

Neo-Calvinism and Roman Catholicism

Edited by

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Bavinck's View of the Relation Between Scripture and Tradition

Hans Burger

1 Introduction

The hermeneutical significance of church and tradition has been emphasized by many in recent decades. Reacting to (post)modern individualism and relativism in the Christian life, and also to the consequences of a historical-critical reading of Scripture in theology, postliberal theologians (and others in their footsteps) have been engaged in reconsidering the role of the interpretative community and its tradition.¹ However, the theme of Scripture and tradition remains a controversial one between neo-Calvinism and Roman Catholicism. This chapter will explore how neo-Calvinists understood the relation of Scripture and tradition, and evaluate their position on this topic in light of recent developments.

To do so, this chapter will focus on Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, and does so noting that this particular topic has not yet received detailed attention in scholarship on Bavinck.² This neglect is striking given that, according to

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- 1 To mention some examples of the literature on this theme: A.K.M. Adam, S.E. Fowl, K.J. Vanhoozer, F. Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2006); C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995); C. Houtman, *de Schrift wordt geschreven: Op zoek naar een christelijke hermeneutiek van het Oude Testament* (Zoetermeer: Meinema 2006); R.W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2010); A. Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark 2009); D. Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation. A Theological Exploration. Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Chichester/Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); D.J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian practice* (Nottingham: Apollos 2008); D.J. Treier, "What is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction," *IJST* 12 (2010), 144–161; K.J. Vanhoozer, *The drama of doctrine: a canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); A. Yong, *Spirit – Word – Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*. Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology & Biblical Studies (Aldershot/Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).
 - 2 On Bavinck and Scripture, see J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie: de openbarings- en Schriftbeschouwing van Herman Bavinck in vergelijking met die der ethische theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn N.V., 1968); S. Meijers, *Objectiviteit en existentialiteit:*

Vroom, Bavinck does indeed ascribe an important role to tradition.³ Hence, by delving into the relation between Scripture and tradition, this chapter aims to fill that lacuna in Bavinck scholarship.

The influence of neo-Thomistic philosophy is often mentioned in discussions regarding the relationship between Bavinck and Roman Catholicism. Bremmer detects this neo-Thomistic influence in Bavinck's critical realism, as well as in his doctrines of the principia, and the divine ideas, arguing that it determined the basic structure of his dogmatics.⁴ Van den Belt, however, has shown that parallels between Bavinck and neo-Thomism can also be traced back to the Aristotelianism that marked Reformed Scholasticism. Moreover, he doubts whether Bremmer is right in suggesting that Bavinck's theological epistemology rests on philosophy. Instead, van den Belt emphasizes the interwovenness of Bavinck's theological and philosophical epistemology.⁵ Similarly, Mattson is critical of Bremmer, because he too easily lumps neo-Thomism and Reformed Scholasticism together.⁶ Eglinton makes clear that Bavinck deals critically with the Roman Catholic dualism of reason and faith, nature and super-nature.⁷ Finally, Sutanto follows Mattson and Eglinton in mentioning

een onderzoek naar hun verhouding in de theologie van Herman Bavinck en in door hem beïnvloede concepties (Kampen: Kok 1979); D. van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek: schriftbeschouwing en schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G.C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok 2003); H. van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed theology: Truth and Trust*. Studies in Reformed Theology, 17 (Leiden: Brill 2008); H. Burger, "Discernment in the Light of an Authoritative Revelation? Rethinking the Authority of Scripture," in Z. Görzdi et al. (eds.), *Roads to Reconciliation Between Groups in Conflict // Theology in a World of Ideologies: Authorization or Critique?* Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau, Band 133 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2021), 214–226.

- 3 H.M. Vroom, "De gelezen schrift als principium theologiae," in M.E. Brinkman (ed.), *100 jaar theologie: aspecten van een eeuw theologie in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1892–1992)* (Kampen: Kok 1992), 96–160 (134–39).
- 4 R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok 1961), 315, 328–30, 386. Bremmer refers to works by van der Walt, Heideman, Kristensen and Dooyeweerd as his sources. He mentions two books that were important to Bavinck: Matteo Liberatore, *Die Erkenntnisz-Theorie der heiligen Thomas von Aquin* and Bellaar Spruyt, *Proeve van eene geschiedenis van de leer der aangeboren begrippen*. Veenhof refers to Bremmer and mentions, moreover, that Bavinck saw a parallel between neo-Thomism and neo-Calvinism. See Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 114–15.
- 5 Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 237–38, 281–82.
- 6 B.G. Mattson, *Restored to our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics*. Studies in Reformed Theology, 21 (Leiden: Brill 2012), 14–17.
- 7 J. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif*. T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, 17 (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2012), 40–44; J. Eglinton, "How many Bavincks? *de Gemeene Genade* and the "Two Bavincks" Hypothesis," in J. Bowlin (ed.), *The Kuyper Center Review: Volume 2 Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 279–302 (290–94).

similar criticisms of Aquinas by Bavinck.⁸ The influence of neo-Thomism is a neglected theme in secondary literature dealing the theme of Scripture and tradition within neo-Calvinism.

Some scholars have noted a degree of openness towards Roman Catholic ideas concerning church and tradition in Bavinck's theology. Veenhof mentions that Bavinck is aware of his historicity, and enters into a discussion with Roman Catholicism. He argues that an Aristotelian-Thomistic influence can be traced especially in the prolegomena to Bavinck's *Dogmatics*.⁹ Van den Belt quotes a letter from Bavinck to Kuyper written in 1885 in which Bavinck discusses, 'an ecclesiastical element or factor in the dogmas'. There, it seems, Bavinck wrestles with Scripture as principium of theology and the church as possible principium.¹⁰ Consequently, it is not strange to expect some positive influence of Roman Catholic theology concerning the relationship between Scripture and tradition.

In investigating Bavinck's understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, particularly as it relates to Roman Catholic theology, this chapter will limit its purview to the first volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, concentrating on Bavinck's doctrine of the principia, as handled in chapters 1–3. The next section will provide an analysis of Bavinck's view of Scripture and tradition as he develops it in part 1 of his *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*. The third section is an evaluation of his position from a contemporary perspective.

2 Bavinck

2.1 *Theological Principles*

Bavinck distinguished three theological principles: God is theology's *principium essendi*, God's revelation is the *principium cognoscendi externum*, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit is the *principium cognoscendi internum*.¹¹ These principles apply to all knowledge of God: they are also the principles of

8 N.G. Sutanto, *God and Knowledge. Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology*. T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2020), 77–93. Concerning Bavinck's critical realism, Sutanto situates Bavinck between naïve realism and idealistic subjectivism. Bavinck's organic holism enabled him to integrate both classical realist elements and elements of the absolute idealism of Eduard von Hartmann. See Sutanto, *God and Knowledge*, 123–149.

9 Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 107, 120, 126.

10 Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 253.

11 On the principles, see Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 155–81; van den Belt, *The authority of Scripture*, 236–50; van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 70–132; W. Huttinga,

religion. God knows himself in his own divine consciousness (*theologia archetypa*), only God can disclose his self-knowledge by revelation and by bringing this self-knowledge into the human consciousness. Bavinck emphasizes that all these three principles presuppose that it is God himself who acts in knowledge, revelation and illumination.¹² Theological knowledge and the absolute certainty of religion both rest on the notion of '*Deus dixit*'.¹³

Dealing with these principles, Bavinck works towards a Trinitarian conclusion. Both his general treatment of principles, and of principles in religion, conclude with an explicit account of how these relate to the Trinity: in the case of the Father, God's self-knowledge; in the case of the Logos (or the Son), revelation; and in the case of the Holy Spirit, illumination.¹⁴

On this point, Bremmer saw Roman Catholic influence. In his account, Bavinck followed Thomas in his choice for Aristotelian realism.¹⁵ Van den Belt however, has shown that Bavinck's sources were drawn from the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy, and more recently, from Abraham Kuiper.¹⁶ Nevertheless, according to van den Belt, the differentiation of one *principium cognoscendi* into an external and an internal principle are a distinct innovation on Bavinck's part.¹⁷ Van den Belt understands this in the light of Bavinck's discussion with the Ethical Theology movement: Bavinck 'fences his position off

Participation and Communicability: Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the Relation between God and the World (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn 2014), 86–91, 102–105

- 12 H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1: Prologomena*. J. Bolt (ed.); J. Vriend (tr.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 212–14, 276–79. Bavinck's understanding of revelation and religion does not presuppose sin; against van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 160, 172; see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 276–79.
- 13 In the English translation, this characteristic '*deus dixit*', used by Bavinck in its original Latin form, is muted by the editor's preference to render it in English; see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 30, 46, 590. In the Dutch edition, see H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek: Eerste deel* (Kampen: Kok 1928, 4th edn.), 5, 22, 559.
- 14 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 213–14, 233, 279. For the influence of Bavinck's trinitarian doctrine of revelation on Karl Barth, see J. Vissers, "Karl Barth's Appreciative Use of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010), 79–86.
- 15 Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 161.
- 16 Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 242–250; on Kuiper's doctrine of scripture see further H. Burger, "Kuiper's Anti-Revolutionary Doctrine of Scripture," in J. Eglinton, G. Harinck (eds.), *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2014), 127–42; van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 68–174.
- 17 Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 248. One can doubt whether this differentiation is really an innovation. According to van den Belt, Kuiper only had one principle. Vroom, however, mentions a comparable differentiation in Kuiper, between the *principium theologiae materiale* (Scripture) and the *principium theologiae formale* (listening in faith). See H.M. Vroom, *de schrift alleen? Een vergelijkend onderzoek naar de toetsing van theologische uitspraken volgens de openbaringstheologische visie van Torrance en de hermeneutisch-the-*

from subjectivism, but the *principium internum* enables Bavinck to give the religious subject a positive place and acknowledge an element of truth in Ethical Theology'.¹⁸ Bavinck himself refers to Herbert Spencer, Schopenhauer and Kant in the first section of his chapter on the internal principle.¹⁹ Accordingly, it seems better to interpret Bavinck's innovation more generally as an acknowledgment of an element of truth in the post-Kantian turn to the subject. Here, it is difficult to find a reason to suppose a particular Roman Catholic influence on Bavinck.

Instead, Bavinck's doctrine of the principia seems typically Protestant: the emphasis falls entirely on the acts of God. A mediating role for community or tradition does not come into play. It has to be said that Bavinck relativizes the role of the church as well as the role of Scripture, and even argues that Scripture can only be '*causa efficiens instrumentalis*' of theology. He leaves open the question of whether God's revelation comes to individual human beings or to humanity in general,²⁰ and in relation to these principles, does not deal with the polarity of the community and the individual. Still, the differentiation of the *principium cognitionis* into objective and subjective tends towards an individual interpretation. Again, this does not favour a mediating role for church or communion. Again, on this point there are no clear traces of a positive interaction with Roman Catholic theology.

2.2 *Christology and Pneumatology*

Within his Trinitarian framework, Bavinck closely links objective revelation to Christology, and its subjective counterpart to pneumatology. The completeness of the revelation and work of God in Christ leads directly to the completeness of the Scriptures. Bavinck repeatedly demonstrates a Christological understanding of the Scriptures, for example, in the parallel between incarnation and inscripturation.²¹ Bavinck's understanding of revelation and soteriology

ologische opvattingen van Van Buren, Ebeling, Moltmann en Pannenberg (Kampen: Kok 1978), 69–72; Vroom, "De gelezen schrift," 120.

18 Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 249.

19 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 501–503.

20 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 212–13, esp. footnote 14.

21 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 380–81, 434. A comparable differentiation of revelation and pneumatology can be found in Kuyper's pneumatologically embedded foundationalism. Kuyper's doctrine of revelation, however, is less christological than Bavinck's. Cf. Burger, "Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Doctrine of Scripture", 131–37. Van Keulen does emphasize the importance of pneumatology for Bavinck's theological epistemology, but overlooks the centrality of Christology for Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture, although he mentions the parallel between incarnation and inscripturation. Van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 111–12, 154–55, 172.

are almost identical: revelation is the gift of new life. Just as Christ has become head of the communion of the church, so God's revelation is completed in the Scriptures. No new constitutive elements can be added: both Christ's work and God's revelation are finished. Bavinck understands the completion of the canon as a consequence of Christ's completed work. After the economy of the Son, the church entered a new dispensation, the economy of the Spirit. The church is now formed as the body of Christ. Prophecy and miracles are no longer necessary and cannot enrich God's revelation. The work of the Spirit is to glorify Christ and to make us share in Christ. Consequently, the completion of revelation is not the completion of God's work. God's aim is the new creation, in which God will live with his people. In the economy of the Spirit, the content of revelation has to be realized in the life and consciousness of humanity. The Spirit does not reveal new mysteries, but rather, applies the treasures of salvation.²² 'There is no knowledge of Christ apart from Scripture, no fellowship with him except by fellowship in the word of the apostles.'²³

This Christological understanding of revelation and Scripture is the core element of Bavinck's discussion with Roman Catholicism concerning the hermeneutical significance of tradition and church, which provided him with direction as he developed his own position.

2.3 *Tradition*

The difference between the two dispensations of the economy of Christology and pneumatology leads Bavinck to a differentiated concept of tradition. Before the completion of the canon, tradition and Scripture were like two streams of water, flowing side by side. But like the incarnation, revelation has to adopt the deficient form of Scripture. When the process of inscripturation came to an end, these two streams became one. Now we only come to know the truth through the reading of the Scriptures. Tradition cannot add anything to the word of God, just as nothing can be added to the person and work of Christ. The Holy Spirit's special work of inspiration has come to an end.²⁴

Nonetheless, Bavinck does emphasize the hermeneutical significance of tradition. This tradition flows from the Scriptures as a river from its source, and has to be shaped by them. The tradition 'is the method by which the Holy Spirit causes the truth of Scripture to pass into the consciousness and life of the church.'²⁵ We inherit everything from the preceding generations. We

22 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 290, 346–47, 382–85, 490–91, 505–506, 587–88.

23 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 472.

24 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 88, 346–48, 383, 482, 485–86.

25 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 494.

always read the Scriptures within the perspective that we received from the communion of the church in which we were raised. Theologians 'look at Scripture with the aid of the glasses that their churches have put on them'.²⁶ Living in a fractured church with many traditions, the best each can do to serve the unity of the church is by trying to think 'through the faith of his own church and [make] the most accurate presentation of it'.²⁷ Reading Scripture, we start with the perspective of the confession and the life of our own church, but we need to read in unity with the worldwide catholic communion of the church. Bavinck believed that despite aberrations, the Christian tradition does make progress in interpreting the Bible. In summary, the apostles' Christological tradition came to an end. Nothing can be added to the objective revelation of God's truth. Pneumatologically, however, the tradition is a tradition of interpretation that is needed if we are to understand revelation. Hermeneutically, the tradition is very significant, for in the tradition it is the Holy Spirit who guides in all truth.²⁸

Consequently, Bavinck's concept of tradition is differentiated, in the first place by two dispensations, the economy of Christ and of the Spirit; and in the second place pneumatologically by the distinction between inspiration and illumination.

Due to his Christological emphasis on the completeness of Scripture, Bavinck is critical of a concept of tradition that sets it alongside Scripture as a second source. In line with Jesus and the apostles, he argues, the Christian church never acknowledged the Jewish tradition as we find it now in Mishna and Gemara. Unjustly, this Jewish tradition had become a second source alongside the Tanakh, suggesting its insufficiency. During the genesis of the Old Testament, revelation and Scripture were two different streams. Still, to preserve God's revelation and to protect it against human sinfulness, it had to become Scripture. The same is the case with the New Testament: the apostles' oral tradition had to be written down to make it lastingly available in an uncorrupted form. As such, the tradition of the apostles became part of Scripture. Bavinck claims that until the Council of Trent, the church always acknowledged the supreme authority of Scripture, at least theoretically.²⁹

26 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 82.

27 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 85.

28 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 82, 85–87, 93, 119–20, 379–80, 493. Despite its significance, according to Bavinck, in reproducing the thought of the church, theology should not start with tradition to go back to the Bible, but begin with the source and then follow the river that proceeds from it, see 93.

29 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 402–408, 452, 470–72.

The Council of Trent changed, which was affirmed, in turn, by the First Vatican Council of 1870, where the infallibility of the pope as head of the church was proclaimed. For Bavinck, a theologian born in 1854, this decision (reached in 1870) was a relatively recent one. In his view, Rome teaches the insufficiency of the Scriptures, which need to be flanked by another source, namely, the tradition of the church. Rome claims the continuity of the apostolic tradition in the church, which Bavinck thought causes the difficulty of selecting who determines what counts as infallible tradition: the bishops, or a council? As such, Bavinck sketches a development in which Rome ultimately decided to proclaim the infallibility of the pope in order to create clarity and certainty. The church and the tradition replace the Scriptures, and the pope replaces Christ, leading Bavinck to conclude that the infallible pope is the *principium formale* of Roman Catholicism.³⁰

This particular conclusion sheds light on why Bavinck only twice briefly presents a positive concept of tradition in his doctrine of principles.³¹ In the Introduction to his dogmatics, in which Bavinck gives a general overview of the field, he develops a concept of tradition more directly. When dealing with the principles of theology, however, Bavinck seems reluctant to do so.

2.4 Church

Closely related to his differentiated concept of tradition is Bavinck's view of the relationship between Scripture and church. Bavinck acknowledges the hermeneutical significance of the church. At the same time, he maintains the unique position of the Scriptures. 'Pedagogically the church is prior to Scripture. But in the logical order, Scripture is the sole foundation (*principium unicum*) of church and theology'.³²

In this context, Bavinck quotes Augustine's dictum several times: 'I indeed would not have believed the gospel, had not the authority of the church moved me'.³³ Of course, church and tradition cannot be separated here. As has already

30 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 81, 452–55, 470–72, 481–85, 487–88, 492–93. Marcel Sarot confirms this analysis, comparing the infallibility of the pope with the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, seeing both as forms of foundationalism. See M. Sarot, "Christian Fundamentalism as a Reaction to the Enlightenment," in B. Becking (ed.), *Orthodoxy, Liberalism, and Adaptation: Essays on Ways of Worldmaking in Times of Change from Biblical, Historical and Systematic Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 249–267 (265).

31 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 379–80, 493.

32 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 86. Cf. 93.

33 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 456, 510. Van den Belt, *The authority of Scripture*, 260–62. Further on Bavinck, Augustine and the church, see M.S. Chen "Herman Bavinck and Augustine on Epistemology," *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011), 96–106.

been seen, it is in the church that we receive our perspective for reading the Scriptures. Bavinck emphasizes over against Rome that ‘church’ does not refer to the pope or to an institution, but to the communion of believers. In the first place, this starts with one’s own local denomination, but in the end has in view the entire catholic church. To understand the length and depth and height and breadth of the love of God, we need the communion of all saints. Further, in the church as organism, objective revelation becomes part of the consciousness of humanity. Christ and the Spirit, revelation and illumination, word and consciousness belong closely together, as do Scripture and the church. In the dispensation of the Spirit, ‘revelation ... is continued jointly in Scripture and in the church. Apart from the church, Scripture is an enigma and an offense... Conversely, the life of the church is a complete mystery unless Scripture sheds its light upon it. Scripture is the light of the church, the church is the life of Scripture... Scripture explains the church, the church understands Scripture.’³⁴ As such, the church remains important for believers throughout their lives. The Holy Spirit prepares the parousia, keeping Scripture and church closely together. In conclusion, Bavinck highly values the hermeneutical significance of the church.³⁵

At the same time, it is Scripture, and not the church, that is the principle of theology. Scripture is *autopistos*, but the church is not. Bavinck is very keen to maintain the right order of Scripture and church. The church lives under the authority of the Scriptures. The Scriptures did not come to existence within the church, but are God’s gift to the church. However, he argues, Rome increasingly changed this order by claiming that temporally and logically the church precedes the Scriptures. According to Bavinck, Rome makes the Scriptures dependent on the church, and even denies that the church needs the Scriptures. Due to their obscure character, the Scriptures need the church as its interpreter. Particularly on the issue of Scripture and church, he believes, Rome is the model of error. In this context, Bavinck often mentions Schleiermacher and Rome together, accusing Schleiermacher of vigorously supporting Rome by changing the order of Scripture and church, in the process giving the church the primacy. To reinforce Rome’s claim on this particular point, it seems, was perhaps the worst thing a Protestant could do.³⁶

34 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 384.

35 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 31, 46, 83, 85–86, 346–47, 383–85, 457–58, 505–506.

36 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 30, 88, 100, 455–57, 468–69, 471, 476, 487–88.

2.5 *Principium Internum*

Unlike reason, feeling or will, the internal *principium cognoscendi* is not a natural anthropological given. Again, Bavinck relates this principium to the acts of the triune God, although the principium is not the act itself, but rather, its result: faith (or rebirth, purity of heart, love for the will of God). The acts of the *logos* result in divine revelation as we find it especially in the Scriptures. However, he also argues that the Spirit is also active – the *testimonium spiritus sancti* – which results in faith.³⁷ Faith as *fides salvifica* is the ‘soul’s union with the person of Christ according to the Scriptures and with the Scriptures as the Word of Christ’. Its object was, ‘the grace of God in Christ; its foundation the witness of God in his Word; its author the Holy Spirit’.³⁸ Consequently, faith is more than believing that what the church and the Scriptures say is true. Bavinck is critical of the Roman Catholic concept of faith. According to Bavinck, this is no more than a *fides historica*, a rational assent of a suprarational, mysterious doctrine. Salvific faith has its own unshakable certainty due to the work of God both in the revelation (*‘deus dixit’*) and in the *testimonium spiritus sancti*.³⁹

Because of this unshakable certainty, the testimony of the church can never be the ground of faith. According to Bavinck, in the end Rome and Reformation both acknowledge that only the Holy Spirit can give the strong convictions of faith. Again, Bavinck acknowledges the role of the church, but sees its pedagogical function as embedded in the work of the Spirit. The *testimonium spiritus sancti* is threefold: first, it is the testimony of the Spirit about the Scriptures as divine in content and form; second, it includes the testimony of the Spirit through the church; and third, the Spirit testifies about the Scriptures in the heart of every individual believer.⁴⁰

37 Van den Belt fears that the subjective element will lead to subjectivism, due to the dualism of an objective and subjective approach to faith. See van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 290–294. However, it is important to notice that, according to the Bavinck, the religion of the sinner who becomes Christian is the result of God’s Trinitarian act. The subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit as well as faith are the results of what God has done in a sinner. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 278–79, 565–66, 570, 587–91.

38 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 573; cf. Dalferth’s emphasis on the eschatological character of the Christian faith, to distinguish faith in Jesus Christ from a doxastic (or affective or fiducial) understanding of faith. See I.U. Dalferth, “Über Einheit und Vielfalt des christlichen Glaubens. Eine Problemskizze,” in W. Härle, R. Preul (eds.), *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie IV* (Marburg: N.G. Erwert Verlag, 1992), 99–137.

39 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 571–78.

40 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 579–82, 585–86, 591–92, 596–98.

2.6 Rome

Considering this analysis of Bavinck's position, we can conclude that in his doctrine of principles, Bavinck is deeply critical of Rome. The decisions of Trent regarding tradition as a second source and – relatively recently in Bavinck's own experience – the First Vatican Council of 1870 on papal infallibility determine his view of the Roman Catholic position. The developments after Trent prove to him the unreliability of the church and her tradition. Moreover, in his view, these developments showed that the church does not need the tradition as a source alongside the Scriptures. Only the dogmas concerning the Virgin Mary and the pope need the tradition; the other dogmas only make explicit what we find embedded in the Scriptures.⁴¹

As has been seen, this critical evaluation almost prevents Bavinck from developing a positive concept of tradition in his chapters on the principles of theology. Marcel Sarot has shown that in the climate of foundationalism, Rome sought its epistemological certainty in the infallibility of the pope, whereas evangelical and Reformed theologians took the infallibility of Scripture as their foundation.⁴² Bavinck's position is too nuanced to accuse him of foundationalism.⁴³ However, it is true that a focus on epistemological questions can be found in *Reformed Dogmatics*. In his context, and in his doctrine of the principles, he could not value the position of Rome positively, although his introduction and his method indicate the hermeneutical significance of church and tradition.

3 Constructive Evaluation

Does Bavinck's position help us to understand the hermeneutical significance of church and tradition today? In his own evaluation of Bavinck, van den Belt asks, 'how this renewed emphasis on the Church can be made fruitful, without returning to the ... position in which the church overrules the authority of Scripture'.⁴⁴

41 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 471–72, 484–88, 490–91.

42 Sarot, "Christian Fundamentalism," 261–65.

43 In his 'The biblical criticism of the present day,' Kuyper defends a pneumatologically embedded foundationalism; see A. Kuyper, 'The biblical criticism of the present day,' in *The Bibliotheca Sacra* 61 (1904), no. 243, July 1904, [409]–442; no. 244, October 1904, 666–688. Burger, "Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Doctrine of Scripture".

44 Van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture*, 296.

Bavinck tried to understand the hermeneutical significance of church and tradition within his modern context, with its focus on epistemology, foundations and certainty. Both the Roman Catholic defence of the infallibility of the pope, and the Kuyperian defence of Scripture, breathe this climate and share its quest for absolute certainty.⁴⁵ That this climate influenced Bavinck is evidenced by the fact that in the chapters on the principia, he develops his own positive account, albeit briefly, at the end of chapter 2.⁴⁶

In offering a constructive way forward, the remainder of this chapter will evaluate and build on Bavinck from a broader soteriological (rather than epistemological) perspective. It will do so presupposing that God uses the Scriptures to let us participate in Christ and to renew our minds in accordance with the mind of Christ. Stated differently, this is to say that God exercises the authority of his kingdom through his word to enable us to be his fellow workers.⁴⁷ Such a perspective can build on passages in Bavinck that indicate the primacy of life and salvation over knowledge and revelation, although his framework favours revelation and knowledge. How does Bavinck help us to understand the relation between Scripture and tradition within this perspective?

1. Bavinck relates his doctrine of the three principia to the Trinity, the Scriptures to the dispensation of the Son, and the *testimonium spiritus sancti* with the dispensation of the Spirit. His own reflections on inspiration and mystical union, however, show that this scheme is too simple. In God's work, we always meet Father, Son and Spirit in a 'mutually single act'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to keep to Bavinck's Trinitarian emphasis. In Christ, in the Scriptures, in the church and in our own lives, we always meet and are always dependent on God's Trinitarian acts.
2. Essential to Bavinck's position is the relation between the completed work of Christ and the completeness of the Scriptures, and hence between the sufficiency of salvation in Christ and the sufficiency of Scripture.

45 Cf. Burger, "Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Doctrine of Scripture"; Sarot, "Christian Fundamentalism".

46 H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 590–99. On Bavinck and fundamentalism, see D. van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek*, 168–71.

47 H. Burger, "A Soteriological Perspective on our Understanding," in M. te Velde, G. H. Visscher (eds.), *Correctly Handling the Word of Truth: Reformed Hermeneutics Today* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 195–207; Burger, "Discernment in the Light of an Authoritative Revelation"; Vanhoozer, *The drama of doctrine*, 103–110, 245–265, 284–285, 301–304, 332–335, 363–399; N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 21–23.

48 R.W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology. Volume 1 The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111.

This Christological emphasis is important to maintain: in Christ we find everything we need. Christ is and remains our representative, who constitutes us as his represented people. Nothing needs to be added to his person and work for our salvation. The Spirit takes from Christ, but never replaces him (John 16:14).⁴⁹ This makes a two-source theory of revelation impossible, as everything we need to know concerning our salvation in Christ is contained by Scripture.⁵⁰

3. Christ makes us participate in his identity and story by his Spirit. The head of the church is formed first, and then the body of Christ, Bavinck writes. In this process of participation, Christ and the Spirit are both active in using the Scriptures and the community of the church. Bavinck's organic thinking in connection to the mystical union with Christ makes it possible to deny primacy both to the individual and the community, because both are rooted in Christ. Still, the central question now concerns the relationship between Christ, the Spirit, the Scriptures, and the church and her tradition and their respective roles in this process of participation.
4. In Bavinck's reflections, an important difference between Christ, the Spirit and the Scriptures on the one hand, and the church and her tradition on the other, has to be noted: as far as our salvation is concerned, the church and her tradition cannot be trusted as infallible, whereas the Son and the Spirit and the divinely inspired Scriptures are infallible. Here the transcendence of the salvation *extra nos* and the critical otherness of God and his truth are at stake. In this critical instance, the church and

49 H. Burger, *Being in Christ. A Biblical and Systematic Investigation in a Reformed Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 460–64, 481, 487. Here, O'Donovan even uses the pairing of objective/subjective to refer to what is reality in Christ as our representative (objectively), and to what is realized in us by our participation in Christ through the Spirit (subjectively). Bavinck himself refers twice to John 16.14 to indicate the relationship between Christ and the Spirit, see H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol 1*, 347, 427. See further E. Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism: disputed questions*. Studies in Reformed Theology, 24 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 306–307.

50 According to Echeverria, the two-source theory is now rejected by a part of Roman Catholic theology. Echeverria distinguishes a material sufficiency (all truth of salvation is contained in Scripture) from a formal insufficiency (for its interpretation, Scripture needs the church). Echeverria claims that the Council of Trent does not necessarily lead to the doctrine of such a two-source theory. However, Ratzinger's criticism of Vatican II indicates a new problem: now the primacy of Scripture is threatened, Scripture being swallowed up into the tradition. See Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism*, 281–83, 295–303. And further C. Trimp, *Betwist schriftgezag: een bundel opstellen over de autoriteit van de bijbel* (Groningen: de Vuurbaak, 1970), 192–221.

her tradition need to lay bare their human ambivalence.⁵¹ In line with e.g. John 10 and 15, Bavinck emphasizes that we have communion with Christ only through the word of Scripture. In this line, the normativity of the Scriptures as critical ‘*Gegenüber*’ of church and tradition has to be maintained.

5. As has been seen, Bavinck emphasizes that Scripture is the light of the church and the church is the life of Scripture. The importance of the church’s particular mediating and formative role must be acknowledged. *Sola scriptura* can never mean *solo scriptura*, as though it should be understood as an ‘anti-tradition principle’.⁵² Bavinck also sees the *testimonium spiritus sancti* working through the church. We can understand the role of the church in the light of the work of the Spirit as communion of the Spirit, and in the light of the work of Christ as his body.
6. Using the difference between Christology and pneumatology, Bavinck develops a differentiated concept of tradition. In the Christological economy, an oral stream of tradition existed alongside the Scriptures. At the end of this economy, this stream of tradition (in its entirety) became part of the Scriptures and disappeared. In the pneumatological economy, a new stream of tradition flows from Scripture as the source, connecting us with the Scriptures. In this tradition, we find a perspective from which to understand the Scriptures. This second tradition, however, does not provide us with new information, or with new revelation of divine mysteries. Bavinck is very hesitant to reflect on prophecy and the guidance of the Spirit.

However, this concept of tradition is not sufficiently nuanced.

First, Bavinck’s idea of the two rivers of tradition and Scripture flowing together until the canon was finished, does not clarify the interaction between tradition and the growing Scriptures. Texts resulting from revelation were preserved, read, interpreted, and handed down within a living community. During the christological dispensation, the community already maintained a perspective on the Scriptures within which they understood Scripture. Moreover, texts produced within the Jewish community that did not become part of the Christian Scriptures nonetheless influenced the genesis of other parts of the Christian Scriptures: for example, we cannot understand the genesis

51 In a comparative way for Berkouwer, see Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism*, 311–16; and further 275–76, 304, 309.

52 Cf. Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism*, 303–304, and further 276–78.

of parts of the New Testament without acknowledging the role of inter-testamental Jewish literature.

Second, within this view of tradition as the handing down of a perspective for reading, we need to distinguish between the basic convictions about the triune God who acts to save us in Christ and the Spirit, uniting us to Christ, and realising his kingdom; the central elements of the Christian faith as we find them in the Apostolic and Nicene creeds of the early church; and more specifically, confessional or exegetical sub-traditions, like the Reformed tradition or a particular exegetical school. This distinction is necessary to acknowledge that within the Christian tradition, readers of Scripture can recognize each other as fellow Christians, even as orthodox Christians, while at the same time perhaps understanding passages differently within their Christian sub-traditions.

Third, the reality of Christ is more comprehensive and more mysterious to us than what we know and find in Scripture. We do not know what it is to share in Christ completely: our knowledge is sufficient for our present Christian lives, but it is not comprehensive. Christ himself is hidden in heaven until he will be revealed in his glory. As the first letter of John says, 'Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). For fear of Anabaptist or Roman-Catholic derailments, Bavinck does not leave room for eschatological newness within the pneumatological economy. Nonetheless, if the Spirit makes us participate in Christ, he can reveal secrets in the lives of individual persons, in prophecy or in guiding the church. And the Spirit will do so when Christ appears in his glory at his parousia.

This necessitates reconsideration of the relationship between Christ, Scripture, Spirit and church. From Bavinck we can learn that nothing constitutive for our salvation can or has to be added by the Spirit or the church to what we have in Christ. Scripture contains sufficiently what we need to know about salvation in Christ. However, we need to maintain openness to what the Spirit can do if he lives in us, unites us to Christ and makes us share in who Christ is and what he has done. Here we face a difficult problem: how can we maintain openness towards prophecy as a gift of the Spirit, without creating openness towards wrong enthusiasm, new dogmas (for example, the ascension of Mary or the infallibility of the pope), or for a liberal movement away from the Scriptures in the name of progress?⁵³ While it is impossible to solve this problem completely, and this is certainly so in a single chapter, some guidelines can

53 Houtman maintains an openness of the canon when moral issues are concerned; a comparable movement can be made as well in doctrinal discussions. See Houtman, *de Schrift wordt geschreven*, 456–507.

be given on the basis of the previous discussion. The words of Jesus, 'It is finished,' should guide us here: our salvation is complete, and Mary or a bishop of Rome cannot add anything to Christ as our inclusive Messiah. As our Lord and our representative substitute, he constitutes our identity as well as our destiny. Furthermore, nothing else than conformity to Christ, as we know him through the canonical writings of his apostles, is the aim of the Christian life. The canonical Scriptures remain normative, and prophecy has to be tested in the light of Scripture. At the same time, we cannot know in advance what will happen if the Spirit makes us share in Christ. Our knowledge of what it is to be conformed to Christ and our life in conformity to him, increase together. Hence, *solus Christus* should be the final word.

Following this, within a concept of tradition, we need to differentiate between:

- a. Tradition as a source of knowledge flowing from God's interaction with his people, culminating in his revelation of the mystery of salvation, and coming to an end in the completion of the texts of the canonical Scriptures.
 - b. Tradition as the non-canonical writings and oral traditions stemming from the first Christians that might be conserved partly in early Christian writings, but that cannot claim canonical normativity.
 - c. Tradition as a perspective of faith in God our creator and Father, in his Messiah as the fulfilment of the Scriptures, and in his Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets, passed down through the generations. Here, the Apostolic and Nicene creeds play an important role, identifying the three persons of the Trinity "by biblical names for the dramatis personae" of the divine drama.⁵⁴
 - d. Tradition as history of the effect of the Scriptures in the life of the church.
- In conclusion, the christological character of Bavinck's emphasis on Scripture can be appreciated within a soteriological framework. When Father, Son and Spirit make us share in Christ, God uses the Scriptures. If God does so, the church is formed in conformity to Christ, the head of the church. In this process of transformation, Bavinck rightly saw the mediating role of church and tradition. Scripture, church and tradition belong together in the unity of the Spirit. However, in the church we need the saving transcendence of Christ and his word, the canonical Scriptures. Here Bavinck's distinction between christology and pneumatology reminds us of something important: Christ and the

54 Cf. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 45, and further 43–50.

Spirit are divine, Scripture is canonical, but while church and tradition are important, they remain ambivalent.

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