The Theological Method of J. H. Bavinck

by Timothy Reid[1]

Ideally, theological work accurately represents the doctrine of God's Word, increases our knowledge of God, and results in authentic spiritual ministry. When one thinks of the robust Dutch Reformed tradition, significant systematic theologies that articulate the propositional truth of God's Word typically come to mind. But an examination of the theological method of a relatively unknown missionary theologian will illustrate the value of theological precision aided by a life of informed gospel ministry.

This article examines the life, work, and theological method of Reformed missiologist J. H. Bavinck through an evangelical perspective, focusing on the defining features of his theological method. A comprehensive analysis of his background and context is readily accessible thanks to the work of P. J. Visser.[2] Visser's work allows a modern audience to find comparable circumstances to import relevant insights into church health, missiology, and exegesis. This paper selectively sketches the most pertinent biographical information relevant to Bavinck's method, including his life, ministry, and written works; sketches his distinctive theological conclusions; describes the primary characteristics of his method; and then offers an evaluation of methodology.

Biographical Sketch

Johan Herman Bavinck was a Dutch Reformed missionary, missiologist, and teacher whose published works rarely left the continental circles of Reformed theology, unlike his better-known uncle, the systematic theologian Herman Bavinck. J. H. Bavinck's most prominent works surfaced during the 1950s and eventually reached some American audiences in the late 50s and 60s.[3] Recently, a spotlight has returned to Bavinck, in part because more of his works have been translated into English and because P. J. Visser's seminal biography has engaged a contemporary audience with his life, ministry, and writings.

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[2] Paul Jan Visser, *Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist,* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

[3] J. H. Bavinck will be referred to simply as Bavinck. His uncle will be referred to as Herman Bavinck.

A Reformed Theological Heritage

Bavinck was born to a family known for pietistic preachers in the Dutch Reformed tradition.[4] His grandfather boldly left the Dutch Reformed Church on his own, alone, following the *Alt-Reformierte Kirche's* secession.[5] This division of churches, led by Abraham Kuyper, prioritized a personal experience of faith and a profound devotion to the primacy of the local church.[6] Bavinck's family produced many preachers and academics, including his uncle Herman Bavinck and his father, who served a humble village church as pastor. His family's academic heritage no doubt steered him toward higher learning and teaching early on. Two vital characteristics found throughout the family and deposited to J. H. Bavinck were honesty and a congenial modesty, which would impact his ministry, relationships, and, indeed, his theological method.[7]

The urgency of a pious and authentic spiritual life never left Bavinck. Visser traces this lasting priority to his final period of life and work in an environment that was growing increasingly secularized and rationalistic.[8] Bavinck believed profoundly that missions and church work operate from an individual's personal encounter with Jesus Christ. True to his Reformed heritage, he believed the church's way forward was a return to understanding God in the person of Jesus Christ.[9] His theological background and particular church upbringing would result in commitment to local-church priority and devotion to spiritual authenticity, which prominently surface in his writings.

Academic Pursuits

Bavinck's earliest university study in the 1910s focused on psychology. Through seminary, Bavinck eagerly studied Augustine and Calvin, and he majored in medieval monasticism, all the while focusing on psychology and the humanities.[10] When he took up postdoctoral work, he returned to psychology at a time when Freudian influence was revolutionizing how the academic world understood anthropology and the human mind. His dissertation pioneered the analysis of a religious component of human psychology by examining how one's affective filter affects information retention and

[4] J. van den Berg, "The Legacy of Johan Herman Bavinck," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7, no. 4 (1983): 171.

[5] Visser, 3. As a sixteen-year-old, his grandfather left his village alone, separating from his church, village, and family on grounds of doctrinal and spiritual conviction.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 5, 13–15. Visser cites testimonies from peers and family friends who recalled that Bavinck's grandfather was repeatedly reluctant to take promotions or influential positions in academia and ministry, and that his gentle demeanor did not lead him to promote himself ambitiously. These traits are evident in Bavinck's father and Bavinck himself. See also van den Berg, 171.

[8] Visser, 15, 71.

[9] J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions,* trans. David H. Freeman (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), xvii.

[10] Visser, 18. Bavinck's doctoral thesis studied the medieval monasticism of Heinrich Von Sumo, which providentially prepared him for wrestling with mysticism and spirituality. This led to his insight into the anthropological realities of eastern religions (Islam, Buddhism, and Animism) in his ministry context.

learning.[11] This emphasis on the unity of the sensory with the cognitive undoubtedly surfaces in his interdisciplinary theological method.[12]

Some surmise that Bavinck would have been destined for a professorship in psychology, and he may have been following such leads until his ministry calling interrupted that pursuit and pulled him away from higher education for a time.[13] Yet both fields of human psychology and mysticism/spiritual phenomenology would serve Bavinck well, preparing him for the ministry calling to which he would devote the next two decades of life.

Ministry Experience

In 1919 Bavinck accepted the pastorate of an expatriate church in the Dutch colony of Indonesian Sumatra.[14] Though not initially strictly mission work, his leadership helped the expatriate church grow beyond a Dutch population, and the congregation tripled in size, including many Chinese and Javanese.[15] Bavinck's pastoral heart, keen understanding of culture and social interaction, and appetite for learning contributed to a flourishing ministry. After a furlough back in the Netherlands, where he continued to write and teach, Bavinck returned to Indonesia as a missionary and focused on cross-cultural ministry among the Javanese. Bavinck became respected for his diligent effort to learn the language and culture and to teach the Word of God effectively, especially to the younger generation.[16] This period of his life made a great impact on him and provided the experience from which he would teach and write about religion and missiology.

Bavinck's earnest desire to connect theology to praxis correlates with his extensive experience as pastor, disciple-maker, and missionary teacher. A lengthy period of cross-cultural ministry demanded effective communication and the art of using universal concepts. Many attested to his acuity in communicating to diverse audiences with simplicity and a congeniality that endeared him to students and parishioners.[17] Though the Second World War brought his overseas ministry to an abrupt end, his lasting influence among the Javanese in Indonesia is well attested.[18] A career of ministry provided

[11] Visser, 18.

[12] An "interdisciplinary" method of theology is a recent term referring to the synthesis of different scientific disciplines that inform one another for the final product of theology. To some degree, this is true of all theological method because one cannot communicate without some measure of language acquisition or understand the Scriptures' narrative without some time spent in the discipline of history, for example. For a concise summary of the method, see Telford C. Work, "Interdisciplinary Theology: Framers and Painters," in *Evangelical Theological Method: Five Views*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Steven M. Studebaker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018). Though Bavinck predates this formal definition of interdisciplinary method, like many theologians he demonstrated a form of it without referring to this categorization.

[13] Berg, 172.

[14] Visser, 19.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 30.

[17] Visser, 35. Bavinck learned the significance of the number *five* in Javanese culture. He especially discipled young men and formed groups of five that met regularly for prayer, encouragement, and accountability. These groups outlasted Bavinck's presence in Indonesia and continued even through times of war, and many from these hardy groups became pastors or ministry leaders for the Javanese.

[18] Berg, 172.

him with formidable experience to put missiology and psychological theory to the test and critically evaluate many theological traditions of the day.

Significant Theological Influences

Even a cursory survey of Bavinck's writings indicates both the theological family heritage he hailed from and the rich theological environment that shaped his thinking. Bavinck's uncle, Herman Bavinck, had a significant impact on his development of dogmatic theology. Uncle Herman also served as a methodological predecessor and a source from which Bavinck would theologize, though sometimes in ways that differed. Although he rarely wrote what would be considered dogmatic theology, his theology of missions also reflected engagement with the ideas of Karl Barth, which were popular at the time. Barth, Schleiermacher, and Kant were among the most influential figures in Bavinck's context.[19] He incorporated their ideas but also cited them more often in areas of disagreement.

Bavinck's writings in missiology often engaged in dialogue with Gisbertus Voetius and Gustav Warneck, leading missiologists who clearly influenced his missiological principles.[20] They also served as discussion partners with whom he would differ.[21] Hendrik Kraemer was likely the most significant influence in Bavinck's ministry life. They met when Bavinck was a student, but they interacted primarily as ministry partners when Bavinck pastored in Sumatra.[22] Their encounters exposed him to Kraemer's revolutionary missiological writings and to the circles in which Kraemer worked (he was slightly more ecumenical than Bavinck at the time). Kraemer's belief, "To be church is to be missionary, and to be missionary is to be church," permeates Bavinck's writings.[23] Besides his impact on Bavinck's missiology and ministry practice, Kraemer was likely the most influential figure in Bavinck's transformation from a more pragmatic anthropological approach (primarily utilizing psychological principles) to an earnest biblical approach that emphasized the foundations of Scripture.

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[19] Visser, 87–88. His most significant critique of Barth regards Barth's denial of a connection between general revelation and religious consciousness.

[20] Voetius was the "first Protestant to develop a comprehensive theology of mission" and a significant force for the Reformed tradition. Gideon van der Watt, "Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676): Some Perspectives on His Influence on Developments in the South African Dutch Reformed Church's Missiology and Mission Practice," *In Skriflig* 53, no. 3 (2019): 1–9. Warneck was a German missiologist whom Bavinck appreciated but critiqued more often than he agreed with in his works, primarily regarding the foundation of missions. Visser, 92–93.

[21] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 58, 63. Bavinck believed in an ecclesiastical-centric model of missions and critiques Warneck for creating a "circle within a circle," putting missions in the hands of parachurch ministries and the work of a few elites. He further critiques Warneck for creating a "double-foundation" for missions by depending on both the glory of God and the "longing of the heathen." As for Voetius, Bavinck mostly appreciated his work and merely inverted the order of priority given to his three goals of missions. See J. H. Bavinck, *The J.H. Bavinck Reader,* ed. John Bolt, James Bratt, and Paul Visser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 77.

[22] Visser, 31, 89. Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House, 1938) significantly influenced Bavinck's conviction that Scripture can and ought to inform a Christian doctrine of religious consciousness.

[23] Visser, 98. See also Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 124.

Key Contributions to Theology

To understand how Bavinck constructed theology, one must first observe the boundaries of the different topics within which Bavinck primarily worked. A life that included missions, seminary training, church leadership, psychological study, and theological dogmatics yielded a diverse array of fields and sources for his theology. Bavinck's later published works demonstrate a penchant for weaving these topics together into a theological model that held them in tension, not disparately. Bavinck contributed to and even pioneered a fusion of several significant theological themes, resulting in an internally coherent theological model.

Survey of Published Academic Works

Bavinck's published works reflect the trajectory of his career. His early writings demonstrate his involvement in psychology, with an anthropological emphasis. His first significant book, *Personality and Worldview*, published in 1928, is an ambitious attempt to merge two hotly debated topics at the time.[24] Written before his missionary experience in Indonesia, this work represents a foundational step for Bavinck's method and thought processes.

The next significant work, *Christ and Eastern Mysticism*, completed during his interim between periods of overseas ministry, is a seminal work for the study of religions and also contains some of his most important exegetical work.[25] Written from the perspective of a committed evangelical missionary, it should not be classified as "comparative religions," though its academic rigor and style fit into that field. While more thoroughly theological and biblical works followed his missionary experience, this book still served as a launchpad for one of the most significant topics Bavinck would undertake: a biblical understanding of religious consciousness, or how Christians ought to relate to other religions. Although Bavinck focused on several chief topics, this one was perhaps the most neglected in evangelical circles, making it the most in need of a clear guide.

Bavinck returned to the Netherlands shortly before WWII and never returned overseas. During his postwar academic career, he produced most of his influential works, which more directly apply biblical exegesis to anthropology, worldview, and other religions. Perhaps his best-known culmination of theology and missiology is his seminal *Introduction to the Science of Missions,* intended as a handbook on the theory, foundation, and principles of missionary work. His books, *The Church Between the Temple and Mosque* and also *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World,* are mature explications of his biblical and scientific study of religious human experience.[26] These books offer the most direct insight into his theological method from text to application since he never wrote commentaries or explicitly exegetical works. Other notable works include *Between the Beginning and the End*, a thorough treatment of his theology of the Kingdom of God, and *Riddle of Life*, an

[24] J. H. Bavinck, *Personality and Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023).

[25] This work is included in Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader*.

[26] J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship Between Christianity and Other Religions,* ed. Daniel Strange (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023). J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1948).

evangelistic tract for a Dutch audience.[27] Bavinck wrote many journals and other more minor works related to the topics above that were never translated into English.

Religious Consciousness and General Revelation

Bavinck's most academically rigorous work, in terms of research and phenomenological analysis, is in the field of religious consciousness. It is no surprise, given his commitment as a missionary bent on mobilizing the church for missions, that he states that religious consciousness, or the study of other religions, is the most important topic for the church to address to remain faithful to its pledge to the Great Commission.[28] To understand religious consciousness biblically, Bavinck often pursues the subject of general revelation, a topic that current tradition had not satisfactorily addressed for him.

Bavinck's chief works in religious consciousness, *Christ and Eastern Mysticism,* and *Between Temple and Mosque* aim to provide a thorough anthropology for the church to be faithful to truth and to the task of effective missions. When Bavinck writes on non-Christian religions, he does so with an expertise in understanding culture and societal value systems.[29] He is also well-versed in modern anthropology with a keen understanding of the human soul in psychology.[30] Yet his primary contribution to a robust biblical theology of religious consciousness comes primarily from biblical exegesis, honed over time. He embraces a biblical anthropology, concluding that man is wholly a rebel, a sinner, frightened of God, and spends his life resisting his Maker, and that the phenomenology of religion is incomplete without acknowledging man's rebellion against God.[31] An anthropology thoroughly rooted in theology would be a fresh departure from the leading secular, rationalist, and empiricist ideas of the day.

For Bavinck, viewing non-Christian religions from God's perspective begins with God's personal self-revelation to man. He resists the tendency of the doctrine of general revelation to become thoroughly rationalistic and risk humanism, permitting man to arrive at truth solely through his own intellect.[32]

> If we wish to use the expression, "general revelation," we must not do so in the sense that one can logically conclude God's existence from it. This may be possible, but it only leads to a philosophical notion of God as the first cause. But that is not the biblical idea of general revelation.[33]

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[27] J. H. Bavinck, *Between the Beginning and the End: A Radical Kingdom Vision*, trans. Bert Hielema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). J. H. Bavinck, *The Riddle of Life*, trans. Bert Hielema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

[28] Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World,* 81.

[29] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 247–72. This keen ability to understand social value systems is evidenced throughout his handbook.

[30] Visser, 12.

[31] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 126.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Bavinck, *Temple and Mosque*, 124.

He believes the Scriptures depict general revelation from God's perspective as a divine concern for all humans, both collectively and individually, and that it cannot be "understood in a merely intellectual way," lest the divine origin and sovereignty of general revelation be lost or minimized.[34] Accordingly, Bavinck frames general revelation as a divine initiative that draws humanity toward God rather than a neutral data field for philosophical inference.

If general revelation was thought of as a dialogue, humanism (and Christian perspectives influenced by it) had assumed man was in a conversation with himself. Bavinck counters that it is foremost a conversation from God to man, then man's response to God. "It is clear that God busies Himself and wishes to busy Himself with each and every member of the human family."[35] The missionary, therefore, does not bring God into the life of one who has never encountered him, but speaks as a witness to the God who has already been addressing that person.

Throughout his works, Bavinck does not precisely identify what is and is not special or general revelation. He acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing general revelation from overlap with special revelation in Scripture. He considers instances such as Job 33:14–18, where it is clear that God reveals himself in dreams, and Matthew 2, where the star of Bethlehem reveals God, as examples of overlap between special revelation and general, or natural, means. However, he still maintains a clear distinction between the two and often emphasizes that knowledge of redemption is exclusive to special revelation. Though the two overlap and share a divine origin, only the discovery of Christ in God's Word can offer salvation to man.

Bavinck's definition of general revelation certainly includes human conscience, history, and nature—in short, the totality of human existence. But he still provides a correction, offering a relational, less abstract understanding of general revelation. For Bavinck, general revelation is not special revelation, nor exclusively rationality, but an ontological reality.[36] With this position, he departed from many in the reformed tradition, including his friend and colleague Kraemer, by grounding general revelation in the character and being of God, a position he defends from Genesis 1.[37] This was a refreshing reprieve and a somewhat bold stance for a Reformed missiologist in a theological world enamored with Kantian existentialism and Barth's indistinct positions on revelation.

Lastly, Bavinck addresses whether God works through non-Christian religions. In his day, many held that unreached peoples possessed an innate, universal desire for Jesus Christ—a view that blurs the distinction between general and special revelation and, in practice, diminishes the missionary mandate.[38] Bavinck counters, "No continuity exists between the gospel and human religious consciousness, although definite continuity does exist between the gospel and what lies behind human

[34] J. H. Bavinck, "The Problem of Adaptation and Communication," *International Review of Mission* 45, no. 179 (1956): 307.

[35] J. H. Bavinck, *Religies en Wereldbeschouwingen in Onze Tijd (Religions and Worldviews in Our Days)*, trans. Paul Visser (Groningen: Wolters, 1958), 136. See also Bavinck, *Temple and Mosque,* 126–27.

[36] Visser, 129.

[37] Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader,* 101–7.

[38] The methodology section below elaborates on this discussion from Haggai 2:7.

religious consciousness, namely God's general revelation."[39] General revelation, he argues, is God's ongoing dialogue with humanity, enabling even pagans to perceive something of God's character. Yet this perception stops short of salvation, for redemption can be known only through special revelation. As he puts it, "It is only where the light of God's grace has begun to shine that the heart becomes restless and the heathen begin to ask after the great son of David."[40] Thus, Bavinck insists that general revelation prepares but never replaces the need for the gospel.

The Foundation of Missions

The most successfully circulated of Bavinck's published works, *Introduction to the Science of Missions (SOM),* likely contains the pinnacle of Bavinck's contribution to theology with the subject of missiology. While several of his books reveal his missionary heart, only *SOM* explicitly presents a comprehensive account of the foundation, theory, and application of missions as a science. Missiology was often relegated to extrabiblical applications and treated as optional or exclusive to a privileged few. Bavinck's textbook would attempt to validate missions theory as a science as valuable as biblical exegesis, practical theology, or church history.

Bavinck's perception of missions as a science is most explicitly evident in a schematic he envisioned for higher education, which placed missions theory within an interdisciplinary education. "What could possibly be scientific about missions? The idea of missions is an integral part of the saving revelation of Christ. The two cannot be separated."[41] First, he divides the science of missions into three components: theory, history, and "elenctics" or practical application (see below). Next, the discipline cannot be treated as a subset of another discipline, such as church history, but must be treated as an independent discipline that is necessarily interwoven with the sciences of biblical exegesis, church history, practical theology, and dogmatics (primarily soteriology).[42] Bavinck views any model of theology that was not fundamentally integrated with missions as insufficient.

A chief characteristic of Bavinck's theory of missions is a clear directive to conduct missions from a biblical foundation. Bavinck acknowledges that *missions* is an extrabiblical term; nevertheless, it is an inseparable command of dogmatic theology and a concept embedded in biblical theology.[43] Scriptural foundations keep missions authored by God, not by man or his needs. Bavinck's foundation of missions entails a biblical-theological survey of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. From this foundation, he builds toward a comprehensive theology of missions with biblical missiological principles and then applies them to church life.

Because missions is rooted in Scripture, Bavinck maintains that it is the responsibility of the whole church for all time. Throughout *SOM*, he repeats the principle of whole-church participation in

[39] Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader*, 297.

[40] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 64.

[41] Ibid., xxviii.

[42] Ibid., xviii–xxi.

[43] Ibid., xii.

missions, making it a science of the entire church rather than an academic ancillary.[44] Observers have hailed Bavinck's pointed effort to make theology as biblically grounded as possible and to surrender other things to do so.[45] This method assured readers that his work was not a disguised attempt to advance a pragmatic missionary objective.

Elenctics

For Bavinck, the theory of dogmatics and missions must always be demonstrably felt theology. Bavinck uses the term *elenctics* to describe the scientific process of soteriology. The term comes from the Greek word ἐλέγχω, meaning "to bring shame," but many had interpreted its use in the NT solely in relation to reproof through preaching.[46] Bavinck expands on its sense to include a Christian's deeds and behavior, which would validate the message preached and convict unbelievers of the Bible's message of salvation.[47] Under the umbrella of elenctics, he then connects religious consciousness, general revelation, and special revelation as these pertain to evangelizing unbelievers. Elenctics, then, from a Christian perspective, is a necessary science of the conviction of sin for effectively and correctly obeying the command to disciple the nations.

Bavinck supplies his nuanced doctrine of elenctics as a correction to an exclusively rationalistic apologetic. He critiques his predecessors Voetius, a significant pioneer of Reformed missiology, and Abraham Kuyper, whom he says approach the task of missions exclusively through reason, seeking to destroy pagan ideas from an apologetic position.[48] Bavinck seeks to correct this method by noting the personal and relational nature of the gospel, the role of the Holy Spirit, and relational missionary outreach.[49] He notes, as he does with the topic of general revelation, that evangelization is more than a mere intellectual exercise.[50] The chapter on elenctics in *SOM* illustrates, from history and experience, how an imbalance toward proclamation without attention to the more relational and visible witness

[44] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 46–48, 61.

[45] W. A. McIlwaine, "An Introduction to the Science of Missions," *WTJ* 23, no. 2 (1961): 225.

[46] John 16:8: "And when he is come, he will reprove (ἐλέγχω) the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." Revelation 3:19: "As many as I love, I rebuke (ἐλέγχω) and chasten." Francis Turretin is an example of a theologian who used this same word, *elenctics,* but exclusively in a rationally apologetic sense where propositional truth corrects the error of the sinner. No one has yet linked any influence from Turretin to Bavinck in any perceptible way. Bavinck then is original in his use of the term, always aiming for a broader sense of conviction that includes both word and deed. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997).

[47] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 222. Expanding on John 16:8, Bavinck emphasizes that elenctics, the conviction of sin, is entirely accomplished by the Holy Spirit and not through human effort. He provides an example of an effective non-verbal presentation of truth to demonstrate that conviction of sin includes both general and special revelation.

[48] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 224–25

[49] Ibid., 150. "Preaching must thus be an encounter, an encounter not with a part of a person, not only with his reason, or his poetic feeling, but an encounter with the entire person, with the whole man, as he exists in this world, as he is in flight from God, as he plays a role in that tremendous drama that is enacted between God and the rebellious human heart." See also Ibid., 222.

[50] Ibid., 135. "Your own life, in which God's grace has performed and patiently continues to perform a wonderful work against the unruliness of your own heart, itself constitutes a basis for your elenctic efforts." Ibid., 230.

of Christians resulted in poor outcomes.[51] Bavinck believes that the proclamation of truth in the Scriptures is never separated from the authentic testimony of deeds; thus biblical soteriology must give proper attention to both the preaching and living example of the gospel in the process of conviction.

Analysis of Theological Method

Bavinck's contributions are as diverse as his interests and pursuits. His audience was rarely the academic world at large but rather the church and the Christian academy. Likely because of his identity as a missionary rather than a systematic theologian, he never precisely lays out his theological method. This is not to say he never acknowledges his presuppositions, but he does so organically and not systematically.

Presuppositions and Prolegomena

Bavinck's works center on the topics described in the last section. His writings are characteristically practical and were written for a church audience more than an academic one. Consequently, Bavinck does not systematically state a theological summary of prolegomena. Bavinck generally acknowledges his presuppositions and Reformed theological inheritance but is unafraid to subject some of those positions to critique.[52] A survey of his writings reveals both stated and unstated working presuppositions.

Bavinck rejects any illusion of pure objectivity, recognizing the futility of total neutrality, which some theologians feigned. In exegesis, he recognizes that one must continuously operate with a sensitivity toward error and miscalculation, no matter how confident one is with interpretation. "When I take a text from the *Book of Proverbs* or from one of the prophets, I am permanently in danger of misunderstanding its real meaning."[53] Bavinck's keen awareness of fallen human nature translates into his academic posture and presuppositions.[54] Because man is sinfully flawed, no one, himself included, should assert total objectivity.

Bavinck contends that faith in the reality of God would provide the truest account of the human condition and the reality of the universe. Science cannot operate free of opinions, values, and choices, so theology should not be disqualified from scientific endeavors; however, science also cannot govern our perception of reality.[55] Bavinck defends this position of faith from critique and rejects any attempt to study religion as nothing more than a historical phenomenon.[56] Though he challenges an exclusively rationalistic and empirical approach, he also profusely uses these approaches as valid, God-given

[51] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 121–41, 221–66.

[52] Visser, 92. Bavinck expressly departs from the Synod of Middleburg regarding principles of missiology.

[53] Bavinck, "Adaptation and Communication," 311.

[54] Bavinck, *Temple and Mosque*, 327. See also Johan H. Bavinck, *Faith and Its Difficulties*, trans. William B. Eerdmans Sr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 44. "Man in his self-judgment and opinion can never arrive at the full objective truth."

[55] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 58.

[56] Ibid., 234.

instruments for aiding the discovery of biblical truth. Empiricism and rationality are not to be rejected, but neither should they govern one's method.[57] This allows him to rest on biblically informed foundations and to have confidence that the most profound questions of life are indeed answerable.

Bavinck does not expound on the biblical concept of *imago dei*, but this theological concept undergirds an oft-repeated theme of man as a holistic creature. He warns that the soul, mind, and physical aspects of man cannot be separated or any part minimized without erroneous consequences.[58] "With one person, that will work more strongly in his intellectual functions, with another in the emotional or practical functions, according to the balance found in that personality, but the need is common to all."[59] Bavinck's theological model operates from an underlying assumption that the Bible clearly demonstrates that God reaches man in his totality, intellect, and being.

His understanding of religious consciousness rests on the firm belief that man is inherently and wholly a religious-spiritual being. He qualifies this proposition, recognizing the appearance that religion was not universal in a quickly secularizing Europe, where atheism was on the rise. And yet he contends that even those self-professed atheists are choosing a religion of their own making.[60] Bavinck stands by his positions that "man stands in an I-Thou relationship, a conversational relationship, and he can only live in this relationship."[61] Bavinck recognizes that man is a complex and diverse being in many respects, but he defies secular anthropology by declaring that man has a universal religious nature as a bedrock presupposition.

Reflecting his academic humility, Bavinck regularly warns against assumptions of Western superiority or cultural universality.[62] Still, he often refers to an Eastern-Western cultural dichotomy.[63] Modern scholars have critiqued Bavinck for this perspective as an imperfect generalization, but this critique is likely unnecessary. Bavinck lived in a time when many still assumed some cultures to be unrelated to one another, and colonial attitudes asserted dominance over other worldviews.[64] Though he operates from a Western point of view, he acknowledges its limitations and adopts a posture of

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[57] J. H. Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith* (Kampen: Kok, 1949), 110.

[58] Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader*, 107.

[59] Bavinck, *Personality and Worldview,* 53.

[60] Ibid., 42.

[61] Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith*, 168.

[62] Visser, 38, 63. Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 102–3.

[63] Today, the cultural schematic of East versus West, such as in Hofstede's Dimensions, remains debated and is often critiqued. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001). Yet it is still widely used in anthropological circles. If one strikes a balance between generalization and exception, it is a helpful diagnostic for measuring cultural values in worldviews in both anthropological and theological domains. See Richard E. Nisbett's *The Geography of Thought* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2003).

[64] A contemporary of Bavinck was Joseph Needham, the famous scientist who categorically dismantled the ignorant view of China as undeveloped and unscientific. Simon Winchester, *The Man Who Loved China: The Fantastic Story of the Eccentric Scientist Who Unlocked the Mysteries of the Middle Kingdom* (New York: Harper, 2008). See also Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) for a history of Orientalism in the West, which was essentially an array of uninformed expectations in a quickly globalizing world.

openness when discussing cross-cultural applications of theory and ideas.[65] Bavinck's commitment to the universal nature and condition of man demonstrates that this generalized dichotomy was neither overstated nor held too rigidly, showing that cultural exegesis includes both common and unique traits.

Bavinck understands that everyone operates from some conditioned preunderstanding, that humans are flawed, and that rationalization is an incomplete methodology. He uses these reasons to support the need to ground one's theology in the starting point of theology: God's ontological being and self-revelation.[66] Bavinck does not attempt to philosophize or reach that conclusion through empirical or rational means but settles on the Bible's revelation of God's being as man's only hope for true understanding.[67] He regularly asserts the priority of deriving principles and truth from Scripture first so that all other sciences are subservient to the authority of Scripture.[68] Bavinck's theological method begins only with the canon of Scripture.

Use of Scripture in Theological Method

Bavinck's own testimony and record accord with a position that sought to return missiology and church theology to a wholly biblical basis. Bavinck rejects any missiological principles dependent on secularized and humanistic rationality. He had become dissatisfied with secular anthropology that failed to account for man's natural rebellious bent for sin, empirically proven by the devastating war that enveloped the world, and that he experienced in his interaction with false religions.[69] Humanism, unlike the Bible, failed to account for man's complex psychology and personality.[70] Bavinck's answer is a return to the Bible as a foundation for anthropology, non-Christian religion, and missions.

Bavinck was a teacher, missionary, and evangelist. He never wrote a Bible commentary nor published many sermons. Yet examples of his exegesis appear throughout his work, especially in his handbook of missions (*SOM)* and his works on religious consciousness. Bavinck does not simply profess a biblical approach; he regularly refers to Scripture in constructing his model of theology, whether in the foundations of theory or in the application of principles.[71] As with his theological method, he does not systematically explain his process for arriving at conclusions; instead, an analysis must examine the breadth of the samples and sketch how he handles several key aspects of the exegetical discipline.

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[65] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 210–11, 301–3.

[66] Visser, 58.

[67] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 5. See also Bavinck, *Faith and Its Difficulties*, 46.

[68] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 81.

[69] Bavinck, "Communication and Adaptation," 311.

[70] Bavinck, *Faith and Its Difficulties*, 14. "God does not tell us in His Book that there are two kinds of human beings. There is only one kind. . . . 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jer. 17:9).'" Ibid., 46.

[71] Chapter 5 of Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, on the foundation of missions includes at least thirty-four specific Bible references from over a dozen books in both the Old and New Testaments.

Unity of the Scriptures

Bavinck's presupposition of Scripture's unity is evident first in what might be called an argument from silence. Unlike some of his conversation partners such as Schweitzer and Schleiermacher, Bavinck assumes the authenticity and genuine authorship of the NT as in his synthesis of Acts 17 and Romans 1.[72] Elsewhere, he regularly assumes Pauline authorship of 1 and 2 Timothy and again correlates theological findings of those passages with Pauline thought in Romans or 1 and 2 Corinthians.[73] Bavinck consistently relates one biblical text to another without noting any discontinuity between them or concern about contradiction.

Next, when analyzing the phenomena of culture, human nature, and behavior, he begins in Genesis 3. He understands its narrative to be programmatic for the rest of Scripture and, indeed, for universal human nature. He concludes, based on the events of that passage, that its effects extend to the rest of redemption history and thus are not isolated as a myth or unrelated narrative.[74] In fact, he states, "The New Testament detached from the Old is completely unintelligible to many."[75] Hence, Bavinck views this pivotal passage as relevant and binding for the rest of the canon because the entire Bible is unified as the Word of God.

Progressive Redemption History

When establishing a whole-Bible foundation for missions, *SOM* provides a neatly arranged survey of the Scriptures, divided into OT foundations, OT prophets, Gospels, Acts, and epistles. This strongly indicates Bavinck constructed theology from this schema, which generally arranges the canonical books by their genre and position within redemption history. His exegesis is sensitive to how each canonical section contributes differently to missions and the present-day believer's application. It is no surprise that his Reformed perspective views the covenantal progression through a Christological lens, maintaining that all fulfillment of promises is found in Jesus the Messiah.[76] From this foundation in redemptive history, he establishes the divine imperative of missions.

A thorough understanding of progressive revelation becomes clear early in his introduction to missions. He mentions commonly accepted theories about the apostolic office and, to define his terms, clarifies that the office of apostle is closed.[77] For him, Matthew 28:19–20 shows that the apostles' calling was passed on to the church rather than dying out with them. He purposefully gives the Gospels and Acts the most attention in his foundation for missions because of their pivotal place in redemption history. Bavinck clearly formulates theological conclusions with sensitivity to the different periods of biblical history.

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[72] Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith,* 123–24.

[73] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 66, 93.

[74] Bavinck, "Communication and Adaptation," 308.

[75] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 143.

[76] Ibid., 33, 59.

[77] Ibid., xvi.

Bavinck briefly addresses the relevance of the OT to NT mission. His warrant for including it in construction for theological missiology is the theme of the nations in redemption, which he sees as partially fulfilled in the Gospels and progressively more so in the NT.[78] It is not immediately clear how he differentiates the prophets from the rest of the OT books. Still, he plainly states they do not significantly contribute to NT mission.[79] Yet, he does not hesitate to cite prophetic books profusely and use them as support in various levels of theological construction. Though Bavinck operates with a scheme for when to link and apply OT prophets with NT texts, his rationale is unclear and leaves unanswered questions about the details of his exegetical rationale.

Later, we will discuss his proposed interpretive center. But it bears mentioning that, at the outset of laying the foundation for missions, he points to the covenant as the unifying concept between the Old and New Testaments. "The work of missions is possible only within the concept of a covenant."[80] Thus, the Gospels and, to some degree, Acts are treated in ways that focus on their Messianic fulfillment of salvation promises. On the Gospels, he states, "Such indications indicate plainly that the notion of missions did not appear with great clarity in the beginning of the gospels, because at that time there lay a veil of mystery over the life of Jesus."[81] Bavinck states the church is now in an interim age between the installation of the kingdom and its future consummation. This Christocentric theme, with Jesus as Messiah, is critical to the development of Bavinck's OT prefiguration of NT missiology and its theological applications across all of Bavinck's works.

Bavinck's missions handbook further discusses the changes from the Gospels to NT theology. He links Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8, and Matthew 21:43, suggesting that a new era for the NT believer has begun.[82] He states that other passages of Scripture, in conjunction with these, "Give the impressions that since the rejection of Christ by official Israel . . . Israel has lost any special claim. The kingdom must be given to 'a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof (Matthew 21:43).'"[83] From here he concludes that Acts indicates Israel was given a special temporary priority. These theological conclusions about the redemptive narrative are vital for establishing missions as the primary goal for the NT believer, as well as establishing a principle for when the narratives in the Gospels and Acts are normative or descriptive. Bavinck's understanding of the progression of the redemptive narrative establishes a foundation from which he will *principlize* for NT mission.[84]

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[78] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 33.

[79] Ibid., 22. "One can hardly speak of the promise of missions within the framework of the Old Testament. It is more glorious than that."

[80] Ibid., 14.

[81] Ibid., 34.

[82] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 70.

[83] Ibid., 34.

[84] The word *principlize* is used here based on its sense in Gary T. Meadors, ed., *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

Biblical Theology

Bavinck mostly predated the height of the biblical theology movement and its emphasis as an exegetical discipline.[85] He makes no mention of the discipline, nor does he take efforts to delineate his exegetical method or compare it to others'.[86] The bulk of Bavinck's utilization of Scripture supports application and synthesized principles rather than initial exegesis or biblical-theological analysis. Still, a complete analysis of Bavinck's use of Scripture is needed to determine whether he gives each book and biblical author an independent voice before theological synthesis throughout his methodology.

Bavinck establishes the parameters for his biblical foundation of missions, explicitly stating, "For from the first page to the last, the Bible has the whole world in view, and its divine plan of salvation is unfolded as pertaining to the whole world."[87] Each section of his foundation-building consults an entire biblical section. Though he does not display the entirety of his exegetical findings, it is implied that the whole of the Gospels, of Acts, etc., are consulted, and a theological synthesis is performed. Consequently, after citing various Scriptures from the epistles, he can say, "Missionary work is thus anchored in divine activity."[88] Though not explicitly stated, Bavinck's biblical theology is founded on a comprehensive survey of the biblical books before systematic synthesis.

Bavinck's use of biblical theology will also be evident in his engagement with cross-canonical themes.[89] In *SOM*, he traces the theme of love in the epistles and the Gospels separately, then connects them in their application to the NT believer.[90] Bavinck accurately identifies that "the glory of Jehovah, not the need of the heathen, is the overruling motif" of OT redemption history. Indeed, Bavinck combats other scholars' tendencies to take NT mission texts and synthesize theology back into the OT. For example, he notes in the OT that the nations are drawn to Israel, and Israel is not sent, a pattern that ought not be directly applied to the NT. Similarly, he discerns that prophetic passages predicting the coming of nations are not to be seen as directly fulfilled in the church age, but as visions of ultimate fulfillment in the final age beyond the present one. "One can hardly, therefore, speak of the promise of missions within the framework of the Old Testament. It is more glorious than that."[91]

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[85] D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology,* ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 91. Carson suggests that the biblical theology movement did not die in the 60s; it simply changed and evolved into various emphases still today.

[86] Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 368. DeRouchie defines biblical theology as "a way of analyzing and synthesizing what the Bible reveals about God and his relations with the world that makes organic salvation-historical and literary-canonical connections with the whole of Scripture on its own terms, especially with respect to how the Old and New Testaments progress, integrate, and climax in Christ." Because this overlaps with what was covered in the above section on redemption history, this section will focus primarily on the biblical themes Bavinck engages.

[87] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 11.

[88] Ibid., 43.

[89] Some definitions of biblical theology do not include cross-canonical biblical themes but place them at a higher level of theological synthesis. I include them here because these themes present the best opportunity to discuss Bavinck's guarding of individual sections and books of Scripture from synthesis prior to systematic theology.

[90] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 46.

[91] Ibid., 15.

Again, he places the NT church and the NT authors in an interim age so as not to conflate these prophecies with NT mission.

Original Languages and Mechanics of Exegesis

Bavinck offers enough discussion of the Scriptures to observe patterns of how he studies and interprets individual passages. He regularly engages in the original languages and performs word studies throughout his exegesis.[92] In his examination of biblical themes such as "world," "kingdom," and "creation," he conducts word studies to trace each theme.[93] These lexical studies often serve as the basis for his linking of Scripture with Scripture, as in the case of Genesis 1:1 serving as the necessary basis for the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20.[94] This aspect of exegesis keeps Bavinck's consequent theological construction tied to the text of Scripture. Though he often engages in historical theological dialogue, it is textual exegesis and not others' theological constructions or conclusions that provide the final authority of Bavinck's theological construction.

The final level of theological construction and the last step of exegesis is application. One key to responsibly moving from text to application is what many call a *principlizing* approach.[95] When handling NT narrative, Bavinck resists merely copying missionary methods from Scripture and instead extracts principles. He posits that rigidly using Paul's descriptive actions as prescriptive is "foolish and absurd. It is impossible to follow the chosen method by Paul in his day and world. Nor can the gospel be preached in the manner of Paul used on the Areopagus."[96] He flatly rejects a wholesale imitation of all biblical narrative. Yet he does not hesitate to appeal regularly to significant narrative passages such as Acts 17 for principles and foundational theologizing for missions.

When formulating missiological principles, Bavinck frequently draws on implications.[97] He draws rather broad implications, such as when he deduces from 1 Timothy 4:14 and a general impression from the NT that the missionary activity of the early church included many men and women who held no office other than that of a believer.[98] From an even wider perspective, Bavinck examines general revelation and the self-disclosure of God. "This self-disclosure of God seems to bear the character of a very serious appeal to man."[99] From this, he reasons that general revelation cannot merely be intellectual, but personal in nature as well.

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[92] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 46; idem, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith*, 123.

[93] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 12, 44.

[94] Ibid., 12, 66.

[95] See Walter C. Kaiser Jr.'s chapter, "A Principlizing Model" in Meadors, *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, 18–44. See also Al Wolters' reflection, which suggests that all exegetes must use some variation of a principlizing method. Ibid., 279.

[96] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 80.

[97] By "implications" I mean conclusions derived from logic, understanding of communication, context, and synthesis that go beyond the information in a surface reading. Bavinck's theological conclusions informed by Scripture go beyond mere proof-texting by dwelling on the passages' whole-context meaning.

[98] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 40.

[99] Bavinck, "Adaptation and Communication," 307.

Bavinck also draws conclusions from more exegetically specific implications. Though not explicitly stated in Scripture, he cites several verses addressing false teachers that, together, imply that the young church feared the emergence of impostors. From this implication, he deduces principles of missiological caution.[100] Later, the expression "And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15) "is so striking because by clearly referring to Isaiah 52:7 ('the feet of him that bringeth good tidings'), the entire congregation is here described as the bearer of good tidings."[101] He links this to 1 Peter 2:9, noting that the entire church is included; therefore, he deduces that mission includes the participation of the whole church. He sees this principle again in the epistles, where Paul addresses whole congregations (Phil 1:27; Eph 5:16; Col 4:5–6), implying that mission, like all NT commands, is not to be left to an exclusive few.[102] The importance of this exegetical principle, which is founded on an unstated implication from Scripture, is evident as he uses the principle of collective responsibility as a basis for the doctrine of elenctics from which he will further build on general revelation, soteriology, and even the working of the Holy Spirit.

Use of Extrabiblical Sources

Although Bavinck acknowledges presuppositions and makes efforts to communicate in a way open to correction, he nowhere delineates a systematic rubric detailing how his different sources relate or interact with one another. It bears examining how he integrates the different primary sciences he draws from in constructing his theological model.

Psychology

Though Bavinck does not define the term *psychology,* he most often ties it closely to the biblical concept of the soul.[103] On a personal level, his interest in psychology appears to be motivated by a genuine care and desire to understand human souls.

> It is precisely insight into the structure of the soul that can awaken in us that tender admiration for the soul's Grand Maker. At every point, there is a road leading from psychology to theology. Augustine puts it in a nutshell: *Deum et animam scire cupio*, God and my soul I desire to know. Few things in this world are more splendid than being allowed, with faith in God in the heart, to penetrate the depths of the soul.[104]

Bavinck's experience and previous doctoral work in psychology provided ample instructional wisdom to draw from in constructing his theology.

A keen understanding of human behavior and personality can enrich every stage of theological model construction. Bavinck's analysis of Romans 1 illustrates how he uses psychological terminology

[100] Bavinck, "Adaptation and Communication," 307.

[101] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 47.

[102] Ibid., 48.

[103] Bavinck, *Personality and Worldview,* 25.

[104] J. H. Bavinck, *Inleiding in de Zielkunde*, forward, 1926, quoted in Visser, 22.

in his exegesis of this passage to emphasize the relational nature of man.[105] Bavinck notes that Paul clearly does not merely have the intellectual content of the gospel in mind in Romans 1, honing in on the phrase "made to look" (ὁμοίωμα) as it pertains to identity and self-image.[106] Bavinck uses the contemporary psychological concept of "repression and substitution" to describe the human rebellion Paul is tracing.[107] The phrases "suppress the truth by their wickedness" and "exchanged the truth of God for a lie" in Romans 1 correspond precisely to how Bavinck experienced and understood the human behavior of repression and substitution, as pioneered by Freud.[108] This process of regression, as described in the Bible, became the basis of Bavinck's biblical theology of religious consciousness.

Visser notes that Bavinck captures the spirit of Paul's original intent in Romans 1 to use novel individualistic terminology, a break from the communal religious identity most people of the ancient world would have shared.[109] Similarly, in Luke 15:17 Bavinck likens the prodigal's "came to himself" to a shattering of a "pseudo stronghold," or a construction of self-identity, that leads him to his true identity as the son of the prodigal's father.[110] Bavinck shows how Scripture narrates man finding authentic security in a right relationship with God as false identities are shattered. In this way, Bavinck is contextualizing theology, staying true to the text's meaning while using modern categories to communicate it.

Bavinck's use of psychology, like his dialogue with theological counterparts, ultimately remains subject to biblical authority.[111] Put another way, his commitment to biblical authority shapes his methodology and created a distinctly theological psychology. When Bavinck speaks frequently about man's "deepest motives," "his essence," and anxiety in the "depths" of man, he is employing psychological concepts within a biblical discussion informed by the anthropology and principles of the biblical authors, not Freud, Skinner, or the like.[112] Genesis 2–3 and Romans 1 inform his worldview of the nature of man, leading him to reject any humanistic psychology not subject to Scripture's authority. In writing about the process of conversion, he reminds us that it is "a work of God beyond all psychological investigation."[113] Bavinck freely utilizes the science of psychology within the boundaries of what it could investigate.

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[105] Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith*, 123, 127, 163, 167–68.

[106] Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader*, 242.

[107] Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith,* 148. Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader,* 242.

[108] Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith,* 122. Visser, 144–50.

[109] Ibid., 147.

[110] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 123.

[111] Ibid., 81. "It is impossible that psychology and ethnology should speak the last and decisive word with respect to the missionary approach. Other sciences can indeed render a most valuable service . . . but the principles of the missionary approach must still be derived from Scripture."

[112] Ibid., 123. "It is impossible to disentangle the threads of human life from the inside. We now approach the borders of all psychology. Psychology can unravel a few threads from the entangled whole. It can open our eyes to the ties and knots that keep the whole captive, but it can never uncover and lay bare the deepest and most basic grounds." Bavinck, *Faith and Its Difficulties,* 44.

[113] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 108–9.

History and Experience

Bavinck's works exhibit prolific use of historical sources throughout his exegesis and theological construction. To begin with, Scripture's accounting of history is assumed to be reliable, trustworthy, and factual. In his handbook on missions, the author begins with a survey of missions history, from Acts to Revelation. For Bavinck, church history begins in Acts, and its connection to nonbiblical church history is organic and inseparable.[114] For Bavinck, the foundation of all lived human history is the redemption history connected from the Bible to human experience.

Beyond using Scripture for historical information, Bavinck often cites biblical narratives as historical precedents for church practice, both for what is best and imitable and for mistakes to avoid. He also frequently cites examples from church history to urge the present church to shape its application of missions principles. In *SOM*, he cites Matthew 10 as evidence that the early church was "afraid of impostors." He then connects this conclusion to examples from eighteenth-century missions history to corroborate and illustrate it.[115] History is used primarily to furnish illustrations and examples in a didactic sense, showing what works and what does not in applying missiological principles.

Even more subtly, Bavinck draws implications from the NT by relying on contextual and cultural data. He concludes that Paul's actions, laboring alongside women and showing mercy to the slave Onesimus, are counter-cultural events that set a precedent for his principles of elenctics.[116] These conclusions can only be made based on extrabiblical historical information (which he unfortunately rarely, if ever, cites) that informs Bavinck of the significance of the original text.

Bavinck is aware of historical bias and the challenges of modern interpretation of ancient history. In *SOM*, he digests several perspectives on church and missions history that he considers open to error and various biases.[117] Bavinck's specialty in comparative religions engages him with a then ever-growing body of literature in the history of religions. Though he draws from the study of religions, he is also keen to point out its limitations and its tendency toward humanism.[118] Bavinck is unsatisfied with much of the continental research at the time, which, to him, does not match the lived religious experience of his context in Asia in particular but also his position on a universal human need for religion.[119] For Bavinck, the history-of-religions approach ignores the personal experience of religion and, in his estimation, is an incomplete science.[120] A genuine science of religion, therefore, must hold historical investigation and lived religious experience together rather than privileging one at the expense of the other.

For Bavinck, history is where the theory and principles taught are actualized and thus available for scientific inquiry. Without history, principles are vague and bodiless, and acquire shape only within

[114] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 81.

[115] Ibid., 98.

[116] Ibid., 93.

[117] Ibid., 277, 282. He offers the example of the teaching that certain races of humanity be excluded from the task of mission as founded on a false teaching of Scripture and a faulty view of history.

[118] Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader*, 66, 121.

[119] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 234.

[120] Bavinck, "Adaptation and Communication," 310.

the shared experiences of human history.[121] Bavinck regularly shares from a trove of missionary experiences, both personal and historical, throughout the section of his handbook on formulating principles for missions.[122] Yet, as Price points out, "Bavinck gives us some guidance from his missionary experience but does not try to legislate for us."[123] History and experience are tools to draw from, but they never dictate the direction or foundation of Bavinck's theological model of missions.

Bavinck is not satisfied with mere empirical facts of history alone. Citing Acts 17:28 and Psalms 33:13, he states that the purpose of history must not be lost. "The history of mankind is more than just a long account of what man has done, created, and invented; its deepest mystery is the story of God's concern with man and man's response to God's revelation."[124] For Bavinck, the history of missions can be adequately assessed only from the perspective of Scripture because ultimately all of human history will find its end and completion in the finality of redemption history.[125]

Distinctives of Bavinck's Theological Method

It would be superficial to label Bavinck only as either Reformed, missiological, or biblical. These labels are helpful but hardly descriptive enough to characterize his method or capture the nuance of his positions. The following descriptors, while not exhaustive either, identify some of the most instructive aspects of his theological method.

Diverse

Bavinck utilizes diverse theological sources, choosing to communicate the application of theology to a church audience beyond his own denomination.[126] This does not necessarily imply cooperation with or mixing non-evangelical views with evangelical ones. For this, the context of Bavinck's Reformed background and his position as a missionary must be taken into consideration. Many in his circles, such as his uncle Herman, the Reformed dogmatician, would hold Reformed positions narrowly with the same frequency and urgency as essential doctrines. It was not unusual for many to unapologetically take a strong stance on predestination in discussions of soteriology.[127] Since he was a

[121] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 280–81.

[122] Visser, 149.

[123] F. W. Price, "An Introduction to the Science of Missions," *Interpretation* 15, no. 3 (1961): 347.

[124] Bavinck, *Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith*, 174. See also Bavinck, *Faith and Its Difficulties,* 56. Bavinck always saw a theological dimension to the entire history of the world, both biblical and extrabiblical.

[125] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 156, 280–81.

[126] One might even use the term *ecumenical* for such diversity. This term often carries a negative connotation associated with compromise of doctrine, but here it would be used in a much more subdued sense. Theologians could tend to write only to their base audience, but missiologists such as Bavinck's mentor Kraemer and Bavinck wrote in a way that intentionally sought evangelical audiences beyond their immediate denominational circles.

[127] A pertinent example is Bavinck's analysis of Romans 1:20. Compared to Kuyper, Calvin, and Herman Bavinck, he took a much softer interpretation of the preposition εἰς as a phrase of result instead of purpose. Visser proposes that this is an intentional avoidance of the doctrine of predestination, where Bavinck wished to focus on the doctrine of general revelation. Visser, 131.

missionary, it is not unrealistic to expect that Bavinck's views would be broader than those of his home church and that he would seek to communicate them to a broader audience.

Bavinck often cites the likes of Kraemer and others outside his typical Reformed theological orbit. At other times, it is obvious that Bavinck is willing to speak to a broader audience, being sensitive to what would likely have been taken for granted in his Reformed home church. "All of this is what Christian theology intends when in contrast with the doctrine of emanation it posits the conviction that the world has been created 'out of nothing.' To think that all puzzles have been solved by this would be foolhardy, for the concept of creation is extremely difficult to comprehend."[128] Bavinck maintains his Reformed roots but is not afraid to push back against certain propositions and to integrate a broader range of theological expertise.

Bavinck's theological construction does not aim solely to include a broad evangelical audience but, by its tone and selection of content, is non-confrontational. His model of theology is characterized by humility and openness, as seen in his acknowledgment of presuppositions and his earnest effort to contextualize effectively. Bavinck is attuned to the danger of unexamined presuppositions and gently reminds, "The danger of such a schema is always that you quickly think you now know how things are, that you imagine yourself to have understood life in dry and arid terms." Again, "The more deeply we think about the reality of life of the soul, the more we end up with puzzles. May all shallow rationalism be far from us."[129] Bavinck's humble upbringing comes through his method of scholarship and theology.

Developmental

Though all theologians experience some degree of shift, adaptation, or growth over time, Bavinck's writings show notable development after his time as a pastor-missionary in Indonesia. Several factors likely contributed to this, including his extensive learning from Hendrik Kraemer, whom he observed in cross-cultural ministry. Influenced significantly by Kraemer, Bavinck recognizes a pressing need amid waning enthusiasm for missions and theology in his home church.[130] This experience moves him to an approach that prioritizes a return to a whole-Bible foundation to guide science, systematic theology, and practical application.

Second, time in ministry focused on evangelization and discipleship for new believers requires thoroughly biblical and practical approaches, which likely leads Bavinck to recenter some of his earlier emphases. Many note a significantly more theological and biblically prolific writing in his later years with a somewhat subdued emphasis on psychology.[131] Bavinck's context at large includes an increasingly secular academy, a denomination losing zeal and missionary involvement, and the devastation of WWII, which cast despair on many hopes and radically altered global interactions

[128] Bavinck, *Temple and Mosque,* 327.

[129] Bavinck, *Personality and Worldview*, 58.

[130] Visser, 18.

[131] Ibid., 144.

among societies once intermingled. When Bavinck retired from missionary service at the beginning of the war, he made it clear that such carnage demanded a return to biblical solutions.

Cross-cultural ministry also likely sharpened and honed his communicative ability. The encounters with Eastern religions and worldviews, so vastly different from the Western audiences he had written to, likely contributed to his ecumenical and approachable manner. The book *Riddle of Life*, written shortly before the war, is a convicting evangelistic treatise that appeals to empirical and rational challenges from beginning to end. Bavinck's exclusive use of this more Western approach disappears from virtually all subsequent writings, indicating a maturation that considered a more universal, relational, and contextual rationale. Though rational thought and empirical evidence are always valid considerations in Bavinck's writing, his method of theology shows a significant shift toward prioritizing Scripture as the final authority of all theology.

Integrative

A consistently demonstrable characteristic of Bavinck's theological method is his integration of multiple disciplines. His life's work reflects his experience and expertise in anthropology, theology, missions, cross-cultural communication, and psychology. These works prove valuable across several fields as he often seamlessly weaves them together in each book. For example, Bavinck's university course "Contemporary Man" in the 1950s sought to analyze modern man in his time, with the aim of preaching the gospel more effectively and exercising pastoral care.[132] This reflects his ambition to methodically and scientifically integrate homiletics, exegesis, and contextualization of the gospel with the praxis of missiology.

To illustrate how Bavinck integrates separate disciplines in his theological construction, it seems best to dissect his treatment of Haggai 2:7 in relation to Bavinck's most apparent departure from Herman Bavinck, Voetius, and others in his Reformed circles. Bavinck reexamines the phrase "the desire of all nations," which many took to refer to the nations' desire for Christ and taught missionaries to seek cultural inroads to untapped Christological desires in non-Christian religions.[133] Bavinck thoroughly contradicts such an idea, declaring that the "redeemers and saviours about whom heathendom dreams are not types of what Christ is and would be, but they are saviours conjured by the fancy of men."[134] Bavinck's integrative approach critiques previous assumptions utilizing a multidisciplinary approach through history, experience, exegesis, and psychology.

First to note in Bavinck's exegesis is his use of history, most often citing Calvin. For this passage, he relates the history of Bible translation from the Vulgate and then uses Calvin's methodology to call into question the interpretive assumption of hidden Christology in non-Christian religions.[135] Next,

[132] Visser, 71.

[133] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 63. Thomas Aquinas, for example, taught a *principium internum*, an inner rule of religion that existed within man's rationality. This became standard teaching regarding humanity's anthropological makeup. Bavinck regularly dismantled then refined this idea on the basis that it is simply not found in Scripture. See Visser 136–44 for a summary.

[134] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 136.

[135] Visser, 86.

he cites his own experience and expertise in cultural anthropology concluding that empirical analysis will not reveal hidden Christology in the unreached.[136] Further, a thorough cross-canonical synthesis brings Acts 17, Genesis 3, and especially Bavinck's study of Romans 1 into the discussion.[137] The premise that Christology can be found in human religions appears to contradict what these passages reveal about the nature and position of natural man.[138] Lastly, we see Bavinck's reevaluation of Haggai 2:7 under lexical exegesis in the original languages. Extrabiblical cultural and literary studies suggest a different rendering of "the desire of all nations."[139] Though Bavinck does not normally demonstrate all these steps when utilizing Scripture, his example of Haggai 2:7 shows clear integration of many disciplines in what we can call the interdisciplinary approach.

As Bavinck integrates those findings with the employment of all the various sources mentioned, he can confidently assert that not only his uncle's interpretation of Haggai 2:7 (and the implied meaning of the fourth verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel") but also a major premise of Herman Bavinck's missiology and religious consciousness is misinformed and needs rebuilding. This test case demonstrates how Bavinck's extensive work overseas in Eastern religion and culture, along with his psychological insight, gave him valuable insights into often-overlooked nuances of the biblical text.

Dialectical

Bavinck rarely discusses dialectics as a theological method. Rather, dialectical thinking is more like a supporting theme that crops up in Bavinck's work, enabling him to address paradox and assert confidence in God's Word while holding two seeming contradictions in tension. One of the most significant of those tensions Bavinck works in is religious consciousness: "We have to be aware of the fact that every non-Christian religion is a common response to the unceasing activity of God in revelation. Therefore, every religion is in what we call a dialectical situation. God's work is behind it and in it, but, at the same time, it is man who is trying to evade Him."[140] A balanced method that approaches general revelation can rest in the complex nuance of both/and rather than either/or.

In exegetical quandaries, a dialectical approach synthesizes conclusions from across biblical theology. For example, it is a paradox that allows Bavinck to uphold the statement in Acts 17:23 that man "does not know" with his conclusions from Romans 1, where man is judged for his knowledge of God.[141] Bavinck coins the phrase about man that he is "a knower who does not know, a perceiver

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[136] J. H. Bavinck, *Inleiding in de Zielkunde* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1935), 203. "Life is different and the world is different. God is different and I too am different."

[137] Though Bavinck never names his own method as such, we can appropriately use the term *biblical theology* to describe his thematic approach.

[138] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 62–63.

[139] Bavinck views several related passages in their broader context and concludes they are all describing a specific time when the Messiah reveals himself to the Gentile nations. This observation erases the supports previously used to defend the Haggai 2:7 interpretation of an anthropological inner desire for God. Lastly, he points to several Bible translations that recognize the change from "the desire of all nations" to "treasures of all people," which Bavinck states refers to the gifts brought to Jerusalem at that time and not universally applied to Gentiles.

[140] Bavinck, "Adaptation and Communication," 312. Idem, *Science of Missions*, 244.

[141] Bavinck, *The Bavinck Reader*, 241–44.

who does not perceive."[142] Bavinck uses a similar balance to expound on the dialectical nature of the kingdom in its "already-not-yet" stage. Generally speaking, a dialectical mode of thinking allows Bavinck the patience to hold up complex theological ideas in tension.

Evaluation of Bavinck's Method

This paper has noted Bavinck's diverse contributions in the fields of psychology, anthropology, missiology, and non-Christian religions. It has also attempted to summarize the most significant distinctives of his method seen throughout the fields mentioned above. We have traced some comparisons between Bavinck and his peers, especially those in his immediate circle, such as Herman Bavinck, from whom he distanced himself slightly. Commentary and evaluation will now be limited to two separate areas under the umbrella of Bavinck's methodology. First, we will ask whether Bavinck's methodology and positions place him within either of the labels *contextual* or *missional* theological construction.[143] Second, we will examine how his choice of theological theme upholds his theological model.

Contextualization and Missional Approach

In his contribution to the multiview series, *Evangelical Theological Method,* Stanley Porter outlines five evangelical views of methodology, including the contextual approach, a methodology that ultimately affords human contexts the authority in providing theological categories.[144] Bavinck, well before this time, similarly emphasizes the importance of context for the effective communication of the gospel and for the interpretation of Scripture.[145] The Word, he says, did not become a "discourse," or "argument," but it became flesh. Along the lines of his emphasis on elenctics, where mission theory meets praxis, he expresses at length what might be considered a contextual approach:

> What we have just said is taught on every page of Scripture. God never speaks in the abstract, but he always addresses himself to real people. When God speaks to Abraham, he does not give utterance to a vague universal statement but to a concrete message directed to Abraham, in the particular circumstances in which he lived. And when God spoke through Moses to Pharaoh, his word was completely different, since it was directed to a completely different person. Jesus spoke in a different way to the Pharisees than to his converted disciples; Paul addressed himself differently to Festus than to the crowd at Lystra. The revelation of God does not hang in a vacuum, it is not an abstract universal truth that descended upon us, but God's revelation entered into our history.

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[142] Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, 67.

[143] Porter and Studebaker, 24–26.

[144] Ibid., 99. Represented by Victor Ifeanyi Ezigbo, "Contextual Theology: God in Human Context" (93–115). Ezigbo contends that all theology is human construct and so all contexts must be authoritative. Though still orthodox in doctrine, this perspective ultimately makes human contexts the arbiter of at least some truth.

[145] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 82. "The first question that I ought to ask is: to whom am I bringing the gospel? It is perfectly clear that I speak to a child differently than I speak to an adult, that I tell a child a Bible story differently than to an adult."

> It took form and "dwelt among us." Those of us who would preach the Word of God to others cannot do otherwise than give the fullest recognition to the people to whom we address ourselves. We are ministers of Jesus Christ and the servant is not above his master.[146]

The above exposition not only demonstrates Bavinck's commitment to effective communication but also tips his hand in favor of the view that theology must inherently be conditioned by context.

Bavinck's statements strongly suggest an affinity with several points of contextual theology: that all theology must be conditioned by its context and that every culture will inevitably understand doctrines in terms of its own context.[147] He recognizes that no language was inherently "ready-made" for the gospel and would require some measure of retailoring.[148] Bavinck's missions methodology gives insightful advice to be sensitive to the cultural norms of Eastern contexts and to look favorably on sincere attempts of unbelievers to understand foreign concepts in their context.

> A strange, perhaps heretical-sounding expression by an Asian Christian can be the symptom of earnest, independent searching and reflection. It might be born from a genuine need to understand God's Word and to reflect on it from a person's typically eastern spiritual approach. In that case, it would be entirely wrong if we bluntly and insensitively objected to it. What is most important in such situations is that a genuine desire exists to be led by God's Word and to bow before the majesty of what that Word conveys to us. If that desire is present, I believe that we may endeavor to lead such people further down the road of true knowledge with complete confidence and discernment. And then we can also cherish the expectation that Christ's Spirit will gradually lead the churches of Asia more deeply into the truth of God's Word. At this time, then, I do not want first of all to assess the formulations of these eastern Christians critically or to weigh their orthodoxy for you. I will not trouble you by indicating whether they risk the danger of Patripassianism, Docetism, Nestorianism, or some other–ism. Our only concern this afternoon is to reckon with what grip these people have on the gospel and how they have been captivated by the adoration of Christ. [149]

Bavinck's theological method demonstrates a commitment to contextualizing the essential doctrines of the gospel, which depends on the target context.

So far, Bavinck's commitment to contextualization is hardly contradictory to either of the five views on the spectrum of contextualization. The crux of the debate concerning contextualization regards whether the gospel includes permanent, universal, and transcultural truths about God that are not determined by subjective human contexts.[150] In this light, one simply asks, "Does Bavinck believe

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[146] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 83.

[147] Ibid., 122, 132. "Any tending to rigidity, any static schematization is detrimental to mission. A place must always be left for variation."

[148] Ibid., 140.

[149] Bavinck, *Temple and Mosque*, 124.

[150] Porter and Studebaker, 105. "Theological universals will not suppress theological particulars."

the gospel must be altered to be understood and adapted to the diverse cultures he entered?" His perspective on non-Christian religions answered this already by concluding that non-Christian religions are in error and that confrontational repentance is a necessary element of contextualization.[151] "The gods of heathen worship are not God, but the product of human imagination. There is no direct uninterrupted path from the darkness of paganism to the light of the gospel."[152] To think that Bavinck in any way suggests gospel truth is flexible over time or in different contexts is to deny his entire work in the field of religious consciousness. Bavinck's position would align with contemporary contextual models that preserve an unalterable universal theology that is not directed by human context.

Later, Stanley observes that the contextualization approach especially values theology in contexts beyond a Western perspective.[153] On this point and others, the contextual label ought to fit Bavinck's sympathy for contextualized communication. Still, if a contextual approach fails to recognize an unchanging center of Christian faith across contexts, it is certainly uncharacteristic of Bavinck.[154]

> Our argument may begin with the ideas of our audience, it may be modest, friendly, polite, and cautious, but it may never omit the call to repentance. This is the truth in the expression that our point of contact exists in an antithesis. In other words, if those whom we would convert have already been busy with God, in the sense that God has done something with them, and they have done something with God, then the missionary can only call such people to abandon the old and accept what has been made new in Christ Jesus.[155]

Bavinck advocates a missional style of proclamation, supported by deeds of witness and contextualized to the circumstances. Yet he consistently returns to the conviction that objective scriptural truth means that confrontation of sin, repentance, and the preaching of Jesus as Savior cannot be removed or altered in gospel presentations.

Central Theological Motif

The kingdom of God serves as Bavinck's theological center, as evidenced by his frequent use of it as a rubric that unifies his biblical themes of mission, religion, and anthropology.[156] He states that the coming and extension of God's kingdom is the single purpose of God's glory, the church, and the conversion of sinners.[157] The kingdom of God is the backbone for Bavinck's understanding of redemption history, and so it upholds his interpretation of the Gospels and Acts regarding mission. Earlier, when addressing the question of where mission begins, Bavinck roots it firmly in the glory of

[151] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 137.

[152] Ibid., 136.

[153] Porter and Studebaker, 214. Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 133.

[154] Ibid., 149. "All gospel preaching, whether direct or polemic, must in one way or the other retain the character of what the Germans call an *auseinandersetzung*, a confrontation."

[155] Ibid., 138.

[156] Ibid., 157. "Mission work is concerned with the Gospel of the Kingdom."

[157] Ibid., 155.

God rather than in human need or compassion.[158] For him, the kingdom of God is what holds these two elements together—both necessary, yet ordered so that the glory of God remains primary.[159] In this way, the kingdom functions not merely as a theme in his writings but as the governing framework through which Bavinck holds mission, revelation, and human need in coherent theological balance.

The theology of the kingdom is not only an academic center; it is worth noting how his theology enters daily ministry life. Bavinck believes that, in light of his doctrine of elenctics, a comprehensive approach to the mission field was "unavoidable."[160] For Bavinck, this would mean that a missionary living as a Christian in a foreign context would see the needs of the people and, because of their innate "theocratic tendency" of wanting to see the perfect eschatological kingdom of God manifest in their lives and the lives of those around them, would be moved to meet them in some way.[161] By virtue of their presence and life in their midst, Christian servants are part of God's general revelation of his goodness and provision to a rebellious and sinful humankind. Put simply, Bavinck connects the pervasive biblical-theological theme of the kingdom as an overarching reality that the Christian would not only understand and know but also live out.

Since he was a missionary and missiologist, it would be tempting to put Bavinck under the "missional theology" tag.[162] Though Bavinck's theology of missions aligns with many biblical and pragmatic conclusions of missional theology, it is still subject to a higher priority. He sees the mission of God as subject to the glory of God; therefore, missions is subject to the kingdom of God. "The goal of our lives is not individual salvation, but rather becoming part of the wider context of the kingdom of God, where all things are again unified under the one and only all-wise will of him who lives and rules forever."[163] Accordingly, unlike many expressions of contemporary missional theology, Bavinck refuses to detach mission from the overarching dogmatic framework of God's glory and kingdom.

Conclusion

J. H. Bavinck's theological method stands as a testament to the enduring value of an integrative, biblically grounded, and contextually sensitive approach to theology and missiology. His life and work reveal a scholar deeply committed to the priority of Scripture while holding together the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and theology. Bavinck's insistence on the holistic nature of human beings provides a robust framework for addressing the complexities of religious consciousness, mission, and cross-cultural engagement. His method, marked by humility, openness to correction, and a dialectical posture toward paradox, offers a model for theologians and practitioners seeking to be faithful to Scripture and understand complex humanity beyond superficial propositions.

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[158] Bavinck, *Science of Missions,* 28.

[159] Ibid., 156.

[160] Ibid., 91.

[161] Bavinck, *Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World*, 37.

[162] Porter and Studebaker, 52–53. The missional theological approach is a distinctive theological method which sees the mission of God's people as an all-encompassing theme of Scripture, the purpose of theology, and the arbiter of theological method.

[163] Bavinck, *Beginning and End*, 35.

Bavinck is still relatively unknown. His priority for the local church, however, should make his writings extremely beneficial to missiologists and theologians today. His multidisciplinary life and work remain valuable in a theological world that has not lost interest in an interdisciplinary theological method. Though Bavinck lived during a tumultuous and rapidly changing time, he maintained a balance between contextualization and the unchanging truths of the gospel by rooting his missiological vision in the glory of God and the advancement of the kingdom. In a theological landscape often marked by polarization and fragmentation, Bavinck's method offers a compelling vision for a theology that is diverse, developmental, integrative, and ultimately centered on the mission of God in the world.