

Sleeping Through a Revolution

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Reformed theology in America, the roots of which lie in the Netherlands, has managed to sleep through the revolution of the modern world and survive. Through strong ethnic identity, internal growth, and a militant mind that maintained an adversarial attitude over against modern culture, a Reformed community of Dutch origin still exists. But the defensive posture that has largely characterized it has prevented it from translating the richness of its sixteenth-century legacy of Reformation theology into a proclamation of the gospel to engage modern thought.

I was struck by this fact as I read Hendrikus Berkhof's *Two Hundred Years of Theology*. Berkhof wrote this work after retiring from the dogmatics chair at the University of Leiden. He calls it a personal journey because he wrote to satisfy his own curiosity about the philosophical and theological developments since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The engagement of the gospel and modern thought has been the passion of Berkhof's own endeavor as a Christian thinker. He traces the efforts of those theologians who sought to build a bridge between the gospel and modern culture, a culture dominated by the assumptions of the Enlightenment: the autonomy of the human person, human rationality as the measure of truth, the historical conditionedness of all truth, and the epistemological dualism of subject-object, of knowledge and faith.

Berkhof's conclusions at the end of his survey are sober. Was the effort successful? He answers in the negative: "Secularized culture manifested polite indifference if not outright intolerance." Nevertheless, the struggle was necessary and its consequences significant.

What struck me as I followed the story of the past two hundred years – the world of modern culture in the wake of the Enlightenment – was that the community of which I am a part was not even engaged in the struggle. As I reflected on my own theological education, I realized I was thoroughly schooled in theological development through the Reformation, but understood very little of the revolution in cultural understanding effected by the Enlightenment, especially

the understanding of the human process of knowing and the rise of historical thinking.

In an attempt to understand why there has been so little engagement with the thought and cultural assumptions of the modern world in my own tradition, I turned to the study of paradigm shifts in the history of dogma, a study spearheaded by Hans Küng. Küng traced theological development with major epochal shifts over two thousand years. He, along with David Tracy, gathered an international Ecumenical Symposium at Tübingen in 1983 to discuss “A New Paradigm of Theology.” Papers delivered at the symposium are published in the volume *Paradigm Change in Theology*. At the symposium, Küng charted the epochal shifts in theology to test his scheme of periodization. Beginning with the primitive Christian apocalyptic paradigm, the historical progression moves through the ancient church Hellenistic, the medieval Roman Catholic, the Reformation Protestant with its two consequent paradigms of counter-reformation – Roman Catholic and Protestant Orthodox paradigms – the modern Enlightenment paradigm, and on to the present contemporary ecumenical paradigm.

Küng came on the idea of paradigm shifts in Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in which Kuhn portrayed scientific development as occurring, not as had been commonly assumed, in smooth cumulative progress, but rather in leaps triggered by paradigm shifts, the displacement of one model of understanding by another. Küng applied Kuhn’s discovery to theological development and found points of significant shift there as well.

Paradigm as Kuhn defined it and as Küng utilizes it means “an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.” Küng’s periodization marks off those points in the movement of history where a major shift in understanding took place, a shift from one constellation of beliefs to another – a change in the explanation model through which Christian faith was interpreted. The points of shift can be debated and the flow of history cannot be rigidly sectioned off. Nevertheless, the periodization Küng has suggested has been widely received.

Küng developed his study of paradigm shifts further in *Theology for the Third Millennium*. There he pointed out the interesting difference between paradigm shifts in the natural sciences and in theology. In science, as data pile up that cannot be explained within the existing paradigm, pressure builds to find a new paradigm. When the new paradigm becomes available, one that succeeds in explaining a broader range of data, it replaces the old paradigm, which becomes obsolete.

But this is not the case with paradigm shifts in theology. The same process operates: new understanding of the knowing process and of the nature of human knowledge, new data – for example, data acquired through the rise of the historical-critical method of biblical study, new philosophical insights, scientific

knowledge – eventuate in a major shift in understanding of the Christian tradition. A new paradigm comes into being. But in contrast to the process in the natural sciences, the old paradigm does not become obsolete; it continues to be the paradigm within which certain Christian communities understand Christian faith and existence.

Thus, the two thousand years of theological development traced by Küng, reveal eight major paradigms. But the fascinating fact is that all eight paradigms continue to claim the loyalty of significant communities. All eight continue to exert their influence down to the present.

This insight enabled me to discover how Reformed theology, with roots in the Netherlands, has been able to remain largely unscathed by the world of modern thought. It has continued to live within the paradigm of Reformed orthodoxy that took shape in the Reformed scholasticism of the seventeenth century, insulated from the acids of modernity. A form of the gospel thus has been preserved, but at a great price. The failure to engage the modern world under the cultural assumptions of the Enlightenment has led to a kind of ghetto existence and a failure to bring the rich legacy of Reformation theology to new expression. An historically conditioned theological confessional position has been frozen in time, absolutized, and perpetuated largely intact over generations, largely untouched by ongoing cultural, philosophical, and scientific assumptions.

Theologically we are stuck, and the best and the brightest know it. Reformed orthodoxy has slept through the revolution of human understanding and knowledge created by the Enlightenment, never to this day having come to terms with the autonomy of the human person, the throwing off of all forms of authoritarianism, and the rise of historical thinking. These cultural assumptions are now being challenged. Many observers believe we are living at an epochal hinge point in history, experiencing the emergence of the postmodern age. But we will not be able to move directly from a seventeenth-century paradigm to the postmodern world without going through the baptism of the Enlightenment. While its assumptions are losing their self-evident status, what will not be lost is the value of critical rationality, and what will not be tolerated is any return to authoritarian claims, be they of church, of tradition, or of Bible.

In theology old paradigms keep their adherents even when theological development has left them behind. But they can do so only by some form of authoritarian claim. In the case of Reformed orthodoxy the authoritarian claim of the Bible has held theological movement hostage, hindering meaningful dialogue with the sciences and philosophy. We are theologically stuck, and we will not become unstuck until we learn to value Scripture as authority, but break loose from its authoritarian use.

In order to give that contention foundation, I will review in brief the philosophical and theological movement of the past two and a half centuries, indicating how philosophical, especially epistemological, analysis has impacted

theological formulation in the broader Christian tradition. Under the domination of Enlightenment assumptions, that development has reached an impasse. I will then discuss new possibilities for theological breakthrough opened by the emerging postmodern paradigm. Finally, with reference to one of the great Dutch Reformed theologians, Herman Bavinck, I will suggest what is necessary if our tradition is to come to new and fruitful expression.

The Copernican-Galilean controversy out of which modern culture arose was a severe challenge to the medieval synthesis of theology and Aristotelian science achieved by Thomas Aquinas. A challenge to the Aristotelian cosmology and natural philosophy was a challenge to theological orthodoxy, both to Catholic and to Reformation orthodoxy. In that opening battle between the church and natural science, science won its independence from the intellectual and theological authority of the church.

The early representatives of philosophical and scientific endeavor lived in two houses: the house of human rationality in which they plied their scientific skills, and the house of faith, in which they remained faithful to the church and its theological authority, understood as based beyond human reason in revelation. This was true of Descartes, considered the father of modern philosophy. He remained in the church, but understood his critical thinking as belonging to the natural realm – a purely human activity. It was Descartes who set the thinking subject over against the object to be thought, the world of material reality. He argued for the certainty of knowledge that could be arrived at by the mind observing the universe, which was understood as a vast machine. This subject-object split became determinative for modern thought in science, philosophy, and theology.

The mechanistic character of the natural world became the premise on which Newton described the natural laws by which the universe operated. The solid success of the natural sciences, in their effort to understand and control nature, seemed to verify Descartes' model of human knowing and Newton's model of the physical universe.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century cannot be explained or understood without reference to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and his critical analysis of how human knowledge is attained. His *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) is broadly acknowledged as the foundational work of German philosophy. In his *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, Hendrikus Berkhof contends that this work of Kant's must be valued "as a radical new beginning for evangelical theology," and that in the wake of its appearance,

orthodox scholasticism, rationalism, and supernaturalism found that, at a single stroke, the road forward had been blocked. In addition, the appearance of Kant's *Critique* meant... the birth of the new theology, or rather: The modern way of posing questions, and modern methodology, in theology. (pp. 1 ff)

Although Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* destroyed the traditional proofs for the existence of God, thereby striking terror in the hearts of conservative theologians, it is Berkhof's conviction that Kant's purpose was positive in intent. Kant himself wrote, "I therefore had to abolish *knowledge* in order to make room for *belief*." For Kant, faith and knowledge were separate but complementary and both were necessary. Here again we see the split of faith and reason which Aquinas synthesized when the overwhelming influence of Aristotelian thought in the West forced an accommodation with revelation in the thirteenth century. It is the same split mentioned above in regard to Descartes and Newton. In Kant, however, we have an acute analysis of the human knowing process brought about by the growing autonomy of human reason, which was throwing off all authoritarian structures, whether ecclesiastical (the church) or revelational (the Bible). Kant was a child of the Enlightenment. Preeminent philosopher though he was, he nevertheless maintained an intense theological and religious interest. Berkhof believes that it was "Kant's purpose to save religion as well as the Enlightenment: in this double objective... lay his deepest passion as a thinker" (p. 5).

Dividing the realm of knowledge into two fundamentally separate domains, he posited the world of phenomena and the world of the noumena. The former was accessible to unaided human reason. The empirical knowledge gained by the knowing subject was not a direct mirror of the natural world but the product of the interaction of the knowing mind and the data of the senses.

For the noumenal world, the things in themselves – for example, the universe as a causal whole, the human self as free agent, and God – no empirical verification was possible. Yet, for practical reasons, Kant argued, faith in them was absolutely necessary. This assertion was made in Kant's second work, *The Critique of Practical Reason*.

This fundamental dualism has shaped and determined modern culture; it is the inheritance of the Enlightenment, whose center is the autonomous human person. This dualism has been regarded as axiomatic – the climate of opinion that has dominated the modern period.

It is on this background that the whole enterprise of modern theology must be understood, at least the theology that attempted to bridge the gulf between the gospel and modern culture, the theology of classic nineteenth-century liberalism, to use Küng's schematization of epochal paradigms.

This is evident in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, regarded as the father of modern theology. If Kant successfully blocked the road to the knowledge of God through rational inquiry, through metaphysical speculation, then what road remains open and on what basis can knowledge of God be grounded? Appeal to authority (of church, tradition, or Bible) was no longer compelling. Where, then, could one turn except to the interior life of the individual – to "the feeling of absolute dependence," an experience that Schleiermacher maintained was common to all humankind at some time or other. This was not to claim, as did

Feuerbach and others later in the whole development of modern atheism, that religion, or specifically Christianity, arose from the feeling of dependence of the human person. No. Rather, the feeling of absolute dependence was the human precondition for it. Schleiermacher was pointing to the place into which revelation enters.

The ongoing development of modern theology was filtered through Kant philosophically and Schleiermacher theologically, whether a theologian followed them or rejected them. They determined the shape of the playing field and the rules of the game.

We can see this in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl, whose influence came to flower in the 1870s. Ritschl was the first German theologian to recognize the intellectual shift from idealism to realism under the impact of such thinkers as Feuerbach, Comte, Marx, and Engels; the significant achievements of science, technology, and industry; the alienation of the working class; and the impact of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1863). The cultural mood in Germany turned more and more to the world of experience and to the natural laws governing it.

Ritschl concluded in such a cultural milieu that the knowledge of God could be realized only in the act of faith – faith directed toward the saving activity of Christ. Religious knowledge, he claimed, consists in value judgments, a term for which he is best known and most misunderstood. Berkhof explains:

He intends to maintain the uniqueness of the Christian faith as a way of access to the “conception of God” through trust in Jesus Christ – apart from any ground other than that given in the unity of revelation and faith. (p. 121)

Wilhelm Herrmann developed the intention of Ritschl's theology. He was convinced, as was Ritschl, that the highest of religion and morality was united in the figure of Jesus. Again following Ritschl under the impact of Kant's epistemology, faith and knowledge were held distinct. The authority of Scripture, dogma, or creed had to do with knowledge, not faith. He wrote,

They cannot bring about a saving personal encounter; they appeal to our thinking only as law. Religion is a totally independent world, though closely bound up with morality, because it relates us to divine revelation and must be the answer to the misery of our moral condition.

Herrmann was deeply concerned about the philosophical base of his theology. For him, Kant loomed large, “whose mighty thoughts emerge increasingly in almost all domains of human learning as the select governor of all true research.” He valued Kant's analysis of the knowing process positively “because in every connection he has placed the value of faith, its independence from science, in the clearest light.” In his analysis of Herrmann's theology, Berkhof offers an

illuminating image by which to understand Herrmann over against the rising tide of historical consciousness and historical thinking.

When I read Herrmann what emerges in my mind is the image of a rock in the midst of a rising flood. In Ritschl the rock of moral autonomy still had a broad surface. Now, however, with the waves of the flood rising higher and higher, it became much narrower. The parts that are closer to the sea – like corporeality, psychological development, history, social relationships, and the authority of Scripture and Christian tradition – have already been inundated. Herrmann now withdrew to the narrow center, to individual (though conceived as interpersonal) inwardness where the individual is in communion with God through “the inner life of Jesus.” With a splendid sort of consistency, he devoted his intellectual powers to the defense of the peak of this rock. (*Two Hundred Years of Theology*, p. 146)

The rise of the historical-critical method of biblical research led Herrmann to realize that the certainty of faith could not rest on the probable results of historical criticism. Faith does take shape in history, but its basis is above history and beyond the reach of historical research.

Is it possible to posit a basis for faith above history invulnerable to the acids of historical criticism? Ernst Troeltsch, a student of Ritschl, did not think so. He rejected the possibility of grounding faith in inner experience, thereby finding an absolute ground in history. Troeltsch, too, recognized that the deterministic-historical mode of thinking was inundating the gospel, but he did not believe, contrary to Herrmann, that there was yet a ridge of the rock above the flood. Troeltsch saw no alternative but to plunge into the stream of historicism with its relativity. Jesus could not be lifted out of the stream of history. Every historical person and phenomenon is subject to historical conditionedness. In Berkhof’s words,

history is an ever-moving stream in which the movement of each drop is determined by the mass of water that precedes it, and each drop shares in determining the direction of what follows. That is the fundamental view of “historicism,” another term for determinism applied to historical reality. (p. 150)

Historical thinking, which arose in the eighteenth century, is another hallmark of modern thought. It has marked all subsequent modern thought as indelibly as has Kant’s analysis of the knowing process. In Troeltsch the full consequences of historical thinking were drawn; Herrmann’s “inner life of Jesus” was “time conditioned,” thoroughly enmeshed in the stream of history.

The struggle to find a basis for faith continued into the twentieth century. The catalyst for a major reversal of the tide of continental theology was Karl Barth. The first edition of Barth’s *Römerbrief* sent shock waves through the world of

academic theology and philosophy. Associated with Barth's name in the early period was Rudolf Bultmann, who affirmed Barth's move, seeing in it a shift to an existentialist interpretation of the gospel – a direction soon rejected by Barth. For Bultmann, Barth's early probings seemed consistent with the effort of their common teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann, to find a basis for faith beyond the relativities of history. For Herrmann and even more radically for Bultmann, there was a basic distrust in historically ascertainable facts as vehicles of revelation. Revelation for Bultmann occurs above history in the "existing" individual who, in the encounter with the claim of the gospel, is called to decision, the decision of faith or unbelief apart from recourse to the investigation of any ground for faith in historical data. Bultmann's whole program of demythologizing the gospel was an attempt to peel off the husk of historical happening, for which only relative certainty could be gained, and find the kernel of God's appeal in the Christ event. *That* Jesus was is all that can be claimed as certain. The "Das" of Jesus is the point at which God's claim touches historical reality.

Barth's first edition of *Romerbrief* was a seismic shock, but for Barth it was only an initial probe – he was in transition. The second edition showed Barth not so interested, as was Bultmann, in the existential analysis of the human person addressed by the gospel, but in the God Who addresses the human person. In the preface to the second edition of *Romans*, he writes:

If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the "infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: "God is in heaven, and thou art on earth." The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy. Philosophers name this *Krisis* of human perception the Prime Cause: The Bible beholds at the same cross-roads the figure of Jesus Christ.

The second edition of *Romans* marked Barth's turn to the interpretation of the Bible, a turn precipitated by his disillusionment with involvement with the social democracy movement, which failed to mobilize resistance to World War I, and the "crisis" created by the need to preach weekly. In his wrestling with Paul's letter to the Romans, Barth was overwhelmed with the sense of the absolute priority of God revealed in the event of Jesus Christ and the working of Spirit. Barth was on the way, on a new way, and for a time continued to grope and feel his way. For him – as for Bultmann – the thin ridge of the rock on which their teacher Herrmann had grounded faith was flooded. There was no place to stand. God's revelation in Jesus Christ, effected in the individual by the miracle of the Spirit's illumination, came "vertically from above." In the world, in the domain of history, there were no vestiges of perceptibility except, for example, the crater which indicates that a meteor has slammed into the earth.

It is clear that even the paradigm shift to the contemporary period demonstrates continuity with the nineteenth century. Barth and Bultmann both radicalized the efforts of Ritschl and Herrmann to ground faith beyond history in order to place faith beyond the attack of historical criticism and the widespread Enlightenment assumption that historical reality can yield only relative certainty. It is further clear that the crucial question that has dogged theological reflection over the past two hundred years is the question forced by the rise of historical consciousness, the question of how absolute truth can be discovered in history's ongoing movement, how faith can find a certain resting place in the ambiguity of history.

The later Barth, the Barth of *Church Dogmatics*, turned more and more to history, valuing it as the "place" of revelation, in contrast to his early work. However, to the end he never answered what has been perhaps the most serious criticism of his theology, a criticism expressed sharply by his young friend and admirer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spoke of Barth's "positivism of revelation," a "take it or leave it" approach that denied the legitimacy of questioning the grounds of the revelation, of the claims of the gospel's appeal. In the final analysis, neither Barth nor Bultmann were able to ground the Word in history, within this worldly existence.

The attempt to do so is the story of the post-Bultmannians and the post-Barthians – students of these giants who felt the pressure of the cultural mood to find within human historical existence the experience that afforded a place for revelation accessible to empirical verification. The development of Christology "from below," such as one finds in the early writings of Pannenberg and in Küng, are examples of this swing back to the attempt to give historical foundation to the gospel's claim. In the Netherlands the work of Kuitert, Berkhouwer's successor, is an attempt to find in history "the footprints of God."

The pendulum swings back and forth. Berkhof concludes that if one starts, as Barth did, with God, it seems impossible to reach real people, and to start "from below" as Kuitert and others have done makes it questionable whether one reaches God.

It seems clear that the assumptions of the Enlightenment – the autonomy of the human person, the subject-object split in the process of human knowing, the historical consciousness – have created false alternatives (an approach from below or an approach from above) thereby bringing theological work to an impasse.

If Enlightenment assumptions have led to an impasse, are there indications that by moving out from under the dominance of those assumptions, breakthroughs might be possible in a new cultural period? In a volume of essays entitled *Postmodern Theology*, James B. Miller contends just that. Miller sets forth the variety of forms in which Descartes' subject-object dualism and Kant's knowledge-faith dualism have been manifested in modern thought. From a different angle, he points to the impasse noted above:

The logical positivist movement implicitly accepted this dualism, but denied meaningfulness to the nonempirical, nonscientific side (i.e., the domain of the noumenal.) Reductionists sought to explain religions and religious phenomena in exclusively scientific (or social scientific) terms, thus denying the autonomy (or independent reality) of the religions (i.e., explaining the noumenal in terms of the phenomenal.) In contrast, the existentialist movement, while implicitly accepting the dualism, invested all significant meaning on the side of faith, moral action, and the religious life (i.e., in the noumenal domain. (p. 5)

In Miller's last group, the existentialists, we can see the line of development we have been tracing from Ritschl through Herrmann to Barth, Bultmann, and their successors. Indeed, we can see it already in "the father of modern theology," Schleiermacher, who sought the ground for theology in the interior life of the individual.

Miller himself sets in contrast the two poles represented by Barth with his "positivism of revelation" – the uncritical confidence that the revelatory "word" provides absolute knowledge of God and God's purpose for the world, and the logical positivists who held that reason and empirical observation were the sole and sufficient sources of absolute knowledge of the world. Thus, Miller observes, the modern worldview or, as it has been named here, the domination of the cultural assumptions of the Enlightenment, continues to form the dominant perspective in Western and Christian culture. He writes:

It is found in the popular understanding of science as an impersonal, detached, and objective search for the facts of nature. Its neoorthodox theological manifestation is "normal" Christian theology. The prophetic rhetoric of the theology justifies a program of cultural change through social action. Its existentialist roots encourage contemporary forms of pastoral care and spiritual renewal which turn people away from their intrinsic relation to nature and history and focus them on a kind of atemporal personhood. It offers a revealed (and so, absolute) dogmatics of transcendence for those who would claim for Christianity a right to cultural dominance. (pp. 7f.)

Miller sees such dominance slipping away; he senses that we are entering a postmodern world. Developments in biology and physics are pointing the way to a fundamentally new worldview. If the Enlightenment paradigm characterized reality as mechanical and dualistic, the model for the postmodern world, according to Miller, is historical, relational, and personal. He describes what this means for the emerging understanding of the world and how the understanding of the human process of knowing is changing.

The world is not simply here; it is evolving. In contemporary biology the world does not embody an eternal essence, but is rather on ongoing process of creating, humans being both the product of and participants in this ongoing process.

The world is understood “to be relative, indeterminate, and participatory.” Existence is fully relative, meaning nothing exists in and of itself; “To be is to be *related*,” in contrast to the absolutes of Newton’s time-space categories. Quantum theory in physics has overthrown the “substantial universe;” the world does not *have* a history, but *is* history. Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty points to the indeterminacy of the core of reality and this, in turn, points to the core of reality as an unfathomable mystery. Interestingly, there is more awe before mystery in contemporary physics than in much theology.

We began this inquiry with Descartes and Kant and their epistemological analysis. The understanding of what it means to know is called in question by these developments in biology and physics. Miller contends,

From a postmodern perspective, all knowledge is historically implicated. Nothing is known apart from its cultural setting, and that setting is constitutive of what is known. There are no culturally neutral facts. *Knowledge is not so much found as made, or better, it does not grow so much as it is grown.* (p. 11, italics his)

There is a significant difference between this conception of the historical character of all truth and the historicism of the modern period as represented by Troeltsch, for example. Here the human subject is not caught in an impersonal historical determinism, but is a participant in the unfolding history of the whole of reality.

Truth relative to any community of knowers makes all knowledge incomplete. Alfred North Whitehead described the world not in terms of substances, but in terms of events, pointing thereby not to a world of static substantiality, but to a world of dynamic temporality. From Whitehead has developed the inquiries of the school of process theology. Miller considers what new theological insights are offered from such a conception of reality.

In regard to creation, the idea of the dualistic relationship between God and world is called into question, as well as the objectifying of the world as a thing. The view of God *creating* provides the possibility of overcoming cosmological dualism and historical determinism.

Anthropology looks different from such a perspective as well. The processes producing the human person are not different from those out of which all else in the universe emerges. Humankind becomes in such a view part of but not the center of the cosmic drama.

There are also implications here for Christology. Incarnation might be understood to characterize every moment of the history of the universe with

Jesus of Nazareth being the one who articulates the incarnational model in his teaching and the one who in his person is said to demonstrate the

meaning of that model for human living. In this sense, Jesus' uniqueness as incarnation is historical but not ontological. (p. 19)

With these brief references to Miller's application of a new understanding of human knowing and human knowledge, we can see the potential fruitfulness of theological inquiry that throws off the dominance of the cultural assumptions of the Enlightenment and allows the fresh breakthroughs in biology and physics to overcome the impasse into which modern thought has led us. The shape in which Christian faith has come to expression in every cultural epoch has borne the marks of the cultural assumptions of each successive epoch. This is no less true of the modern period under Enlightenment assumptions than of Reformation theology under the assumptions of the sixteenth century with its heritage of medieval thinking and Renaissance humanism. The challenge before us is to bring the legacy of sixteenth century Reformation theology to new expression, given the openings provided by the emerging postmodern age.

In his *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, Berkhof provides a chapter on the engagement with modern thought in the Netherlands. What he has to say about Herman Bavinck is especially interesting in regard to this discussion. Bavinck was firmly rooted in the Reformed Church of the Secession led by Abraham Kuyper. Brilliant and highly gifted, he studied at Leiden under Scholten, against the prevailing tradition of his church. He was attracted to ethical theology, an attempt to mediate the gospel and modern thought. Kuyper appealed to him to be clear in his objections to this mediating theology but was never satisfied with Bavinck's criticism – it was not strong enough.

Bavinck remained within the Secession Church and, in time, became Kuyper's successor at the Free University. He wrote his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* and in the first volume enunciated the theological foundations upon which his work was built. The objective principle of knowledge is primary: the Holy Scriptures. He was viewed, according to Berkhof, as "the faithful theological partisan and alter ego of Kuyper."

Yet Berkhof notes that apart from the second edition of his dogmatics and a one-volume summary, Bavinck produced little in the field of dogmatics during his years at the Free University, and nothing that was new and original. He observes,

He [Bavinck] felt increasingly that the modern period needed a much more vigorous renewal of theology than he himself had produced or was able to produce. Particularly the issues arising from the historical-critical interpretation of Scripture needed a very different approach. (p. 113)

Berkhof goes on to say that Bavinck's views on the issues at stake became increasingly relativistic, and, in 1910, he sold a large part of his dogmatics library; during these years his interest turned to issues posed by culture.

Berkhof writes that after 1900 “Bavinck increasingly felt that his theological direction was leading to a dead end.” Was it only historical-critical research that undermined his earlier certainty? Berkhof asks. Or was it deeper? Did he finally yield to his earlier fascination with ethical theology, recognizing that the issue between it and his Reformed orthodoxy was not really an issue between theocentricity and anthropocentricity, but rather between intellectualism and personalism?

Is faith submission to the authority of scripture truths or is it the personal encounter with God through the person of Christ by which we are transformed into personalities? Bavinck opted for the priority of the scripture principle, . . . Hence Bavinck remained more strongly burdened than he wished by the legacy of the Reformed scholasticism of the seventeenth century and gave up intellectual tools he could not well do without in the continuing confrontation with the modern spirit. (p. 114)

One cannot help but wonder why Bavinck’s latter years were not more fruitful. Why did he sell most of his dogmatics library? Why did his interest turn to issues in the broader culture? Berkhof does not speculate, but he does tell us that Bavinck felt his theological direction was leading to a dead end. Could it be that he sensed he was stuck? Was he not perhaps blocked from fruitful engagement with modern thought by his own objective principle of knowledge, the holy Scriptures? Indeed, not by Scripture as such, but by Scripture as understood by premodern seventeenth-century Reformed scholasticism, a view still prevalent in present-day Reformed orthodoxy.

Scripture itself is the cumulative translation of tradition over several centuries. Where it is not valued as an inspired human witness to encounter with the living God, but rather as a book of absolute truths not only about God but also about science, cosmology, anthropology, and history, how can genuine dialogue with ongoing human intellectual and spiritual development be engaged in? It is impossible. Given Bavinck’s ecclesiastical context, to raise that issue would have been fruitless; it would not have been tolerated.

Reformed theology in this country faces the same dilemma. Its doctrine of Scripture has remained immune from the acids of criticism, and an authoritarian use of Scripture continues, making it impossible either to engage the cultural assumptions that remain as a legacy of the Enlightenment, or to capture the attention of an obviously spiritually destitute and groping present generation where the yearning for transcendence is pervasive.

Perhaps the insights and breakthroughs in science and the spiritual bankruptcy of the West have created the moment that will compel us to move beyond both the theological impasse traced above and an authoritarian use of Scripture. In his biography of Karl Barth, Eberhard Busch records a conversation of Barth in which he referred to being dubbed orthodox. That was fine with Barth, if it pointed to a willingness “to learn from the Fathers.”

But he rejected any restriction to the doctrinal position of any teacher, school or confession.... "Confessions" exist for us to go through them (not once but continually), not for us to return to them, take up our abode in them, and conduct our further thinking from their standpoint and in bondage to them. (*Karl Barth*, p. 375)

That is the freedom we must discover in order to enter the contemporary discussion, bringing the richness of Reformed theology into engagement with a postmodern world.

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