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# Proposal for a Theological Prolegomena of Education

## Lessons from Herman Bavinck's Legacy

Hanniel Strebel

### I The Need for a Theological Prolegomena for Education

Let us imagine Christian parents accompanying their child while he is growing up. They have a vital interest in how they can develop his gifts to secure him a place within the professional world. Loyal caring Christian parents spend their energy and money on a proper education. They can expose the child to different influences and the child can come in contact with different worldviews. The dogma of pluralism, according to which all religious beliefs and value terms have equal standing, stays at the forefront. The child meets other children following various religions such as Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

In our western countries, children are predominantly influenced by a secular outlook, which sets their own needs at the centre of their life. God does probably exist, but he has nothing to do with their every-day life. So how can parents guide their children and what can they do to help them navigate their way through this diversity of beliefs?

Alternatively, take a young adult who has his compulsory school years behind him. He enters the university, where he meets with several inter-related competing goals: on the one hand, he is persuaded that he has to secure the best possible chance in professional life, and definitely the highest possible income. Secondly, it is made clear to him by fellow students that the time has come in which enjoying life is the top priority. He is invited to indulge in a party lifestyle. This raises the question: What is a proper goal that he should pursue?

Let us continue imaging a primary school teacher in front of a class of—let us say—25 pupils. Concepts and methods are subject to constant change. He still feels that in the end teaching is a human encounter. How should he deal with recent findings in brain research? How will he respond to the child-oriented approaches in education? What helps him to start from a biblical image of man in his daily lessons?

Fourth, let us put ourselves in the position of a university lecturer of

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English literature. During his studies and his PhD, lecturers and fellow students consistently work under the assumption of social constructivism. For discussion and interpretation of texts, this approach is applied comprehensively, and the assumption is that all judgments are only socially constructed, and are defined and controlled by their own frame of reference. Which way should he follow in the midst of this relativistic environment?

This essay is an elaboration from the work of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist thinker Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) to answer these fundamental questions. A balanced approach to education is equally aware of the why, the who and the how of education. The threefold structure of this essay is derived from his basic work on education. In his *Principles of Education*<sup>1</sup> Bavinck follows three concerns: namely to clarify the aim of education (teleology), to identify the nature of man (anthropology) and to evaluate certain concepts (methodology).

Before working out these three key issues we will have a look at Bavinck's historical context.

## II Bavinck's Historical and Intellectual Background

We first have to ask why Bavinck is relevant for today's educational context. As a Dutch theologian, professor of dogmatics, author and public speaker, national church leader and Senate dep-

uty, he is regarded as one of the leading Dutch Reformed thinkers.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, his *opus magnum*, the four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*,<sup>3</sup> has been translated and published in various languages. While Herman Bavinck has experienced a (limited) renaissance in the US, he is still little known in the German-speaking world where I live.<sup>4</sup>

Bavinck experienced profound societal, religious and political upheavals during his lifetime. Shaped by the spiritual revival in the Netherlands in the early 19th century, which had been adopted especially within intellectual circles, he grew up in a denomination which in 1834 had separated from an increasingly theologically liberal Dutch Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk). He witnessed the rise of the Christian Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP). He was a member of the committee which completed the merger with another spin-off from the Reformed state church in 1892.

Bavinck himself was trained at the theologically liberal university in Leiden. He spent 20 years of his productive lifetime as a professor and rector of his church's seminary in rural Kampen and another 20 years working at the Free University in Amsterdam, which was founded in 1881 by Abraham Kuyper, his famous mentor and friend. Within that urban cosmopolitan

1 Herman Bavinck, *Paedagogische beginselen* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1904): The purpose of education (24-53); the starting point of education (54-92); the method of education (93-176).

2 Recently an English biography has been released: Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck. Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Philippsburg: P & R, 2010).

3 Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1-4, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2008).

4 A German translation of his *Reformed Dogmatics* is in preparation.

environment he addressed many current philosophical, psychological and educational issues.

Bavinck was familiar with philosophy since the time of Immanuel Kant and especially the theology, philosophy and psychology of the 19th century. He extensively read Darwin and Haeckel, the leading propagators of evolution, as well as the dark thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche. He lived through the exuberant, optimistic mood at the dawn of the 20th century as well as the sobering First World War. Bavinck was an eyewitness of the industrialization of cities as well as of the establishment of the state school system.

Bavinck's commitment to education has to be seen against the background of the Dutch school dispute (*schoolstrijd*) which lasted for more than 100 years.<sup>5</sup> The confessional Reformed who united with the Catholic private school movement in the 1870s fought a successful battle for the equality of private institutions. They finally achieved legal recognition and equivalent tuition in 1920.

We can locate four reasons for Bavinck's present-day relevance:

- A deep understanding of the western history of ideas as well as the Christian theological framework
- His 40-years involvement in National Higher Education
- His expertise on national and

international educational polity (which meant questions such as establishing educational structures in Islamic Indonesia)

- His first-hand experience of the complex building process of a modern democratic civil society

Bavinck wrote several books on the topic of education beside *Principles of Education* (1904). His *Biblical and Religious Psychology*<sup>6</sup> (1920) contains a collection of essays in which he intended to address especially Christian teachers. His longer book, *The Education of the Adolescent* (1916),<sup>7</sup> contains a brief history of education. In his shorter writing, 'The New Education' (1917),<sup>8</sup> he dealt with the question of how the educational landscape should be designed after the war. His Dutch biographer Bremmer says that Bavinck's most fruitful work of his last years was in the field of education;<sup>9</sup> Hepp, another biographer, even talks about the lifelong 'love of his heart'.<sup>10</sup>

We are now ready to plunge into four questions for a Theological Prolegomena of Education, beginning with a definition of 'education' and of 'world-view'.

<sup>5</sup> Bavinck describes his view of the intellectual and social development of his country in the article, 'Mental and social forces of the Netherlands', *A General View of the Netherlands*, Number XVII (1915). <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl/hb/mrsf/mrsf.html2013>. Accessed May 15, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Bijbelsche en religieuze psychologie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1920).

<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De opvoeding der rijpere jeugd* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1916).

<sup>8</sup> Herman Bavinck, *De nieuwe opvoeding* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1917).

<sup>9</sup> R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966), 258.

<sup>10</sup> Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1921), 315, 322.

### III Education and Worldview

#### 1. Education

Bavinck sees the task of education (*opvoeding*) as a comprehensive one.<sup>11</sup> Man is born within a community as a helpless being. As a unity of body and soul, he must be provided for in both areas.<sup>12</sup> Education in the narrow sense includes the carrying and dragging of man from immaturity towards independence. This is done primarily by the small circle of the family and secondarily by the school. In the family it is unplanned, intuitive, but at school it is realized according to a plan. Bavinck distinguishes between education (*opvoeding*) as a generic term for the development process, and instruction (*onderwijs*) as the formal, structured part. Instruction is thus a part of the overall education and therefore subsidiary.

Bavinck also talks about an extended concept of education. The whole of life is designed as a process of orientation as well as rebuke. Education is therefore a 'conscious, purposeful, systematic process of life' that includes correction, orientation and shaping of the individual.<sup>13</sup> The aim of this whole process is to be equipped for the work of God (2 Tim 3:17). Personality is continually shaped through a person's thoughts and actions. This development aims at the perfection of man in

the image of God and thus the realization of his God-given potential.

#### 2. Worldview

Education and worldview are deeply intertwined in Bavinck's thought.<sup>14</sup> Bavinck discerned three major actors, namely God, man and cosmos. All worldviews move among these three poles. 'GOD, THE WORLD, AND MAN are the three realities with which all science and all philosophy occupy themselves.'<sup>15</sup>

This means that every worldview is forced to define the relationship among these three poles and to justify itself if one dimension is excluded.

(A)s every worldview moves between the three poles of God, the world, and man, and seeks to determine their reciprocal relations, it follows that in principle only three types of worldview are distinguishable—the theistic (religious, theological), the naturalistic (either in its pantheistic or materialistic form) and the humanistic.<sup>16</sup>

Bavinck derived several regularities from the interaction between God, world and cosmos:

- Access to God, to man and to the world is established through a single channel, namely our perception.

<sup>11</sup> See Herman Bavinck, *Paedagogische beginselen*, 14-17.

<sup>12</sup> In the Dutch language 'voeding' and 'opvoeding', nutrition and education, are linguistically related.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius Jaarsma, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1935), 128.

<sup>14</sup> During the last decades, the term has suffered under an inflationary use. I decided to use 'worldview' but to define first what it meant for Bavinck a century ago.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Amazon Digital Services, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, *Philosophy*, pos. 444-447. (pos. is short for 'position numbers').

- The relationship with God affects all the remaining relationships among people and between people and cosmos.
- Since the fall man flees from God. In this way he also loses contact with his neighbour, which he needs.
- Escape and alienation result from sin. Bavinck distinguishes sins against one's self, against one's fellow man and against God.
- Unity can be restored only by God. The place where we belong is in right relationship with God and all creatures.

If we exclude God, we can either focus on man or on cosmos. Humanism focuses on humanity and sees itself in God's place. Materialism focuses on the cosmos, defining atoms as ultimate elements of the universe. Everyone has such a framework of thought, whether consciously or unconsciously. This overall framework of beliefs has a principal influence on every philosophy of education.

Bavinck draws a direct connection from his book, *Christian Worldview*,<sup>17</sup> to his theoretical work, *Principles of Education*,<sup>18</sup> both published in 1904. Education for him is neither purely empirical nor purely historical, but a normative, teleological, constructive science. Rooted in the realm of ideas, it also appears in reality. Education is determined in its essence by religion and ethics. It is not purely speculative, but

uses inductive and deductive methods to align perception and thinking. Biology, physiology and psychology, from Bavinck's perspective, are indispensable auxiliary sciences for education.

In the study of Bavinck's biography and context, we find that a major concern of his work was to apply the Christian worldview to all areas of life. Education can be seen as the first common theme of the confessional movement in the Netherlands from the mid-19th century, triggered by a revised legislation.

Bavinck was committed to provide teachers and parents within the Reformed private school movement with the main ideas of current educational philosophies. These were largely attributed to the evolutionary worldview by 'gurus' such as John Dewey (1859-1952) who emphasised pragmatism. This was mingled with humanistic thought through the rising movement called 'Progressive Education' that put the child at the centre of education.<sup>19</sup>

## IV The Why of Education: Reclaiming a God-centred Teleology

### 1. Bavinck's teleological focus

Because every creature owes its origin to the creator, we can find his destiny only therein. Romans 11:36 functions as Bavinck's theological key: Everything comes from God, is sustained by him and therefore created for him.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1904).

<sup>18</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Paedagogische beginselen*, see the foreword.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen Key's programmatic book, 'Das Jahrhundert des Kindes' was published in 1900. See Bavinck, *Paedagogische*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> See for example Herman Bavinck, *Our*

God's glory is the ultimate purpose, and thus the starting point for Bavinck's entire *oeuvre*. Anyone who does not read his work with the theocentric 'glasses' misses the main point. God is the highest good of his creatures. Because they were created through him, they are always—consciously or unconsciously—searching for him. As religious beings we must, if we turn away from God, align our aspirations to a God-substitute.

Bavinck stands with his teleology on the shoulders of Augustine and Calvin, to both of whom he explicitly refers. Augustine thought and wrote in the deep awareness that only in God's light do we see the light (Ps 36:9).<sup>21</sup> In Calvin's words, the whole of life is played out before God (*coram Deo*).<sup>22</sup>

What Bavinck particularly claimed for religion, he also expands to the entirety of science. No area of life can live without God's revelation. This is the main thesis of his famous Stone Lectures, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1908). What he writes with regard to the Dutch poet Willem Bilderdijk comes out of the heart of his own conviction.

Bilderdijk 'sees everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of God. Everywhere he takes measure of

God's word and law and applies it to all phenomena and events. Not a philosophical principle, not an abstract idea of God, but the God of revelation is the starting point of his life and thought.'<sup>23</sup>

This approach stands contrary to that of human perspective. Theocentric thinking had been progressively lost during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Enlightenment taught people that they are intellectually and morally independent of God. This emancipation is nevertheless contrary to the Christian worldview. God's sovereignty claim must not be limited to a sub-area of life. Human autonomy is also in contradiction to reality, as Bavinck proves in his short work on ethics. We are not bound only to natural laws, but moreover to countless human regulations and conventions.

The evolutionary worldview reduces everything to reliance exclusively on matter. All existence and events are coincidental. Humanity thereby loses meaning and *raison d'être*. From this point it is only a small conceptual step towards utilitarianism, according to which we deliver ourselves to our own criterion of usefulness.

What Bavinck derived for the individual, he equally developed for the entire course of history. History is the ongoing design and unfolding of God's plan (Eph 1:10), not an endless and aimless succession of events. History is a coherent drama.

If both the individual person and the entire creation are geared towards their Creator, this must also be true for human learning. Although Bavinck

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*Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 17, 568. Bavinck begins and ends his comprehensive systematic theological study with the notion of Romans 11:36.

<sup>21</sup> For Bavinck's assessment of Augustine see Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 136, 139.

<sup>22</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Calvin: A Lecture on the Occasion of his 400th Birthday, July 10, 1509—1909, *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010), 69.

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<sup>23</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Bilderdijk als denker en dichter* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1906), 44.



does not despise empirical research (on the contrary, he encouraged empirical studies), he refuted the derivation of higher rules from pure observation as an impossibility. Education is a normative, teleological science because it always makes assumptions about the origin and purpose of humanity.

The contemporary pedagogy, Bavinck wrote in the heyday of 'Progressive Education', saw man as the sole standard and purpose of education. But where man takes the place of God, he commits idolatry and shifts the order established by God. This affects all relationships in the learning processes as well as the selection and presentation of contents. Because learning never takes place in a vacuum, there is no neutrality in education. Everyone who cuts through our bond to God commits violence against human nature. Bavinck therefore sees religious education as the core content, around which the other disciplines are grouped peripherally.

Bavinck's worldview is reflected in its historical teleology as well as in his philosophy of education. It is not we who set the standard for ourselves, but God's revelation is the standard and ideal. Deviations from God's created reality bring confusion and ambiguity. We must rely on a substitute for God, usually on ourselves. This is based on the false assumption that we are his own creators and developers. Current daily influences often lead to methodological changes, which lead to uncertainty among all participants in the learning process.

## 2. A God-centred education in a secularized state

This brings us to the question: How can a God-centred education be implemented in a country that has been secularized? This question can be answered only by defining the relationship between religion and culture. This was one of the fundamental questions with which Bavinck wrestled throughout his whole life.

During the Middle Ages the church had dominated the field of education, whereas in the 19th century the state had gradually been taking over that role. To clarify this complex relationship it is necessary to understand Bavinck's central motif of nature and grace. The question is nicely summarized in his work, *'The Sacrifice of Praise'*:

The great question therefore, which always and everywhere returns, is this: In what relation does grace place itself to nature. Practically every child of man must regulate that relation for himself in his thoughts and life, in his will and actions. And in a larger field it also continually makes its appearance, in church and state, in family and society, in science and education.

What is the relation between the creation and recreation, of the kingdoms of the earth and the Kingdom of Heaven, of humanity and Christianity, of that which is from below and that which is from above? All in accordance with his own personal peculiarity or characteristics every man will designate this relation differently and will also apply it differently in his life.

It makes a great difference whether



we think of grace as a doctrine or as life; whether we consider it as a supernatural addition to nature or as a remedy against the sickness of sin; whether it is designated for the heart and closet only, or for the whole rich and full life of man; whether it only serves to save the soul or has the tendency to prepare honor for God out of all His works.

On account of this difference there arises amongst believers — even amongst members of one and the same church, all manner of smaller and greater differences in the confession. The truth, to be sure, is one but it reflects itself in the consciousness of man in very different ways.<sup>24</sup>

Bavinck's answer in a nutshell reads like this: He defined the relationship between religion and culture in accordance with Trinitarian salvation history. The same triune God who had created this universe also accomplished its recovery that became necessary through the fall. Grace and nature should not be separated.

Disturbances in the original order are due to sin. Salvation does not destroy or avoid nature, but rather intends its renewal. Accordingly, the fall has not brought about any material change. To recover the fallen creation God set the work of grace in motion.<sup>25</sup>

**24** Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1922), 71-72. A comprehensive study is Jan Veenhof, translated by A. M. Wolters, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, (Sioux City: Dort College Press, 2006).

**25** This is Bavinck's short definition: 'The essence of the Christian religion consists in the reality that the creation of the Father, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the

Throughout the history of the Christian church this unity of nature and grace was abandoned and replaced by a quantitative instead of a qualitative contrast. The Reformation revised this view, claiming again a purely ethical antithesis between nature and sin. Bavinck saw himself and his time as a God-given opportunity to complete this work that had begun centuries earlier. For the individual Christian this primarily meant the faithful performance of his earthly vocation. On the collective level it meant that areas of life such as education had to be redefined and reinstalled from a God-centred perspective.<sup>26</sup>

Bavinck's personal ideal lies within a confessional private school movement. State, school, church, family and youth organizations should cooperate with regard to the local conditions. For children from Christian homes, Bavinck emphasizes a unified view of the world, which is likewise transmitted through the family, the church and the school.

Bavinck was concerned about the ongoing secularization of society in general and school in particular. In his time both the liberal and socialist movements aimed to separate religion and education completely. As part of the confessional Reformed movement, Bavinck saw not only the church but also home, school, society and the

Son of God and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God.' Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 61.

**26** A good overview is given in Herman Bavinck, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and the Christian Church', *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 220-251.

state (!) under the rule of Christian principles.<sup>27</sup>

Bavinck positioned religion at the centre of education. Wherever Christian faith is banished from life, the soul is impoverished. A huge area of the inner life then remains unexplored. He expected this development to corrode the foundations of any society in the long-term.

## V The Who of Education: Reclaiming a Re-Balanced Anthropology

The Bible sets people in the place where they belong. Where is that? The Bible teaches two complementary things: First, we are created in the image of God. At the same time we are fallen. In this respect we and our environment fit together: We live as fallen creatures in a fallen world. Sin is therefore a relevant dimension for education.

Bavinck remains balanced. He sees humanity as fallen creation, but he also emphasizes our dignity as created in God's image. This justifies even speaking of the 'majesty' of the child who is heir to the covenant of eternal life. There is no other book that assigns to the child such a high place as the Bible.

### 1. Created in God's image

Bavinck's magnificent description reads like this:

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<sup>27</sup> In this respect, it is interesting to read his early essay on the Kingdom of God (1881) that is based on a lecture for the Kampen seminary. Herman Bavinck (Trans by Nelson D. Kloosterman), 'The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good', *The Bavinck Review* 2 (2011), see especially 155-156.

(M)an forms a unity of the material and spiritual world, a mirror of the universe, a connecting link, compendium, the epitome of all of nature, a microcosm, and, precisely on that account, also the image and likeness of God, his son and heir, a micro-divine-being (*mikrotheos*).

He is the prophet who explains God and proclaims his excellencies; he is the priest who consecrates himself with all that is created to God as a holy offering; he is the king who guides and governs all things in justice and rectitude.<sup>28</sup>

Let us briefly ask what insights can be derived from such a picture of biblical anthropology. What does it mean to be the 'image of God'?

- The Christian faith alone provides the relevant justification for the value of people. We have no value in ourselves, but only with respect to the Creator.
- There is congruence between us and the cosmos. They are made for each other.
- As a whole we embody the image of God. 'In our treatment of the doctrine of the image of God, then, we must highlight, in accordance with Scripture and the Reformed confession, the idea that a human being does not *bear* or *have* the image of God but that he or she *is* the image of God. As a human being a man is the son, the likeness, or offspring of God (Gen 1:26; 9:6; Lu 3:38; Acts

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<sup>28</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 2: God and Creation*, 562.

17:28; 1 Cor 11:7; James 3:9).<sup>29</sup>

- The whole human race forms a unity with a single origin. This is manifested in the fact that the same basic conditions apply to all universal laws, for example, in mathematics and logic, but also in ethics. There exist common internal ideas.
- We are inseparable unities of body and soul, which together form our personalities. Our bodies are not prisons, but an integral part of us.

To subdue the earth is the God-given mandate for humanity as the unfolding of God's image.

- Every person has been equipped with different potentials and talents. These have already been distributed unequally at birth.
- Scripture emphasizes both the value of individuality and of community without playing one against the other. Learning happens in and through the community and at the same time in an individual, unique way.

Without this biblical framework we always distort certain aspects. 'If a person lacks an objective norm in his thought, for example, in the Holy Scriptures, then he constructs the world and God according to his own image.'<sup>30</sup>

## 2. Fallen humanity

What changed<sup>31</sup> after the fall? Since the Bible sees humanity principally in relationship to God, it takes a salvation-historical stand. The Bible looks at our creation in the image of God, his disfigurement by sin, our restoration through God's grace and our completion in the *eschaton*.

Generations of parents and teachers during Bavinck's lifetime (and today) started with other presuppositions. They took the 'best in the child' and did not reckon with sin anymore.

Thousands upon thousands of people exist who believe in the total natural goodness of humanity, who proceed from it in the upbringing of children, and who build their optimistic future expectations upon it.<sup>32</sup>

Bavinck describes our condition as distorted in every faculty and function. We are no longer capable of exercising our threefold office, namely to serve as a prophet, priest and king. What are the consequences thereof?

- Sin is universal, for there is no one who does not sin. Sin is present from birth and relates to all of Adam's descendants.
- Especially relevant for education is the inclusion of intellect, will and affections.
- (Sin) begins with the darkening of the understanding, continues with the excitement of the imagi-

<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, Vriend, *God and Creation*, 554.

<sup>30</sup> Herman Bavinck, 'Primacy of the Intellect or the Will', Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Science, Society and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 201.

<sup>31</sup> For a systematic treating of the doctrine of sin, see Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 23-190.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, Bolt, Vriend, *Sin and Salvation*, 87-88.

nation, stimulates desire in the heart, and culminates in an act of the will.<sup>33</sup>

- Even though reason and will can sometimes depress desire and lust, these are in their turn often subdued and put into the service of lust. ... Not seldom they let themselves be carried along by lust to such an extent that we are robbed of all independence and become slaves of our passions. The evil thoughts and the evil desires come up out of the heart and then proceed to darken understanding and pollute the will.<sup>34</sup>
- The environment affects humans but is not ultimately responsible for his genuine development. On the one hand, we are the products of our parents and ancestors, our environment and upbringing. On the other hand, we are independent and responsible.
- The effect of sin can be very different under the same conditions, but in varying characters.
- There are countless variations, but only one source of sin. The severity of sin may vary.
- Sin intensified the existing differ-

entiation between potentials and inequalities.

Based on a shifting anthropology initiated by men like John Locke (1632-1704) and especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the idea was spread that we originated perfectly from the Creator's hands, degenerating through our own hands. Applied to education, this led to the theory that the child by nature was good and innocent. Education should aim to keep the child as far as possible away from bad influences. This explanation has stubbornly persisted.

It led to the false assumption that sin is dependent on the organization of society.

Finally, there are also those who cast the blame for all sin and misery on the lousy organization of society, and within that society, especially on capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

In the modern era, as the notion of sin is slipping away, the culpability for every misery is being sought outside the person and located in the institutions, in social circumstances, in the organization of the state.<sup>36</sup>

That means that external change improves learning conditions. That is partly true.

Culture can surely contribute some improvement in terms of outward forms and social circumstances, and Christianity has also played a significant role in that; but human nature remains constant, its capaci-

<sup>33</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 224.

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *Reasonable*, 238. In the history of Western thought there were three alternative justifications for sin: 1. The source of all moral evil is a lack of knowledge. 2. Sin is an act committed by free will which brings forth sin. 3. Sin belongs substantially to human nature. The three theories attempt to explain the sin originating out of the spirit, the will or the affections. However, the Bible sees all three human abilities involved.

<sup>35</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family* (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2012), pos. 2209.

<sup>36</sup> Bavinck, *Family*, pos. 1403-1404.

ties and powers constantly hover near average, and from the human heart constantly proceed the same evil thoughts and imaginations.<sup>37</sup>

Wherein lies the *utopia*? 'They all suffer from the illusion that by means of external measures, by means of abolishing old laws or implementing new laws, they can change human nature or convert the wicked human heart.'<sup>38</sup>

Sin was thus banished from the textbooks of pedagogy. In this way the topic disappeared from the conscious experience of educators. In Bavinck's time, this led to the absurd situation that Christian teachers agreed with the church's confession, but never talked about sin within their professional activities.

## VI The How of Education: Reclaiming a Confident Access to Reality

Bavinck saw himself confronted with two epistemological schools: with *idealism*, which emphasizes the subject of knowledge, and with *empiricism*, which attaches importance to the object of knowledge. Empiricism tends to deny the spirit while idealism tends to devalue the body. Bavinck assessed overarching ideas and norms as indispensable (emphasized by idealism), but not at the expense of sensory perception (emphasized by empiricism).<sup>39</sup>

The first foundation for Bavinck was *divine revelation*, which precedes all human knowledge. As he writes, God,

is the Creator and Sustainer of all things; also, his thinking and knowing is antecedent to the existence of things. It is not the case that God knows the world because and after it exists, but the world exists because God thought it and called it into being by an act of his will.<sup>40</sup>

*Self-awareness* is further the starting point for human perception.

In the final analysis it is in self-consciousness that we find the ineradicable conviction of the reality of the world within us and without us, of the actual and the ideal, of spirit and matter, of the seen and the unseen. These concepts constitute part of our nature and lie at the root of all our thought and action.<sup>41</sup>

A third pillar for Bavinck's epistemology is the informal, *intuitive perception of the external world* and confidence in the reliability of the information obtained. In everyday life we tacitly assume that what takes up our eyes and ears does not deceive us.

There also is a *correspondence* between the outside world and the inner being of people. The reason for this is the divine Logos who created both the entire cosmos and the individual. Humanity and the world are created by the Creator to correspond with each other. This means that people are dependent

37 Bavinck, *Family*, pos. 1847-1849.

38 Bavinck, *Family*, pos. 1205-1206.

39 For a comparison see Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 217-222; Herman Bavinck. Jack Vanden Bort (trans.), *Herman Bavinck's Foundations of Psychology* (Grand

Rapids: Calvin College, 1981), 67-69.

40 Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, 69.

41 Cornelius Jaarsma, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck*, 49-50.

on the external reality in every respect.

Human beings are in every respect dependent on the world outside of them. In no area are we autonomous; we live by what is given, i.e., by grace. But, reciprocally, we are made and designed for that whole world outside of us and connected to it by a whole spectrum of relations.<sup>42</sup>

Beside that, there exists *a-priori knowledge* in each person that is outside its own created categories.

Finally, human knowledge is *limited but reliable*. 'We are God's creation; he is not ours. While our knowledge of him is accommodated and limited, it is no less real, true and trustworthy.'<sup>43</sup>

Bavinck's epistemology was heavily criticized. Bremmer criticised him for leaning too heavily on Neo-thomistic Theology, Aristotle and the Platonic doctrine of ideas.<sup>44</sup> The second and third generation of Neo-Calvinists after Bavinck saw him as an advocate of a synthesis-theology which mixes Christian and pagan-Greek elements.<sup>45</sup> Cornelius van Til, a self-declared enthusiastic follower of Bavinck, wrote: 'Perhaps the weakest point in the argument of Bavinck lies in his failure to

distinguish clearly the Christian basis of the certainty of human knowledge from the non-Christian.'<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, Bavinck provides a solid Christian epistemology which helps to reorientate our minds in the midst of wide spread scepticism. How does that scepticism work out? All of our life and how we perceive it is ultimately the product of our own ideas. That means that everyone's picture of reality fundamentally differs, because it is designed by himself. In a radical form of epistemological scepticism, a common human concept of reality is denied, by the claim that there is no independent perception of facts.

More common is a milder form of this belief system which reads: Any belief is the product of its environment and inextricably bound up with it. That is, beliefs are necessarily and exclusively bound to a context of time and place and therefore relative. Especially popular is this so called 'social constructivism' in disciplines such as education, sociology and psychology. Bavinck's critical-realist epistemology re-introduces God as the creator of an objective reality.

## VII Conclusion

A balanced approach to education takes into consideration the why, the who and the how of learning. There is a rich heritage that comes from Herman Bavinck's broad intellectual and public life throughout the 19th and early 20th century. Not everything is applicable today. While he was living at the outset

<sup>42</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 501.

<sup>43</sup> Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> See R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1961), see for example 182, 188, 196.

<sup>45</sup> See Albert M. Wolters, Dutch Neo-Calvinism: Worldview, Philosophy and Rationality, *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. H. Hart, J. van der Hoeven and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Toronto: UPA, 1983), 113-131.

<sup>46</sup> Cornelius van Til, ed. William Edgar, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2007), 95.



of modernity, we are facing the consequences of some decades called 'late modernity' (say, postmodernism).

This means that Herman Bavinck will not offer accurate answers to all our questions.<sup>47</sup> But he helps us to orient ourselves in the midst of the contemporary intellectual 'fog' which has captured current philosophy of education, especially in the field of teleology, anthropology and epistemology.

## 1. Worldview

Parents are God's first chosen teachers in worldview training! Unfortunately, a lot of Christians are separating faith and learning completely. Faith proceeds within the heart and is a private thing. Learning takes place in public.

This view is one result of the intellectual history of the last centuries. To protect the faith from attack and the decomposition of science, it has been removed from the public discourse. Bavinck would object: God is not only Lord over the realm of faith, but also of learning. This does not mean that Christians do not recognize that  $2 + 2 = 4$  or would have completely different learning strategies. But they consider each topic through the 'spectacles' of faith.

Knowledge building is a means, but not the goal of learning. Faith is related to the entire formative life of the child (and the parents as well). It

will help us to correct our motives and goals (compare 2 Tim 3:15-17).

In summary, thoughts and actions are to be changed so that they honour God. God-fearing parents make it a habit, for example, to review a child's homework not only in form and content, but also ideologically. They pray constantly to establish good links between the material imparted and the Christian worldview.

## 2. Teleology

Bavinck reminds us that creation and history are made with a view toward the glory of their Creator. The end of all things lies not immanently in things *per se* but is assigned to a transcendent purpose. Each person is part of an overall plan. We are always subliminally aware of this arrangement. We come to peace only when we find rest in our creator through reconciliation with him and start to deliberately live for him.

In this respect, Bavinck follows Augustine's footsteps, and we should too. To accept God's sovereignty, not only in theology but in every sphere of science and life, is adequate for us. I agree with Jaarsma who summarized this aspect nicely: 'The main objective of Bavinck in his efforts in behalf of education was the defense of a philosophy of education which finds its center, as does his entire philosophy, in the Absolute Personal Being.'<sup>48</sup>

Each learning process takes place between three actors, namely between God, humanity and the rest of creation. Some years ago I showed this model to my former supervisor. I will never

<sup>47</sup> Our differing political situation—a completely secularized state—requires an alternative approach for a vanishingly small Christian minority. Otherwise there is the danger of a grotesque contradiction between 'theocratic rhetoric' and 'pluralistic reality'. See John Bolt, *A Free Church, a Holy Nation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 339-348.

<sup>48</sup> Cornelius Jaarsma, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck*, 131.



forget his reaction. 'Please erase God from the model and replace it by "customer".' In that moment, I realized how deeply the belief that God has nothing to do with our everyday life, has taken root in our thoughts and actions.

We have banished God from our learning activities. But God cannot be eliminated, he has to be replaced. It makes me sad when I think that even Christians apply this 'functional atheism' in large parts of their professional lives. If the student understands that he lives for the glory of God, he will spend his study time differently. He will regard these important years not just as a license for a reckless life.

### 3. Anthropology

The consideration of the two aspects of reality, our creation in the image of God and our sinful condition, brings a healthy anthropological balance: on the one hand, there are gifts and powers of human nature which are due to the remaining image of God in fallen humanity, whereas on the other hand, sin expands continually and pours out in a stream of misdeeds over all the earth as well as in the lives of individuals.

Instead of blaming one specific agent (for example, the teachers or the parents) and thereby building up blame-relationships, we are asked to reconsider the individual situation. That means we have to evaluate the existing potential and to train will and affections by the formation of good habits as well as by sanctions. Besides that, it forbids us to excuse everything, which is a tendency of humanistic psychology. It protects us also from an overly optimistic perspective on learn-

ing processes which offers great potential for disappointment and a constant wavering between optimism and pessimism.

Finally, our sinful condition should lead us to the cross, where our real salvation comes from. Thanks to the new life we are able to live with our primary duties. That is, in Bavinck's and the Reformer's words, to act as prophet, priest and king.

A Christian school teacher is well aware that both he and his students are affected by sin. Sin is therefore part of his everyday reality. If it does not exist conceptually, it has to be re-interpreted. Our teacher could easily blame his pupils or the parents. He can despair and despise the gifts that God has entrusted to him. The downside to this is the pride if he masters everything with flying colours. A third possibility is to make the environment (schoolhouse, superiors, education system) responsible for his failure. A grain of truth lies in these allegations! Our people and our environment are actually affected by sin. But we can never excuse ourselves.

### 4. Epistemology

The epistemological scepticism with which Bavinck was confronted and which led to a lifelong struggle has its contemporary equivalent. It emerges under the umbrella term of 'constructivism' and represents the programmatic doubt of our age. The perception of an objective, real external world is seriously questioned. When the subject-/object distinction is completely cancelled, we act solely within our experienced reality.

This form of scepticism seems to

have captured various streams of today's philosophy of education. Even in this current form the 'I' remains the last reliable bastion. One could speak of an Archimedean point, which has retained its claim since Descartes: the human mind is the first principle by which one becomes a receiver of God's revelation. Bavinck reverses the order and puts the creature in the place where we belong—in every respect dependent on the revelation of God. This message from Bavinck is highly relevant.

That means that our young univer-

sity lecturer thoroughly deals with the Christian worldview. He should over time—like Bavinck—consider the material he teaches with the eyes of faith. This functions as an internal corrective to the ideological currents within his field. It strengthens his faith that God is Lord of the entire reality of his students as well. English literature can become a study of common human hopes and fears. The Christian faith stands up to reality. This confidence extends the known way and gives room to new questions and approaches.

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