

## **Johan Herman Bavinck (1895-1964): The Legacy of a Missionary, Professor and Author**

I have been asked, "Why did you decide to go to the Philippines as a missionary, leaving behind your relatives, your friends, your congregation?" Obedience to the Great Commissions was the key factor. But the love for missions instilled by Professor, Dr. J.H. Bavinck, while I was a student at the Free University in Amsterdam, also contributed to the acceptance of the call to the foreign mission field. Bavinck was a wonderful, inspiring professor with a broad range of interests. His lectures were profound, always intellectually stimulating and spiritually enriching. They left an unforgettable impression on his students. His impact is best measured by the great stream of students who pursued their doctoral studies under his guidance. He was a missionary "who thought it important to confront the world of Eastern religious thought with the message of Christ." His inspiring example left a powerful impression. A Brazilian, who was studying with Bavinck when the professor had already become extremely fatigued and worn out, testified, "He doesn't have to say much; just to see him once in a while is for me a fount of inspiration." I can identify with this sentiment. Bavinck was a unique man, who spoke from the heart and by his life and deeds. No wonder that shortly after he began to teach at the Free University, he attracted many students from the United States and Canada. He was also a prolific and gifted author, one of those rare learned scholars who could write with childlike simplicity for specific groups of people. All his writings show his intimate devotional knowledge of Scripture. He read the Bible as the book of the daily meeting with God and man. His fertile mind was always busy. From 1923 onward there was scarcely a year without the publication of one or more books or articles. Many of them were devoted to missions; others were Biblical studies and meditations.

### **Bavinck's Background**

Johan Herman Bavinck, the second son of Grietje Bouwes and Coenraad Bernard Bavinck (1866-1941), a pastor in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), was born in Rotterdam in 1895. Jan Bavinck, his grandfather, had been a leading pastor in the Secession church. Jan's eldest son Herman became a professor of dogmatics. Coenraad, a deeply spiritual man, was also a theologian at heart, and an authority on the works of Augustine. However, he left the writing of theological works to his elder brother. J.H. Bavinck grew up in an atmosphere of mild piety, blended with a lively interest in theology. In 1912 he enrolled as a student of theology at the Free University. In addition to his theological and philosophical interests, he also developed a fascination for psychology. In this time period he became critically ill and had serious surgery. This experience deeply impacted his spiritual life.

Bavinck was a man of great faith; the latter was fed continually by the Bible and his close walk with God. His sermons, his writings about religion and missions, and his published Bible Studies testify to his deep and warm spirituality. He felt overwhelmed by the awesome greatness of God. He said that the Almighty God always takes the

initiative in His dealing with people. Salvation is, therefore, "fundamentally a mystery of grace." We can only speak when the living God speaks to us and in Jesus Christ answers us.

After completion of his work at the Free University, Bavinck went for further studies to Germany. In 1919 he received the doctor of philosophy degree from the University of Erlangen. His thesis was on the mysticism of the medieval Heinrich Suso. Throughout his life, Bavinck was intensely engaged in showing how the powerful Gospel of Jesus Christ opposes the alluring forces of mysticism. During his student years he joined the Netherlands Student Christian Movement. Through his involvement, Bavinck showed his desire to present the Gospel to the intelligentsia both during and after the First World War.

Bavinck was a transparent Christian, a harmonious and humble man who used his many talents in the service of his Lord. He neither aspired nor attempted to become a denominational leader. He was more at home in his study, on the pulpit and in the lecture hall than in a crowd. Yet he was a good listener and genuinely interested in people. I can testify to it. When I sat for an exam in his book-lined study in his home, he put me at ease and asked questions about my background. Bavinck was "famous" for his absent-mindedness. Many stories can be told about it. One evening, someone saw Bavinck standing in the front of a mailbox with a letter in his hand, intently staring at the slot of the box. When he was asked what he was looking at, he replied, "By accident I have thrown my cigarette into the mailbox and I am waiting whether it will catch on fire." Bavinck was adverse to absolutism, party forming and ecclesiastical strife. The outbreak of a long-smoldering conflict within the GKN on matters of doctrine and church order, which resulted in division of the denomination and the formation of the GKN (Liberated), deeply hurt him.

### **Pastor and Missionary**

In 1919 Bavinck accepted a call to serve the Dutch-speaking churches (GKN) in Indonesia. During his brief stay in Medan he married Tine Robers (She died in 1953). Afterwards he went to Bandung, the capital of the province of West Java. He worked chiefly among the Dutch. But he opened their eyes for the needs of Indonesian and Chinese societies. Bavinck gained the attention of young Indonesians and Chinese. Every Sunday many of them came to hear him preach. His contacts with the Indonesian and Chinese world while serving a "Dutch congregation" prepared him for the missionary service which would follow.

In 1926 Bavinck returned to the Netherlands and became affiliated with the GKN church in Heemstede. His remarkable personality and unique style of preaching caught the attention of people outside his own congregation. During his Heemstede period he also concentrated on studying psychology. His book *Inleiding in de zielkunde* ("Introduction to Psychology") was a marked achievement for that time. In the foreword he cited the words of Augustine that are so typical of his own approach: "I desire to know God and the soul." To those words he added, "For one who has faith in God in his heart, in this

world, few things are more beautiful than to be allowed to penetrate into the depth of the soul."

In 1929 Bavinck became a missionary in Solo, a town of central Java, the very heart of Javanese culture. He was put in charge of the youth work. He wrote a small book describing it, *Youth Work in Middle Java*. It describes the great variety of work done among young people. He saw as his crucial task, through vital contact with the Bible, to bring young people to Jesus Christ. Bavinck said that the Bible calls us to conversion, to surrender. It invites us to be reconciled to God through the blood of the cross. In *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* Bavinck states that "Conversion is not a psychological, but a theological phenomenon; every effort to describe it will prove unsuccessful because the hand of the Lord is in it, and we are not authorized to scrutinize God's own work." He once said that the Apostles' Creed lacks one article, namely, I believe in conversion. What he meant was perfectly clear. Many don't seem to believe in conversion. But there is no other way to God than through the Gospel of the crucified and risen Saviour. It calls people from the East and the West to repentance and conversion.

While in Solo he strengthened his contacts with Javanese mystics. He was well qualified in both personality and education to penetrate the mysterious and subtle world of Javanese mysticism. He had a rare gift of fully understanding other people's spiritual experiences, so much so that he was sometimes nicknamed "the white Javanese." His understanding of Eastern thought did not lead him, however, to any form of syncretism. He was a respectful missionary, but still a missionary who confronted the world of Eastern religious thought with the claims of Christ.

In 1933 Bavinck was called to teach at the theological college in Jogjakarta, central Java. In preparation for his teaching position he went back to the Netherlands to study at the Leiden University. During that time he completed his famous book *Christus en de Mystiek van het Oosten* ("Christ and Eastern Mysticism"). Although it went through only one edition and was never revised, it is his most important publication. In the book Bavinck shows an appreciation for the attraction of mysticism as few others have. He once said, "I was born with an Eastern soul." But he also dispels the delusion of mystical speculations, using the results of his father's studies in Augustine to clearly explain the difference between Eastern mysticism and Christianity. He notes that the cutting difference between Eastern religions and Christianity is in the two opposing views of salvation. "Salvation in the Gospel is never a psychological process, but it is first and foremost a profound change in the relationship of God and man, it is reconciliation, justification."

In 1935 Bavinck went to Jogjarkarta to join his colleagues in training pastors for the Javanese and Chinese congregations. In Jogjarkarta he was able to pursue his studies, especially in the field of Oriental mysticism, and at the same time help his students to relate to the Gospel they were going to preach to their own people. In those years, Bavinck wrote a number of works on Biblical subjects -- I refer especially to the fine book *Mensen Rondom Jesus* ("People Around Jesus"). He teamed up with Dr. F.L

Bakker to write *Geschiedenis der Godsopenbaring* ("History of Divine Revelation"). Bavinck did the New Testament section. The book was translated into both Javanese and Indonesian. Because it provides new and unexpected perspectives on the sacred Scriptures, it speaks to the simple "dessa" (village) Christians, but also to Western theologians. Indonesian pastors, teachers and evangelists still use it today.

## **Professor**

When the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) decided to establish a chair of missiology at Kampen, Bavinck was their logical choice. He accepted the call, and returned to the Netherlands, at the eve of World War II. At the same time he was appointed professor extraordinaire of missiology at the Free University. He began his teaching career at these two institutions, toward the end of 1939, by delivering an imposing inaugural lecture entitled "Christusprediking in de Volkerenwereld" ("Proclaiming Christ to the Nations"). In it Bavinck shows how the apostles already struggled with the question of how to bring the truth of Christ in such way that the Gospel becomes understandable for those who are not acquainted with its language. He also stated that the key to missions is to preach Christ to people who do not know Him, Who is the Light of our light, and the Life of our life. The cross is central to the Gospel proclamation. Bavinck observed, "It is remarkable that many Christians from the East came to realize the terror of sin when they saw the cross."

## **Why Missions?**

In joyful and humble obedience to her Lord's Great Commission (Matt. 28:19), the Church goes into all the world to preach the Gospel. But the Great Commission can only be understood from the perspective of John 3:16. God does not want to build His Church only in Europe and America, but the whole world must know the message of reconciliation through Jesus Christ, God's Son. Missions is striving to win people to Christ, but it is also a struggle with cultures which bear the traces of other religions. Since Christians long to see the coming of the Kingdom of God, they cannot let society remain in the devil's control. The Gospel is for all of life. Christians may not disobey the call of the Kingdom in the social and the economic life of their time. In other words, the Church of Christ is always busy, always seeking, always struggling. She stands in history as the seeker of the Kingdom.

Missions is not an option. It is our God given duty to do missions, to pray for it, to give it a place in our heart. Hence, we must show interest in it because it concerns God's work and because we, as members of the Church of Christ, are involved in it. In his lectures, Bavinck repeatedly stated that missionaries must require proper academic training. In fact, a missionary needs more education than a pastor at home. For instance, one blunder made by a missionary may effect the whole missionary situation in a particular field for years to come. But he also said that the best missionaries are ordinary Christians, who -- in word and deed -- confront a nation with the message of Christ.

After the Netherlands was caught up in World War II, academic teaching was still possible only for a few years; ultimately all universities and colleges were closed. The connection with the Dutch East Indies was cut off. The war became a time of great tension for the Bavinck family. Three children were actively engaged in all kinds of underground activities. Bavinck himself gave spiritual guidance in various ways, among them the writing of books and pamphlets on a popular level, preparing the church for the resumption of her missionary task after the ceasing of hostilities. After the war, he taught for a while -- once every two weeks -- at the Theological School of the Free Reformed Churches in Apeldoorn. In the fall of 1947, he lectured at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan on "The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World." In 1949 he wrote *Religious besef en christelyk geloof* ("Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith"), a masterful study on Romans 1 in which he showed that God in His general revelation is at work in the world, but that at the same time people replace God's revelation by images of their own making. In 1953-54 he was guest lecturer at the Theological School at Potchefstroom, South Africa. Considering his pioneering work in missiology, it is no wonder that he has been called one of the greatest builders of this still young "science." A summary of Bavinck's approach is his great work *Inleiding in de zendingswetenschap*, published in 1954, which has been translated into English as *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*. It will continue to be used as a text in Evangelical Seminaries and Bible Colleges for its exposition of Biblically based mission principles. In 1955 he gave up his position in Kampen and became full time professor of missiology and practical theology at Free University.

## Conclusion

Although a serious kidney ailment sapped his strength for a long time, Bavinck kept working until the very end of his life. His second wife, F. van der Vegt, whom he married in 1956, was a wonderful support during this very difficult time. The kidney problem clouded his spirit. When he was coherent, he testified of the love, which drives out all fear of death. On June 23, 1964, the Lord welcomed into His eternal home His faithful servant, Johan Herman Bavinck.

Johan D. Tangelder  
October, 2000