



Some benefits of going organic: Herman Bavinck's theology of the visible church

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The turn of the early twenty-first century is undoubtedly marked as a period of significant social changes. Interwoven among these developments is the general social trend wherein Western society has become decidedly post-Christian. Within this context, the church must intentionally appropriate its own identity and calling in the world. Indeed, the prominence of ecclesiology in the twentieth century was notably reflected in the publication of Otto Dibelius' presciently titled *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche*¹ (The Century of the Church) in 1926. Debate on the nature of the church has scarcely abated since.

That Christ's church finds itself at a time where clear thinking on its own nature is at a premium is evident from much contemporary discourse.² Theologically responsible ecclesiology has rarely been as important.

This paper aims to glean vital lessons from the ecclesiology of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), the leading dogmatician of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist revival at the beginning of the twentieth century. In particular it probes what Bavinck's concept of the church can contribute to those within what may be broadly termed the Scottish Calvinist tradition.



Bavinck: biographical introduction

Herman Bavinck was born on December 13th, 1854 in Hoogeveen, a small town in the Dutch province of Drenthe. By virtue of Hoogeveen's status as a frontier town, Bavinck grew up as a native speaker of Dutch and German. His father, Jan Bavinck, was a pastor and theology professor in the highly conservative *Christelijke*

Gereformeerde Kerk (the Dutch Christian Reformed Church, also known as the *Afgescheidenen*).

Bavinck's church, his family, and his own spirituality were thus definitively shaped by strong patterns of deep pietistic Reformed spirituality. It is also important to note that [...] by the mid-nineteenth century the Seceder group had become significantly separatist and sectarian in outlook.³

However, Bavinck's young life took a surprising theological twist in 1874. After one year studying at his denomination's seminary at Kampen, where his father was on the verge of a professorship, Bavinck made the bold decision to transfer to Leiden University, the flagship seminary of the established *Hervormde Kerk*. The theological distance between Kampen and Leiden can scarcely be understated. Bavinck was moving between polar extremes.⁴ In hoping 'to become acquainted with the modern theology firsthand,' he sought, 'a more scientific training than the [Kampen] Theological School is presently able to provide.'⁵ These desires were not celebrated by the *Afgescheidenen*.

Bavinck completed his candidate study in 1877. Following on from this he commenced doctoral work, his thesis on Ulrich Zwingli's ethics being awarded the degree Doctor of Theology *cum laude* in 1880.

This time at Leiden was, in many respects, a difficult one. He publicly lamented at his sense of post-Leiden spiritual want; 'it has also greatly impoverished me, robbed me, not only of much ballast (for which I am happy), but also of much that I recently, especially when I preach, recognize as vital for my own spiritual life.'⁶ Having finished his doctorate, Bavinck applied for ordination within his own denomination. Bavinck's doctrinal examinations bore the hallmarks of deep suspicion with regards to his views on Scripture.⁷ Nonetheless, he was received and ordained by the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk* and was installed in Franeker, in the rural setting of Friesland.

Bavinck's spell in the pastorate was short but much appreciated. While in Franeker, he spurned a professorship at the newly established Free University of Amsterdam. After a year as minister, he became a professor at the Theology School in Kampen, where his teaching

remit included Dogmatics, Polemics, Ethics, Encyclopaedia, Classics, Mythology, Philosophy and Greek. This was a time of prolific output for Bavinck. He also served as a leading churchman during the coming together of his own denomination (which had left the *Hervormde Kerk* in the *Afscheiding* of 1834) and Kuyper's *Doleantie* group (who broke away from the *Hervormde Kerk* in 1886). He married Johanna Adriana Schippers in 1888.

In 1895, Bavinck declined another approach from the Free University of Amsterdam. After this, in the period between 1895 and 1901, his four volume magnum opus *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics) was first produced and published.

Bavinck finally accepted a position at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1902. His time in Amsterdam was marked by a prolific and wide-ranging output in literature and public life. He served as president of Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party from 1905–07. His other political achievements include becoming President of the First Chamber in 1911, and appealing to the Senate for women's voting rights in 1917. This period also saw Bavinck make substantial contributions to philosophy, applied ethics, psychology and educational theory.

Bavinck died on June 2nd 1921.



Bavinck's theocentric ecclesiology

One of the most striking features of Bavinck's dogmatics, by way of both content and structure, is its deliberate theocentrism. For Bavinck, theology has but one subject: God himself. Indeed, 'the imperative task of the dogmatician is to think God's thoughts after him and to trace their unity.'⁸

So then, the knowledge of God is the only dogma, the exclusive content, of the entire field of dogmatics. All the doctrines treated in dogmatics [...] are but the explication of the one central dogma of the knowledge of God. All things are considered in the light of God, subsumed under him, traced back to him as the starting point. Dogmatics is always called upon to ponder and describe God alone⁹

The theologian's vocation is to consider God and, having done so, to appropriate all else in the light of divinity. Theology is therefore the process of continually returning to God. For Bavinck, then, the doctrine of God takes on an almost gravitational force: it continually posits and maintains all other truth in relation to itself.

In that light, one makes some sense of why *Reformed Dogmatics* often reads like a running battle between Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian theologies of the divine (monism, pantheism, deism and so on).

His overall dogmatics follow a Trinitarian contour. *Prolegomena*, the first volume, establishes the methodology by which one knows God to be triune. Volume II, *God and Creation*, focuses on the Father's role in creation and providence. *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, the third volume, deals with the Son's accomplishment of redemption. *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, Bavinck's conclusion, expounds the Spirit's application of Christ's victory over sin.

Thus each loci of dogmatics is understood in relation to the three persons of the Godhead. Ecclesiology, then, is located in pneumatology.¹⁰ The church is the unique creation of the Holy Spirit. Bavinck's choice of ecclesiology-within-pneumatology is no mere structural convenience. This much is evident in how Bavinck defines the church's basic identity and calling in relation to the Spirit. Indeed, viewed within Bavinck's Trinitarian scheme, the church is literally inconceivable without the Holy Spirit.

The *ecclesia*, he maintains, is a new community made by the Holy Spirit. As such, its essence is spiritual.¹¹ Its government is also spiritual. The Spirit's work means the church has an utterly unique composition as an ordered, living organism.¹² Furthermore, the church's power is inherently related to the Holy Spirit. Its mission is not world domination through violence, political clout or slick marketing. Rather, the church has, through the Holy Spirit, an unparalleled spiritual power in which to communicate Christ's gospel.¹³ Through the church's possession of the means of grace, the Spirit uses the church to redeem the world.¹⁴

As the church ponders how to recover some of its courage, Bavinck's Trinitarian ecclesiology provides a timely reminder: the *ecclesia* is the Triune God's church. Desired by the Father, paid for by the Son and gathered by the Holy Spirit, the church is a unique

possession treasured by the entire Godhead.

Viewed in context, Bavinck's theocentric ecclesiology is a radical stance. While Bavinck was a student at Leiden, the 1876 Law on Higher Education required the seminaries in Dutch state universities to retain the word 'theology' in their names, but to teach religious studies in the place of theology.¹⁵ The church was thus to be conceived of *via* strict sociological principles. Bavinck did not comply. He insisted on a higher view of the church because he took a high view of the Triune God.



Bavinck on the visible church

One asks, however, what pressing significance this Dutch theologian has to theology – and particularly ecclesiology – in modern day Scotland? It should be noted first that there is much by way of shared history among the Calvinist traditions in the Netherlands and in Scotland. Secondly, however, this common past in no way equates to a homogenous present. Indeed, the reception and appropriation of Calvinism in the two countries has taken a noticeably different flavour. One need look no further than the general tone of the classical subordinate standards produced by the respective traditions: Heidelberg is pastoral, its logic is organically structured; Westminster is highly propositional, following a connectional logic.

Dutch Calvinism thus stands as a fascinating comparator for its Scottish cousin. The level of historic common ground quickly facilitates engagement, whilst the distance is enough to create differing lines of investigation and emphasis.

In that light one moves to discuss Bavinck's definition of the visible church as organism and institution; a definition unique to Dutch Calvinism and with highly useful applications for Scottish Calvinists.



Calvin as the historical backdrop

The Reformation was the scene of much ecclesiastical upheaval. The Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on itself as the institutional mediatrix of salvation was dramatically challenged by Martin Luther. Claiming to find peace with God through justification by faith alone,



rather than through the institutional Roman Catholic Church, Luther began to vocalise his grievance against Catholicism's institutional self-emphasis.

Anabaptism, for all its chaos and fervent rejection of Catholicism, also developed a distinctly institution-based ecclesiology: by virtue of its emphasis on believer's baptism, its implication was that all (re)baptised members were true Christians. In Münster, Anabaptists proclaimed themselves the first true believers in 1,400 years.¹⁶ Those who, after adult baptism, vowed to abstain from alcohol, politics, war, friendship and clothing were, it was held, real Christians.

The Reformed, however, had a problem with such a one-sided, institutional ecclesiology. If one can judge the true believers on the basis of participation in the visible institutional church, how does one deal with figures such as Judas, Ananias and Sapphira or Simon the Magician? All were undoubtedly active participants in the church on earth. Indeed, the latter three received Trinitarian baptism in the Apostolic church. However, it seems that ultimately none were true believers.

Luther's challenge was developed by Melancthon, Zwingli and finally Calvin. One finds the latter, in 1543, expressing a theology of the church as visible and invisible.¹⁷ This is to say that the church is simultaneously visible in the world, thus being composed of believers and unbelievers, and invisible, made up only of true believers. Calvin regarded the latter element as 'invisible' for three reasons. First, it is the church catholic, spanning time and space, and thus cannot be fully seen in any single time or place. Secondly, it contains the full number of the elect, which is unrevealed before the end of time. Thirdly, one cannot definitively distinguish on earth those who are 'elect'.¹⁸ According to the Reformed, this visible-invisible distinction accounts for the temporary presence of Judas et al in the visible church, whilst preserving the purity of the invisible church.

Calvin's ecclesiology entered the British Reformed tradition *via* the Westminster divines. In chapter 25 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Calvin's basic position is restated. The invisible church is the church catholic, the elect of God. Conversely, the visible church is made up of those who profess Christian faith and their children. It is 'the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of

which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.’¹⁹

Up to this point, the Calvinist traditions in Scotland and the Netherlands have much in common. Both have historically relied on the Reformation’s ecclesiological categorisation of visibility and invisibility. However, the point of dissimilarity also becomes evident when one probes how the respective traditions have defined the visible church. In short, Dutch Calvinism has pursued a standardised understanding of the visible church as organism and institution, whereas its Scottish counterpart has made no standardised development beyond Westminster’s bare statement.

Calvin’s doctrine of the church had a considerable impact on the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Bavinck’s colleague Abraham Kuiper’s theological trajectory was transformed by reading ecclesiology *à la* John Calvin and John a Lasco.²⁰ Bavinck’s history of ecclesiology also demonstrates a close familiarity with the intellectual direction of the Reformation.



The visible church in neo-Calvinism

The Dutch Neo-Calvinist movement was heavily ecclesiological in character. Indeed, its theological development led to a major ecclesiastical merger between the seceding *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* groups.

In their appropriation of Calvin, Kuiper and Bavinck sought a highly specific definition of the visible church. Their pursuit of such a definition led to a specific ecclesiological claim: the visible church is an organism and an institution.

Calvin’s accent comes across in Bavinck’s ecclesiology. Listing the various biblical references to the church’s members (sheep, living stones, children, brothers and sisters, and so on), he highlights that among these are false members: chaff (Matt 3:12), weeds among wheat (13:25), bad fish amongst the catch (13:47), wedding crashers (22:11), the unchosen called (22:14), unfruitful branches (John 15:2) and so forth. He proceeds to state,

All this makes it incontrovertible that in its essence the church is a gathering of true believers. Those who do not

have an authentic faith may externally belong to the church; they do not make up its essential character. Though they are in the church, they are not the church.²¹

Clearly, then, the visible-invisible definition has been carried into Dutch Calvinist ecclesiology.



The visible church as organism

Hugely important to Bavinck's ecclesiology is location of a living element within the visible church. The church, created by the living Holy Spirit, is a new community of faith and worship. Its spiritual essence is characterised by a necessary vitality. Bavinck draws on the heavily organic illustrations used in Scripture to refer to the church: it is a body, a vine, a field and so on.

Trying to simultaneously maintain Reformed doctrines of election and ecclesiology, Bavinck views Scripture's organic pictures of the church as referring to the visible, rather than invisible, *ecclesia*.

In his lesser known work *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (The Christian Worldview), Bavinck defines his regularly employed 'organic' language. Applied to ecclesiology, the church's organicism bears the following marks. First, its highest ideal is unity-in-diversity, rather than mechanical uniformity.²² This is rooted in God's eternal nature as three-in-one. 'The Christian mind remains unsatisfied until all of existence is referred back to the triune God, and until the confession of God's Trinity functions at the centre of our thought and life.'²³

Second, its unity precedes its diversity.²⁴ The Spirit unites its diverse members to Christ. Third, the church as organism has a common ideal.²⁵ Its members press towards the same goal. Bavinck perceives Roman Catholic ecclesiology as crushingly uniform, and its Anabaptist equivalent as chaotically multiform. His unity-in-diversity organic paradigm, however, is an attempt towards a third way. Fourth, the organic church has an essentially teleological character.²⁶ It is destined for an eschaton wherein the Trinity will be glorified as the church maintains its triform unity-in-diversity.

Identifying that the church's spiritual vibrancy is not exclusive to

its invisible aspect is, for Bavinck, a point of considerable significance. Through the creative power of the Holy Spirit, there exists a church on earth that is teeming with spiritual life.



The visible church as institution

In drawing on Scripture's rich pictorial ecclesiology, Bavinck is quick to note that the organisms in question possess a distinctly ordered existence. A body requires a head, every kingdom needs a monarch, a vineyard has a gardener, a flock must have a shepherd. Similarly, the visible church in addition to its status as an organism is also an institution. Bavinck defines this on two levels: first, in terms of its elder and deacon-led government; and second, in its possession of the means of grace.

Thus Bavinck's contention is that this institutional element is absolutely necessary.

[...] the church is not conceivable without a government. Granted, Christ could have exercised his office without any service from humans. If it had so pleased him, he could have dispensed his spiritual and heavenly blessings without the help of institutions and persons. But this was not his pleasure; it was his pleasure, without in any way transferring his sovereignty to people, to nevertheless use their services in the exercise of his sovereignty and to preach the gospel through them to all creatures. And also in that sense the church was never without a government. It was always organised and institutionally arranged in some fashion.²⁷

Again, his discussion of historical theology in relation to the institutional church is nuanced regarding the pre- and post-Reformation church. Unsurprisingly, Bavinck disagrees with the idea of continued apostleship.²⁸ The apostles were, he believes, instituted at a particular epoch to meet a specific need. The church's ongoing government, Bavinck maintains, is found in the ordination of elders and deacons.

What is fascinating about Bavinck's conception of the institutional church, particularly from the vantage point of modern Scottish



Presbyterianism – with its highly developed and complex system of legal identities and institutional polity, and its often wholesale collapse into bureaucracy – is just how bare he renders the institutional church. In short, the visible church’s institutional essence is first that its leadership be ordained elders and deacons; and second, that it possesses and exercises the means of grace. Christ has instituted that an elder-led church proclaims the word, exercises diaconal ministries of mercy, baptises its members and declares his death in the Eucharist.

Bavinck’s clear definition of that which Christ instituted gave him a healthy perspective on the aspects of visible church life not instituted by Christ. This clarity enabled Bavinck the churchman to manage ecclesial change.

In the biographies of Hepp²⁹ and Bremmer,³⁰ one finds Bavinck portrayed as a remarkable agent of change within the church. As a young minister in rural, culturally conservative Franeker, Bavinck initiated several (contextually) radical changes to the workings of local congregational life. As a mature man, Bavinck, by then an elder statesman of the Dutch church, was at the core of a major move for denominational unity.

The extent to which Bavinck’s theological definition of the visible church affected his vision for the visible church in the Netherlands will be evident in the conclusion.

Worth stating in passing is that Bavinck posits a strict concatenation between the visible church’s organic and institutional facets. Neither takes precedence: the presence of one always necessitates the other.³¹ One cannot have a living church without the institutional factors established by Christ, and *vice versa*.



In conclusion: Practical applications

Abundant scope exists for the practical outworking of the organic-institutional definition of the visible church. Within the scope of this article, three avenues will be briefly suggested: structural, theological and pastoral.

Structurally, in many contexts the church is thoroughly bogged down by bureaucratic organisation. The visible church’s life is regularly

dominated by often archaic legal processes, nameless and faceless policies and an unending series of committees. In this context, if the church fails to articulate the essence of its visible nature, it runs a grave risk: that its spiritual ontology be eclipsed by its bureaucracy. Indeed, when one confuses the two, havoc is wreaked on Christ's living body.

Bavinck labours the point that the visible church's essence is non-bureaucratic: the visible church's legal identity is not its ontology. In that light, Bavinck's approach to the visible church was utterly inflexible on the genuinely institutional and much less so on the merely circumstantial.

Theologically, unless one highlights the presence of vitality in the church's visible aspect, many will assume that the church's spiritual life is exclusively located in its invisible aspect. This is particularly the case in churches where a grossly imbalanced approach to the church's visible-invisible aspects is taught; communicating the barest of definitions concerning the visible church whilst heavily emphasising the true church's invisibility. Such a set of emphases creates a church culture wherein 'visible church' is understood along non-living, mechanical lines: the visible church is its courts and formal structure; whereas 'invisible church' is taken as living, but known only to God. This, in turn, creates a membership unenthused by the seemingly non-living visible church, and with no sense of assurance regarding its place in the invisible church. In short, this emphasis has a paralysing effect on church growth. Bavinck's clear emphases on the visible church as organically alive and non-bureaucratically instituted go some way towards reversing this paralysis.

Bavinck strenuously states that the organic-institutional distinction conveys a different concept to the visible-invisible definition:³² grasping and articulating these key definitions is central to cultivating Christians who are enthusiastic about their roles and membership in the visible and invisible church.

Pastorally, an organic definition of the visible church provides an indispensable theological coping device for pastors in the aftermath of Judas-like circumstances. Sadly, most pastors will at some point experience the pain of a church member who reneges on his Christian

profession – sometimes to astonishing degrees. Jesus’ own ministry was not impervious to this reality. Judas Iscariot was an active member of the visible community of disciples, and yet he ultimately rejected Christ’s fellowship. Jesus perceived Judas’ betrayal in advance (Mark 14:20) and duly sought to prepare the remaining disciples for this event. In doing so, his choice of metaphor is strikingly organic: ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit [...] you are the branches’ (John 15:1–2a, 5b).

In preparing the other disciples, Jesus was not inoculating them from the pain of broken fellowship. However, in providing a theological explanation for Judas’ actions, he ensured that they would not face his departure shrouded in theological darkness. This doctrine has the same effect on pastors in contemporary Scotland: while apostasy remains heartbreaking, the prior acquisition of such theological apparatus is nonetheless immensely helpful.

Returning to Dibelius’ comment on the twentieth century as the century of the church, one may suggest that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the need for ecclesiological clarity remains pressing. Bavinck, it seems, has much to contribute.

Notes

- ¹ Otto Dibelius, *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche: Geschichte, Betrachtung, Umschau und Ziele* (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1926).
- ² See, for example, Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Post-modernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007).
- ³ John Bolt, “Editor’s Introduction” in Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 10.
- ⁴ James Hutton MacKay, *Religious Thought in Holland During the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911); Karel Hendrik Roessingh, *De moderne theologie in Nederland: Hare voorbereiding en eerste periode* (Groningen: Van der Kamp, 1914).

- ⁵ R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 20. Cit. John Bolt, “Editor’s Introduction” in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003–08), passim. Hereafter referred to as *RD*.
- ⁶ Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921), 84. Cit. *RD*, “Editor’s Introduction”, passim.
- ⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Diary* June 16th 1880.
- ⁸ *RD*, 1:44.
- ⁹ *RD*, 2:29.
- ¹⁰ *RD*, 4:271–585.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 273–325.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 326–88.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 389–440.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 441–585.
- ¹⁵ Bavinck’s analysis of this change is found in “Godgeleerdheid en godsdienstwetenschap” in *De Vrije Kerk* 18 (1892): 197–225. This is available in English as “Theology and Religious Studies” in Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society*, (ed. John Bolt; trans. H. Boonstra and G. Sheeres; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 49–60. In addition, Bavinck explores the distinction between theology and religious studies in *RD*, 1:50–54.
- ¹⁶ Menno Simmons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simmons: c.1496–1561* (ed. John C. Wenger; trans. L. Verduin; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 158–59, 175–89, 212–15.
- ¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xvi.19.
- ¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.1–9.
- ¹⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV.2.
- ²⁰ Henry Zwaanstra, “Abraham Kuyper’s Conception of the Church”, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974): 149–81.
- ²¹ *RD*, 4:298.
- ²² Herman Bavinck *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: Kok, 1913), 50.
- ²³ *RD*, 2:330.
- ²⁴ Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 51.
- ²⁵ For an explanation of Bavinck’s appropriation of the Platonic-Aristotelian doctrine of the idea, see Ron Gleason, “The Centrality

- of the *Unio Mystica* in the Theology of Herman Bavinck” (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001), 6.
- ²⁶ Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing*, 65.
- ²⁷ *RD*, 4:329.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 337–58.
- ²⁹ Valentijn Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have 1921).
- ³⁰ R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966).
- ³¹ *RD*, 4:330.
- ³² *Ibid.*