

Dr. Bavinck And The Catholicity Of Christendom And Church

Dr. Francis Schaeffer, a theologian of Reformed persuasion, wrote: "Before a watching world an observable love in the midst of difference will show a difference between Christians' differences and other men's differences. The world may not understand what the Christians are disagreeing about, but they will very quickly understand the difference of our differences from the world's differences if they see us having our differences in an open and observable love on a practical level " (p. 149. *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*.) I suspect that Dr. Schaeffer would be in wholehearted agreement with Dr. H. Bavinck's thesis on the unity and diversity within the church.

Dr. Bavinck (1854-1921) was a remarkable man. Not many theologians keep on speaking to relevant issues even years after their death. Dr. Bavinck is one of those exceptions. The publishing house Kok in Kampen recently reprinted an address he delivered in Kampen on December 18, 1888. Dutch scholars have produced many worthwhile orations, but not many have made such an impact as Bavinck's *The Catholicity of Christendom and Church*. I am sure that we in Canada also do well to pay careful attention again to this very valuable work.

Dr. Bavinck had a unique place in the theology of the last century. He was a true son of the Secession of 1834, but his interest and study led him to see beyond his own circle. He was a man of true great character; humble before God and courteous towards his fellowman. He had the unique ability and gift to appreciate his opponent's opinion, and tried to fully grasp his thought life so that he could do justice to what was written or said. He was a brilliant scholar and able theologian, but also a realist. He saw the problems within his own denomination quite well. There were the strict people who fought everyone who did not belong to their camp and there were men like Brummelkamp who kept in touch with Groen VanPrinsterer.

Dr. Bavinck deplored the brokenness of the church, but felt that the unity of the church so beautifully outlined in the Scriptures will never be regained. In a brochure published in 1912 he wrote as a conclusion: "The unity of the church and Christendom is gone forever; the differentiation is on the increase in every area, also in religion."

Dr. Bavinck saw his world increasing in godlessness. The secular spirit was taking hold everywhere. He understood that Christians needed each other in the battle against unbelief. He was convinced that rather than Christians fighting each other, they should firmly oppose together the secular spirit. Yet Bavinck always refused to compromise the Saviour whose voice he heard in the Scriptures. He had the true catholicity of spirit as well as an unswerving loyalty to the truth. He was truly Reformed and worked along confessional lines. For Bavinck, the gospel went beyond the personal salvation of the individual. "The gospel is a message of good tidings not only for each individual, but also for all of humanity, for the family, and society and government, for art and science, for the whole cosmos, for the groaning creature" (p. 11 *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk*.) This glorious message must be proclaimed by the church. This church is a fragmented body, but the New Testament paints a beautiful picture of the unity and catholicity of the church.

This oneness is pictured by Jesus and His apostles through the image of the vine and the branches, of the bridegroom and bride, of temple and home . Jesus prayed for this unity, and He is still praying. The congregations of the first century were different in origin, in culture, in nationality and different in history, but in Christ there was a oneness. "This catholicity of the church, as the Scriptures portray to us and the first congregations show us, is of gripping beauty. Whoever shuts himself up in the narrow circle of his own little church or group (conventikel) does not know her and has never experienced in his life her power and comfort" (p. 16). No wonder that the apostles who taught this beautiful unity and catholicity of the church warned against schisms. Already in the first century the dangers existed. Judaist and Gnostic heresies arose and found acceptance in congregations. Yet Bavinck said that in the light of the catholicity of the church discipline was applied by the early church to bring the errant sinner back to the fold of Christ (op. 16f).

What of the brokenness of the church today? Especially since the Reformation of the 16th century, the trend of history of the church has been in the direction of constant secession and divisions. When Bavinck deals with the brokenness of the church he begins with pointing out that this is a sin before God. This is the view from which he looks at and judges this sad phenomenon. Therefore Reformed people, Bavinck writes, never made secession a matter of historic principle. In 1834 necessity forced Reformed people into secession. But how concerned he remained for the catholicity of the church and the spirit of understanding and love among those who differ.

Unity and catholicity according to the will of Christ can only be realized in this present world on the basis of the truth of God as revealed in Scripture. To be a real church of Jesus Christ, as far as this is possible in this sinful world, the church ought to show the three marks of the true church. This means, the church must be: a place where the gospel is preached, the sacraments administered and discipline applied. But the church may never be sectarian in character. Her separation from the world and unto Christ may never lead to an isolation from the world. She must stand in the midst of life.

Bavinck emphasizes that it is the duty of believers to remain in their own church as long as she does not hinder them to remain true to the confessions and if she does not force them to obey men more than God. You just don't walk out of your church if there is something you don't like. He writes that the problem we face now is lack of understanding of what the church really is and ought to be. "One leaves a church as easy as one joins it. If something does not suit in a certain church, one searches without a pinch of conscience for another. It is the taste that ultimately decides. The exercise of discipline becomes impossible this way, she completely loses her character; which minister still dares in good conscience, except in very, very few cases, to make use of the form of excommunication" (p. 47).

Bavinck asserts that we have to be careful with the way we handle the words schism and heresy. We should never forget that these evils are great sins. Schismatics are

those people who without having any objections to the fundamental teaching of their church separate from her because of some minor point of worship or church government. Heretics are those people who err in the substance of doctrine. Schismatics break the fellowship of the church. Heretics break the unity of doctrine. In this discussion we must place protestantism's important differentiation not only between faith and theology, but also between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith. If we do not make this distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith, then there will be no end to church divisions.

Bavinck contends that secessions will become repetitious as a result. He refers to Calvin who maintained that: "The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults. What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrines are of the same sort...since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV, ch. I, 12).

Bavinck concludes his oration with these relevant words: "Every sect which holds its own circle for the only church of Christ and believes to be the only one in the possession of truth languishes and dies off, like a branch that is torn from its stem" (p.52).

As we experience tensions in our churches and an increasing lack of understanding of the nature of the church, we do well to read and discuss Dr. Bavinck's thought provoking oration.

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