

Herman Bavinck and same-sex marriage: A current application of older theological concepts



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It seems like an anachronism to turn to Herman Bavinck for a vision of homosexual relationships in the church. It is indeed an anachronism when we look at Bavinck's treatment of this phenomenon. Except for a reference to 'unnatural sin', he does not explicitly reflect on this theme. Yet, his theological concepts may offer possibilities for creating an openness to same-sex marriage in the church. This article examines four of Bavinck's concepts, namely the concepts of *catholicity*, *hermeneutics*, *subjectivation* and *worldview*. While the first three concepts suggest an openness, it is different with the fourth concept. This leads to the question of how to value it. Added to this, it is uncertain how Bavinck's later hermeneutical insights relate to his Christian worldview. In this article, these insights are weighed, and the conclusion is drawn that there is no evidence that the relativisation of historical and natural worldviews in the Bible also applies to Bavinck's moral biblical worldview. Therefore, it seems that Bavinck's concepts do not lead to openness for same-sex marriage in the church. If we make use of these concepts today, we must again account for the weight we assign to the various concepts, their interrelationship and the relative weight of each concept with respect to other concepts.

Contribution: This research contributes both to the understanding of the tensions in Bavinck's theology, to the consciousness of Bavinck's hermeneutics, and to the reflection on same-sex relationships in the church.

Keywords: homosexuality; same-sex marriage; catholicity; hermeneutics; evolution; subjectivation; worldview.

Introduction

In the present day, there is much tension in the church concerning human sexuality. There is hardly a topic that causes more tension in the churches than this issue, especially the question whether same-sex marriages should be accepted in the church.

It seems a complete anachronism to relate Bavinck to same-sex relations. In the index of his writings, we find no treatises or explicit reflections of this phenomenon (Bavinck 2019; Eglinton 2020). Yet, there are reasons to make the connection between Bavinck and homosexuality as a thinking exercise. Firstly, the historical roots of the acceptance of homosexuality are to be found among Christians in Bavinck's day. Secondly, Bavinck's own education took place in relation to developments in modern culture (Eglinton 2020:11, 26, 41), and because he was aware of the influence of modernity on theology, he deliberately wanted to study in Leiden rather than in Kampen where the training was more isolated from developments in the culture (Eglinton 2020:59–104). Bavinck had a deep intuition for developments in culture and it was his conviction that theology should interact with these developments (Eglinton 2020:221, 225–226). So, he wrote about the relationship between faith and science, social issues and especially about a Christian worldview. Thirdly, Bavinck (1894) wanted to participate in the culture of his time (Brock 2017:21) and its progress:

Modern Calvinists do not wish to reprobate and have no desire for the old conditions to return ... 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. (p. 13)

We have also to consider that Bavinck was part of an emancipation movement in those days. He criticised racism in colonialism, and he pleaded for the emancipation of women in society. This raises the question of whether the emancipation of homosexuals could in some way be an extension of his own emancipation and his promotion of emancipation. Fourthly, Bavinck was conscious that theological concepts can be translated and applied differently in other historical

and cultural contexts (Brock 2017:273–280) – the modification ‘of the Old Calvinism in accordance with the so-called demands of the times’ (Bavinck 1894:16). So, the reflection on Bavinck’s concepts from the perspective of same-sex relationships can help us today to contribute to our interpretation of Christian faith in a postmodern context.

These considerations lead to the main question for this contribution: Can Bavinck’s theological concepts account for the church’s acceptance of same-sex marriage? To answer this question, a brief overview is given of the developments concerning homosexuality and same-sex marriage in church and society in the Netherlands. Being conscious of this historical context, several concepts of Bavinck’s theology which are relevant for this issue are considered. The evaluation of these considerations leads to a nuanced and reasoned answer on the research question.

Towards the acceptance of homosexuality

At the end of the 19th century, people started to look differently at sexuality between persons of the same sex.¹ The terms *homo* and *homosexuality* came into use. The Austro-Hungarian journalist, Karl Maria Kertbeny, first used the word in 1869. The German psychiatrist, Carl Westphal, also called attention to homosexual identity. Sigmund Freud developed his understanding of sexuality as identity. These developments were the impetus for a major shift in thinking. Homosexuality no longer related to behaviour, but to our deepest being. Sexuality changed from a verb to a noun. Culturally, a new kind of human being was born, namely the homosexual (Foucault 1986:43; Van Vlastuin 2023). Homosexuality has been part of many cultures as a practice, but now it became an identity.

This meant that the focus was no longer on treatment and cure, but on acceptance and self-acceptance. Especially within Christendom different voices emerged in favour of the homosexual identity (Bos 2017). Jacob Israel de Haan, a contributor to the *Christian Sunday Newspaper*, released *Pijpelijntjes* in 1904. In it he described the homoerotic relationship between the two young men Sam and Joop. It led to his immediate dismissal as a contributor to the *Sunday Review*. In the same year, G. Helpman translated a pamphlet by the Swiss Reformed pastor, Caspar Wirz. According to Wirz, the Bible does not condemn sincere homosexual love. It is conceivable that these incipient tendencies also aroused concern. For Abraham Kuyper, such noises were a reason to promote the Christian school (Lee 2019).

In 1912, the Nederlandsch Wetenschappelijk Humanitair Komitee was founded. Willemina Vermaat (1923), using the pseudonym Wilma, wrote the novel *God’s gevangene* [God’s prisoner] about a young teacher, Bartko, who discovered he was gay himself when an acquaintance committed suicide. It made him despair and he feared that this was a sign of his

¹The historical overview in this paragraph is based on Bos (2017; 2019).

eternal rejection by God. Bartko came to accept his homosexuality, even though he was convinced that this praxis was not for him. The book was not well received.

In the years after World War II, this movement gained momentum. In 1946, the Cultuur- en Ontspanningscentrum (COC), an association of and for homosexuals in the Netherlands, was founded. While around 1950, the Catholic People’s Party argued for criminalising every form of homosexuality, the report of the Dutch Reformed Church of 1952 gave a minimal opening to homosexuality. After 1958, a progressive movement also emerged in the Roman Catholic Church in which the health of the mind was more important than morality. The attitude toward the ‘gay’ fellow man changed. Instead of asceticism, it was now about authenticity. It is striking that, in the new trends of the 1960s, the churches played a leading role (Bos 2017).

The first public figure to reveal his homosexuality was Gerard Kornelis van het Reve (1923–2006). In 1965, he published a letter in which he wrote that Jesus would come back as a donkey and that Jesus would have sex with him (Bos 2006). He was charged with blasphemy. This was followed by the so-called ‘Donkey Trial’ in which Van het Reve defended himself with his religious views on sexuality. Van het Reve was acquitted. The literary P.C. Hooft Prize also promoted his rehabilitation in 1968. A few months later, he was offered a tribute in the Vondelkerk in Amsterdam, which was broadcasted on television. Hand in hand with his friend, Teigetje, he walked out through the aisle of the church. This image became an icon of the gay movement, while, for Van het Reve, it symbolised a church ceremony of his gay relationship.

In 1972, the Synod of the Lutheran Church emphasised that sexual orientation was irrelevant and performed church rituals to bless gay relationships. In 1983, a lesbian couple was blessed. It was intended to remain a secret, but the ‘marriage portrait’ with the Bible in hand made the front page of the newspaper with the caption, ‘Two women married’. Such unofficial rituals and blessings also took place in the Dutch Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The Remonstrant Brotherhood made this official by a church order change in 1986.

In society, the developments continued. An important milestone in the history of gay emancipation was the acceptance of the *General Equal Treatment Act* in 1994. Interestingly, not all left-wing parties were in favour of same-sex marriage. However, on 04 April 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to break down the barrier of same-sex marriage. Many countries followed. We can safely say that today the emancipation of the gays is an expression of Western superiority in the world (Derks 2019:19, 35–36, 95–97, 112, 150). Supporters of the sexual revolution could not say a positive word about marriage for years. Now they too could say positive words about marriage, because it had something emancipatory about it. We do not know how far

this emancipation will develop. If human choice is the basis for marriage, which relationship is impossible (Pessers 2002:18; 2004:59)? What does this mean for the significance of the family and raising children?

Listening to Bavinck

How did Herman Bavinck with his sensitivity for cultural trends relate to these developments, of which he witnessed the first traces? Given the fact that Kuyper opposed these developments, Bavinck must also have been aware of these developments and the insights of, for example Sigmund Freud. Although he did not treat this issue as a theme, in his *Reformed Ethics* we find a negative reference to homosexual practices. In the treatment of the 7th commandment, he deals with forbidden sins in relationships. In this context, he refers to adultery and polygamy, concubinage and fornication, and several degrees of incest. He continues this list of forbidden sins with 'unnatural sins, men with men, sodomy' without further explanation and problematisation (Bavinck 2019:596–597).

This is an indication that it is quite self-evident for him that these forms of sexuality are against God's will. Although every sin is in some sense against human nature, Bavinck uses the qualifier 'unnatural sin' to express that homosexuality is against 'natural' heterosexual moral structures. Also, the common accepted expression 'sodomy', at that time for homosexuality, indicates that there was also in Bavinck's mind a direct relationship between gay practices in Sodom and God's judgement of the city. This approach does not give the impression that Bavinck had a dynamic attitude toward homosexuality, or that he had an interest to reflect deeper on this issue.

Yet, it is too simple to characterise Bavinck's understanding of sexuality with this. In the whole of his theology, we notice his great sensitivity to culture and the calling to give an adequate theological response to it. Above that, we see that his *Reformed Ethics* lacks the depth of problematisation and reflection so characteristic of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. In the whole of Bavinck's theology, there are several concepts that can be relevant to consider the issue of sexual gay relationships in the church. In this article, three concepts in Bavinck are explored that can be relevant in this context.

Bavinck's concept of catholicity

On 18 December 1888, 5 days after his 34th birthday, Bavinck gave his first rectoral address at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Kampen, the Netherlands, on the topic *The Catholicity of Christianity and Church*.² The intention of Bavinck's speech (1992:222) is clear from the introduction: 'The affirmation of the catholicity of the church and of the universalism of Christianity is of the greatest significance in our time, which is so rife with

errors and schisms'.³ According to a letter to his friend, Snouck Hurgronje, Bavinck suffered from 'separatist and sectarian tendencies' in his own denomination which brought him to complain about 'narrow-mindedness, so much pettiness among us, and worst of all, it is even considered piety' (Brinkman 2006:309). In these words, we see the attitude of a believer of whom was said at his funeral that he walked a 'path from separation to integration' (Eglinton 2020:77, 104, 291).

In Bavinck's conclusion of *Catholicity of Christianity and Church* (1992:250–251), it appears that it is a sectarian attitude to presuppose that our own denomination understands the whole truth. Every denomination that absolutises its own interpretation of God's Word will 'die like a branch severed from its vine'. Bavinck (1992) criticises the lack of catholicity in this approach:

This catholicity of the church, as the Scriptures portray it for us and the early churches exemplify it for us is breathtaking in its beauty. Whoever becomes enclosed in the narrow circle of a small church (kerkje) or conventicle, does not know it and has never experienced its power and comfort. Such a person shortchanges the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit and incurs a loss of spiritual treasures that cannot be made good by meditation and devotion. Such a person will have an impoverished soul. By contrast, whoever is able to see beyond this to the countless multitudes who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from every nation and people and age, whoever experiences the powerful strengthening of faith, the wondrous comfort in times of suffering to know that unity with the whole church militant that has been gathered out of the whole human race from the beginning to the end of the world, such a person can never be narrow-minded and narrow-hearted. (p. 227)

Bavinck's rejection of absolutising his own theological position, implied that he was conscious that he did not grasp the whole truth. This consciousness implied, on the one hand, that he did not reason from an antithesis between orthodoxy and modernity (Brock 2017:8, 57–68) while, on the other hand, it led him on to an openness to other interpretations of Christian faith:

While with respect to others we must apply the saying of Jesus that those who are not against us are for us, with reference to ourselves we must adhere to that other saying: He that is not for me is against me. (2008a:4.319).

Bavinck (1992:245) practices this attitude in his positive valuation of Fox, Wesley, Spener, Francke, Von Zinzendorf, De Labadie, Darby, Irving, Moody and Booth. Although these Christians were not reformed, Bavinck was able to accept their Christianity as such and their contribution to the catholicity of Christian faith. He (Bavinck 2008a:4.323) was convinced that we need each other to come to the fulness of faith: 'That church is most catholic that most clearly expresses in its confession and applies in its practice this international and cosmopolitan character of the Christian religion.'

2. Bavinck (1992) is the translation of Bavinck (1968). According to B. Kamphuis (2013), Bavinck's reflection on catholicity is one of his most important contributions to Reformed theology. For this paragraph, compare W. van Vlastuin (2020:128–142).

3. Bavinck (1992:246, 249) understands this separatism as a 'dark and negative phenomenon' that accompanied Protestantism.

This attention to the practical application of the Christian faith is closely related to his awareness of the theological translation of the faith into the cultural context. In his criticism of 'dead' orthodoxy and 'doctrinal holiness', it appears that he did not understand the reformed confession as a finished set of eternal truths that have only to be repeated, but he was aware that, for the living faith, it is necessary to constantly update and reformulate the old faith in interaction with the development of his times (Berkouwer 1989:56–58). According to Bavinck:

Our situation is thus quite different – a new order prevails. Forces have arisen against which the Christian faith has never yet had to test itself, realities with which the church has not yet come to terms (1992:244).

Apparently, Bavinck was aware of the developments of our culture when he put his finger on the development of economics and science, the worldview of evolution, the disappearance of the awareness of eternity, and individualism. This dynamic interpretation of Christian faith raises the question of whether it includes an openness to same-sex sexuality. Does Bavinck's openness to other views, new insights, and cultural developments imply the possibility of a reinterpretation of sexuality?

Bavinck's invention of the concept of catholicity

This question is reinforced by Bavinck's unique interpretation of catholicity. Bavinck (1992:221–222) did not interpret catholicity as the catholicity of the church exclusively, but he spoke primarily about the 'catholicity of Christianity' (cf. Bavinck 2008:4.322–4.323; Belt 2011:277; Brinkman 2006:316). While Calvinistic interpretation of catholicity was related to the *corpus Christi* [the body of Christ], in Bavinck we see attention for the complete cosmos as expression of the *regnum Christi* [kingdom of Christ].⁴

Although Calvin did not incorporate the redemption of the cosmos into his concept of catholicity, and although he emphasised more the negative virtues of self-denial, cross-bearing, longsuffering, and temperance, he did – according to Bavinck (2008a:4.265) – ultimately have an eye for the fullness of Christ in the cosmos. This implies that catholicity does not only concern religious life, but it comprises also civil, social, and political life, namely all things that 'are good and true and beautiful' (Bavinck 1992:223), because Christ is the 'desire of all nations' (Kamphuis 2013:101).

Bavinck's most important argument for his invention of the concept of catholicity was the danger of dualism between the cosmic reality and the life of the church, between nature and grace. He saw this danger in gnostic, nomistic and antinomian heresies as well as in ascetic, Donatist and separatist movements. In the context of the Reformed tradition, it is remarkable that also the conflict between Rome and the Reformation was interpreted from this perspective.⁵ Bavinck

4.J. Calvin applies the renewal of all things in his commentary on Ephesians 1:10 to the elect. Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* 3.16.6) does relate this text to the visible reality.

5.'It was a radically new way of conceiving Christianity itself' (Bavinck 1992:235).

interpreted this controversy mainly around the first article of faith. In contrast to the dualism of Rome, the Reformation has restored this article by liberating natural life from the pressure of the church.⁶ On the one hand, this has led Protestants to position sin much more deeply in natural life, and on the other hand, it gave the theological space to appreciate natural life intrinsically, according to Bavinck.

Bavinck used this principle also to criticise the Lutheran tradition. Because this tradition had – due to the doctrine of the two kingdoms – only an eye for the change of heart, the attention of the Reformation to unrighteous structures lacked, so that dualism was not completely overcome in the Lutheran doctrine and full catholicity of Christianity was not reached.

Although Bavinck (1992) spoke positively about pietism, the cosmic aspect of catholicity led him to the critical remark that:

One misses the genuine catholicity of the Christian faith in them ... there is never a methodic, organic reformation of the whole cosmos, of nation and country ... It is not a mighty, imposing conflict between the entire church militant and the world in the entirety of its organization as a kingdom under its own master, but rather a guerilla war ... The unbelieving results of science are rejected, but there is no inner reformation of the sciences on the basis of a different principle ... It is a denial of the truth that God loves the world. It is dedicated to conflict with and even rejection of the world but not to 'the victory that overcomes it' in faith. (pp. 246–247)

Bavinck's new interpretation of catholicity led to a reinterpretation of Christian life. While for earlier Christians 'life on this side of the grave was then chiefly viewed as a preparation for heaven, it now has its own independent value' (Bavinck 1992:245).⁷ In this sense, Bavinck appreciated a *weltliches Christentum* and he understood Christian faith not only as culture-avoiding, but also as culture-renewing (cf. Kooi 2008a:10). In this context, it is understandable that the accent of Calvin on the negative virtues has changed to a new focus on positive virtues:

It was no longer sufficient for her to practice the negative and passive virtues, but it now became her task to reform and renew the world according to the principles of Christianity. (Bavinck 2008a:4.233, 244; 2008b:278)

In this context, he (Bavinck 2008b) wrote:

The church adopted these apostolic principles when it achieved the victory over the world through purely moral and spiritual means, and could no longer be satisfied with a negative attitude towards the culture of its days ... Also the church could not continue without making great concessions to the ascetic ideal, and without marking out a special area for it within its own boundaries. But in particular under the guidance of the bishops of Rome, they continued on the way which had been pointed out by the apostles, and gradually it

6.It is striking that A.A. van Ruler (2007:3.416; 1947:27, 59, 63, 75–76) assumes responsibility for this development and believes that the Reformation has failed at this point.

7.Berkouwer (1976 [1970]:195–196) referred to these words.

assumed a more positive attitude towards state, science, art, business, army, etc.⁸ (p. 278)

This positive approach of Bavinck to interact with art, science, philosophy, politics and social life in his time, underlines the question whether this interaction would have implied the developments of sexual life and the acceptance of new forms of sexuality. The positive suggestion in this question is affirmed by the critique of Oepke Noordmans (1871–1956) (1988) on Bavinck's concept of catholicity:

It killed the scintillas of asceticism, the 'eternity diffidence' in life, and drew many Reformed people very far, in cultural and political areas. Of course they had to do their work there. But as Calvinists they lacked the (dangerous) separation between Christian and civil life, just like the Luther of that church. Calvin had taught them that the church not only has to preach the Gospel, but also has to organize life. When the brake of church asceticism, the negative belief of common grace, the ecclesial attitude, disappeared, one was immediately exposed to the danger to understand the connection between Christianity and culture, Christianity and science, Christians and politics too directly, and to consider the existent powers of the original creation, already dissolved under certain circumstances, in some ways to be Christianized in one way or other ... It is time to re-emphasize the negative side of common grace, the rights of asceticism, the true meaning of the scintillas, the scintillae, that the Reformed theologians spoke of ... It would be interesting to study Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics at this point, where the positive view of common grace contains a critical vein. Or rather, where the critical, negative warp contains a cultural weft ... Bavinck is afraid that Christianity will be deprived of catholicity if the universal revelation is put to the background too much, and ethos and physis will be separated ... We have to derive our theology and anthropology more consistently from the Gospel, anthropology becoming knowledge of sin, and theology becoming knowledge of God's mercy ... It is no longer about connecting Christians with non-Christians. The opportunity to do this is passing. Universal revelation is no longer the bridge on which non-Christians enter the church, but the gangway through which the Christian leaves the church (pp. 118–125).

In these words of Noordmans, we hear the critics of Bavinck's cosmic interpretation of catholicity. He is afraid that the concept of *common grace* will erase the distinction between church and culture. Although Noordmans sees the danger of dualism, he pleads for a duality of church and culture, special and universal revelation. If the distinction between the two is erased, the church will lose its distinctiveness as the bride of Christ by being influenced by the thinking of culture. In the context of this thought exercise, it is conceivable that this means that the sexual thinking of culture will affect the Christian understanding of marriage and erode the sanctity of sexuality. Overall, we can conclude that Noordmans' analysis of Bavinck's concept of catholicity implies the possibility of a positive attitude towards homosexual relationships and gay marriage in the church.

8.R. Boon (2007:61–62) emphasises the meaning of the Reformation for science, economy, culture, art and politics. Also Gunning understood catholicity cosmically (De Lange 2007:240–241).

Bavinck's concept of hermeneutics

Bavinck's understanding (1992:249) of catholicity in its cosmic aspects, encompasses the full reality of life: 'That faith is catholic, not restricted to any time, place, nation, or people. It can enter into all situations, can connect with all forms of natural life, is suitable to every time, and beneficial for all things, and is relevant in all circumstances.'⁹ This approach clarifies that Bavinck (Berkouwer 1989:58–70) did not want to flee from the world. In this context, we can also understand his thinking through issues such as evolution and the doctrine of Scripture.¹⁰

Regarding the last issue, Bavinck's considerations surrounding the authority of Scripture are interesting. These considerations are related to the neo-Calvinist concept of the doctrine of organic inspiration to honour the human factor in Scripture.¹¹ While Kuyper in practice still remained very close to the approach of Reformed orthodoxy and minimised the significance of the culture of the Bible writers, Bavinck's thoughts went deeper.

In a meeting of the first chamber of which he was a member on behalf of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, he entrusted his thoughts to paper in a draft that was published under the title *Als Bavinck nu maar eens kleur bekende* [If only Bavinck confessed his meaning] (Bavinck 1994). We can analyse his wrestling with the question about the limits of the human factor in Scripture (Berkouwer 1989:63, 65–66, 69).

This question caused several tensions in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Between 1917 and 1926, there were three moments in which these tensions appeared. Firstly, in the case of Van Gelderen; secondly, the case of Netelenbos; and finally, the well-known case of Geelkerken who denied that the snake in paradise had literally spoken. In all these cases, the question was how the human factor was present in Scripture.

In the published draft, Bavinck (1994:56) wrote:

Therefore, the application of the newer, better methods has undoubtedly contributed much to better understanding of Holy Scripture. I dare not cast the spell on text criticism and historical criticism. (p. 56)

In the circle of the professors, Bavinck (1994:77) remarked:

Because the reliable results of the newer natural and historical sciences are incompatible with the ordinary exegesis of the biblical account of creation, it is necessary to revise this exegesis

9.Compare A.A. van Ruler (1969–1973:5.77): 'It is also catholic. (...) It enters all forms and ways of human life. It connects and unites itself to them. It assumes the colour of its environment. And it adopts all elements of truth and lies from the pagan existence into its one great salvation and culture synthesis'. He (Van Ruler 1969–1973:5.161) also writes: 'Full catholicity is not reached until then: when the church itself, modest and serving, discovers itself in the rich and varied company of the many forms and institutions of the kingdom of God. But this also means that one cannot remain loyal to the Reformation, if one does not also remain loyal to its view on the world, on its culture vision, and on its view on the unification of church and state and its greatest and bold concept of a state with the Bible'.

10.Compare E.P. Meijering (1995) about Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture.

11.For a complete treatment of this history from Kuyper and Bavinck, via Berkouwer to Kuitert, see Dirk van Keulen (2003).

particularly with regard to the time, duration, and order of the work of creation. (p. 77)

This critical attitude towards the text of the Bible was especially related to the question whether and how the Spirit used the worldview of the authors of the Bible (Bavinck 1994):

A distinction must be made between *auctoritas normae et historiae*? Worldview of Scripture, astronomy, anthropocentric, geocentric. Earth in astronomical sense not center of universe. Language of everyday experience ... We have to reckon with difference of times and states ... The relationship between lords and servants (slaves) is particularly clear. See brochure Talma. The whole social issue is different for us. The whole relationship of man and woman, parents and children, government and subjects has changed for us ... Nature and history have an entirely different meaning. Natural science has made discoveries that are of great importance for the world and for our philosophy of life. Think of natural laws, natural causality, the theory of relativity (Einstein). (pp. 60–62)

It is an exciting question where these principles might lead a century after Bavinck's death. Brock (2017:278) concludes that Bavinck is orthodox using modern philosophical concepts. The question is whether these philosophical concepts might not influence Bavinck's orthodoxy. Indeed, in the issue at hand, that seems to be the case.

It is easily understandable that 100 years after Bavinck's death, his reflections about the worldview of the Bible-authors had also to be applied to sexuality. What is the precise difference between the historical and the moral authority of Scripture? If the historical claims of the Bible concerning the account of creation are to be reinterpreted, why not the moral claims about marriage and sexuality?

Bavinck's concept of subjectivity

We can mention one more characteristic in Bavinck's work that can lead to a reinterpretation of marriage and sexuality, namely the so-called turn to the subject. In a positive way, Bavinck (2008a:1.583) could write: 'The Reformation – deliberately and freely – took its position in the religious subject, in the faith of the Christian, in the testimony of the Holy Spirit.'

That this expression is not an incident, is clear from the structure of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, because he has systematised this subjective approach in the Reformation (Kooi 2008b). In the first part of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, he describes – in interaction with Schleiermacher – two principia of theology, namely the *principium externum* and the *principium internum*. The *principium internum* is not the witness of the Holy Spirit, but faith. While the *principium externum* of Scripture is instrumental, the *principium internum* is 'formal and principal'. It is clear and saying that in this way, the human subject has received a key position in theology (Belt 2006:292–993; Brock 2017:277).

This turn to the subject can be understood as a characteristic of modernity, while this movement is continued and

intensified in post-modernity (cf. Izenberg 2016; Taylor 1989; Trueman 2020). This implies a reduction of super-personal structures and a focus on human authenticity (Taylor 2007:475). Thomas Harris' book *I'm ok, you're ok. A practical guide to transactional analysis* (2012) may be representative and symptomatic for our postmodern culture. In this context it is understandable that human beings must feel free to express their sexual feelings and that super-personal structures such as marriage cannot hinder this individual freedom.

What does this mean for Bavinck? Does it imply that his acceptance of the initial turn to the human subject leads to the acceptance of its implications for sexuality and marriage, specific the acceptance of same-sex marriage in the church?

Bavinck's concept of worldview

Clearly, the above theological concepts provide an opening for dealing with homosexuality differently than in Bavinck's own context. In this part of this contribution, I want to reflect on another more critical concept in Bavinck, namely his worldview. In this context, three considerations are relevant:

Firstly, it must be considered that Bavinck was not an uncritical follower of cultural trends. On the contrary, he analysed the spiritual roots of the developments in his time. This analysis brought him to a critical judgement of these spiritual roots. According to his judgement, Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche were the spiritual fathers of several tendencies in his time. During his lifetime, he became more and more conscious of the reality of secularisation which led him to a critical attitude towards this reality.

The catholic Bavinck, who lived out of the wholeness and fullness of God's catholic reality in creation and church, could no longer escape the antithesis. In this context, he developed the concept of the Christian worldview. In his rectoral address (Bavinck 2019 [1904]), he expressed this concept in the title of the address, namely 'Christian worldview'. He started this address with the complaint that the population is not living out of a unifying perspective. He perceived a revolutionary spirit that opposes the Christian faith, and he observed a wide gap between the Christian worldview and the '*diesseitigkeit*' in the surrounding culture. During his argument, he also used the word *antithetical* to indicate that the Christian faith definitely takes a stand against other worldviews.¹²

In this address (Bavinck 2019 [1904]:44; cf. Eglinton 2020: 226–229), he made it clear that there are ultimately only two worldviews, theistic and atheistic. The atheistic worldview is characterised by a mechanic relationship between cause and effect. Another characteristic of this worldview is its nominalism – a separation between object and object, an arbitrary summation of phenomena in which the autonomous human being is the centre of all. The instincts of the

12. In 1910, Bavinck said that the 'current of the times is away from Christ and His cross' (Eglinton 2020:256).

autonomous 'I' are the ultimate conditions in life. Reality is fragmented, objectivity fails, laws and morality disappear. In the age of Nietzsche, reality and truth are denied (Bavinck 2019 [1904]:17).

The Christian worldview can be characterised as organic in which the preceding unity in the diversity of reality can be accounted for. This preceding unity is invented by the Logos in which all God's wisdom is present. The thinking of the Wisdom precedes the existence of reality, and the human mind must turn to this reality outside of itself (Bavinck 2019 [1904]:24). For this insight, Bavinck (2019 [1904]:23) refers to Augustine who stated that the world must come from thinking if we can think it. This is a deep insight, because, in this way, it becomes clear that the human mind is not autonomous and cannot create truth. Human beings do not create truth, but they must discover truth that exists independent of themselves. The presupposition of God's eternal wisdom and truth offers the best explanation of truth and science (cf. Brock 2017:230).

God's wisdom in his creation is displayed in several laws. These laws can be found in physics, logics, art, family and ethics. In an age which Bavinck analyses and describes as one in which the deepest question is whether there is an order at all, he upholds that everyone has to turn himself to the wisdom of God's order. Even if our instincts could conceive of marriage as a form of cohabitation, the underlying rationale for it is lacking (Bavinck 2019 [1904]:89).

God's eternal wisdom accounts also for the order of diversity in God's creation. If the difference between plants and animals, human beings and angels, stars and planets, measures and numbers is designed by God, each creature has its own nature which will remain. According to Bavinck (2019 [1904]:46), the theory of evolution rejects God's design of real differences between God's creatures.

These considerations in relation to the Christian worldview indicate that this Christian worldview was essential for Bavinck – also because of its ontological and epistemological, theological and anthropological implications. Bavinck could only think from the structures of creation and God's order on all levels of our existence. Given the antithesis between the Christian worldview and the atheistic worldview, it does not concern a detail in Bavinck's understanding of reality. On the contrary, we get the impression that the Christian worldview is a lens for Bavinck through which he views and evaluates various concepts.

We come to a second consideration: Bavinck explained his interpretation of the Christian worldview in 1904. This raises the question of whether he has changed his understanding of the order in God's creation in the later years. To answer this question, we must look at two moments of Bavinck's attitude in public events. The first moment concerns his attitude in the debate of universal suffrage in 1917. In this debate, he had to reconsider the position of women. He reflected upon her

position in *The woman in contemporary society*. Although Abraham Kuyper rejected equal voting rights for women, Bavinck accepted and defended their voting rights. He was also an advocate of education for girls. In these aspects, Bavinck accepted the cultural trends, and he was a child of his time.

Yet, Bavinck's acceptance of modern trends was not unconditional. We find that the critical attitude toward the secular worldview became clear when he spoke about the broken relationship of men and women in the individualism in society, which could not be healed by Darwin and Marx. According to his view, this broken relationship should be healed, because men and women participate together in the *imago Dei*. For Bavinck (Eglinton 2020:278–279), this meant that both men and women should have the right to vote, but at the same time he affirmed the diversity of men and women. He valued the special place of women, but he opposed feminism that he understood as a form of individualism in which women were isolated from broader structures.

His acceptance of the equal voting rights for women was not based in his acceptance of individualism. In a parliamentary speech, Bavinck (Eglinton 2020:278) criticised universal suffrage, because 'it was rooted in a revolutionary individualism that rejected the facts of history in favour of an idealized, abstract notion of the human as an individual'. We can say that Bavinck (Eglinton 2020:273) rejected individualism, while he accepted the revaluation of the individual. Bavinck (Eglinton 2020:237–238) was conscious of the turn to the individual subject as an aspect of modernity. He accepted this turn (see Brock 2017:277), but at decisive moments it appears that he did not absolutise this turn (Brock 2017: 168–172).

Overall, we see Bavinck's wrestling with the cultural trends of his time. While he accepted the individual place of women, his basic conviction was rooted in his understanding of the order of creation that characterised his Christian worldview in 1904. This appears also in his attitude in a second public moment in Bavinck's life.

In the year of the debate about universal suffrage, he gave a speech for the Dutch Bond of Reformed Youth Associations.¹³ Referring to the 'great lines of Scriptures', he explained the basics of human social life. He chose his starting point in the creation of man and woman. In the marriage of husband and wife, we see the first proto-society which is the fundament for culture. All basic social relationships in society can be related to the relationships in marriage and family. He encouraged his young listeners in their responsibility to restore the individualistic society of broken relationships.

These two moments in Bavinck's public action in 1917, do not indicate that Bavinck's Christian worldview has fundamentally changed in the intervening years. This means

13.H. Bavinck, 'De Jongelingsvereniging in hare beteekenis voor het sociale leven: Rede gehouden op de 29e bondsdag van de Nederlandschen Bond van Jongelingsverenigingen op Geref. Grondslag'.

that Bavinck consciously rejected individualism while he revalued the individual, and he understood marriage between man and woman as a cornerstone in the Christian worldview. We can assume that his conscious acceptance of the Christian worldview entailed a structural critical attitude toward other approaches, because his Christian worldview was built on unchangeable principles. Ultimately, Bavinck (Eglinton 2020:236, 246) founded his understanding of history, science, truth, the family and the state in God. The reverse was that the denial of God would imply the reformulation of these aspects of life. Again, it seems that the absoluteness of the Christian worldview functions as a lens of interpretation and valuation.

A third consideration is also related to Bavinck's cosmological interpretation of catholicity. Such an approach is more related to protology than to eschatology. The fact that Jesus says there will be no more marriage in the eschaton, may relativise marriage in this dispensation as a creaturely institution (Lk 20:34–35), although we do not see that in Jesus' handling of marriage and sexuality.¹⁴ But because we see in Bavinck a greater accent on protology than on eschatology, marriage between husband and wife is valued higher than in an eschatological approach of reality. According to his neo-Calvinistic interpretation of reality, marriage between man and woman belong to the principles of reality. So, we can imagine that Bavinck could not reconsider marriage, the relationship of man and woman, and sexuality.

Conclusion

Can Bavinck's theological concepts account for the church's acceptance of same-sex marriage? Bavinck's catholic understanding of creation and church meant an openness to all cultural contexts. His sensitivity for hermeneutics implied the problematisation of the biblical worldview. The turn to the human subject in modernity, lead him to a revaluation of the human individual, but we see at the same time that Bavinck lived out the Christian worldview, which explains his opposition to individualism, his understanding of marriage as the cornerstone of society and his starting point in creation. Listing these concepts, we cannot decide what Bavinck's considerations would be today regarding views on sexuality in church and society. Moreover, it is conceivable that Bavinck would have developed other concepts in our culture.

If we consider that Bavinck's Christian worldview was an interpretive framework for reality, we arrive at a different consideration. Then we would have to conclude that Bavinck would not reconsider his interpretation of marriage as a marriage between husband and wife. The probability of this approach is reinforced by the realisation that this worldview unlocks Bavinck's ontology and epistemology.

The big question is what Bavinck's hermeneutical reflections after 1917 mean for the relationship between the historical

¹⁴. Compare John 8:1–12.

and moral authority of Scripture. We have seen that Bavinck can interpret the 'natural scientific' worldview in Scripture as the worldview of the Bible writers of that time. There are no indications in Bavinck that this is also true of the moral worldview. Therefore, I think that Bavinck would have valued same-sex marriage in the church negatively. If we make use of these concepts of Bavinck today, we must again account for the weight we assign to the various concepts, for whether one particular concept serves as a lens for the others, and whether other concepts must be taken into account.

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