

The Structure of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*

The first edition of *Reformed Dogmatics*, H. Bavinck's masterpiece, was published almost a hundred years ago. Bavinck had begun to teach at the Theological School of the churches of the Secession in 1883. After years of intense study, he published the first volume of his *Dogmatics* in 1895. The final, fourth volume, appeared in 1901. The following year, Bavinck became a professor at the Free University in Amsterdam. There he revised the entire work for the second edition that appeared between 1906 and 1911.¹ This second edition differs in all sorts of ways from the first, but there are only a few changes in contents.²

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¹ After the second edition, there were three more editions offering the same text but with different pagination than the second one. I used the fourth edition, Kampen: Kok, 1928. [Translator's note: Since the publication of this article, Bavinck's work has appeared in English: Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008). In the body of this article, the page numbers in parentheses refer to this English translation.]

² For a comparison between the first and second edition, see R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961) 151ff., and the summary, 367; next to this, the review by J. Faber, “R. H. Bremmer, Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus,” in *Lucerna* 2 (1960) 554–555; and J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buyten en Schipperheijn, 1968) 128. About the question of whether Bavinck changed his views at the end of his life, see V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amster-

Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* was immediately received with great enthusiasm. After the second volume appeared, A. Kuyper already wrote that it was "a thorough dogmatics. Not a manual and not a textbook, but a work that is principled, well-equipped and well-rounded, carefully moving through the field of dogmatics and discussing it. It is hard for us to express how sincerely we rejoice in this."³ This time Kuyper's opponents agreed with him.⁴

There has been ongoing admiration. While only a few still study Kuyper's dogmatics,⁵ Bavinck's work is still being used in all quarters as a standard. K. Barth refers to him and uses his collection of material.⁶ H. Berkhof writes that among the Reformed churches "a book on dogmatics has been produced that rises high above many comparable works in this country and abroad: H. Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, of which the first edition appeared in 1895-1901. That work, full of information and insights, and moreover very well written, is to this very day a treasure trove for theologians."⁷

What is the secret that makes this dogmatics so attractive that it continues to be useful and admired? The answer to that will vary according to the convictions of different people. Those who disagree with Bavinck's position will nevertheless still be able to make much use of his broad surveys of the history of doctrine which introduce his actual explanation of

dam: Ten Have, 1921) 323ff., 330–331; and E. P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959) 217–218.

³ See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 242. In fact, Bavinck was first planning to write a manual for dogmatics but decided later to develop the material more extensively. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 374 and 28 respectively.

⁴ For reactions from the side of proponents of "ethical" theology, see Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 100ff.

⁵ Kuyper did not write a book on dogmatics himself; students published their notes of his lectures on dogmatics. Later, they were published as *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, I–V (Kampen: Kok, 1910–1911) with a preface written by Kuyper.

⁶ According to the list of references in *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth mentions Bavinck four times; in this connection, he really uses Bavinck's work twice: *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes* (4th ed.; Zurich: Zollikon, 1940) I/1.355; and *Die Lehre von Gott* (Zurich: Zollikon, 1940) II/1.208; cf. E. Brunner's assessment in *Dogmatik, I, Die Christliche Lehre von Gott* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1946) 103; and O. Weber, *Grundlagen der Dogmatik* (2 vols.; 4th ed.; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972) 172.

⁷ H. Berkhof, *Christelijke geloof. Een inleiding tot de geloofsleer* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1973) xvi. Accordingly, Berkhof mentions Bavinck as one of the theologians whom he uses as a point of reference, xxi. The fifth edition no longer contains the section in the Introduction in which this quote appears. However, he does still mention Bavinck as one of his points of reference.

particular doctrines. Moreover, they will not be annoyed by his tone. Bavinck always tries to do justice to those he disagrees with.

Reformed people who wish to continue in line with Bavinck's dogmatics will also benefit greatly from the contents. They will not only obtain new information, but their insight in the connections between Reformed doctrines will also increase. Nevertheless, they will not be able to stand still behind Bavinck. Too much has changed since he published and revised his book.

In this connection it is important, first of all, to pay attention to changes in theology. Bavinck faced theology of the nineteenth century, but much has happened since then. K. Barth has had a profound impact on doctrinal debates. Theologians such as W. Pannenberg, J. Moltmann, G. Ebeling, and E. Jüngel have each continued the discussion in their own ways. There is also the revival of Schleiermacher's theology in various forms, for example, with P. Tillich and H. Berkhof. Roman Catholic theology, in which Bavinck was very interested, has gone through a development that led to the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. Next to this, in the twentieth century, one can point to the development of the Pentecostal movement and the charismatic movement. Theologians of these persuasions have now given comprehensive summaries of their doctrines that need to be assessed. No matter how helpful Bavinck's work may be, it is no longer enough.

Next, it is essential to point to the influence of philosophy in Bavinck's dogmatics. He often gave his theological answers in the thought forms of Aristotelian philosophy as it has contributed to shaping theology through Augustine and Thomas.⁸ Since then, the philosophical climate has changed radically. The result is that we are in a better position than Bavinck's contemporaries to discern the weakness of his philosophical resources.

Nevertheless, even though we need to get further than Bavinck was in his time, we will still be able to learn much from him, not only in terms of content but also in method. How did he set up his dogmatics? What are the advantages of his framework, and what tensions and problems occur with it? As far as I know these questions have not yet been deliberately raised for discussion anywhere.⁹ A study of these questions will give us a

⁸ V. Hepp already pointed to this in 1931; see Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 390, cf. 328; and J. Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*. See in this connection also an interesting article not restricted to this subject by C. van Til, "Bavinck the Theologian," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 24 (1961) 48ff.

⁹ Bremmer (*Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 384ff.) and Veenhof (*Revelatie en inspiratie*, 119ff.) discuss the structure of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bremmer only characterizes Bavinck's method; Veenhof also makes some critical remarks.

better grip on the attractive singularity of Bavinck's dogmatics. At the same time, it is an exercise that can enable us to make progress in the method of dogmatics. Mozart was not ashamed to study how Bach set up a fugue, and Brahms analysed Mozart's string quartets. In a similar way, we wish to take stock of how Bavinck arranged the material in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Survey of What Bavinck Did

From a formal point of view, there are four divisions in Bavinck's dogmatics. The most extensive division is the one consisting of Introduction, Principles of Dogmatics, and Dogma. Bavinck deals with the first three together in volume 1, and then devotes the following three volumes to doctrines. The second division is that of chapters, consisting of a total of eleven after the Introduction. The chapters of volume 2 can serve as an example. There are only two: Chapter IV: About God; and Chapter V: About the World in Its Original State.

The third division consists of paragraphs numbered from 1 to 62.¹⁰ To give an example of this, the chapter about God is dealt with in ten paragraphs, beginning with the incomprehensibility of God and ending with the counsel of God. The fourth division consists of subparagraphs: a total of 580 in the four volumes. The length of these subparagraphs can vary from two to eight pages.

This last division is rather arbitrary. In contrast with the previous one, it is not so much determined by the internal logic of the subject, but rather by the amount of material. In this way, in the paragraph about the Trinity the names of the Father and of the Son are dealt with in one subparagraph (216) and the name of the Holy Spirit in a separate subparagraph (217). Logically, these subjects should have been dealt with either in one or in three sections. What is even more remarkable in terms of content is the way in which Bavinck divides the scriptural data about regeneration into two subparagraphs in volume 4. Under number 437, he deals with how the concept of regeneration occurs in the Old Testament, and then with John the Baptist, and in the instruction of Jesus Christ. In the next subpara-

¹⁰ In total, there are in fact 63 paragraphs, because two are numbered 13. This unfortunate mistake was already in the first edition; it continued in subsequent editions, probably in order to make it possible to use the first edition next to the subsequent ones. [Ed. note: These paragraph numbers have been removed from the English translation. However, the subparagraph numbers have been retained. The original four major divisions as well as major chapter headings also no longer function in the English translation.]

graph (438) Bavinck shows how the apostle speaks about regeneration. The contents of these subparagraphs, of course, belong together as the instruction of Scripture. However, Bavinck had so much material from the apostolic writings—a good five pages, compared to a good two pages devoted to the Old Testament, John the Baptist, and the instruction of Jesus—that he separates this without there being an internal reason for it. This shows that Bavinck deals with the actual topics of dogmatics in paragraphs. It means that if we wish to take stock of Bavinck's dogmatic method, we will have to take our point of departure in the third division, consisting of paragraphs.

It appears that Bavinck prefers to deal with Reformed doctrine in terms of major themes. This is also very clearly the case with respect to the two topics that we wish to concentrate on in our study: the Trinity and the counsel of God.¹¹ For example, while Bavinck deals with the doctrine of the Trinity in three chapters in the Synopsis which he himself republished,¹² in his *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck deals with it all together in one paragraph that goes on for seventy-five pages. In the same extensive way, the paragraph about the counsel of God includes the doctrine of election along with a discussion about infra- and supralapsarianism. To give an impression of Bavinck's method of working, I have placed a survey of his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the counsel of God next to each other (see following page).

This survey shows that Bavinck deals with the topics in three phases: first the scriptural data, then the historical development of the doctrine, and finally his own summary of the doctrine. In the next section we will successively scrutinize Bavinck's way of dealing with these three parts. Finally, we will consider which problems are inherent in this order.

¹¹ Aside from personal preference, the reason for this choice is that, in my opinion, Bavinck is at his best here.

¹² Bavinck, *Synopsis purioris theologiae* (6th ed.; ed. H. Bavinck; Lugduni Batavorm: Donner, 1881). The section about the Trinity can be found in Disp. VII–IX.

Trinity	The Counsel of God
After an introductory sentence, the Old Testament data (§ 213). ¹³	Survey of the literature. After an introduction about where to place the doctrine of the Counsel of God, the Old Testament data (§ 213).
Their influence in the apocryphal literature (§ 214).	
The New Testament data concerning the Trinity (§ 215), concerning the three Persons (§ 216).	The New Testament data (§ 233).
The historical development of the doctrine (§§ 218–219).	The historical development of the doctrine (§§ 234–238).
The opposition to the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity (§§ 220–221).	The opposition to the ecclesiastical doctrine of the counsel of God (§ 239).
Explanation of the doctrine: Father, Son, and Spirit (§§ 222–227), The “filioque” (§§ 228, 229),	Explanation of the doctrine: Providence (§§ 240–241), Predestination (§§ 242–249).
Images for the Trinity (§ 230). Importance of the doctrine of the Trinity (§ 231).	
	(Importance of the doctrine of the Counsel of God, § 248.)

¹³ The place of the topic is not dealt with when the subject of the Trinity comes up since Bavinck has already dealt with this in par. 27, “Classifying God’s Names” (ET 2.110–131).

The Treatment of the Scriptural Data

The enormous flood of scriptural data that Bavinck brings up with every subject is always striking. This dogmatician can rightfully be called a theologian of Scripture.¹⁴ Behind the references to many texts lies Bavinck's conviction that doctrine may not be based on one or two texts but on all of Scripture. To say it with a thesis that Bavinck derives from Von Hofmann and that is not without danger, "Let the whole prove the whole."¹⁵

The survey already shows that Bavinck presents the scriptural data in an organized way. Both with the Trinity and with the counsel of God he deals with the Old Testament data separately, preceding the material from the New Testament. The summary is also structured. In connection with the Trinity, he points out that there appears to be a three-fold cause in the work of creation, and subsequently that this three-fold cause is also active in re-creation. We find this two-fold division in the scriptural data from the Old Testament as well as from the New Testament. Bavinck lets go of the division into the Old and New Testament when he goes on to speak about the names of Father, Son, and Spirit. Then the scriptural data is mixed.

Bavinck often presents scriptural proof by series of texts, but sometimes he discusses texts and material from texts more extensively. In this way, in the section about the Trinity we find an explanation about the Angel of the Lord (2.262–263), about 1 John 5:7 (2.271–272), and Proverbs 8:22–23 (2.274–275).

Bavinck is not content with repeating traditional proof from Scripture; he also subjects that to critical investigation. Comparison with the *Synopsis* mentioned earlier can already make this clear. The *Synopsis* gives six proofs for the Trinity from the Old Testament:¹⁶

1. The occurrence of the name Yahweh (one being) next to the name Elohim (more Persons)
2. Texts in which God speaks about himself in the plural (such as Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7)
3. Texts in which the name of God is repeated three times (Num. 6:24–26)

¹⁴ According to H. Bouwman; see Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 124.

¹⁵ Cf. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.40, 70 (ET 1.65, 93). See also Bremer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 387: Bavinck's "use of the Bible is not limited to mentioning isolated texts, but is more differentiating and seeks the great themes in the revelation of Scripture."

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, VII.39-48.

4. Texts in which three titles are assigned to God (such as Isa. 6:3)
5. Texts in which God speaks of the Lord (Psalm 110:1; Hosea 1:7)
6. Texts in which more Persons are mentioned separately (Gen. 48:16; Ex. 14:19, 23; Ps. 2; Prov. 8; Isa. 63:9; Hag. 2:6, 8)

Bavinck rejects point 4. According to him, point 3 is possible, especially in connection with 2 Corinthians 13:13. Point 2, like point 1, can be explained from the fact that God is full of life and power, and is dropped as proof.¹⁷ He agrees with point 5 and adds texts to it. Point 6 becomes: “A three-fold self-differentiation in the divine being is most clearly expressed in Psalm 33:6, Isaiah 61:1, 63:9, 12, Haggai 2:5–6” (2.264). However, while these six proofs form the complete evidence in the *Synopsis*, Bavinck begins with a broad introduction in which he shows that there is a three-fold cause at work in creation and redemption (2.261ff.). In this way, in regard to the evidence from Scripture, Bavinck has investigated the proofs traditionally given; he adopts, rejects, adds, and places them in a broader context.

There is widespread recognition for the useful way in which Bavinck deals with the evidence of Scripture. Still, there are also some critical remarks. An old criticism is that Bavinck uses an easy method of Scripture proof. Statements from various Bible authors of different times from the Old and the New Testaments are used next to each other and mixed.

However, there are two things that we can bring forward against such objections. First of all, Bavinck often does organize the scriptural evidence in an historical-chronological way. Secondly and more importantly, Bavinck worked in this way because of his conviction that Scripture is essentially the work of one Author: God.¹⁸ Th. L. Haitjema therefore rightly defended Bavinck as follows: “Bavinck’s method of summing up proof texts from different places, quoting from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and also even from Old Testament historical books next to Paul’s most dogmatic letter, was very irritating for historical-critical biblical scholarship. However, it in fact only serves to prove that as a dogmatician Bavinck was completely serious about dealing with the Holy Scripture as a unit, the book of ecclesias-

¹⁷ Bavinck refers in this connection in a footnote to his explanation of the Old Testament name of God, *Elohim*, but the passage he meant can be found on p. 110 (ET 2.139).

¹⁸ See the broad explanation about Scripture being God-breathed, in Volume I.357ff. (ET 1.389ff.).

tical proclamation that has the Holy Spirit as its first Author.”¹⁹

G. Vos offered criticism from the perspective of biblical theology. He agreed with Bavinck's view of Scripture; he acknowledged that with regard to the evidence from Scripture, Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* was a step forward compared to the usual manuals for dogmatics. Nevertheless, according to him, the biblical-exegetical foundation for the doctrines was somewhat neglected compared to the explanation of the history of doctrine. “Although the author's work bears ample evidence of a wide and thorough acquaintance with what has of late years been done in the field of biblical theology, yet the exegetical data is not given with the same degree of fullness nor with the same detailed explanation of their historical significance as the facts borrowed from the history of doctrine.”²⁰

It was exactly at this time that Vos, after having been professor of dogmatics for five years, became professor of biblical theology at Princeton. In his inaugural oration, he describes biblical theology as “the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historical continuity and multiformity.”²¹ Accordingly, Vos's objection to the evidence that Bavinck offers from Scripture would be that, according to him, Bavinck does not sufficiently show how the doctrine gradually became more clearly and fully revealed.

I am not yet convinced that dogmatics should be confronted with the demand to show the organic progress of revelation in the way that biblical theology (in its good form) wishes to trace it when presenting proofs from Scripture. It is true that the various parts of doctrine are connected in Scripture and that their connections should be pointed out in dogmatics. However, the organic progress of that revelation is not the reason for that connection. Revelation does not grow from a principle in the way that a plant grows out of a seed. There is no immanent growth. God is the Giver of all revelation, and he adds to it in all sorts of ways. The reason why the contents of revelation are connected to each other is not to be found in an

¹⁹ Cf. Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 124; see also 625. By the way, characterizing Scripture as “the book of ecclesiastical proclamation” is not, in my opinion, a correct reflection of Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture.

²⁰ Vos writes this in a review of the first edition of the second volume of Bavinck's *Dogmatics*, now included in R. B. Gaffin, Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 487.

²¹ Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 15.

organic process of growth, but in the fact that one and the same God has revealed everything, and that in him there are no contradictions.²² For this reason, dogmatics has the right to gather proof texts from different periods without having to construct a chronological development from them.

If there is to be criticism of Bavinck's Scripture proofs, then in my opinion it should be not so much on the way he set it up but on the way he worked it out. In this regard, J. Veenhof remarks that one would wish that Bavinck had given fewer lists of texts and more detailed exegesis.²³ To put it differently for a moment, it is too bad that Bavinck's lists are not based on more detailed exegesis. That could have prevented him from using a text against its meaning. A few examples may be used to illustrate this objection.

Bavinck thinks that the Old Testament teaches that God distinguishes himself in a three-fold way, for example, in Psalm 33:6 (2.264). This viewpoint is in line with tradition. The Dutch Authorized Version of the Bible (Statenvertaling) translated the text as follows: "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the Spirit of his mouth."²⁴ However the commentary of F. Delitzsch on the Psalms was already available and a glance through it could have provided him with a better explanation.²⁵

Here is another example. Bavinck repeatedly states that by his Spirit God is immanent in all that has been created, that he makes everything live and adorns it (2.262; cf. 2.269). However, none of the texts that he mentions in this connection clarify what this "adorning" is based on.

When Bavinck discusses the counsel of God, he writes that God does not exhaust the riches of his knowledge and wisdom in the created world. What is included in God's counsel "is no more than a sketch, a summary,

²² A. van de Beek now talks about changes in God that cause conflicting ideas to arise in Scripture. About this, see B. Kamphuis, "Waarom?" *De Reformatie* 62 (1986–1987) 537ff; and J. Kamphuis, "Schriftuurlijke leer over de Heilige Geest?" *Nederlands Dagblad* (January 16, 1988).

²³ Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 124. Veenhof rightly adds to this that there are also passages in Bavinck's *Dogmatics* that give evidence of careful exegesis.

²⁴ Cf. the marginal notes of the Dutch Authorized Version in regard to the term "word": "Understand this as the eternal independent Word of the Father"; in regard to "the Spirit of his mouth": "Understand this as a reference to the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and is sent, being together with them a source of the creation of all things."

²⁵ F. Delitzsch, *Biblischer Kommentar über die Psalmen* (5th ed.; Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1894) 268.

of the depths of the riches of both God's wisdom and knowledge. With God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26)" (2.343). However, this use of Matthew 19 runs counter to the meaning of the text. This statement occurs in the instruction of the Lord Jesus that even a rich man cannot enter the kingdom of God in his own strength. The disciples conclude from this that then no one can be saved. Christ agrees: "With man this is impossible," but he adds to this, "but with God all things are possible." In this context, the passage does not mean that only a small portion of all the things that are possible for God become reality. The point is that where man is powerless in regard to his redemption, God is capable of bringing all of that about.

A special difficulty occurs when Bavinck includes 1 Corinthians 2:6 among the texts where the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Christ. This must be a printing error, but it is not easy to determine what should have been there instead. The most obvious solution is that Bavinck intends to refer to verse 16. That verse contains an expression which could be translated as "the Spirit of Christ." The problem is just that the usual word (*nous*) differs from the word used for the (Holy) Spirit (*pneuma*). If Bavinck indeed meant verse 16 here—and I have not been able to find any other text that could have been meant—then he probably did not look at the Greek here.²⁶

As a final example, I point to the use of Hebrews 11:3, a text that is used with different translations and meanings (2.186; 2.343).²⁷

With all due respect for the extensive scriptural proof that Bavinck offers, its weakness must also be acknowledged. Repeatedly, too many texts are quoted because they sound good. It can only be beneficial for dogmatics if the scriptural proof is based more strongly on exegesis.

The Treatment of the History of Doctrine

The summaries of the history of doctrine that Bavinck provides are not merely interesting sections; he meant them to be an essential part of his explanation. According to Bavinck, the doctrine is implied in Scrip-

²⁶ It is also possible that he looked at the Greek text very carefully, for there are exegetes who equate *nous* here with the Holy Spirit; cf. H. A. W. Meyer, *Kritischexegetisches Handbuch über den ersten Brief an de Korinther* (3rd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969) 87. But if Bavinck would wish to use the text with this meaning, then he should do more than just include this in a list.

²⁷ See my dissertation, *De geestelijkeheid van God* (Franeker: Wever, 1984) 148, footnote 112.

ture, but it had to develop from it in the course of church history.²⁸ Without church history there is, therefore, no doctrine at all. In the section on the history of doctrine, Bavinck wants first of all to trace the route along which doctrine has been formed.

The fact that this is his intention can be illustrated from the different ways he dealt with the history of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the counsel of God. With the Trinity, he devotes attention to the Apostolic Fathers and to the Apologetes, where he refers in particular to the strong and weak points of Justin. Next, he deals with Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, who each have contributed in a way to a better insight, but who each also have a weak spot. Finally, he gives a survey of the ideas of Athanasius, the three Cappadocians, and especially of Augustine, “who elaborate and complete the doctrine of the Trinity” (2.285). According to Bavinck, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity stops with Augustine. He does, however, also give surveys of the history of doctrine from the time after Augustine, but they belong to the section about the opposition to this doctrine (2.288ff.).

In Bavinck’s discussion about the counsel of God, we find a brief explanation of the ideas in the church of the second century, of Pelagianism, and of Augustine. But this time he does not stop with Augustine; he also delineates the struggle of the medieval ages as they lead up to the council of Trent. A discussion of the Reformation era follows, in which he shows how the doctrine of election was given up by the Lutherans, and maintained and elaborated on by those who were Reformed. Only after this does Bavinck deal with the opposition to this doctrine.

Whereas for Bavinck the doctrine of the Trinity reached the farthest point of its development with Augustine, the final point with the counsel of God was reached with the Westminster Confession. In the parts on the history of doctrine, Bavinck does not really give an historical survey in which important theologians are dealt with chronologically. He wishes to shed light on the way in which the doctrine developed in the course of history. Because he wishes to show the formative period of the doctrine, he can in one case stop at the fifth century, while in another case he continues

²⁸ Cf. his *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1.90–91 (ET 1.116): “Holy Scripture is no dogmatics. It contains all the knowledge of God we need but not in the form of dogmatic formulations.... Processing the content of Scripture dogmatically, however, is not just the work of one individual theologian, or of a particular church or school, but of the entire church throughout the ages, of the whole new humanity regenerated by Christ.” See also the further discussion of this in the last part of this article.

into the seventeenth century.

As far as I know, this framework for the parts on the history of doctrine is new. It is not unusual to include data from the history of doctrine in a textbook on dogmatics. But with Bavinck it is not a loose collection of theologians giving their opinions on a certain doctrine. He wishes to give a survey of the various insights that together have led to the doctrine in its current form. It is an original and effective way to give insight into the structure of a doctrine. Bavinck clearly stands in the nineteenth century with his attention to historical development. It appears that he learned this approach from A. Kuenen, the Old Testament scholar in Leiden, whom he strongly admired in spite of having fundamental criticism for his views.²⁹ But whereas that man applied the historical-critical method to the Scriptures, Bavinck applied it to the development of doctrine. Bavinck has enriched our insight into doctrine by approaching it from the perspective of the history of its development.

Just as Bavinck looked for the constituting factors in the formation of doctrine, he also looked for the basic pattern in the opposition to doctrine. According to him, there are two possible deviations from the doctrine of the Trinity—one to the right and one to the left, characterized by him as Sabellianism and Arianism (2.289–290). Those opposing the doctrine of the counsel of God are classified as deists and pantheists (2.369–370), a classification that also occurs again and again elsewhere in his dogmatics. In this way, the surveys of those opposing certain doctrines are rather broad.

This characteristic of Bavinck's dogmatics has often been related to his disposition. In a study about Bavinck as a philosopher, J. Brederveld wrote: "And then I believe that he lacked the ability to drill down by sharp logical analysis to the most basic components, where the root of a great number of philosophical problem lies."³⁰ Authors then often connect this to a well-known quote from a letter that Bavinck wrote to his friend Snouck Hurgronje before becoming a professor: "But I am not a critic. I cannot analyse everything in a cold and indifferent way. That would kill me. My eye is also not sharp enough to investigate and sort out all sorts of fine details. I have sensed it in myself that I would never get further than a broad survey of the material."³¹ Veenhof rightly notes after passing on this quote that Bavinck is referring to the historical-critical study of Scripture, but accord-

²⁹ Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 387; Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 119.

³⁰ Cf. J. Geelhoed, *Herman Bavinck* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1958) 63–64.

³¹ Cf. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 89.

ing to him, it is valid to apply it in a broader way: “It discloses something of the structure of Bavinck’s spirit.”³²

It seems incorrect, however, to explain Bavinck’s setup of the sections on the history of doctrine in terms of his disposition. Whoever reads his dogmatics cannot continue to maintain that Bavinck was incapable of critical analysis. Whoever wants an example outside of his dogmatics should read his analysis of the different concepts of the church held by those of the Secession and of the Doleantie of 1888.³³ Bavinck is quite capable of detailed analysis, but in the surveys of the history of doctrine he consciously chooses to give broad outlines while often bypassing individual differences. He wants to show which thoughts have contributed to forming a doctrine and how the opposition to it follows certain patterns.

Bavinck’s use of the history of doctrine has repeatedly been criticized for not bringing out clearly enough the specific characteristics of a certain thinker or trend.³⁴ Veenhof, who passes on this criticism, does not, however, give any concrete examples of this.

Considering this criticism, we need to observe first of all that Bavinck could also characterize someone’s position very precisely. In the section on the Trinity, he defines the opinions of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen very accurately, and in particular he gives many quotes from Augustine. Furthermore, the purpose of Bavinck’s surveys of the history of doctrine should be taken into account. Bavinck is not giving a portrait of theologians. He wishes to show to what extent the thoughts of a theologian have contributed to a doctrine, or what his relationship is to that doctrine. Within that framework, it is not at all always necessary to give a detailed description of someone’s opinion.

Nevertheless, it is true that because of his thematic approach, Bavinck from time to time omits information that is still significant within his own framework or that could even break that framework. For example, when Bavinck delineates the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, he states: “From the beginning, the doctrine of the Trinity revolved around the divinity of Christ...” (2.280). He then gives a number of quotes from the Apostolic Fathers which prove that Christ was more to them than just a creature. He then writes about the Holy Spirit, “The Apostolic Fathers rarely mention the Holy Spirit, but when they do, they distinguish him

³² Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 130.

³³ Hepp quotes this extensively in *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 185ff.

³⁴ Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 129, referring to W. J. Aalders and K. H. Roessingh.

from, and put him on a level with, the Father and the Son" (2.280). But whoever would list the quotes about the Spirit in the same way as Bavinck did in connection with Christ would notice that the list is indeed shorter, but not less clear.³⁵ This does not, however, fit in Bavinck's theory that the doctrine of the Trinity began with the acknowledgment of the divinity of Christ, and he therefore leaves this material out.

Actually the same applies when Bavinck goes on to discuss the Apologetes. There too he writes in detail about how Christ was spoken about, while only very brief mention is made about how people thought about the Holy Spirit. "But about the divine nature of the Holy Spirit and his ontological relation to the Father and the Son, we find virtually nothing in Justin" (2.282). But even the very information that Bavinck himself mentions here already makes clear that the Holy Spirit was acknowledged as God, the third in order. Even though the struggle at that time was about the divinity of Christ in the first place, the Christians then were just as concerned about the divinity of the Spirit as they were about that of Christ.

The way in which Bavinck classifies those opposed to this doctrine is also not always convincing. When he subdivides the deviations from the ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity into Sabellianism and Arianism, the question arises as to where tritheism then belongs. After all, Sabellianism denies the existence of three Persons next to each other; Arianism denies that the Son is essentially God. Strangely enough, Bavinck places tritheism under Sabellianism. But even Bavinck's own formulation shows that this division does not fit the facts. He states that with Sabellianism, the Son and the Spirit are included in the essence of God in such a way "that all distinctions among the three persons melts away." But with tritheism "the three persons are separated from one another" (2.292). Bavinck's outline here is not satisfactory.

We wish to take another example from the paragraph about the counsel of God. As mentioned earlier, Bavinck divides the opponents of this doctrine into two groups: the Deists and the pantheists. Pelagianism belongs with Deism. But what about semi-Pelagianism? Bavinck writes about that as follows: "Pure and consistent Pelagianism is the total subversion of Christianity and religion. That, too, is the reason why not a single Christian church has accepted it. However much the doctrine of predestination has been rendered impure by semi-Pelagian admixtures in the Roman Catholic and Lu-

³⁵ See e.g. the summaries of G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1964) xxii, 80ff; and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 90ff., 110ff.

theran churches, it is still confessed by them all. Essentially and materially, predestination is a dogma accepted throughout Christianity” (2.382).

This shows how Bavinck maintains his division: he categorizes semi-Pelagianism together with those who defend the doctrine of the counsel of God. According to him they, in fact, acknowledge election as a decree of God.³⁶ Such a remark has the power to elicit a following. But Bavinck does not do justice to the reality of the history of doctrine when he does not acknowledge semi-Pelagianism as an existing alternative to the Reformed doctrine of election.

The way in which Bavinck has set up the sections on the history of doctrine is valuable. He is capable of deepening our insight in dogma, because he investigates which thoughts have successively contributed to the formation of doctrines from which directions they have been opposed. The weak point is often too rigid a schematization.

The Doctrinal Explanation

What is typical for Bavinck’s explanations of doctrine is that he really occupies himself with the problems. A good example is the way in which he deals with the difference between supra- and infralapsarianism. First, the problem is precisely defined (2.283). Both have been accepted by the Reformed church, and in that connection Bavinck shows how great the similarity is (2.384). The data from Scripture does not lead to a solution (2.385). This already shows that both ideas are one-sided. A survey of the weak points of infralapsarianism (2.385–386) is followed by a list of the weak points of supralapsarianism (2.386–387). In this connection, Bavinck does not evade difficult statements—for example, that sin and punishment were willed and determined by God without God being called the author of sin

³⁶ Bavinck speaks in another way on p. 338–339 (ET 2.377): “Pelagianism has traded predestination with foreknowledge and described foreordination as the decree of God in which he determined either eternal blessedness or eternal punishment for people, depending on whether he foresaw their persevering faith or their undying unbelief. Now, however generally this view has been adopted in the Christian church (is it not the confession of all the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Remonstrant, Anabaptist, and Methodist Christians?), it is nevertheless firmly contradicted by Scripture, religious experience, and theological reflection.” The transition to the quote given in the text is formed by the following thought: “Third, it is the unanimous witness of all religious Christian experience that salvation, both in an objective and a subjective sense, is solely the work of God,” 339 (ET 2.377).

(2.387–388). Then Bavinck points to four elements which do not come to their own in either of the two approaches (2.388–391), after which he attempts to avoid the one-sidedness of each point of view by conceiving of the counsel of God as an organic whole (2.392).

The goal of this somewhat extensive survey is not to give insight into the problems of supra- and infralapsarianism, but into the way in which Bavinck works. He really discusses the problems. He takes the reader along in a debate in which arguments for and against a position along with the strong and weak points are dealt with. He attempts to make progress in a discussion where he really listens.

The unique character of Bavinck's explanation becomes even more clear by comparing it with other books on dogmatics. The classic Protestant method is that of the *Synopsis* written in Leiden. It is a method applied right into our century, for example, in the dogmatics by J. A. Heyns.³⁷ In such books on dogmatics, doctrines are summarized in the form of propositions. The goal is not to let students think along, but to teach them. Undoubtedly, the work is based on reflection, but in the text we do not find the path for thinking, only its result.

There are two dogmatics which depend on Bavinck and which do give ongoing argumentation: the ones written by L. Berkhof and A. G. Honig.³⁸ Honig's treatment of supra- and infralapsarianism is not brief (262–271); he ends up at the same point as Bavinck (269–270), but the character of the explanation is different. Honig agrees with Bavinck and organizes his material so that he comes to Bavinck's conclusion. It is therefore not a real discussion, but a factual explanation. Berkhof deals with the material more briefly (118–124). But he also orients himself with reference to Bavinck and does not think through the matter in a new way. Berkhof offers a

³⁷ J. A. Heyns, *Dogmatiek* (2nd ed.; Pretoria: N.G. Kerckboekhandel Transvaal, 1981).

³⁸ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949); along with *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); and A. G. Honig, *Handboek van de gereformeerde dogmatiek* (Kampen: Kok, 1938). Moreover, L. Berkhof experienced the difficulty that he wanted to continue to work proceeding from Bavinck in a different theological tradition in a different part of the world. He did not succeed in forging the Dutch and the American tradition into one whole. One example: Berkhof adopts the American name for this subject, Systematic Theology, and even refers to B. B. Warfield who defends this name. But in fact he wants to write a book on dogmatics, as evidenced by the title of the first main part of his *Introduction*: "The Idea and History of Dogmatic Theology."

manual in which the question of infra-and supralapsarianism is explained, but the problem has apparently not kept him awake. Bavinck is not writing a manual for students in which he wishes to give a clear explanation of difficult problems. He thinks his way through the entire field of dogmatics in a fresh way. He occupies himself with the problems, listens to all sides, and answers objections. Repeatedly, you feel how he wrestles with the material. It is this existential treatment of dogmatics that gives Bavinck's explanations a unique character. If we look for a parallel, then he reminds me strongly of Calvin. Calvin also argues and disputes, repeatedly even passionately, although more pointedly according to the spirit of his times.

This reasoned approach to the material does not make Bavinck's explanations lose focus. He chose to give his work the title *Reformed Dogmatics*, and he argues as a Reformed theologian. He is not ashamed of this conviction, and thanks to it we have passages in which Bavinck testifies of his faith with a seriousness that still leaves a deep impression today. A stirring passage about the fact that the counsel of God also embraces sorrows and disasters in the world can prove that. According to Bavinck, the difference between Augustinianism and Pelagianism lies in the fact that

the former accepted Scripture in its entirety, also including this doctrine; that they were and always wanted to be theistic and recognize the will and hand of the Lord also in these disturbing facts of life; that they were not afraid to look reality in the eye even when it was appalling. Pelagianism scatters flowers over graves, turns death into an angel, regards sin as mere weakness, lectures on the uses of adversity, and considers this the best possible world. Calvinism has no use for such drivel. It refuses to be hoodwinked. It tolerates no such delusion, takes full account of the seriousness of life, champions the rights of the Lord of lords, and humbly bows in adoration before the inexplicable sovereign will of God Almighty. As a result it proves to be fundamentally more merciful than Pelagianism (2.394).

Bavinck does not evade the problems but delves into them, reflects on them, and then offers his opinion in a confessionally-Reformed, engaged way. This characteristic of Bavinck's dogmatics, more than the addition of the surveys of the history of doctrine, determines its lasting value and attractiveness for me.

One consequence of Bavinck's reasoned approach is that it takes time to find his opinion about a subject. He gives relatively few definitions; for him, the truth is also too complicated to be summarized in one sentence. Whoever wants to know Bavinck's opinion on a certain matter should not leaf through the pages until he has found the right one but should read the

relevant paragraph completely and follow the argument. The reader should follow Bavinck in the progress of his explanation; then Bavinck will certainly help such a person along.

As far as the content of the dogmatic explanation is concerned, just as Bavinck structures the surveys of the history of doctrine and the opposition to the doctrine, so he also applies firm structural elements in his explanation of doctrine. I wish to mention two here. The first is the Trinity. For Bavinck, the Trinity is not merely one of the subjects in dogmatics. According to him, the fact that God is triune is a determining factor for every part of doctrine. He remarks in this regard: “the heartbeat of the Christian religion: every error results from, or upon deeper reflection is traceable to, a departure in the doctrine of the Trinity” (2.288). The Trinity “is the core of the Christian faith, the root of all its dogmas, the basic content of the new covenant” (2.333).³⁹ Accordingly, in all the following paragraphs of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* we find a reference to the Trinity and to how each doctrine is connected to it. In this way, when he deals with election he speaks especially about Christ's place, but the Trinitarian perspective is not absent; the elect “are the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit” (2.402).⁴⁰

A second structural principle in Bavinck's explanations is the connection that he establishes between nature and grace, and between creation and redemption.⁴¹ When discussing the scriptural evidence for the Trinity, he first demonstrates that a three-fold activity appears in the work of crea-

³⁹ It is possible that Bavinck was already convinced of the central place of the Trinity at a very early stage. In a lecture given in 1881, “The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System,” he concurs with A. Kuyper in the following way: “And it is, therefore, in every respect a striking, glorious thought with which Dr. Kuyper concludes his explanation of the Antirevolutionary Program: that life has never been fully fathomed in the areas of theology, morality, jurisprudence, society and politics, as long as the investigation did not yet finally come to rest in God himself, that is in the confession of his holy Trinity,” see H. Bavinck, *Kennis en leven* (ed. C. B. Bavinck; Kampen: Kok, 1922) 59.

⁴⁰ Cf. further the significance of the Trinity in what he writes about the principles of dogmatics, 1.183–186, 205–207 (ET 1.211–214, 231–233). Up to today this structural element brought forward by Bavinck continues to be used in theology. See, for example, A. N. Hendriks, *Kerk en ambt in de theologie van A. A. van Ruler* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1977).

⁴¹ With this, Bavinck builds on his two first speeches as rector in Kampen, *De katholiciteit van Christendom en kerk* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888); and *De algemene genade* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1894).

tion and then in the work of re-creation. “This three-fold divine principle which underlies creation as well as re-creation, and sustains the entire economy of Old Testament revelation...” (2.264). At the end of his discussion of the Trinity, Bavinck mentions its importance for the doctrine of creation (2.264–265) and for the Christian religion (2.333–234).

This connection between creation and redemption is also the reason why Bavinck deals with election in the paragraph about the counsel of God. The counsel of God overarches everything, also unconscious nature (2.376). Predestination is only a further application of the counsel: “Just as we cannot separate the natural from the moral world, so neither can we point to a boundary line between the temporal condition of human creatures and their eternal state” (2.377; cf. 2.392).

Bavinck repeatedly arrives at a parallel connection between nature and grace. When he speaks about reprobation, he offers the general statement: “It seems that the rule ‘many are called and few are chosen’ is valid everywhere.” He elaborates on this as follows: “Thousands of blossoms fall to the ground so that a few may ripen and bear fruit. Millions of living beings are born, yet only a few remain alive.⁴² Thousands of people labor in the sweat of their face in order that a few persons may swim in wealth.... Equality exists in no area of life. Election exists everywhere alongside, and on the basis of, reprobation. The world is not ordered according to the Pharisaic law of work and reward. Merit and riches are totally unrelated. And even on the highest level, it is only God’s grace that makes the difference” (2.399).

Nevertheless, Bavinck’s parallels are often far from convincing. In the last mentioned quotation, Bavinck wishes to point to a similarity between the world of plants, animals, and people. However the rule that the world is not organized according to the law of work and wages does not apply to the plant and animal kingdoms. Merit, wages, and grace certainly do not apply there. In fact, the comparison does not touch the actual problem of reprobation, and therefore gives the impression that Bavinck is quite willing to write off the reprobates as long as the elect are saved.⁴³

⁴² Bavinck places a footnote here in which he refers to an article in the realm of biology. This, too, is a consequence of the connection that Bavinck sees between nature and grace, leading him to include such information in his dogmatics.

⁴³ Another example of comparing two matters that, in my opinion, cannot be compared is the similarity that Bavinck sees between poetic inspiration and the inspiration of Scripture, 1.395 (ET 1.425). (At the same time, Bavinck denies that these two can be identified, 1.396, 400 [ET 1.426, 429–430]). After all, precisely

In the doctrine of the Trinity, Bavinck uses the parallel to defend the thought that traces of the Trinity do exist. According to Bavinck they cannot prove the doctrine of the Trinity, but they can refute objections against it. "To this, finally, we must add that these arguments uncover and preserve the connectedness between nature and grace, between creation and re-creation. The God who created and sustained us is also he who re-creates us in his image. Grace, though superior to nature, is not in conflict with it" (2.330). However, along these lines one does not look for a similarity between creation and re-creation, but for a similarity between God and his creation. Here Bavinck has thought too lightly of making use of the parallel between nature and grace.

A complaint often voiced with regard to Bavinck's doctrinal explanations is that he stops just as it gets exciting. H. Bouwman wrote that Bavinck "was sometimes weak in drawing conclusions and elaborating on them..."⁴⁴ Bremmer presents the following quote of G. Vellenga: "But when it comes to the point that a decision needs to be made that it is one or the other, we are disappointed again and again."⁴⁵ Veenhof also mentions this criticism, but together with Van der Vaart Smit, he explains Bavinck's vagueness as coming from his modesty and humility. Nevertheless, he later does appear to agree with it: "Although Bavinck can offer very clear argumentation, his explanations repeatedly have a rather diffuse and vague character. When discussing a question Bavinck also sometimes ends just when suspense builds and we would gladly hear him continue to speak."⁴⁶

We would like to give a number of responses to this criticism. First, in general, critics do not say which parts of the *Reformed Dogmatics* they are re-

what is absent with poetic inspiration is characteristic for the inspiration of Scripture, namely that an Other is speaking through the human author. Cf. also my criticism of Bavinck's use of the testimony of the Spirit as a solution for the heart of the issue; see my article "Het getuigenis van de Geest in verband met de Schrift," in *Radix* 11 (1985) 199ff. [Ed. note: A translation of this article is included in this book as chapter 7.]

⁴⁴ See Geelhoed, *Herman Bavinck*, 57.

⁴⁵ See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 102. Vellenga gives an example from the way in which Bavinck deals with the doctrine of baptism, but Bremmer does not agree with this criticism. On the next page, Bremmer mentions a similar criticism brought forward by J. Riemens: "Bavinck...and this is the greatest weakness of this book—fails to give a further explanation, a *clear definition* of his understanding of inspiration." Bremmer does not consider this criticism entirely fair.

⁴⁶ Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie*, 129.

ferring to.⁴⁷ But it seems to me that it is too strong a statement when Velenga observes a deficiency “again and again” in Bavinck’s elaboration. Whoever follows Bavinck’s extensive argumentation and does not look for little quotations will in most cases certainly get a clear view of Bavinck’s intention. Secondly, Bavinck wishes to show as much as possible the catholic or universal character of Reformed doctrine. For this reason, he often incorporates good elements from theologians of other persuasions even if he disagrees with them further. He even regularly adopts their terminology, which sometimes can give rise to confusion. But also here what counts is that whoever continues to read can know what Bavinck means.

Thirdly, Bavinck is careful and does not want to go any further than what he has thought through and can justify. If he cannot completely solve a problem, he prefers to leave it as such rather than make it disappear by means of an authoritative statement that has no substance. A good example of that is the question of supra- and infralapsarianism. Bavinck is sufficiently clear in pointing out the strong and weak points. He also leads us further toward a solution. But in the end, he lets them stand next to each other in an organic connection (2.392). Here the word “organic” is not the solution to the problem but the framework within which the problem must be solved. As long as Bavinck does not drop any parts of Christian doctrine, it seems to me that his careful approach does not count as a point against him.

The Order in which Bavinck Deals with Things

Bavinck seems to deal with doctrinal subjects in a rather logical order: data from Scripture, the history of the doctrine, and the explanation of the doctrine. Nevertheless, this way of dealing with things is not as self-evident as it may seem, nor is it generally followed. For comparison, I would like to point to two other dogmatic works. In the *Synopsis* of the seventeenth century, the doctrine of the Trinity is dealt with first by an explanation defining the concept of “person” and its relation to “being.” Only after that is the Trinity proved from Scripture.⁴⁸ With this order, the obvious danger is that Scripture only begins to function after the essential decisions have al-

⁴⁷ This is the case in regard to Bavinck’s doctrine of Scripture. See the quotation in footnote 43 and the letter from J. H. Gunning, quoted in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 105.

⁴⁸ *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, VII. The more detailed organization of the material is as follows: 1–32: explanation of the doctrine; 33–38: the Trinity can only be proved from Scripture; 39–49: the evidence of Scripture; 50: those who deny the doctrine of the Trinity.

ready been made in the definitions.

H. Berkhof basically has the same three divisions as Bavinck, but in a different order. He first explains his own opinion on a certain subject. Then follow in small print the biblical data and the material from the history of doctrine.⁴⁹ Of course he does take into account what will be dealt with in the next two sections. Apparently, he chose this order to avoid burdening many readers with technical explanations. Nevertheless, in many cases the significance and scope of Berkhof's own opinion will only really be understood by studying the small print well.

Bavinck deliberately chooses another order. Before he can explain the doctrine, he first must show how this arose. In general, Bavinck puts it as follows: "In a formal sense, there are no dogmas in Scripture, but the material for them is all to be found in it" (1.89). How doctrines arise is evident in the following statement: "Dogmas were produced by the church but not apart from the labor of theologians; dogmas are in part the fruit of theology" (1.89). This is connected with the fact that Bavinck would rather not call Scripture the "source." This expression "describes the relation between Scripture and theology as a mechanical one, as though dogmas could be drawn from holy Scripture like water from a well" (1.89). He prefers the term *principium* ('principle'). That word "suggests an organic connection" (1.89), namely between Scripture and the doctrines. Against the background of this opinion, it can be understood why Bavinck first deals with data from Scripture because they form the material for the doctrine. Then he shows how the dogma has arisen in the history of doctrine.

The same conviction is evident in the way in which Bavinck deals with individual doctrines. He introduces the history of the doctrine of the Trinity with the following sentence: "In all of these elements of revelation, of course, Scripture has not yet provided us with a fully developed trinitarian dogma." And a little further, after a summary of the data from Scripture, he says, "And so Scripture contains all the data from which theology has constructed the dogma of the Trinity. Philosophy did not need to add anything essential to that dogma: even the Logos doctrine is part of the New Testament. It all only had to wait for a time when the power of Christian reason would be sufficiently developed to enter into the holy mystery that presents itself here" (2.279–280).

The question is whether by speaking about "organic" and "Christian reason" Bavinck does not attribute too much value to doctrine as com-

⁴⁹ H. Berkhof, *Christelijk geloof*, beginning with § 7.

pared to Scripture. He gives the impression that doctrine represents a higher level of development of the truths that can be found in Scripture.⁵⁰ But, in fact, doctrine presents the contents of revelation not at a higher level but at a different level. Whereas God reveals himself in Scripture in all sorts of concrete situations in a wide variety of ways, doctrines are an attempt to summarize and formulate the contents of revelation structurally. If one must use the word “higher,” then the way in which Scripture speaks is higher. After all, in Scripture the truths of revelation are seen in their significance in concrete situations. For example, the gospel accounts show by all sorts of words and deeds of the Lord Jesus that he is the Son of God who has become man. The doctrine confessed, among other things, in the Apostles’ Creed, is that he is the one and only Son who has been born out of the virgin Mary. And dogmatics speaks of Christ’s divine and human nature.

But in this way nothing has yet been decided about how dogmatics should be organized. Even if one denies that doctrine forms a higher stage of the development of the truths of Scripture, the order that Bavinck uses is still possible: first, deal with how Scripture speaks about a certain matter; then, how the church has struggled to do justice to the scriptural data and to protect it against attacks; and finally, think one’s way through the doctrine personally.

The first problem with Bavinck’s approach appears when we consider the question of whether Bavinck can do without the scriptural data when he offers his own explanation. That is, of course, impossible for a theologian who sees Scripture as the source (or *principium*) and norm (1.88–89).⁵¹

⁵⁰ We also find organic imagery with Kuyper: “In fact, the doctrines on the other hand are living plants that have branches in the entire historical past, and roots firmly planted in the holy Scripture. As a consequence, dogmatics has to place the doctrine in its living, organic form before itself and may never see anything else in the doctrine than scriptural truth reflected through history in the thought forms of our common human consciousness” *Encyclopaedie der heilige godgeleerdheid* (3 vols.; Kampen: Kok, 1909) vol. 3. The danger of such talk stands out much stronger with Ch. Hodge, the American dogmatician who was in a certain sense the predecessor of Kuyper and Bavinck. The second reason that he mentioned for systematizing is: “A much higher kind of knowledge is thus obtained, than by the mere accumulation of isolated facts,” *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; London & Edinburgh: Nelson, 1883) 1.2.

⁵¹ In this regard, Bavinck expresses himself in opposition to the theology of Schleiermacher and his followers, who “have also made the church’s confession into an epistemic source by denoting Scripture to norm, or by placing the confes-

In Bavinck's approach, the scriptural data must therefore appear in two places: in the first and in the third part. Apparently Bavinck felt that this double use of the scriptural data presented a difficulty, and he tried to prevent it in two ways.

When dealing with the Trinity, the scriptural data is discussed extensively in the first part. When he offers his own opinion in the last part, he often refers back to it. For example, in the section on doctrine he uses Romans 9:5 (2.309–310) to prove that the Son is not a creature, but in fact this position is supported by a whole series of texts that he has listed with the scriptural data (2.276). Mentioning that the followers of Arius appeal to Proverbs 8:22 (2.310) does not involve looking back to the discussion of that text in the first section (2.274). The proof texts for comparing the Spirit with breath and wind (2.313) have already been mentioned more extensively earlier (2.277).⁵²

When the counsel of God is dealt with, we find the opposite solution. Here the first section in which evidence from Scripture is given is rather short. The texts come back in the part containing his argumentation. In this way, the series of texts for the counsel of God in the doctrinal explanation (2.372) is a combination of data from the Old and New Testaments (2.345–346). When dealing with reprobation as a deed of God in history (2.393), Bavinck repeats texts mentioned in the first section (2.343–344). But at the same time, when he presents his own version of the doctrine in the last section, we find many more texts than were mentioned in the section with the scriptural data.

In this way, Bavinck has tried to eliminate the difficulty of dealing with the scriptural data twice, sometimes really dealing with the texts in the first section (as with the Trinity), and at other times in the third section (as with the counsel of God). But with this approach, Scripture must be discussed twice, and the treatment of the scriptural data is unsatisfactory either in the first or in the third section.

The second problem with Bavinck's approach lies in the choice of the subject for which he gathers scriptural data. Why does he look for data

sion alongside of Scripture as an epistemic source." It is true that with Schleiermacher the "feeling" of the congregation is a source of knowledge, but it is not correct that with him Scripture would be the norm. See F. Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube, nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt* (2nd ed.; Gotha: F. A. Perthes, 1889) §§ 21–22.

⁵² Here too it is evident that we must read the whole paragraph to really get to know Bavinck's opinion.

about a three-fold cause? Why does he gather the texts in connection with the Son that speak of his divinity, but in connection with the Spirit also the texts that show he is a Person? Why does Bavinck begin his explanation of Old Testament texts for the counsel of God by saying: “The same is true of election and reprobation. In the Old Testament these two realities are not described as eternal decrees, but face us on every page as facts in history” (2.343)? Why is supra- and infralapsarianism suddenly brought into the discussion of Romans 9:21 (2.346)?

The reason is that Bavinck evidently knows what he is looking for. He does say that he is moving from the *principium* (Scripture) to its elaboration (doctrine), but his actual starting point is the doctrine. The doctrine is already evident from the choice of the subjects that he looks for in Scripture. Here too, Bavinck expresses his Reformed convictions as he formulated them in the title of his book: *Reformed Dogmatics*. In the section containing the scriptural data, Bavinck is looking for the biblical principles for Reformed doctrine, organized according to the chapters of seventeenth-century Reformed dogmatics.⁵³

Accordingly, with Bavinck Reformed doctrine in fact precedes the scriptural data. He approaches the scriptural data with Reformed presuppositions. One cannot say that this is wrong; a presuppositional approach does not necessarily do violence to the field of research. The field of research is there, with all the data that it offers. That is why research can show whether or not our presuppositions are appropriate for the object of research. In this way, Scripture remains itself regardless of the conviction with which people approach it. It is therefore possible to ascertain whether any particular presupposition indeed corresponds with Scripture and whether Scripture says something else or something more about a subject than the researcher previously thought. A Reformed dogmatician can proceed from Reformed doctrine not only implicitly, as Bavinck does, but also explicitly, in order then to ascertain whether that doctrine does justice to Scripture.

But what must we do with the first problem that we found with Bavinck, namely, dealing with evidence from Scripture twice? Behind this lies Bavinck’s conviction that Scripture has two functions in Reformed dogmatics: source (or if preferred: *principium*) and norm. Doctrine comes from Scripture and its contents and implications must be judged according to Scripture. Is it then really possible to arrange material in a Reformed dog-

⁵³ Bremmer observes that Bavinck derived his subjects from the dogmatics of the seventeenth century, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 386.

matics without presenting evidence from Scripture twice?

Of course, material in a book on dogmatics can be arranged responsibly in many ways. For example, a popular dogmatics could work directly from scriptural data to the doctrinal summary and how it is to be processed without devoting special attention to its development in the history of doctrine. Then the problem of dealing with scriptural data twice would not arise. But it is different if we would follow Bavinck by including the development of the history of doctrine. By building on the indisputable gains of Bavinck's dogmatics, it might be possible as follows. Rather than beginning with the biblical data, one deals with Reformed doctrine by first tracing its development in history. It seems possible to me to integrate Scripture as the basis in delineating this development. We would then be left with two main sections: the development of the history of doctrine and the explanation of the doctrine. In section one, it would first be necessary to investigate and describe how the development of a particular doctrine came about, who was involved, and which data from Scripture were used. Next, there should be an examination of how the resistance to this doctrine has developed and who brought arguments, including biblical arguments, against it. In the second main section, the doctrines could be explained in a summary. In this connection, taking criticism into account, there should be an examination of whether the doctrine is scriptural and whether it has been expressed properly. And proceeding from Scripture, we should try to make progress.