

Neo-Calvinism: A Theology for the Global Church in the 21st Century

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On April 24, 1872, over five hundred people gathered in the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton, New Jersey, to honor to Princeton Seminary's Charles Hodge for fifty years of his scholarship and teaching at the seminary. Throughout the day much praise was heaped upon Hodge, who would come to be seen as the greatest American Reformed theologian of his century.

At the conclusion of the festivities, Hodge addressed the gathered dignitaries, offering some brief remarks of gratitude to those who were present. It was in these comments that Hodge articulated what a recent biographer describes as “the defining, oracular statement of his life.” What he was especially proud of, Hodge declared, was the fact that during his half-century of service at Princeton “a new idea never originated in this Seminary.”¹

Twenty-six years later Abraham Kuyper visited Princeton to deliver the 1898 Stone Lectures. In introducing his perspective on the relevance of Calvinist theology to contemporary life and thought, Kuyper gave expression to a somewhat different spirit than what Hodge had articulated. The task of Calvinism in this time and place, Kuyper proclaimed, was “not to restore its worn-out form” but rather to address the basic principles of Calvinism in a way that meets “the requirements of our own century.”²

To be sure, these quite different assessments of what it means to be faithful to the Reformed tradition are not fully accurate measures of how Hodge and Kuyper actually went about their respective theological tasks. Hodge was obviously capable of

¹ Paul Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 363.

² Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1931), 41.

breaking new ground. And Kuyper could certainly resist new theological thoughts, as he frequently did, for example, in some of the ecclesiastical controversies in which he was actively engaged. Nonetheless, while being aware of the complexities in each of their theological approaches, the statements that I have quoted from the two of them do point to what are, in the abstract at least, differing dominant tendencies within the broad tradition of Reformed orthodoxy. One tendency is *protectionism*, a posture of resistance to significant theological innovation, and the other tendency is what we can label *creative engagement* with new cultural realities.

Both of these tendencies are meant to serve the cause of Calvinist orthodoxy. There has long been disagreement within the Reformed tradition regarding what is exactly required by way of faithful subscription to the Reformed confessions.³ Some have insisted upon “line-by-line” assent to each mode of formulation in each confessional document; while others have stipulated that sincere assent be given to the basic theological principles *affirmed by* those documents. But in neither case has it been acceptable for a person to claim confessional fidelity who disagrees with the details of what is clearly *taught* in the confessions. Within those boundaries, then, Hodge and Kuyper would have seen each other as obvious co-defenders of Reformed orthodoxy.

My own theological sympathies are firmly on the Kuyperian side of the spectrum. We live in a time of rapid change—both in the larger cultures in which we spend our daily lives, and also in our efforts to support the ongoing mission of the Christian community in the midst of that cultural change. The challenges are great, but I like to see them as providential opportunities to present the message of the Gospel in a manner that is appropriate to the times and cultural contexts in which the church finds itself.

And I am personally convinced that the neo-Calvinist strand of Reformed orthodoxy, as represented by the thought and witness of both Abraham Kuyper and his younger colleague Herman Bavinck, represents the best that the Reformed tradition has to offer in equipping us to pursue those opportunities. Because of these loyalties, I have been pleased to see the interest in the thought of Kuyper and Bavinck spread in recent decades beyond the North American Dutch-Calvinist communities, where it has always had its strong adherents, into the broader evangelical community. There are a number of factors that explain this growing appreciation, but clearly a key factor is a deep desire among many evangelicals these days to move beyond a mere protectionist spirit in theology toward a more robust creative engagement with the complex challenges of life in the 21st century. Kuyper himself has been a key focus in this regard. He has not only come to be seen by many American evangelicals as a model of what it means to engage complex cultural realities as a committed Christian, but the Christ-centeredness of his oft-quoted manifesto about every square inch of the creation belonging to Jesus Christ

³ Cf. Roelf C. Janssen, *By This Our Subscription: Confessional Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition since 1816* (Doctoral Dissertation, Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 2009).

forges for many evangelicals a strong link between the atoning work of Christ as a personal Savior and the acknowledgement of the cosmic scope of Christ's Kingdom.

Until recently this growing interest in neo-Calvinist thought among evangelicals has had to rely on rather limited English language resources, with a heavy reliance on Kuyper's 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton Seminary, which have been continuously available in book form for English speaking readers since 1931. Fortunately, the situation is changing significantly, not only with new translations of Kuyper's publications, particularly his extensive writings on common grace. But the appearance of previously unavailable works by Bavinck in English translations, especially with the recent appearance of the English language version of his four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, is also a significant development.

I am pleased to use this occasion—the first annual Bavinck Lecture here in Kampen—to celebrate this growing interest in Bavinck in the English-speaking world. For too long the narratives about the beginnings of Dutch neo-Calvinism have treated Bavinck as primarily an understudy to Kuyper, as evidenced in James Hutton Mackay's characterization, in his 1910 Hastie Lectures in Glasgow, of Bavinck as “Dr. Kuyper's loyal and learned henchman.”⁴ But with more of Bavinck's writings available to us in English, we can now appreciate the extent of his own genius, and explore the riches of his extensive and creative theological scholarship for much-needed guidance for our engagement with our contemporary challenges.

I must preface my own remarks about this engagement by saying that I personally have developed a deep appreciation for Bavinck's theology in recent years. My own introduction to the rich cultural vision of neo-Calvinism came by way of reading Kuyper's Stone Lectures, and I still study Kuyper's extensive writings to my great benefit. But I must confess that more and more in recent years it is Bavinck who helps me most in bringing my neo-Calvinism to bear on some of the crucial challenges for the life and mission of the Christian community in the 21st century. Unlike Kuyper, who often formulated his theology “on the run,” as it were, and also frequently in the heat of various controversies, Bavinck maintained a steady and sustained focus, with a modest tone in dealing with views with which he had significant differences. In what follows I will illustrate some of the help that I find in Bavinck for what are for me important contemporary concerns by focusing briefly on three topics, each featuring the idea of plurality: the plurality of God's creating and redeeming purposes, the plurality of cultural contexts, and the plurality of religions.

The “many-ness” of God's creating and redeeming purposes in the world is surely a—if not *the*—key theme in neo-Calvinism. It is what inspired Kuyper's oft-quoted

⁴ James Hutton Mackay, *Religious Thought in Holland in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), x-xi.

declaration “not one square inch in the whole domain” of creation falls outside of the authority of Jesus Christ. For many evangelicals this “many-ness” theme is profoundly illuminating. Personal salvation is of central importance, but God cares about more than that. God takes delight in good art, in healthy family patterns, in just political and economic relations, in careful scholarship. Bavinck insisted that this emphasis on the plurality of God’s purposes points to very basic theological issues, which is why he treats the topic in some detail in his discussion of the differences between the supralapsarians and the infralapsarians. In seeing God’s primary purpose in his plan for his creation as bringing everything to a final state in which the elect show forth God’s mercies and the reprobate God’s justice, the supralapsarian fails to acknowledge that God’s “decrees are as abundantly rich in content as the entire history of the world.”⁵ The cosmos serves, then as “a suitable theatre for the display, on a creaturely level, of all God’s attributes. The world plan is so conceived by God that it can radiantly exhibit his glory and perfections in a manner and measure suited to each creature.”⁶

What Bavinck is providing here, of course, is the theological grounding for the neo-Calvinist understanding of common grace. God intended from the very beginning that human obedience to his creating purposes would not merely consist in having individuals glorify him by their personal worship. They were to bring him glory by filling the earth with the processes and products of human cultural formation. These are things in which God takes delight—and when God’s human creatures also taking delight in them they are genuinely honoring the Creator’s purposes. Even when the curse of human fallenness pervaded the creation, God did not give up on these original designs. The patterns of a renewed cultural obedience were made possible by Christ’s atoning work. Furthermore, under the conditions of fallenness the Lord takes delight even when his original purposes shine through beyond the scope of the elect community—when, for example, an unbeliever produces a well-crafted poem or a film that sets forth a narrative of human flourishing, or when signs of justice are seen in public policies implemented in the larger society.

I should mention in passing here that while Klaas Schilder was less positive than Bavinck about the cultural contributions of the unredeemed, Schilder did nonetheless hold out some hope that there are times when the influence of the Gospel can “penetrate very deeply even into the circles of the unbelievers.” And this, said Schilder is due to a continuing “*sunousia*, a being-together, among all men.” This is not to be confused, Schilder stressed, with “cultural *koinonia*,” which is a bond that “can only be achieved wherever the same nature is directed towards a common goal through love for the same basic principles and wherever the same interests are promoted in common faith and hope and love.”⁷ But neither, said Schilder,

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 2: God and Creation; John Bolt, general editor, and John Vriend, translator (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 390.

⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 373.

⁷ Klaas Schilder, *Christ and Culture*, translated by G. van Rongen and W. Helder (Winnipeg,

can we ignore the importance of *sunousia* by insisting that *koinonia* is our exclusive Christian concern.

Again, though, Bavinck placed a strong emphasis on the positive working-out of God's multiple creating and redeeming purposes in human history, pointing to the way these purposes will be fully revealed in the *eschaton*. Here is his description of that marvelous end-time scenario:

The state of glory, Scripture tells us, will be rich and splendid beyond all description. We look for a new heaven, a new earth, a new humanity, a restored universe, an ever-progressing development never again disturbed by sin. To that end, the creation and the fall, Adam and Christ, nature and grace, faith and unbelief, election and reprobation—all work together, each in its own way, not only consequently but in concert. Indeed, even the present world, along with its history, is as such already an ongoing revelation of God's perfections. It will continue to exert its influence in depth and in breadth also in the coming dispensation, and to furnish a new humanity with ever new reasons for the worship and glorification of God.⁸

In my formative years as a participant in the evangelical scholarly community, we talked much about "Christ and culture," inspired in good part by H. Richard Niebuhr's influential 1951 book of that name. In recent decades, however, a shift of attention has occurred, away from a concern about how to relate Christian faith to culture in a generic sense to a focus on the plural: how to understand the relationship of Christ to *the cultures*, which is the second plurality I want briefly to discuss.

For evangelicalism, where the commitment to evangelistic mission has remained strong, considerable missiological attention has been given to the relationship of core Christian beliefs to the diversity of cultural contexts. The kind of theological attention that is required in this regard was spelled out nicely in Kosuke Koyama's delightfully titled book, *Waterbuffalo Theology*. When the late theologian had been sent by his Japanese church as a young missionary, to Northern Thailand, he thought much about how to bring the Gospel to people whose lives involved many days of standing in shallow water alongside of water buffalo, to be followed by periods of attempting to stay dry during the onslaught of the monsoon rains.

Manitoba: Premier Printing Ltd., 1977), 55.

⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 391-392.

Koyama tells us that he decided to read the Bible as if he were standing alongside of a water buffalo in a rice paddy. When he did so, passages and images leaped out at him that he had never really thought about before. He discovered that there is much in the Bible about water. God rules from a place above the rains and the floods. God stays dry! These themes came to loom large in his presentation of the Gospel to the people of that region.⁹

In generalizing on the method he had been using in his efforts to understand what the Bible has to say to the culture of northern Thailand, Koyama observed that the missionary must always be aware of being “sandwiched between Christ’s saving reality” and the “other-than-myself reality” of the neighbors to whom the Gospel is being addressed. And this requires, Koyama argued, engaging in “two kinds of exegesis: exegesis of the Word of God and exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom [the missionary] lives and works.” This two-way exegesis allows the missionary to take the questions asked in a given cultural context “to the enlightenment and judgment of the Word of God.”¹⁰

This kind of theological exercise presents some important challenges for neo-Calvinism. As already discussed, we have focused rather broadly on the role of cultural formation as such in God’s creating and redeeming designs for the variety of *spheres* of human interaction: art, family, politics and the like. The recent focus on the plurality of cultures has invited us to probe the ways in which a variety of spheres are embodied in a plurality of cultural *contexts*. How, for example, do Nigerian family life and art differ from Cambodian family life and art? Or how do Brazilian economic life and politics differ from economic and political life in Scotland? And what does a biblical world-and-life view have to say to these combinations of sphere plurality and cultural diversity?

Again, this presents new challenges for neo-Calvinism. But this also provides us with opportunities, especially if we explore the ways in which Bavinck anticipated many of the central theological issues bearing on cultural diversity. Here also, Bavinck asks us to think on a fundamental theological level, with special attention in this instance to the image of God. He insisted that in addition to the fact that each human individual is created in the divine image, there is also a collective possession of the *imago*. The creation of humans in the divine image in the Genesis creation narrative, Bavinck observed, “is not the end but the beginning of God’s journey with mankind.” In mandating that the first human pair be “fruitful and multiply,” said Bavinck, God was making it clear that “[n]ot the man alone, nor the man and the woman together, but only the whole of humanity together is the fully developed image of God,” for “[t]he image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be.” Furthermore, this collective sense of the *imago*, he argues, “is not a static

⁹ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1974), vii-viii, 32-40.

¹⁰ Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology*, 91.

entity but extends and unfolds itself” in the rich diversity of humankind spread over many places and times.

For Bavinck, this understanding of the image necessarily takes on an eschatological significance, when in the end times “all the glory of the nations will be brought” into the New Jerusalem.¹¹ “Tribes, peoples, and nations all make their own particular contribution to the enrichment of life in the new Jerusalem... The great diversity that exists among people in all sorts of ways is not destroyed in eternity but it is cleansed from all that is sinful and made serviceable to fellowship with God and each other.”¹²

For our present-day discussions, this suggests that we might think of the Creator as having distributed different aspects of the divine likeness to different cultural groups, with each group receiving, as it were, a unique assignment for developing some aspect or another of the divine image. And we today have new opportunities to learn from these assignments, in anticipation of the eschatological gathering-in of the peoples of the earth, when many tribes and tongues and nations will be displayed in their honor and glory in the New Jerusalem—and we will see then the many-splendored *imago dei* in its fullness.

The third topic is the plurality of multi-faith realities. It is obvious that we cannot go very far into attending to the diversity of cultural *contexts* without soon having to wrestle in new ways with the plurality of *religions*. And here too Bavinck did much to equip present day neo-Calvinists for taking on this complex and challenging agenda.

Bavinck called for a new approach to wrestling with inter-faith encounters. He was critical specifically of the way that “in the past the [Christian] study of religions was pursued exclusively in the interest of dogmatics and apologetics. The founders of [non-Christian] religions, like Mohommed,” he observes, “were simply considered imposters, enemies of God, accomplices of the devil.” That way of viewing the leaders on non-Christian religious groups, Bavinck argues, is no longer tenable. This is because, he says, those religions in recent times “have become more precisely known,” especially through the insights offered by “both history and psychology.” And then Bavinck offers this theological verdict: “Also among pagans, says Scripture, there is a revelation of God, an illumination by the Logos, a working of God’s Spirit.”¹³

Bavinck is appealing in these comments to a rather robust divine “revealing” that supplements the all-important content of biblical revelation. Bavinck is going be-

¹¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 577-578.

¹² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 727.

¹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 318.

yond here the generic conceptions of natural theology and general revelation by proposing a dynamic involvement by the members of the Trinity in the particularities of other religious perspectives. There may be very specific ways, he is suggesting, that the members of the Trinity—he mentions both the Logos and the Spirit in this regard—may be actively at work in the spiritual quest of a Confucius or a Mohammed.

And an especially important emphasis in what he says here is Bavinck's insistence that it is not enough to approach non-Christian religions simply within the confines of "dogmatics and apologetics." Not that it is misguided to develop a systematic account of the central truths of biblical religion, or to defend those truths against those who reject them—these are non-negotiable for those of us committed to the cause of the Gospel. But for a proper understanding and assessment of, say, Confucian teaching, Bavinck is saying, we cannot proceed "exclusively" with dogmatic or apologetic questions in mind. When the main question is whether a consistently Confucian worldview can point us to how a person can enter into a saving a relationship with the one true God, an evangelical has to give a negative answer. If, however, we can bracket the dogmatic and apologetic focus on issues about whether Confucians *as Confucians* can be saved, then we are free to evaluate this or that particular Confucian teaching in terms of whether it illuminates reality, and we may well find many good and true elements in the Confucian worldview. Indeed, we might even find things in the Confucian understanding of spiritual reality that can enrich—perhaps by calling our attention to spiritual matters that we have not thought about clearly—our own Christian understanding of religious truth.

The general approach to other religious perspectives that Bavinck is encouraging is one of paying close attention to the particularities of a given perspective. This approach was set forth in 20th century by Bishop Stephen Neill, of the Church of South India, who, drawing upon arguments that Hendrik Kraemer had laid out in his *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, insists that the "comparative method" approach to the study of religions is misleading in the way it treats "all religions as commensurables," that is, as falling under shared understandings of the concepts they seem to hold in common. When scholars take, for example, the idea of the deity and lay various conceptions—Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh—side by side, they are often ignoring the fact that they are abstracting those ideas from other ideas with which they are interconnected, thus detaching the ideas in question, as Neill puts it, from "the living fabric of the religion from which the idea has been somewhat violently dissevered."¹⁴

Bavinck also wants us to approach the "living fabric" of a specific religious perspective with spiritual and theological discernment, but also with a posture of openness

¹⁴ Stephen Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1961), 3.

to possible lessons we can learn. Thus his emphasis on the importance of employing the categories of “history and psychology.”

Having touched briefly upon each of these three “pluralities”—creational sphere, cultures and religions—I want to conclude by offering some personal thoughts about the overall picture of which they are components.

The three components are intimately connected. The various religious perspectives with which we are directly aware these days have to be understood in relationship to their specific cultural-historical contexts—thus Bavinck’s insistence on our drawing upon insights of “both history and psychology” in grappling with, say, Confucian thought. And this plurality of cultural contexts in turn must be seen against the background of a robust grasp of God’s creating and redeeming purposes in the unfolding of the historical process of cultural development that will culminate in the *eschaton*.

In all of this, the multi-faith issue is obviously the most challenging one for Reformed orthodoxy. While Bavinck makes it clear that the diversity of cultural spheres was built into God’s very design for his creation, and also that even if the fall had not occurred the human race would have developed various cultural embodiments of “the honor and glory” of the peoples of the earth, the diversity of religions is a very different story. A plurality of faith-commitments is a purely post-lapsarian phenomenon, a departure from the Creator’s intention for us as beings whose “chief end...is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” Even though it is helpful, in our attempts to understand non-Christian perspectives while temporarily bracketing apologetic and dogmatic considerations, this does not mean that we can simply abandon those concerns. Salvation comes through the atoning work of Jesus Christ alone, “for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4: 12). Calvinist orthodoxy is incompatible with a relativistic universalism.

The important question for us, though, is what kind of *spirit* we should manifest in our efforts to hold firmly to the tenets of Reformed orthodoxy in our religiously diverse world. In an address I once heard Kosuke Koyama give to a theological conference, he remarked that every theologian must make a decision regarding the basic spirit that we bring to our study of biblical revelation: “Do we come,” he asked, “with the conception of a *stingy* God or a *generous* one?” I sense a strong presumption of divine generosity at work throughout Bavinck’s writings. And I see that as a spirit that is much to be desired in wrestling with the present day challenges of understanding cultural context and interfaith engagement.

A few years ago I found myself in a situation where I had to offer some theological counsel on a matter that I had not previously thought about in any serious manner.

I was lecturing at several “Three Self” theological seminaries in mainland China, and I had been assigned a very talented young Chinese woman as my translator. As we reviewed together the contents of the lectures I was going to give, she told me that she had become a Christian only a few years before. She spoke glowingly about having come to a deep faith in Christ after having been raised in Buddhist family. But she also expressed a sense of inadequacy in her ability to employ theological categories in a sustained manner.

Actually, she did a wonderful job as a translator. The questions from the audiences in response to my lectures indicated that she had clearly conveyed the theological content of my lectures. In my final meeting with her I expressed my gratitude for her efforts. Suddenly, her face took on a worried expression and she said that she needed some theological advice. She was genuinely thrilled to be a Christian, she said, but she was saddened by what her conversion meant for her relationships with her parents. As devout Buddhists they were not hostile to Jesus as such—they saw him as a good ethical teacher, she said. But they were deeply disturbed by the thought that by becoming a Christian their daughter had embraced a religion that condemned all of their ancestors to hell. Through her tears she spoke to me in a pleading tone: “Revering my ancestors means much to me, and I want to assure my parents that I do not want to dishonor my family heritage. So please tell me what I as a Christian can say to my parents about this!”

What immediately came to my mind was a biblical text I had recently been thinking about: the story of the young man whose friends cut a hole in the roof of a home where Jesus was visiting, in order bring their friend to the Savior for healing. I reminded her of the story, and then quoted the response of Jesus in Luke 5:20: “When he saw *their faith*, he said [to the young man], ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven you.’”

I told her that I found that verse encouraging for her family situation. Jesus healed the young man because of the faith of the man’s friends. It may be—and I stressed the word “may”—that there are times when Jesus honors the faith that we manifest on behalf of others who are incapable of having their own faith at that point. It could be, I said, that in her family context the Lord was allowing her faith to count in his dealings with her ancestors. At the very least, I told her, she could tell her parents that she honors her ancestors so much that she fervently prays to the Lord to show mercy to them.

Her face lit up, and she expressed her gratitude. In my own heart, of course, I wondered whether I had gone beyond the boundaries of orthodoxy in my counsel to her. At the same time, however, I was convinced that we Christian theologians cannot avoid wrestling on her behalf with a topic that takes on urgency in her Asian cultural context.

My conviction about the importance of working on this topic in a serious manner was reinforced in a very helpful way recently by my reading of an important book

by Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*. Chan, a Pentecostal theologian who is on the faculty at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, is quite critical of the reigning theological methodology among “elite” theologians representing Western ecumenical perspectives. Grassroots Christians in Asia, he argues, have their own profound grasp of their cultural contexts that differs from what is offered by “elite” theologies. These local believers seek out ecclesial communities, typically of a Pentecostal type, in which the actual cultural realities in which they are immersed are taken seriously in the light of the Gospel.

Chan explores at some length, for example, the relevance of the kind of honor and shame culture that is pervasive in Asia for a Western evangelicalism that has typically concentrated primarily on the concepts of sin and guilt. He does not deny the fact of our guilty sinful condition, but he argues that to fail to pay attention to honor-and-shame themes is to miss much of what the Bible tells us about our shared humanity.

In this regard Chan addresses the topic of the veneration of ancestors, pointing out the same kind of concern that was expressed so earnestly to me by my young Chinese translator. Chan points specifically to Japanese indigenous Pentecostal movements, where the complaint is regularly raised that traditional Protestant thought has failed to address ancestor veneration. What these local movements have done to remedy this inattention, Chan reports, is to develop a strong emphasis on the *communio sanctorum*, with an expanded sense of continuing relationships between the living and the dead. Furthermore, these movements have instituted “elaborate rituals relating to evangelizing of and communion with the dead,” including a “commending of the dead to the mercy of God.”¹⁵

Chan cautiously commends these explorations, pointing to the fact that they are “Christologically grounded,” and “sufficiently distinguished from Confucian and Taoist ancestral rites.” Furthermore, he says, “when bold steps are taken to find appropriate Christian ritual expressions of ancestral veneration, fresh theological insights have emerged.”¹⁶

Let me make it clear that I am not agreeing here with Chan’s favorable—albeit it cautious—assessment of these developments. But I do want to point out that the practices he described can be thought about in the light of the three topics I have discussed in relationship to neo-Calvinism. Chan observes, for example that the deep commitment to “[a]ncestor veneration underscores the unsurpassed value placed on the family in Asia.”¹⁷ It has to do, then, with a theological focus on the sphere of the family, emphasizing our obligation to attend more carefully to these concerns than we Calvinists have engaged in thus far. We owe that hard theological work to those who have already come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ in

¹⁵ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 193–194.

¹⁶ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 202.

¹⁷ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 189.

contexts where ancestral veneration is so deeply embedded in the important creational sphere of family life. And, I should add, we owe it also to our own cultural settings, where many new questions are being raised about the nature of family and marriage.

And here too I can appeal to both the spirit and the letter of Bavinck's portrayal of divine generosity—a portrayal that is, I insist, a model of Calvinist orthodoxy. On the subject of the salvific status of those who have not heard the Gospel proclaimed, Bavinck leaves a lot of room for mystery. "In light of Scripture, both with regard to the salvation of pagans and that of children who die in infancy, we cannot get beyond abstaining from a firm judgment, in either a positive or a negative sense." Then Bavinck quotes from the Westminster Confession's chapter "Of Effectual Calling," which affirms that "elected infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how he pleases," with the Confession going on to observe that this also applies to "all others who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."¹⁸

Bavinck addresses this same subject in his critique of the "single decree" conception of the supralapsarians. It is not theologically proper, he insists, "to say that in the eternal state of the lost, God *exclusively* reveals his justice, and that in that of the elect he *exclusively* reveals his mercy. Also in the church purchased as it was by the blood of his Son, God's justice becomes manifest." And then he immediately adds this verdict: "and also in the place of perdition there are degrees of punishment and glimmerings of his mercy."¹⁹ And lest we miss the point he is making in saying that, he repeats it three pages later: "[i]t is not true that God's justice can only be manifested in the wretched state of the lost and his mercy only in the blessedness of the elect, for in heaven, too, his justice and holiness are radiantly present, and even in hell there is still some evidence of his mercy and goodness."²⁰

Again, I am not fully confident regarding even the cautious support that Simon Chan gives to Asian indigenous Christian practices regarding the evangelization of the dead. But I do not think that Herman Bavinck would reprimand me for telling the young translator in China that she should lift up pleas for mercy on behalf of her ancestors, to the Throne of the God of the Westminster Confession—"who works when, and where, and how he pleases." In fact, in one of my lectures that the young woman translated for me, I did mention the name of Herman Bavinck. Perhaps she will remember that name and read Bavinck's *Dogmatics* someday. If so, I am firmly convinced that she will be delighted to see how Bavinck's theological explorations speak profoundly to crucial topics for the global church in the 21st century.

¹⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 726.

¹⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 386.

²⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, 389.