



Bavinck on special revelation

In addition to general revelation, which is mediated through the creation itself and the history of all things under God's sovereign dominion, Bavinck insists that the Triune God has revealed himself from the beginning of history also by way of special revelation. Supernatural revelation did not commence with the Fall into sin, but was a means of divine self-disclosure already in the pre-Fall revelation of the covenant between God and Adam (and the entire human race as his posterity). However, due to the insufficiency and limitations of general revelation, and due to the sinful suppression of the truth of divine revelation that results from the Fall into sin, special revelation has become necessary as a primary means of disclosing the Triune God's will and purpose, especially in respect to the redemption of God's people through Christ.

Bavinck begins his treatment of special revelation by emphasizing the diversity of modes by which God has revealed himself throughout the course of history. The inscripturation of special revelation in the Bible is itself the product of a process of revelation that has taken place throughout the history of redemption. Though this process is complex, Bavinck maintains that the modes of special revelation may be reduced to three: theophany, prophecy and miracle. In theophany God assumes some perceptible form in order to appear to his people and disclose his purpose. Through visible signs, through personal envoys (e.g. the "angel of the Lord"), and finally and definitively in the Person of his own Son, God visits his people in order to enjoy communion with them and to reveal progressively his plan of redemption. Like the other modes of special revelation, theophany prepares for and finds its fulfillment in the great event of the incarnation of the Word in the fullness of time. In prophecy God communicates his thoughts and purposes to the prophet, whether by dreams or visions or illumination, and ensures that the prophet speaks the word that has been entrusted to him. After a long history of prophetic utterances throughout the Old Testament, the incarnation of the Word represents the appearance of *"the supreme, the unique and true prophet"* (RD I:335).

All of the prophecy that preceded Christ's coming finds its culmination in the ministry and word of the chief Prophet. In the third mode of special revelation, miracles, Bavinck notes that God characteristically accompanies his interpretive Word with deeds that confirm the nature of his redemptive purpose. Just as God's word is a wonderful deed, so God's deeds are a revelatory word; they confirm or attest what God is doing in the course of history to accomplish his aims for his people and the recreation of all things. Rather than viewing such miracles as opposed to the ordinary processes of creation, Bavinck notes that they presuppose God's great work of creating and maintaining all things, which itself is ongoing work or miracle, and serve the purpose of recreating or renewing the creation to the extent that it has been broken and cursed through human sin. With the coming of Christ in the fullness of time, we witness a profusion of miracles that group around his Person and exhibit the pattern of deeds that accompany the divine word.

(Christ's) incarnation and satisfaction, his resurrection and ascension are God's great deeds of redemption. They are in principle the restoration of the kingdom of glory. These facts of salvation are not only means of revelation but are the revelation of God himself. Miracle here becomes history, and history itself is a miracle. The person and work of Christ is the central revelation of God; all other revelation is grouped around this center. (RD I:339)

Thus, the inscripturation of special revelation takes place against the background of a history of revelation that amounts to *"one single historical and organic whole, a mighty world-controlling and world-renewing system of testimonies and acts of God"* (RD I:340). The subject of all revelation, whether general or special, is God himself. Through divine revelation God discloses his attributes of omnipotence and wisdom, wrath and goodness. The means of revelation are the whole of

creation and history. What distinguishes special revelation, however, is not that it is supernatural but that it *"is a revelation of special grace and thus brings into existence the salvific religion known as Christianity"* (RD I:342).

Though the Triune Redeemer is the same God as the Triune Creator, in his special revelation God becomes human or incarnate in a process of historical and progressive self-disclosure of his saving purposes in Christ. The event of the incarnation is the culmination and fulfillment of all special revelation, since it is the great and central miracle of history: God coming to dwell with his people and restore them to communion with himself. For this reason, Bavinck underscores the thoroughly historical nature of all special revelation and observes that one of the features of modern theology is its greater appreciation for the history of revelation. Special revelation is also distinguished from general revelation by virtue of its "soteriological character." General revelation discloses God's power and wisdom as the Creator of all things and the Lord of history. Special revelation discloses God's saving mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, since special revelation is thoroughly historical, and finds its focus in the great event of the incarnation in the fullness of time, it addresses not only the human intellect but lays claim upon its recipients at the deepest level of their person. Special revelation serves as the means to re-establish saving communion between the Triune God and those whom he redeems through the work of Christ. Therefore, it comprises a rich self-disclosure of God's words and deeds, which summon sinful human beings to a life of worship and service. Through divine revelation the Triune God glorifies himself and seeks to be glorified in his image bearers.

Toward the conclusion of Bavinck's treatment of special revelation in distinction from general revelation, he offers a comprehensive definition of these two types of revelation. Rather than attempt to summarize Bavinck's view at this point, I will quote his definitions in full.

General revelation is that conscious and free act of God by which, by means of nature and history (in the broadest sense, hence including one's own personal life experience), he makes himself known — specifically in his attributes of omnipotence and wisdom, wrath and goodness — to fallen human beings in order that they should turn to him and keep his law or, in the absence of such repentance, be inexcusable. Special revelation, in distinction from the above, is that conscious and free act of God by which he, in the way of a historical complex of special means (theophany, prophecy, and miracle) that are concentrated in the person of Christ, makes himself known — specifically in the attributes of his justice and grace, in the proclamation of the law and gospel — to those human beings who live in the light of this special revelation in order that they may accept the grace of God by faith in Christ or, in case of impenitence, receive a more severe judgment. (RD I:350)

The "incarnation" of the Word of God

With this general overview of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of revelation, especially the distinction between general and special revelation, we are almost in a position to take up directly his doctrine of Scripture. I say "almost" because we have still to treat an important section of Bavinck's handling of this subject, namely, his understanding of the relation between the comprehensive history of special revelation and the "inscripturation" of that revelation in the canonical Scriptures or Bible. In Bavinck's estimation, historic Christian, including Reformed, theology has tended to minimize the complex history of special revelation and the redemptive-historical occasion for the preservation and fixing of that revelation in the form of the canon of the Old and New Testaments. The impression has often been left that the Scriptures emerged suddenly and in their final form at a moment in history, as if they were "dropped out of heaven" into the lap of the church. Such a view fails to appreciate the historical character of God's works and words, and the manner in which he has provided for the preservation of special revelation in the Bible.

Rather than downplay the historical character of revelation and inscripturation, Bavinck notes that this is an unavoidable and proper feature of divine revelation. Even viewed from the vantage point of the history of religions, there is an evident link between revelation and inscripturation. Human

language is the most exalted means of expressing and articulating the conscious thinking of human beings who bear the image of God. God, who first created man in his image and endowed him with the gift of language as an extraordinary means of self-communication and expression of thought, is pleased to communicate with human beings in the form of human language. In Bavinck's eloquent prose, the human word or language is described as

"the soul of a nation, the custodian of the goods and treasures of humankind, the bond that unites human beings, people, and generations, the one great tradition that unites in consciousness the world of humankind, which is one by nature. But just as the thought embodies itself in a word, so words are embodied in scripture."

(RD I:377)

It is not surprising, therefore, that God's self-communication and dwelling with his redeemed people should occur through the use of an inscripturation of revelation. In the history of revelation, God's condescension and accommodation to his imagebearers takes the form ultimately of a written Word. This written Word, far from being limited and diminished through its integral link with the "accidental" truths of history (cf. Lessing's dictum: *"accidental truths of history can never become the necessary truths of reason"*), is the proper means to give expression to the *"thoughts of God, the expression of a divine plan for his creatures"* (RD I:379). Rather than the historical character of Scripture being an embarrassment to the Christian theology, it is an expression of its richness and universality: in world history

"Scripture itself occupies the preeminent and all-dominating place. The 'truths of history,' accordingly, are not accidental, least of all the truths of the history of revelation. They are necessary to the degree that without them all of history and all of humankind would fall apart."

(RD I:379)

Because the Christian faith is rooted in the actuality of God's divine self-disclosure in history, a revelation that ultimately centers upon the historical event of the incarnation of the Son of God, its Scriptures must be nothing other than historical.

The historical character of special revelation and inscripturation leads Bavinck to use remarkable language in his description of the nature of the Scriptures. Even as the eternal Word of God became flesh in the fullness of time, so the words and deeds of special revelation assume "flesh" through inscripturation.

"The bearer of the ideal goods of humankind is language, and the sarx of language is the written word. In making himself known, God also adapts himself to this reality. To be able fully to enter the life of humankind and for it fully to become its possession, revelation assumes the form (morphē) and fashion (schemata) of Scripture. Scripture is the servant form of revelation. Indeed, the central fact of revelation, i.e., the incarnation, leads to Scripture."

(RD I:380)

Since the history of revelation is the history of God's coming to man as his imagebearer in order to dwell with him, the central event in this history is the incarnation. However, in order for the history of special revelation, which comes to its culmination in the incarnation of the Word, to remain a fixed and permanent disclosure of God's redemptive purpose, it must take the form of Scripture. In Bavinck's estimation, there are two dangers that theology faces at this juncture. On the one hand, there is the danger of identifying special revelation and Scripture. Such an identification fails to reckon seriously with the rich and complex history of revelation that assumes written form in the Bible. On the other hand, there is the danger of separating revelation and Scripture, treating the latter as a mere *"accidental appendix, an arbitrary addition, a human record of revelation, which might perhaps still be useful but was in any case not necessary"* (RD I:381). In the tradition of liberal theology, the latter error has come to expression in the slur that the Bible is for Protestantism a kind of "paper pope." This denigration of inscripturated special revelation fails to

reckon seriously with the truth that all knowledge of special revelation can now only be derived from the Scriptural form that it has assumed. Anyone who would know and serve Christ can only know and serve him as the Christ who is revealed to us in Scripture.

The wonder of Scripture is that it constitutes the living voice of the Triune God, who continues through the Word to speak to his people and establish thereby communion with them. Scripture is the complete and "perfected Word of God." By means of inscripturated revelation, the church continues to enjoy communion with the Triune God who is pleased to make himself, and especially the person of Christ, known by these means. Far from being "*an arid story or ancient chronicle*," *the Scriptures are God's "ever-living, eternally youthful Word"* (RD I:384). Again, Bavinck's own words offer a sparkling testimony to his estimation of Scripture:

In it (Scripture) God daily comes to his people, in it he speaks to his people, not from afar but from nearby. In it he reveals himself, from day to day, to believers in the fullness of his truth and grace. Through it he works his miracles of compassion and faithfulness. Scripture is the ongoing rapport between heaven and earth, between Christ and his church, between God and his children. It does not just tie us to the past; it binds us to the living Lord in the heavens. It is the living voice of God, the letter of the omnipotent God to his creature.

(RD I:385)

Conclusion

In the tradition of historic Reformed theology, Bavinck's doctrine of revelation confirms his general understanding of the task of Christian theology, particularly the branch of theology known as dogmatics. The theologian is first and foremost a "*servant of the Word of God*." It is his task to build upon the foundation, not of human experience or opinion, but the divine testimony that God bears to himself in his revelation. Whether through general or special revelation, theology starts from the conviction of the existence of the Triune God. Furthermore, it proceeds from the certainty that this God has spoken and ultimately secured a fixed record of his speech in the Scriptures. It is evident, therefore, that the most important dogma that requires exposition in Bavinck's introduction to dogmatics is the dogma of Scripture itself.

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