk. He is not, therefore, completely relativistic in his view of the church. But on the other hand, he embraces Kuyper’s theory of pluriformity and sometimes makes remarkably relativistic statements.¹⁶ These two lines are also apparent in his catholicity address. On the one hand, discipline, including discipline in doctrinal affairs, is part of the catholicity of the church. On the other hand, heresy is a vague concept. On the one hand, Bavinck is ashamed of the endless schisms of Protestantism. On the other hand, he says that “the consequences to Christianity itself have not been unqualifiedly negative. They testify to the vitality of the Christian faith, to its power in a people, a power that still moves thousands. The richness, the many-sidedness, the pluriformity of the Christian faith, has in this way become evident” (250 [39]).¹⁷

Perhaps this uncertainty is also the background for the unsatisfactory treatment of the attributes of the church. It is difficult for Bavinck to give these attributes a positive sense. He has a tendency to spiritualize them. In my judgment, Bavinck’s resistance to sectarianism and separatism has to be combined with a much clearer view of the visible unity of the church. As a consequence, this resistance to sectarianism can be even more effective. I think such a view of the visible unity of the church can be found in the doctrine of the church developed by Klaas Schilder, one of Bavinck’s successors in Kampen.

The second point in which I judge Bavinck’s view on catholicity to be still relevant is the connection he makes between the catholicity of Christianity and the catholicity of the church. This strikes me as something original to Bavinck. He goes beyond the usual distinction

16. R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, Kampen: Kok 1961, 284.

17. The translation “They testify to the vitality of the Christian faith.” does not have quite the full force of the Dutch: “Zij is een bewijs dat het christendom nog leeft.”

between qualitative and quantitative catholicity. He is convinced that it is characteristic of the religion of the Old and New Testament to touch everything in human life. Real catholicity of the church is only possible if this is acknowledged. This is the understanding we saw elaborated on earlier in several places in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* and is one of the things that makes the *Dogmatics* such a unique book that is still relevant after more than a century.

On this point, there is a certain parallel between Bavinck and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer's conviction that our entire reality is a "Christ reality" can in fact also be found in Bavinck. The conviction that God in Christ is in the midst of our reality, that He is transcendent in the midst of our life, and that therefore no part of our reality can be withdrawn from Christ, is a conviction shared by Bavinck and Bonhoeffer. There are, of course, also important differences between the two such as the role of general revelation. But with respect to the catholicity of Christianity, they give evidence of a common perspective, rather than a basic disagreement.

Bavinck's views are very relevant to our current cultural context. In a globalizing world and an ever increasingly multicultural society, it is highly important to proclaim that God wants to save the world through the cross of Jesus Christ. The church has to find or to retrieve its unity in that gospel. No less than in Bavinck's days, the church needs to maintain its close connection with the catholicity of the Christian faith itself. It is precisely at this point that we find the greatest significance of Bavinck's contribution: The catholicity of Christianity and the catholicity of the church are inextricably bound up with each other.