

Herman Bavinck, “Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*”¹

Translated by John Bolt

A brief foreword will help put this work in perspective. The dogmatic theologian no less than the ordinary believer is obliged to confess the communion of the saints. How wide and long, how high and deep the love of Christ is. A love that surpasses all knowledge can only be grasped with all the saints in communion. It is first of all in and by means of their fellowship that a theologian learns to understand the dogmas of the church that articulate the Christian faith. Above everything else, the communion of the saints provides empowering strength and superb comfort.

At the present time, dogmatic theology does not get much respect; our age is not amenable to Christian dogma. For good reason, then, many of us feel isolated and forsaken (Groen van Prinsterer). However, this is all the more reason to be grateful that we can underscore our communion and fellowship with generations past. That is why more attention is paid in this work to Patristic and Scholastic theology than is often the case in a Protestant dogmatics. Irenaeus, Augustine, and Thomas do not belong exclusively to Rome; they are Fathers and Doctors to whom the whole Christian church has obligations. Even the post-Reformation Roman Catholic theology is not overlooked. In general, Protestants know far too little about what we have in common with Rome and what divides us. Thanks to the revival of Roman Catholic theology under the auspices of Thomas, it is now doubly incumbent on Protestants to provide a conscious and clear account of their relationship to Rome.

This work of dogmatic theology is especially tied to the type of Christian religion and theology that arose in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, notably in Switzerland. Not because this tradition claims to be an *exclusively* true expression of the truth but because the author is convinced that it is *relatively* the purest statement

¹ Translator’s note: The first volume of Bavinck’s *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* was published in 1895 (Kampen: Bos). It is much to be regretted that the second and subsequent editions did not include this highly personal and illuminating programmatic statement that continues to give wise counsel to Reformed Christians as they wrestle with their heritage in new circumstances. For Bavinck, good theology must be *both* rooted *and* contemporary. Note that Bavinck’s original plan was to produce a three-volume work instead of the four that ensued; he underestimated himself by some 30 percent. This is, to the best of the translator’s knowledge, the only English translation ever published.

of the truth. In no other confession does the Christian faith in its religious, ethical, and theological character come as clearly into its own; nowhere else is it acknowledged as deeply and broadly, so widely and freely, is it so truly catholic, as in the churches of the Reformed tradition. In spite of much good that can be observed in our own nation and also in England, Scotland, and America, the Reformed faith has also experienced a lack of progress and even deformation. The author, who has a preference for the older generation whose freshness and originality exceeds that of later ones, thus reserves the right of a dogmatic theologian to distinguish kernel from husk in the history of Reformed theology. To cherish the ancient simply because it is ancient is neither Reformed nor Christian. A work of dogmatic theology should not simply describe what was true and valid but what abides as true and valid. It is rooted in the past but labors for the future.

For that reason, this work of dogmatic theology is eager to carry the imprint of its own time. It would be an unending task to loosen one's ties to the present; it would also not be pleasing to God who speaks to us as seriously and loudly as to previous generations. Some blows will definitely be struck at numerous theological movements that crucify each other; in the midst of all of them I have sought and taken my own place. Where duty obligates that a different path be taken, I shall provide reasons, but even then I strive to appreciate what is good where it is found. Frequently, this study will set forth newly discovered relationships that initially may seem not to exist.

Built on that foundation, this work of dogmatic theology strives to be a handbook for those who are dedicated to the practice of theology. Even in places where one disagrees, may it stimulate further study. With a view toward this goal, the various problems and the solutions attempted have been presented as objectively as possible. Additional literature is suggested in a form that makes it possible quickly to become oriented and to work through the problem with the author.

This first volume deals with the introduction and the foundations (*principia*). The second part will examine the content of dogma and probably come out in two volumes that in any case will not exceed in magnitude this first volume and will follow shortly, as soon as feasible. An expanded index will complete the work.

H. Bavinck

Kampen, April 1895