

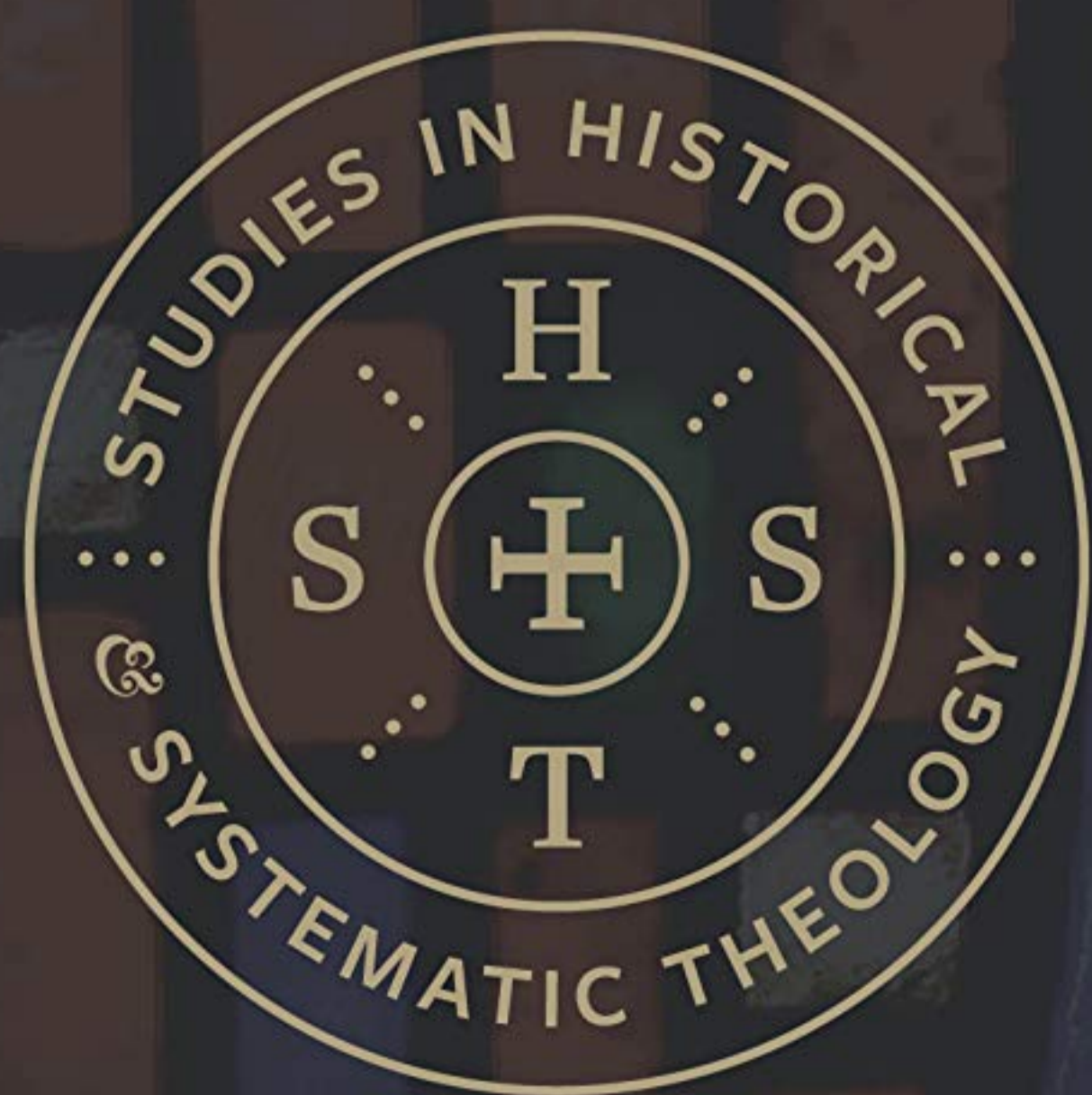
**ORTHODOX**

*yet* **MODERN**

*Herman Bavinck's*

*Use of Friedrich  
Schleiermacher*

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## INTRODUCTION

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“Modern ... and yet orthodox,” so begins McCormack’s study of Barth.<sup>1</sup> This study begins with a parallel statement about its subject Herman Bavinck: “orthodox ... and yet modern.” The latter dictum provides the answer to a question that much of Bavinck scholarship has been asking for the last half-century: what is the relationship of his orthodoxy to what has been called “the challenges posed ... by modernity” in his turn-of-the-century Dutch context?<sup>2</sup>

These terms “orthodox” and “modern” are difficult to define. Regarding Bavinck (1854–1921), there are two contexts for expressing their meanings. On the one hand, there is European culture—what of the spiritual kingdom of God in relation to the changing social milieu of post-Revolutionary Europe? This was a principal question for the leaders of the neo-Calvinist movement in the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Bavinck, leading to the public theology for which it is well known. How ought we, they queried, relate the social order after 1789 (French Revolution) and 1848 (European revolutions) with Christ’s hands and feet in an evolving *polis*? On the other hand, there is dogmatics. With the epistemological barriers constructed by Kant, the lingering rationalism of the *philosophes*, the historical consciousness of the Romantic spirit, Hegel’s sublation (*Aufhebung*) of religious thinking, the reign of historical-critical hermeneutics, and the theology/religious studies division in the academy, so stands dogmatics wondering where it goes from here. Bavinck put it accordingly in 1895:

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1. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 9.

2. John Bolt sets modernity in sharp contrast to Reformed orthodoxy: “Bavinck was a man of deep piety and great learning who faced head-on the challenges posed to Reformed orthodoxy by modernity without forsaking his deep, pietistic roots.” John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 38.

But today it is, above all, the philosophical underpinnings of dogmatics that are under fire; not some isolated doctrine but the very possibility of dogmatics is being questioned. The human ability to know is restricted to the visible world, and revelation is considered impossible. In addition, Holy Scripture is being robbed of its divine authority by historical criticism and even the warrant for and value of religion is being seriously disputed. Consequently ... religious life today is dramatically less vigorous than before ... there is little genuinely religious life. ... The childlike and simultaneously heroic statement “I believe” is seldom heard and has given way to the doubts of criticism. People perhaps still believe their confessions, but they no longer confess their faith (Schweizer).<sup>3</sup>

Doubt regarding the possibility of knowing God and the diminishing religious life were the problems of Bavinck’s “today.” In the age of revolution, the theology of Dordt, the Belgic confession, and Heidelberg waned in the first half of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands, following on from the age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth.<sup>4</sup> Bavinck especially lamented the atrophy of confessional theologies after Kant, Napoleon, and Darwin. Considerations of this modern culture and its ideas in the Dutch, neo-Calvinist context continue to provoke articles and monographs.<sup>5</sup>

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3. RD 1.106. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1895), I.45. Hereafter, *GD* I-IV.

4. According to Bavinck’s historiography, the eighteenth century was an age of subjectivity in which Reformed theology “withdrew from public life.” And while the early nineteenth century saw a “renewed vigor” for Reformed theology in some subcultures, he notes that an increasing number of people succumbed to English deism, French philosophy, and the spirit of revolution. Bavinck, “Recent Dogmatic Thought in the Netherlands,” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 3, no. 10 (1892): 209–28, 210.

5. The rise of the Bavinck readership and secondary scholarship follows the publication of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* in English, the *Reformed Dogmatics*. The question of Bavinck’s orthodoxy in relation to his modernity was treated implicitly in nuanced forms recently in James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); and Wolter Huttinga, *Participation and Communicability: Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the Relation Between God and the World* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn Motief, 2014). Related to the discussion of Bavinck and modernity, also see George Harinck, C. van der Kooi, and J. Vree, eds., “Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende,” *Aantekeningen van H. Bavinck over de zaak-Netelenbos, het Schriftgezag en de situatie van the Gereformeerde Kerken (November 1919)* (Amsterdam:

## MODERN-ORTHODOX BI-POLARITY?

The structuring question of this study makes explicit the central tension in Bavinck scholarship to date: was Bavinck, in fact, modern, orthodox, or both? This query participates as a species in the genus Tillich calls the “perennial question” regarding the relation between the “Christian message and the modern mind ... can the Christian message be adapted to the modern mind without losing its essential and unique character?”<sup>6</sup> For Bavinck’s theology, the question arises first from the most important details of his biography. Herman, son of Rev. Jan Bavinck, a pioneer of the Dutch secessionist movement (*Afscheiding*), moved from his place at the Kampen theological school of the seceder church to gain a more scientific and modern education at the University of Leiden.<sup>7</sup> One version of the narrative that follows is of a student in internal conflict, torn asunder between a pietistic anti-modernity of the secession’s confessionalism and the post-Kantian milieu of the theological academy.<sup>8</sup>

The search for the latter, led by the fathers of modernity themselves, from Lessing and Herder to Kant and Schleiermacher, was taken up in revision by their Dutch progeny, van Heusde, Hofstede de Groot, and the Groninger School, and then to Bavinck’s teachers, Johannes Scholten

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VU Uitgeverij, 1994); Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck’s Theological Epistemology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2020).

6. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 7.

7. Known as the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*, see Eric D. Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 12. For an introduction to the *Afscheiding*, Peter Y. De Jong and Nelson Kloosterman, eds., *The Reformation of 1834: Essays in Commemoration of the Act of Secession and Return* (Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1984); J. C. Rullmann, *De Afscheiding in de Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerk de XIXe Eeuw* (Kampen: Kok, 1930). George Harinck and Lodewijk Winkeler, “The Nineteenth Century,” in *Handbook of Dutch Church History*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Bristol, CT: Vandenheock & Ruprecht, 2015), 435–520.

8. However, the seceder’s relationship to the “modern” is more complex even within Bavinck’s household as a child. For examples of the older narrative see Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie: De Openbarings en Schriftbeschuwing van Herman Bavinck in Vergelijking met die der Ethische Theologie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 108–11; John Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck’s Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 39–78. For a critique: Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 27–50; Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 9–18. The secession was especially provoked by King William’s centralization of ecclesiastical authority in 1815–16. For a brief history from the *Nadere Reformatie* to the Secession, see Bolt, *A Theological Analysis*, 42–49.

and Abraham Kuenen at Leiden.<sup>9</sup> Between secession and Leiden, Bavinck underwent, so the narrative goes, what Eglinton satirizes as a “Jekyll and Hyde bi-polarity, a lifetime of crisis concerning theological and philosophical identity” — the obvious outworking of orthodoxy meeting modernity, *Afscheiding* meeting the legacy of German theological liberalism at Leiden.<sup>10</sup> The modern/orthodox duality present in the milieu of Bavinck’s secessionist church is summarized no clearer than in his friend Henry Dosker’s letter to Bavinck after the transfer to Leiden:

I thank God that you have remained true, amongst all the heathen attacks around you. What are Herman’s reasons for studying theology *there* was the question which, perforce, arose in my mind. Leiden, the focal point of modernism. The names of Kuenen, Scholten, etc. are, alas, all too familiar. What can you seek there ... only this, in my opinion, a thorough knowledge of the plan of attack, the weapons and the enemy’s strength. God help you, Herman, to remain true to your choice to persevere and to choose the clear truth of faith of our historical Christianity above all the flickering light rays of an enemy science. And yet, you risk a lot. We are both susceptible to the influence of apparently logical arguments. We are growing, tender plants that are bent in the storm and easily keep a misshapen form; you will, I think, have to withdraw within the narrow walls of your own opinions; you will have to be on the defensive and as a result have to adopt a somewhat terse opinion of the truth, while you can grow and develop only by attack. These are just a few points that I would like to see cleared up in your next letter. What are your reasons for studying in Leiden? What do you expect?<sup>11</sup>

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9. K. H. Roessingh, *De Moderne Theologie in Nederland: Hare Voorbereiding en Eerste Periode* (Groningen: Ervan B. van der Kamp, 1914), §2.26–43.

10. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 28.

11. H. E. Dosker to H. Bavinck, December 23, 1876, H. Bavinck Archive, *Historisch Documentatiecentrum, Vrije Universiteit*, Amsterdam, #346/12. Translated by G. Harinck, “Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us’: The Reformed Spirituality of Herman Bavinck.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (2003): 248–62, 251.

Harinck comments that this letter was “a typical secessionist reaction” to Bavinck’s choice.<sup>12</sup> Building upon such reactions, an older narrative of dualism follows providing a sharp juxtaposition between the concepts modern and orthodox. The representative institutions, Leiden (modern) and Kampen (orthodoxy), and their accompanying ideas existed in an entirely converse relation. For Dosker, the relation is metaphorically expressed as a war. For Bavinck, however, modernity and orthodoxy were not each other’s opposite. The relation was more nuanced exhibiting difference and development. The meaning of the concepts therefore, for this study, are derived first from Bavinck’s own voice with attention to his Dutch context. Those in the secessionist environment did at times read their history according to this sharp modern/orthodox binary and while Bavinck used the binary to describe his historical-theological moment, he did so with striking nuance. He was as Harinck characterizes him, “a remarkable appearance, loved by his students, respected for his professional qualities by the church, but distrusted because he openly criticized the narrow-minded and sectarian sentiment within his circle.”<sup>13</sup> Bavinck gave one of his earliest and most refined expressions of “the times” in his 1888 address on catholicity:

How the times have changed! ... [In the middle ages], the church was the center of life in the same way that the church building was the center of city and town. ... However, the emancipatory forces that existed alongside the Reformation have since then grown in power and influence and have, after a brief struggle, gained the upper hand over virtually all of Christendom. A new world-view has arisen that does, to be sure, grant freedom of religion to all that is itself unconnected with Christianity and the church and seeks to eliminate the latter from public life. ... For the most part, our contemporary culture takes place without reference to

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12. Harinck, “Something That Must Remain,” 251.

13. George Harinck, “Calvinism Isn’t the Only Truth: Herman Bavinck’s Impressions of the USA,” in *The Sesquicentennial of Dutch Immigration: 150 Years of Ethnic Heritage; Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Conference of the Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies*, eds. Larry J. Wagenaar and Robert P. Swierenga (Holland, MI: The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, 1998), 151–60, 154.

Christianity and church. Our situation is thus quite different—a new order prevails.<sup>14</sup>

Bavinck's classification of cultural modernity testifies to the development of the public square, to the privatization of religion, and to the freedoms of pluralism. And, likewise, there is a related theological modernity for which he holds modest antipathy especially regarding its dispute with the trustworthiness of Scripture. He remains, nevertheless, keenly aware of his own situation as participant in the "modern world-view." He presented both a cultural and theological taxonomy of this new order accordingly:

Among those [new] realities we must consider are the modern idea of the state with its complete neutrality ... the new world of finance and business, industrialization, and factory life. All these have greatly complicated social relationships. The field of science, too, brings its challenges including ... the faith in the absoluteness of causality that governs all inquiry; the emancipation of childrearing and education, of schools and universities; the so-called independent science that denies the knowability or existence of God, contests the trustworthiness of Scripture at every point, turns upside down the geo- and anthropocentric view of the universe, applies the law of evolution to everything, and from that one starting point reconstructs psychology, anthropology, ethics, politics, and every other discipline, while allowing theology at best a small discreet place next to the terrain of science. ... *In addition, we ourselves, perhaps more than we imagine, are influenced by this modern world-view.* Our view of things is quite different from that of previous generations.<sup>15</sup>

Awakened to the early development of hermeneutical theories, as passively formed subjects, the context did more work on his readers than

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14. Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 220–51, 244. Emphasis added.

15. Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 244–45. Emphasis added.

they supposed, Bavinck argues. The Jekyll and Hyde bi-polarity caricature mentioned above, while overstated, does have its ground in a real tension between an antipathy for much of the modern taxonomy of ideas and his embrace of aspects of the modern situation. He described his “new orientation” as the adoption of an ethic that cherishes the security of the temporal in order “to make this life as tolerable and as comfortable as possible.” He affirms its attempts to “alleviate misery, to reduce crime, to lower the mortality rate, to enhance health, to oppose public disorder, and to limit panhandling.”<sup>16</sup> More importantly and ironically, the changes within this modern order he argued, provide better the opportunity for the recognition of the catholicity of Christianity. When the Christian religion gains an earthly focus only then can its spiritual movement of proclamation toward the “the organic reformation of the whole cosmos, of nature, and country” become a more visible power—one that says God loves *the world*.<sup>17</sup>

Four years after his article on catholicity, he expressed this tension again in an address following his first *reis naar Amerika* (trip to America). While traveling, he awoke to the reality, that “Calvinism isn’t the only truth!”<sup>18</sup> As Harinck suggests, this was a startling phrase for his fellow Kampen faculty: “if anything was clear and holy to them it was that the Reformed doctrine was the truth, which implied that all other doctrines were wrong.”<sup>19</sup> Herein lies the dichotomy present in his context: orthodoxy (Calvinism) stands entirely against its converse, modernity so-called. In 1892, Bavinck argued both that Calvinism is “the only consistent theological view of the world and humanity,” and that it also promotes extremisms “guilty of exaggeration” insofar as “it has often disowned and killed the natural [and] sometimes nourished a hardness of sentiment, a coldness of heart, and a severity of judgment, which cannot

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16. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 245.

17. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 246.

18. Herman Bavinck, “The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations,” *Proceedings of the Fifth General Council of the Alliance of the Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian System* (London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1892), 48–55, 50.

19. Harinck, “Calvinism Isn’t the Only Truth,” 156.



impress favorably. The free, the genial, the spontaneous in the moral life, have often been oppressed and killed by it.”<sup>20</sup>

While attuned to the complexity of his location within the modern context, Bavinck maintained an uncertain attitude of secession from many of its ideologies. Two years after announcing the necessity of epistemic modesty in locating the truth in a singular movement like Calvinism, he re-affirmed the confessionalist Reformed tradition as that expression of theology which conforms more than any other to the teaching of Scripture. In “The Future of Calvinism” he both characterized other modern theologies capitulation to philosophy as a “down-grade movement” and pronounced: “the revival of Calvinism is of double importance. Its significance would not be so great if Holland had not experienced the influence of all those modern theological tendencies.”<sup>21</sup> These modern tendencies, he argued, desire a “[modification] of the old Calvinism in accordance with the so-called demands of the times.”<sup>22</sup> He subtly identified “modern tendencies” as variations of mediation theologies, first coming from Germany and then developing in the Netherlands, both after Schleiermacher:

All dogmas [today] must submit to modification—the doctrine of Scripture, of the Trinity, of election, the divinity of Christ, His satisfaction, the Church, eschatology; they are all to be thrown into the crucible, in order that the impure dross may be purged away, and the pure religious and ethical elements retained. ... The whole of theology is to be transformed into a religious, ethical, “Christological” direction.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Cited in Harinck, “Calvinism Isn’t the Only Truth,” 156. Interestingly, Harinck adds in fn. 22: “In his comprehensive reproduction of Bavinck’s speech he, [Hepp], left out these remarks.” See V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921), 215–18.

21. Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5, no. 17 (1894): 1–24, 18.

22. Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” 16.

23. Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” 17–18. These three adjectives, religious, ethical, and Christological, are in this instance pejoratives used in a similar way here as in *RD* 1.497ff on dogmatic methods. They are referents to ways of re-structuring dogmatic foundations in religious experience, in an ethical existentialism, and in an imprudent Christocentrism. These trends he associates to Schleiermacher originally. Contemporary scholarship generalizes the method as “experiential expressivism.”

He also maintained such expression regarding the complex relationship between the modern and orthodox into his late career. The 1911 address titled *Modernisme en Orthodoxie* unveiled Bavinck's perspectival consistency. Here, although stamping the validity of the binary in the title, he argued that the two modes of classification are neither static nor related in a total converse manner. Orthodoxy, "holding high the Christian confession," he wrote, cannot "be against the modern in every way. Just as modern theology, in general, thinks and lives out of the Christian tradition much more than they themselves suppose, so orthodoxy does also—unless it entirely shut itself off from the environment—in greater or lesser degree under the influence of the spiritual currents of this century."<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, therein, considered the terms "orthodox" and "modern" ill-suited as generalizations of current societal trends and "orthodoxy," referring to confessional adherence, only useful when combined with a freedom of thought and expression.

There are three points in this article pertinent for the entire study. First, note Bavinck's simple definition of orthodoxy in this address: "holding high the Christian confession," a term further qualified by adherence to a particular Christian tradition. Second, modern and orthodox theology did not exist, he argued, in a mere relation of contradiction. Modern theology is, in part, a genealogical derivative of orthodox theology and orthodox theology cannot pretend that it stands untouched by the modern context and its ideas. Third, orthodox theology must not suppose itself to be an end in itself, lest it become a dead orthodoxy: "even as the anti-revolutionary and political spheres," he writes, "were open to the Christian-historical principles of Groen van Prinsterer and always opposed conservatism, so too can and must those who profess the Reformed religion, as long as they remain true to their origins, never give the impression that for them orthodoxy *per se* is the highest truth."<sup>25</sup> For this reason and for the fact of its relative

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24. Bavinck, *Modernisme en Orthodoxie: Rede Gehouden bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Vrije Universiteit op 20 oktober 1911* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1911), 15. Original: "Trouwens, niemand, die meeleeft met zijn tijd, kan in elk opzicht tegen al het moderne gekant zijn. Zooals de moderne theologie over het algemeen nog veel sterker uit de Christelijke traditie denkt en leeft dan zij zelve vermoedt, zoo staat ook de orthodoxie, tenzij zij zich geheel van hare omgeving afsluit, in zwakker of sterker mate onder den invloed van de geestes stroomingen dezer eeuw."

25. Bavinck, *Modernisme en Orthodoxie*, 14–15.

dependence on a specific tradition, the term “orthodoxy” fails to adequately describe Bavinck’s concept of true faith. So, he writes,

In the Reformation saving faith took on a completely different character from the beginning. It was a matter more of the heart than of the head, more heart than the mind, a trust in God’s grace in Christ and an assurance of salvation. The name “orthodox” completely undervalues this element and gives the impression that agreement with the confession is the only thing that counts; and that is not so and must not be so. The university that brings us together here in this hour does not place itself on an orthodox but on a Reformed basis, and the churches with which its theological faculty is affiliated are not called orthodox but Reformed churches. This name deserves preference far above orthodox and also that of Calvinistic or Neo-Calvinistic.<sup>26</sup>

There are multiple other expressions of this complexity in Bavinck’s Dutch context. Puchinger, commenting on Bavinck’s dogmatics, highlights such contextual tension by recasting the binary in terms of dogmatic irenicism and isolation: “There is irony in the course of history but it is undeniable [that] the most ecumenical work of Protestant dogmatics was composed in Kampen, where theology was professed in the most isolationistic way!”<sup>27</sup> Puchinger’s insight reflects Bavinck’s expression of his own modern-Calvinist dogmatic ethic: “modern Calvinists,” he wrote, “do not wish to reprimand and have no desire for the old conditions to return. They heartily accept the freedom of religion and conscience, the equality of all before the law. ... They strive to make progress, *to escape from the deadly embrace of dead conservatism*, and to take their place, as before, at the head of every movement.”<sup>28</sup> Harinck, commenting on the pluralistic social context, further concludes that Bavinck’s “openness to cultural relativism reveals

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26. Bavinck, “Modernism and Orthodoxy,” translated by Bruce Pass, *The Bavinck Review* 7 (2016): 63–114, 82.

27. G. Puchinger, “Bavinck en de volkhistorie,” *Ontmoetingen met theologen* (Terra: Zutphen, 1980), 113. Cited in G. Harinck, “Calvinism Isn’t the Only Truth,” 154.

28. Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism,” 13. Emphasis added.