

Herman Bavinck's Theological Aesthetics: A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis

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In 1914 Herman Bavinck wrote an article for the Almanak of the Vrije Universiteit entitled, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” which has recently been translated and republished for the English-speaking world in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*.¹ While this is not the only place where Bavinck treats the subject of beauty, this article stands out as a unique, extended glimpse into Bavinck's theological aesthetics.² In it we see that Bavinck was conversant with philosophical aesthetics and aware of the tensions of doing theological aesthetics from both a small “c” catholic and a distinctly Reformed perspective.

There are many ways to assess Bavinck's reflections on aesthetics. For example, one could look at the intimations in Bavinck's works of the aesthetics formulations of later Dutch Reformed writers such as Rookmaker, Seerveld, or Wolterstorff.³

1. Herman Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetic” in *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 245–60.

2. See also *Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 252–55.

3. This in itself would prove to be a very interesting study. In one section of the essay Bavinck entertains an idea by a “Mister Berland” who maintains “the characterization of an anarchist situation in the arts.” See Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” 252. This sentiment adumbrates Rookmaaker's critique of

Yet this paper is concerned with two interrelated theological questions that can be characterized as synchronic and diachronic. First, how does Bavinck's aesthetics fit into his broader theological commitments? Second, where does Bavinck's aesthetics place him in the larger trajectory of Christian theological aesthetics? Before exploring these questions it would serve us well to briefly summarize Bavinck's article.

“OF BEAUTY AND AESTHETICS”

Although Bavinck's article takes many twists and turns along the way, it can be briefly (and therefore somewhat reductively) summarized in two major movements. His first movement sketches the history of aesthetics, including such notable thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Schelling, Hegel, Hume, Burke, Darwin, Baumgarten, and Kant. In his sketch Bavinck pays particular attention to three approaches: (1) the influence of Plato's idealism, (2) the modern empiricist movement (i.e., Hume's, Burke's, Darwin's, and Baumgarten's aesthetics), and (3) Kant's a priori via media between Plato's idealism and modern empirical approaches.

Through it all Bavinck presents no winners. He sees all three schools as providing both promise and problems for a theological aesthetic. In fact, for Bavinck, the way forward must hold both an

modern art as characterized by “anarchy, nihilism and the gospel of absurdity.” See Hans Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 130. Additionally, Bavinck states, “some have even proposed that each art has an independent origin and that an archetype has never existed. And thus there remains, in spite of all exact study, the greatest possible difference about the essence of art” (“Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” 253). Here Bavinck seems to gloss an idea resembling Wolterstorff's critique of all essentialist attempts to define art as fulfilling a specific purpose, preferring instead to see works of art finding their origin in the uniqueness of each independent action. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 4–8.

empirically-based aesthetic from below (an analysis of man's own sense of beauty, the nature of artistic activity, and the objects themselves) combined with a more "spiritual" aesthetics from above (a *via media* that does not err as Kant did by reducing beauty to a function of the human mind). In other words, Bavinck is looking for an aesthetic that can offer a satisfying answer to the complexity of both subjective and objective beauty.

Having provided a brief intellectual sketch of the history of aesthetics, Bavinck's second movement can be organized around the categories of the classical Platonic triad: the true, the good, and the beautiful. In spite of some concern regarding Augustine's use of beauty as a transcendent, Bavinck assures us that Augustine was right to ascribe these categories to God. Yet Bavinck cautions against what he believes is a trace of neo-Platonism in Augustine's thought and emphasizes the limited nature of all earthly manifestations of this triad. Additionally, he recommends referring to God's "glory" rather than to God's "beauty." Such language provides a safeguard to the otherness of God's attributes. According to Bavinck, within the created world the true, the good, and the beautiful are distinct though limited reflections of their divine counterparts, and the triad is associated internally with man's irreducible capacity for seeing the world as containing the true, the good, and the beautiful. Hence they are clearly manifested in society through the developments of science, technology, and art.⁴ Bavinck concludes his second movement by emphasizing that as foundational as beauty is as part of the human condition, it must

4. Bavinck's language of the correspondence between faculties and the external object is central to his thesis of bridging the subjective/objective divide: the intellect corresponding to the true, agency corresponding to the good, and aesthetic awareness corresponding to the beautiful. For Bavinck such an epistemic gap seems to implicitly deny a theological assumption behind the Kantian noumena/phenomena divide. Bavinck states, "Humanity and the world are related because they are both related to God. The same reason, the same spirit, the same order lives in both." See Bavinck, "Of Beauty and Aesthetics," 259. A notable comparison can be seen in Richard Swinburne's principle of credulity. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), ch. 13.

never be the initial movement towards the world; for, the beautiful does not have its own content apart from the true and the good.

Having briefly reviewed the two movements in Bavinck's article, we are now in a position to begin exploring the synchronic and diachronic theological implications of Bavinck's aesthetics.

PUTTING BEAUTY IN ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE

One of the most predominant theological concerns for Bavinck is the theological fallout of both a too high and a too low view of beauty. Regarding the latter, Bavinck devotes a large portion of the essay to guarding against the powerful forces of the modern intellectual world that attempt to develop purely immanent explanations of truth, goodness, and beauty. Although he is painstakingly careful to give empirical aesthetics its due, elucidating the strengths and embracing such approaches at a level that is uncommon among theological aesthetics, Bavinck nevertheless rejects all attempts to reduce the dynamic of beauty to its empirical aspects—the eye of the beholder, the skill of the artist, or the form of the work of art. For Bavinck, such reductions can never give a robust account of the question of beauty itself, a question that haunts human perception. Likewise, for Bavinck, to deny man's distinct perception of beauty as an objective, fundamental awareness is to erode one of the elements that makes humans distinct. In other words, Bavinck believes that the perception of beauty—no less than religious, moral, and cognitive awareness—is “peculiar to man.”⁵ Interestingly, in spite of Bavinck's theological problems with a purely evolutionary or empirical explanation of aesthetics, his response is not to dismiss such approaches but rather to show their role as a partial explanation. In other words,

5. “Perception (as we saw above) as the means whereby beauty is observed points back to a sense of beauty that is by nature peculiar to man, just as in religion, morality, cognition, and so forth. Man cannot be understood as a monistic and evolutionary unit; he is and was, as far as we can go back into history, a being that forms a unity, although imbued with different gifts and capabilities.” See Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” 257.

such answers serve as an invitation to revelation and demonstrate the need for additional sources to explain the depth of “things that arise in the human spirit” due to beauty’s objective and spiritual quality.⁶

It is precisely here that we see most clearly Bavinck’s continuity with contemporary attempts to reclaim beauty over against the subjectivizing of beauty in the secular imagination. For example, in his article, “Beauty and the Soul,” John Milbank speaks of a “simultaneous objectivity and subjectivity of the experience of the beautiful.”⁷ Likewise, David Bentley Hart remarks, “beauty is objective” regardless of “the modern climate which has attempted to sequester beauty within the human subject via phenomenology.”⁸ So Bavinck, long before Milbank and Hart, argued in the face of the modern imagination that beauty required more than the subjective frame (what Bavinck refers to as “empirical aesthetics”).

Going even farther one might say that Bavinck adumbrates much of the language of Milbank and Hart regarding the richness, depth, and charged power involved in the interaction of subjective and objective beauty. Predating both Milbank’s and Hart’s critique of Kant’s placing the “sublime” as merely “subjective” rather than offering a “disclosure of depth” within the objective world,⁹ Bavinck states that “beauty and the sense of beauty respond to each other, as the knowable object and the knowing subject.”¹⁰ This response “discloses us to ourselves,” “deepens, broadens, enriches our inner

6. Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” 253–254.

7. John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Edith Wyschogrod, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 2–3.

8. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 17.

9. Milbank, Ward, and Wyschogrod, *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty*, 4.

10. Bavinck, “On Beauty and Aesthetics,” 259.

life,” “brings cleansing, liberation revival,” and creates “a longing deep in every human heart.”¹¹

Bavinck clearly believed that this longing, when matched with truth and goodness, could lead humans to desire the very thing beauty reflected, namely, the glory of God. However, in spite of Bavinck's formulation of an elevated power of beauty within the human soul, his Reformed instincts made him more guarded than modern participation-based elucidations of beauty that view such interactions as sufficient in themselves for providing a window to the infinite.¹² For him, beauty “does not have the same compelling

11. Bavinck, “On Beauty and Aesthetics,” 259.

12. David Bentley Hart describes “the infinite toward which beauty leads reflection, and which lays open the space in which every instance of beauty shines forth.” See Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 19. Hart's description of beauty is so dynamic, changing, and ineffable that one might be left to wonder how it does not itself come to be an extension or experience of the divine essence. Hart, in his defense, gives a very nuanced and brilliant distinction between his own approach and “Neoplatonism” which has been “left unredeemed by theology” (p. 245ff.). Yet even if we take Hart's own insistence that such language maintains *analogous* participation, some might insist that there is a danger regarding the integrity of materiality when given such an overloaded sense of divine presence. As Jon Mackenzie has noted, sacramental ontologies must navigate an inverse relationship between the degree of divine presence or participation and the actual integrity of materiality. See Jon Mackenzie, “Presence without Absence? A Critique of David Brown's Ontology of Divine Generosity,” unpublished paper presented at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts, St. Andrews University, Sept 6th, 2010. For a contemporary neo-Calvinist critique of the redemptive aspect of Milbank's participatory aesthetics, see Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, “The Invisible and the Sublime: From Participation to Reconciliation” in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 89–106. Chaplin states that a “participation ontology. . . remains confined within the traditional dualistic and hierarchical terminology of a ‘lower’ human realm . . . and a ‘higher’ divine or transcendent” by which the “lower realm is construed as rising up toward the higher realm via participation in it.” She continues, “It could be argued that an even more Radically Orthodox Christian understanding of aesthetics would depart from this traditional hierarchical terminology and recognize that the summons to reclaim culture is not adequately stated as a mediation between corporeal and incorporeal or physical and nonphysical but rather as a vindication and healing of an originally and enduringly good but now also broken and

force as the true and the good.”¹³ Though a powerful form of revelation, beauty remains dependent on other elements without which her real magic cannot be fully worked. Even granting an objective status to beauty as part of the world, as well as its ability to enlighten and move the self beyond itself, such aesthetic events can at best leave us longing for something more, some other complement whereby to complete the perception of revelation.¹⁴

Now for Bavinck to speak of the revelation of beauty in a loose way will not do, for beauty is a distinct kind of revelation. This is what is at the heart of Bavinck’s critique of beauty as a transcendental. Bavinck, speaking of the neo-Platonic influences of the church fathers, states that the true, the good and the beautiful were “separated from the theistic foundation and marked as

corrupted creation. . . . [T]he Reformed tradition has understood such reconciliation to be, not a mediation between physical and nonphysical, visible and invisible, material and immaterial realities, but rather both a restoration and transformation . . .” (p. 104).

13. Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” 259.

14. Here Bavinck’s distillation of the nature of the perception of beauty apart from the propositional and ethical elements of revelation echoes Calvin’s view of the relationship between the witness of creation and scripture. Calvin, recognizing the spiritual and therefore revelatory nature of the natural world, speaks of the Spirit “transfusing into all things his energy, and breathing into them essence, life, and movement. . . .” See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 1:14. However, in contrast to the revelation of creation, Calvin deems Scripture as a critical source of a true (saving) knowledge of God. For like spectacles that bring the subject into focus, Scripture can gather up the “confused knowledge” in our minds and give us a clear picture of God. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.6. William Dyrness, in his discussion on *Institutes* 1.6.1, adds a helpful recognition that Calvin (in a way that parallels Bavinck’s movement) is simultaneously holding forth both more and less of a role for the beauty of creation. He states that for Calvin “the world cannot ‘hold’ God, and therefore no image can be transparent to the Divine, as icons are for the Orthodox. But in another sense Calvin wants to redefine what is religious . . . God’s presence can be glimpsed in a larger sphere of activity.” See William Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 75–76.

metaphysical realities; or even elevated to the rank of gods. . . .”¹⁵ He reiterates this concern in his *Reformed Dogmatics* in a passage dealing with God's majesty:

In the created world there is a faint reflection of the inexpressible glory and majesty that God possess . . . what we have here, however, is . . . not identity. Speaking of creatures, we call them pretty, beautiful, splendid; but for the beauty of God scripture has a special word: glory. For that reason it is not advisable to speak—with the church fathers, scholastics, and Catholic theologians—of God's beauty. Augustine already spoke in this vain, proceeding from the basic premise that “whatever is, insofar as it has being, is true, good, and beautiful.”¹⁶

Bavinck contends that the discontinuity between divine beauty (along with truth and goodness) and creation's beauty is not merely a Protestant hang up or the lack of a truly eschatological focus. The patristic tradition, including the likes of Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodoret, Jerome, Isidore, and so forth, all denied that in the hereafter we would see God “with respect to his essence.” For Bavinck, the communicable attributes maintain both a qualitative and quantitative distinction. He reiterates this truth as part and parcel with the phenomenology of beauty itself; for, finite beings are incapable of perceiving the infinite. God's incommunicable invisibility—which is more (though not less) than simple immateriality—must always mitigate the nature of the communicability of divine attributes lest in bringing man up to God, we inadvertently bring God down to fit a finite frame. This creaturely limitation is why Bavinck believed Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical view of participation in the divine beauty is implicitly pantheistic. Such a view duplicates the idealist panentheism of Hegel who saw beauty as the commodity bonding the Geist to the world. This pantheism was also reflected in early Schelling's elevation of beauty such that art stood above religion and

15. Bavinck, “On Beauty and Aesthetics,” 255.

16. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:254.

philosophy. As Bavinck puts it, for Schelling, art was “the complete revelation of the absolute, the perfect manifestation of the divine idea.”¹⁷ One must ever guard against an idolatrous elevation of beauty to a metaphysical category that transcends the creator-creation divide.

Here Bavinck’s suspicion that an over-elevated understanding of beauty infringes on God’s glory finds resonance from a different voice on the theological spectrum—that of Karl Barth. Barth notes:

If we say that God is beautiful, and make this statement the final explanation of the assertion that God is glorious, do we not jeopardize or even deny the majesty and holiness and righteousness of God’s love? Do we not bring God . . . into the sphere of man’s oversight and control, into proximity to the ideal of all human striving? [. . .] Certainly we have every reason to be cautious here.¹⁸

That Barth drew from Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* in preparation for his *Church Dogmatics* is well known, being possibly most conspicuous in Barth’s adoption of Bavinck’s idiomatic “Deus dixit.”¹⁹ Yet in reading Barth’s distinction of the relationship between glory and beauty, his concern over Augustine’s development, and his assessment of Pseudo-Dionysius’ approach to divine beauty as “hardly veiled Platonism,”²⁰ it is hard not to hear Barth reframing Bavinck’s concerns as part of his own account of the relationship between God’s glory and beauty.²¹

17. Bavinck, “On Aesthetics and Beauty,” 247.

18. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 2/1:651.

19. John Visser has recently offered an assessment of the positive nature of Barth’s adoption of Bavinck. See John Vissers, “Karl Barth’s Appreciative Use of Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 45, no. 1 (2010): 79-86.

20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1:651.

21. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:252–55 with Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1:649-667. Although we know that Barth read Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* in preparation for his *Church Dogmatics*, there is no evidence to

However, it must be said that the real point of comparison between Bavinck and Barth is not their concern over distinguishing divine and creaturely beauty. If this were the case, it would simply place them both within the dominant trope of such twentieth-century Protestant theologians as Anders Nygren, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Eberhard Jüngel.²² What makes the comparison between Barth and Bavinck all the more fascinating is that while they echo sentiments common to other Protestants, they stand out by doing so within a largely positive and spirited defense of beauty as a category of revelation itself. This is not to say that Barth and Bavinck saw eye to eye on the nature of that revelation. For whereas Bavinck associated beauty with his view of general revelation,²³ Barth saw the divine voice as irreducibly linked to the revelation of beauty. Therefore, for Barth “the statement that God is . . . beautiful . . . cannot claim to have any independent significance” for “we must keep strictly to Jesus Christ. . . . It is indeed only of Him that we can speak when we dare to say such extravagant things about ourselves and the rest of creation.”²⁴

At this point we are in a position to see Bavinck's unique place in twentieth-century theological aesthetics. On the one hand, Bavinck (along with Barth) stands out among twentieth century Protestants for his unusually positive and robust place for a theological understanding of beauty. As we have seen he did this by his articulation of beauty as a distinct kind of general revelation. Moreover, it was precisely because of Bavinck's view of the nature of beauty's role within general revelation that he demonstrated such

suggest that Barth read Bavinck's article, “On Beauty and Aesthetics.”

22. See Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (London: Ashgate, 2001), 68–74.

23. While not salvific revelation, “all peoples have to a certain extent recognized this revelation” for “even idolatry presupposes that God's ‘power’ and ‘divinity’ manifest itself in creatures.” See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:310.

24. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1:667–68. The classic exposition of the distinction between these two versions of revelation can be found in the book by Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

a keen awareness of the denial of objective beauty in the modern imagination. Here, in somewhat bold relief from Barth, Bavinck adumbrates many contemporary scholars (Milbank, Hart, etc.) who desire to defend beauty as an objective quality of the world; for, these scholars ground a theological appraisal of beauty in the objectivity, depth, and longing that the revelation of beauty engenders, and they argue that creation, though fallen, still has an irreducible, objective aesthetic revelation, a revelation pointing towards a higher beauty albeit not identical with that beauty.

THE TRINITY AND BEAUTY

To understand the second theological implication of Bavinck's aesthetics we must return to his concern regarding the fracture of beauty in modern thought. This fracture includes not only separating beauty from creation but also separating beauty from its natural relationship with the true and the good. Bavinck believed that since this triad acts as a created revelation of God's own transcendent truth, goodness and beauty, it was originally intended to work together.²⁵ He is not stating that this is necessarily the case in our fallen world, however. Rather, he asserts only that since the triad reflects the divine qualities, truth, goodness, and beauty were originally intended to subside together in unity despite the fact that they appear in asymmetrical form in the fallen world.

Consequently, Bavinck's description of the relationships among the triad evinces an uncanny resemblance to his formulation of the

25. It is really quite remarkable that, a hundred years before the current debate, Bavinck returns to Plato as the clue to a proper view of beauty. For an excellent review of the contemporary ways to read Plato regarding beauty, see Jamie Smith, "Will the Real Plato Please Stand Up?" in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, eds. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 61–72. Bavinck implies the unnatural nature of separating the triad with the simple question: "is beauty essentially bound to content, as well as to truth and goodness, and even if it were possible, is it really permissible to break this triad? In short, is Satan beautiful if he appears as an angel of light?" Bavinck, "On Beauty and Aesthetics," (p. 257).

relationships among the persons of the Trinity. This is not to say that Bavinck explicitly states a trinitarian structure for aesthetics. However, it is difficult to ignore the striking similarity in Bavinck's description of the relationship of the true, the good and the beautiful with his view of the Trinity. For example, when describing the triad Bavinck states, "the true, the good, and the beautiful are one but also three." Additionally, when reflecting upon the created nature of the three he restates, "their unity, however, does not exclude diversity." These relationships among the members of the triad mirrors his Augustinian trinitarian formulations.²⁶

In describing the power of the intellect (corresponding to the true), intention (corresponding to the good), and aesthetic delight (corresponding to beauty), Bavinck makes clear that the source of the three is conceptualization or the true. Then, emerging both dependently and simultaneously, is our pursuit of the good by which we shape the world "according to our ideas." Bavinck reiterates that these two—the true (which is the source) and the good (which emerges from the source)—are paired in a unique relationship. And then, in addition to this initial relationship "comes a third: the aesthetic" which unlike the unique relationship between the first two "consist in the agreement" between the true and the good. It is marked by "harmony" and "fullness." Although Bavinck sketches the trinitarian structure subtly, and although this structure is spread throughout his essay, a careful reading of his aesthetics reveals an implicit identification of the true with the Father, the good with the Son, and the beautiful with the Spirit.²⁷

26. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:316. It is very interesting to compare Bavinck's use of the triad with Plato. For Plato, the Good is the ontological basis for truth and the epistemological basis of the knowledge of the truth. The knowledge of the truth then fills us with beauty. While Bavinck's model reverses the order of the true and the good, it retains the dependent role of beauty upon the true and the good. For a helpful review of Plato's original model see Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 28.

27. Bavinck, "On Beauty and Aesthetics," 254.

That Bavinck would adopt a trinitarian structure to the corresponding human capacities for the true, the good and the beautiful should come as little surprise given his affinity for Augustine's psychological analogy of the Trinity, a model which discovers traces of the Trinity "in the faculties of the soul."²⁸ What should draw our attention, given the history of theological aesthetics, is Bavinck's distinct development of the Augustinian model such that the Spirit has a unique relationship to beauty that is characterized by "harmony," "unity," "perfection," and "completeness".²⁹ Thus to rightly appreciate Bavinck's unique theological aesthetic we would do well to place Bavinck's association of the Spirit with Beauty in the context of church history. Here Patrick Sherry's work, *Spirit and Beauty*, proves invaluable.³⁰

According to Sherry, the association of the Spirit with beauty has a long history, finding its inception early in the church. The tradition begins with Irenaeus' association of the Spirit's work in creation with adornment, Clement of Alexander's connection of the Holy Spirit to artistic beauty in the world, and the Cappadocean's eschatological association of the Spirit with perfecting or "beautifying." There are many names that could be added to this early patristic list such as St. Basil, whose treatise, *On The Holy Spirit*, claims that the Spirit's work is to return us to our natural beauty. This patristic trend was conspicuously absent in Augustine, however, who distinctly connected beauty to the Son. Augustine's legacy was very strong in the West and remained the primary association. His view was further embellished by Aquinas and Bonaventure. One has to wait for the work of Calvin before a robust connection between the Holy Spirit and beauty can be reclaimed. Moreover, it is not until the Eighteenth century, with the work of Jonathan Edwards, that an "aesthetic discussion" is keyed into "a

28. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:325.

29. Bavinck, "On Beauty and Aesthetics," 256.

30. Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty* (London: SCM, 2002).

fully developed Augustinian Trinitarian Theology.”³¹ In his *On the Trinity*, Edwards argues that the Father and Son delight in each other and breathe forth the Holy Spirit in love and joy; thus, “the Holy Ghost, Being the Love and Joy of God, is his beauty.”³² In like manner Hans Urs von Balthasar uses Augustine’s view of the Spirit as the harmony between the triune members as the basis for connecting the Spirit with beauty. Speaking of the Spirit as the bond between the Father and Son, Balthasar states, “In this incomprehensible unity the Spirit is the locus of the beauty of God.”³³

With this brief historical sketch a very fascinating picture of the uniqueness of Bavinck’s trinitarian aesthetic appears. Drawing on Calvin, Bavinck’s robust creation pneumatology echoes the early patristic connection of the Spirit to the common encounter with beauty.³⁴ Yet, like Edwards and Balthasar, Bavinck seems to move beyond Calvin by intimating a connection between the Spirit and beauty in an Augustinian trinitarian fashion. Thus he places his theological aesthetic in the company of such renowned modern aesthetic theologians as Edwards and Balthasar. This should cause one to take pause. For it is striking to see Bavinck’s aesthetic theology in the company of two such celebrated theologians.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to unpack fully the unique aesthetic developments of Edwards and Balthasar. Yet a few things should be noted. First, Edwards’ concept of beauty as a disposition toward being is so distinct that it is unique to any other theologian’s concern. Additionally, Bavinck’s concern regarding the transcendent nature of being shows a contrast with Edwards who, at least on one level, freely associates beauty as a transcendental.

31. Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 12.

32. Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 12–15.

33. Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 16–17.

34. Patrick Sherry places Calvin in the same line as the Cappadocians in connecting the Spirit to beauty. See Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 11–12.

Bavinck's work resonates more naturally with Balthasar's theology than with Edwards' for two reasons. First, Balthasar, like Bavinck, is leery of allowing beauty to control theology. Second, Balthasar's use of Aquinas to speak of the splendor of divine truth and goodness parallels Bavinck's view on the primacy of truth and goodness as the "content" necessary for beauty.³⁵

Since Balthasar postdates Bavinck, and since Edwards only makes a handful of appearances in Bavinck's works, neither of them are directly related to Bavinck's aesthetic formulations. It seems fair to conclude, therefore, that Bavinck, despite clear resonances with a number of theologians, is not merely recycling previous theological aesthetics but formulates his own distinctly trinitarian theological aesthetics, an aesthetic both sensitive to the broader Christian tradition and reflecting his unique neo-Calvinist perspective.

CONCLUSION: AN UNASHAMEDLY THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

We have seen that Bavinck, though happy to recount the philosophical history, made use of theological categories—especially Augustinian trinitarian formulations—to frame and analyze aesthetics. Through a careful examination of his work, Bavinck's true intent becomes clear: his desire is to guide his readers through the increasingly reductive empiricism of modern thought and to reclaiming created beauty as a revelation of God designed to direct us toward a transcendent beauty—the beauty that God alone possess in his categorically distinct trinitarian glory. Since the time of Bavinck's publications almost one-hundred years ago, the need for a Christian reframing of aesthetics (and epistemology and ethics) has become all the more pressing. While some headway has been made, one wonders how the development of theological aesthetics would have been different if Bavinck's contribution initially had a wider circulation. Though a century late to the larger theological party, it may well prove to be just in time for those

35. Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 75.

attempting to defend a fresh theological account of beauty in our late modern world.