

# "Grace Restores and Perfects Nature"

## Herman Bavinck and 21st Century Cultural Transformation

An Address to the Center For Cultural Leadership Annual Conference

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## **Introduction**

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you! This has been a full day, and I suspect that your minds are reaching critical capacity from the wonderful and challenging lectures we've heard! I'm hopeful that my lecture this afternoon will not be quite as intricate as my lecture this morning. There is a reason I delivered the challenging one first. I knew you would be fresh!

Let me share with you the roots of what I am about to say. By the grace of God I have just had the privilege of seeing six years' worth of labor come to fruition. In October of 2005 I found myself in the beautiful city of Aberdeen, far in the Northeast corner of Scotland, searching fruitlessly for a doctoral research topic. Through the encouragement of my supervisor, Don Wood, I spent the subsequent years studying the works of the great 19th century Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck. For six years Bavinck, though long dead, has through his writings been my closest intellectual friend, my ever-present mentor and guide. Six years may not seem a long time, but that length of concentrated, dedicated study, devoting oneself to understanding the brilliant mind of a theologian like Bavinck is a long time. It has been a deep privilege and opportunity not afforded many people. Yet I find myself having barely scratched the surface.

I have now experienced that the fruits of my study are complete, in the form of a beautiful (thin but heavy) volume entitled, *Restored To Our Destiny: Eschatology & The Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics*, authored, it says, by me. I could not be more thrilled and more thankful to God to witness the fruits of my labors. God is so faithful and good.

The book is a heavily academic volume. Its content (and its pricing!) indicates that it is not designed for a particularly wide readership. It is aimed, actually, at the relatively small guild of scholars with expertise in Bavinck's theology. However, I want to take this occasion to distill something of my studies for you. I believe that Herman Bavinck was blessed with astounding theological insights just as relevant and practical today as they were a hundred years ago. Our conference theme is, of course, "Why The Church is Failing Culture and What To Do About It." Herman Bavinck's central theological insight helps illumine exactly that. It is a theological blueprint or path for Christian cultural engagement in our own day and context. That central insight, deceptively pithy and simple, is actually extraordinary in its intellectual power:

"Grace restores and perfects nature."

## **Biographical Background**

Who was Herman Bavinck? He was born in 1854 and died in 1921, and in his lifetime and until recently he was primarily known as the right-hand man and closest colleague of Dr. Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper, a name you might be familiar

with, was a giant of a man, both figuratively and, one might argue, literally. He was flamboyant, controversial, passionate, fiery, and incredibly accomplished. He was a journalist who founded newspapers, a natural-born leader and organizer who started a successful political party, a churchman who successfully united two denominations, an educational visionary who founded the Free University of Amsterdam, a *bona fide* theologian in his own right, and - oh, yes - in his spare time served as Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Kuyper was at his best in the limelight. His right-hand man was, by way of contrast, quite the opposite. Herman Bavinck was not flamboyant. He was not fiery and passionate. He was quiet, measured, and level-headed. Next to Kuyper, it was perhaps inevitable that he would be something of the forgotten man in Dutch history.

After a hundred years, this is true no longer. Over the last decade his massive four-volume work of systematic theology has finally been translated into English from Dutch, and the wider world is now coming to realize the truth: it was Bavinck, even more than Kuyper, who was the theologian of their movement. Bavinck was every bit as brilliant a thinker as Kuyper, and every bit as accomplished. A man of incredibly diverse interests, he not only wrote significant theological works, but also wrote about modern trends in philosophy, educational philosophy, modern science, and the (then) brand-new discipline of psychology. He was endlessly fascinated by the modern world, with its explosion of new technology, and he sought to evaluate cultural trends through the lenses of his Christian faith. In addition to authoring one of the most significant, brilliant, and profound systematic theologies in many centuries, he succeeded Kuyper in the chair of systematics at the Free University of Amsterdam for twenty years, sat in the Dutch parliament, was admitted (a theologian, mind you!) to the Royal Academy of the Sciences, was knighted by the Queen of Holland, and was even hosted by President Teddy Roosevelt in the White House on his second trip to America in 1908. Bavinck, as you can see, was no wallflower. He was very much an accomplished man of the modern world.

It was not always this way. Bavinck was born the son of a minister and therefore, as often is the case, the son of a church community, with all the pressures and expectations that entails. His denomination was small, the kind where everybody knows everybody. It was somewhat doctrinally narrow, and tended toward Pietism (or what I've called "Privatism"). Their tendency was to be suspicious and to avoid the world. It is a story often told: the son of Pietist or fundamentalist parents yearning to be free, breaks from the shackles of his youth and uncritically embraces all that he has been taught to avoid, right? Almost, but by God's grace not quite!

It could have turned out that way, but didn't. Bavinck attended his small denominational seminary in Kampen for one year before declaring to his parents and friends that he intended to go to school in Leiden. To give you the flavor, this is like an fundamentalist kid going to Bob Jones University telling his parents that he was enrolling at UC-Berkeley! It was a shock to everyone, and viewed as betrayal by many. Bavinck knew he was going into the lion's den. He knew the

theological liberalism rampant in Leiden, but he wanted to hear it for himself. His fascination and curiosity compelled him. Bavinck was indeed deeply challenged in Leiden, but by God's grace, and much prayer, Bavinck ultimately emerged with his faith intact. He did not emerge the *same*, mind you; he emerged as a mature man emerges from a great and serious spiritual struggle. It was a loss of innocence for him. He was saddened that in some ways aspects of his child-like faith had been lost; but for him there was no other way to truly know the enemies of the gospel and to truly know the challenges the church faced. He knew that liberalism could never truly be faced if orthodox Christians never encountered any true liberals or never truly sought to understand their point of view. The world could not be engaged if Christians refused to be a part of the world. In the post-Leiden years Bavinck found resolve, and over the next 40 years he became a champion of orthodox Christianity in the face of modern liberalism.

But... here is why I rehearse this history for you: it is true he did not, in the end, embrace the siren-song of Leiden's liberalism. But neither was this, figuratively speaking, a *return to Kampen*. Bavinck refused the all-or-nothing choice posed by Privatism: either cultural isolation (equated with faithfulness) or cultural engagement (equated with worldliness). It was that very dualism, the chasm drawn between Christianity and culture, the church and the world, that became the intense, over-arching theological problem he devoted his entire life to resolving. Looking back, of course, his own biography might predict it. For Bavinck, it is not either Kampen or Leiden, faithfulness to God or engagement with the modern world. There simply must be a way of *faithfully* engaging the modern world. There must be, in other words, a way for the church not to "fail" culture by isolating itself from culture.

### **Nature/Grace Dualism**

Bavinck came to believe that the main reason Christians "fail" culture is that they don't have a *unified* world-and-life view. Instead, they tend to divide up the world into two realms that essentially have nothing to do with each other, or at least they exist side-by-side in a state of uncomfortable tension. There is the realm of "nature," the world God originally created, the world as it exists apart from his special grace revealed in Christ, the great wide world as we know it. The realm of nature consists of the rich cultural life of human civilization: civics, art, science, economics, and more. Then there is the realm of grace, the new creation in Christ, the bonds of Christian brotherhood in the church. This dichotomy in our day normally goes by the name of the "sacred/secular" distinction. If you think about it, these two realms really just describe the two great works of God: creation "in the beginning" and re-creation "in Christ." Bavinck saw that most significant questions boil down to how we relate Christianity, God's re-creation of humanity in the image of Christ, to God's original creation. How does our identity in Christ (new creation) relate to the entire range of the rest of our lives, our work

and vocation, our families and relationships, our civic responsibilities, arts, politics, all things that continually exist due to God's original creation? In other words, how does the truth of the gospel relate to the rest of life, Christianity to culture, grace to nature? It was this question more than any other that captivated Herman Bavinck. And he believed that most Christians sense this question in some measure. He wrote:

At the bottom of every serious question lies the self-same problem: The relation of faith and knowledge, of theology and philosophy, of authority and reason, of head and heart, of Christianity and humanity, of religion and culture, of heavenly and earthly vocation, of religion and morality, of the contemplative and the active life, of Sabbath and workday, of church and state--all these and many other questions are determined by the problem of the relation between creation and re-creation, between the work of the Father and the work of the Son. Even the simple, common man finds himself caught up in this struggle whenever he senses the tension that exists between his earthly and heavenly calling. (CG, 55-56)

Bavinck himself, not a simple, common man, devoted his life to helping the rest of us come to some resolution of this tension. And there I've just stated Herman Bavinck's first important observation: nature and grace need to relate to each other. They need "resolution." We must not view God's redemptive grace as being at war with God's original creation, or, as the Two Kingdoms model has it, his redemptive plans as something unrelated to his original purposes. To allow Christianity and the church to stand unrelated to the rest of culture is to believe that the work of the Son of God in redemption is unrelated to the Father's work of creation. In other words, if nature and grace exist side-by-side with unrelated purposes, then God has an identity crisis. Not only that, we ourselves have an identity crisis. We will necessarily have a strong dichotomy between our "Christian" endeavors and "secular" ones. Once we start dividing the world into two realms, we end up dividing both God and ourselves, too.

### **"Story," not "Storeys"**

The roots of this kind of dualism go deep, and they are found most obviously and influentially in Greek philosophy. Plato divided reality into "two," the realm of "ideals" and the material realm of our experience. Later, the Gnostics and Neoplatonists drew the distinction in terms of the "spiritual" realm and the "material" realm. And there are certainly other ways of conceiving it. Here are two crucial points: first, the two realms really *are* two realms, two states of existence. They are not figures of speech or different perspectives on one reality. This is to say, in philosophical terms, the dualism is *ontological*. This will be important later. Second, the line dividing these two realms always runs horizontally: there is always a "higher" realm, i.e., the important one, and a "lower" realm, i.e., the not-so-important one. Sometimes that is construed in

even stronger terms: the "higher" realm is the good, and the "lower" realm is evil. Regardless of whether the "lower" realm is viewed as evil or in more benign terms, it is nevertheless always a realm of lesser importance and lesser value.

Christianity has not been immune from conceiving the world in these kinds of dualistic terms. There have always been groups of separatists who view the realm of nature, the "world," as evil, if to some extent a necessary evil. Anabaptists like the Amish or Mennonites would be examples. This is radical and frankly, a Gnostic view. We can summarize their view this way: Grace opposes nature, or, alternatively, Christianity opposes culture.

Others take a more benign view; the realm of nature is not evil, it is just incomplete. It is good as far as it goes, but what it really needs is supplementation from the realm of grace. This is the view of Roman Catholicism. The natural realm gets a passing grade, but if you consecrate it to the realm of grace (e.g., by way of baptism, holy water, signs of the cross), it really shines! Marriage may be a creation ordinance and ordinary people can naturally enjoy it; but to get the most out of it, it needs to be a *sacrament*. We can summarize Rome's view this way: Grace supplements or "elevates" nature, or, Christianity supplements or elevates culture.

Then there is the form of dualism I dealt with this morning, the Two Kingdoms model. This view is every bit as dualistic as the others, and in it the "higher" realm of redemption in Christ is the important one and the "lower" realm of culture is the less important one. In this view nature is neither evil nor incomplete. By God's common grace, it is good as far as it goes and needs no supplementation by grace. Unfortunately, this makes the dualism absolute. Nature has no relationship with grace whatsoever. The very purpose of the model, you will remember, is to keep the realms distinct. Whereas Rome wants grace to baptize and sacralize nature, The Two Kingdoms wants grace to mind its own business and remain in the four walls of the church where it belongs. I will say more about the Two Kingdoms view in a moment, but for now we can summarize it this way: grace occupies its own realm apart from nature, or, Christianity has nothing distinctive to offer culture. Nature and grace run on parallel tracks that never meet.

Herman Bavinck vigorously opposed all of these views, and it was not enough for him to nit-pick around the margins. Instead, he wanted to uproot dualism once and for all. Remember the two crucial things to remember about dualism? First, the two realms are "ontological." That is, they really *are* two realms, not two ways of speaking about one thing. Second, the line dividing the realms is always horizontal. There is always a "higher" and a "lower."

Herman Bavinck is about to eradicate dualism for us once and for all. Are you ready? Take the horizontal line. No. I mean: take it! This takes audience participation. Grab it, one end in each hand. Do you have it? Now: crank it 90 degrees.

Now we have a vertical line. We no longer have two distinct, ontological realms. We have instead two distinct *eras*. Two distinct periods in history. *We have a B.C. and an A.D., a "Before Christ" and a "Year of Our Lord."* The problem with dualism is that it always conceives of nature and grace, creation and re-creation, as two "storeys" on a building, one higher than the other, one that we should care about more than the other. Bavinck saw clearly that what we have are not storeys on a building, but a *story*, a history, a narrative. Nature and grace are not two separate realms; they are instead, different states of affairs in the narrative plot of a story, what the Westminster Divines called the "estates" of man. The terms describe not two separate realms, but the same unified reality: the entire creation that God made "In the Beginning." Only now that one, unified reality of humanity, inclusive of its civilization and culture, are considered from two different ethical perspectives: they are either B.C. or A.D., "in Christ" or outside of him.

Christianity is not about two *realms*; it is about two *times*. And that is because history is, at its root, the story of the Father's good creation ruined by sin, restored by his Son, and perfected by his Holy Spirit. There not two realms, there are two times: "this age, and the age to come."

Jesus brought this "age to come" into the middle of history. The beginning of the coming age was always understood by the Jews to be the resurrection from the dead at the end of history. And now, in the middle of history, God has done the astonishing: he raised his Son from the dead as the firstfruits of the harvest! Paul can say with perfect accuracy that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has gone, and the new has come!" Being in Christ means we are already participants in the new creation, the age to come!

Instead of two "storeys" on a building, then, nature and grace represent two ends of a narrative story. Nature is the "Once upon a time...", the creation as God originally made it. Grace is the "happily ever after," the creation renewed by the work of Christ. Now you can begin to see why these things cannot be unrelated to each other. One thing we instinctively know about good stories is that the ending must really flow from the beginning. The Greeks had a term they used for stories where the ending doesn't flow from the internal framework of the story: *deus ex machina*, the "god of the machine." In ancient Greek plays, sometimes the plot got too complicated, and to wrap things up they had a machine that would literally drop a god (Athena, Apollo, etc) onto the stage who would arbitrarily just sort out the difficulties. This was not satisfying. We ourselves have movies like this. *Independence Day* built up the doom of humanity so effectively that Jeff Goldblum's drunk epiphany, "hey let's upload a virus!" seems pathetic by comparison! The second half barely connects to the first half. Much better is the ending, a "happily ever after" that flows organically from the "Once upon a time." In the best stories, the ending resolves something that was already a potential at the beginning. Cinderella, by all rights, should be master of her father's house upon his death, yet she sleeps in the fireplace. In her "happily ever after," she

rules not just a house, but a kingdom. Job should be blessed by God for his faithfulness, yet has everything taken from him. His "happily ever after" finds him twice as prosperous as before. In both stories, the ending fulfills a potential outcome at the beginning.

So also the story of history. The perfection brought by Jesus Christ is a perfection God always intended for his creation. God's work of redemption after the fall was not a "Plan B." He did not change the plot or come up with something unrelated to his original purposes. He did not decide to junk his creation and move on to something else. The whole point of redemption is that God maintained his purposes for creation, so much so that he was willing to send his Son to die to make it happen. There is a reason Jesus Christ is described as the "Second Adam" and the "image of the invisible God." His work directly relates to and connects to God's original creation of Adam as the image of God.

If we conceive of nature and grace this way, then they are not unrelated, distinct and separate realms. For the terms describe the same reality: the world that God made. But they describe it at different "times" in the story: the world still wayward and far off, separated from God, or the world redeemed by the God's grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. Herman Bavinck's view can be summarized this way: "Grace restores and perfects nature." Note well: in this view grace does something to nature. Christ's work does something to God's wayward creation. The "age to come" has rather abruptly and unexpectedly intruded into "this age." The light shines in the darkness. Christianity actually does something to culture. It restores it from its sin and corruption and perfects it to its destiny, what it was always intended to be.

### **Christianity: Religion of Resurrection**

Now, some of you may be familiar with the literature produced by Two Kingdoms advocates, and you might think that I'm wading into some tricky waters. Isn't it true that Dr. VanDrunen emphasizes the sort of "this age" and "age to come" biblical theology I'm suggesting? It is true. And yet he resolutely rejects the notion that grace restores and perfects nature. Either there is something Herman Bavinck and I are missing, or there is something Dr. VanDrunen is missing. I am quite confident it is the latter.

And that is because David VanDrunen has, in fact, not escaped dualism. He has actually doubled-down on it. On the surface of things it appears that he has got rid of the old horizontal line of the two realms when he speaks of the timeline of "this age and the age to come." But his vertical line is, in fact, a horizontal line in disguise. And I will now explain why.

I just got done saying that in an adequate biblical theology, the "happily ever after" has to flow from the "Once upon a time." Grace has to organically relate to nature, re-creation to creation. Dr. VanDrunen, by contrast, believes that



creation and re-creation represent two (almost) totally distinct realities. The world to come, the realm of the new creation, is a completely different realm than God's original creation. It is Plan B to the original Plan A. We do not have one realm, God's creation, viewed in two different "times," under the wrath and curse, on the one hand, and liberated by Christ's grace on the other. On the surface VanDrunen's view looks like a "story" rather than "storeys" on a building because he talks about it in terms of two ages, "this age" and "the age to come." But in fact ontological dualism (really, truly, two separate realms) makes its reentry into his theology right here. We are right back to a horizontal, not vertical line. The "new heavens and new earth" is an (almost) completely new heavens and a new earth, and the old and new (almost) never intersect.

We can perhaps see this most clearly by looking at Romans Chapter 8. Paul tells us that "the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21). Here Paul views God's original creation as positively longing for something. It is under bondage, and it groans for liberation and freedom. It longs, he tells us, for the resurrection. In other words, the resurrection of humanity will be the liberation of creation. Whatever else Paul is telling us, he is very clearly indicating that redemption has decisive consequences for the rest of creation.

Let us now examine Dr. VanDrunen's brief interaction with this text. After rehearsing Paul's argument that creation longs to be set free, he writes:

To understand Paul's point, it is important to remember that *this present world was never meant to exist forever*. The first Adam was commissioned to finish his task in this world and then to rule in the world-to-come (Heb. 2:5). Thus when creation groans (Rom. 8:22) for something better, for 'the glory' that is coming (8:18), creation is not seeking an improvement of its present existence but the attainment of its original destiny. It longs to give way before the new heaven and new earth spoken of in 2 Peter 3 and Revelation 21. (*Living In God's Two Kingdoms*, 65)

There are many, many things gravely wrong with this. Let me highlight a few.

First, he begins with a nifty trick. He tells us, in italics, no less: "To understand Paul's point, it is important to remember that *this present world was never meant to exist forever*." This is the scholarly equivalent of saying: "If you already agree with me, you will see that I am right." I am not sure I have ever seen more brazen question-begging in a theological argument. Be that as it may, the point he makes is crucial: he begins with the presupposition of dualism. Creation was never meant to last forever. Re-creation is a completely distinct realm.

Second, because he is committed to dualism, he interprets "freedom" and "liberation" to mean "giving way." Did you get that? Creation is groaning and longing not to be renewed, liberated from bondage and to experience freedom, but to "give way" or yield to the new creation. There is no way to sugar-coat this: David VanDrunen thinks the creation longs for *euthanasia*: a "good death." God's original creation is destined to completely pass away to make way for the new creation. Do you now see why the "Two Kingdoms" never mix? The "common" kingdom belongs to the old creation and the "redemptive" kingdom belongs to the new creation, and these two realities never mix!

I frankly cannot imagine a more grotesque caricature of Paul's point. His point is exactly what he says it is: creation longs to be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. It will experience this at the resurrection from the dead. The new creation is, therefore, the liberation and freedom of God's creation. There is nothing whatsoever here about "giving way" (hardly an adequate interpretation of Paul's "*brought into*"). There is nothing about, we might say, *completing the decay*. There is no need for the purely gratuitous, "In order to understand Paul's point...." Paul's point is obvious and clear.

Third, you may have noticed a few moments ago when I said that VanDrunen believes creation and re-creation are (almost) completely distinct realities. Given what he has just written, you can be forgiven for wondering about that (almost). The truth is that even David VanDrunen cannot possibly believe what he has written here. And, thank God, he doesn't. For if the present creation completely passes away to make way for the new creation, then there cannot be, in the nature of the case, a *resurrection of the body*. There would be no point of continuity between this world and the next. There would be no hope, for it means that God is starting completely over.

Dr. VanDrunen pulls back at the last moment and, frankly, preserves his Christianity. He admits that Paul goes on to speak of the resurrection, but this is the most he will say: "Our earthly bodies are the only part of the present world that Scripture says will be transformed and taken up into the world-to-come" (66). This, from a text where Paul just emphasized the groaning and longing of the "whole creation" for liberation (Rom. 8:22)!

Here is what we have: Dualism is driving VanDrunen headlong in the direction of denying the resurrection, precisely where dualism led the ancient Gnostics before him. Seeing the problem, and being a true Christian, he makes the necessary adjustment and allows for the resurrection of the body, so long as that is the only concession. But can he not see that the problem requires something much greater than tweaking and conceding this point? Dualism has led his logic in precisely the opposite direction of the Apostle Paul's logic. An acknowledgment of the resurrection will simply not suffice. He needs to abandon the dualism that leads his theology to the brink in the first place.

He can start by following Bavinck's lead. He can grab that horizontal line that separates this world and the age to come, that line that prevents them from interacting, that line that keeps heavenly realities from transforming any earthly realities (except our bodies, of course!), and crank it 90 degrees. Now we have just one realm, one world, one creation that fell into sin, is restored by the work of Jesus Christ, and perfected by the Holy Spirit. Now we have heavenly realities that transform earthly realities. And transforms not just bodies, but in the end answers the longing of the whole creation.

Herman Bavinck understood that dualism always mutes the gospel. It always puts something out of the gospel's reach. There is always something to which the gospel is irrelevant. On the contrary, Bavinck championed a full-orbed gospel: the good news that grace restores this corrupted world "far as the curse is found" and brings it to the perfection God always intended for it. The gospel is not content with just resurrected bodies; it wants souls, too, and minds, and hands and feet, and relationships. It wants the entire matrix of what it means to be human. And that means culture, too.

I will close with some beautiful words by Herman Bavinck. It is my fervent hope that someday they will be a motto, a rallying cry for Christian cultural engagement every bit as memorable as Abraham Kuyper's famous "square inch."

"Christianity creates no new cosmos but rather *makes the cosmos new.*"

Thank you very much for the privilege of speaking to you!