



# BAVINCK

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A Critical Biography

JAMES EGLINTON



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# Introduction

## Prolegomena

Why does Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), a prolific theologian who worked within the Dutch neo-Calvinist movement, deserve a biography? In his own era, the answer to that question would have been fairly obvious: in the early twentieth-century Netherlands, Herman Bavinck was a household name. To his contemporaries, he was known not only as a brilliant theologian. To them, he was also—among other things—a pioneer in psychology, a pedagogical reformer, a champion for girls’ education and advocate of women’s voting rights, a parliamentarian, and a journalist. He was, and in some circles today *remains*, a person of international significance. In 1908, for example, Bavinck gave the prestigious Stone Lectures in Princeton, before which President Theodore Roosevelt received him and his wife at the White House. Bavinck was the kind of Dutchman whose foreign travels were chronicled in the national press and who would then return to give sold-out lectures across the country on his impressions and experiences overseas. A century later, a growing international audience reads his works in a host of languages.

His rise to national and international prominence was all the more striking given his family background: the Bavincks belonged to a formerly clandestine denomination that had left the Dutch Reformed Church earlier in the nineteenth century and, until shortly before Herman’s birth, had faced state-led persecution on account of its religious dissent—with all the crippling social prospects that accompanied their pariah status. Viewed in that light, the significance of Bavinck’s remarkable life was all too clear: born shortly after the Netherlands had committed itself to liberal democratic social ideals, he

was something of a poster boy for that new age of opportunity, equality, and freedom.

Given this background, it might be more natural to ask why someone would *not* write a biography of Herman Bavinck. That question, however, has already occurred to a number of people in the century since his death. After all, to prospective biographers, the fascinating lives of polymaths are like honey to the bees. Indeed, prior to this book, six previous writers have set out accounts of Bavinck's life. Taking their works into consideration, one faces the pressing question of why another Bavinck biography should appear now. Why does Herman Bavinck deserve a *new* biography?

In short, this biography's new reading of Bavinck's life is part of a movement that has challenged a number of long-standing assumptions on how his works ought to be read. In the second half of the twentieth century, much secondary literature on Bavinck relied on a puzzling set of terms to describe him as something of a "Jekyll and Hyde" figure in the Reformed tradition. In reading works that noted his unusual combination of conservative Calvinist orthodoxy and apparent modernism, I encountered the regular description of two separate Herman Bavincks: one orthodox and the other modern. In these sources, the presence of these orthodox and modern elements of his life and thought was consistently attributed to two irreconcilable impulses. Bavinck was (or rather, as I had often read, the two conflicted Herman Bavincks were) pushed and pulled by opposing and contradictory forces and never able to settle on one direction. As for its impact on the growing field of Bavinck studies, this portrayal was seen, for example, in Jan Veenhof's classic description of the "two Bavincks" and "two poles" in Bavinck's thought<sup>1</sup> and eventually led to Malcolm Yarnell's unfortunate use of the language of "schizophrenia" as a descriptor for Bavinck's theological efforts.<sup>2</sup>

The direct result of this was the creation of a widely accepted hermeneutical lens through which Bavinck was read. When the reader noticed a section in Bavinck's work that appeared to reflect his confessionally Reformed roots, it became standard to identify that as the work of the "orthodox Bavinck." Conversely, it became normal to label sections that showed Bavinck's engagement with modernity as the writings of the "modern Bavinck." Brian Mattson's *Restored to Our Destiny* insightfully observed the application of this hermeneutic in Eugene Heideman's *Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, a book that tries to discern "which Bavinck," the "biblical" or the "idealist, scholastic" Bavinck, wrote particular sections of the *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>3</sup>

In that light, I began to wonder whether the future of Bavinck studies was simply one of Balkanization, as his "orthodox" and "modern" admirers

carved up and claimed portions of his oeuvre for themselves. My first book, *Trinity and Organism*, grew out of my curiosity in that regard.<sup>4</sup> I began to ask questions about the scope of Bavinck's own theological vision. A former teacher's quip (originally from Cicero)—that consistency is a virtue of small minds—made me wonder whether Bavinck's mind might have deemed it possible to hold orthodoxy and modernity in some kind of critical equipoise. My first book, then, was an extended argument that specific nuances in Bavinck's doctrine of God (which stress divine unity-in-diversity in a number of ways) created the scope for him to develop a particular view of the world within which diverse parts are somehow organically connected. That work's central axiom is that "a theology of Trinity *ad intra* leads to a cosmology of organism *ad extra*": Bavinck's understanding of God had considerable consequences for his view of the world, which entailed consequences for his self-understanding as a human agent within it.

In rejecting the dominant set of tools used by most Bavinck interpreters for the last few decades, *Trinity and Organism* advanced a new reading of Bavinck. He was no longer the "Jekyll and Hyde" of Reformed theology. Without denying the hard challenge he set for himself or the difficult lived reality emanating from the tensions in his thought, it argued for Bavinck as a creative thinker whose theological imagination allowed him to envision a distinctive articulation of the historic Christian faith within his own modern milieu.

In making this argument, *Trinity and Organism* attempted to avoid a rapidly impending (and fruitless) impasse in Bavinck studies. And it ended on a bold note: "The breakdown of the 'two Bavincks' model calls for nothing less than a paradigm shift in Bavinck studies."<sup>5</sup> Its conclusion was that the rejection of the "two Bavincks" hermeneutic has consequences for all future readings of Bavinck. In view of this, it is no longer acceptable for his readers simply to annex portions of his thought or writings for their own "camp." Rather, they must wrestle with both sides of this tension in exploring Bavinck's example of modernity not denying orthodoxy and orthodoxy not precluding participation in modernity.

In the conclusion to *Trinity and Organism*, I noted that it was primarily concerned with Bavinck's *theology* rather than with Bavinck the *theologian*.<sup>6</sup> My goal was to explore the workings of a theological system that might allow him to maintain difficult tensions (and even to find this desirable). However, my conclusion left open a conversation that I am now picking up again: that of how this particular theologian came into, and developed within, the struggle to be an orthodox Calvinist participant in a rapidly modernizing culture. *Trinity and Organism* could be followed up by a number of theologically focused sequels probing different areas of his thought in its newly reunited form.

However, my current book plots a different kind of sequel in an altogether different literary genre: biography. If we are no longer justified in speaking of *two* Bavincks, what bearing might that have on how we tell the story of his life? What distinctive shape might his biography take in view of the collapse of the “two Bavincks” hermeneutic?

Bavinck, as I noted above, has already been the subject of a number of biographies. Within a year of his death, one (particularly hagiographical) English and two Dutch accounts of his life had been published: of these Dutch accounts, Valentijn Hepp’s was the only extensive retelling of Bavinck’s story.<sup>7</sup> A. B. W. M. Kok’s Dutch biography, *Dr Herman Bavinck*,<sup>8</sup> followed by J. Geelhoed’s *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, kept this interest alive into the mid-twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> although these works were all surpassed by R. H. Bremmer’s 1966 publication, the excellent *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Herman Bavinck and his contemporaries).<sup>10</sup> More recently, however, the English translation of Bavinck’s magnum opus, the *Reformed Dogmatics*,<sup>11</sup> has prompted several writers of English-language publications to introduce their works with short biographical sketches.<sup>12</sup>

In 2010, a longer English biography appeared: Ron Gleason’s *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian*.<sup>13</sup> My biography, however, is quite different from Gleason’s, which was written as a largely derivative—and not always accurate—amalgam of Hepp’s and Bremmer’s contents. While my biography engages with Hepp and Bremmer throughout, it does so critically and prioritizes an *ad fontes* approach over reliance on the works of earlier biographers. Beyond this, Gleason’s forays away from Bavinck’s story into contemporary applications of “orthodox versus liberal” debates perhaps support locating his work somewhere in the Balkanization that my own *Trinity and Organism* politely declines.<sup>14</sup>

My biography has a particular aim: to tell the story of a man whose theologically laced personal narrative explored the possibility of an orthodox life in a changing world. Its foundations in *Trinity and Organism* lend no motivation to ignore or downplay either crises of faith or resolute Reformed convictions on Bavinck’s part. It does not intend to draw contemporary applications of Bavinck for either self-professedly “orthodox” or “modern” readers. To the contrary, its disavowal of the “two Bavincks” model means it is set free from those obligations. As a consequence, this freedom entails the opportunity to consider his life anew. In that light, this biography is an attempt to retrace the narrative of his life and, in so doing, to chart the development of his (single, rather than divided) theological vision.

At this point, a few final prolegomenous comments are necessary. In setting out the life and times of Herman Bavinck, this biography makes abundant



reference to three key terms: *modern*, *orthodox*, and *science*. By way of historical chronology, our story treats the events of 1848—the Spring of Nations so central to the eventual trajectory of Bavinck’s life—as the point at which the last stage of the *early modern* period in the Netherlands gave way to its *late modern* successor. It marks the transition from one distinct phase of what can broadly be termed “modern European culture” into another and informs this account of Bavinck’s life profoundly. Alongside that, this book’s handling of the *modern* also leans heavily on Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt’s notion of “multiple modernities.” This is the view that modern people continually reconstructed the cultures they inhabited, negotiating which parts of modernization they would embrace and which they would reject. There was no single “modernity” or “modern culture”—just as there is no single “modern theology.” Rather, “modernisation” was a process realized in a myriad of ways.<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, a theologically conservative Calvinist, was one such modern European. (It will probably be helpful for the reader to note that this book deals with *both* generic *modern theology*—a widely used umbrella term for a complex web of post-Enlightenment Protestant theologies—and a homonymous but quite particular branch of Dutch theology, “*de moderne theologie*,” which defined the University of Leiden’s theological faculty during the second half of the nineteenth century. When referring to the Leiden school of thought and its exponents, I have capitalized *Modern*. References to the catch-all *modern theology* and its practitioners remain in lowercase.)

This biography also frequently refers to *orthodoxy*. This term is used to denote a set of intellectual, theological, and ecclesiastical commitments maintained by Bavinck throughout his lifetime—albeit sometimes in moments of doubt and struggle. In that regard, this book handles *orthodox* as a synonym for Bavinck’s unwillingness to follow the Enlightenment tendency to devalue and disregard the contribution of pre-Enlightenment (and specifically Christian) intellectual tradition. Positively, it points to his allegiance and willingness to submit to the texts, creeds, confessions, and an institution (the church) brought forward across two millennia by previous generations of Christians, and in his own particular context by the historic Dutch Reformed tradition.

The term *science* also plays a key role in this account of Bavinck’s life. Although this book has been written in English, it primarily describes and interacts with sources written in Dutch. Like its German cognate *Wissenschaft*, the Dutch term *wetenschap* is appropriately rendered in English as *science*. Unlike its English equivalent, however, *wetenschap* has a purview not limited strictly to the hard (or soft) sciences. Rather, it deals broadly with higher forms of reflective knowledge and is used to describe humanities disciplines like theology just as much as physics, chemistry, and biology. Bavinck

himself was aware of this linguistic difference and was publicly critical of the anglophone tendency to privilege the natural sciences over other avenues of inquiry by denying them their right to use that one mighty word.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, this book translates *wetenschap* as *science*. A failure to do so would project today's anglocentric assumptions about higher forms of knowledge onto Bavinck quite inappropriately.

It is with these definitions that I present my subject as a modern European, an orthodox Calvinist, and a man of science.

This is the story of Herman Bavinck.

# Chronology

- 1854, Dec. 13 Herman Bavinck born to Rev. Jan and Geziena Bavinck, in Hoogeveen, the Netherlands.
- 1857 Bavinck family moves to Bunschoten.
- 1862 Bavinck family moves to Almkerk.
- 1871 Herman becomes a student at the Zwolle Gymnasium.
- 1873 Enrolls as a student at the Theological School in Kampen.
- 1874 Enrolls as a theological student at the University of Leiden.
- 1880 Declines post at the Free University of Amsterdam, awarded doctoral degree at Leiden, and passes theological exams in Kampen.
- 1881 Accepts call to pastor Christian Reformed congregation in Franeker.
- 1882 Declines position at the Free University of Amsterdam; appointed at the Theological School in Kampen.
- 1889 Declines position at the Free University of Amsterdam; overlooked for professorship at the University of Leiden.
- 1891 Marries Johanna Adriana Schippers.
- 1893 Declines position at the Free University of Amsterdam.
- 1894 Birth of daughter Johanna Geziena Bavinck.
- 1895–1901 Publishes four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*.
- 1902 Accepts position at the Free University of Amsterdam.
- 1911 Elected as parliamentarian in the First Chamber.
- 1921, July 29 Dies in Amsterdam at age sixty-six; buried in Vlaardingen.

# Map of the Netherlands



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PART 1

# Roots

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# 1

## The Old Reformed Church in Bentheim

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*“From the farmhouse to the town”*

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### The Modern European Experience of Upheaval

Insofar as it is seen as a story of upheaval, the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe forms a striking backdrop to Herman Bavinck’s own life story. Tim Blanning portrays the experience of modern Europeans—including, by implication, our subject—as characterized by the conviction that “the ground [was] moving beneath their feet.”<sup>1</sup> Theirs was an epoch of staggering, broad, and often dramatic social, political, intellectual, and religious shifts. As the nineteenth century dawned, the French Revolution had finished and was followed by the Napoleonic Wars. The First Industrial Revolution, which had begun in the eighteenth century, was in full swing. Europeans of that era saw the rise of nationalisms and the peak of the age of Eurocentric world empires. Europe at the time was the birthplace of new liberal democratic political ideals. In the twentieth century, its inhabitants knew the Great Depression and World Wars and watched as their world reoriented itself from modernization to globalization. Modern Europe was the garden in which diverse species of secularism bloomed.

In the Netherlands, more specifically, Bavinck was born into a tumultuous period of political, industrial, and religious change. In the decade before his

birth, King William I, the authoritarian ruler of the nondemocratic Dutch state, abdicated. In 1848, his successor, King William II, consented to a new liberal constitution. Overnight, the Netherlands became a constitutional monarchy, the king's powers were constrained, and a new set of modern democratic civil liberties became the framework that guided Dutch social interaction. With the advent of parliamentary democracy and enlarged suffrage came a basic set of rights—the freedoms of assembly, religion, and education. The immediate social context into which Bavinck was born, as the son of a preacher in a movement of ecclesiastical secession from the established Dutch Reformed Church, was also one of flux: it was a cultural moment in which religious affiliations were regularly realigned, often with drastic consequences.

Bavinck entered the world in the midst of a period busy with its own reinvention—a constant setting of change that spanned the entirety of his lifetime. Indeed, the worlds into which he was born (in 1854) and died (in 1921) were dramatically different places. The backdrop to our story is thus anything but static. Had Bavinck been disengaged from this relentless process of social change, his biography would likely take a distinct shape. It would be the story of a theologically orthodox monolith, unyielding and immutable, weathering decades of storm, grounded in bygone and seemingly better days. That, however, is not the story to be told in this book. Our subject was profoundly aware of his social and historical context. To borrow Blanning's phrase again, Bavinck had no difficulty in recognizing that the ground was moving beneath his feet. The fact of this movement, however, was not inherently problematic to him—and often enough, he would be the one willing that ground to move in particular ways. The bare fact of change was not Bavinck's enemy. As he would articulate later, the only thing in this world that grace opposes is sin itself. In his eyes, this process of constant *becoming*, including perpetual change in human culture, was a basic feature of the created order. The great challenge of Bavinck's life was, rather, where he—as an orthodox Calvinist—should place his feet in this ever-shifting terrain.

If not read carefully, the basic details of Bavinck's early life could tempt the reader to caricature his life in a certain fashion. Following his upbringing in a pious Reformed family in small towns, he chose to study under the leaders of the unorthodox "Modern theology" movement at a secular university in a large city.<sup>2</sup> If not read carefully, that move to Leiden might be seen as a rejection of the conservative subculture that nurtured him. And his decision to study under that university's heterodox theologians might then be read as his first intellectual foray into the modern world. Our story will present Herman Bavinck quite differently, showing that the direction of his life was not to break with his tradition, as though he was simply a force of nature

who moved forward into modern European culture while his fellow orthodox Calvinists were retreating from it. Rather, he emerged at the forefront of an already established social movement in the Dutch Reformed world that developed as early modern Europe was consumed by revolution and as a newly ordered form of late modern culture arose from its ashes.

As will be explained, in the mid-nineteenth century—the end phase of early modern culture—a movement of spiritually reawakened Dutch Reformed Christians seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church and were pushed to the periphery of their society as a result. As that century reached its midpoint, their society underwent seismic change. The early modern period came to a close and was superseded by a considerably different expression of late modern culture—one in which power shifted from the monarch to the people.

This new age's social conditions presented these marginalized Protestants with a set of possibilities, one of which was the chance to reenter a newly liberalized democratic society as equal participants. Herman Bavinck emerged as one of the most noteworthy and outstanding figures in that period, speaking in a recognizably orthodox voice as his movement negotiated its place in the late modern Netherlands. Bavinck's story might be remarkable, and is certainly unique, in that he stood at the forefront of a much larger movement and played a distinctive role within it. However, it remains the story of one person whose outstanding contribution was enabled and compelled by the lives of others. When approached through their stories, Bavinck's own life begins to take a particular, fascinating shape.

### Saint Bavo's Wandering Children

To trace Bavinck's roots, we must begin in the early nineteenth century, in Bentheim, on the eastern side of the then-porous Dutch-German border. Bentheim, the capital of Lower Saxony, was his father's birthplace and had been home to generations of Bavincks.

Although Herman's life was spent in the Netherlands, he was well aware of his Lower Saxon heritage. In 1909, shortly before his own father died, Herman supplied the editor of *De Zondagsbode*—a Dutch Mennonite newspaper—with an account of their family's history in Bentheim, which was Mennonite on one side and a mix of Lutheran and Reformed on the other.<sup>3</sup> In the distant past, if the family folklore is to be believed, the Bavincks were Bauingas, Bavingas, Bauinks, and Bavinks—the offspring of a sixteenth-century Roman Catholic from Bauingastede (now Bangstede, a hamlet in northern Germany) who became a Lutheran and moved south to Bentheim. Bauingastede was



named in honor of Saint Bavo, a seventh-century Catholic hermit, as were the subsequent generations of Bauingas, Bauinks, Bavinks, and Bavincks who all bore Bavo's name in Bentheim through the centuries that followed.<sup>4</sup>

Some of those descendants left the Lutheran church, becoming Mennonites who moved to the Netherlands in search of greater religious tolerance. (One of Herman's own contemporaries, the Dutch Mennonite preacher Lodewijk Gerhard Bavink [1812–90], descended from this branch of the family.)<sup>5</sup> Of those who remained in Bentheim, more still left the Lutheran church to become Reformed. While that ecclesiastical realignment did not push the first Reformed Bavincks to leave their hometown, subsequent developments in the mid-nineteenth century would eventually lead one of their clan—Herman's father, Jan—to look across the border, as his Mennonite cousins had done, in search of freedom to follow his religious conscience. Across its history, even into the nineteenth century, the Bavinck line was well acquainted with enforced religious sojourn. In that regard, they remained the sons and daughters of Saint Bavo—a man whose own conversion experience led him to abandon the comforts of home and hearth in favor of a long missionary journey through France and Flanders.

### Lower Saxony and the Netherlands in Modern Europe

The capital of Lower Saxony, Bentheim had a long-standing, diffuse cultural identity, with its historically bilingual population reflecting its frontier location. However, and perhaps typical of its location as a border town, its history was marked by annexations and conquests. Swenna Harger has described this as producing a local population of resilient and independent spirit: “They became Hanoverians; they were invaded by Napoleon. Prussia took them over in 1866. They lived under the Kaiser and under Hitler. Through all this they came with good courage. If you ask them today about their identity, they just might tell you, ‘*Wy bin't Groofschappers*’ (We are from the County).”<sup>6</sup> Bentheim's nineteenth-century history was also one of emigration—in the case of different branches of the Bavinck family, from Germany to the Netherlands, but in many instances from Bentheim to North America.<sup>7</sup>

Although Bentheim's cultural identity straddled the Dutch-German border, it was nonetheless a German town, and the ecclesiastical ties of Herman's branch of the Bavinck family were to German denominations. At some earlier point, these particular Bavincks had left the Lutheran church and joined the (German) Reformed church (Reformirte Kirche),<sup>8</sup> although Herman's father would leave the church of his birth to join the Evangelical Old Reformed Church in Lower Saxony (Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirche in Niedersachsen).

In order to understand their family history, however, we must look beyond their context in Lower Saxony, beginning instead with earlier historical developments across Europe, and then, more specifically, in the Netherlands.

### Nineteenth-Century Secessions and Revivals

Across Protestant northern Europe, much early nineteenth-century theology had been profoundly affected by the values and beliefs of the Enlightenment, which, in turn, had produced (and given dominance to) a liberal, anti-supernatural, rationalistic form of Christianity. Alongside this, by the mid-nineteenth century, the reordering of society along liberal democratic lines raised new questions on the church's relationship to other centers of social power. In response to this combination of factors, a range of movements arose that tried to recover (to differing degrees) personal piety, a higher view of the authority of Scripture, a greater emphasis on personal Christian experience, and a reassertion of the contrast between sin and grace. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries thus saw the rise of pietism in Germany, evangelical awakenings in the English-speaking world, and the *Réveil* emanating from Switzerland across a range of European settings. A concurrent movement of devotionalization among nineteenth-century Dutch Catholics also mirrored this series of Protestant revivals.

How did this play out in the Netherlands, and how did that come to affect the Bavinck family in Bentheim, and then as they moved into Dutch society?

The Netherlands was also subject to the conditions of upheaval described at the outset of this chapter. In 1815, the Batavian Republic came to an end as William I became ruler of a new Kingdom of the Netherlands (*Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*). In this role, he set out to provide political unity between the Netherlands and Belgium, a task complicated by the religious division between Catholics and Protestants in his new kingdom. William I's ideal was to join them in a single, enlightened denomination that would then exist to a particular end: to serve the state by educating the people in civic virtues.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, this unification proved impossible, leaving William I to work with the preexisting Christian division. In general, early nineteenth-century Dutch Catholics rejected the king's ideal of a single church redefined in line with the values of the Enlightenment and proved less than willing to be co-opted into his plan. The king's attention thus came to focus on the Dutch Reformed Church, which proved more receptive to his own Enlightenment-inspired influence,<sup>10</sup> and through which he believed he could promote a practically oriented, enlightened "Christianity above doctrinal division."<sup>11</sup>

William I had inherited governmental Departments for Religious Affairs established in 1808<sup>12</sup> and a state that, in 1814, had taken upon itself the task of providing stipends for Reformed ministers. The state attempted to exert considerable influence on Protestant worship, especially through its promotion of the (often moralistic) hymnbook *Evangelische Gezangen* (1807). This growing influence created a context in which the evangelical Réveil movement spreading through France and Switzerland would also see growth among Dutch Protestants. Conventicles were formed, increasing numbers of Reformed preachers began to emphasize the Réveil's "sin and grace" religion, and the works of the theologians of the older Dutch Further Reformation (Nadere Reformatie) experienced renewed popularity.

A further reaction to the state's appropriation of the Dutch Reformed Church for its own goals was seen in the Secession of 1834 (Afscheiding). Hendrik de Cock (1801–42), a Reformed minister who had experienced a pietistic conversion, began to protest and preach openly against the dominant liberal spirit within the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1834, he and his congregation formally seceded from the church. In the same year, he authored the foreword to a book opposing the aforementioned hymnbook, "*The Evangelical Hymns*" *Tested and Weighed and Found to Be Too Light*,<sup>13</sup> by Jacobus Klok, a businessman from Delfzijl.<sup>14</sup> This particular religious insurrection drew clergy and laity alike.

Klok's criticism of the substance and purpose of these hymns is instructive in demonstrating the atmosphere in the emerging secessionist circles. Attacking its supporters as "so-called Reformed teachers and their followers" who he claimed were, in reality, "Arminian, Pelagian, and Socinian," Klok wrote in damning terms. "Viewed as a whole, these 192 hymns are, in summary, in my opinion, the love songs of sirens, sung to rid the Reformed—already singing—of their sanctifying doctrine and to replace it with a false and deceptive doctrine and to coax all the parties outside of the church in order to unite them."<sup>15</sup>

This feeling began to spread more widely.<sup>16</sup> Within two years, approximately 2 to 3 percent of the Dutch Reformed Church's membership had joined the newly formed Seceder Church (which, from 1869, would be styled as the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk [Christian Reformed Church]), which had gathered some 130 congregations.

Their church came into existence before full freedom of religion was allowed in the 1848 constitutional revision. Prior to this, from 1815 onward, a limited degree of religious freedom had been established, whereby Dutch Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Remonstrants, and Mennonites were granted toleration. However, the freedom to be Reformed did not entail the right to leave the established Reformed Church in order to start another denomination. Therefore, the first Seceders (Afgescheidenen) faced considerable state

persecution on account of their departure from the mother church. Indeed, they were among the last Europeans to experience the state-sanctioned billeting of troops in their homes (and be charged for the cost of the billeting).<sup>17</sup> As a result, many immigrated to North America, founding Dutch Reformed colonies in the United States and Canada. As will be seen, those who remained eventually came to occupy a more settled place in modern Dutch society and saw their denomination grow rapidly in that context.

At the time of the Dutch Secession, Herman's branch of the Bavinck family was in Bentheim, where the Afscheiding's impact resonated in a parallel movement in the local German Reformirte Kirche. There, in 1838, four years after the secession in the Netherlands, another secession took place as a small Reformed church was birthed: the Evangelisch-altreformierte Kirche (Old Reformed Church) in Niedersachsen, the denomination in which Herman Bavinck's father, Jan, would come to play an important role.<sup>18</sup>

Central to this movement were the Bentheimers Harm Hindrik Schoemaker (1800–1881) and Jan Barend Sundag (1810–93). As a young man, Sundag, the son of pietistic German Reformed parents, came to believe that the ministers in the local Reformirte Kirche had abandoned the true Reformed faith. He formally broke with the church in 1837 and quickly gathered and led a small group of like-minded believers who met for Sunday worship in a conventicle. Schoemaker underwent a conversion experience at the age of twenty-three and (in 1837, the same year that Sundag left the Reformed Church) formally aligned himself with the Dutch Seceders.<sup>19</sup>

Together, Sundag and Schoemaker became the focal point of a local movement to recover living piety and orthodox doctrine—a movement that looked toward the Dutch Secession and its theological leaders. As was the case for the early Seceders in the Netherlands, the first Reformed Christians to leave the Reformirte Kirche in Bentheim were subject to state persecution. Ordinary members of the Old Reformed Church received fines, while their ministers were regularly imprisoned.<sup>20</sup> These fines increased each time a person was caught attending illegal church services, which were often broken up by armed police.<sup>21</sup> When the Dutch Seceder minister Albertus van Raalte led a movement of persecuted Seceders to pursue a better life in North America, he was joined by many Old Reformed Christians from Bentheim.<sup>22</sup>

## The Spring of Nations

The Old Reformed Church's lot changed considerably in the midst of the revolutions of 1848. During these revolutions—the Spring of Nations—political

upheavals led to the implementation of new, modern, liberal social ideals across much of Europe. As has already been mentioned, in the Netherlands this meant the adoption of a new constitution under King William II, which turned the country into a modern liberal democracy (and included the freedom to form new Reformed denominations).

In Bentheim, the Old Reformed Christians felt the impact of the revolutions in that they were also granted freedom of religion, albeit in stages. Until 1847, it was illegal for citizens of Bentheim to leave the Reformirte Kirche in order to start another denomination. A qualified degree of religious freedom was first introduced in 1848, ending the persecution of Old Reformed believers and granting them tolerance, but not making them equal subjects under the law. Until the Kingdom of Hanover (to which Bentheim belonged) joined Prussia in 1866, the local Reformirte Kirche minister could demand forced declarations from Old Reformed members, stating that they had never intended to leave the Reformirte Kirche. Until 1873, all Reformed births had to be registered in the Reformirte Kirche, and every Reformed couple wishing to marry first needed the permission of the local Reformirte Kirche minister: no exemption was granted to the Old Reformed. The practice of taxing Old Reformed believers in order to fund the Reformirte Kirche only stopped universally in 1900.<sup>23</sup>

Religious freedom entered into the Old Reformed experience gradually. In comparison to the Netherlands, Lower Saxon society (and the place occupied by the Old Reformed within it) liberalized slowly. And therefore, the pace at which they had to process their newfound relationship to a pluralistic religious context was different from the pace at which the Dutch Seceders had moved. However, the Spring of Nations did change the Old Reformed Church's lot definitively, if not immediately. Their place in society, as a religious group that styled itself as *Old* insofar as it sought to revive pre-Enlightenment Christian tradition, was forever changed by the implementation of a distinctly *new* modern, liberal social ideal championed by the likes of Immanuel Kant and Gotthold Lessing—namely, the belief that people should not be persecuted for their lack of adherence to the beliefs of the state church.

Although some previous Bavinck biographers have tended to view Bentheim romantically, as though its relative obscurity and communal Reformed identity made it an “almost ideal place for Christians to live,”<sup>24</sup> a retelling of its history should also make plain that early nineteenth-century Bentheim was a part of this broader context of Europe-wide upheaval. It was profoundly affected by the onset of modernity.<sup>25</sup> While it was a place of great natural beauty, mid-nineteenth-century Bentheim was also a challenging locale for Reformed Christians who did not align themselves with the established Reformed

Church. By the time Jan Bavinck was born, Bentheim was a typical northern European town at the end of the early modern period. Its favored religion was established, moralistic, and antisupernatural, and its social structure (with rapidly modernizing judicial and medical systems) was characteristic of its era.

### Orthodox Participation in Modern Society

Herman Bavinck's Lower Saxon roots contribute in no small way to the eventual course of his life. They also provide a corrective to the assumption that prior to his move to Leiden, or his own emergence as a prominent theologian who self-consciously tried to combine orthodoxy and modernity, he and his family had inhabited a premodern bubble and were in no sense children of their times.

It would be wrong to homogenize the various modernities developing in diverse nineteenth-century Europe<sup>26</sup> and, in so doing, for example, to ignore the piety and strongly Reformed identity that marked many people in nineteenth-century Bentheim. However, it remains to be said that Herman Bavinck's father was born into a modernizing world and that this cultural legacy was bequeathed to Herman. The question of how to inhabit the modern world while maintaining a vital connection to pre-Enlightenment orthodox Christianity was not Herman Bavinck's own creation. Rather, it was inherited from his father and was *already* central to the story of the secessions in the Netherlands and Lower Saxony in the 1830s and the revolutions of 1848.

An intriguing picture thus begins to emerge. The church Jan Bavinck would join styled itself "Old" rather than "New," and in so doing, it rejected one of the key tenets of the Enlightenment's modern program—namely, the claim that that tradition was laden with irrationality and superstition and should be shunned in favor of the new, the modern, and the rational.<sup>27</sup> In the face of this, the Old Reformed Church reasserted an older identity and orthodoxy. However, by accident more than design, its existence post-1848 was as a curiously modern social institution in a society reimagined by the implementation of modern liberal values. In short, the relationship that will be seen between Jan Bavinck's tradition and the modern world is already a complex one, where the rejection of one modern tenet was enabled by the application of another. Evidently, for the orthodox and the modern alike, finding one's feet in this new, late modern world was a game of give-and-take.

This is not to imply, of course, that either the Dutch Seceders or the Old Reformed in Bentheim were universally glad to join in this game. In the Dutch

case, the Seceder movement was marked by a strong divergence between those who wanted to be recognized as the true Dutch Reformed church (and thus to replace the current established church in an otherwise untouched early modern social order) and those who wanted to exist as a minority group, alongside the established church, free to practice their beliefs (in a new social order). The latter group, led by the likes of Albertus van Raalte (1811–76) and Hendrik Pieter Scholte (1805–68), called enthusiastically for the liberalization of Dutch social space. The former group, however, was not quick to celebrate and affirm a liberal notion like religious pluralism, however much this newfound freedom transformed their existence.

Neither secession, then, should be seen as homogenous in its impulses or intentions. Believing that the existing Reformed churches had departed from the true Reformed tradition, the *Afgescheidenen* certainly saw themselves as reasserting the identity of *the* true Reformed church. However, the manner in which this reassertion was envisioned was complex and diverse. To recall Pieter Stokvis's memorable description, the majority impulse in the Dutch Secession was to restore "a mythical Calvinist church state."<sup>28</sup> De Cock's concerted efforts to have William I convene a synod to recognize the Seceders as the true Reformed church perhaps typify this desire. Alongside this, though, was a significant minority that called instead for an end to their persecution through the separation of church and state.

But for the majority of Seceders, their new post-1848 status—as a minority group tolerated in a pluralistic liberal social setting—was not one of their own design or choosing. Nonetheless, it was the new situation thrust upon them, benefiting them in unexpected ways and challenging them in others.

While the modern Dutch constitution reflected William II's willingness to establish more distance between church and state,<sup>29</sup> it did not establish a new, rigidly defined religious landscape. Its effect, rather, was to create a modern environment within which multiple religious forces could assert their own identities and existences. As James Kennedy and Jan Zwemer have argued, "A return to the situation before the Constitution was no longer conceivable,"<sup>30</sup> insofar as the social structure introduced in 1848 made it impossible for any one religious group to carry on its pre-1848 existence. And with that, the realization of the quest to be the only true Reformed church and be treated accordingly by society became very difficult indeed. From now on, no religious group would be persecuted or privileged by the state.<sup>31</sup> Seceders were, however, free to gather for worship and create their own space in this new society—but only insofar as they were prepared to accept their government's basic conditions (in this case, the separation of church and state and the religious pluriformity necessitated by the freedom of religion).

As was also true of the mainline Reformed (Hervormd) and the political Liberals (Liberalen), not all Seceders and Old Reformed were willing to engage in this new mode of inhabiting their societies, which would have meant accepting that they had become “new religious forces [who had] to contend for their own place in [a pluralistic] society.”<sup>32</sup> Those who were unwilling to strike a deal with this new society could, of course, exercise their religious freedom by resuming a peripheral place in society. The right of religious freedom did not oblige religious groups to involve themselves in any other part of society, and therefore it became perfectly possible to use religious freedom to continue calling for a pre-1848 goal—however much more difficult the attainment of that goal had now become. And of course, in immigration to the new world, there remained one way of emphatically rejecting a reimagined Dutch society.<sup>33</sup>

In reflecting his own location in this range of possibilities, Herman Bavinck would later offer equally strong criticism, on the one hand, of Seceders who remained in the Netherlands but whose exercise of religious freedom was limited to worship services and evangelistic outreach *and*, on the other, of those émigrés who wished no further involvement in the cultural development of their fatherland: “Satisfied with the ability to worship God in their own houses of worship or to engage in evangelism, many left nation, state and society, art and science to their own devices. Many withdrew completely from life, literally separated themselves from everything, and, in some cases, what was even worse, shipped off to America, abandoning the Fatherland as lost to unbelief.”<sup>34</sup> In the case of some of those who chose to remain, it took decades before they accepted their new status as minority groups in a religiously diverse society, in place of the early view that they had simply reconstituted the old, true church.<sup>35</sup> Others were far more enthusiastic in affirming the new social terrain. The Dutch Seceder Scholte, for example, was inspired by the practice of religious freedom in America and argued early on that the Afscheidenen should embrace their new freedom in the Netherlands’ new context.<sup>36</sup>

Prior to the 1848 constitutional revision, Scholte publicly called for the separation of church and state in the Netherlands. In doing so, he simultaneously denied the rights of the state to exercise authority over the church and the right of the church to involve itself in the political realm. When the government minister for religious affairs encouraged Reformed ministers to offer prayers of thanksgiving for William II on his birthday in 1841, Scholte, as editor of the Seceder publication *De Reformatie*,<sup>37</sup> set forth how one might pray for the king while believing in the separation of church and state.<sup>38</sup> In accordance with Scripture, he argued, Christians should pray for all those in authority. However, praying for William II as a person did not require a believer to pray in support



of his particular regime—and in reality, Christians of different persuasions would invariably pray for different outcomes. To follow Scholte’s reasoning, why would Dutch Roman Catholics not pray for the king to join their church and submit to their pope? And why would liberal Dutch Reformed Christians not pray for the king to act swiftly in dealing with the Seceders? Should the Seceders not pray for the king to follow their movement?<sup>39</sup> In any case, Scholte encouraged his own readers to pray that William II would experience conversion and grant freedom of religion to the Dutch people. Four years on from this, in 1845, Scholte published the full text of the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom of 1786* in *De Reformatie*, further encouraging his Seceder readership with this American example of religious pluriformity.<sup>40</sup>

Both van Raalte and Scholte encouraged Seceders to emigrate in view of what Scholte described (in an 1846 letter to the Dutch Calvinist statesman Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer) as “the government’s obstinate opposition to the freedom of religion.”<sup>41</sup> The pre-1848 Secession church became increasingly marked by what Hans Krabbendam has called “the spread of emigration-fever”<sup>42</sup> precisely because increasing numbers of Seceders were calling for a different kind of social state within which freedom of religion would be guaranteed.

In making this call for religious freedom, Scholte and those who followed him were not arguing for a godless, secular state. He believed that the House of Orange had been appointed by God to rule over the Dutch people and that the Dutch monarch had to be a Christian (though not a Mennonite, which would require pacifism and render the king unable to fulfill the role assigned in Romans 13:4, and not a Roman Catholic, which would make him subordinate to the pope).<sup>43</sup> In Scholte’s view, the Dutch monarch should be a Reformed Christian who defended the freedom of his subjects’ religious expression.<sup>44</sup>

In this context, interestingly, both van Raalte and Scholte did nonetheless emigrate to America despite the eventual implementation of religious freedom in the Netherlands. Attempts to explain why they chose emigration over the new social order for which they had campaigned quickly become mired in intra-Secessionist politics. The Seceder Simon van Velzen, for example, argued that Scholte’s influence in the movement had waned and that he emigrated in search of greater personal appreciation and importance.<sup>45</sup> However, as Hans Krabbendam has helpfully acknowledged, this verdict probably tells us more about van Velzen than it does about Scholte, bearing in mind that their visions for the relationship between the Seceder church and the state were considerably different.<sup>46</sup>

Whatever truly motivated the likes of Scholte and van Raalte to emigrate, their stories, before and after 1848, demonstrate the ongoing nonstatic, non-

homogenous nature of Seceder identity and theological vision. Clearly, the Seceders' path through the modern world was a complicated one.

### Herman Bavinck as a Son of the Secession

What, however, does the history of theological diversity among the *Afgescheidenen* contribute to our biography of Herman Bavinck?

Bavinck has often been described not simply as the son of a Secession preacher, which he was quite literally, but also as a “son of the Secession” himself. This title predates by some time the development of the “two Bavincks” hermeneutic mentioned in this book’s introductory comments.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the “child of the Secession” label was invoked by Bavinck himself during his own lifetime. Nonetheless, in the heyday of more recent “two Bavincks” scholarship, the “son of the Secession” label was applied to the parts of his oeuvre deemed the work of the “orthodox Bavinck.” As an epithet, “son of the Secession” was thus employed in sharp contrast to its antithesis, the “modern Bavinck,”<sup>48</sup> with the assumed implication that the Seceders were not modern and that fidelity to his Seceder legacy somehow should have directed him away from rather than into the modern world. While the problems with this reading of Bavinck’s own thought are now well documented, a related flaw in its assumptions about his Seceder forebears should also be acknowledged—namely, that it assumes a certain degree of (negative) univocity among the *Afgescheidenen* regarding their posture toward their new, modernizing society.

From its inception onward, however, the Secession movement’s theological vision was far from homogenous.<sup>49</sup> Such should hardly be surprising, given the movement’s rapid growth and the manner in which its theological input came from a small original group of Seceder ministers and a larger number of untrained preachers. In that light, a new reading of Bavinck’s identity as a “son of the Secession” would do well to heed J. van den Berg’s reminder that speaking generically of “*the Seceders*” is highly problematic.<sup>50</sup> The *Afgescheidenen* were diverse. Unless we further nuance which stream of secessionist thought and tradition Bavinck followed, “son of the Secession” becomes a general, and not particularly useful, identifier.

As the Secession church grew rapidly in the first few decades of its existence, Seceder emigration began to tail off, and that branch of the church reached a generally settled view of its place as a tolerated minority group in late nineteenth-century Dutch society. Bavinck’s life demonstrates a noteworthy development within this acceptance, whereby Seceders became increasingly

ambitious in their own attempts to carve out a space within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Dutch society.

I continue to describe Bavinck as a “son of the Secession,” but do so aiming to give the label a richer texture. Certainly, Herman Bavinck was the son of the Seceder Jan Bavinck and an inheritor of the movement instigated by Hendrik de Cock. But he was also a son in (at least parts of) the tradition of Hendrik Pieter Scholte and Albertus van Raalte, and this, of course, is to say nothing of his proximity to the many rank-and-file Seceders whose unchronicled lives sought a greater degree of integration in their revised post-1848 society. It is in this sense that I invoke the title “son of the Secession”—not as a symptom of division in his outlook but rather to identify the beginnings of Bavinck’s trajectory within the primordial core of the Secessionist movement and to see him as a critical figure in carrying that trajectory forward. The book locates Herman Bavinck within Jasper Vree’s characterization of the Seceder movement as walking “the path from separation to integration”<sup>51</sup> and functions as a recovery of G. M. den Hartogh’s deployment of the term (“een echt ‘kind der Scheiding’”) precisely as a descriptor for Bavinck’s commitment to orthodox participation in the modern world.<sup>52</sup>

One of the core assertions in this biography is that the central concerns of Bavinck’s life are framed by several important dates: the Dutch Afscheiding of 1834, the formation of the Old Reformed Church in Bentheim in 1838, and the Spring of Nations in 1848. Only against this backdrop can we begin to make sense of a life tasked with the reimagining of both Dutch culture and the orthodox Reformed tradition within it.

For the Afscheidenen and the Old Reformed, little rest could be found on either side of the Spring of Nations. The first decade of their respective existences, pre-1848, was taken up with an existentially difficult question—namely, How should orthodox Reformed Christians inhabit an *early modern* society that (because of its restricted view of religious freedom) persecuted them and hindered the realization of some of their key ideals? Post-1848, the question shifted to ask how orthodox Reformed Christians should inhabit a *late modern* society that (because of its religious pluralism) tolerated them while rendering some of their original ideals obsolete and unachievable. The ground beneath them kept on shifting. This is the context within which Jan Bavinck came to the fore, and it required him to engage with the questions his son Herman would continue to answer throughout his own life.