HERMAN BAVINCK AND THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN CERTAINTY

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Let me begin with a caveat. Each of us reads Bavinck through our own eyes. I am Scottish, not Dutch; 20th century, not 19th; and very much inclined to have my own view on everything. Inevitably, then, I read Bavinck in the light of my own agenda. This means that there is always a risk of making him say the things I want to hear. There is also a risk of confusing his thinking with my own. I hope this will be taken as a tribute to Bavinck. He has got under my skin.

PRELIMINARY POINTS

And after the caveat, some preliminary points.

First of all, Bavinck regarded certainty as a matter of enormous importance. Religion, he argued, could not deal in probabilities. It must deal in certainties; and it must do so because it requires unconditional obedience and total self-surrender. Every believer is potentially a martyr, and only a faith which is fully persuaded can sustain such a commitment. This, according to Bavinck, was the mind-set of the Reformation. The Reformers were sure about God, sure about the scriptures and sure about their own salvation; and they were sure with a certainty which a man would go to the stake for.

At the same time Bavinck was fully aware that we are no longer living in the Reformation. 'Doubt,' he wrote, 'has now become the sickness of our century'; and theologians 'are the most doubting, vacillating group of all'.[1] In his hugely influential *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant had argued that reason, as such, could know nothing of the *noumenon*, and his argument had seemed to many to administer the *coup de grâce* to the idea of theology as a science. A decade later he had struck a further blow against the certainties of the old rationalism in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). In the mid-nineteenth century, Darwin's version of the theory of evolution had seemed to make the Creator utterly

[1] H. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. by H. der Nederlanden (St Catherines: Paideia Press, 1980; repr. Potchefstroom: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1998; from *De zekerheid des Geloofs*, 1901), pp. 1, 2.

redundant, while Biblical Criticism, with ever growing confidence, had undermined the church's faith in the historicity of scripture. We are heirs to this scepticism, and it has been exacerbated by the dominance of post-modernism with its apparent denial of any meta-narrative and its associated argument that every written text is susceptible of an infinite variety of interpretations.

Yet Bavinck clung to the belief that even within this framework certainty is possible: not merely abstract theoretical certainty, but personal, existential certainty leading to discipleship, worship and, if need be, martyrdom. This certainty is not something additional to faith. It is the certainty of faith. Faith is certain. Believers may doubt. Faith never doubts.

Secondly, Bavinck repeatedly asserted that all knowledge rests on faith. At the back of his mind here was the common bifurcation of knowledge into two kinds, scientific and religious. The one rested on the sure foundation of proven facts; the other was based on faith. Bavinck did not accept this distinction. Yes, he agreed, religion is pre-suppositional. But so, too, he argued, is science, which 'would be in bad straits if it could reckon only with that which is demonstrable'.[2] All human knowledge rests on *principia*, or self-evident truths, which serve as axioms, and which in their very nature are unproven and un-provable. Science assumes, for example, the reliability of our senses: there really is something out there corresponding to the impression in our minds. Equally, it assumes the rules of logic and the law of causality: there must be a reason for everything because all events are linked in an inexorable causal chain. It also assumes, particularly in the case of geology, the principle of uniformity, believing firmly that geophysical processes have always proceeded at the same rate (and if you have ever argued with a Creation Scientist you will know how difficult this can be to prove). Above, all, science assumes that we live in a cognitively friendly environment. We assume both that the world around us is a world of order, and that our own cognitive faculties are competent to explore that order. As if all this were not enough, successive generations of scientists take on trust the great paradigms of their predecessors such as Newton and Einstein, Darwin and Mendel. These become 'basic beliefs', yet the vast majority of scientists never verify them for themselves. They are taken on trust, and verified, if at all, only by the fact that they 'work'.

These are considerable assumptions, and this is a considerable amount of trust. Behind all physics lies a metaphysic.

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[2] H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. by J. Bolt, trans. by J. Vriend, 4 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2009), 1, p. 599.

Thirdly, Bavinck is constantly aware of the limited value of reasons and proofs. What Bavinck has in mind here is the generally Thomist approach, first of all proving the existence of God *via* Natural Theology (the theistic proofs) and then, *via* Christian Evidences (mainly the miracles and fulfilled prophecy), proving that the scriptures are a divine revelation, before finally arriving at specifically Christian theology. This means in effect that we must first of all prove various 'truths of reason' before proceeding to the truths of revelation.

Bavinck unhesitatingly acknowledged that such proofs and evidences had some value. Indeed, Jesus and the apostles used them. Fulfilled prophecy attested the prophets as God's spokesmen, and miracles attested the Messiah and his apostles. Even today, argument can be used to demonstrate that faith is not irrational and that Christians are not following 'cunningly devised fables'.

But still, in Bavinck's view, such proofs and evidences could never provide a basis for religious certainty. There were two reasons for this. One was the very nature of religious faith, which has at its heart the willingness even to lay down one's life for the object of one's devotion. No one comes to such a position by a process of mere logical argument; and even if this route could take us to God, it could be used only by the learned, able to assimilate, for example, the ontological argument. What we need, on the contrary, is a route for the unlearned: not for the wise and prudent, but for babes.

Bavinck's second reason for the inadequacy of theistic proofs and Christian evidences was that we are not arguing to neutrals, free of all prejudice. We are arguing to the phenomenon, Man: man as she is; fallen, blind, rebellious, hostile, and totally disinclined to have her liberty circumscribed by God. Humans want to be free to choose their own idols and to decide for themselves which Moral Law, if any, they will be subject to. The apologist, therefore, will meet with adamantine resistance to the truth.

This will not prevent people coming to a historical faith and 'assenting' to, for example, the truths of the Apostles Creed. But such *fides* or *assensus* can easily exist without *fiducia*. There can be intellectual or scientific belief where there is no trust or commitment, but this is not the faith that takes up the cross. On the contrary, it can easily co-exist with idolatry.

Yet the weakness is not in the arguments. The problem is that the sinner has a vested interest in the gospel's not being true, just as his colleagues and contemporaries had a vested interest in Galileo's discoveries not being true. It is this vested interest that presents the real obstacle to apologetics.

The fourth general point takes us to the heart of Bavinck's approach: only God can give certainty. He bears witness to himself, he bears witness to his word and he bears witness to his own love for us. This means that what believers enjoy is a divine certainty. God is its source, and God is its ground.

I want to explore this certainty in three main areas: the existence of God, the divine authority of the Christian scriptures, and the assurance we have of God's love for ourselves.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

First, then, the existence of God. God bears witness to himself, and here, in essence, Bavinck follows Calvin, who in turn follows Paul's argument in Romans One; or indeed the approach of Genesis One, where God suddenly stands before us, without introduction, as the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth. No argument or proof of his existence is offered. He is simply presupposed, and instead of ascending from the Finite to the Infinite we descend from the Infinite to the Finite. In the language of Calvin, God has endowed every human being with a *sensus deitatis*, implanted within each one of us a knowledge of God and sown in very heart the seed of religion.[3] We are surrounded by revelation (Rom. 1:18-32), with the result that we know, and know with certainty, the eternal power and godhead of God. This is part of the mental equipment of every human being.

But is this not naked fideism? Are we simply to assume that everyone is by nature a theist and that there is no such thing as an atheist: 'beyond the *sensus deitatis* thou shalt not pass'?

One question that arises here is whether the *sensus deitatis* can sometimes malfunction. Suppose you live not under a Judean sky but in a concrete jungle where bird never sings, flower never grows and star never twinkles, are you still aware of the heavens declaring the glory of God? Leaving that question aside, do we have no apologetic except to repeat endlessly that God has engraved the knowledge of himself on every heart?

Curiously enough, this is not where Calvin left it. Having started from the premise that every heart is aware of God he goes on to trace the ways that 'both the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs'; to adduce man himself as 'a rare specimen of divine power, wisdom and goodness'; and to point to the history of religions as proof of a universal divine revelation.[4]

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[3] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by J. McNeill, trans. by F. L. Battles, 2 vols.; LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I.iii.1.

[4] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.2-3.

Do such arguments have any value? Yes, but only within the framework of Anselm's principle, 'faith seeking understanding' (*Fides quaerens intellectum*).[5] The origins of faith do not lie in such arguments, but faith, once it exists, seeks to understand itself, in the sense of wanting to understand both *what* it believes and *why* it believes. It also seeks to explain itself to others. This means that Christian apologetics is always rooted in faith; and far from being a prelude to theology or independent of it, belongs firmly within it. Thus understood, and prompted by such revelation as Genesis One, apologetics is able, for example, to expose the bankruptcy of such alternatives to theism as thoroughgoing materialism. How can the loves and choices of the human spirit, and the achievements of the human imagination, be regarded as no more than re-arrangements of atoms? How can the mind itself be but the product of random evolutionary mutations? And how can the order all around us be explained as the haphazard fall-out from a primeval explosion?

But Christian apologetics, still standing on the rock of revelation, can also argue that faith in a personal Creator coheres with the nature of the world in which we live and enables us to understand why that world is as it is. In particular, it helps us understand why it is that, in the later language of Alvin Platinga, we live in an epistemically congenial and cognitively friendly environment.[6] The universe around us is a world of order, conforming to consistent laws and disclosing an astonishing variety of systems within systems. This is why it admits of logical analysis and precise mathematical description. At the same time, and no less remarkably, our own minds are adapted to this environment, enabling us to understand our universe and to trace the causal forces which link event to event.

Whence this astonishing accord? From the fact, according to Bavinck, that the world was created by the Logos, and that this same Logos indwells our human minds, its Light still shining even in the darkness of our fallen condition (John 1:5, 9). To this we owe the correspondence between the knower and the known, and between intelligence and intelligibility: 'it is the same Logos who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence.'[7] This correspondence, in turn, demonstrates that our faith is not mere fideism, as if the only warrant for what we believe is that

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5 The title originally proposed by Anselm for what he later named *Proslogion*. See *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. by B. Davies and G. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 82-104.

6 A. Platinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 184, 189.

7 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, p. 231.

we believe it. The fact that we live in a cognitively friendly environment warrants the belief that everything that exists is the work of an almighty personal intelligence. The physical world is the product of thought.

THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The second issue on which Bavinck explored the basis of certainty was the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures. We have to be sure, he insisted, that they are the Word of God. Otherwise it would be folly to accord them the reverence and self-surrender which they demand.

How can we be sure? Here again Bavinck has an ambivalent attitude towards 'proofs'. He repeatedly declares that they can never produce the requisite faith. Yet he is not prepared to dismiss them as of no value. On the contrary, he admits, as we have seen, that Jesus and the apostles sometimes used arguments to move people to faith. Besides, literary and historical arguments can be used to rebut the charges that the scriptures make false claims as to their authorship and are self-contradictory: and archaeology can be invoked to confirm the biblical narrative from external sources. In sum, considerable force of evidence can be deployed to demonstrate that belief in the Bible as the Word of God is not unreasonable or irrational; or, more positively, that the Bible is eminently credible.

Bavinck's approach here is reminiscent of that of Calvin, who, though he insisted that those 'who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards',[8] yet went on to devote considerable space (the whole of Book I, Chapter viii) to an exposition of the external evidences for the divine authorship of scripture, developing a theme he had introduced in Chapter vii.4: 'if we wished to proceed by arguments, we might advance many things that would easily prove—if there is any god in heaven—that the law, the prophets and the gospel come from him.'

Bavinck, similarly, is fully aware that theology 'may not proclaim as truth what cannot survive the test of truth, no matter how rich it may be in comfort'.[9] Yet his prevailing emphasis is, once again, on the spiritual inadequacy of the proofs. One reason for this is his view of faith as involving a certainty far greater than any that can be produced by mere induction of evidence. Far from being less assured than (scientific) knowledge, religious faith is *more* assured: more intense, certainly, and virtually ineradicable. 'In terms of sheer power,' writes Bavinck, 'the assurance of

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[8] Calvin, *Institutes*, I:vii.4.

[9] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 6

faith far exceeds scientific certainty.'[10] No mere induction of evidence can produce anything so unshakable. After all, 'Scientific certainty, no matter how strong and fixed, always remains based on human argument and can, therefore, always be overturned by further and better investigation.'[11] Curiously enough, this ties in with the relativism we associate with Post-modernism. No mere academic discipline, marshalling evidence and appealing to universal reason, can put us in touch with ultimate certainty. Whether in history, morals or physics our approximations to truth are always tentative and provisional. This is why Bavinck will have to lay religious certainty on a totally different foundation: one on which science as such can never stand.

But why do the 'proofs' fail to produce the requisite religious certainty? Bavinck suggests two reasons. One is the special character of the biblical revelation itself. It is not a word of mere historical narrative or a literature resourced only from human nature ('the flesh'). It is a word that goes forth from God to man, imperiously summoning us into fellowship with the divine. It does not present itself as ordinary literature to be responded to 'like any other book'. It has a unique standpoint, in that it is not addressed to academics and never invites assessment as mere literature, history or science. In fact, as Markus Bockmuehl points out, the scriptures 'represent second-rate literature in often third-rate linguistic terms', and therefore to view them as primarily literature is 'like using a stethoscope to examine a light bulb'.[12] The implied readers of scripture are believers; its human authors are believers; its ultimate author is God; its subject-matter is the plight of man and the redeeming grace of God; its opening chapter begins with the Creator God; its New Testament begins with the Virgin Birth. All of these present an instant, full-frontal challenge to so-called 'neutral' scholarship.

'You can't argue with someone who is principially opposed to you.'[13] This is a recurring theme in Bavinck. If we are to know God there must be an accord between the knower and the known; and if we are to appreciate scripture there must be a similar accord between the reader and the ultimate author. This is precisely the point made by Jesus in his rebuke to the uncomprehending Peter at Caesarea Philippi: 'you are not on the side of God, but on the side of men' (Mark 8:33, RSV).

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[10] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, p. 578

[11] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 9

[12] M. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 48-9.

[13] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 34.

The second reason that 'proofs' are insufficient to produce faith in scripture is that academic enquiry and scientific research 'only touch the facts externally and do not penetrate their heart and essence ... they lead us to the empty tomb but not to the living Savior'.[14] They can lead us to a historical faith, but this means no more than the conviction that the events narrated in the Bible actually happened. They cannot bring home to us that these events urgently demand life-changing choices. Christ rose; but life goes on.

But if religious faith cannot be laid on an academic foundation, neither can it be based, according to Bavinck, on experience. This negative, again, has two aspects. One is that Christian certainty cannot be based on *sense*-experience. The objects of science can be seen and heard, and weighed and measured, but this is impossible in the case of core Christian beliefs such as the incarnation, the resurrection and the atonement. From this point of view there is no place for (sense) experience in religious knowledge.

This takes us back to the basic Old Testament principle that God has no visible form. As pure spirit he is inaccessible to our senses. Yet this is not quite as straightforward as it appears. The invisible God may give himself a temporary visible form, as he did in the burning bush at Horeb (Exodus 3:20) and in the vision of Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-13). God can also give himself audible form, as he did when addressing, for example, the child Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-14). Similarly, God's mighty acts (such as the dividing of the Red Sea, Exodus 14:15-31) were visible and audible, as were the resurrection appearances of Jesus; and it was precisely to a sensory experience on the Damsacus road that the Apostle Paul traced the origin of his religion (Acts 26:12-19).

This means that Bavinck's dismissal of sense-experience needs some qualification. It is indeed true that for us today belief in the crucifixion and the resurrection can never be a matter of sense-perception. Yet this should not blind us to the fact that God did frequently give empirical verification of himself. The patriarchal, prophetic and apostolic testimony is neither more nor less than testimony to such empirical episodes: 'that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you' (1 John 1:3).

From this point of view, and despite Lessing, contingent truths of history can in fact yield necessary truths of reason. The resurrection, for example, yields eternal truth; and even the great paradigms of the natural sciences are verified by experiments which are themselves contingent events of history. Divine revelation does not consist of abstract truths of

[14] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 28.

reason, but (in the first instance) of epochal empirical events of which the prophetic and apostolic records are the divinely given explanations.

But what of certainty based on inner, religious experience? There was no shortage of claims to such experience as the various streams of European Christianity retreated in face of attacks from rationalism, natural science and biblical criticism (and also in reaction to dead orthodoxy). Schleiermacher found a basis for certainty in the feeling of absolute dependence, Kant in the Categorical Imperative and Pietism in Zinzendorf's dictum, 'It is so to me; my heart tells me so'.[15]

Bavinck was fully aware, of course, that religious truth produces experience. It inevitably has an emotional and affective impact. But he insisted on this order. It is the truth that produces the experience, not the experience the truth. In this, he would have been in entire agreement with Charles Hodge: 'Christian experience is only the effect produced by Christian doctrine on the soul'.[16] Bavinck insisted, too, that we have no experience of cardinal Christian truths such as are set forth in the Apostles' Creed. Doctrines such as the virgin birth, the crucifixion and the resurrection cannot be deduced from experience. They come to us from the outside, and we can know them only if someone tells us, or bears witness to them. This is even more true of such a doctrine as the trinity. It is not given in experience, and any theology which regards its task as being merely to elucidate the contents of the Christian consciousness will be forced, like Schleiermacher, to relegate it to an appendix.[17]

The argument from experience comes perilously close to suggesting that certainty itself is the basis of certainty, a position which Bavinck utterly repudiates. The truth brings certainty, but certainty is no guarantee of truth. After all, the Buddhist is certain, as is the Muslim. Time and again Bavinck insists that faith is not the source of truth or the norm of truth. Instead, it is the grace which apprehends the truth: truth which exists prior to faith and independently of faith. Faith cannot put its faith in itself.

This is why theology must not be allowed to degenerate into mere anthropology, limited to reporting selected aspects of the human consciousness. The object of theology is not religion, but God; and the presupposition of such a study is that God has revealed himself, at the same time exercising his own inherent right to determine the conditions on

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15 Quoted in *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 33.

16 C. Hodge, *Princeton Sermons* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1879; repr. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), p. 355.

17 F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), pp. 738-51.

which he may be known. But then, science too is limited. It cannot bend the universe to its will, but must accept it for what it is, and on its own terms.

Back, then, to our original question: What binds the soul of the believer to the Bible? Bavinck answers unhesitatingly, The witness of the Holy Spirit. It is he alone who can make a person inwardly certain of the divine authority of scripture. This is, of course, a commonplace of Reformed theology and Bavinck's discussion has its roots in Calvin and its parallels in Jonathan Edwards (though Bavinck takes no notice of Edwards in this connection) and Alvin Platinga.[18] It continues the theme that God alone can bear witness to himself. Just as he bears witness to his own existence so he bears witness to his word, attesting it as his very own. Bavinck is at pains, however, to distance himself from what he regards as misunderstandings of this inner witness. It is not a revelation of some previously unknown truth. Nor is it a special personal revelation to an individual that the Bible is the word of God. Nor again is it an inference from the marks of the Spirit's authorship impressed on scripture; nor, at the other extreme is it a mystical warming of the heart.

What, then, is it? We have to bear in mind (though this point is not laboured by Bavinck) that like all the works of the Spirit his inner witness to the scriptures is mysterious. We have little insight into the Spirit's *modus operandi* in the new birth and equally little into how exactly he operated in inspiring the prophets and the apostles. The Spirit blows where he pleases (John 3:8). We can see the effects, but we cannot tell how he produces them. The *testimonium internum* is no less mysterious. We know it produces certainty: 'a solid, full, thorough and effectual conviction of the great things of the gospel ... they are points settled and determined, as undoubted and indisputable'.[19] But how this certainty is produced, we know not. Once we have said that the Spirit operates by way of supernatural influence we have said virtually all we can.

There is, however, one clear analogy to the Spirit's inward witness to scripture: the way he operated on the hearts of those who were brought to faith through the preaching of the apostles. Paul refers to this in relation to the Thessalonian believers: 'our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with great conviction (*plerophoria*).' (1 Thess. 1:5) He repeats the point in 1 Thessalonians 2:13: 'we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of

[18] See Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii; Platinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 290-323; and J. Edwards, *A Treatise concerning Religious Affections*, ed. by J. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 291-311.

[19] J. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 291.

God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God'. What is important here is that the certainty was produced not by arguments designed to 'prove' the gospel, but by the gospel itself. The preaching, the *kerygma*, carried its own power to convince. Similarly, our full assurance of the divine authority of scripture is produced not by arguments in favour of scripture, but by the scriptures themselves, just as our assurance that the Mona Lisa is a work of genius is produced not by the arguments of art historians but by the painting itself.

Further insight is offered by the description of the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16:14: 'The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.' One notable point here is that Lydia was no out-and-out enemy of the gospel. She was already a devout God-fearer, yet her heart was closed against the apostolic message. This implies that one clear result of the *testimonium internum* is, as Platinga points out, that it repairs the cognitive damage done by sin.[20] This reflects the position described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:14, where he distinguishes between the soulish (*psuchikos*) person and the spirititual (*pneumatikos*) person. The soulish person does not receive the things of the Spirit. Instead, they are folly (*moria*) to him because he lacks the discernment to recognise them, like a philistine in the presence of the Mona Lisa. The only remedy is a radical change in disposition, converting the *psuchikos* into a *pneumatikos*. This, of course, is exactly what the new birth does: 'Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit' (John 3:6), and at the heart of this lies the gift of faith. This is precisely what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8: faith is the gift of God. The Westminster Confession (XIV:II) reflects this: faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts by which 'a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word'. With this Bavinck is in full agreement: 'It is the Spirit of God alone who can make a person inwardly certain of the truth of divine revelation.'[21] Or, in other words, he persuades and enables us to believe the great truths of the gospel.

But this is linked to something else. The Spirit's witness is to Christ (John 15:26) and his witness to scripture is bound up with his witness to the Saviour. The 'things of the Spirit' (1 Cor. 2:14) are the things relating to Christ, just as the human being's aversion to scripture is at bottom an aversion to Christ. This means that when the Spirit repairs the cognitive damage done by sin, what he does is remove the blindness which prevents us seeing the beauty of Christ. This is where salvation always begins: in the vision of Christ. 'God was pleased to reveal his Son in me,' declares

[20] Platinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp.280-81.

[21] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, p. 578.

Paul in one of his accounts of his own conversion (Gal. 1:16). It is this Christ who is the glory of scripture, and the Spirit's witness to *it* is fundamentally his witness to *him*. He witnesses to Christ as the one than who a greater cannot be thought;[22] and he witnesses to Scripture as the bearer and deliverer of this unsurpassable Saviour. It is its witness to Jesus that binds the soul of the believer to the Bible.

Bavinck alleges that this doctrine of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit gradually began to lose its place of honour even among Reformed theologians,[23] who began, instead, to link confidence in the authority of scripture to the marks of divinity impressed upon it by its divine author. This meant that faith was no longer connected directly to scripture, but to the 'marks'. At best, the Spirit illuminated these marks; at worst, rationalism dispensed with the Spirit altogether and rested the truth of scripture on historical proofs.

How are we to respond to this? We have to concede, once again, that confidence in the scriptures and in the gospel can never be a matter of simply building up a body of evidence and formulating a scientific conclusion: not because the conclusion is less than scientific, but because it is more. It is religious, laying a foundation for such faith as a soul would stake its life on.

At the same time, however, we have to avoid the danger of fideism, and if we are to do so faith must have good warrant. If certainty itself becomes the ground of belief, the Christian and the Muslim are at an impasse. Both are certain, and there can be no appeal beyond their certainty. However, as Bavinck himself repeatedly insisted, the Spirit is the source of faith, but not its ground. For example, he is the source of our faith in the resurrection of Christ, but the ground of that faith is the empty tomb and the post-crucifixion appearances of Jesus to his disciples. The ground of faith in scripture, according to Bavinck, is scripture itself. It is inherently the word of God and attests itself as such. But what if the Muslim claims to be similarly impressed by the Qur'an. 'The mere reading of it,' he says, 'convinces you that it is the word of Allah, communicated directly from heaven without any human admixture.'

What then? Though the marks are seldom, if ever, the road to faith, yet after we have come to faith they may serve, *a posteriori*, to explain our faith. Here again we may speak of *fides quaerens intellectum*. Faith seeks to understand; and to understand itself as well as its object. It asks not

[22] This is Anselm's invocation of God: "You are something than which a greater cannot be thought." (*Proslogion*, 2).

[23] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, p. 584.

only, What do I believe? but, Why do I believe? But it is faith itself that is asking.

Alternatively, we may ask whether in coming to faith there is an instinctive, subconscious assessment of the 'incomparable excellences' of scripture. The conviction is not then drawn by way of inference from enumerated qualities, yet these qualities are there, and they may well be the ground of the faith of which the Holy Spirit is the source. Here it may be helpful to invoke once again the analogy of a great painting. It is the Mona Lisa itself which convinces us of its genius, and it convinces us in the very seeing of it. But it is still legitimate for the art critic to ask, What is it about this painting that makes it so extraordinary? What exactly is it about her smile, or her eyes? Listing its characteristics would not itself convince us that here was a work of unique genius; but it would help to explain and warrant our conviction that it is so.

Similarly, we must be able to give a reason for our belief that the New Testament is superior to the Qur'an: is, indeed, God's last word spoken not through a prophet, but through a Son (Hebrews 1:2). What can that reason be? The question brings us back again, surely, to Christ himself. He is the incomparable excellence of scripture: a deity and a prophet than who a greater cannot be conceived; God making himself nothing, becoming flesh, taking a servant form, washing feet, tasting death, becoming accursed for us; a man experiencing the whole range of our human emotions; dependent, yet all-conquering; living amid sin and squalor, yet undefiled; harassed, yet ever accessible; crucified, yet risen; entombed, yet now in the centre of the Throne. Could any greater story be conceived or holiness ever be more adorable?

The Christian scriptures are incomparable because they are the bearers of Christ. He is a wonder; and so, therefore, is the book that bears him.

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

The third issue addressed by Bavinck is the believer's personal assurance of salvation. Here was something deeply prized by the Reformers. Bavinck even goes so far as to claim that the Reformation was 'born out of a deeply felt need for the assurance of salvation.'[24] It was certainly a matter of paramount importance. Luther never lost an opportunity to condemn the Roman Catholic view that no one can ever know with certainty whether he is in a state of grace: 'This wicked idea, on which the entire kingdom of the pope rests, is one that you young people should flee and regard with

[24] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 16.

horror as a dangerous plague.'[25] Instead, 'Let everyone accustom himself to believe for a certainty that he is in a state of grace and that his person with its works is acceptable to God.'[26]

Bavinck was firmly committed to this Reformation perspective: 'The certainty of truth is not enough for a Christian. He also needs the certainty of salvation. [27] He even insisted that these two certainties were so closely related that the one could not exist without the other. But he was also keenly aware that after Dort things changed. Faith gave way to orthodoxy; justification by faith to justification by doctrine. Bavinck passes a remarkable stricture on this: 'the Catholic righteousness by good works is vastly preferable to a protestant righteousness by good doctrine. At least righteousness by good works benefits one's neighbour, whereas righteousness by good doctrine only produces lovelessness and pride.'[28] This reliance on orthodoxy provoked two reactions: rationalism, which would subject faith to reason; and pietism, which replaced assurance with introspection, and even with the deliberate cultivation of doubt. Yet Bavinck was aware that the Reformers, too, could have their doubts. Even Calvin, who taught so plainly that assurance was the essence of faith, was also fully aware that the believer may be troubled by doubts. This arises from the imperfection of faith: the believing mind 'partly rests upon the promise of the gospel, partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity'.[29] As a result, 'we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety'.[30]

This has its own pastoral importance: doubts of themselves are not proof that we are not in a state of grace. Yet there was, Bavinck insisted, a clear difference between the Reformers and their later disciples. The Reformers did not feed or foster doubt: 'They saw no good in it and were not content to remain in doubt. They struggled to come out of doubt and they begged to be freed from it. The Reformers rose above it by the power of faith. Not doubt and fear, but steadfastness and certainty was the normal condition of their spiritual lives.'[31]

But how are we to attain to such certainty? As far as Bavinck is concerned, faith itself *is* certainty.[32] It is assured in itself. The believer may

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[25] M. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535* in *Luther's Work*, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), vol. 26, p. 377.

[26] Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, p. 379.

[27] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 39.

[28] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 15.

[29] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii. 18.

[30] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.17.

[31] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 16.

[32] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, p. 577.

doubt; faith does not doubt. Far from distinguishing faith from knowledge, Bavinck, aligning himself with the thinking of Lutheran as well as Reformed theologians, equates it with knowledge: 'a "certain knowledge," which excludes all doubt and uncertainty.'[33] In sum, then, faith is a knowledge (*cognitio*) of God's goodwill; it is a knowledge not merely of his goodwill in general but of his goodwill to *us*; and it is no wavering, floundering knowledge but a sure and certain knowledge. He writes: 'In the state and attitude of the soul which the Holy Scriptures call faith, certainty is included by its very nature—certainty first of all regarding God's promises given us in the Gospel, but also certainty that by grace we too share in these promises.'[34]

But what is the relation between such assurance and the witness of the Holy Spirit? Here, again, Bavinck's distinction between *ground* and *source* is useful. The Spirit is the *source* of our assurance, but he is not its *ground*. Nor is his witness external to faith. His witness is to faith, and given within faith. As he bears witness through the word to God's gospel promises he makes us sure and certain that God loves us. He causes us to trust the God who loves us, and the result is the joy and peace which are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). The very fact that these graces are 'fruit' means that they flow spontaneously and organically from the internal witness of the Spirit who indwells us.

What of the role of 'the inward evidence of those graces unto which the promises are made' (Westminster Confession, XVIII.II)? And what of the so-called Practical Syllogism: 'All who believe in Christ are saved; I believe in Christ; therefore, I am saved.'

One thing is immediately clear: no one first puts her hand in the hand of God as a result of such a process of syllogistic reasoning. Besides, while on the face of things such 'marks' may warrant assurance that one is in a state of grace, all too often the result of self-examination and introspection is the very opposite. We see only the imperfections of our graces. This is the very point made by Calvin as we saw earlier: the believing mind 'trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity'. Introspection, then, is no road to assurance. On the contrary, we may say with King Lear, 'that way madness lies'.

We are in grave danger of inverting the biblical and spiritual order here. Precisely because our graces are the fruit of faith they are the consequences, not the causes, of assurance. We have too often neglected this. There can be no real joy, peace, patience, or taking up of the cross where there is no assurance. It is even unlikely that there can be any seri-

[33] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, p. 575.

[34] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p .40.

ous evangelism. Our whole encouragement to obedience comes, as Paul reminds us, from the love of Christ (Phil. 2:1). What Wordsworth said of good poetry is thus true of all Christian service: it is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.[35] This is why all the great heroes of the faith, from Paul through Luther to Bonhoeffer have been sustained by the certainty that God loved them. What Bavinck says of Luther was true of them all: 'His faith was so firmly anchored and his hope so sure that with them he dared stand alone before all his opponents.'[36]

Which comes first: God's love for us, or our faith in him? It seems a simple question, but it is a momentous one. The Reformation (like the apostles) gave an unequivocal answer: God's love and grace comes first. That God loves us is not something we infer from our faith in him. It is what faith puts its trust in, from its very first breath. 'He loved me and gave himself for me'. That is what faith believes in; and from then on we and God walk hand in hand.

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[35] From Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). See *Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and Coleridge*, ed. by R. Brett and A. Jones, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 246.

[36] Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, p. 16.