

Daily Devotions  
*with* Herman  
Bavinck

Believing and Growing in  
Christian Faith

DONALD K. McKIM



P U B L I S H I N G

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Dedicated to the memory of

Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer (1903–96)

Jack B. Rogers (1934–2016)

in thanksgiving to God for the lives, scholarship, and  
witnesses of these two disciples of Jesus Christ (John 15:15)



# Contents

Preface	11
Introduction	13
Using This Book	17
<b>Part 1: Believing as a Christian</b>	
1. Theology Leads to Adoration and Worship	21
2. Faith in Christ and Scripture	23
3. The Spirit Bears Witness	25
4. Certainty Flows from Faith	27
5. Center and Periphery of Scripture	29
❖ <i>Special Revelation</i>	31
6. The Heart and Core of Our Confession	33
❖ <i>The Divine Trinity</i>	35
7. The Fountain of All Good	37
8. God's Covenant of Grace	39
9. God Alone Saves	41
10. The Counsel of God	43
11. Election	45
12. Christian Faith Is Pure Grace	47
13. The Purpose of All World History	49
14. Christ Is the Turning Point of Time	51
15. The Wonderful Works of God	53
16. Creation Rests on God's Good Pleasure	55
17. God Maintains Creation	57
18. Faith in God's Providence	59
❖ <i>Divine Providence</i>	61

19. Created in the Image of God	63
20. Humans <i>Are</i> the Image of God	65
21. Original Sin	67
22. Sin Affects the Whole Person	69
23. Idolatry	71
24. Seeds of All Wickedness	73
25. Trinitarian Salvation	75
26. God Appears to Our Eyes	77
❖ <i>Jesus Christ</i>	79
27. The Incarnation, a Wonderful Confession	81
28. The Mystery of the Cross	83
29. The Cross Is the Hand of Peace	85
❖ <i>The Work of Christ</i>	87
30. Joyful Tidings for the Whole Creation	89
31. Christ's Resurrection Proclaims Our Acquittal	91
❖ <i>Jesus Christ Is Lord</i>	93
32. He Ascended into Heaven	95
❖ <i>Christ's Ascension</i>	97
33. The Knowledge of Faith	99
34. True Conversion	101
35. Justification in Christ	103
❖ <i>New Life in Christ</i>	105
36. Adoption	107
37. The Church Is All Who Are Saved	109
38. Perseverance of the Saints	111
❖ <i>Sanctification through Christ</i>	113
39. The Savior and Judge of the Church	115
40. The Book of Life	117
41. Every Knee Shall Bow	119
42. God Is All in All	121

## **Part 2: Living as a Christian**

43. One Continuous Coming of Christ	125
44. Amen! to All God's Promises	127
45. The Comfort of Election	129
46. Salvation Is All of Grace	131

❖ <i>Righteousness through Christ</i>	133
47. God Actually Forgives Our Sins	135
48. Forgiveness Is Erasing	137
49. Forgiveness Is Received by Faith	139
50. Forgive Us as We Forgive	141
51. A Personal Trust of the Heart	143
52. Being Forgiven Day by Day	145
53. A Seed in the Heart	147
54. We Receive the Holy Spirit	149
❖ <i>The Holy Spirit in Us</i>	151
55. Sealed with the Spirit	153
56. An Incalculable Wealth of Blessings	155
57. Our Meat and Drink	157
58. Confessing Jesus Christ	159
59. The Unbreakable Unity of the Church	161
❖ <i>The Church</i>	163
60. Benefits of Baptism	165
61. Members of His Body at the Lord's Supper	167
62. The Communion and Fellowship of Christ	169
63. Confessing Guilt	171
64. Hearty Repentance	173
❖ <i>Repentance</i>	175
65. Dying and Rising	177
66. Saving Faith	179
❖ <i>Mystical Union with Christ</i>	181
67. Cooperating with God's Purposes	183
68. The Foundation of Spiritual Life	185
69. The Essence of Spiritual Life	187
70. Imitate Christ	189
71. Test and Thermometer	191
72. Comfort by God Leads to Good Works	193
❖ <i>God Arouses Us to Walk in Good Works</i>	195
73. Confessing through Service	197
74. Love for God	199
75. The Spirit of Love in the Law	201
76. Continuing Christ's Compassion	203

77. Live the Life of Love	205
78. Neighbor Love to Everyone	207
79. Love for Neighbor	209
80. The Value of the Whole World	211
81. Nothing Separates Us from God's Love	213
82. Hope Sustains and Guides	215
83. Eternal Life	217
❖ <i>Salvation</i>	219
84. King of Kings	221
Notes	223
Selected Herman Bavinck Resources in English	229
Selected Resources for Further Reflection	231



## Preface

I FIRST GOT acquainted with the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) in my days as a student at Westminster College (Pennsylvania).

Throughout my theological studies, Bavinck’s understandings of Christian faith have been helpful to me. Bavinck was primarily a dogmatician, one who explains the meanings of Christian theology and Christian faith. But I have also found that his emphases are nourishing for the living of Christian life, as they flow from deep and rich theological understandings.

Christian faith and Christian life coalesce in *Daily Devotions with Herman Bavinck: Believing and Growing in Christian Faith*. This is one of a number of books I have written in the past decade that are “theologically devotional” in nature. In these, I try to acquaint readers with the thoughts of major theologians by providing a discussion of a few sentences from their writings. I hope to explain what the theologian meant and combine this with comments about the importance of these thoughts for our Christian living today. I hope in this way to provide accessible devotional readings that can nourish the minds and the hearts of those who read them.

From the writings of Herman Bavinck, I have selected quotations that can instruct and—I hope—inspire us to deepen our knowledge of Christian faith as well as our commitment and devotion to living out the implications of what we believe. Doctrine and life went together for Bavinck. He was a stalwart proponent of the Reformed faith rooted in the Protestant

Reformation and expressed in sixteenth-century Reformers such as John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger as well as their theological successors. For Bavinck, the Reformed faith is a living faith—a faith that expresses itself in the everyday lives of Christian people. I hope that as we read Bavinck’s words our Christian knowledge and experience can grow in vitality for us.

This book is dedicated to the memories of my beloved teacher and friend, Jack B. Rogers (1934–2016), and the Dutch theologian Gerrit Cornelis (G. C.) Berkouwer (1903–96). I am deeply grateful for their ministries of scholarship in the Reformed tradition and for their emphases on Christian living in the church in obedience to Jesus Christ.

Great thanks are due to my friends at P&R Publishing. Bryce Craig, Dave Almack, Amanda Martin, and Kim McKeever are superb publishing professionals as well as fine people. Their interest, support, and advice have been invaluable throughout this project. I am most grateful to them for their many kindnesses.

My life and work are enriched beyond measure by my family. My dear wife, LindaJo, loves and blesses me in our daily lives to bring the greatest joys. I thank you, LindaJo, as ever. Our sons and their families bring us wonder upon wonder. We are blessed by Stephen and Caroline and our grandchildren: Maddie, Annie, Jack, and Ford; and Karl and Lauren. We could not be more grateful for the gift of family love that we share together. We thank God!

Donald K. McKim  
Germantown, Tennessee

# Introduction

**H**ERMAN BAVINCK (December 13, 1854–July 29, 1921) was one of the most significant Reformed theologians of the nineteenth century. Along with Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), Bavinck helped to revive and reinvigorate Reformed theology in the Netherlands. Through his writings, Bavinck affected Reformed thought in wide areas. His works are still read with appreciation and valued today. Theologically, Bavinck was compatible in many ways with the major American Reformed Presbyterian theologians of Princeton Theological Seminary: Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921).

Bavinck's father, Jan Bavinck, was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Secessed Church. Herman Bavinck studied theology at Leiden and wrote his doctoral dissertation on *The Ethics of Ulrich Zwingli* (1880). He became a professor at the Theological Seminary of the Secessed Church at Kampen (1883) until he was called to become professor of systematic theology at the Free University of Amsterdam (1902).

While at Kampen, Bavinck published a four-volume work on dogmatics (theology) titled *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (1895–1901). Bavinck showed the value of the old Reformed theology in the context of contemporary, modern times. God is the object of theology. Holy Scripture is the source of our knowledge of God, made known by the work of the Holy Spirit to bring faith. Faith leads to understanding. The task of theology is to understand the knowledge of God. We appropriate

this knowledge of God through faith in Jesus Christ. G. C. Berkouwer said Bavinck was “sensitive to the dangers of dead orthodoxy, of a confession that one believed in place of a living faith that one confessed.”<sup>1</sup>

Bavinck visited the United States to give lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary on Calvinism (1898) and the philosophy of revelation (1908). Bavinck and Warfield agreed on the major dimensions of Reformed theology, though they had some differences, particularly on apologetics and Bavinck’s book *The Certainty of Faith*. But in reviewing that book, Warfield wrote of his Dutch counterpart, “We must not close without emphasizing the delight we take in Dr. Bavinck’s writings. In them extensive learning, sound thinking and profound religious feeling are smelted intimately together into a product of singular charm.”<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, interest in Bavinck’s work has accelerated. Portions of Bavinck’s works were published in English through the efforts of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, based in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and through the editorship of John Bolt and the translations of John Vriend, four volumes of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* have been published (2003–8). These were followed by an abridged one-volume edition (2011) and two of a proposed three volumes of Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* (2019; 2021).

Additionally, a number of books on aspects of Bavinck’s theology have appeared by authors such as Cory C. Brock, Bruce R. Pass, and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, to name just a few.<sup>3</sup>

1. G. C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology*, ed. and trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 14.

2. B. B. Warfield in *The Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 148. See pages 138–48 for Warfield’s review of Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1901), translated as *The Certainty of Faith* by Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catherines, ON: Paideia Press, 1980).

3. See Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern: Herman Bavinck’s Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); Bruce R. Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck’s Theological Epistemology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020).

James Eglinton's *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (2020) is superb, giving us an unsurpassed resource.<sup>4</sup> Eglinton has also written a piece to introduce Bavinck to a wider audience: "Everybody Loves Bavinck: How a Dutch Neo-Calvinist Thinker Became the Latest Christian Theologian-Du-Jour."<sup>5</sup>

James Eglinton reminds us of some words of Bavinck as he was dying, which sum up what for Bavinck was most important in this life . . . and in death. Bavinck said, "My dogmatics avails me nothing, nor my knowledge, but I have my faith and in this I have all."<sup>6</sup> *In faith I have all.*

May this book deepen our Christian understandings and our Christian faith!

4. James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Books), 2020.

5. James Eglinton, "Everybody Loves Bavinck: How a Dutch Neo-Calvinist Thinker Became the Latest Christian Theologian-Du-Jour," *Christianity Today*, February 18, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/february-web-only/herman-bavinck-dutch-calvinist-theologian.html>.

6. James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 28.



## Using This Book

**T**HIS BOOK PROVIDES reflections on quotations from the nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). The reflections convey the theological meaning of what Bavinck wrote as well as give implications of what his words mean for Christians today.

The book is intended for both personal and group use. Church groups can use it as a basis for reflection and discussion. Individuals can reflect on the pieces as a devotional dimension of their Christian living. Each entry features a biblical passage or verse at the beginning and a prayer point or question for discussion at the end of the piece.

The book is divided into two parts: “Believing as a Christian” and “Living as a Christian.” These are general categories into which the devotions fall. The pieces can be used in the order in which they appear or in any other order. To give a further flavor of Bavinck’s writings, a number of excerpts from Bavinck’s works have been included among the devotions.

Several suggestions may be helpful for using this book.

*Read the Scripture passage and the devotion.* Each piece is written compactly, so each sentence is important. You can think about the meaning of each sentence as you read it in a contemplative manner. After reading a sentence, you may pause and reflect on its meaning.

*Meditate on the quotation and the devotion.* Bavinck's quotation is found in the midst of the devotion. As you think and meditate on the devotion and Bavinck's words, you may ask:

- What is Bavinck saying here?
- What do Bavinck's thoughts mean for the life of the church?
- What do Bavinck's thoughts mean for my own beliefs and life of faith?
- What new attitudes am I being led to discover through Bavinck's comments?
- How can Bavinck's thought be put into practice in the life of the church community and in my own life?

*Pray about this devotion.* Use the prayer point or question for discussion to orient your prayers or your discussion of this piece with other people. Ask God's Holy Spirit to lead and guide you into ways God wants you to believe and to live.

*Act on the insights you receive.* Ask yourself directly, "In what ways are the teachings I've received here leading me to stronger, deeper, and more informed belief in Christian faith? How am I being led to stronger, more committed ways of Christian living?" Then follow new insights and directions according to God's will as the Holy Spirit leads you.

The title of each devotion is a phrase that may bring the devotion's key insights to mind. When you look through the titles of the devotions, recall the important meanings and understandings that emerged for you from each piece.

If you keep a personal journal, you may wish to summarize what the devotions, quotations, or reflections mean to you. Be specific in indicating ways your life can be affected. Periodically, you can review these summaries through the days ahead.

"Selected Resources for Further Reflection" and other resources are found at the end of the book. These can encourage you to pursue more of Herman Bavinck's works and works about Bavinck.



PART 1

**BELIEVING AS A CHRISTIAN**



## 1.

# Theology Leads to Adoration and Worship

*Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:1–3)*

**S**TUDYING THEOLOGY TAKES place in many ways. Some undertake formal theological studies in seminaries. In the church, Christian believers study their faith, focusing on Scripture and church doctrines (teachings). Reading theology, talking theology, or listening to theology can take place formally or informally in our daily lives.

What is the purpose of learning Christian theology? We can have many purposes, but Bavinck believed one stood out. Scripture is the source of theology—it is God’s revelation of who God is and what God has done. The knowledge of God is “one central dogma” to which all theology points, said Bavinck. Theology always focuses on God and God alone. The more

theology reflects on God, Bavinck believed, “the more it will be moved to adoration and worship.”

This makes studying theology “superlatively fruitful for life.” Can you think of anything more important than knowing God—and being led by that knowledge into the adoration and worship of God? Theology is not abstract talk—just “ideas” that are removed from real life. No! Theology is eminently practical—and livable—because it deals with our most basic need: to know who God is and what God has done.

Our knowledge of God, as God is revealed in Jesus Christ, is the fullness of life itself (Ps. 89:15; Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:34). Jesus pointed to this when he said, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). John Calvin pointed to this in the first question and answer of the 1545 Geneva Catechism: “What is the chief end of human life? To know God by whom [humans] were created.” Our knowledge of God our Creator and Redeemer comes to us through Scripture and through the study of theology based on Scripture.

May our studies of theology—however they take place—lead us to a deeper knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, whom God has sent. May we be led to deeper adoration and worship as we praise the living God!

**Prayer Point:** Spend time in prayer praising and thanking God for the ways you know who God is and what God does. Remember theological insights you have gained, and let them lead you to deeper prayers of adoration and the worship of God.

## 2.

# Faith in Christ and Scripture

*We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. (1 Thess. 2:13)*

**W**E KNOW OF Jesus Christ only through the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is the source of our knowledge of God—who God is and what God has done. Central to Scripture is God's love for the world, which is known to us most fully in God's sending Christ to live and die and be raised again for our salvation. This is the gospel message: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). In the Bible we find Christ offered to us by God—as John Calvin said, "clothed with his gospel."

As we hear and accept the message of Christ, we also hear and accept the Scriptures through whom Christ is presented to us. We receive Christ and the Scriptures by faith. Faith focuses on Jesus Christ as the object of our faith, and faith receives the Scriptures through whom Jesus Christ is known to us. As Bavinck put it, "Faith . . . reaches out in a single act to the person

of Christ as well as to Scripture. It embraces Christ as Savior and Scripture as the word of God.” As Paul told the Thessalonians, he was thankful the people received the message of Christ “as what it really is, God’s word” (1 Thess. 2:13).

Today, Scripture leads us to Christ and Christ comes to us in the Scriptures. We receive Christ and the Scriptures by faith. There is the closest possible relation between Scripture and Christ because Scripture is the way by which the person and message of Jesus Christ is made known to us. Martin Luther said the Scriptures are the cradle in which Christ lies. So we need to use every means possible to understand more fully the message of God’s Word.

This is our great cause for thanks to God and gratitude. God gives us the means of knowing Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior through Scripture as God’s Word. The Scriptures are a means of God’s grace. Let us rejoice in faith!

**Prayer Point:** Pray that in Jesus Christ, God’s Word will be “a lamp to [your] feet and a light to [your] path” (Ps. 119:105).

### 3.

## The Spirit Bears Witness

*All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (Rom. 8:14–17)*

THE BIBLE MAY not mean anything special to someone for many years. The Bible? Their attitude is "Take it or leave it." But at some point, the Scriptures become supremely important to them. The Scriptures, which were once like dead letters, now become the words of a wonderful new way of life: life lived by faith in Jesus Christ.

What makes the difference? Bavinck noted that "it is the Spirit of God alone who can make a person inwardly certain of the truth of divine revelation." God's Holy Spirit gives us faith in Jesus Christ, and with that faith comes the assurance that Scripture is the Word of God. No number of intellectual arguments or logical deductions can bring the certainty of faith that the Holy Spirit brings to our minds and hearts. Paul affirmed that "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that

we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16; see also 1 Cor. 12:3). The Spirit points us to Scripture to find God’s reaching out in love to save us by sending Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:8).

The Holy Spirit has given us Scripture. The Spirit inspired biblical writers to convey God’s Word in the written words of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). God’s Spirit also “bears witness”—or points us toward the Scriptures—so that in faith we recognize the Bible as God’s Word, God speaking to us. The Bible “comes alive” for us now. In Scripture, we experience God’s presence and power, supremely in Jesus Christ. The “external word”—the Bible—becomes the “internal word”: God’s Word speaking directly and personally to us. Our whole selves are bound to the Scriptures by the witness of God’s Spirit. This is, as theologians say, the “testimony of the Holy Spirit.”

We have the inner assurance that Scripture is the Word of God. We do not have to prove the Bible. The Spirit’s witness gives us the deepest confidence that in Scripture, God is addressing us and, through our union with Christ, is at work within us!

**Prayer Point:** Pray for God’s Holy Spirit to illuminate your mind and heart to hear God’s Word to you in Scripture every day.