

“Will I Remain Standing?": A Cathartic Reading of Herman Bavinck

Willem J. de Wit

Doctoral candidate, VU University Amsterdam

A TRAGIC HERO OF FAITH

“Will I remain standing? God grant it!” writes the nineteen year old Herman Bavinck in his diary on September 23, 1874, the day he arrived at Leiden University to study theology.¹ In the next decades he will see many of his contemporaries drift away from the Cross in the current of the modern worldview and bow down to the idol of evolution.² He himself will seek to stand firm as a Christian, not by

1. Herman Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” [diary 1874–1879], September 23, 1874, H. Bavinck Archives, Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism (1800 to the present day), University Library, VU University Amsterdam, collection 346, folder 1 or 16. Subsequent references to this archive follow the following format: H. Bavinck Archives, HDC, folder number. When two folder numbers are given, there is a difference in the numeration between J. F. Seijlhouwer, “(Voorlopige) Inventaris van het archief van H. Bavinck” (Amsterdam: HDC, October 2004), http://www.hdc.vu.nl/nl/Images/346%20Herman%20Bavink_tcm99-137241.pdf and J. F. Seijlhouwer, “Inventaris van het archief van H. Bavinck, 1870–1954” (Amsterdam: HDC, October 2004), respectively.

2. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *De wetenschap der heilige godgeleerdheid: Rede ter aanvaarding van het leeraarsambt aan de Theologische School te Kampen, uitgesproken den 10 jan. 1883* (Kampen: Zalsman), 6, and *idem*, *The Philosophy of Revelation: The Stone Lectures for 1908–1909; Princeton Theological Seminary* (New York: Longmans Green, 1909), 291: “Just as the pagan treats his idol, so modern man acts with the idea of evolution.” The question, “Will I remain standing?” may allude to the Old Testament story of the three men who refused to bow down for Nebuchadnezzar’s golden image and therefore were thrown in

isolating himself from the world, but in an existential struggle with the intellectual climate of his day.

In this article we will follow Bavinck in his struggle. Our focus will not be on his major works such as the *Reformed Dogmatics* and *The Philosophy of Revelation*,³ but rather we will examine his personal notes, letters, lesser known publications, and his contemporaries’ memories of him. The image that appears after a wide reading of his writings is that of a “tragic hero of faith.”

Bavinck is a hero of faith. He sought to remain standing, and he stood firm. We have no indications to the contrary. In his confrontation with the modern worldview, he kept the faith.

However, we may wonder whether his attempts to overcome the modern worldview intellectually were also successful. His *Reformed Dogmatics* is impressive, if only for its sheer size, and *The Philosophy of Revelation* displays a depth and breadth of thought that is rarely found. Still, these works can leave one with the feeling that they are not sufficient as an answer to the modern worldview, that is, the way of thinking that breaks away from Christianity, explains the world without God, and understands human life and culture from an evolutionary perspective.⁴ As

the fiery furnace (Daniel 3).

3. In this article, references are to the English edition of the dogmatics: Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008; Logos4 electronic edition). References follow the format “volume:page #section.” The same section numbers are found in the second and subsequent Dutch editions of the *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*. A searchable Dutch version (similar to the second edition, but in revised spelling) is available in *Online Bijbel DeLuxe: Studie-editie 2002* (Dordrecht: Importantia, 2001; CD-ROM) or its successor the *Online Bijbel Studie DVD* (various editions).

4. The following quotations illustrate how Bavinck understood what was going on in his days: “Man has undertaken the gigantic effort of interpreting the whole world, and all things that are therein, in their origin, essence and end, what is called purely and strictly scientifically, that is, without God, without any invisible, supernatural, spiritual element, and simply and alone from the pure data of matter and force.” “Thus presently over against the old world-view there will be placed the new world-view thought out to its latest instance and

Henrikus Berkhof remarks: “After 1900 Bavinck increasingly felt that his theological direction was leading to a dead end. . . . He felt increasingly that the modern period needed a much more vigorous renewal of theology than he himself had produced or was able to produce.”⁵ Also, some texts that we will discuss later in this article show that Bavinck, far from being always victorious, was rather a tragic hero of faith.

My invitation in this article is to read Bavinck in a cathartic way. Just as Aristotle said about Greek drama that following the hero in a tragedy brings about *catharsis* (cleansing, purification), so also following Bavinck in his existential-intellectual attempts to remain standing, including his failures, can purify our minds and hearts from problematic patterns of thought and piety and enable

consequently applied to every department of life, namely, the irreligious over against the Christian, the atheistic over against the theistic, the mechanical over against the organic, or as it has been named, the world-view of development over against that of creation.” Herman Bavinck, “Creation or Development,” trans. J. H. de Vries, *Methodist Review* 17 (1901): 849, 852; Dutch original: *idem*, *Schepping of ontwikkeling* (Kampen: Kok, 1901), 8, 12. Although Bavinck can speak about “creation *and* development [evolution]” (see e.g. *Schepping of ontwikkeling*, 2nd ed. [Kampen: Kok, 1919], 5), he explicitly rejects the idea that human beings descend from (other) animals. For an early example of this rejection, see the text edited in Willem J. de Wit, “Beeld van gorilla en chimpansee of beeld van God? De eerste pagina’s van Herman Bavincks manuscript ‘De Mensch, Gods Evenbeeld’ (1884); Inleiding, tekst, commentaar,” in *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck*, ed. George Harinck and Gerrit Neven, AD Chartas-reeks 9, 165–82 (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2006). A popular overview of Bavinck’s views on evolution can be found in Willem J. de Wit, “Herman Bavinck over de evolutieleer,” *Nederlands Dagblad* (October 29, 2004): 2K.

5. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology: A Report of a Journey*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 113. Jan Veenhof agrees with Berkhof, but nevertheless shows appreciation for Bavinck’s dogmatics as it is. See Jan Veenhof, “Bavinck and Guardini: Theologie en cultuur; Over de continuïteit in het levenswerk van Herman Bavinck,” in *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck*, 20–21; cf. 24n23. For Andrea Ferrarri it was a discovery that Bavinck himself is more interesting than that he had understood from these few lines of Berkhof. See Andrea Ferrari, “Bavinck in Italiaanse context,” in *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck*, 121–22.

us to live and theologize with a new openness and freedom amid the questions that face Christianity and the Church today.

“FOR THE SAKE OF CONSCIENCE”

Shortly after the young Bavinck prayed to remain standing, his commitment to faithfulness is tested. He decides to follow his conscience, but even doing that is not so easy, as a short study of two passages in his diary will show. This study will also give some insight into the spiritual climate in which Bavinck grew up and into his personal character.

In his diary notes on September 23, 1874, the words, “Will I remain standing? God grant it!” are immediately preceded by the remark: “Leaving my parents was difficult for me, especially because I went to L[eiden].”⁶ Bavinck’s problem is probably not the physical distance from Kampen to Leiden or the fact that he is no longer to see his parents daily. When he was at grammar school in Zwolle, he also lived far away from his parents, and, while he had been rather reserved with his parents, he reportedly opened up in Zwolle.⁷ The point of his remark must be then that at Leiden University he will be outside the Reformed circle and within the atmosphere of the modern worldview.

Although Leiden’s faculty of theology is not radically atheistic or turned against the church, its predominantly modern theology breaths a different spirit than his Reformed upbringing. His 1902 farewell lecture to his students in Kampen offers some insight into this upbringing:

I am a child of the Secession,⁸ and I hope to remain so. . . .

6. “’t Afscheid van mijn Ouders viel me zwaar, vooral hierom, dat ik naar L. ging. Zal ’k staande blijven? God geve het!” Herman Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” [diary 1874–1879], September 23, 1874, H. Bavinck Archives, HDC, folder 1 or 16.

7. See V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: Ten Have, 1921), 20, 27.

The best I have I am indebted to the Secession. My father and mother were both from Secession circles. And I do not owe the Reformed confession to Dr. Kuyper, but to my father and mother. . . .

My father . . . is a simple man, but he has been foreign to all separatism, and that was even more the case with my most simple and nevertheless perfectly healthy mother.⁹

The autobiographical sketch that Herman's father, Jan Bavinck, wrote at the age of almost eighty offers further insight. Herman was the second of seven children, four of whom died at an early age. In a telling passage, father Jan looks back on the death of his two daughters:

Although we mourned our dear dead, we did not do so without hope that they rest in the Lord and had been taken up into heaven. Already in Bunschoten, our oldest daughter Dina gave clear signs that, as we already attested, she loved Jesus, so that a pious neighbor, whom she often visited, once said about her to us: "In that child lies something good for the Lord." Also in Almkerk, she revealed her choice to serve the Lord at several occasions, and this especially became clear at her deathbed. She liked nothing more than when someone prayed with her, that one chapter or another

8. Bavinck refers to the 1834 secession from the Dutch Reformed Church. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) led a second secession from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886. In Dutch, the first secession is usually called "Afscheiding" and the second one is called "Doleantie."

9. "Ik ben een kind der scheiding en dat hoop ik te blijven. . . . Het beste wat ik heb, heb ik aan de scheiding te danken. Mijn vader en moeder waren beiden uit de afgescheidene kringen afkomstig. En de Geref. Belijdenis heb ik niet te danken aan Dr Kuyper, maar wel aan mijn vader en moeder. . . . Mijn vader . . . is een eenvoudig man, maar toch van alle enghartigheid, van alle separatisme is hij vreemd geweest en dat was nog meer het geval met mijne allereenvoudigste, en toch door en door gezonde moeder." C. Veenhof, "Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6," *De Reformatie* 30 (1955): 123–24 (Veenhof quotes a report of Bavinck's speech). According to R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 13, Bavinck's mother is not from the circles of the Secession but from a Dutch Reformed family in Vriezenveen.

from the Word was read for her, or that one spoke with her about God and his service. In our other daughter we did not notice such clear signs of grace, but she too was asking and longing, and we hope that the Lord our God will have heard her sighs and our prayers. Nevertheless, these signs are not the foundation of our hope that our children died in the Lord; no, our hope is founded on the covenant of grace with his promises that are yes and amen in Christ Jesus. Also to our children the Lord has made his promises, promises that have also been signified and sealed to them in Holy Baptism.¹⁰

In this passage father Bavinck not only expresses his hope that his children rest in the Lord, but also he alludes to questions that were vehemently discussed in Reformed circles in those days, questions concerning the relationship between (infant) baptism and salvation, the foundation and meaning of baptism, and the way one can be certain of one's salvation. Meanwhile, outside Reformed circles, a way of thinking was developing in which the very premises of the discussions were becoming obsolete: a modern, evolutionary worldview was gaining prominence, and the “the covenant of grace”

10. “Doch betreunden wij onze lieve dooden, wij deden dit niet zonder hope, dat zij in de Heere ontslapen en in den hemel opgenomen waren. Onze oudste dochter Dina heeft reeds in Bunschoten duidelijke blijken gegeven, dat zij, gelijk wij reeds van haar getuigden, Jezus liefhad, zoodat eene vrome buurvrouw, bij wie zij veel kwam, eens, van haar sprekende, tot ons zeide: ‘In dat kind ligt iets goeds voor den Heere.’ Ook in Almkerk openbaarde zij bij verschillende gelegenheden hare keuze om den Heere te dienen, en vooral op haar sterfbed kwam dit duidelijk uit. Niets had zij liever, dan dat met haar werd gebeden, dat een of ander hoofdstuk uit het Woord haar werd voorgelezen, of met haar over God en Zijn dienst werd gesproken. Van onze andere dochter, Femia, merkten wij zulke duidelijke blijken van genade wel niet, maar ook zij was vragende, uitzierende, en wij hopen dat de Heere onze God hare verzuchtingen en onze gebeden zal verhoord hebben. Doch niet op deze blijken rust als grond onze hope, dat onze kinderen in den Heere gestorven zijn, maar onze hope is gegrond op het verbond der genade met Zijne belofte[n], die in Christus Jezus ja en amen zijn. In dit verband heeft de Heere ook aan onze kinderen Zijne beloften toegezegd; beloften welke in den H. Doop hun ook beteekend en verzegeld zijn.” Jan Bavinck, “Korte schets van mijn leven” (typoscript) [1906], 62, H. Bavinck Archives, HDC, folder 14 or 29.

was fading into meaningless, old-fashioned terminology. The hope of dying in the Lord was being replaced by the claim that there is no Lord.

Given the gap between his Reformed upbringing and the theology at the university, why does Bavinck go to Leiden? Later, he will explain that he wanted “a more academic education than the Theological School [in Kampen] could offer in those days” and that he had “a strong desire to become acquainted with modern theology first hand.”¹¹ It is certainly not his intention to break away from the Reformed faith and to become a modern theologian. The words, “Will I remain standing? God grant it!” in his dairy prove the contrary. But why then does Bavinck feel attracted by modern theology if he already knows that he fundamentally disagrees with it? Why will he later feel so attracted by the theory of evolution that he does not reject it once and for all but comes back to it again and again? Probably he already had doubts—existential-intellectual doubts—before he went to Leiden,¹² and maybe he hopes that in Leiden he will find words to make them manageable: unless the power that tries to bring him down gets a face, he will not be able to set his face against it.

At the same time, Bavinck goes to Leiden for some space and fresh air. The Reformed world is safe but also small. In his 1902 farewell speech in Kampen, he explains:

In that time it was thought in [our] church that we should abandon the world to its fate, and just because I come from the circle where I come from, I felt impelled to seek my education at a university; for, because of its concern for holiness of life, that church ran the high risk of losing sight

11. Herman Bavinck, “Ter gedachtenis,” in *Beschouwingen van een christen-denker*, by A. Steketee, ed. A. Gislinga and C. J. Goslinga, v–ix (Kampen: Kok, 1914), v. See also Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 29, and Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 20.

12. A letter that A. Brummelkamp wrote to Bavinck on March 2, 1878 makes clear that Bavinck already experienced an inner struggle when he went to Leiden. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 21.

of the catholicity of the church.¹³

For Bavinck, catholicity means not only that the church of all times and places is essentially one, but also that the Christian faith is essentially related to all areas of life. For him, it is the opposite of narrow-mindedness and pettiness, both of which he observed in his own circles.¹⁴

Bavinck also goes to Leiden for a more down-to-earth reason. As a nineteen year old he goes not only to study but also to enjoy student life. His diary contains the following expenses estimate:

Costs in Leiden¹⁵

Tuition fees	270 guilders
Student Corporation membership	14
Subtotal	284
Glass of beer	15
Freshmen Society membership	50

13. “In der tijd leefde in die kerk [de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk] de gedachte, we moeten de wereld maar overlaten aan haar eigen lot, en juist omdat ik gekomen ben uit den kring, waaruit ik gekomen ben, gevoelde ik mij genoopt om aan eene Universiteit mijne opleiding te zoeken. Want die kerk liep groot gevaar om terwille der heiligheid des levens de catholiciteit der kerk uit het oog te verliezen.” Veenhof, “Uit het leven van de Theologische Hogeschool 6,” 24 (quote from the report of Bavinck’s speech).

14. See, e.g., Bavinck’s letter to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, dated December 22, 1888, that is discussed later on in this article.

15. “Kosten te Leiden

Collegegeld	f 270
Lid Corps	+ 14

	284
Glas bier	15
Lid Groen Societeit	50”

Herman Bavinck, diary 1871–1875, undated note, H. Bavinck Archives, HDC, folder 1 or 16.

Bavinck obviously reserves quite a lot of money for student life, and a day after his arrival he goes as a freshman to the Leiden Student Corporation. However, very soon he begins to question whether as a Christian he really belongs there. After a conversation with Rev. J. H. Donner, the Leiden colleague of his father, he concludes that he does not. Thus he writes in his 1871–1875 diary on September 24, 1874: “Decided not to become a member of the Corporation, for my conscience’s sake.”¹⁶ That sounds honest and principled: yesterday he prayed that he would remain standing, and today he does not give in to the temptation to throw himself into a world of which he knows by now that it is at odds with his Christian convictions.

But is his decision not to become a member of the Corporation really an act of faith and principle? Or is it an act of cowardice, of giving in to Rev. Donner’s pressure? Bavinck is doubly honest with himself. Thus when he copies his notes on September 24, 1874, from his 1871–1875 diary to his 1874–1879 diary, he makes a remarkable change in the final sentence:

Can I as a Christian become a member of the Leiden Student Corporation? I was in doubt: Rev. Donner came to me at half past ten in the evening, advised me against it, and—I will not become a member, so I decided. Oftentimes I wonder whether it was *only* and *purely* for the sake of conscience that I did not become a member.¹⁷

The bird sits gloomy in his cage. Finally, the door is open and he can fly away, but he hesitates and lets the door slam again.

16. “Besloten geen lid te worden van ’t Corps om mijns gewetens wille.” Bavinck, diary 1871–1875, September 24, 1874. For the role of Donner, see also Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 20, 31–32.

17. “Mag ik lid worden als Christen van ’t Leidsche Stud.-Corps. ’K twijfelde: D^s. Donner kwam ’s avonds te half elf bij me, ried ’t me af en—ik word geen lid, zoo besloot ik. Dikwerf vraag ’k me af, of ’t wel *alleen* en *zuiver* gewetenshalve was, dat ik geen lid werd.” Bavinck, “Ex animo et corpore” [diary 1874–1879], September 23, 1874 (italics replace original underlining).

Bavinck has been brought up in piety and is a pious man himself. When he goes to Leiden to study theology, he prays that God will grant that he remains standing. However, his piety entails a tremendous tension: he cannot go and delight in Leiden’s modern theology with fresh openness but must compare everything against the Reformed confession of his upbringing. Just like almost every other student in his days, he was to become a member of the Student Corporation. But for him, he is haunted by his conscience because of it. And once he has followed his conscience and has made a decision on principle, it is not yet his final word. “I decided not to become a member . . . for the sake of conscience” is typically Bavinck, but “Oftentimes I wonder whether it was *only* and *purely* for the sake of conscience that I did not become a member” is probably even more characteristic of him.

“TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE OPPONENT”

In 1922 Coenraad Bernardus Bavinck (1866–1941) edits a florilegium from the work of his brother Herman that contains articles mostly from the eighties. In the preface he speaks about the “twinkling of youthful ardor and animation that was so characteristic of him [Herman] in those days and that still shines in these articles.”¹⁸ If one reads the articles along with his inaugural lecture, *De wetenschap der heilige godgeleerdheid* (*The Science of Sacred Theology*) (1883), and his rectorial lecture, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk* (*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*) (1888),¹⁹ one soon notices that brother Coenraad has not

18. “De tinteling van jeugdigen gloed en bezieling, die hem in die dagen zoo eigen was en ook in deze artikelen nog doorstraalt.” Coenraad Bernardus Bavinck, “Voorwoord,” in *Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren*, by Herman Bavinck (Kampen: Kok, 1922), v.

19. See Bavinck, *De wetenschap der heilige godgeleerdheid*; *idem*, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk: Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen, op 18 dec. 1888* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888); *idem*, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220–51.

said too much. At the same time, the eighties are also years of searching and struggle for Bavinck. This much is especially clear from his letters to Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936) with whom he became close friends during his studies in Leiden.²⁰ We will examine several of these letters below.

When Bavinck completes his studies in 1880, he attempts to bid farewell to Leiden and to become a good Reformed theologian. The pressure to bid farewell comes partly from his church. After the

20. Whereas Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Amicissime: Brieven van Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje aan Herman Bavinck, 1878–1921*, ed. J. de Bruijn (Amsterdam: HDC, 1992) contains letters from Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck only, Herman Bavinck and Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Een Leidse vriendschap: De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875–1821*, ed. J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck, Passage Reeks 11 (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), contains 76 letters from Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje (not 66, as said in the introduction, page 12). Additionally, this latter work is not so much “a biographical study [that] explores the correspondence” as an annotated edition of the correspondence itself, pace Eric D. Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 128; cf. Bristley’s confusion of the two editions on page 139n91. Furthermore, *Een Leidse vriendschap* contains only 29 letters by Snouck Hurgronje, and Bavinck often answers to letters on postcards that have not been preserved (or whose location is at least unknown). However, three letters from Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck that are not included have been quoted in earlier publications. For the sake of completeness, I give the quotations here.

When Snouck Hurgronje had received Bavinck’s *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing: Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op 20 oktober 1904* (Kampen: Bos, 1904), he writes on January 29, 1905: “. . . komt mij steeds meer de schriftbeschouwing voor, het zwakke punt uwer leer te zijn. Met de bezwaren, waartoe eene ernstige studie der bijbelboeken aanleiding geeft—geheel afgezien van den dogmatischen grondslag des vorschers—wordt daarin m.i. niet ernstig rekening gehouden, een groot gebrek, dat slechts kan blijven voortbestaan zoolang de gemeente, de schrift slechts door vele intermediären kennend, te dien aanzien geene eischen stelt.” C. Augustijn, “Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen, 1912,” in *In rapport met de tijd: 100 jaar theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit*, by C. Augustijn et al., 88–110 (Kampen: Kok, 1980), 109–10 n98. June 1, 1905, Bavinck answers with a letter that is published in *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 157–58. October 23, 1905, Snouck Hurgronje replies from Weltevreden (Jakarta): “Wat ge mij nader omtrent uwe beschouwing der Schrift schrijft, heb ik meer dan eens, in min of meer gewijzigden vorm van u gehoord, en ik kan mij erin verplaatsen, dat ge u

defense of his thesis in Leiden, he has to pass an ecclesiastical exam in Kampen in order to be eligible to become a pastor. During the examination pastor F. J. Bulens asks him to deliver a sermon about Matthew 15:14a: “Leave them; they are blind leaders. . . .” Who Bulens means by “blind leaders” is fully clear to Bavinck, but he cannot say goodbye to his Leiden professors so cheaply. He preaches on this verse only under protest.²¹ For many years he will keep in his study a picture of the Leiden professor Abraham Kuenen (1828–1891), one of the leaders of modern, liberal theology who was especially famous as a historical-critical Old Testament scholar. He also does not end his friendship with Snouck Hurgronje, but rather describes his own inner change to him.

If Bavinck briefly but powerfully expresses in his dairy on September 23–24, 1874, how he experienced his move from the

daarbij nederlegt, maar het is en blijft in mijn oog een uiterst zwak punt uwer wereldbeschouwing. Of men al zegt: anders is de natuur, is de geschiedenis mij een raadsel, daarmee rechtvaardigt men niet eene oplossing van het raadsel, die eene onderstelling in zich sluit, waartegen zoo gewichtige en onweerlegde bedenkingen ingebracht zijn als tegen het supranatureele karakter der Schrift. . . . Met het aprioristische van denk- en zedewet laat zich dit niet vergelijken, want wat wij voor denk- en zedewet houden, kan blijken iets anders te zijn en dan zijn wij bereid, onze voorstelling dienaangaande te herzien, maar de Schrift is eene bepaalde verzameling van gewijde documenten, over welker oorsprong, samenhang en karakter in de laatste eeuw veel licht is opgegaan, dat men niet met eene algemeene phrase kan negeeren. . . . Mij dunkt, dat het Calvinisme zijne schriftbeschouwing zal moeten herzien om in volle oprechtheid jegens zichzelf voort te kunnen bestaan.” Augustijn, “Bavinck ter vergadering van moderne theologen,” 109–10 (first and third fragment in the main text, second fragment at n98). Exactly six years later, October 23, 1911, Snouck Hurgronje writes to Bavinck about his *Modernisme en orthodoxie: Rede gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 oktober 1911* (Kampen: Kok, 1911): “Zooals al hetgeen gij mij uit uwe pen te lezen gaaft, heeft ook dit stuk mij gesticht, in dezen zin, dat het mij noopte over allerlei vraagstukken, die het leven ons opgeeft, ernstig na te denken. Gij hebt in hooge mate de gave vanuit den streng begrensden kring, waarin gij leeft, te spreken niet alleen tot geestverwanten in den engeren zin van het woord.” Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), 135.

21. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 81 and Bremmer, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 35. In Dutch, the difference between “leidslieden” (leaders) and “Leidsche lieden” (Leiden men) is very small.

Reformed world to Leiden, then in his letter dated November 24, 1880, he describes the opposite. He writes on the occasion of Snouck Hurgronje taking his doctoral degree (his own graduation was a few months earlier, and since then he has lived with his parents in Kampen):

And so both of us have reached the end of the academic curriculum. I can only regret that we differ so much, so very much in principle and in view of life. Nevertheless, my cordial friendship and warm interest will accompany you in spite of great difference in insight and conviction. I hope that that difference will become smaller, but I do not yet see it. Now that I have left Leiden and look upon the modern theology and the modern worldview somewhat differently than when I was so strongly under the influence of Scholten and Kuenen, many things seem me to be rather different than they appeared to me during that time. I learned a great deal in Leiden, but I also unlearned much. The latter could in part have harmed me, but I begin to see more and more what is harmful in it. The period in which the convictions that we brought with us [to Leiden] were thrown in the melting pot of criticism is over. Now it is our task to be faithful to the convictions that we hold now and to defend them with the weapons that we have at our disposal.²²

22. “En zoo hebben wij beiden dan het einde van de academische loopbaan bereikt. ’t Kan me alleen maar spijten, dat we zoo ver, zoo ontzachlijk ver in beginsel en in levensbeschouwing uiteengaan. Toch blijft mijne hartelijke vriendschap en warme belangstelling u vergezellen ondanks nog zoo groot verschil van inzicht en overtuiging. Dat dat verschil kleiner zal worden hoop ik, maar zie ik nog niet. Nu ik uit Leiden weg ben, en de moderne theologie en de moderne wereldbeschouwing wat anders in de oogen zie, dan toen ik zoo sterk onder den invloed van Scholten en Kuenen stond, nu lijkt mij veel weer heel anders toe dan waarin het mij toen voorkwam. Ik heb in Leiden veel geleerd, maar ook veel verlerd. Dit laatste kan ten deele schadelijk voor mij gewerkt hebben, maar meer en meer begin ik dat schadelijke ervan in te zien. Het tijdperk, waarin onze van vroeger meegebrachte overtuigingen in den smeltkroes der kritiek geworpen zijn, is voorbij. ’t Komt er nu op aan, de overtuigingen, die wij thans hebben, trouw te zijn en ze te verdedigen met de wapenen die ons ten

The duck fully plunged into the pond of modern theology and the modern worldview, but now that it has come back on the bank it soon lets the water slide down its back.

When Snouck Hurgronje objects that in the days of their daily companionship he never noticed such a strong influence from Scholten and Kuenen on him (just like Kuenen, J. H. Scholten (1811–1885) was a leader of modern theology), Bavinck answers that indeed their influence did not lead to “loss of truths of faith and acceptance of other ones, of theirs.” So, for Bavinck, “the convictions that we hold now” do not essentially differ from the Reformed confession with which he was brought up.²³

It is worthwhile to go so somewhat deeper into the letter dated November 24, 1880. This will not only provide us a background for understanding the letters to Snouck Hurgronje that will be discussed later on, but also it will show us how Bavinck values and interprets somebody who thinks differently. Snouck Hurgronje and he are good friends, but they differ “in principle and in view of life,” in “insight and conviction.” He does not see this difference as a mutual enrichment; no, he regrets it and hopes that the difference will become smaller even though he does not yet see this happening. Therefore he concludes that each of them has to be faithful to the convictions that he has now and should defend them. This is Bavinck’s analysis of the difference between Snouck

dienste staan.” Bavinck aan Snouck Hurgronje, November 24, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 75–76. My English translation is partly a revision of Harinck’s; cf. George Harinck, “Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us’: The Reformed Spirituality of Herman Bavinck,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 253.

23. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 22–26, says that Scholten imparted a thorough knowledge of older Reformed theology to Bavinck, but A. Vos, “Gespleten wortels van Samen-op-Weg: Bavinck en La Saussaye,” *Kerk en Theologie* 52 (2001): 226, points out that Scholten no longer taught dogmatics during Bavinck’s student days but rather New Testament studies. For Snouck Hurgronje’s reaction see Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 79. And for Bavinck’s response—“het verliezen van geloofswaarheden en het aannemen van andere, van de hunne”—see Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, January 13, 1881, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 81.

Hurgronje and himself: just as he has a Reformed view of life and wants to defend it, he ascribes to Snouck Hurgronje a modern view of life that he should defend with the weapons that are at his disposal.

However, Snouck Hurgronje actually does not have such outspoken convictions. He does not say that he regrets that his friend is still Reformed. In his answer he emphasizes that he “continually” has “due respect and unconstrained sympathy.” He finds that Bavinck should not neglect “the critical objections against the old view of Scripture,” but should work towards a solution of the problem. He explains: “Although I did not share your dogmatic opinions, I have never despaired of the possibility of such a solution, as usually happens in modern circles—my more or less uncertain, if you like it, sceptic point of view allowed me to deviate from the common opinion on this issue.” So, Snouck Hurgronje counts himself among the moderns, but he does not feel obliged to think after the typical modern fashion. Already a year earlier he had written: “All kinds of things bring about that my sympathies are anything but at the side of one persuasion or party and that I, since my conscience as yet forbids me to ally anywhere, preferably find my spiritual food there where I am at least certain to find seriousness.” Later on he will call himself a “skeptic, be it without making a system of skepticism or agnosticism.”²⁴

24. “. . . steeds den noodigen eerbied en ongedwongen sympathie . . .”; “. . . de kritische bezwaren tegen de oude Schriftbeschouwing . . .”; “Ofschoon ik uwe dogmatische meeningen niet deelde, heb ik aan de mogelijkheid dier oplossing toch nooit gewanhoopt, zooals dat in moderne kringen gewoonlijk geschiedt—mijn meer of min onzeker, als ge wilt sceptisch standpunt veroorloofde mij die afwijking van de gewone meening in dezen.” Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 79–80. “Allerlei zaken brengen mée dat mijne sympathieën alles behalve aan de zijde van ééne richting of partij zijn en dat ik, daar mijn geweten mij vooralsnog verbiedt, mij ergens aan te sluiten, het liefst mijn geestelijk voedsel zoek daar waar ik zeker ben altháns ernst te vinden.” Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 55. “. . . sceptisch, zonder van scepsis of agnosticisme een systeem te willen maken.” Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 30, 1908, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 163.

For Bavinck, Snouck Hurgronje represents “modern man” over against whom he wants to justify himself as a Christian.²⁵ But actually Snouck Hurgronje is not such a typical modern man. In today’s terms one would rather call him postmodern: he cannot agree with grand narratives, systems, worldviews, at least he does not adopt one. In this respect Bavinck is much more modern: grand narratives do draw him.

The difference between the two friends also becomes strikingly clear in the following. On August 19, 1879, Bavinck writes: “If I owe something to Leiden, it is this: trying to understand the *opponent*. You also said that in your letter.” However, Snouck Hurgronje actually wrote: “You will be willing to believe that I appreciate and strive to understand also *the serious opinion of somebody else* and to sharpen the ‘organs of my own mind’ with it.” He does not use the word “opponent.”²⁶ For Snouck Hurgronje, Leiden is an environment in which he meets people who think differently, like Bavinck; for Bavinck, it is a place of confrontation with “the opponent.”

Whom or what he means exactly by “the opponent” is not fully clear. One might suppose it is Snouck Hurgronje, since Bavinck

25. See H. F. von Meyenfeldt, “Prof. dr Herman Bavinck, 1854–1954: ‘Christus en de cultuur,’” *Polemios* 9 (1954): 109–12, cited in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 142.

26. “Heb ik iets aan Leiden te danken dan is het dit: *den tegenstander* trachten te begrijpen. Dat zegt ge nog in uw brief.” Bavinck aan Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 57 (italics added). “Gij zult wel willen gelooven, dat ik er prijs op stel en dat het mijn streven is, ook *anderer ernstige overtuiging* te begrijpen en daarmêe mijne eigen geestesorganen te scherpen.” Snouck Hurgronje aan Bavinck, August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 55 (italics added). In their introduction the editors of the correspondence remark that “this understanding for each other as opponent . . . may especially be called remarkable for a polemicist par excellence like Snouck Hurgronje.” (“Dit begrip voor elkaar als tegenstander, dat vooral voor een polemicus pur sang als Snouck Hurgronje opmerkelijk mag heten . . .” J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck, “Inleiding,” in *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 9.) This remark overlooks the fact that Snouck Hurgronje does not use the word “opponent” for Bavinck at all.

subsequently expresses the wish that nothing will take away “the tone of true friendship” from their relationship. But in the preceding sentences he speaks about Leiden in general:

Leiden has been useful to me in numerous ways; I hope always to acknowledge it with gratitude. But often it has also made me very poor. It has not only deprived me of a lot of excess baggage (of which I am glad), but also of much that I later on learned to value as indispensable for my own spiritual life, especially when I had to prepare sermons.²⁷

In the light of this passage, the opponent may be (the representatives of) modern theology and the modern worldview. In the discussion of his dairy notice of September 23, 1874, we suggested that Bavinck went to Leiden because the power that tried to bring him down had to get a face before he would be able to set his face against it. On this point Leiden has not disappointed him; for, he has begun to understand the opponent. If this interpretation is right, Snouck Hurgronje in person is not his real opponent.²⁸

Nevertheless, in the letter dated November 24, 1880, he ascribes to Snouck Hurgronje a set of convictions that he must defend with the weapons that are at his disposal just as he himself must defend his Reformed convictions. Also in his letter of August 19, 1879, he tries to include his friend in his struggle: “My honest

27. “. . . de toon der ware vriendschap . . .”; “Leiden is me van veelzijdig nut geweest; ik hoop het altijd dankend te erkennen. Maar het heeft me ook dikwerf zeer arm gemaakt, me ontnomen, niet alleen veel ballast (daar ben ik blij om) maar ook veel dat ik thans in den lateren tijd, vooral als ik preeken maken moest, als onmisbaar voor eigen geestelijk leven leerde beschouwen.” Herman Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 56–57. My English translation is partly a revision of Harinck’s. See Harinck, “Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us,” 252.

28. In a later letter, however, Bavinck clearly refers to Snouck Hurgronje when he writes: “Exactly because by now I always live among kindred spirits, the control of opponents who are also friends is sometimes even more indispensable.” “Juist wijl ik thans altijd onder geestverwanten leef, is mij de controle van tegenstanders die tevens vrienden zijn soms te onmisbaarder.” Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 23, 1884, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 122.

prayer is that, through struggle and doubt and suffering, both of us will always come closer to what is really true and good. Then would also be fulfilled what I wish with all of my heart: that we always come closer to each other in conviction and confession.”²⁹

However, Snouck Hugronje does not follow a similar path of struggle and doubt and suffering. Certainly, in his letter dated December 22, 1880, he writes that Bavinck’s questions also “are and remain *the* questions” for him, but that is first of all meant empathetically, to underline the wish that he just uttered: “Let us continue to sympathize with each other’s spiritual development as cordially as before.” Later on in Bavinck’s life struggle, Snouck Hugronje appears not so much as someone who is also wrestling with the same questions, but as a friend who gives honest criticism from the sideline. That was his ideal in his friendship with Bavinck: “An exchange of thoughts in which one does not hesitate at all to tell each other the truth.”³⁰

If one compares him with pastor Bulens, for example, Bavinck’s openness for those who think differently attracts attention. However, when one reads his letters to Snouck Hurgronje carefully, one gets the impression that he can appreciate others more *despite* than *in* their otherness and that he seems to understand the mental world and experience of others as a kind of mirror image of his own. “Trying to understand the opponent” is a strength, but it becomes a weakness if the other is immediately understood as an opponent.

29. “Mijne oprechte bede is het, dat we beiden door strijd en twijfel en lijden heen altijd nader komen aan wat wezenlijk waar is en goed. Dan zou tegelijk vervuld worden wat ik met mijn gansche hart wensch, dat wij altijd nader tot elkaar komen in overtuiging en belijdenis.” Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 19, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 57.

30. “. . . de vragen zijn en blijven . . .”; “blijven wij steeds even hartelijk als vroeger in elkaars geestelijke ontwikkeling deelnemen.” Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, December 22, 1880, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 80 (italics original). “. . . eene gedachtenwisseling, waarbij men niet in het minst schroomt, elkaar de waarheid te zeggen.” Snouck Hurgronje to Bavinck, August 4, 1879, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 55.

“AN UNSPOKEN DESIRE THAT SCRIPTURE MIGHT NOT BE TRUE”

On December 22, 1888, Bavinck writes a letter to Snouck Hurgronje that gives deep insight into his inner struggle.

Sometimes I perceive in my own *soul* an unspoken desire that Scripture might not be true, that the newer criticism might be right, and in this I see something of that secret enmity that the sinful *heart* feels against the Holy One and that can only be overcome by faith and prayer. . . . Exactly this experience of the soul, in connection with others, ties me to Scripture and confession, although I feel in my *mind* the objections that can be brought against Christianity as deeply as you do. As for me, primarily *heart* and *conscience* prevent me from being modern and liberal. . . .

You will certainly have received my oration [*The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church*]. Remember when you read it that it is especially meant as some medicine against the separatist and sectarian tendencies that sometimes show up in our church. There is so much narrow-mindedness and so much pettiness among us, and, worst of all, this is counted as piety. I know, the ideal which I strive after is unattainable here, but to be human in the full, natural sense of that word and then as a human to be a child of God in every respect—that seems me to be the most beautiful of all. That is what I strive after.³¹

31. “Soms bespeur ik in mijn eigen *ziel* een onuitgesproken wensch, dat de Schrift niet waar mocht zijn, dat de nieuwere kritiek gelijk hebben mocht, en daarin zie ik iets van die geheime vijandschap, die het zondig *hart* tegen den Heilige gevoelt, en die alleen door het geloof en het gebed overwonnen kan worden. . . . Juist deze zielservaring in verband met andere bindt mij aan Schrift en belijdenis vast, ofschoon ik in mijn *verstand* even diep de bezwaren gevoel die er tegen het christendom kunnen ingebracht worden als gij. Het is voor mij in de eerste plaats het *hart* en het *geweten*, dat mij belet modern en liberaal te zijn. . . . Mijne oratie hebt ge zeker ontvangen. Bedenk bij de lezing dat ze vooral bestemd is als eenige medicijn voor de separatistische en sectarische neigingen, die soms in onze kerk zich vertoonen. Er is zooveel enghartigheid, zooveel bekrompenheid onder ons, en ’t ergste is dat dat nog voor vroomheid geldt. Ik weet wel, het ideaal

Bavinck perceives a *desire* in his soul that Scripture might not be true. This is quite astonishing. He does not say that he *fears* that Scripture might not be true, but that he *desires* so. Apparently, Scripture is not a book (maybe we should say: a power) that makes him feel at ease. Fortunately, one might say, Bavinck also knows the objections against Christianity with his *mind*—if only he distances himself from Scripture and Christianity, both his soul and his mind will be satisfied. A narrow-minded person may not dare to distance himself, but Bavinck does not like narrow-mindedness and certainly not when it is counted as piety. In short, he is not far from being a human in the full, natural sense of that word!

The bird is sitting in the opening of the cage. It knows about the problems inside. It knows that it wants to go. And still, it remains sitting.

When Bavinck feels uncomfortable with Scripture, he does not blame Scripture but his own desire that Scripture might not be true. That desire is not good but sinful. It is enmity against the Holy One. Neither does he give in to what his mind says, namely, that there are many objections against Christianity. Using the means of faith and prayer, Bavinck struggles to dissociate himself from his sinful heart and his mind and to associate himself with his conscience and with that other heart that is tied to Scripture and confession, that bows before the Holy One, and that lives as a child of God. Remarkably, Bavinck does not speak about a second mind or about arguments in favor of Christianity that are also “felt” by his mind.

For Bavinck, this struggle has little to do with narrow-mindedness. Rather, he who knows this struggle will no longer worry about all those issues that do not really matter. Being human in the full, natural sense of the word is not a category that he uses to describe the mainstream of his life so far. On the contrary, real life,

waar ik naar streef is hier onbereikbaar, maar mensch te zijn in den vollen natuurlijken zin van dat woord en dan als mensch in alles een kind van God – dat lijkt mij ’t schoonst van alles. Daar streef ik naar.” Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, December 22, 1888, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 136–37 (italics of “*heart* and *conscience*” [het *hart* en het *geweten*] are original; other italics added).

true humanity is an ideal for him: it will be attained when both the sinful heart and petty piety have been overcome, but that will not be in this sublunary existence. One feels the oppression that dominates his life: just being human—for Bavinck this is an ideal, not reality. Out in the countryside the bird could sing a much more glorious song for its Creator, but it feels it cannot reach the countryside.

How shall we evaluate this letter? Does it reveal that Bavinck was a person with a well-nigh tragic religious development that made him unhappy and insincere toward sound arguments? Was that Holy One from whom Bavinck wanted to escape but could not really the living God, or was it an oppressing idol? And when we read Bavinck's books, should we think that they spring from a disturbed mind?

Or is Bavinck one of those heroes of faith who remains standing amidst all conflicting desires and intellectual pressures? Is this letter a precious example of the true struggle of faith, the struggle between "the flesh" and "the Spirit"?³² Are his works therefore so important because he was such an experienced Christian?

Can it be both? Can we take Bavinck's oeuvre seriously and not discard it as the work of a sufferer from religious mania? And at the same time can we acknowledge that his tense self-understanding sometimes led him to "self-demonization" and hindered him from developing a level-headed view, for example, on the gains and weaknesses of critical Biblical studies?³³

32. Cf. Galatians 5:17.

33. See also the discussion of Bavinck's letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated June 1, 1905, later on in this article. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck offers a more matter-of-fact discussion about objections against the inspiration of Scripture. Yet even here, right at the beginning, he puts the issue at the level of an "ethical battle, which at all times has been carried on against Scripture": "If Scripture is the word of God, that battle is not accidental but necessary and completely understandable. . . . Christ bore a cross, and the servant [Scripture] is not greater than its master. Scripture is the handmaiden of Christ. It shares in his defamation and arouses the hostility of sinful humanity." This is not only a battle fought by outsiders, but a battle within the believers themselves: "In Scripture too there is much that raises doubt. All believers know from experience that this is

“IN PRAYER HE DOES NOT SEEK HIMSELF
BUT THE HONOR OF HIS FATHER”

In the letter that we have just discussed, Bavinck mentions two means to overcome the secret enmity of the sinful heart: faith and prayer. In this section and the next we will seek to catch some glimpses of how Bavinck uses prayer and faith to remain standing. However, before we proceed we must note that we are approaching a private area that requires an attitude of reverence and to which our sources provide only limited access.

Indeed, to be clear from the beginning, we do not know much about Bavinck’s prayers or his views on prayer. An occasional remark in *Het christelijk huisgezin* (*The Christian Family*) suggests that he is used to a regular pattern of prayer: “Everything in the family has an educative function: . . . prayer and thanksgiving at the meal and the reading of God’s word, and the morning and evening prayers.”³⁴ Sometimes he writes short prayers in his diary, especially during his years in Leiden. Most of them can be categorized under the heading of loyalty such as prayers to be a worthy follower of Jesus, prayers of thanksgiving that God enabled

true. . . [Also] simple Christians . . . know the hard struggle fought both in head and heart against Scripture. . . It is one and the same battle, an ever-continuing battle, which has to be waged by all Christians, learned or unlearned, to ‘take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:5). Here on earth no one ever rises above that battle. . . There is no faith without struggle. To believe is to struggle, to struggle against the appearance of things.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:439–41 [#116]. What one misses in Bavinck’s argument is a criterion to decide what belongs to the true struggle of faith and what is rather a misguided attempt to believe that something is true that is actually not true.

34. “Alles voedt in het huisgezin zin op, . . . de bede en de dankzegging aan den disch en de lezing van Gods woord, het morgen- en het avondgebed.” Herman Bavinck, *Het christelijk huisgezin* (Kampen: Kok, 1908), 140 (2nd ed., 1912: 148). Bavinck refers to a habit among Reformed Christians in the Netherlands both to pray before the meal and to read the Bible and say a prayer of thanksgiving after the meal. At the celebration of his hundredth birthday, his daughter told that every morning at half past eight he read Scripture with the family and prayed for all family members and also the servants. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 272.

him to pass exams with good results, a prayer for humility and gratitude, and so forth.³⁵

When Bavinck was a pastor in Franeker (1881–1882), the chairman of the school board came to his house to take him to a meeting that he was to address. Forty years later, the chairman relates how he overheard Bavinck in prayer:

The housekeeper of the pastor took me into the front room. The pastor would be ready in a minute, I just had to wait. I sat down, but immediately heard somebody speaking in the next room. . . . I heard Bavinck praying. Praying, begging, wrestling for wisdom, for a blessing on the work that he was about to do. I stood as if pinned to the ground and was surprised . . . that he felt so little and incapable to fulfill this work that he had to put pressure on the throne of grace. But that evening I was surprised for a second time: now about the mighty, awesome word that the pastor laid on the consciences of the hearers. It was the witness of all: we have never heard Bavinck like this!³⁶

If this rather hagiographic story is true, then such intensive preparation in prayer seems to have been an exception rather than a rule for Bavinck.

35. See Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 32.

36. “De hospita van den dominee liet mij in de voorkamer. De dominee was zóó klaar, ik moest maar even wachten. Ik zette mij, maar hoorde meteen spreken in de kamer naast me. . . . [Ik] hoorde Bavinck bidden. Bidden, smeeken, worstelen om wijsheid, om een zegen over den arbeid, dien hij stond te verrichten. Ik stond als aan den grond genageld, en was verbaasd . . . dat hij zich tot het volbrengen van dezen arbeid zoo klein en onmachtig gevoelde, dat daarom als het ware de troon der genade geweld moest worden aangedaan. Maar ik heb mij dien avond nogmaals verbaasd; en toen over het machtige, ontzaglijke woord door den dominee op de consciëntie der hoorders gelegd. Het was het getuigenis van allen: Nog nooit hebben we Bavinck zóó gehoord!” See J. H. Landwehr, *In memoriam Prof. Dr H. Bavinck* (Kampen: Kok, 1921), 22, who quotes this story from *Friesch Kerkblad* (August 19, 1921).

Later on, when he lived in Amsterdam and lead a church service, he was asked to pray for a child who was ill. His prayer is still remembered many years later:

The words in which this prayer was lifted up to God were very simple, but did not a deep emotion spread through the whole church? That was praying. A father prayed, who was used to praying for his own child and now loved these parents as himself, these unknown parents who had a child that was ill and who had asked for his intercession. That was true charity. We experienced it.³⁷

As for Bavinck’s theological views on prayer, neither the *Reformed Dogmatics* nor *Our Reasonable Faith* contain a chapter or section on prayer. Although the title might suggest otherwise, *The Sacrifice of Praise* (a popular gift for young adults on the occasion of their public profession of faith) can only be called a treatise on prayer if one takes that in a much broadened sense; it does not even contain a chapter on personal prayer, for example.³⁸

A small but more relevant source for understanding Bavinck’s view on prayer is his three-page foreword to a practical work on prayer. Herein he first discusses Kant’s criticism of prayer (i.e., in essence prayer is an act of superstition, although public prayer can

37. “Het waren zeer eenvoudige woorden, waarin dit gebed voor God werd opgedragen, maar ging er niet een diepe ontroering door de gansche kerk heen? Dàt was bidden. Daar bad een vader, die zelf voor zijn eigen kind bad en nu dat onbekende ourderpaar dat een ziek kind had en zijn voorbede vroeg, daar liefhad als zichzelf. Dat was waarachtige naastenliefde. We beleefden het.” H. W. van der Vaart Smit, “De Dogmatische beteekenis van Dr H. Bavinck,” *Vox theologica* 8 (1936): 43.

38. See Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de christelijke religie naar gereformeerde belijdenis* (Kampen: Kok, 1909); English translation: *idem, Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. H. Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956); and *idem, De offerande des lofs: Overdenkingen vóór en na de toelating tot het heilige avondmaal* (The Hague: Verschoor, 1901); English translation: *idem, The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after Receiving Access to the Table of the Lord*, trans. John Dolfin (Englewood, NJ: John V. Bogert, 1908) and *The Sacrifice of Praise*, trans. Gilbert Zekveld, SpindleWorks, <http://spindleworks.com/library/bavinck/sacopraise>.

be allowed because of the impact it has on the people who listen to it) and the total rejection of prayer by others. Next, he complains about the growing abuse of prayer: people pray for physical needs only and hardly for spiritual needs. “Disconnected from the rules to which God has bound it,” writes Bavinck, “it serves as a means to get a sudden cure, to find lost goods again, to ascertain oneself of the success of a dubious enterprise, to gain without effort whatever the sinful heart desires.” Then, he emphasizes that prayer is a commandment that God has prescribed us, that the Lord himself has said in his Word what prayer is and which are the rules for serving and honoring him. There is no space for human self-will in prayer. True piety is first of all expressed in obedience. Next, he explains that prayer is also a need and privilege of humanity: “An animal does not pray, but a human cannot live without prayer.” (Should we sense here an implicit rejection of the idea that human beings descend from animals?) Finally, he mentions the higher meaning of prayer for a Christian:

For him, it is not just an expedient from distress but a fruit of gratitude; not a burden but a pleasure; not a commandment but a privilege. Prayer is the breath of his life, the pulse of his spiritual existence, the most intimate act of communion with God. His life becomes praying without ceasing. Also, in prayer he does not seek himself but the honor of his Father.³⁹

39. “Losgemaakt van de regelen, waaraan God het gebonden heeft, dient het als een middel, om plotselingen genezing aan te brengen, om verloren goederen terug te vinden, om zich van het welslagen eener bedenkelijke onderneming te verzekeren, om zonder inspanning deelachtig te worden hetgeen het zondig hart begeert.” “Een dier bidt niet, maar een mensch kan niet leven zonder gebed.” “Voor hem is het niet maar een redmiddel uit den nood, doch eene vrucht der dankbaarheid; geen last maar een lust; geen gebod maar een voorrecht. Het gebed is de ademtocht van zijn leven, de polsslag van zijn geestelijk bestaan, de innigste gemeenschapsoefening met God; zijn leven wordt een bidden zonder ophouden. Ook in het gebed zoekt hij zichzelf niet, maar de eere zijns Vaders.” Herman Bavinck, “Voorrede,” in *Het gebed*, by F. Kramer, 1–3 (Kampen: Kok, 1905), 2–3.

This foreword confirms the impression that we gained from his dairy notes—Bavinck’s piety is characterized by deep loyalty more than by confidential conversation. Prayer is a commandment that loses its character as a command for the Christian who prays out of gratitude. The traditional phrases, “prayer is the breath of his life,” and so forth, as such leave open a different conclusion, but the next sentence confirms again that he basically thinks in terms of loyalty: the Christian “does not seek himself but the honor of his Father.” Prayer as the free expression of one’s doubts and needs, without worrying whether this is according to the rules, does not seem to have been very important to him.

Although Bavinck calls prayer “the most intimate act of communion with God,” and although the mystical union between Christ and believers is an important theme in his thinking, by this union he means that Christ indwells believers (through the Holy Spirit and signified and sealed in the Lord’s Supper) rather than that believers speak in words to or with Christ.⁴⁰ Certainly, his personal prayers are not always wordless, as the chairman of the school board testifies, but maybe prayer as communion with God is for him more that one seeks the presence of the Lord than that one says so much to him.

If so, one may tentatively say that Bavinck’s understanding and practice of prayer might have helped him to remain standing, to remain loyal to his Father and not to give in to the modern worldview, but that they were probably not so useful for actually freeing him from the burden of the challenge of that worldview.

40. For the mystical union with Christ, see, e.g., Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 4:250–51 [#480], 4:567–68 [#544], 4:576–79 [#546]. See also Ronald N. Gleason, “The Centrality of the *unio mystica* in the Theology of Herman Bavinck” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001) and Hans Burger, “Een eeuwigdurende verbondenheid: Bavincks concept van de *unio mystica*,” in *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck*, 265–86.

“THIS IS THE VICTORY THAT OVERCOMES THE WORLD,
EVEN OUR FAITH”

Bavinck uses not only prayer but also faith in order to remain standing—to overcome both the secret enmity of his own sinful heart and the world. One of the most important Bible verses in his life is 1 John 5:4b: “This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.”⁴¹ His first sermon was about this verse. In a letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated August 3, 1878, Bavinck relates that, although the fact that he had preached his first sermon felt as a victory, he was not completely satisfied: “It inspired me less than I had thought. I did not speak with that feeling for myself as I had hoped that I would do, while the thought was continuously with me that I would always stand so far below the ideal.”⁴² May we infer from this that he had hoped to speak from the experience of the victory of faith over the world, whereas in fact this experience of having overcome still stood as an unattainable ideal before him?

Bavinck’s only published sermon is about the same passage. He preached it when Paul Kruger was with him in the church in Kampen on June 30, 1901. Also, quotations and allusions throughout his writings show that this verse has a special meaning for him.⁴³

41. My translation of the Dutch Statenvertaling (the Bible version that Bavinck used): “Dit is de overwinning, die de wereld overwint, *namelijk* ons geloof” (italics original, indicating that a word is not found in the Greek original). Whereas several English versions translate the Greek aorist participle νικήσασα with “that has overcome” (e.g., NIV, NASB, and ESV), the Statenvertaling uses the present tense (“overwint”), which can be understood as a futuristic present: now, the battle with the world is going on, but faith will overcome and have the victory.

42. “Toch was ik in zooverre onvoldaan, dat het mij minder inspireerde dan ik gedacht had. Ik sprak niet met dat gevoel voor mijzelf, als ik gehoopt had dat ik doen zou; terwijl de gedachte, altijd zoo ver beneden ’t ideaal te blijven staan, me onophoudelijk bijbleef.” Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, August 3, 1878, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 45.

43. Herman Bavinck, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs: Leerrede over 1 Joh. 5:4b; uitgesproken in de Burgwalkerk te Kampen den 30sten juni*

At the eighth congress of Dutch philologists in 1916, he speaks about the victory of the soul. He notices that the materialistic worldview has had its heyday and that there is renewed attention upon the soul. He himself sees in science and technology a proof of the superiority of the human mind over nature and in art the victory of the ideal over reality. The highest victory, however, is the victory in the soul itself. Art can prophecy the victory over the struggles in the world and in oneself, it can make us see the promised land from far away, but it cannot take us there.⁴⁴ Bavinck speaks for a general scholarly audience and does not elaborate on specific Christian beliefs. However, at the end of his lecture he quotes Dante to make clear that the real victory of the soul can only be reached by faith. Art has a prophetic function, but “the happy end goes far beyond the earthly horizon. Therefore: ‘What reason sees, I can explain to you, but otherwise you will have to wait for Beatrice in matters of faith.’”⁴⁵

According to Bavinck’s students, he could already see beyond the horizon in his preaching and teaching:

When Bavinck lectured . . . it could happen that he was so much filled by God’s glory that he forgot us, and, while speaking, gazed out of the window into endless distances;

1901 (Kampen: Zalsman, 1901). For allusions, see, e.g., *idem*, “Het christelijk geloof,” *De Vrije Kerk* 9 (1883): 187–88, reprinted as “Het christelijk geloof,” in *Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren*, by Herman Bavinck, 86–97 (Kampen: Kok, 1922), 93–94; *idem*, *De katholiciteit van christendom en kerk*, 45, 49; English translation: “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 247, 249; *idem*, *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:600 [#155]; *idem*, *De zekerheid des geloofs* (Kampen: Kok, 1901), 78, English translation: *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. H. der Nederlanden, 2nd ed., IRS Study Pamphlets 364 (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys, 1998), 45.

44. Herman Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel: Rede uitgesproken in de algem. vergadering van het achtste Nederlandsche philologencongres te Utrecht, 26 april 1916* (Kampen: Kok, 1916), 27, 29, 30, 33.

45. “Maar het blijde einde gaat ver boven den aardschen gezichtseinder uit. Daarom, ‘Wat de rede ziet, kan ’k U verklaren; / Maar verder moet gij wachten / Op Beatrice in zaken des geloofs.’” Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel*, 34 (quoting Dante, *Divina Comedia*, Purgatorio 18.46–48).

for God's glory is endless, and we were listening speechlessly and were introduced—for our whole life—into the mystery of salvation of the Eternal and Almighty One, who is our merciful Father in Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

When he was teaching, there was something visionary or prophetic about him as if he witnessed a higher world.⁴⁷

He did much more than mere teaching. As a Christian he was able to make one feel the width and glory of God's revelation in Christ, to make one realize the limits of the temporary over against the eternal, to make one look forward from knowing in part to the day of the full solution of the mystery. He carried one away to kneel before the throne of the Lamb.⁴⁸

When Bavinck began to speak at a mission conference after other speakers had finished, the room became silent, "ecumenically and universally silent": "majesty had come into the meeting, the majesty of the greatness of God's revelation."⁴⁹

46. "Als Bavinck . . . college gaf, kon het gebeuren dat hij zelf zo vervuld werd van de heerlijkheid Gods, dat hij ons vergat en al sprekende door het raam naar buiten staarde in eindeloze verten, want Gods heerlijkheid is eindeloos, en wij zaten sprakeloos te luisteren en werden ingeleid—voor ons gehele leven—in het heilgeheim van de Eeuwige en Almachtige, die in Jezus Christus onze genadige Vader is." J. J. Buskes, *Hoera voor het leven* (Amsterdam: De Brug-Djambatan, 1959), 33; also available at Digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren (dbnl), http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/busk005hoero1_01/busk005hoero1_01_0011.php; quoted in A. Th. van Deursen, "Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit," in *Ontmoetingen met Herman Bavinck*, 29–30.

47. According to E. D. Kraan, "Prof.dr. H. Bavinck," *Fraternitas: Groot-gereformeerd studentenblad* 8 (1921–1922): 34; cited in Van Deursen, "Bavinck en de Vrije Universiteit," 30.

48. "Hij deed veel meer dan doceeren. Hij wist als Christen de wijdte en de heerlijkheid der openbaring Gods in Christus te doen gevoelen, de grenzen van het tijdelijke tegenover het eeuwige te doen beseffen, uit het kennen ten deele te doen uitzien naar den dag der volle oplossing van het mysterie. Hij sleepte mede om te knielen voor den troon des Lams." Van der Vaart Smit, "De dogmatische betekenis van Dr H. Bavinck," 43.

Do these testimonies demonstrate that Bavinck lived from the victory of faith? From his letters we have already learned that he was not unfamiliar with struggle and doubt. Remarkably, in *De overwinning der ziel* (*The Victory of the Soul*), he does not connect the prophetic-visionary experience with faith but with art. He continues: “The esthetic human, says Kierkegaard, lives from moment to moment; if he could maintain himself in the moment, he would be like a god. But his danger is . . . in the emptiness between the moments; again and again, he has to go through his own emptiness.”⁵⁰ Does Bavinck here also describe his own experience, at least in part?

Still, Bavinck was not the kind of person whose life of faith concentrated on special immediate experiences. His foreword to a biography about Rev. L. G. C. Ledeboer (1808–1863) is instructive in this regard. This pastor was respected in circles that stood somewhat apart from the mainstream of the Secession tradition. According to Bavinck, Ledeboer was “a speaking example of the piety that is regarded as the highest and purest” in these circles: “He possesses all its characteristics, its originality, its freshness, its immediacy, but also all the peculiarities, caprices, and extravagances by which it is often accompanied.” From this biography Bavinck learns “what is the one-sidedness of this kind of godliness and what we lack ourselves.” He continues: “And when we have taken all this in and have passed it through our souls, then we willingly return to the language of *faith* of the Christian of Heidelberg [i.e., the Heidelberg Catechism] or even better to the testimonies of *faith* of the apostles and the prophets. We breathe

49. “Wat werd het stil, muisstil, oecumenisch en universeel stil in die groote kerk. Daar was majesteit in de vergadering gekomen, de majesteit der grootheid van de openbaring Gods.” Van der Vaart Smit, “De dogmatische betekenis van Dr H. Bavinck,” 43.

50. “De aesthetische mensch, zegt Kierkegaard, leeft van oogenblik tot oogenblik; als hij zich in het oogenblik handhaven kon, zou hij een god gelijk zijn. Maar zijn gevaar ligt . . . in de leegte tusschen de oogenblikken; altijd weer moet hij door zijne eigene leegte heen.” Bavinck, *De overwinning der ziel*, 33–34.

again and revive.”⁵¹ Living from faith rather than from experience seems to have given Bavinck the power to live.

In his theological works Bavinck has written much about faith, most of which we will not try to include in the discussion here. However, his very first article deserves attention. In this article, entitled, “Geloofswetenschap” (“Science of Faith”), and published in 1880, he reflects upon the relationship between science and faith and upon the scientific character of theology. The article gives the impression that Bavinck himself is still searching.⁵² At the end of

51. “[Ledeboer is] een sprekend type van de vroomheid, welke daar als hoogste en zuiverste geldt.” “Hij bezit er al de eigenaardigheden van, de oorspronkelijkheid, de frischheid, de onmiddellijkheid, maar ook al de zonderlingheden, grilligheden, buitensporigheden, die er dikwijls mee gepaard gaan.” “[Men kan leren] wat eenzijdigheid aan dezen vorm van godsvrucht kleeft, en wat onszelven ontbreekt.” “En als wij dit alles in ons hebben opgenomen en door onze ziel hebben laten gaan, dan keeren wij gaarne tot de *geloofstaal* van den Heidelbergse Christen en nog liever tot de *geloofsgetuigenissen* van de apostelen en de profeten terug. Wij herademen en leven weer op.” Herman Bavinck, “Een woord vooraf,” in *L. G. C. Ledeboer in zijn leven en arbeid geschetst*, by J. H. Landwehr, 2nd ed., v–vii (Rotterdam: Bolle, 1910), vii (italics added).

52. Herman Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” *De Vrije Kerk* 6 (1880): 510–27; reprinted as: “Geloofswetenschap,” in *in Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren*, by Herman Bavinck, 1–12 (Kampen: Kok, 1922). The Dutch title, “Geloofswetenschap,” is ambiguous in several respects: “geloof” can be translated both as faith and as belief and can also mean the attitude of faith (*fides qua*) or the content of faith (*fides quae*). “Wetenschap” can be translated as science or as knowledge, but it is also the general term for all scientific and scholarly disciplines together, and the title does not make clear whether the article will speak about an approach of science that is based on faith or about the scientific study of faith. To complicate matters further the combination “geloof en wetenschap” (literally: faith and science) is the usual Dutch term for the problem area that is commonly called “science and religion” in English. So, “geloof” in “geloofswetenschap” may even be translation as “religion.” Bavinck is partly aware of these ambiguities and uses them in his article, but at the same time they seem to make it difficult for him to get a full grip on his topic. By contrast he begins his 1918 essay, “Philosophie des geloofs,” in a much clearer way, immediately discussing what he does and does not mean by his title. See *idem*, “Philosophie des geloofs,” in *Annuaire der Societas Studiosorum Reformatorum, 1918*, 62–72 (Rotterdam: Donner, 1918); republished as “Philosophie des geloofs,” in *Verzamelde opstellen op het gebied van godsdienst*

the article he says remarkably that God is the ultimate hypothesis, of which one already knows by faith that it is true, while one may still exhort others to search deeper and deeper to discover that God truly exists.⁵³ To my best knowledge Bavinck does not call God a hypothesis in any of his other works. However, the implicit tension will remain: Is it possible to say in the same breath that by faith I am certain of something and that it is open for scientific research? By declaring the same statement both a matter of faith and a hypothesis for scientific scholarly research, does one not either compromise one’s academic open-mindedness or give way to doubts in matters of faith, or both? If a matter is truly open to research, is faith not simply too early if it already claims its victory and states beforehand what the outcome of research will be?

The 25th anniversary of Bavinck’s professorship was celebrated in 1908. In his thanksgiving speech at the end of the celebration, he looks back at the past twenty-five years and recalls what he has lost, what he has gained, and what he has kept. All are touched when they hear him speak about the third point: although it seems a miracle to himself, he has kept the faith.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

This article has certainly not offered an exhaustive treatment of the sources that give insight into Bavinck’s inner life, but hopefully it has examined enough of his writings in order to read Bavinck in a cathartic way, to reconsider our own piety in the mirror of his even when it appears to be problematic.

en wetenschap, by Herman Bavinck, 9–16 (Kampen: Kok, 1921); English translation: “Philosophy of Religion (Faith),” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, by Herman Bavinck, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres, 25–31 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); cf. the editorial note on page 25 that explains why the Dutch word “geloof” in the title has been translated as “religion (faith).”

53. Bavinck, “Geloofswetenschap,” 526; cf. *Kennis en leven*, 12.

54. See Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, 299–300.

Henrikus Berkhof describes the main problem of Bavinck's theology as follows: "For him faith was not in the first place a yielding up of one's life to a Person [Christ] but intellectual assent and submission to Scripture."⁵⁵ Berkhof's observation is confirmed by a letter to Snouck Hurgronje dated June 1, 1905, in which Bavinck writes:

I agree that the supposition on which my view of life rests, namely, the truth of Holy Scripture, includes a difficult problem. I can only say this about it: the longer and deeper I live, the more I perceive that I cannot free myself from the authority of Scripture. . . . Sometimes I am inclined to break with it, but when I examine myself carefully, it is related to the evil in my human nature. . . . And conversely, the more I am, to put it this way, in a pious mood and experience better moments, I feel totally willing and inclined to accept Scripture and to submit myself to it, and then I have peace for my heart.⁵⁶

Bavinck does not piously and cheerfully revel in Scripture, but experiences it as an authority from which he cannot free himself; at moments that he calls his best he is "totally willing and inclined to accept Scripture and to submit" himself to it. When he feels the inclination to break with it, he relates this to the evil in his human nature. Just as in his letter of December 22, 1888, so here we see a tendency to self-demonization. Does Bavinck use the Word of God as part of his spiritual armor in his struggle to remain standing, or

55. Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 114.

56. "Mijnerzijds stem ik toe, dat de onderstelling, waarop mijne levensbeschouwing rust, namelijk de waarheid der Heilige Schrift, een moeilijk probleem insluit. Ik kan er eigenlijk dit alleen van zeggen: naarmate ik langer en dieper leef, bemerk ik, dat ik van het gezag der Schrift niet los kan komen. . . . Soms heb ik er wel eens de neiging toe, om er mede te breken, maar als ik mij zelf dan goed onderzoek, dan hangt dat saam met het booze in mijne menselijke natuur. . . . En omgekeerd, naarmate ik, laat ik het zoo maar zeggen, vromer gestemd ben en betere oogenblikken doorleef, *voel ik mij tot aannemen van en onderwerping aan de Schrift volkomen bereid en geneigd*, en heb vrede voor mijn hart." Bavinck to Snouck Hurgronje, June 1, 1905, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, 158 (italics added).

does he feel compelled to use his own arms to defend the authority of Scripture and to submit himself to it?

Even though Berkhof has a point when he says that, for Bavinck, faith means submission to Scripture, another passage shows that he has also clearly misunderstood Bavinck.⁵⁷ This passage is from an article that is included neither in Veenhof’s nor in Bristley’s bibliography of Bavinck’s works.⁵⁸ However, Bavinck himself mentions it in his own (incomplete) bibliography.⁵⁹ The article, entitled, “Geloof en liefde” (“Faith and Love”), contains the following lines with which I conclude this article and which make clear that the deepest reason why Bavinck remained standing was not intellectual argument or blind submission but union with Christ:

True faith has a person as its object, namely, Christ. . . . True faith does not stop at the witness of Scripture but pushes forward through it to Christ himself, joins with him, enters into communion with him.⁶⁰

57. Also Dirk van Keulen is of the opinion that Berkhof has represented Bavinck’s concept of faith one-sidedly. See Dirk van Keulen, *Bijbel en dogmatiek: Schriftbeschouwing en schriftgebruik in het dogmatisch werk van A. Kuyper, H. Bavinck en G. C. Berkouwer* (Kampen: Kok, 2003), 126 n261.

58. Veenhof’s bibliography has been published in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus*, 425–46, with additions in Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten*, 299–301.

59. Herman Bavinck, “Lijst mijner geschriften,” H. Bavinck Archives, HDC, folder 60.

60. “Het ware geloof heeft dus een persoon tot voorwerp, nl. Christus. . . . Het echte geloof blijft echter toch niet bij het getuigenis dier Schrift staan, maar dringt door haar heen tot Christus zelve door, sluit zich bij Hem aan, treedt met Hem in gemeenschap.” Herman Bavinck, “Geloof en liefde,” *Maandblad van de Jongelingsvereniging ter bevordering van Christelijk leven “Excelsior”* (August 1909). In his “angelology” Bavinck says that angels are not object of our trust or worship—“the object of true faith is the grace of God in Christ.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:450 [#261].