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A Critical Review of Brock and Sutanto’s Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction

Brock and Sutanto inform us that their study is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Yes, they are “broadly sympathetic with many of the claims of Kuyper and Bavinck, … even while [they] may agree or disagree with some of their theological judgments” (7). But this is an understatement of their sympathy with these founders. More strongly, they claim that, in their own words, “the dogmatic output of Kuyper and Bavinck is so rich but also … their work seems to promise substantial yields for contemporary dogmatics” (1). Furthermore, “The theologies of Kuyper and Bavinck not only contain promising possibilities for contemporary dogmatics, but are also a significant but sometimes silent influence behind many theological trajectories today: the theological interpretation of Scripture, redemptive-historical hermeneutics, theological retrieval, Christian missiology, apologetics, and eschatology” (2). Also, while they show that Kuyper and Bavinck give a unique, dogmatic contribution, they assert that these two chiefly provide a “model for adapting and updating orthodox, confessional dogmatic reasoning for each generation and in each culture” (4). Brock and Sutanto exhibit a theology of “creative and critical retrieval” (41) in their study of the founders of neo-Calvinist theology, for the sake of revitalizing the present. Hence, I dare say that their study of the theologies of Kuyper and Bavinck is prescriptive, even if not entirely so.

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Introduction

Neo-Calvinist systematic theologians Cory Brock and Gray Sutanto have written an engaging and penetrating study of the founders of neo-Calvinist theology, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). This theological introduction goes ad fontes, back to the sources, of neo-Calvinist theology, encouraging a fresh engagement with the theologies of Kuyper and Bavinck. (References to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.) Brock and Sutanto inform us that their study is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Yes, they are “broadly sympathetic with many of the claims of Kuyper and Bavinck, … even while [they] may agree or disagree with some of their theological judgments” (7). But this is an understatement of their sympathy with these founders. More strongly, they claim that, in their own words, “the dogmatic output of Kuyper and Bavinck is so rich but also … their work seems to promise substantial yields for contemporary dogmatics” (1). Furthermore, “The theologies of Kuyper and Bavinck not only contain promising possibilities for contemporary dogmatics, but are also a significant but sometimes silent influence behind many theological trajectories today: the theological interpretation of Scripture, redemptive-historical hermeneutics, theological retrieval, Christian missiology, apologetics, and eschatology” (2). Also, while they show that Kuyper and Bavinck give a unique, dogmatic contribution, they assert that these two chiefly provide a “model for adapting and updating orthodox, confessional dogmatic reasoning for each generation and in each culture” (4). Brock and Sutanto exhibit a theology of “creative and critical retrieval” (41) in their study of the founders of neo-Calvinist theology, for the sake of revitalizing the present. Hence, I dare say that their study of the theologies of Kuyper and Bavinck is prescriptive, even if not entirely so.
Prolegomena

Brock and Sutanto’s book is structured around *loqui theologici*, namely, prolegomena, creation, salvation, and ecclesiology. The second and third chapters address issues related to prolegomena. In the former chapter, the question addressed is this: What is neo-Calvinism? And its answer is this: Neo-Calvinism is a holistic theological project that best addresses “the perennial questions of the world [e.g., epistemology and ethics] and provides unity between the self, world, and God” (27). In addition, neo-Calvinism refers to a “full-orbed vision of the implications of Christ’s lordship for every sphere of life” (11). In the latter chapter, addressed is the question of how Kuyper and Bavinck theologically reconcile both tradition and novelty, continuity and change, essence and form, in the new articulation of Reformed orthodoxy in modernity. Kuyper made a distinction between the form and essence of Christianity—the forms of Christianity might look different from age to age, and from place to place, but the essence remains the same. However, conservatism “clings to a dead form while forgetting that the essence can live on through new cultural, linguistic, and philosophical dresses” (11).¹

Revelation and Reason

In the fourth chapter, Brock and Sutanto consider general revelation, which stands at the beginning of every possible knowledge of God—God’s self-revelation to us in and through the works of creation. In this connection, they deal with a neo-Calvinist epistemological distinctive, particularly in Bavinck the “implanted” and “acquired” knowledge of God (82).² In addition, they qualify the former as “the affective dimensions of revelation’s reception” (72). This is a pre-theoretical reflection and response to general revelation. That is, “We do not merely know God’s existence by way of cognition” (72). Nevertheless, there is natural theology, i.e., proof of God’s existence,³ which is a “second moment of reflection and response to that pretheoretical general revelation” within the dynamic of *fides quarens intellectum* (73). “Conceived as testimonies,” says Bavinck, “and proclaimed as the revelation of the God of whose existence every human is by nature—and prior to any reasoning or study—assured in the very depths of his or her soul, they are of no small value.” ⁴ Bavinck elaborates on the latter:

> They furnish [believers] the weapons with which their opponents, who in any case are not better armed than they, can be repulsed…. Together they [testimonies of God’s general revelation that have been condensed in the arguments for God’s existence] make him known to us as necessary and necessarily as existing; who is the sole, first, and absolute cause of all creatures; who consciously and purposefully governs all things, and who above all reveals himself as the Holy One in the conscience of everyone who believes.⁵

A Missing Distinctive of Neo-Calvinist Epistemology

Still, missing in Brock and Sutanto’s account of Kuyper and Bavinck’s epistemology is, as Kuyper put it, the “formal function of [faith in] the life of our soul which is fundamental to every fact in our human consciousness.” He adds, “There is no objection, therefore, to the use of the term faith for that function of the soul … by which it obtains certainty directly and immediately, without the aid of discursive demonstration. This places faith over against ‘demonstration’; but not of itself over against knowing.”⁶ Faith, then, is a way of knowing. That is, “By faith you are sure of all those things of which you have a firm conviction, but which conviction is not the outcome of observation or demonstration.”⁷ This firm conviction includes perception, self-consciousness of our ego, historical testimony, and tradition.⁸ Kuyper makes clear that this is not faith in a soteriological sense. In 1935, neo-Calvinist philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd states, in the first edition of the *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* II, “Faith as a particular modal function is not to be viewed in an exclusively soteriological orientation but in a much wider perspective. This view was no doubt first developed by Dr. A. Kuyper in his famous *Encyclopedia of Theology.* In a masterly way he analyzed [faith] as an irreducible function in the whole process of human knowledge.”⁹ This, too, is Bavinck’s view:
“Faith is the foundation of society and the basis of science. Ultimately all certainty is rooted in faith. The term faith is then applied to immediate knowledge of the first principles: reliance on self, our perception and our thinking; to the recognition of the objective existence of the external world; to the mutual trust on which all human society is built; to all that is known and done by intuition.”

For Kuyper and Bavinck, then, faith is an irreducible function of the whole process of human knowledge. I am at a loss to explain why Brock and Sutanto left it out of their account as a distinctive of neo-Calvinist epistemology.

**Scriptural Authority and Organic Inspiration**

The fifth chapter deals with not only the relationship of biblical authority to the full range of human knowledge but also the nature of organic inspiration of Scripture itself. Regarding the former, both Kuyper and Bavinck “argue that Scripture is a book for humanity” (100). Hence, it is “authoritative over and for the other sciences”; it exercises its authority at the metalevel of “system or a worldview” (100); put differently, it is the ultimate framework of the unity of human knowledge, which locates all the sciences in their “proper place within the organism of human knowledge.” Still, the individual sciences as such “do not provide any insight on the ‘unifying plan’, the telos, or the divine government behind all things” (102). This metascience “depends on the nature of reality itself as organic, as all things stand in organic relationship” (103-104).

Based in the work and word of God in Christ, as revealed in Scripture, Christianity plays a leavening role for the sciences, indeed “the entire natural order” (108). Brock and Sutanto make clear that Kuyper and Bavinck avoid both dualism and biblicism (101)—the former, because Scripture is not the only source of knowledge; the latter, because “[g]eneral and special revelation both serve as sources of knowledge, but special revelation is the means by which a Christian world-and-life-system is constructed” (100). So, general and special revelation should be read in light of each other, but the latter has epistemic priority over creation revelation.

We might think of organic inspiration as a “Chalcedonian” account because it holds that the Bible is at one and the same time both fully divine and fully human. In this context, Kuyper and Bavinck distinguish between center and periphery, form and content, and Christ’s sinlessness and the limits of human knowledge (128). I’ll limit my discussion to the first two points. The center of redemptive history is the redeeming acts of Christ; he is the mediator and fullness of all revelation. The periphery, as I understand Brock and Sutanto’s account of Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s theology of organic inspiration, involves “signs that attest to God’s working in Christ”: form and content pertain to the “distinction between the fact that has occurred and the form in which it is presented” (97), according to Bavinck. As the contemporary French Evangelical Protestant theologian Henri Blocher puts it, “The real issue when we try to interpret Genesis 2-3 is not whether we have a historical account of the fall, but whether or not we may read it as the account of a historical fall. The problem is not historiography as a genre narrowly defined … but correspondence with discrete realities in our ordinary space and sequential time.”

Furthermore, I cannot hesitate to add a distinction drawn by B. B. Warfield and A. A. Hodge to bring into view “the various genres and forms of discourse in Scripture, along with the inspiration of its various human authors” (123):

It must be remembered that it is not claimed that the Scriptures, any more than their authors, are omniscient. The information they
convey is in the forms of human thought, and limited on all sides. They were not designed to teach philosophy, science or human history as such. They were not designed to furnish an infallible system of speculative theology.... Nevertheless, the historical faith of the Church has always been that all the affirmations of Scripture of all kinds, whether of spiritual doctrine or duty, or of physical or historical fact are without any error.... [Still] There is a vast difference between exactness of statement, which includes an exhaustive rendering of details, an absolute literalness, which the Scriptures never profess, and accuracy, on the other hand, which secures a correct statement of facts or principles intended to be affirmed.... Every statement accurately corresponds to truth just as far forth as affirmed.12

Consider the assertion “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Clearly, assertions such as this one presuppose propositional revelation, that is, revealed truth, and hence a realist idea of truth such that a proposition is true if and only if what it asserts is, in fact, the case about objective reality; otherwise, it is false. Of course, this assertion does not tell us the whole truth about what is referred to. As Paul Helm rightly notes, applying the distinction between exhaustive and accurate, “Who Christ is, how he reconciled, what the reconciliation is, require many more sentences, and even then such a fuller account would not exhaustively describe or provide a fully comprehensive description of these matters. There’s always more that could be said.”13 In other words, St. Paul’s assertion is no less accurate a proposition corresponding to truth, even without being exhaustively true.

Furthermore, missing in Brock and Sutanto’s account of Scripture and tradition is the place of tradition. Scripture and tradition are intrinsically and necessarily related such that Scripture must be interpreted in the concrete life of the Church. “Therefore,” as Bavinck explicitly states, “a tradition is needed that preserves the connectedness between Scripture and the religious life of our time. Tradition in its proper sense is the interpretation and application of the eternal truth in the vernacular and life of the present generation. Scripture without such a tradition is impossible.”4 On the matter, then, of the relation between Scripture and the Church, Bavinck stresses their reciprocal interrelationship even while affirming the subordination of the latter to the former. In other words, Bavinck seems to affirm that Scripture and the Church are interrelated and joined together such that one cannot maintain itself without the other. He writes eloquently,

In applying [objective] revelation, illumination and regeneration, Scripture and church are linked to each other.... Revelation in this dispensation is continued jointly in Scripture and in the church. In this context the two are most intimately connected. Scripture is the light of the church, the church the life of Scripture. Apart from the church, Scripture is an enigma and an offense. Without rebirth no one can know it. Those who do not participate in its life cannot understand its meaning and point of view. Conversely, the life of the church is a complex mystery unless Scripture sheds its light upon it. Scripture explains the church; the church understands Scripture. In the church Scripture confirms and seals its revelation, and in Scripture the Christian—and the church—learn to understand themselves in their relation to God and the world, in their past, present, and future. Scripture, accordingly, does not stand by itself. It may not be construed deistically.15

Tradition’s role is interpretative and explicative in Bavinck’s account of Scripture and tradition. I am at a loss to explain why this aspect of Bavinck’s theology is missing from Brock and Sutanto’s account.

**Ontology of Meaning**

It is helpful to provide a philosophical grounding to Scriptures, “the written word,” which, according to Kuyper, “is entitled to claim the four characteristics of durability, catholicity, fixedness and purity.” As Kuyper eloquently explains, durability “relieves the spoken word of its transitoriness.” He elaborates:

Thus, writing alone has created the possibility of collecting human thought, of congealing it, of handling it down from age to age, and of maintaining the unity of our human consciousness
in the continuity of the generations. If, now, the special revelation from God is not destined for the one generation to which a certain part of the revelation was given, but for the world, and hence for the generations of all ages until the end is come, it is evident that it was necessary for this special revelation to take the form of writing. Only by this written form could it be a revelation to the race as a whole. In connection with this stands the second characteristic which we mentioned; viz. writing is catholic, i.e. universal, in the sense that, bound by neither place nor nation it overcomes the limita-

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my purpose here, I shall draw on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1900-2002) ontology of the meaning of the text that he inherited from Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) via Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). I think that Kuyper’s view has some affinity with Gadamer’s ontology. Nicholas Wolterstorff gives the clearest account of this ontology and its bearing on the hermeneutic tradition, especially Gadamer. As he explains,

We need, therefore, to say more about ontology of meaning in order to provide the material identity of truth—of the four characteristics Kuyper refers to, of durability, catholicity, fixedness and purity—with a metaphysical buttress. Leading Catholic theologian Msgr. Thomas Guarino is right that “the issue of stability within change, unity within multiplicity, perdurance within temporality, inevitably raise questions concerning the metaphysical and ontological dimensions of reality.” Briefly, pared down for judgment, on the other hand. The content of the belief that 2+3=5, is that 2+3=5, and the content of the judgment that today is warm and sunny, is that today is warm and sunny. Let us further suppose that the content of beliefs and judgments are entities of some sort, so that believing something consists of taking up the stance of belief toward that entity which one believes, and judging something consists of performing the action of judging on that entity which one judges to be true. Frege called such entities Gedanken, that is, thoughts…. Gedanken are not states of mind. He argues that whereas you and I can believe and assert the same Gedanke, we cannot share the same state of mind. Obviously Gedanken are also not physical entities. And neither, so Frege argued, are they to be identified with sentences, for the reason that two distinct sentences may express one and the same Gedanke. Gedanken have to be abstract entities—or as the hermeneutic tradition preferred to call them, ideal entities. What distinguishes them from such other abstract entities as properties is that they can be believed and asserted, and that they are all either true or false.

Indeed, Gadamer calls the ontological status
of the meaning of the text an “ideal” entity. On this point, we find him saying, “What is stated in the text must be detached from all contingent factors and grasped in its full ideality, in which alone it has validity.”20 Gadamer explains himself more fully in the following often overlooked passage that Wolterstorff brings to our attention:

[The] capacity for being written down is based on the fact that speech itself shares in the pure ideality of the meaning that communicates itself in it. In writing, the meaning of what is spoken exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication. A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says. Writing is the abstract ideality of language. Hence the meaning of something written is fundamentally identifiable and repeatable. What is identical in the repetition is only what was actually deposited in the written record. This indicates that “repetition” cannot be meant here in its strict sense. It does not mean referring back to the original source where something is said or written. The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning.21

The Fregean-Husserlian ontology of textual meaning then affirms the objectivity of meaning in general and is thus anti-historicist. I join Wolterstorff in siding “with Frege and Husserl that the right analysis of judgment is that, in judgment, there is something that one judges to be true that’s to be distinguished from both that particular act and the sentence one uses to make the judgment.”22 What is more, thoughts, meanings, and propositions—what Wolterstorff elsewhere calls noematic content— are true if and only if what they assert is in fact the case, being the way things are; otherwise, they are false. In short, regarding the status of meaning, the way things are, objective reality, is what makes “meanings” true or false. Furthermore, adds Wolterstorff, “readers of texts can often find out the noematic content of the discourse of which the text is the medium—so that, in that sense, noematic content is ‘transferable’ from one mind to another.”24 One could add here that propositions are transferable as well to different contexts and conceptualities in which we seek to understand and communicate truth, including divine truth.25 Of course, this has everything do with the issue of relating, as Brock and Sutanto put it: “the essence [that] can live on through new cultural, linguistic, and philosophical dresses” (11).

Ecclesiastical Epistemology

Brock and Sutanto’s distinction between essence and form raises the perennial problem of the relationship between truth and its human expression in Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s thought: “The universal faith expresses itself in diverse ways in each place and generation. This does create lingering questions: Is not truth unchangeable? Are they compromising clarity and objectivity of the truth when they admit that each generation requires a new form of expression? On what basis can one distinguish clearly between form and essence?” (69). Brock and Sutanto make clear that Kuyper and Bavinck do not endorse theological relativism. They hold the “insight that the truth is greater than any one time or place or one apprehension of that truth” (54). The previous section on the ontology of meaning is essential for explaining the material continuity, or material identity, of Christian truth, despite the profound effects of historicity. This is missing in Brock and Sutanto’s account in their distinction between essence and form.

In volume 1 of his 1970 work De Kerk,26 the Dutch master of dogmatics and ecumenical theology, G.C. Berkouwer, argues that Abraham Kuyper deals with this perennial problem in what Berkouwer calls Kuyper’s “ecclesiastical epistemology.”27 Berkouwer writes about that problem in his 1957 study Nieuwe Perspectiven in de Controvers: Rome-Reformatie: “This is the problem of variable, historically defined thought forms in different eras when all kinds of philosophical notions have played a definite role. What is the relationship between unchanging truth and theological formulations and doctrinal choices?”28 This is precisely the question raised by Brock and Sutanto.

In Gemene Gratie, 3, Kuyper states, “The objective truth remains one, but its appropriation, application, and confession must differ, even as
the color of the light differs according to the glass in which it is refracted.” Kuyper also aims at commensurable pluralism but is unsuccessful in reaching it. Commensurable pluralism can (a) account for the need for new dogmatic formulations; (b) explain why propositions of dogmas and doctrines are unchangeable, irreformable, or definitive; and (c) justify the distinction between proposition and sentences, content and context, form and content, and message and the medium.

It is helpful to provide a philosophical grounding to Scriptures, “the written word,” which, according to Kuyper, “is entitled to claim the four characteristics of durability, catholicity, fixedness and purity.” In other words, commensurable pluralism can show that new doctrinal formulations mediate the universality and material identity—a dogmatic conceptual hard core—of the permanent meanings and truths of Christian dogmas, such as that of the Trinity, incarnation, and atonement, according to the same meaning and same judgment (eodem sensu eademque sententia). If the latter, then the new linguistic formulation or expression can vary as long as they mediate the same meaning and same judgment of truth.

This distinction between truth and its linguistic formulations in dogma is inspired by St. Vincent of Lérins (died c. 455), the fifth-century theologian and monk. The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) draws on Vincent in its constitution, Dei Filius. It cites a passage from Vincent’s work, the Commonitorium 23, in which he raises the question of whether there is progress in religion. He states, “Therefore, let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of ages, but only with the proper limits, i.e., within the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgment” (eodem sensu eademque sententia). Unity here is at the level of meaning and truth but not necessarily at the level of formulations. Although the truths of faith may be expressed differently, the Church must always determine whether those new reformulations are preserving the same meaning and judgment, and hence the material continuity, identity, and universality of those truths.

The first principle of Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology is epistemic perspectivalism, namely, that “our knowledge of the truth is always imperfect and inadequate.” In other words, perspectivalism recognizes “subjectivity in the understanding of truth.” The acceptance of perspectivalism is a result of recognizing that “absolute or objective truth, which Kuyper affirmed,” cannot “appear in unity of form and content.” Like Kuyper, Herman Bavinck also holds that “no one claims that content and expression, essence and form, are in complete correspondence and coincide. The dogma that the church confesses and the dogmatism it develops [are]… not identical with the absolute truth of God [himself].” Kuyper makes clear his rejection of the claim that “truth, which of necessity must be absolute, was also bound to maintain this absolute character in the unity of form and expression.” In Kuyper’s view, “the truth of God was too rich and the great salvation in Christ too abundantly precious, by reason of the Divine character exhibited in both, for them to be able to reach their full expression in one human form.” Of course, Kuyper understood “that theology as such could not dismiss the problem of how this multiformity was to be brought into harmony with the unity of the body of Christ.”

Berkouwer insists, with some justification, that a concern for perspectival pluriformity, and its basis in the inadequacy of expressions, such as in Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology, should not be mistakenly understood as relativism or subjectivism about truth, or ecclesial relativism.
Still, insists Berkouwer, there are profound problems “for Kuyper in connection with pluriformity in confessions.”37 For one must make clear that inadequacy of expression does not mean inexpressibility of truth, even divine truth. I have argued elsewhere why Kuyper fails at this task.38 For now, let me just note that Kuyper fails to show a relationship between language and reality with respect to truth. This is a fundamental flaw in Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology since the relationship between dogmatic formulations and reality determines the truth status of the dogma. Consider, for example, the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Is what they assert and hence make judgments about—for example, the Trinity and the person and natures (human and divine) of Christ—true to reality? In other words, do they have truth-conveying status, meaning thereby that what is asserted in them is ontologically true? And, what about linguistically articulated doctrine, judgments expressive of propositional truth, supporting the conclusive and abiding assertions of revelation and doctrine and logically sustaining the affirmations of Christian belief, their universality, continuity, and material identity? Divine truth may be expressed incompletely and inadequately, but neither falsely nor indeterminately. Just because we do not know everything that there is to know about a particular divine truth does not mean that what we do know is not determinately true in these doctrinal formulations. Brock and Sutanto agree with this conclusion but do not explain how Kuyper gives an account of it.

Creation, Redemption, and Common Grace

The sixth and eighth chapters, the themes of creation and redemption, and common grace, can be treated together because the theme of nature and grace connects them. Grace restores nature (structures of reality) from within its own order to the ultimate end of creation, its highest good and final cause. That is, “Natures, as created, have final causes and teleological purpose” (238), and “Eschatology precedes soteriology” (138). There is something missing here. Isn’t the creation order a proper good, in its own right, and not a mere means in relation to the ultimate eschatological end of creation?

Right out the gate, Brock and Sutanto engage us with central neo-Calvinist themes: “the absolute sovereignty of God, the unity of humanity as God’s image bearers, the radicality of sin, the restraining power and provision of common grace, the church’s mission to engage in every sphere of life, and the kingdom of God as a kingdom of renewal” (21). Interestingly, Richard Mouw identifies the following neo-Calvinist themes, partially overlapping with Brock and Sutanto’s selection: “the supreme kingship of Christ, the antithesis, common grace, sphere sovereignty.”39 Still, Mouw cites Al Wolters, who captures a theme that is conspicuously missing in Brock and Sutanto’s list, but which Mouw and Wolters hold to be philosophically essential to the Kuyperian tradition, namely, “the philosophical commitment to the constancy of creation, and to creation as delivered by the creator, prior to the Fall, as the normative standard to which creation is being redeemed and restored.”40 Although Brock and Sutanto in passing refer to “creational design” (46), “creation intent” (154), “creational intent” (267), the “order of creation,” “original order of creation,” “God’s creational norms” (283), the “norms of creation” (287), and “a creational logic to creaturely existence” (256), they give no systematic attention to the normative standard of God’s constant creation order. This is also a lacuna in their theological account of Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s thought.

I’m not suggesting that Brock and Sutanto deny the original order of creation. In fact, their emphasis on common grace in chapter eight is about sustaining the “creation order despite sin.” They also speak eloquently of “a creational logic to creaturely existence, where God determines the essence and purpose of all the kinds of creation (nature)” (256). Indeed, in chapter nine, the responsibility of the church vis-à-vis the world is defined in light of the creational principle, namely, “that God makes everything and determines that humans should assist in its development—creation and cultural mandate—which becomes the principle of the church as well” (257). Brock and Sutanto add that for Kuyper “to Christianize public life [is]
to bring [it] into line with its creational intentions, to re-create it’. In other words, to ‘Christianize’ is to recover the true purpose, the God-given nature, of a particular cultural enterprise and act into it as such” (267). That is the crux for them regarding the responsibility of the church—“pursuing the various human vocations in alignment with the order of creation itself” (281).

Brock and Sutanto’s distinction between essence and form raises the perennial problem of the relationship between truth and its human expression in Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s thought...

**Broad Ecclesiology**

One more comment. The crux of Kuyper’s ecclesiology is the distinction between institute and organism. Brock and Sutanto speak of a “broad” ecclesiology (264) regarding the church as organism. Bavinck is clear about this aspect: “For every believer manifests his or her faith in witness and walk in every sphere of life, and all believers together, with their faith and lives, distinguish themselves from the world.” Similarly, Herman Dooyeweerd states in the first edition of the *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* III, “The term ‘Church as organism’ had better be replaced by the expression ‘temporal manifestation of the body of Christ in all societal relationships, but in this broad sense it also embraces [but is not identical with] the temporal [church] institution.”

**Holistic Anthropology and the Human Body**

The seventh chapter considers a neo-Calvinist distinctive of “the holistic character of Bavinck’s and Kuyper’s theological anthropology” in light of the radicality of sin—the Fall. The focus is on corporate humanity because no individual fully manifests the image of God. Neo-Calvinism does not “eclipse a proper expression of individuality.” Still, “We are God’s image bearers not simply as individuals, but as a corporate and ethical unity—a single organism” (192). Furthermore, “The unity of this organism of humanity is founded in the federal headship of Adam or in Christ” (192). The creation text of Genesis 1:27, “So God created man in his own image… male and female he created them,” entails that God did not create man as a solitary being. We find here a primary form of interpersonal communion such that the image of God in man manifests unity-in-diversity, being therefore an image of the Trinity.

Significantly, although their emphasis is on

**Common Grace and Natural Law**

In conclusion, I want to return briefly to
the matter of common grace. What is common grace? Common grace is a conserving or restraining grace. Dutch neo-Calvinist philosopher S.U. Zuidema (1906-1975) correctly states, in his penetrating study of Kuyper’s doctrine of common grace, that “Common grace checks the operation of sin and the curse of sin, and in principle makes possible again the unfolding of creation’s potentialities and the development of the creature.”

This, too, is Brock and Sutanto’s view. What is, then, the relationship between common grace and special grace, the latter called “renewing” or “regenerating” grace? Zuidema argues that Kuyper had difficulty formulating that relationship. He seemed at times to think that common grace and particular grace ran along parallel tracks, existing independently side-by-side, with completely independent purposes, having only an extrinsic relationship to each other. Now, Brock and Sutanto rightly claim, “In Christ, we find the unity of common and special grace” (230). They explain that “General and special revelation together form an organic unity, as does the reality of common and special grace; each relies on and interpenetrates the other” (222). So, Brock and Sutanto have an anti-dualist view. But Zuidema’s account of Kuyper’s resolution to the dualism between common grace and particular grace is more articulate.

Zuidema argues that all things considered, Kuyper resolved the question regarding the relationship between common grace and particular grace because Kuyper does affirm that the purpose of the former does not exist outside the latter, given that the latter—in Kuyper’s words—“restores creation in its root.” Indeed, Zuidema sees more maturity in Kuyper’s later statement: Christ as the Mediator of Redemption not only may lay claim to the central, spiritual core of man, but also is in principle the new Root of all created reality and the Head, the new Head, of the “human race.” With that, Kuyper had broken with his own polarly dualistic contrast between particular grace and common grace. That is why he could state more forcefully in his writings on Pro Rege [For the King] than in those on Gemeene Gratie [Common Grace] that we are in the service of Christ throughout the entire domain of common grace.

Furthermore, to claim that particular grace restores creation at its root includes the idea not only that the original creation structures hold and are enduringly valid in the regime of sin, but also that those “creation structures … serve to realize the original goal and purpose of the world in the present dispensation.”

But now with respect to the question of natural law in Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s thought, Brock and Sutanto acknowledge that they “do indeed separate themselves from their tradition to a degree as relates to this subject” (239). What is the tradition? “For both first-generation neo-Calvinists, human nature as created does indeed participate in God’s eternal law and is teleologically driven by God-given nature toward humanity’s highest good: God himself. Natures, as created, have final causes and teleological purpose” (238). Where, then, do Kuyper and Bavinck differ with this tradition, according to Brock and Sutanto? The brief answer to this question must be that they differ with the tradition in regard both to the ontology and epistemology of natural law, which, according to Brock and Sutanto, “are best grounded not in creation simpliciter but in common grace” (229).

As I understand Brock and Sutanto, they adopt an “actualist” view of common grace, so that our relationship with God must be understood in active, historical terms. Yes, creation does have integrity and independence; indeed, “creation is revelation” (222). But with respect to the “ontology of epistemology and epistemological justification” (242) of natural law, Brock and Sutanto claim that “Bavinck argues that access to natural law is now to be grounded in common grace rather than creation” (240). For former neo-Calvinists, Brock and Sutanto claim they “were less careful in ensuring that natural reasoning is always dependent on God’s dynamic revelation…. There is no such thing as mere reason or mere nature left to itself to operate in the world apart from God’s consistent and constitutive agency” (241). Ontologically speaking, according to Brock and Sutanto, there is no natural law grounded in the order of creation. There is a “supernatural law by the fact of common grace, rather than merely natural” (245). In other
words, they explain their “actualist” interpretation of “revelation more as God’s free and ongoing activity [rather] than a mere static reality, as well as to emphasize the subjective dimensions of revelation as the necessary correlate of any appropriation of objective law or knowledge of God” (240). Indeed, natural law “is not some static object to which all have access by way of logical reflection” (244); it isn’t a “static moral consciousness within the domain of subjectivity that corresponds neatly to a common, universal, natural

law” (247). Again, Brock and Sutanto emphasize the difference with the early neo-Calvinists: There is not an “equal and unqualified participation in God’s eternal law at all times and places” (244). It is situation and person specific because the “the domains of historical context, human desire, and sin restrict the epistemic possibilities for the human conscience to receive said moral order commonly and correctly due to the complexity of the embodied self…. Thus, [conscience] operates according to a plethora of situated logics” (247).

Bavinck and Conscience

Brock and Sutanto claim that this is a key difference of Kuyper and Bavinck from the tradition, and it emerges in their interpretation of Bavinck on conscience, as person and situation specific. Is Bavinck a cultural relativist such that morality is a conventional matter varying from culture to culture? Are Brock and Sutanto suggesting that Bavinck holds that given the knower’s epistemic conditions of culture, tradition, and intuitions that it can’t get beyond the “momentary moral consensuses” to the “correct human articulations of natural law?” (247) Does morality, then, change? Arguably not in Bavinck.

In Bavinck’s 1881 essay “Conscience,” he concludes with affirming the knowability of the unconditional validity of the law:

Therefore, the subjective rule of our life must be brought into agreement with the objective one made known in God’s revelation. With increasing measure, Christ must become the content of our conscience…. To be good, a deed must be in agreement not only with our conscience but also with the law of God; and the opposite is just as true. Between the conscience and

Indeed, in chapter nine, the responsibility of the church vis-à-vis the world is defined in light of the creational principle, namely, “that God makes everything and determines that humans should assist in its development—creation and cultural mandate—[which] becomes the principle of the church as well” (257).

The situation and person-specific view Brock and Sutanto offer in their interpretation of Bavinck on conscience is, then, mistaken. This is shown in the concluding passage from Bavinck’s essay on conscience that is cited above, but it could also be easily shown in Reformed Ethics I; Gereformeerde Ethiek. Bavinck distinguishes between morality and ethics. The former pertains to the rules and customs by which people live. As Bavinck says in his essay on conscience, “In its entirety, morality is and remains, in one word, conventional.” But in Reformed Ethics, Bavinck states that ethics is something “deeper and normative.” Bavinck explains, “Morality consists

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of what is in agreement with the dominant customs…. According to etymological explanations of morality, a moral life is a life that is normatively governed by and in agreement with the customs of the people.”56 Still, besides the “standardized norms” of conventional morality, “there has to be another, higher, absolute standard.” Otherwise, we would be left with cultural relativism. Bavinck rejects cultural relativism, and hence, “that which is considered to be normally human cannot truly serve as the standard of ethics.” Rather, Bavinck is a moral realist; what is moral in its own right transcends every society’s judgment and hence is “valid for all people at all times.” He elaborates: “There has to be a foundation for ethics, a supreme basis, a comprehensive and all regulating principle that governs all conduct always…. This is the idea of the Good.”57 The supreme standard of goodness is, however, not some general principle or an impersonal idea, such as Plato’s idea of the Good. Rather, it is God Himself: “It is only because the All-Good One exists that the good also exists. The moral law rests thus in God, not as sheer will, but in all his perfection, in his being, in his divine mind.”58 Bavinck adds, “God, or, God’s law, is the norm and standard of what is good. Only what entirely and in all its parts agrees with that standard is good.” Indeed, “God himself is the good and no goodness exists apart from him.”59

But Brock and Sutanto limit themselves to Bavinck’s essay “Conscience,” and so shall I. Bavinck asks what conscience itself is, in its nature and essence. He asks what the content of conscience is, and what particular judgments conscience issues. He asks how it arrives at these judgments.

Relevant to Bavinck’s account of conscience is the experience of moral obligation: “The awareness of duty, of something requiring unconditional obedience, is implanted within every human being” (122). This awareness is about something that is intrinsically right. But human experience cannot teach us, says Bavinck, why that moral obligation exists, and hence why something is good or evil, and true or false: “We also criticize and repeatedly pronounce our judgment. We cannot avoid doing this, we must always evaluate…. Nothing exists in connection with which a person considers observation alone to be sufficient, not asking about the reasonableness and necessity thereof” (122). He adds, “Thus a person does not receive the categories of good and evil, and thereby also of true and false … from the outside, but possesses them a priori and brings them along in advance” (123). Thus, an individual assesses facts and arguments because he feels obliged to depart from some prior moral consensus embodied in the “empirical person,” and to attain ethical transcendence to a new level of moral awareness, the “ideal person” (124). That is, “conscience is the rift … between what one must be and what one is, between ideal and reality” (124). Furthermore, that transcendence occurs because “the conscience is the law of our personality. Each thing has its own law; all life is bound to laws that manifest themselves gradually in life. The conscience is the law of personal life to the degree that this is in conflict with its own essence and idea. And that this can deviate from its own law is precisely identifying it as a personal, a free, life” (124). Finally, the experience of moral obligation and duty and the concomitant account of self-transcendence point toward the existence of God as the ultimate explication of that experience:

Thus it [law] cannot be explained from within myself but points to an authority above me that has been given to me as a law of my personality. It is something absolute, something unconditional and valid above everything, something divine that manifests itself to me therein. God himself is the last factor of the conscience. The law of the personality points back to him as the Legislator…. According to that divine side, according to its inner essence, in itself, not as it manifests itself empirically within us, the conscience is infallible and cannot err. At its deepest core, the conscience is a knowledge shared not only with our selves but also with God; an awareness that we live outside of him, that by transgressing the law of our own personality we have thereby simultaneously broken his holy law.60

This passage brings us back to the passage I cited earlier: “Between the conscience and the law of God there is a close connection. The
moral, i.e., the universal-human, law of the Ten Commandments is, after all, nothing other than the natural law, which was implanted in Adam. Consider the following universally valid moral standards, such as, “Do not steal,” “Tell the truth,” “Keep promises.” With Brock and Sutanto’s emphasis on “situated logics” (247) in making moral judgments, do they deny that, for Bavinck, there are absolutely and universally valid biblical precepts against incest, bestiality (Exod. 22:19), adultery (Exod. 20:14), child sacrifice, prostitution (Lev. 19:29; Deut. 23:17-18), and rape (Deut. 22:25-29)? Is it ever morally acceptable to oppress the poor? To commit idolatry (Exod. 20:4; Deut. 13:6-11) or bribery (Exod. 23:8; 2 Chr 19:7)? To bear false witness against one’s neighbor (Exod. 23:1-2)? No, they don’t. But their Bavinck interpretation leads to that conclusion. Thus, Brock and Sutanto’s interpretation of Bavinck’s view of conscience is mistaken.

Nevertheless, despite my critical remarks throughout this article essay, I heartily recommend Brock and Sutanto’s engaging and penetrating study of the founders of neo-Calvinism, the master theologians Kuyper and Bavinck.

Endnotes

15. *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, I, 356; *Reformed Dogmatics*, I, 384. Bavinck’s position in this passage on the relation of Scripture, tradition, and the Church is at odds with what he says in *Reformed Ethics* I: “Holy Scripture is the only source of knowledge and stands by itself alone” (29). See also *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 51.
18. These paragraphs on ontology of meaning are adapted from my work, *Berkouwer and Catholicism, Disputed Questions* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2013), 88-90.


27. I have dealt with Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology in my essay “The One Church, the Many Churches: A Catholic Approach to Ecclesial Unity and Diversity—with Special Attention to Abraham Kuyper’s Ecclesiastical Epistemology,” in the *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, Volume 5, Issue 2, (2020): 239-264, particularly 254-261. Paragraphs from this article are adapted in this section.


34. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1, 7; *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, 32-33.


38. See my critique of Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology in my essay “The One Church, the Many Churches: A Catholic Approach to Ecclesial Unity and Diversity—with Special Attention to Abraham Kuyper’s Ecclesiastical Epistemology,” 254-261. On Bavinck’s ecclesiastical epistemology, see my essay, “Bavinckian Ressourcement and Aggiornamento.”


40. Albert Wolters, “What is to be done? Toward a Neo-Calvinist Agenda,” *Comment* 23, no. 2 (December 2005), 38.


55. *Reformed Ethics*, I, 18; *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, 45.


