

# Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck's Reception and Influence in North America

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## I. Herman Bavinck in North America Today: The *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* in English Translation

In October 1892, some six years before Abraham Kuyper's triumphal visit to North America to deliver the Stone Lectures at Princeton, his younger compatriot and fellow Neo-Calvinist Herman Bavinck attended and spoke to the fifth general council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System in Toronto, Canada.<sup>1</sup> Rather than beginning with that visit and telling the story of Bavinck's reception and influence in North America in an orderly, chronological manner, I am choosing to begin with the present. I say the "present" and not the "end" because the final chapter has not yet been written on this story. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect about the story of Herman Bavinck in North America is happening today with a definitive, critical edition of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* being translated into English one full century after the first Dutch edition was published in the decade of the 1890s.<sup>2</sup>

Some one hundred years after Bavinck's first visit to North America,<sup>3</sup> a small gathering of pastors, professors, and representatives of publishing companies,

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<sup>1</sup> Bavinck's lecture was fully in accord with the world-formative Calvinism articulated by Kuyper in his six Stone Lectures: "The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations," in *Proceedings of the Fifth General Council, Toronto* (London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1892), 48-55.

<sup>2</sup> At this time (fall of 2003), two half-volume works have been published, one on the eschatology section (*The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996]), and the other on the creation section (*In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999]). The former volume represented the second half of volume 4 of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* and the latter the second half of volume 2. The full volume on prolegomena (volume 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*) was published by Baker in the summer of 2003. The complete volumes 2-4 are in process.

<sup>3</sup> In January 1994.

from five different Reformed denominations,<sup>4</sup> gathered together in a Grand Rapids Korean restaurant and formed what eventually became legally incorporated, under State of Michigan law, as the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. The purpose of this group from the very beginning was simple and singular: to translate Bavinck's four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* into English. The reference to the Korean restaurant is more than just a historically interesting but eccentric piece of trivia. The original impetus for translating Bavinck into English came largely from international (mostly Korean) Reformed students at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Not only does Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* continue to be well received and accepted as a work of classic Reformed theology in North America (and elsewhere), but this venture has accomplished a remarkable and unprecedented spirit of cooperation among the different Reformed communities in North America, particularly in West Michigan. For many years, a kind of theological and ecclesiastical guerilla warfare through pamphlets and papers characterized the relationship between these groups and closed them off from one another. It seems to me that it is fully in keeping with Bavinck's ecumenical (genuinely Catholic) Reformed vision, a vision known for its inclusiveness and irenic character as well as its Reformedness, that it is precisely *his* theology (and, to emphasize it differently, *his theology*) that has found acceptance in such a broad range of confessionally Reformed circles in North America and has led to this cooperation. It is exactly here, I shall suggest, that an important difference exists with our sister Reformed churches on the other side of the Atlantic. In North America, we used and use Bavinck differently than did the Dutch Reformed community in this country during the past century.

By reflecting on Bavinck's reception in North America and by providing an overview of some theological developments in the Reformed communities of North America—most specifically within the Christian Reformed Church—it is not possible to avoid critique and polemic. To provide background, it will be necessary to mention certain names and sound certain critical notes. That cannot be avoided. The history of theological education and theological training, as well as ecclesiastical commitment in the churches of the broader Dutch Reformed world after the era of Bavinck and Kuyper, is a somewhat bloodied history. I sincerely hope that my discussion of that history will not contribute to more bleeding but, instead, will be helpful in promoting common understanding and better appreciation for the Reformed faith.

## II. The Two Bavincks

We must begin by reminding ourselves that any consideration of Herman Bavinck's influence has to start with the annoying acknowledgment that there is

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Reformed Church in North America, Free Reformed Church, Netherlands Reformed Church, Protestant Reformed Church, Reformed Church in America.

not just one but rather *two* Bavincks.<sup>5</sup> Radically different people and agendas could and did appeal to Bavinck as the authority for their views. Professor Berkouwer was keenly aware of that when in his final, large theological autobiography he observed that Bavinck was particularly susceptible to being “annexed” by contemporary devotees for their own purposes. Berkouwer judges that it is difficult to overcome this danger “because Bavinck’s theology contains so many irreconcilable themes in tension.”<sup>6</sup> Let me risk oversimplifying this tension with the following characterization of the two Bavincks. On the one hand, there is Bavinck the pious son of a secessionist minister (*afgescheiden domineeszoon*) who defended his church’s legitimacy before his Leiden professors with this proposition (*stelling*): “Judged by the standard of the Reformed Confession (Belgic Confession, art. 38 & 39), the Secession of 1834 was both valid and necessary.”<sup>7</sup>

This Bavinck is the Daniel who entered the lion’s den of modernist theologians in October 1912 to defend his 1911 rectoral address, *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*.<sup>8</sup> This first Bavinck is also the meticulous theologian who pored over dusty tomes written by such equally dusty but learned men of old with names such as Voetius, Cocceius, De Moor, Vitringa, Polanus, van Maastricht, Maresius, and Turretin, not to mention Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Bellarmine, Bonaventure, and Petavius. For simplicity’s sake, not altogether fairly, let us call this one the “fundamentalist”<sup>9</sup> and “scholastic” Bavinck.

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<sup>5</sup> To speak of “two Bavincks,” or of a tension between “two poles” in Bavinck’s thought and his spirituality, as Jan Veenhof does, is a rather conventional portrait. For a longer discussion along with relevant literature see Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie: De Openbarings- en Schriftbeschouwing van Herman Bavinck in Vergelijking met die der Ethische Theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 108-11. See also John Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck” (Ph.D. diss., University of St. Michael’s College, Toronto, 1982), 38-78, “Herman Bavinck as a Man Between Two Worlds.”

<sup>6</sup> “Het gevaar van een beschrijving en beoordeling van Bavincks levenswerk is, dat men hem annexeert voor eigen inzichten. Het is niet onmogelijk boven dat annexatie-gevaar uit te komen, doordat in het werk van Bavinck allerlei onweersprekelijke motieven zichtbaar worden.” G. C. Berkouwer, *Zoeken en Vinden: Herinneringen en Ervaringen* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 55.

<sup>7</sup> “Getoetst aan het Gereformeerd beginsel (art. 38 en 39 der Nederl. Geloofsbelijdenis) was de Afscheiding van 1834 recht- en plichtmatig.” Herman Bavinck, *De Ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman, 1880), 182. The reference is obviously in error; it should read art. “28-29.”

<sup>8</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Modernisme en Orthodoxie* (Kampen: Kok, 1911); see the discussion in R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), 115-50; C. Augustijn, “Bavinck ter Vergadering van Moderne Theologen 1912,” in *In Rapport met de Tijd: 100 Jaar Theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit* (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 88-110. The notes in Augustijn’s essay contain further helpful bibliographic references and, the Daniel metaphor is also used by Augustijn.

<sup>9</sup> The closest anyone of Bavinck’s own contemporaries came to thinking of him as a “fundamentalist,” was C. B. Hylkema’s hateful assessment of Bavinck’s *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*: “What a mountain of learning, but also what a soul-less pile of stone. . . . This fat book of Prof. Bavinck also contrasts sharply with a living faith such as Calvin’s *Institutes* was rooted in its time.” (*Oud- en Nieuw-Calvinisme: Een Vergelijkende Geschiedkundige Studie* [Haarlem, 1911], 187; cited by Augustijn, “Bavinck ter Vergadering der Moderne Theologen 1912,” 91, n.17). More recently, efforts to excuse Bavinck (and Kuyper) of any fundamentalism were criticized by J. A. Montsma, *De*

Now, we turn to the “other” Bavinck. This is what we might call the “good,” progressive, modern, Bavinck—the Bavinck who, in the last decade of his life, got rid of his stuffy theology books “because I have no further need of them,”<sup>10</sup> became disillusioned with the church, quietly telling his students that, while regular politics is often dirty, ecclesiastical politics is *always* dirty,<sup>11</sup> and became increasingly open to the modern world and its challenges. It is tempting—particularly for a *systematic* theologian who loves to have everything neat and tidy—to say that this second Bavinck was invented by Valentijn Hepp; appealed as to an authority by *de jongeren*, Netelenbos, and Geelkerken; celebrated by G. C. Berkouwer and his students; and, finally, shamelessly exploited by more recent Gereformeerden such as Harry Kuitert.<sup>12</sup> Such an interpretation of the second Bavinck is a temptation, but it is neither fair nor true to history; it is one of the great gifts of the last few years that our historical knowledge of both Bavinck and Kuyper has greatly increased even though it has made our theological lives more complicated.<sup>13</sup>

It may be true that Hepp, for example, exaggerated Bavinck’s despair in the last decade of his life,<sup>14</sup> and that *de jongeren*, who appealed to Bavinck for latitude beyond what was judged to be the limits of the Reformed confession, were excessive in their youthful enthusiasm.<sup>15</sup> Yet, Bavinck, at the end of his life, did

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*Extraterritoriale Openbaring* (1985) who defended this *stelling* in his dissertation defense: “The synodical study report of the GKN on the authority of Scripture (“God With Us”) incorrectly claims that Kuyper and Bavinck, on close inspection, should not be considered as fundamentalists” (Cited by G. C. Berkouwer, *Zoeken en Vinden*, 60).

<sup>10</sup> Reported by Hepp; see V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921), 317-18.

<sup>11</sup> Hepp, *Herman Bavinck*, 322: “gewone politiek heeft meestal een vuilen kant, maar kerkelijke politiek heeft er altijd een.”

<sup>12</sup> *De Jongeren* (lit. disciples) were leaders in the GKN who appealed to Bavinck as the inspiration for a number of challenges to the traditional Dutch Reformed church and world. Chief among these challenges was the matter of scriptural authority, as in the synodically debated cases of Netelenbos (1920) and Geelkerken (1926). On this period in general see H. C. Endedijk, *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, Deel 1, 1892-1936* (Kampoen: Kok, 1990), 133-46, 179-91. On *De Jongeren* see *De Critiek der Jongeren: een Woord to de Gereformeerde Kerken* (Baarn: 1918).

<sup>13</sup> I wish to single out here particularly my appreciation for the archival and editorial work done by G. Harinck, C. Van der Kooi, and J. Vree in making available Bavinck’s previously unpublished reflections on the Netelenbos affair. See “*Als Bavinck nu maar eens Kleur Bekende*”: *Aantekening van H. Bavinck over de zaak-Netelenbos, het Schriftgezag en de Situatie van de Gereformeerde Kerken* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Bremmer’s biography does provide a more nuanced portrait of Bavinck during this time; R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn Tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 263-66.

<sup>15</sup> The story of the early years of the new Reformed weekly paper, *De Reformatie*, are telling in this respect. Begun in the flush of enthusiasm for new ideas and new challenges to the Reformed faith posed by the twentieth century, its editorial direction increasingly moved toward a more traditional confession position and its best-known editor was of course Klaas Schilder. See George Harinck, *De Reformatie: Weekblad tot Ontwikkeling van het Gereformeerde Leven* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1993). For a discussion about the accuracy of Hepp’s characterization of Bavinck’s mood in the last years of his life see, G. Harinck et. al., “*Als Bavinck nu maar eens Kleur Bekende*,” notes 3 and 8, pp. 7, 10 and the literature cited there.

provide encouragement for asking new, tough, and even risky questions, especially about Scripture and its authority.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, we must not forget that the same Bavinck who courageously defended the *Afscheiding's* ecclesiology before his Leiden professors had also, in the first place, chosen the University of Leiden and teachers such as Scholten and Kuenen over the Kampen Theologische Hogeschool because, in his own words, he wanted “a more academic theological education” in which “he could engage the new modern theology directly.”<sup>17</sup> I could make the case for the second Bavinck stronger yet, but, finally, for now, let me just point out that in his *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*, when he expressed his wonder about the new modern world and its remarkable changes—“a world altogether different from that of our ancestors”—he was not at all negative about it:

We do not know, either, what greater changes still lie in store. We are likely not at the end but at the beginning of developments. We do not know what triumphs in science and technology still await, what new conditions these will bring about in society and state. Still, there is reason to expect wonderful things.

And then follows this remarkable sentence: “God is busy doing great things in these days.”<sup>18</sup>

The portrait I have just sketched of the two Bavincks—the fundamentalist scholastic and the good progressive modern man—is of course, in its exaggeration, a cartoon, a caricature. Yet, there is plenty of evidence to warrant talking about a duality in Bavinck, and we cannot understand the developments in twentieth-century Dutch Reformed theology apart from the conflicting appeals made to these two sides. Let me state it more modestly and moderately: The two sides of Herman Bavinck the theologian reflect a pull between the academic theologian (*wetenschappelijke theoloog*) and the churchly dogmatician (*kerkelijke dogmaticus*). The pull of the former led him to Leiden and is reflected in his engagement with modern culture and science. It also explains Bavinck's passion for scholarly precision and fair mindedness even with those who were

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<sup>16</sup> In addition to the biographies of Hepp and Bremmer, see “*Is Bavinck nu maar eens Kleur Bekende*,” especially the helpful notes provided by the editors.

<sup>17</sup> Bremmer, *Tijdgenoten*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> H. Bavinck, *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*, 11: “En wij weten niet, wat er in de toekomst nog meer veranderen zal. Wij staan blijkbaar niet aan het einde, maar aan het begin van eene ontwikkeling; welke veroveringen er nog in wetenschap en techniek gemaakt zullen worden, en welke nieuwe toestanden tengevolge daarvan in maatschappij en staat zullen intreden, wij kunnen niet zeggen, maar voor grootsche verwachtingen bestaat er alleszins grond. God is bezig, groote dingen in deze tijden te doen.”

his religious or theological opponents, such as the *Ethischen* and the *Modernen*.<sup>19</sup> It is this same pull and the desire to bring the Reformed tradition into dialogue with modern consciousness that drew Bavinck to Kuyper's neo-Calvinism and explains his enthusiasm for the Kuyperian emphasis on common grace. It was this that led Bavinck to pour his energies into the unification of theological education in the united Gereformeerde Kerken (GKN) at the turn of the century and finally to his move from Kampen to Amsterdam.<sup>20</sup> Finally, this is the reason why Bavinck the theologian spent more of the last decade of his life exploring philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, the role of women in society and church, economics, war, and international relations than he did dogmatics.<sup>21</sup>

However, this dimension should not be viewed negatively as simply a tug at Bavinck's heart from the siren call of modernity but rather as a positive expression of Bavinck's Reformed catholicity. In what may be his most self-revelatory single piece of writing, the rectoral address of 1888, *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*, we see the essential Bavinck and the grandness of his Christian vision.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, we should never sever this vision from Bavinck the church dogmatician—rooted in and faithful to the profound Reformed piety of the *Afscheiding*. The church dogmatician side of Bavinck is also reflected in his intense involvement in the struggle to unify theological training in the Gereformeerde Kerken and is expressed in such writings as *The Office of Doctor [In the Church]*,<sup>23</sup> *The Right of the Churches and the Freedom of Science*,<sup>24</sup> not to mention the more popular though no less profound *Certainty of Faith*.<sup>25</sup> Though he

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<sup>19</sup> In addition to the *Modernisme en Orthodoxie* lecture cited above, see Herman Bavinck, *De Theologie van Prof. Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye: Bijdrage tot de Kennis der Ethische Theologie* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1884). Kuyper's reaction to Bavinck's mildly appreciative but hardly uncritical assessment of the "ethische theologie" is worth noting. As Bremmer describes it, according to Kuyper, Bavinck should have been more "prophetically" critical. "What Kuyper missed in Bavinck's critique was the hate, the fierce denunciation that one finds in the prophets and also, e.g. in Calvin. And Kuyper concluded: 'Calvin should have occasionally put a gag on his mounth, but Dr. Bavinck should have not have let the fire of his soul been dampened so much by the waters of urbanity'" (Bremmer, *Dogmaticus*, 18).

<sup>20</sup> On the struggle for unifying theological education and Bavinck's move to Amsterdam, see Bremmer, *Tijdgenoten*, 110-93.

<sup>21</sup> See Bremmer, *Tijdgenoten*, chs. 13, and 14, "Afscheid van Theologie," and "Amsterdam II (1914-1920)." It must not be overlooked, however, that the first edition of Bavinck's *Beginselens der Psychologie* (Kampen: Bos, 1897) was published while he was still at Kampen.

<sup>22</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk* (1888; reprint, Kok: Kampen, 1968); English translation by John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (November 1992): 220-51.

<sup>23</sup> H. Bavinck, *Het Doctorenambt* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1899).

<sup>24</sup> H. Bavinck, *Het Recht der Kerken en de Vrijheid der Wetenschap* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1899).

<sup>25</sup> H. Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: Kok, 1901). English translation by Harry der Nederlanden (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia Press, 1980). One of the most moving and self-critical (of neo-Calvinism) passages in all of Bavinck's oeuvre comes at the end of this book (p. 94 Eng.; pp. 100-101, Dutch):

left Kampen for Amsterdam in 1902 to pursue the wider scientific questions that had been thrown at the Christian and Reformed faith by modernity,<sup>26</sup> his parting words to the Kampen students included this personal confession: “I am a child of the secession and I hope always to remain one.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, Bavinck’s piety is reflected in the testimony prepared for his guest appearance at the Convention of Modernist theologians in 1912 wherein he describes his theological training at Leiden as “stones for bread” and concludes that for him to accept the modernist credo would mean that the great realities of the Christian faith—creation, fall, atonement, regeneration—would be reduced to “clangs, symbols,” but, he adds,

they remain realities. Were I to give them up, I would lose myself. And then I said: That cannot be true. These realities are worth more, they are more real as facts than the difficulties in nature and Scripture. I am, therefore, not bound by any tradition but rather by that which is for me personally, in the depth of my soul, the life of my life, the very salvation of my soul.<sup>28</sup>

To conclude this section of my article, I will repeat what I said in my editor’s introduction to the English translation of *The Last Things* about the unity of the two streams in Bavinck: “Bavinck’s life and thought reflect a serious effort to be pious, orthodox, and thoroughly contemporary.”<sup>29</sup> The *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* is the serious and, I judge, largely successful effort by a modern, scientific theologian to be, at one and the same time, a faithful, churchly dogmatician.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps it is better said the other way around: the faithful churchly dogmatician was also a rather successful modern, scientific theologian.

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While those nineteenth-century Christians [Bavinck is referring to the pietist tendencies of the *Afscheiding*, j.b.] 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 doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, *even for Christian principles*, if he loses his own soul? (emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> See Bavinck’s Free University Inaugural Address of December 17, 1902, *Godsdienst en Godgeleerdheid* (Wageningen: “Vada,” 1902).

<sup>27</sup> Bremmer, *Tijdgenoten*, 192: AIK ben een kind der scheiding en dat hoop ik te blijven.

<sup>28</sup> Cited by Augustijn, “Bavinck ter Vergadering van Moderne Theologen 1912,” 99-10:

Ze blijven realiteiten. Als ik ze prijs gaf, verloor ik mijzelf. En toen heb ik gezegd: dat kàn niet waar zijn. Deze realiteiten zijn meer waard, zijn reëeler feiten dan de moeilijkheden in natuur en Schrift. Dus geen traditie bindt me, maar dat wat voor mij zelf persoonlijk, in ‘t diepst van mijn ziel, ‘t leven van mijn leven, de zaligheid mijner ziel is.

<sup>29</sup> “Editor’s Introduction,” in Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for this World and the Next*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Friend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Significantly, the same combination is reflected in Bavinck’s Amsterdam Inaugural, *Godsdienst en Godgeleerdheid*.

### III. The Critique of and Appeal to Bavinck

It was important to raise the matter of the two Bavincks and clear it up to the degree possible in this brief discussion because the history of twentieth century Dutch Reformed theology in The Netherlands and in North America is in significant measure a story of conflicting appeals to Bavinck. This is usually done by setting the scholastic Bavinck over against the good biblical, Christocentric, kerygmatic, Bavinck and then using the latter to sit in judgment on the former. The critique of neo-Calvinism's scholasticism came from two quarters, the reformational philosophy of the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* and the theological work of G. C. Berkouwer and those whom he influenced, primarily but not exclusively, as *Doktorvater*. Herman Dooyeweerd's critique of Kuyper's philosophy of science, particularly his epistemology,<sup>31</sup> included a repudiation of Bavinck's *Logos*-speculation as part of a neo-Platonic, Thomistic, scholastic religious ground-motive, that Dooyeweerd judged to be at odds with the biblical, reformational, ground-motive. Dooyeweerd links what he calls the scholastic ground-motive to the neo-Platonic *analogia entis* tradition and to "the traditional scholastic-Aristotelian notion of the "soul" as "substantia rationalis."<sup>32</sup> Dooyeweerd also finds another, biblical, reformational line in Kuyper (a line that in Dooyeweerd's judgment must be the starting point of a Calvinistic philosophy and epistemology). This so-called line is that of the wholistic notion of a *sensus divinitatis*, located in the human *heart*. Dooyeweerd cites the following definition of "heart" from Kuyper: "properly to be understood not as an organ of feeling but at the place in you where God is at work and from which he also works on your head and brains."<sup>33</sup> According to Dooyeweerd, faith as a formal function, and not human rationality, is the foundation of a reformational philosophy and theology.<sup>34</sup> On this point, Dooyeweerd reserves his praise for Kuyper alone. "Only Kuyper here reached mightily, and with one blow radically redirected the anthropological vision in a biblical direction."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuyper's Wetenschapsteorie," *Philosophia Reformata* 4 (1939): 193-232.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 211; citation is from Abraham Kuyper, *Honig Uit den Rotssteen*, II (Amsterdam and Pretoria: Höveker & Wormser, 1883), 35: "wel te verstaan niet als gevoelsorgaan, maar als de plek in u, waar God werkt en waaruit Hij werkt op uw hoofd and op uw hersenen ook."

<sup>34</sup> For further development of this dimension of Dooyeweerd's own thought, see James H. Olthuis, "Dooyeweerd on Religion and Faith," in *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd: Reflections on Critical Philosophy in the Christian Tradition*, ed. C. T. McIntire (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), 21-40. Kuyper develops this idea most fully in *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. by J. Hendrik De Vries (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 125-45; *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1909), 2:72-94.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-12; Dooyeweerd adds that neither the VU classicist Woltjer nor Bavinck developed this notion (p. 212).

Influenced by the *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*, Westminster Seminary theologian Cornelius Van Til, in an extended review of R. Bremmer's *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, also highlighted the need to avoid scholasticism and all forms of ontologism in the theological method in favor of a truly biblical one.<sup>36</sup> Van Til agrees with Bremmer's judgment that Bavinck was influenced by ontology and is thus guilty of scholastic thinking though he contends that Bremmer exaggerates this feature, and he thus wonders "whether Bremmer does justice to Bavinck."<sup>37</sup>

Introducing Bremmer's work at this point leads us to the other quarter from which critique arose of Bavinck as a scholastic, the Barth-Berkouwer axis.<sup>38</sup> For the most part, Berkouwer's enormous respect for Bavinck leads him to keep his criticism to a minimum.<sup>39</sup> In a manner that is somewhat analogous to the appeal that contemporary, progressive Roman Catholic theologians make to the "Spirit of Vatican II," Berkouwer accents the personal, pastoral, existential, ethical, and Christological motifs in Bavinck, the "Bavinck spirit," if you will.<sup>40</sup> Rather than document this in detail here, I will simply refer to Hendrikus Berkhof's perceptive analysis of Berkouwer's theological method in the festschrift, *Ex Auditū Verbi*. Berkhof contends that Berkouwer moves from an early phase in his career honoring "the full authority of Scripture" (het volstrekt gezag der Schrift), to a transitional phase focusing on "the salvation-historical content of Scripture" (de heilsinhoud der Schrift), to a final phase that emphasizes "the existential tendency of Scripture" (de existentiële strekking der Schrift).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cornelius Van Til, "Bavinck the Theologian: A Review Article," *Westminster Theological Journal* 24 (1961): 48-64.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. The key page references in Bremmer are 326-30, 370-71

<sup>38</sup> For an explicit linkage of Berkouwer with Barth in critique of Bavinck, see Bremmer, *Dogmaticus*, 331-51, *passim*. The key issues are knowledge of God, sin and anthropology, predestination, and Christology. What links the two camps materially is their mutual hostility to a positive notion of the *analogia entis*.

<sup>39</sup> In *Zoeken en Vinden* (pp. 75-77), it is in his discussion of Hepp rather than Bavinck that Berkouwer raises the issue of "scholasticism" and "biblicism" and then only in the form of questions.

<sup>40</sup> By contrast, Berkouwer is frequently critical of Kuyper. In Jan Veenhof's words: "Berkouwer also refers frequently to Kuyper and does not hesitate to criticize him when he is too indebted to idealism or scholasticism. Berkouwer emphatically aligns himself with Bavinck, specifically with the antischolastic, progressive directions in Bavinck's *Dogmatics*." Jan Veenhof, "A History of Theology and Spirituality in the Dutch Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken), 1892-1992," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (November 1993): 286.

<sup>41</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, "De Methode van Berkouwers Theologie," in *Ex Auditū Verbi: Theologische Opstellingen aangeboden aan Prof. Dr. G. C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 1965), 37-55.

To make a long story short, though I am now convinced that there are hints of the final phase already in Berkouwer's earliest writing,<sup>42</sup> I judge this in general to be a fair assessment of the direction taken by Berkouwer and many of his students<sup>43</sup> as well as that of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland as it dealt with the issues of reprobation, subscription to the Reformed Confession,<sup>44</sup> international ecumenical relations,<sup>45</sup> and, finally, the authority of Scripture as reflected in the Synodical Report, *God With Us*,<sup>46</sup> as well as its decisions about homosexuality.<sup>47</sup> The tenor of this direction is suggested by *God With Us* in its proposal of a new relational understanding of truth—an understanding that has significant ethical as well as confessional-theological implications. In varying degrees, this is also the *Tendenz* of Berkouwer-inspired studies of Bavinck's theology such as Jan Veenhof's *Revelatie en Inspiratie* and R. H. Bremmer's *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*. Finally, it is the explicit focus of S. Meijer's *Objectiviteit en Existentialiteit*, a study of Bavinck and three theologians purportedly influenced by him—G. C. Berkouwer, A. A. Van Ruler, and H. M. Kuitert.<sup>48</sup> Without explor-

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<sup>42</sup> A few years ago, one of the students in my doctoral seminar on contemporary Dutch Reformed Theology, Raymond Blacketer, called my attention to a passage in Berkouwer's 1932 dissertation, *Geloof en Openbaring in de Nieuwere Duitse Theologie* (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1932), p. 242, wherein he speaks favorably of the need to rise above the "objective-subjective" polarity and the possibility of a belief in the Bible that could be characterized as a "living, personal, truthful relationship" (levende, persoonlijke, vertrouwensvolle relatie.) These words take on a whole new meaning in the light of *God met ons*.

<sup>43</sup> Similar themes can be found in the dissertations of Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), and John Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, N.J.: Mack, 1978).

<sup>44</sup> After a gravamen submitted against the teaching of reprobation in *Canons of Dordt*, the GKN synod in 1971-72 revised the form of subscription to reflect a more "dynamic adherence" to the Reformed Confessions; see Jan Veenhof, "Geschiedenis van Theologie en Spiritualiteit in de Gereformeerde Kerken," in *100 Jaar Theologie: Aspecten van een Eeuw Theologie in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1892-1992)*, ed. M. E. Brinkman, (Kampen: Kok, 1992), 70.

<sup>45</sup> The Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland joined the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1965 and the World Council of Churches in 1971.

<sup>46</sup> Generale Synode, Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, *God Met Ons*, 1979; English translation from Reformed Ecumenical Synod. For a CRC critique of *God met ons*, see John Cooper, "The Changing Face of Truth," in *Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis in the Reformed Community Today*, ed. J. Bolt (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia, 1986), 33-58.

<sup>47</sup> Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland van Bentheim, 1981, "Rapport over gebruik van Schrift gegevens bij vragen rondom HOMOFILIE." English translation from Reformed Ecumenical Synod, *Homophilia: A Report on the Biblical Data* (1981).

<sup>48</sup> S. Meijers, *Objectiviteit en Existentialiteit: Een Onderzoek naar hun verhouding in de Theologie van Herman Bavinck en in de door hem Beïnvloede Concepties* (Kampen: Kok, 1979). It is striking that the two most recent dissertations on Bavinck have been done in North America—both in the Toronto School of Theology—and that they not only lack such a *Tendenz* but also in many ways explicitly oppose it. That they were done in Toronto, in the *umwelt* of the Institute for Christian Studies

ing this further in detail, at this point, I think it is fair to say that in the ecclesiastical and theological world of the GKN, the progressive, modern Bavinck—the existential, ethical, Christological, pastoral, biblical Bavinck—triumphed over the scholastic Bavinck. Also, I believe it is true that in this way the *academic, scientific theological* ideal trumped the work of the *churchly dogmatician*. Finally, there is a harder judgment: I believe that the one-sided working out of the modern, scientific Bavinck has not been a happy development for the GKN nor has it led to a healthy Reformed faith in the Netherlands during this century. It has divided and scattered rather than brought about unity and effective witness.

#### IV. Bavinck in North America

Now, which of these two Bavincks gained the upper hand in North America (and for reasons of economy I restrict myself to the Christian Reformed Church, the only North American denomination directly influenced by neo-Calvinism<sup>49</sup>)? Once more, we need some essential historical background. We have to go back to the 1890s. Two events *anno domini* 1896 directly impacted the theological direction of the North American CRC. First, Geerhardus Vos, the man who in the CRC was himself most like Bavinck in temperament and learning as well as theology, in like manner to Bavinck's departure from Kampen to the Free University six years later, left the confining and exhausting work at Calvin Seminary for the newly created post of biblical theology at Princeton Seminary.<sup>50</sup> That same year, the Gereformeerde minister in Franeker (Friesland), having failed to persuade his consistory to follow him in secession should he fail to stop Kuyper's efforts to

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(though not at the ICS), may be a factor. See John Bolt, "The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck" (1982) and Syd Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," (Th.D. diss., Wycliffe College, Toronto, 1998). Since this article was written, and just prior to publication, another Dutch dissertation has been completed on the relationship between Scripture and dogmatics in Kuyper, Bavinck, and Berkouwer: Dirk Van Keulen, *Bijbel en Dogmatiek: Schriftbeschouwing en Schrifgebruik in het Dogmatish Werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G. C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> See Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed Thought and Experience in the New World* (Kampen: Kok, 1973), and James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>50</sup> For evidence of the close resemblance between Vos and Bavinck see Vos's thorough and thoughtful reviews of Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek as the various volumes appeared in the 1890s*; *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 7 (1896): 356-63; 10 (1899): 694-700. Vos was the first appointee to Princeton's newly established chair of biblical theology. For details of this departure see *Semi-Centennial Volume, Theological School and Calvin College: 1876-1926* (Grand Rapids, 1926), 14-19, 28-32. On Vos as a biblical theologian, see Richard B. Gaffin, introduction to *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), xix-xxii. For a fascinating discussion of significant differences between Vos and Abraham Kuyper on the matter of biblical theology see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed: 1971), 228-36.

bring theological education in the united Gereformeerde Kerken under the umbrella of the Free University model, accepted a call to the Oakdale Park Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.<sup>51</sup> The minister happened to be one of Kuypers's sharpest (in intellect and tone alike) critics from the *Afscheiding* group, and he brought his critique with him to the United States where he soon (in 1900) became the CRC's professor of dogmatics at its theological school, a post he held for twenty-five years.

The preacher we are speaking of was Foppe Ten Hoor and his critique focused directly on Kuypers's efforts to develop a *wetenschappelijke theologie* along Kantian lines as part of the larger "organism of science" in the university.<sup>52</sup> Ten Hoor, in contrast, and in direct critique of Kuypers,<sup>53</sup> judged the church to be the appropriate provider of theological training for ministry and insisted that church-run seminaries rather than free academies of higher learning are the proper places for doing theology. In a revealing exchange of letters with Herman Bavinck,<sup>54</sup> Ten Hoor vigorously defends the ecclesiastical character of theological education and insists that the vocation of theology professor was simply a specialized extension of the office of minister of Word and Sacraments. Bavinck was not prepared to sacrifice the scientific character of theology nor its connection to the other sciences, but he does indicate key differences between his position and Kuypers's. Specifically, he rejects the important methodological role of Immanuel Kant in Kuypers's speculative attempt to establish the scientific character of theology in the organism of science. Though he agrees that the

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<sup>51</sup> For the detail about the Franeker consistory, I am grateful to Jasper Vree for alerting me to his article, "Brieven aan A. Kuypers als bron van informatie over het leven in de Gereformeerde Kerken in de jaren 1892-1901," *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800*, 37 (November 1992): 36.

<sup>52</sup> Kuypers's vision for a post-Kantian scientific theology is clearly stated in the following passage from his *Encyclopaedie*:

only when, by and after Kant, the question about the essence and the method of our knowledge, and consequently of the nature of science in general, pressed itself forcefully to the front, in our human consciousness, was there gradually adopted the organic interpretation of Theology as a whole and as one of the sciences in the great unit of the sciences, which is now dominant in the theological faculty, and is being more widely recognized by the other faculties. Formerly a science of theology in that sense was *not necessary* because the human consciousness in general did not feel the need of such an interpretation; neither was it *possible*, because the data for such a construction of theology and of all the other sciences, cannot be borrowed from the *knowledge of God*, but from Logic in the higher sense. (Abraham Kuypers, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrick De Vries (1898; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 293.

<sup>53</sup> See, inter alia, F. M. Ten Hoor, "'Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godegeleerdheid,' door A. Kuypers," *De Vrije Kerk*, 20 (1894): 550-59, 653-74; 21 (1895): 23-43, 95-117; and "Kerkelijke of Universitaire Opleiding," *De Vrije Kerk*, 21, (1895): 151-75, 219-44, 257-77, 434-53, 457-76.

<sup>54</sup> Reprinted in Bremmer, *Domesticus*, 393-424. That which follows in this paragraph is a brief summary of the key issues in this correspondence, also dependent on Bremmer's helpful overview of the relationship between Bavinck and Kuypers in general (*Dogmaticus*, 13-64).

knowledge of God obtained by special, biblical revelation is the proper object of theology, Bavinck also chides Ten Hoor for his dualistic separation of theology from all other forms of human knowledge and science.

To summarize our story thus far, if we can use “Amsterdam” to represent the Kuyperian attempt (in his *Encyclopaedie*) to develop a modern, Reformed, academic theology and “Kampen” to represent Ten Hoor’s *Afscheiding* vision of a purely churchly dogmatics (with Bavinck himself positioned somewhere between these two), then we are at the point where we can ask: Where does Grand Rapids stand? The title of my essay gives *my* answer to that question, and I shall now provide the evidence on which I make that judgment. (We are, I should emphasize, speaking here about only one issue—the location of theology between the church and the academy. On certain substantive issues—such as the covenant—Grand Rapids is in the same place as Kampen and opposed to Amsterdam. This is not surprising because the earliest teachers of the CRC, as Professor Faber has shown in a recent study,<sup>55</sup> were all Kampen students.

Foppe Ten Hoor, who taught dogmatics at Calvin Seminary for twenty-five years, finally produced a textbook compendium of theology.<sup>56</sup> Though Kuyper’s influence on the Christian Reformed Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was significant,<sup>57</sup> it honored Ten Hoor’s principle of subordinating theological education to the church and its confessions. This became particularly clear during the debate about the professorate of Ralph Janssen in the 1920s.<sup>58</sup> Dr. Ralph Janssen, who had earned a Ph.D. from the German University of Halle, was first appointed by the 1902 CRC Synod to teach exegetical theology at CTS.<sup>59</sup> Noteworthy is the decision that because Dr. Janssen had earned a “Doctor of Philosophy and not of Theology,” his appointment was not permanent and he “was not publicly installed.”<sup>60</sup> Suspicions about Janssen’s “unmistakable leaning toward Higher Criticism” soon surfaced as did

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<sup>55</sup> Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Neerlandia, Alberta.: Inheritance, 1996); Prof. Faber considers G. E. Boer, L. J. Hulst, G. K. Hemkes, G. Vos, W. Heyns, H. Beuker, and F. M. Ten Hoor, all of whom taught at Calvin Seminary.

<sup>56</sup> F. M. Ten Hoor, *Compendium der Gereformerde Dogmatiek*. This work was published privately and, like Kuyper’s *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, “Niet in den handel.” The Ten Hoor Archives at Heritage Hall, Calvin College and Seminary, Grand Rapids, also contain printed lectures in *Encyclopedia der Theologie* (1909); *De Geschiedenis van het Dogma* (1920); *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1918; vol. 1, 1923; vol. 2 1923); and *Hoofdedachte van Kant’s Kritiek de Zuivere Rede* (1917).

<sup>57</sup> See especially Henry Zwaanstra, *Reformed Thought and Experience*, and James Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*.

<sup>58</sup> For a thoughtful assessment of the Janssen case, see David E. Holwerda, “Hermeneutical Issues Then and Now: The Janssen Case,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 7-34. Also see, John H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), 75-79.

<sup>59</sup> *Semi-Centennial Volume*, 36ff.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

a disagreement with Ten Hoor about the relationship between theology and the church. When pressed by Ten Hoor to respond affirmatively to the propositions that “the church has authority over the Theological School and that God is the object of theology, Dr. Janssen declared he was not yet in a position to give a definite answer to these questions.” The response of Calvin’s board of trustees (Curatorium) was equal to this indefiniteness: “Curatorium did not send a recommendation [concerning Janssen’s reappointment] to the Synod of 1906, only calling attention to the fact that his time had expired.” The same synod, we should note, “re-elected Prof. Ten Hoor *ad vitam*.”<sup>61</sup> The story does not end here, however. When pressed to answer Ten Hoor’s two questions about the role of the church in theology and its proper object, the CRC synod of 1910 itself equivocated. It accepted the historic responsibility of the church for educating its ministers but fell short of Ten Hoor’s principled position, and he was not satisfied. Interestingly, in 1914, synod appointed Ralph Janssen, who had spent two years (1906-1908) studying theology at Kuyper’s Free University of Amsterdam, as Professor of Old Testament. In favor of Janssen’s appointment, it was reported, “he . . . learned a great deal.”<sup>62</sup> Apparently, however, he had not learned enough. In 1920, Janssen’s four faculty colleagues requested an investigation of his views, a process that finally led to his dismissal by Synod 1922.<sup>63</sup>

In his own defense<sup>64</sup> Janssen had appealed to Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace, among other things,<sup>65</sup> and the need for a university-oriented scientific theology. As Holwerda notes,

Janssen was clearly a university person who did not favor the ecclesiastical control of theology as a science. Since he also was not an ordained minister of the gospel, several insisted that he had no right to be a professor of theology, and they feared that his appointment meant that greater significance would now be given to the demands of scholarship and objective research than to the confessions of the church. . . . Thus the appointment of Janssen generated both high scholarly expectations and serious fears within the church. In the end, fears won out.<sup>66</sup>

During the discussion about Janssen in the first years of the 1920s, the issue of common grace emerged as a rallying point for both his defenders and detractors. “The Rev. Herman Hoeksema warned that should the doctrine of com-

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 36, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 41, 45.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>64</sup> Ralph Janssen, “De Crisis in de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Amerika” (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Printing, 1922).

<sup>65</sup> Janssen also appealed to Kuyper (and Bavinck) for support of his views on miracles and revelation. See Holwerda, “Hermeneutical Issues,” *passim*.

<sup>66</sup> Holwerda, “Hermeneutical Issues,” 11.

mon grace as taught by Abraham Kuyper not be repudiated by the church, Janssen's views would rise again and ultimately prevail."<sup>67</sup>

Though it repudiated Janssen's alleged higher-critical views of Scripture in 1922, the CRC was not of a mind to follow Hoeksema and reject Kuyperianism altogether (in particular the notion of common grace) and so only two years later affirmed the doctrine and paved the way for Hoeksema's ouster with the subsequent formation of the Protestant Reformed Church. To make sure that the doctrine of common grace did not become an excuse for un-Christian worldliness in the Christian Reformed Church, the synod of 1928 passed its famously stern declaration on "Worldly Amusements."<sup>68</sup>

Into the decade of the 1920s, therefore, the Christian Reformed Church can be said to have come to stand *between* Kampen and Amsterdam—maintaining with the former a strong confessional, ecclesiastically bound theological education but, at the same time, not closing the Kuyperian door to the broader scientific and cultural questions involved in affirming the doctrine of common grace. This *via media* was consolidated theologically when Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* became the "official" theology of the CRC's Seminary through the publication of Louis Berkhof's three-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* in 1932.<sup>69</sup> Though the introductory prolegomena section was dropped when the work was issued as a one-volume *Systematic Theology* in 1938, Berkhof became and remains to this day the standard theological manual for Calvin Seminary students. It is largely through Berkhof's manual that Herman Bavinck has influenced the theology of the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

In some respects this has had less than fortunate consequences. The four volumes of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, with their magnificent historical sweep and careful nuance, with the strong sinews and thick tissues of Bavinck's rich, catholic, Reformed vision, are reduced to a skeleton of doctrinal essentials. The flesh is missing. This is undoubtedly the reason why the "anti-scholastic gambit," encouraged by Dooyeweerd and Berkouwer alike, proved so attractive to some North American Christian Reformed students who went to Amsterdam to study Reformed philosophy and theology. Three in particular—Harry Boer, James Daane, and later, Philip Holtrop—valiantly tried to persuade the Christian Reformed Church that its fixation on a scholastic understanding of

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Agenda for Synod, 1928*, Christian Reformed Church, 4-56.

<sup>69</sup> For the history of publication of Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* see Richard A. Muller's preface to the new combined (including the prolegomena section) edition of 1996 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), v-viii. Further reflection on Berkhof as a theologian and his relationship to Bavinck can be found in Henry Zwaanstra, "Louis Berkhof," in *Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 153-71.

doctrine in general and a decretal view of election in particular<sup>70</sup> was detrimental to a joyful, Christ-centered, positive, evangelistic form of Christian discipleship. In addition to the influences from neo-orthodox, semi-Barthians such as Edward Dowey<sup>71</sup> and Thomas Torrance,<sup>72</sup> the hand of Berkouwer is clearly evident in this critique. Though it is difficult to verify this by the canons of rigorous historical scholarship and appeal to specific texts, I would judge that a generation of CTS students, roughly in the time period from 1955 to 1980, were infected by the antischolastic virus, and it was the scholastic theology of Louis Berkhof in particular that was under attack.<sup>73</sup> Berkouwer's *Studies in Dogmatics* were a useful ally in this cause, and the main issue around which the critique centered was the doctrine of predestination. Here the *revisionist* exegesis of Herman Ridderbos on Romans 9<sup>74</sup> joined with Berkouwer's volume on *Divine Election*<sup>75</sup> against the scholastic tradition of Dordt.

The critique also came from the quarter of philosophy. A center for reformational philosophy (the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship; later simply the Institute for Christian Studies [ICS]), inspired by the work of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, was established in Toronto in 1967. Here, too, Reformed scholasticism with its many dualisms was the chief object of attack.<sup>76</sup>

The crucial question that remains is: What about the CRC itself? Did it succumb to the attack on scholasticism and, like the GKN, move toward a revised

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<sup>70</sup> See James Daane, *The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973); Harry R. Boer, *The Doctrine of Reprobation in the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Phil Holtrop, "Toward a Biblical Conception of Truth, and a New Mood for Doing Theology," in *The Bolsec Controversy on Predestination, from 1551-55*, appendix 5 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

<sup>71</sup> E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).

<sup>72</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949); idem., *The Incarnation* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981).

<sup>73</sup> A personal anecdote may be helpful here. I graduated from CTS in 1973 and returned after serving two churches to pursue a Th.M. in 1976. My thesis project on the biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos arose directly out of a desire to overcome the personal, theological tension I experienced between my love for biblical theology, particularly the Old Testament, and the experience of finding that preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism week after week made my study of dogmatics not only useful but also interesting and exciting. Preaching turned me toward systematic theology. See John Bolt, "Implications of Reformed Biblical Theology for the Definition, Method, and Organization of Reformed Dogmatic Theology with Special Reference to the Biblical Theology of Geerhardus Vos," (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1977).

<sup>74</sup> See Herman Ridderbos, *Romeinen* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), and idem., *Paulus: Ontwerp van zijn Theologie*, 2de druk (Kampen: Kok, 1971), 380-96.

<sup>75</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *De Verkiezing Gods* (Kampen: Kok, 1955).

<sup>76</sup> Among the works of influential AACS/ICS supporters that reflect this passion are John Vanderstelt, *Philosophy and Scripture* and Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

formula for confessional subscription, thus a weakening of the traditional understanding of biblical authority by substituting a relational notion of troth for truth? Did this, finally, result in an erosion of ethical principles and commandments in such areas as homosexual practice and euthanasia?

There were efforts to move the CRC community in the same direction. Views of Scripture similar to that found in *God met ons* can be seen in ICS faculty member Hendrik Hart's book, *Setting Our Sights by the Morning Star*<sup>77</sup> and in Philip Holtrop's critique of the Reformed dogmatic tradition in his essay on troth as the proper mode and mood of doing truth.<sup>78</sup> ICS staff members Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton's more recent book on Scripture in a postmodern world, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*,<sup>79</sup> carries the argument even further by rejecting philosophical realism and antirealism in favor of what they call a covenantal or relational view of knowledge.

However, the synodical decisions of the CRC did not follow that pattern. Efforts to change the CRC's understanding of scriptural authority along existential-ethical lines were decisively rejected by the CRC synods of 1961 and 1973 when they accepted the two study committee reports "The Inspiration and Infallibility of Scripture" in 1961 and "The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority" in 1972.<sup>80</sup> Harry Boer's attempt to change the CRC formula of subscription as well as his gravamen against the teaching of reprobation in the Canons of Dordt were rejected by the synods of 1976 and 1980 respectively.<sup>81</sup> The 1973 CRC synodical decision about the immorality of homosexual practice<sup>82</sup> has withstood a number of efforts to change it, and, on each of these matters, significant leadership for maintaining the traditional Reformed confessional position has come from the faculty of Calvin Seminary.<sup>83</sup> It is also

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<sup>77</sup> Toronto: Patmos, 1989; The subtitle of the book is significant: "Reflections on the role of the Bible in post-modern times."

<sup>78</sup> See note 70, *supra*.

<sup>79</sup> Downer's Grove, Ill.: 1995. Also see the critical review of the Walsh-Middleton book by CTS faculty member John Cooper, *Calvin Theological Journal* 31 (November 1996): 287-93.

<sup>80</sup> *Acts of Synod, 1961*, 76-79; *Acts of Synod, 1972*, 65-70.

<sup>81</sup> On the Formula of Subscription see *Acts of Synod, 1973*, 729-32; *Acts of Synod, 1974*, 101-5; *Acts of Synod, 1976*, 66-70. On the Boer Gravamen against Dordt's teaching of reprobation see *Acts of Synod, 1977*, 665-79; *Agenda for Synod, 1980*, 72-76; *Acts of Synod, 1980*, 486-558. On the broader issue of Boer's critique of Reformed Orthodoxy see John Bolt, "A Smoldering Ember: Harry Boer's Continuing Battle with the Reformed Tradition," *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 (April 1991): 111-24.

<sup>82</sup> *Agenda for Synod, 1973*, 50-53, *Acts of Synod, 1973*, 609-53.

<sup>83</sup> While I have provided hints in this essay to show that Grand Rapids stands *between* Kampen and Amsterdam, it is of course the case that on the point of confessional, ecclesiastical loyalty as the higher virtue (than modern academic respectability) Grand Rapids (i.e., CTS) is closer to Kampen than to Amsterdam. How and to what extent Grand Rapids also distances itself from Kampen and stands with Kuyperian Amsterdam will have to be the subject of another essay on the broader impact of Kuyper's neo-Calvinism on North America.

noteworthy that calls for revision on these moral issues often come from the same persons who criticize the theological tradition for its scholasticism. What also needs to be noted, however, is that outspoken revisionists, whether from the reformational philosophy tradition or from the ethical-existential (Berkouwer?) camp, have not received church appointments at Calvin Seminary.

### V. Conclusion: The Irony of History

In conclusion, I would like to underscore an observation made by historian Dr. G. Puchinger about a profound irony with respect to Bavinck's theology. "History has its ironies but it cannot be denied: the most ecumenical protestant dogmatic theology in fact appeared in Kampen, the place where theology was practiced in the most isolationist manner."<sup>84</sup> The history of Herman Bavinck's reception and influence in North America, in comparison with the Dutch GKN, suggests a similar irony: Using one dimension of Bavinck self-consciously to further a program of Reformed *aggiornamento*, as the Dutch GKN did, may in fact be far less successful as a strategy for church renewal or ecumenicity than a serious effort to engage this greatest of modern Reformed theologians *theologically*. Here I come full circle to the point I made at the beginning of this essay: the remarkable and truly ecumenical character of the current translation project of Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* into English. At his dissertation defense a few years ago, a CTS doctoral candidate, having the Dutch Reformed debate about truth in the back of his mind, defended the proposition: "De waarheid is niet trouw" ("Truth is not troth/faithful"<sup>85</sup>). I love a good intelligent dogmatic double entendre and this one is exceptional. But, the lesson I draw from an overview of the use and misuse of Bavinck's theology in our Reformed world during this century, on both sides of the Atlantic, is straightforward and is its direct opposite: "Only the truth is faithful" ("Alleen de waarheid is trouw"). That conclusion is confirmed for me by the One who said:

ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωὴ  
(John 14:6)

<sup>84</sup> Cited by George Harinck, "Herman Bavincks indrukken van Amerika anno 1892," *Documentatieblad voor de Nederlandsche Kerkgeschiedenis na 1800*, 47 (December 1997): 27: "Er zit ironie in de gang der historie, maar het valt niet te ontkennen: de meest oecumenische protestantse dogmatiek verscheen toch maar in Kampen, waar op de meest isolationistische wijze aan theologie werd gedaan."

<sup>85</sup> The Dutch word "trouw" serves both as a noun meaning "loyalty," "fidelity," or, in older English, "troth," and as an adjective meaning "faithful," "true" or "trustworthy."