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Discerning Culture with Herman Bavinck

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Abstract

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Discerning Culture with Herman Bavinck

John Thompson

February 13, 2023

Herman Bavinck was one of the great Dutch reformed theologians of the 20th century, and he can help us navigate our culture in the present day. According to Bavinck scholar Cory Brock, “(Bavinck) is biblically grounded, historically aware, philosophically trained, culturally prophetic, broadly catholic, polemical and yet balanced.”¹ As such, he offers a solid platform for discernment—something every generation of Christians is called to do. His understanding of *common grace* states that we can utilize human or ‘worldly’ ideas and practices, in any sphere of human endeavor, but only when they can be made consistent with a Christian worldview.² We also must have firm boundaries and reject all things that do not conform to Christ.³ Bavinck states, “While it is true that the world has been corrupted by sin, it nevertheless remains the work of the Father, the Creator of heaven and earth. Of his own will he maintains it by his covenant, and by his *gratia communis* (common grace) he powerfully opposes the destructive might of sin.”⁴ In other words, God has not simply wound up the universe and left us here to drift—he plays an ongoing and active role in restraining sin, leading people toward truth, beauty, and goodness, whether in family life, the arts, sciences, business, sports, government, etc.

Therefore, as Christians we should not attempt to separate ourselves from the world, presumptively rejecting all human ideas and practices in a faulty attempt at purity. That said, we must not accommodate the world, compromising our doctrines, values, and practices in order to be tolerated or accepted by the world (e.g. secular culture). Instead, we should attempt to be transformative, working toward “Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life” (as our Dordt mission statement suggests).⁵ Bavinck continues,

Christ came not to do away with the world and the various spheres of life but to restore and preserve them. Ultimately the same holds for the relation of the Christian religion to the arts and sciences... Like man, they are born and conceived in sin, but they are not of themselves sinful or unclean. They can be sanctified by the word and Spirit of Christ. The gospel is also a word of health and blessing in these powerful aspects of culture.⁶

Human ingenuity and activity in any sphere may produce something worthwhile, and as disciples of Christ we can acknowledge this and even work alongside nonbelievers toward beneficial ends. But the tendency toward sin and depravity is always near, especially where

Christ has been rejected. Bavinck was well aware of this in his own day, a century ago⁷, as he saw his own culture becoming increasingly hostile to Christianity.

(H)istorical Christianity has had its day. It no longer fits with our Copernican worldview, or with our knowledge of nature and her immutable laws, with our modern culture, with our “this-worldliness” outlook on life, with our valuation of material goods. The thought world of Scripture is no longer embedded in our ways of thinking. The whole of Christianity, with its Trinity and incarnation, with its creation and fall, with guilt and atonement, with heaven and hell, belongs in an obsolete worldview and is, accordingly, gone for good.⁸

Bavinck’s lament is evident here as he describes a culture that has come to reject the historic, biblical faith of its founding. He goes on to explain that as this happens it sends people into confusion as they seek something to fill the vacuum left in their souls—a futile effort to discover or construct some sort of ‘god’ to ground their existence, to answer the fundamental human questions. “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” “How shall I live?” As John Calvin said, the human mind is a “factory of idols,”⁹ and without God’s revelation it wanders desperately, entertaining whatever is the spirit of the age, from high faith in science, to various forms of spiritualism, to hopeless nihilism. And what is most prominent in all of these worldviews is an aversion to Jesus Christ.

Bavinck is clear that faithfulness means denouncing ideologies and worldviews that reject Christ.

There can be no thought of reconciliation. The times are too grave to flirt with the spirit of the age. The deep, sharp contrast standing between the Christian faith and the modern person must provide us with the insights that picking portions of each is not possible and that deciding between alternatives is a duty. *However lovely peace would be, the conflict is upon us.*¹⁰ (my ital.)

This may seem confusing here—how can we, on the one hand, utilize secularly generated ideas and practices, yet on the other hand, refuse to “pick portions of each,” recognizing our duty to clearly decide between worldviews that are in direct conflict? The answer lies in the idea of *renewal*—that is, to restore, or sanctify (as quoted above). Bavinck does not intend that we simply adopt and casually integrate secular ideas into our Christian worldview. Instead, every idea must be brought into conformity with Christ.¹¹ Everything must be deeply scrutinized and evangelized by way of proper exegesis. The Bible, as a “norm for all of life,” is not just for salvation and the church, but extends to all aspects of human existence.¹² A Christian worldview brings its own criteria to test and “take over”¹³ what is true and useful. “The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in this world be subservient to it...”¹⁴

An example may help us make sense of all this. Let's take Freud. Imagine a new Freudian wave has swept through our culture. Everywhere you turn there are newly colorized images of Sigmund Freud, neatly suited with his cigar. There are Netflix shows infused with psychoanalytic ideas such as hysteria and sublimation; school boards are debating how children should be inculcated into Freudianism; people everywhere are rethinking their lives in terms of libido and psychosexual stages and cathartic breakthroughs. Of course, some of this carries truth already as Freud has had a profound influence on our culture which obtains to this day. So how should we react as Christians to this hypothetical Freud frenzy?

Bavinck and Freud were contemporaries, and though he didn't comment comprehensively on Freud's psychoanalytic worldview,¹⁵ Bavinck did offer some thoughts on the concept of the unconscious¹⁶ that will illustrate our discussion. First, we should note that Bavinck rejected Freud's atheistic worldview. Freud was not just non-Christian, he was anti-Christian, stating that Christianity is merely a functional cultural construction, and psychologically an infantile state of illusory wish fulfillment.¹⁷ Despite this, Bavinck thought there may be some use for the concept of the unconscious¹⁸: it is descriptive of some aspects of human experience such as dreams and hypnosis; it is also consistent with Holy Scripture, such as the reference in 1 Corinthians 14:25 to unbelievers becoming convicted of their sins as the "secrets of their hearts are laid bare."¹⁹ This passage implies that there are thoughts, memories, inclinations, etc. that are outside of a person's current consciousness.²⁰

In order to find a concept valid or useful, however, Bavinck requires more than just consistency. It must be subsumed under the Word of God—and of course many ideas must be rejected outright as inconsistent with a Christian worldview. So Bavinck's understanding of "unconscious" did not import Freud's (or anyone else's) false theory of the human mind with its additional states of consciousness, id urges, or a superego.²¹ Instead, Bavinck understood the unconscious simply, as "...the name for that important group of phenomena of the soul that may be lying outside the center of consciousness..."²² In other words, Bavinck's use of the concept did not shape his theology—the theology shapes the concept. Understanding that human beings are God-breathed souls (and bodies) is primary, and no speculative theory of the unconscious is necessary because scripture has already sufficiently defined what a human being is. Bavinck further clarified that the idea of the unconscious is only valid as it is subject to the doctrines of sin, regeneration, mystical union, inspiration, etc. In sum, he suggested the concept had some descriptive utility—as with related extra-biblical terms such as *brain*—but only as properly understood from a distinctly Christian perspective.²³

So much for the unconscious, but what should be done about the rest of the big new Freud craze? If Bavinck has helped us, then we'll tread carefully, we'll scrutinize everything like a fire blowing through a dry forest, burning away every false thing, and harvesting the remaining seeds to renew them in the light of Christ.

1. Cory Brock, <https://credomag.com/2019/11/bavincks-cultural-moment/>
2. This applies to theologians as well (e.g. Schleiermacher) and Bavinck draws from many sources, but always with a transformative biblical approach. See Brock, C., and Sutanto, N. (2017) "Herman Bavinck's Reformed Eclecticism: on Catholicity, consciousness and theological epistemology." Cambridge University Press. SJT 70(3): 310–332. Edinburgh, UK.
3. 2 Corinthians 10:5
4. Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace." <https://bavinckinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Herman-Bavinck-Common-Grace.pdf>
5. <https://www.dordt.edu/about-dordt/mission-vision-history>
6. Bavinck, "Common Grace," 64
7. Bavinck died in 1921.
8. Bavinck, "Christian Worldview"
9. Calvin's Institutes, 1:108
10. Bavinck, "Christian Worldview"
11. 2 Corinthians 10:5
12. Herman Bavinck, Kampen Lectures, 1888, quoted in Herman Bavinck, the Two Kingdoms, and Reformed Social Ethics, Ron Gleason, The Confessional Presbyterian, Vol 7, 2021, Pg. 40.
13. Herman Bavinck, "Christian Worldview."

14. Herman Bavinck, *Kampen Lectures*, 1888, quoted in Herman Bavinck, *the Two Kingdoms, and Reformed Social Ethics*, Ron Gleason, *The Confessional Presbyterian*, Vol 7, 2021, Pg. 40.
15. See Cory Brock's interview: <https://rts.edu/resources/bavinck/>
16. Bavinck found this concept in Freud as well as other theorists at the time. See Han Byung-Soo, "Unconsciousness and Religion in Bavinck and Freud." *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 50, Number 4. Pgs. 181-211. 2018.
17. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion; Civilization and its Discontents*.
18. *Herman Bavinck, Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*. Ed. John Bolt, 2008.
19. *Bible, New International Version*.
20. Bavinck noted many other biblical references such as Psalm 44:21; Jeremiah 17:9-10; 1 Peter 3:4.
21. Han Byung-Soo, "Unconsciousness and Religion in Bavinck and Freud." *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 50, Number 4. Pgs. 181-211. 2018.
22. *Herman Bavinck, Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*. Ed. John Bolt, 2008. Pg. 196.
23. Joohyun Kim, *Herman Bavinck: Between a Scholastic and Modern Psychology: toward a "reformed psychology."* Masters thesis, Calvin Seminary, 2016. https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/cts_theses/7/