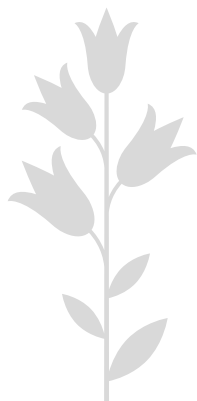


HERMAN
BAVINCK

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?



TRANSLATED & EDITED BY
GREGORY PARKER JR.



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What Is Christianity?

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REVIEW OF "GROOTE GODSDIENSTEN:
SERIE II, No. 7. HET CHRISTENDOM
DOOR DR. H. BAVINCK"

It is no small task which Dr. Bavinck has undertaken, to tell in sixty-two small pages all that Christianity is, and that, in a series in which it is brought into comparison with other "great religions." He has fulfilled this task, however, in a most admirable manner. His method is, first, to point out what all Christians are agreed upon; and then to give an historical account of Christianity in its origins and in its progressive manifestations in the great forms of the Orthodox Eastern, the Romish, the Lutheran, Reformed Churches, with further descriptions of the forms it has taken since, in Anabaptism and Socinianism, and the New Protestantism rooted in the Enlightenment. His plan thus resolves itself into an informal sketch of the historical development of Christianity. This sketch is written with remarkable grasp of details and an equally remarkable power of synthesis. We cannot imagine how the work could be done better.

B. B. Warfield
The Princeton Theological Review (1913)

THE *QUESTION* OF CHRISTIANITY

[3] It may well be a precarious undertaking to provide in a mere handful of pages a description of Christianity that is somewhat sufficient. The richness of [Christianity] is already in inverse proportion to the limitations of the available space. Christianity is a religion which, apart from its beginnings in Israel, has existed for more than eighteen centuries and has in this time gone through a very important history, taken root among various peoples and in distant countries, and has now spread to more than a third of mankind. However, anyone who gave a short and therefore unsatisfactory account of this history would have accomplished only a small part of the task that had been assigned to him in describing Christianity.

For Christianity has an objective side in doctrine and church, in worship and church government. But it also penetrates subjectively into the human being himself; into his mind, heart, and conscience; and there it cultivates a new world of ideas, conditions, and dispositions which are difficult to know and to describe. And from within, the Christian faith again extends to all areas of human life, exerts its influence in all spheres, and leaves [4] its mark on all elements of culture. A description of Christianity that would be satisfactory in any way would have to take into account this inner power and do justice to this hidden, spiritual activity.

This difficult task could perhaps be accomplished today if there were some agreement on the matter itself—that is, on the origin and essence of Christianity. But precisely the opposite is true. From

the beginning, different ideas about the nature and character of Christianity were formed; within and alongside the official church, all sorts of groups and sects arose which held a different view of Christianity from that which the majority held. This process of differentiation continued throughout the Middle Ages, expanded still further during and after the Reformation, and has had such a disintegrating effect at the present time that not only do hundreds of churches and sects stand side by side, but practically every thinking person has his own opinion about the Christian religion. Everything that seemed certain in the past is now being questioned, and this doubt is spreading ever wider; not a single word, not a single event reported in the New Testament remains untouched. In recent years, people have even denied and disputed the historical existence of the one after whom Christianity was named. It is obvious that a short description of Christianity cannot meet all the above requirements and cannot discuss and judge all the views expressed; it must be content to give a brief and clear account of the origin and development of the Christian religion.

It cannot be objected that in the series *Groote Godsdiensten*, the Christian religion is treated by someone who was born and raised in it himself, and [5] who therefore considers a certain view of this religion to be the right one or at least the most correct one. Whether he describes Christianity from a Roman, Lutheran, Reformed, or any other Christian point of view, Christianity is for him always a religion in which he has a personal interest. He is not indifferent to it and does not look at it objectively, but he is at the center of it and thinks and lives from it. And this is ultimately the case with all who bear the name of Christian; they all consider that the truth of their conception of Christianity more or less concerns the peace of their hearts, the comfort of their consciences, and the rest of their souls. Even those who answer the question "Are we still Christians?" in the negative are by no means above this personal interest, but it works in another direction and drives them to op-

pose Christianity; the side of deniers also has its fanatics. That is why it is fortunate that impartiality is not the same as indifference; hate blinds but love often makes things clearer to see.

One thing can somewhat console us in the face of all these difficulties: the division in the understanding of Christianity is indeed great, but not so large that any further reasoning would be superfluous and useless. There are indeed innumerable formulations of the essence of Christianity: the Greek, Roman, Lutheran, Reformed, etc., to which one can add those of Kant and Hegel, of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, of Harnack and Eucken, of Green and Caird, and many others.¹ Yet on several points, there still exists agreement which should be gratefully acknowledged.

In the first place, there is no church or movement that wholly identifies its view of Christianity with the original Christianity.² It is true [6] that each party holds its own interpretation to be correct and defends it as such against all others, but nevertheless every church and each movement distinguishes between the truth which has appeared in Christ and the understanding which it has gained of it and which it has, imperfectly and fallaciously, expressed in its confession. The Roman Church is an exception to this, in that it attributes infallibility to the pope and presents its doctrine as the only true and absolutely correct interpretation of the gospel. But it also distinguishes between Christ and the pope as his vice-regent, between the inspiration of the apostles and the assistance of the Holy Spirit, which the head of the church enjoys. In principle, no one disputes the difference between the truth of Scripture and the teaching of the church. This remark is not without significance in regard to those who call their own personal interpretation of the gospel the historical one, as distinct from the dogmatic one given by the churches. Churches, too, have sincerely and earnestly desired in their confession to give as pure an understanding of the gospel as possible. Men like Harnack, for example, who reject this understanding and offer their own explanation also never succeed beyond

giving an understanding of the original gospel, which in their view is preferable to all others. Therefore, they do not substitute the gospel for ecclesiastical teaching, but place a different conception of the gospel beside that which is held in the churches. The dispute is not over historical or dogmatic interpretation, but over the facts themselves; that is, over what indeed was the original gospel.

Second, there is also great agreement that the question of the essence of Christianity coincides with that of the original, real and true [7] Christianity, and that to know this we must go back to the Scriptures, especially to the New Testament. Besides, no other sources are available. Josephus's testimony about Jesus is critically suspect and contains nothing new; the slanders spread by the Jews since the middle of the second century to combat Christianity have been welcomed by Celsus, Porphyrius, and more recently by [Ernst] Haeckel, but are not considered in any serious study of original Christianity.³ The short statements on Christ and the Christians by Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny are in themselves important and place the historical existence of Jesus beyond reasonable doubt, but they do not increase our knowledge of early Christianity. And the numerous apocryphal Gospels, which originated in Ebionite and gnostic circles, reveal the desire to be able to say something more about Jesus' life other than what is reported in the four canonical Gospels, and to support one's own dissenting opinions with them rather than to be used as real sources. Only a few of the sayings of Jesus discovered in recent times may have flowed from his lips and been preserved purely by tradition. Apart from these few sources, we have no other sources for the knowledge of the life of Jesus than the books of the New Testament, and even more so the four Gospels, because what is mentioned in the other writings of the New Testament about that life is relatively little and almost entirely contained in the Gospels as well.

With regard to the authenticity, integrity, and reliability of these canonical Gospels, a considerable struggle has been going

on for more than a century and a half, and it is not to be expected that it will lead to a universally accepted outcome in the near future. But here are three [8] remarkable things.

First, the attempt should be called a failure to explain Christianity—as it is understood in the churches and expressed centrally in their Christology—from Hellenistic or other alien influences in the second century. The New Testament writings, especially the four main letters of Paul, continue to oppose this and cannot have originated in or after that time. As a result, it is now generally recognized that the church's Christology had its origins in the first century. This then eliminates the reason for moving the various New Testament writings to the second century; successively, they have all been brought back to the first century. In 1897, Harnack said that there had been a time when the oldest Christian literature was regarded as a tapestry of hoaxes and forgeries.⁴ But that time is over. We are returning to the traditional [view]. The chronological order in which tradition has arranged the documents, from the letters of Paul to the writings of Irenaeus, is correct in all essential aspects. And this judgment of the Berlin professor has since been more and more confirmed and recognized as correct.

Second, it has not been possible to excavate down to the bottom of the New Testament as low and as deep as all the layers of the earth until one arrives at the rocky foundation of reality. The slogan “From Paul to Jesus, back to the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels” has proven vain, because the image of Christ is essentially the same in all New Testament writings.⁵ How would Paul have come by his teaching about Christ? How could he, with this “falsification” of the original gospel, have found acceptance among the congregations? How could he, expounding his gospel to the apostles in Jerusalem, have received from them the right hand of the [9] community (Gal. 2:2, 9) if he had cherished an entirely different idea in this central article of faith? There was a difference between Paul and some of

his Jewish brethren, but this difference was limited to the consequences arising from the gospel in regard to the Old Testament law [Gal. 2:11–14]. But there was no difference concerning the person of Christ, his life, death, resurrection, and return. All the apostles agreed with one another; there was no question of a christological dispute between them or in the earliest churches. Conversely, the first three Gospels were written by disciples of Jesus just as the Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul were written at a time when there were already many congregations and for an audience that had already been taught about the person of Christ by the apostles. They do not proclaim any Jesus as the Christ other than the one preached by all the apostles and confessed by all the believers of that time.

If, however, the earliest church, as far back as we can tell from the sources, professed Jesus as the Christ, then only two explanations remain: (1) Christ is the product of the church, or (2) the church is the product of Christ. In the first case, we must imagine that a group of religious people had existed for a long time, or that as a result of social circumstances such a group had formed in that time, who combined the various characteristics present in the image of Christ in the New Testament from various Hellenistic or Jewish, Indian, Babylonian, or Egyptian sources and applied them to a Jesus [figure] who may or may not have existed. Although this attempt at an explanation has found many supporters in recent times, it does not seem daring to predict it has little prospect. For [10] although it offers ample scope for fantasy, it has no basis in reality. It leaves unanswered the questions as to what brought together this group of persons, from where, simple-minded as they were, they derived the features of the figure of Christ, how they were able to link them to such a harmonious image as we see in the New Testament, how they came to think of all of them in a certain man Jesus, the reason why they believed in the existence of this Jesus, etc. The riddles are so numerous that no other con-

clusion remains than this: without Christ, Christianity cannot be explained.

And this is also a third point on which there is fairly general agreement. There are many who have broken with Christianity once and for all and who no longer care about the person of Christ. But this indifference is also significant, for it tacitly implies the recognition that the Christ of the church is identical with the Christ of the Scriptures, and that through reduction and criticism no Jesus is to be found in the Gospels who still delights their hearts. Besides, the whole attempt to explain the Christ of the New Testament through pagan influences, which is attempted by many today, is based on the same concession and is an eloquent vindication of the church's creed. Fortunately, however, not all those who reject the Christology of Paul and John are pursuing this indifference. They still value the Christian name and feel connected to the person of Jesus. That is why they strive to give him an exceptional place in the kingdom of God. They accept a special revelation of God in him and believe that in his person and work he has a lasting significance for the religious and ethical development of [11] mankind. Even in this weak form, their confession serves as proof that the question of the origin and essence of Christianity is identical with that of the person and work of Christ. *What do you think of Christ?* This is and remains the primary question in religion and theology.