

Satya Maharjan

Dr. Kang

Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena

June 14, 2020

Reading Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics, Volume One: Prolegomena

Prolegomena is the first of four volumes of the Reformed Dogmatics by Herman Bavinck. I had heard my Reformed Doctrine professor either mention or quote him numerous times in my undergraduate. I, however, had not read his work as such one like this before. To say “tedious” to the reading of this work will be an understatement. I found the book so thorough that Bavinck’s intellect and his caliber as a Reformed theologian can be seen in these pages. He is more than a scholar or theologian; he is also a pastor. He does not leave any stone unturned in pursuit of pressing the issues that he deems it requires his attention or criticism. While explaining the opposition position or weakness succinctly, he does so without disapproving or demonizing the person or institution. He does so with grace.

Reading the Reformed Dogmatics, at times, becomes confusing and hard. Sometimes, I have a hard time knowing the thoughts of Bavinck from the opponents’ view on the subject matter he is critiquing. There is a fair chance of misreading Bavinck for someone else’s position if not pay close attention to the development of his arguments. He quite extensively deals with the Kantian philosophy of pure reason, Schleiermacher’s liberal theology, and attack on the reliability of the scripture in the 19th century.

Bavinck lays out the history and definition of *dogma* as the word suggests “say beforehand” for his readers in the introductory chapter. The present usage of *dogma* carries a negative connotation, such as “blind faith,” or “religious ideology,” or “unquestioning belief.” He asserts that *dogma* is authoritative and incontrovertibly true in what it teaches about God and salvation. It is a true proposition from which God reveals himself in his Word, thus stays universally true to all cultures:

“Dogmas, articles of faith, are only those truths, “which are properly outlined in Scripture as things to be believed.” It is only those “propositions [sententiae] which must be believed on account of a

mandate from God... that religious or theological dogma is always a combination of two elements: “divine authority and churchly confession. In the case of a dogma is not based on divine authority, it is wrong to call it by that name, and it should not have a place in the faith of the church” (30-31).

In this sense, the Scripture bears the sole authority and God cannot be known apart from what he has revealed himself in and through the scripture. Bavinck has a high view of scripture that he goes on length to defend his position in the book. He argues that the Word cannot contradict not what it says regarding the revelation of God. “God’s thought cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily from an organic unity” (44). The Vedic texts admonish the readers not to question when the revelations contradict each other and warn of the danger of sinning by questioning the source of revelation. We, as Christians, learn that the perfect God cannot contract himself hence cannot make any mistake. Bavinck even goes on to say that the contraction will prove the religion(s) to be a false religion. If we consider ourselves dogmatic, it is imperative that we hold onto the *dogma* and trace its unity and conduct ourselves after God’s thought. As someone said that what we eat is what we become. In the same manner, what we think of this *dogma* reveals our hearts and thinking mind. He adds that dogmatics is closely related to ethics:

“Theological ethics, which is ... to be distinguished from philosophical ethics, is rooted in dogmatics... If dogmatics and ethics are to be treated as distinct disciplines... the distinction between the two can only consist in the fact that human beings, however always and utterly dependent on God, are nevertheless also free and independent agents. Regenerated and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit, sinful human beings again receive the desire and strength to live in accordance with God’s commandments. Dogmatics describes the deeds of God done for, to, and in human beings; ethics describes what renewed human beings now do on the basis of and in the strength of those divine deeds. In dogmatics human beings are passive; they receive and believe; in ethics they are themselves active agents...

Dogmatics sets forth what God is and does for human beings and causes them to know God as their Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; ethics sets forth what human beings are and do for God now... Dogmatics is the system of the knowledge of God; ethics is that of the service of God. The two disciplines, far from facing each other as two independent entities, together form a single system; they are related members of a single organism” (58).

Bavinck maintains that ethics or virtues one possesses cannot be separated from God’s attributes. They do not have an independent existence but have their being in God. So, these two entities must be viewed and treated in unity as a single organism.

In line with his high-view of scripture, he further argues against the view of Roman Catholicism that the Scripture alone is self-authenticating. No human authority or tradition can be put above or on par with the revealed Word of God. In all the matter of controversies and interpretation, the Scripture has the ultimate authority and last say. Church, confessions, and tradition must bow to the authority of the Scripture and “must be ordered and adjusted by it and submit themselves to it” (86). Later, he discusses the Reformed doctrine of Scripture that justly honors the inner witness of the Holy Spirit on our faith.

The very basis of Bavinck’s understanding of the theory of knowledge is grounded in the Logos. The Logos is the divine light that illuminates the conscience and intellect of a person’s soul. The reason is a divine light but not the logos. It merely participates with the Divine Logos (232). In the nature-grace pairing, he points out to the eschatological vision of God in the recreation of the universe (cosmos) and redemption of humanity into the Kingdom. God alone illuminates human consciousness in the power of the Holy Spirit to convey his divine knowledge and truth. He gives us the capacity to receive his objective revelation. “Corresponding to the objective revelation of God, therefore, there is in human beings a certain faculty or natural aptitude for perceiving the divine... True and genuine religion can exist only in the complete correspondence of the internal to the external revelation... Religion exists because God is God and wants to be served as God by his rational creatures. To that end, he reveals himself to human beings in word and deed... There is no religion apart from God making himself known to human

beings both objectively and subjectively” 278-279). Therefore, we come to know God through human cognitive faculty through reasoning only after the Holy Spirit objectively reveals God to us.

Regarding the topic of revelation, Bavinck categories the revelation to two. He distinguishes general revelation from special revelation only as a way for helping us understand the correlation between two. He sees all revelation as special revelation since they come from God himself. He views the Scripture is a special revelation. “Scripture in the case of revelation makes no distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ revelation” (307). Everything that has been happening from the eternity past and is now happening in the working of God. They are his revelation. For a human consciousness, every action God does is the revelation of his attributes and perfections thus supernatural. He perceives that “this general revelation is not purely natural; it also contains supernatural elements” (311). Things around us as we deem it natural or pertain to nature are labeled as a ‘general’ revelation only for a better understanding of ‘special revelation’. “General revelation is the foundation on which special revelation builds itself up” (322). If we think about the proposed distinction between ‘general’ and ‘special,’ the line between two will disappear that will prove Bavinck’s conviction that everything we observe, experience through senses, and the reason is a supernatural revelation from God. He further expounds:

“It is one and the same God who in general revelation does not leave himself without a witness to anyone and who in special revelation makes himself known as God of grace. Hence general and special revelation interact with each other...Nature precedes grace; grace perfects nature. Reason is perfected by faith, faith presupposes nature” (322).

However, he keeps the distinction between two revelations for the sake of distinguishing their respective work on the matter of human salvation. Every human being with cognitive faculty can observe the nature or ‘natural revelation’ without coming to the saving knowledge of God. Only through ‘special’ revelation from the testimony of the Holy Spirit can a person come to know God:

“General revelation is that conscious and free act of God by which, by means of nature and history — specifically in his attributes of impotence and wisdom, wrath and goodness — to fallen human beings in order that they should turn to him and keep his law or, in the absence of such repentance, be inexcusable. Special revelation is that conscious and free act of God by which he, in the way of a historical complex of special means (theophany, prophecy, and miracle) that are concentrated in the person of Christ, makes himself known — specifically in the attributes of his justice and grace, in the proclamation of law and gospel — to those human beings who live in the light of this special revelation in order that they may accept the grace of God by faith in Christ, or in case of incompetence, receive a more severe judgment” (350).

Bavinck offers Christianity as the only true religion. His treatment on faith and reason with presuppositional apologetics provides good reason to do apologetics. In retrospect of what we discussed above, reason alone cannot change people’s hearts and intellect to know God. Nonetheless, when we take account of our responsibility as dogmaticians, we are required to not run away nor hide from the opponents and stay embarrassingly silent. “The Christian worldview alone is the one that fits the reality of the world and life.... It cannot truly convert people to God. Not even the preaching of the gospel is able to do that... [But] apologetics... can be a source of consummate blessing” (515). We do apologetics in the power of the Spirit. Our reason is short and insufficient. When we present the defense for the Christian faith, personal experience of encountering God, of Spirit, and his power will convert people. This is a subjective experience in its nature but it is originated objectively from God.