

BAVINCK'S REALISM,  
THE LOGOS PRINCIPLE, AND *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

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The deep and long benefit, for the church, of the recent translation of Herman Bavinck's four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* can hardly be overestimated.<sup>1</sup> This masterful exposition of Reformed theology, now easily accessible to the English-speaking world, will surely provoke new discussions and provide an advance in the depth of that theology for a much wider audience. Because the "reach" of these volumes is now significantly extended, the breadth and depth of the Reformed faith explained therein will surely be expanded for the church beyond what it was previously.

With this in mind, we propose here to begin to work through some of the material that Bavinck offers in his first volume on theological prolegomena. Specifically, we will attempt to answer the question as to whether or not Bavinck's argument for an epistemological realism is consistent with the Reformed theology that he so clearly sets forth in his *Dogmatics*. We will also want to examine whether or not Bavinck's insistence on the Logos as both the subjective and objective ground of knowledge is itself consistent with his realistic epistemology.

Pertinent to the question of Bavinck's epistemology, and a helpful place with which to begin, is a review, not of the latest translation, but of the original first volume of Bavinck's *Dogmatiek* by Geerhardus Vos. In that review, as Vos attempts to allow Bavinck to "speak in his own words,"<sup>2</sup> Vos says this concerning Bavinck's view of knowledge:

The Reformed theologians in opposing the Cartesian form of the *ideae innatae*, and in speaking of the mind as *tabula rasa*, did not mean this in the sense of Locke's empiricism. The essence of their gnosiology was, that the human mind always receives the first impulse for acquiring knowledge from the external world. But the nature of the intellect is such, they held, that in thus being impelled to work, it forms of itself involuntarily the fundamental principles and conceptions which are certain *a priori*, and therefore deserve to be called *veritates aeternae*. This, it will be observed, is the same theory of knowledge that has been set forth in this country by the late Dr. McCosh.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008).

<sup>2</sup> Geerhardus Vos, review of Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, Vol. 1*, in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 484.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 478.

In other words, to summarize Vos here, the theory of knowledge that Bavinck sets forth in his prolegomena as a Reformed epistemology is “the same theory . . . that has been set forth in this country by the late Dr. McCosh,” that is, Scottish Common Sense Realism.<sup>4</sup>

From a more critical standpoint, Cornelius Van Til, who himself claims Bavinck as one of his primary spiritual and intellectual influences, sees inconsistencies in Bavinck’s epistemology.

We note again the failure to distinguish carefully a Christian from the non-Christian epistemology. When he gives the distinguishing marks of the realism he is setting forth, he says no more than that against empiricism it maintains a certain independence of the intellect, while over against rationalism it maintains that the intellect depends to an extent on sensation. Bavinck does to an extent wish to correct Scholasticism, but this correction does not involve a rejection of its principle of commingling Aristotelianism with Christian principles. “The fault of Scholasticism,” says Bavinck, “both Protestant and Catholic, lay only in this, that they had done too quickly with observation, and that it thought almost exclusively of the confession as taken up into the books of Euclid, Aristotle, and the Church fathers.” Against this position Bavinck once again reiterates the doctrine that all knowledge must begin from observation. The net result of Bavinck’s investigation is a moderate realism<sup>5</sup> which seeks on the one hand to avoid the extremes of realism, but on the other hand to avoid the extremes of idealism. It is not a specifically Christian position based upon the presupposition of the existence of the God of Scripture that we have before us in the moderate realism of Bavinck. Yet he himself has told us again and again that dogmatics must live by one *principium* only. It is difficult to see how dogmatics is to live by one principle if it is not the same principle that is to guide our thinking both in theology and in other science. If we are to be true to Bavinck’s requirement that there shall be only one principle of interpretation for us, then we shall have to apply that principle when we work out an epistemology no less than when we are engaged in dogmatics proper.<sup>6</sup>

What, then, is Bavinck’s epistemology? Is it, in fact, consistent with the theology that he himself explicates? Is it the case, we could ask, as both Vos and Van Til seem to indicate, that Bavinck’s realism is itself grounded in “common sense” principles (Vos) or in some principle or principles that differ from the one *principium* of the existence of the God of Scripture (Van Til)?

### I. *Bavinck on Epistemology*

In order to begin to address these questions,<sup>7</sup> we should first attempt to get straight what Bavinck himself says with respect to his epistemology. The statements themselves can be confusing. There appear to be statements that affirm

<sup>4</sup> For more on McCosh and Common Sense Realism, see, for example, George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 196-218.

<sup>5</sup> The difference between realism and moderate realism will be explained below.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> An edited version of much of this discussion on Bavinck can be found in my chapter, “The Prolegomena Principle: Frame and Bavinck,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame* (ed. John J. Hughes; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 201-32.

the necessity of God's revelation as the only *principium* in order for knowledge to be had, but there are also statements that seem not to allow for such necessity in that they affirm other starting points for knowledge. The latter is what provokes Van Til's criticism.

The first place to begin in seeking to put together Bavinck's epistemology is with those statements that more positively set forth the necessity of a relational *principium*. First of all, with respect to dogmatic method, which includes Scripture, tradition, and consciousness, Bavinck is clear that the principle of *sola scriptura* must be in place:

But in the logical order Scripture is the sole foundation (*principium unicum*) of church and theology. . . . Not the church but Scripture is self-authenticating ( $\alphaὐτοπιστος$ ), the judge of controversies . . . , and its own interpreter (*sui ipsius interpres*). Nothing must be put on a level with Scripture. . . . Scripture alone is the norm and rule of faith and life.<sup>8</sup>

Any method, therefore, of dogmatic theology that seeks to place tradition, or consciousness in general, or anything else on a par with Scripture is forbidden in a Reformed approach to dogmatics. Whatever means other than Scripture dogmatics uses in its task are themselves subordinate to and governed by Scripture itself. This, for Bavinck, is basic.

There is also a clear articulation, more generally, that God's revelation provides the foundation for all thought and reasoning:

Thus, we have discovered three foundations (*principia*): First, God as the essential foundation (*principium essendi*), the source, of theology; next, the external cognitive foundation (*principium cognoscendi externum*), viz., the self-revelation of God, which, insofar as it is recorded in Holy Scripture, bears an instrumental and temporary character; and finally, the internal principle of knowing (*principium cognoscendi internum*), the illumination of human beings by God's Spirit. These three are one in the respect that they have God as author and have as their content one identical knowledge of God. The archetypal knowledge of God in the divine consciousness; the ectypal knowledge of God granted in revelation and recorded in Holy Scripture; and the knowledge of God in the human subject, insofar as it proceeds from revelation and enters into the human consciousness, are all three of them from God. It is God himself who discloses his self-knowledge, communicates it through revelation, and introduces it into human beings. And materially they are one as well, for it is one identical, pure, and genuine knowledge of God, which he has of himself, communicates in revelation, and introduces into the human consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

More specifically with respect to this external and internal foundation, Bavinck is clear that it is the Logos who, externally and internally, grounds any and every attempt to know the world:

<sup>8</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:86.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:213-14.

The Logos who shines in the world must also let his light shine in our consciousness. That is the light of reason, the intellect, which, itself originating in the Logos, discovers and recognizes the Logos in things. It is the internal foundation of knowledge (*principium cognoscendi internum*).<sup>10</sup>

Further on, he says: "Construed religiously, it is the Logos himself who through our spirit bears witness to the Logos in the world."<sup>11</sup>

These affirmations are consistent with everything that Van Til has himself wanted to assert. Why, then, would Van Til accuse Bavinck of being less than consistent? It may be that Van Til detected distinctions in Bavinck's own formulations that allowed for such an inconsistency. Remember Van Til's point above, "If we are to be true to Bavinck's requirement that there shall be only one principle of interpretation for us, then we shall have to apply that principle when we work out an epistemology no less than when we are engaged in dogmatics proper." Could it be that Van Til sees another principle at work in Bavinck, when he sets out his own epistemology, than the one so clearly affirmed above? Could it be that the clear affirmations of a revelational epistemology are more explicit when discussing dogmatics, and less explicit when discussing epistemology more generally? It would appear so.

As noted above, it seems clear that Bavinck allows for no other foundation than revelation when the context is dogmatic theology. He is clear that Reformation theology marked a return to Holy Scripture as the sole foundation of theology.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the only purpose of dogmatics is to set forth the thoughts of God that he himself has spoken in Scripture.<sup>13</sup> And, as noted above, even though dogmatic method includes Scripture, tradition, and consciousness, it is *with respect to dogmatic method* that Scripture alone is the ground and foundation.

With respect to knowledge generally, or knowledge that obtains in other theoretical fields, such as science, Bavinck seems to waver on his revelational commitment. To be clear, it is not the case that he sets up a dichotomy between what he says concerning dogmatics and what he says concerning science. But it is, without question, the case that his analysis of scientific foundations, generally speaking, could easily (and perhaps consistently, of which more below) be interpreted as an argument for a generic, universally recognized epistemological foundation.

For example, at one point Bavinck gives this analysis:

All life and all knowledge is based on a kind of agreement between subject and object. Human beings are so richly endowed because they are linked with the objective world by a great many extremely divers connections. . . . Now Scripture leads us to view all these human connections with the world religiously and to explain them theistically. . . . But this operation of the Spirit of God assumes a higher form in the intellectual, ethical, and religious life of people. It then takes the form of reason, conscience, and the sense

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1:233. Bavinck has a very good, concise discussion of the notion and kinds of *principia* on pp. 210-11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1:587.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1:78.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1:83.

of divinity, which are not inactive abilities but *capacities* that, as a result of stimuli from related phenomena in the outside world, leap into action.<sup>14</sup>

Bavinck further maintains, that, with respect to this knowledge, “It is the one selfsame Logos who made all things in and outside of human beings. He is before all things, and they still continue jointly to exist through him (John 1:3; Col. 1:15-17).”<sup>15</sup> Whenever we consider the knowledge situation, therefore, says Bavinck, we must give due credit to the reality of the Logos.

In speaking of the analogy of the Spirit’s work in the hearts of believers and his work in the world more generally, Bavinck notes,

The objects of human knowledge are all self-attested (*αὐτοπιστα*); they rest in themselves. Their existence can be recognized but not proven. . . . To prove a thing is to trace the unknown to the known, the uncertain to the certain. . . . “There is no point in arguing against a person who rejects the first principles” (*Contra principia negantem non est disputandum*).<sup>16</sup>

That is to say, there is an analogy between the self-attestation of Scripture and the self-attestation of the objects of human knowledge which, according to Bavinck, “are all self-attested.” Our belief in Scripture as the foundation of knowledge is itself “mystical in nature—like the belief in the first principles of the various sciences.”<sup>17</sup>

It is in his discussion of “scientific foundations” that Bavinck most clearly lays out his epistemology. As noted above, he affirms that knowledge must be grounded in revelation; the “three *principia*” are themselves rooted in the Triune God. However, it is not clear that this “rooting” takes the *principium cognoscendi* as seriously as it should.

After a survey of both rationalism and empiricism, Bavinck commits himself to realism with respect to epistemology. In this, he follows many of the Reformed, as well as Aquinas.

The intellect is bound to the body and thus to the cosmos and therefore cannot become active except by and on the basis of the senses. From the outset the intellect is pure potentiality, a blank page (*tabula rasa*) without any content, and is only activated, aroused to actuality, by the sensible world. The primary impetus therefore comes from the sensible world; it impinges upon the human mind, arouses it, urges it to action. But the moment the intellect is activated, it immediately and spontaneously works in its own way and according to its own nature. . . . Since these concepts that are certain are a priori and precede all reasoning and proof, they deserve to be called eternal truths (*veritates alternae*).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1:586; my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1:589.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1:590.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1:225.

Consistent with the Thomistic and (much of the) Reformed tradition, therefore, argues Bavinck, we should avoid the extremes of rationalism and empiricism, and opt for a middle way, a way that takes the best of both and combines them. Realism, then, differs from rationalism in that it has a special view of the intellect, and from empiricism in that it recognizes that it must abstract from the things perceived the “logical element naturally inherent in those things. . . . Hence the starting point of all human knowledge is perception.”<sup>19</sup>

It seems Bavinck is content to establish an epistemology of realism, but a realism that is grounded and founded in the Triune God. In an attempt further to explicate the “mechanism” of concept-formation in a realistic epistemology, Bavinck takes his cue, at least in large part, from Aquinas.

Realism was doubtlessly correct in assuming the reality of universal concepts, not in a Platonic or ontological sense prior to the thing itself (*ante rem*), but in an Aristotelian sense in the thing itself (*in re*) and therefore also in the human subsequent to the thing itself (*in mente hominis post rem*). The universality we express in a concept does not exist as such, as a universal, apart from us. In every specimen of a genus, particularly individualized and specialized, however, it has its basis in things and is abstracted from it and expressed in a concept by the activity of the intellect. So, in entertaining concepts we are not distancing ourselves from reality but we increasingly approximate it.<sup>20</sup>

The question to be asked is, given Bavinck’s analysis, is this, indeed, in the end, a revelational epistemology?

In a fascinating and thoughtful attempt to argue against *sola scriptura* as sufficient for an evangelical theological method,<sup>21</sup> John Bolt uses Bavinck’s own theological method as an example.<sup>22</sup> Bolt wants to argue that “a full and proper

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1 226

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1 321

<sup>21</sup> A significant point of clarification is needed, which cannot be pursued here, in Bolt’s assertion of *sola scriptura* as a theological *method*. Historically, *sola scriptura* was thought to be a *foundational principle* of authority (i.e., the formal principle of the Reformation), which itself would *ground* methodology. “It is, thus, entirely anachronistic to view the *sola Scriptura* of Luther and his contemporaries as a declaration that all of theology ought to be constructed anew, without reference to the church’s tradition of interpretation, by the lonely exegete confronting the naked text” (Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* [4 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 2 63). Recognizing different degrees of authority within the church, *sola scriptura* was meant to highlight the fact that “Scripture alone is worthy of faith (*autopostolos*) and the rule of faith” (ibid., 2 104). This may not be pertinent to what Bolt intends to argue, but just how *sola scriptura* is, historically, thought by him to be itself a methodology is not clearly articulated.

<sup>22</sup> So, says Bolt, “When one considers that our modern and so-called postmodern world is characterized by a radical questioning of the very idea of God as well as a growing epistemological relativism, it should be apparent that Christian theology which seeks to tell the truth about God cannot afford the luxury of biblicism. It must face the truth question about God head on. To see that this is not a lamentable concession but a richer, more thorough approach to theological work, let us consider the example of Herman Bavinck as one who explicitly rejects using *sola Scriptura* as a theological method” (John Bolt, “*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?,” in *Reforming Or Conforming? Post Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* [ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ron N. Gleason, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008], 78).

Christian theology must have an explicit epistemology that attempts to explain universal human experience. That is to say, Christian theology must incorporate an explicit metaphysic.”<sup>23</sup> In his attempt to incorporate what he sees as the best of Bavinck’s epistemology, he does affirm, with Bavinck, that realism has its roots in the Triune God and activity of the Logos. Specifically, as he concludes his article, and in response to what he calls the (insufficient) biblical-theological approach to theology, Bolt notes,

As an alternative, I appealed to Herman Bavinck’s Christian realism, the epistemology that is rooted in the creation of all things, including the human logos by the divine Logos. All truth is from God; we participate in the truth to the degree that our intellects adequately form concepts that correspond to the things of this world including our experience of God. . . . Concretely this means that while the Bible is the final source and norm for Christian theology, the knowledge of God obtained by natural reason, reflected in the religions of the world, as well as legitimate, reasonable inferences from biblical truth, are all part of the theologian’s thesaurus of truth.<sup>24</sup>

There is more that could and needs to be said with respect to Bavinck’s approach, and a bit more will be said below. For the present, however, some critical questions loom large. Perhaps we can work our way from the more specific to the general, in terms of Bavinck’s realism.

First, specifically, is it the case that a realistic approach to universals, guided by Aquinas, can move us in the direction of a Christian epistemology?

### 1. *Aquinas’s Realism*

Though Thomas’s approach to epistemology can, in places, be a helpful guide through the morass of current-day discussions on the topic,<sup>25</sup> questions remain with respect to the role of universals in his epistemology.

As Aquinas is forced to wrestle with the problem of universals in chapter 3 of *On Being and Essence*, he adopts what has come to be called a “moderate realism.” Unlike Plato, the realist, who affirmed the actual existence of all universals, or Roscelin (and, following him and Aquinas, Ockham), who saw the universals as having no real foundation in reality, Aquinas sought to show that the universals did indeed exist in the mind. Unlike the nominalist conception, these universals had their foundation in the existence of the particulars. All of this Bavinck thus far affirms.

Aquinas further delineates three different methods of scientific inquiry, each of which was related to its particular task.<sup>26</sup> There was, first of all, the method

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. These two statements seem confused, but we need not pursue that here. To say that one must have an explicit epistemology does *not entail* that one must have an explicit metaphysic, at least not without making an explicit connection between the two.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>25</sup> For one analysis of such help, see K. Scott Oliphint, *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), chs. 7 and 8.

<sup>26</sup> What follows is taken from Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (trans. Armand Mauer; Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), 8-9.

of natural science (or physics). Herein, says Aquinas, the physical scientist is required to abstract the universal from the particular. Physical science deals with those things in reality which cannot be understood apart from "sensible matter." The first level of abstraction, which pertains to physical science, must deal exclusively with individuating matter. "For example, it is necessary to include flesh and bones in the definition of a man." The second degree of abstraction deals, not with sensible matter, but with so-called "intelligible matter" and is the method of the mathematician. Mathematics deals, according to Aquinas, with quantity which, though dependent on matter for its being, is not dependent on matter for its being understood, as is the case in physical science. "This is the case with lines and numbers." That which is abstracted in this science is not sensible matter but intelligible matter which can be understood conceptually, quite apart from its existence in reality, though it can never exist apart from the matter itself.

Thirdly, and most important for our purposes, is the science of metaphysics. It was Aristotle who maintained that metaphysical science alone exists for its own sake. Like Aristotle, Aquinas seems to see the science of metaphysics, what Aquinas calls theology or divine science, as the first philosophy. In metaphysics we reach the third level of abstraction which, unlike the previous two, is not dependent on sensible matter, either for its being or for being understood. This third level could be called separation. Herein the mind considers being itself or being as being and (here is the crucial point) it can so exist in reality. "There are objects of speculative knowledge that do not depend upon matter for their being, because they can exist without matter." Aquinas then goes on to give examples of such things: God, angels, substance, potency, act, one, many, and so on. Such things may, at times, exist in matter but need not do so. The science of metaphysics, therefore, is the science that deals specifically with being as being and consequently with the relation that obtains between being and things.

For Aquinas, being was act in distinction from essence which was potential existence or potency. Being, by definition, was pure actuality. Thus, Aquinas saw existence as at the root of the real. It is the one attribute or characteristic that is common to all things and thus is, in Aquinas's system, a transcendental notion, that is, it transcends the limitations and perfections of any and every thing. Aquinas's metaphysics, then, begins with the primacy of existence over essence. In this, it has been called an "existential" in distinction from an "essentialistic" metaphysic (the latter of which would be more in line with Aristotle). It is existence that confers on an essence its act of existing. Aquinas seeks to delineate this, very simply, by asserting that we can know what a thing is without asserting its actual existence. Because we can conceptualize, for example, a unicorn without asserting its actual existence, there must be a distinction between a thing's essence, in this case a unicorn, and its existence.

Given Aquinas's distinction between existence and essence, he seeks to show that every "thing" participates in its received act of to be to the extent that its

respective essence permits. This is the Aristotelian potency-limiting-act principle in natural philosophy translated by Aquinas into the science of metaphysics. In Thomas's metaphysics, potentiality limits actuality. This is to say, essence is potential existence. It is not in itself existence and therefore does not have existence in itself as essence. When the perfection of being, which is inherently unlimited, confers existence on an essence, that which is unlimited and transcendental becomes limited and actual only to the degree that a thing's essence will allow.

In the realm of metaphysics, Aquinas sought to consider being qua being. Yet, as Maritain has said, it is not enough, in Thomistic metaphysics, simply to say "being." Rather, we must have the intellectual perception of the inexhaustible and incomprehensible reality of this being.<sup>27</sup> What Maritain, in his attempt to be true to Aquinas, is saying is that, whereas one must begin with sense experience, and whereas our senses communicate to us imperfectly, it remains for the intellect to perfect and to organize, "universalize," that which is diverse. Thus, as we perceive that all things present to sense exist, and as we understand that it is possible to know what a thing is without making judgment as to its existence, we come to see existence as a transcendental notion distinct from essence. Thus, according to Aquinas, a being exists to the degree that its essence permits.

Because Aquinas (and Bavinck follows him here) seeks to begin with sense experience alone, he is never able to "see" being except as diverse, interspersed throughout different things in which essence and existence come together. A truly transcendental notion must include a real totality such that one is able to allow both for unity and diversity in reality itself. Aquinas's transcendental notion of being allows only for unity (of being) in the intellect, and diversity (of being) in reality, in things. The problem that we come to, therefore, is one of epistemology.

How does Aquinas claim to know a thing such that he can avoid the dilemma of both Parmenides and of Heraclitus? For Aquinas, truth and knowledge are the adequation of the immanence in act of our thought with that which exists outside our thought.<sup>28</sup> Because Aquinas (again we hear Bavinck echoing this) associated the intellect with unity and sense experience with diversity he saw all knowledge as, by nature, abstract. Herein he follows Aristotle. Because, in knowledge, the intellect abstracts from sensible reality that which does not exist in that reality as such, that is, as abstracted, we are left with the problem of how one can know that that which is abstracted is of the character of that from which it is abstracted. Aquinas's answer, following Aristotle, was to refer to the hylomorphic theory. Whereas Plato believed that the real was that which was universal, that is, the forms, Aristotle sought to "bring the forms down" into the matter itself. When one wants to know an object, therefore, the form is abstracted from the matter and, though existing in the mind as immaterial and

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (2d ed.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

immobile, and in reality as material and mobile, the form itself was analogous to, though not identical with, that from which it was abstracted. The form, for Aquinas, was that in the real (*in re*) which makes knowledge of it possible. Yet, in order to maintain his distinction, Aquinas had to maintain that that which is abstracted is not in reality as such. The problem is now coming to the fore and is summarized for us by Aquinas himself:

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the character universal belongs to nature so understood, because commonality and unity belong to the character universal. For if commonality were included in the notion of man, commonality would be found whenever humanity was found. But this is false, because in Socrates no commonality is found. On the contrary, whatever is in him is individuated.<sup>29</sup>

This is the problem. That which is in the mind (i.e., the universal) is *not in* individuating matter. The universal, however, can indeed exist in things, but only as individualized. Individuating matter can exist in the mind only as "common matter," or universalized form. Wolterstorff has expressed the problem in this way:

So also, humanity is individualized in the things and universal in the mind. Thus, when humanity is in the mind, there is something which is individualized which is in the mind. But it does not follow that humanity is universal in the things, or that there is something in the things which is universal in the things. And it does not follow that humanity is individualized in the mind, or that there is something in the mind which is individualized in the mind. To say that humanity is individualized, is incomplete, it is individualized in the things. And to say that humanity is universal, is incomplete, it is universal in the mind.<sup>30</sup>

Aquinas's epistemological problem as related to his metaphysics becomes acute at this point. How can that which is individualized in things be common in the mind and still be true to reality? We must keep in mind that Aquinas is not here affirming that, for example, human nature has many instances, but rather, that it can be many or zero. To have many instances of human nature is to have that nature in common.<sup>31</sup> Yet Aquinas affirms that "human nature itself exists in the intellect in abstraction from all individuating conditions."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, once that which is universal in the mind is "applied" to individuating matter, it loses its universality such that the nature of Socrates is entirely different from the nature of Plato.

We could summarize the above discussion by saying that Aquinas, though he sought for similarity in forms between that which is individuated in matter and that which is in the mind, nevertheless, failed to go beyond pure univocism and pure equivocism. The result is a kind of rationalism/irrationalism. That which

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Aquinas, "On Being and Essence," in *Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas* (ed. Robert Goodwin, New York: Bobbs, 1965), 48.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals: An Essay in Ontology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 146.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>32</sup> Aquinas, "On Being and Essence," 48.

is in the mind is common, yet that which is common in the mind is different in things. In other words, the meaning of the term “human nature,” if spoken of in its universal mode, is univocal. The same term, however, if spoken of in its individuated mode, is diverse, equivocal, never univocal.

## II. *Back to Bavinck*

What might Bavinck say to all of this? How indeed does he affirm the connection between that which is universal (in the mind) and that which is diverse (in things)? Fortunately for us, we need not speculate. Bavinck seems to be, at least implicitly, aware of the problem and provides a counterpoint. First, he says,

The universality we express in a concept does not exist as such, as a universal, apart from us. In every specimen of a genus, particularly individualized and specialized, however it has its basis in things and is abstracted from it and expressed in a concept by the activity of the intellect [and here he cites Aquinas]. It seems strange, even amazing, that, converting mental representations into concepts and processing these again in accordance with the laws of thought, we should obtain results that correspond to reality. Still, one who abandons this conviction is lost.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, there is a kind of “impossibility of the contrary” notion asserted. Unless we hold to this kind of construct of human thought and knowing, we are lost. But Bavinck goes further,

But the conviction can, therefore, rest only in the belief that it is the same Logos who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two. . . . But insofar as things also exist logically, have come forth from thought, and are based in thought (John 1:3; Col. 1:15), they are also apprehensible and conceivable by the human mind.<sup>34</sup>

So Bavinck is explicit where Thomas, as far as I can tell, is not. Bavinck affirms that the connection between the universal and the particular is produced by the Logos. We will return to this later.

Consistent with the notion of universals and particulars with respect to knowledge is Thomas’s principle of participation, which Bavinck seems content to adopt. So, Bavinck explains his amenability to Thomas this way,

Says Thomas: just as we look into the natural world, not by being in the sun ourselves, but by the light of the sun that shines on us, so neither do we see things in the divine being but by the light that, originating in God shines in our own intellect. Reason in us is that divine light; it is not itself the divine logos, but it participates in it. To be (*esse*), to live (*vivere*) and to understand (*intelligere*) is the prerogative of God in respect of his being (*per essentiam*), ours in respect of participation (*per participationem*).

In order to get straight what Bavinck, following Thomas, means by “participation,” a word about Thomas’s view should help clarify.

<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:231

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Note Bavinck’s reference to John 1:3, more of which below.

### 1. *Aquinas on Participation*

Thomas proposes two types of principles of participation, both of which relate themselves to his notion of analogy. Neither of these is defined as such by Thomas, but clearly reside in his writings. The first type is what has been called the “analogy of proper proportionality.” Aquinas seeks in the analogy of proper proportionality to distinguish between the same attributes in different things.<sup>35</sup> He denies univocal predication on the basis of God’s coterminous character.<sup>36</sup> Because that which is ascribed to creatures or creation is ascribed in a divided and particular way, and because the same ascription would be simple and universal in God (because God is what he thinks and thinks what he is), such ascription to both cannot be univocal. But Aquinas also must deny equivocal predication.<sup>37</sup> There is indeed a certain likeness of creation to its Creator, though such likeness, as was said, cannot be univocal. Equivocation would show us that though one name is predicated of several things, we cannot infer from one of those things the knowledge of the other because there is, by definition, no point of reference. We could, therefore, understand nothing of God by creation, which for Aquinas is patently false.

Thus, Aquinas proposed his doctrine of analogy. That which is predicated of God and man actually exists in both to the extent that their respective essences permit. To say that “God is good” and that “man is good” is to say that God is good in proportion to his received act of to be (which in God is his essence, of which more below) and that man is good with respect to his potential existence. Or to use another example, God knows as deity, man knows as man. The proportion that obtains between being and essence determines the truth of that which is predicated of each thing.

At this point we can see something here of Aquinas’s so-called “scale of being.” Every thing is limited in being according to its essence. Every characteristic of a thing is further limited as to the proportion that obtains between its being and its essence. Thus, potential existence limits the received act of to be (existence) and the combination of the two in some thing limits the attributes and perfections of that which is. We could say then that angels know as angels are, men know as men are, and there is a proportion (1) between knowledge in angels as they exist and (2) between knowledge in angels and knowledge in men.<sup>38</sup> Knowledge, therefore, cannot be predicated in the same identical way when speaking of an angel’s knowledge and a man’s knowledge, the existences of such being proportional to their respective essences.

So far, however, the type of analogical “participation” of which Bavinck speaks does not obtain. There is a tension internal to this Thomistic doctrine that

<sup>35</sup> Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy is found, among other places, in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae Latin Text, English Translation, Introduction, Notes, Appendices & Glossary* (60 vols., London and New York: Eyre & Spottiswoode and McGraw-Hill, 1964), vol. 1, q. 13, and, for our purposes here, in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (4 vols., trans. Charles J. O’Neil, Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1957), 1.124

<sup>36</sup> See *Summa Contra Gentiles*, vol. 1, ch. 32

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*, vol. 1, ch. 33

<sup>38</sup> G. B. Phelan, *Saint Thomas and Analogy* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1941), 24

has caused some controversy among his interpreters but is, nevertheless, crucial to his metaphysics. Simply stated (and on this all seem to agree) the analogy of proper proportionality cannot apply to God and his relations to the world. The reason for this is that the analogy of proper proportionality derives its basis from the proportion that obtains between essence and existence. But in God no such proportion obtains. God is Pure Act. His essence is his existence. Unlike any other thing, it belongs to the very essence of God to exist. How, then, can a real analogy be predicated of, for example, men, in which every act of existence is limited by essence, and God, in which essence and existence are identical and completely exhaustive one of the other? It seems that there must be a second kind of analogy introduced that will account for One in whom essence and existence are identical.

Such an analogy has been called “analogy of intrinsic attribution” and can be seen, for example, in the following statement from Aquinas:

Such words apply to God and creatures neither univocally nor equivocally but by what I call analogy (or proportion). This is the way a word like healthy applies to organisms (in a primary sense) and to diets (as causing health) or complexions (as displaying it). Whatever we say of God and of creatures we say in virtue of the relation creatures bear to God as to the source and cause in which all their creaturely perfections pre-exist in a more excellent way. In language, the equivocal presupposes the univocal. But in causation the univocal presupposes the non-univocal. Non-univocal causes cause entire species, in the way the sun helps generate the whole human race. Univocal causes cause individuals of the species (in the way men reproduce men). Causes of individuals presuppose causes of the species, which are not univocal yet not wholly equivocal either, since they are expressing themselves in their effects. We could call them analogical. In language too all univocal terms presuppose the non-univocal analogical use of the term being.<sup>39</sup>

Note the absence (conceptually, not terminologically) of any proportionality in the description above. Such is the case because Aquinas is now attempting to do justice to analogical knowledge with respect to the Creator. This analogy of intrinsic attribution, therefore, has as its basis, not proportionality but *causality*. The relation of creature to God in the above quote is a causal relation, yet is proposed as an analogical relationship. Because the definition of potential existence is that which makes a thing what it is, what is of the essence of a thing must be possessed fully by that thing. For example, it is impossible for man to be partly human. It follows, then, for Aquinas, that existence is not intrinsic to created being and therefore must be caused by One in whom essence and existence are identical. The analogy of intrinsic attribution becomes, then, in one sense, the basis for analogy of proper proportionality.

Analogy of intrinsic attribution, then, will assure us that between limited beings of our direct experience, in whom there is a real relation between essence and existence and a conceivable being in whom there is no such real relation, but identity of essence

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation* (trans. Timothy McDermott; Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1989), 32.

and existence, there is still real similarity. By our analogy of proper proportionality we can then assert of this latter being, as actually intrinsically possessed, in an unlimited way, all those perfections that we found proportionately in finite beings of our actual experience, with an assurance that only an analogy of attribution can provide.<sup>40</sup>

All of this is simply to say that if Bavinck affirms the Thomistic notion of the relationship of knowing with respect to God and man, what he is, in reality, affirming is (to oversimplify) that God is the cause of it. Our “participation” in knowledge, therefore, between God and man is rooted in the fact that the God who knows also causes his human creatures to know as well. As Bavinck states it, again following Aquinas, our reason is the light that participates in the divine Logos; it participates by virtue of the causal relationship. We will return to this point, as well, below.

One final, critical point needs consideration before we look more specifically at the Logos principle, as that principle is given to us in Scripture (specifically in the Prologue to the Gospel of John), and that point is the one we began with above. The more general point, highlighted by the review of Vos, with respect to Bavinck’s realism, is that it “is the same theory of knowledge that has been set forth in this country by the late Dr. McCosh.” That is, Bavinck’s realism is, if not identical with, certainly within the same family of, Common Sense Realism.

## 2. *Reidian Realism*

Without moving too far afield, we can perhaps summarize the tenets of such an approach by way of its founder, Thomas Reid. According to Reid, a philosophy of common sense has at least the following four characteristics:

- (1) First, it is “purely the gift of heaven,” not learned or acquired by education.<sup>41</sup>
- (2) Second, it is not merely a practical gift, but has a theoretical or speculative focus as well—not only does it make us “capable of acting with common prudence in the conduct of life,” it make us “capable of discovering what is true and what is false in matters that are self-evident” when they are “distinctly apprehended.”<sup>42</sup>
- (3) Third, the possession of such common sense entitles us “to the denomination of reasonable creatures.”<sup>43</sup>
- (4) Fourth, and most important, Reid argues that common sense, and common sense alone, judges self-evident truths.<sup>44</sup>

According to Reid,

We ascribe to reason two offices, or two degrees. The first is to judge of things self-evident; the second to draw conclusions that are not self-evident from those that are. The first of these is the province, and the sole province of common sense; and

<sup>40</sup> Charles A. Hart, *Thomistic Metaphysics: An Inquiry into the Act of Existing* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), 42.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Powers of the Human Mind; To Which Are Added, An Essay on Quantity, and An Analysis of Aristotle's Logic* (London: Printed for Thomas Tegg; R. Griffin & Co., 1827), 276

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

therefore it coincides with reason in its whole extent, and is only another name for one branch or one degree of reason.<sup>45</sup>

It is important to notice here that what Reid describes is what has come to be called classical foundationalism. Classical foundationalism asserts that there are two kinds of beliefs—those that are self-evident (and then some would include other kinds of beliefs such as evident to the senses, incorrigible, etc.), and those that are inferred from the former.<sup>46</sup>

If it is indeed the case that Bavinck's epistemology is a realism, which itself is in the neighborhood of Reid's approach, then there are serious questions that need to be asked. Perhaps the best critique of a Reidian approach to epistemology can be found, not in a critique of epistemology per se, but rather in a critique of an apologetic approach which, it is argued, has its roots deeply embedded in Reid's Common Sense philosophy.

In his excellent essay, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,"<sup>47</sup> George Marsden attempts to show the (partial) historical progression in which scholarship has divorced itself from Christianity, beginning in the eighteenth<sup>48</sup> and into the nineteenth centuries. One of the key elements in this progression was the adoption (as well as the consequent failure) in evangelical apologetics of Reid's Common Sense philosophy. The primary reason for this failure, according to Marsden, was that it was never able to provide a ground, or foundation, for its most basic principles; it was never able to account for its understanding of "common sense" itself.

As Marsden follows the historical progression up to the middle of the nineteenth century, he notes the inability of evangelical apologetics to deal with the destructive elements of Darwinism. Marsden's central question, given such an inability, is this: "What . . . about this mid nineteenth-century American evangelical apologetic made it particularly vulnerable to onslaughts of the scientific revolution associated with Darwinism?"<sup>49</sup> Now the "mid nineteenth-century American evangelical apologetic" of which Marsden speaks is that promoted by, among others, Mark Hopkins, Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>46</sup> This brings up an entire contemporary discourse that cannot be pursued here. Alvin Plantinga has developed an ingenious and fascinating epistemological method that has, at its root, a Reidian approach to knowledge. In its initial stages, Plantinga designated his approach as a "Reformed epistemology," and considered himself to be in the general territory of the approaches of Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, and Barth. For more on this, see K. Scott Oliphint, "Epistemology and Christian Belief," *WTJ* 63 (2001): 151-82; Oliphint, "The Old New Reformed Epistemology," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 207-19.

<sup>47</sup> Ironically, this essay by Marsden, which calls into question the cogency of a Reidian epistemology, is found in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff; Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that Marsden sees Jonathan Edwards as the only one among the specified group who saw the necessity of grounding common sense beliefs in biblical revelation. See *ibid.*, 247.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

B. B. Warfield. With regard to the approaches of these men, says Marsden, “Common-Sense philosophy was the starting point.”<sup>50</sup>

An apologetic with its roots in Reid’s Common Sense philosophy means that one would begin with the “immediate, noninferential beliefs . . . as Reid proposed, such as the existence of the self, the existence of other personal and rational beings, the existence of the material world, the relationship of cause and effect, the continuity of past and present.” These were called by Reid, “principles of common-sense.”<sup>51</sup> In defending Christianity, those who adopted this philosophy began by attempting to show how the basic truths and principles of Christianity could fit within the already established truths of common sense. In other words, they would argue, belief in God can fit with other, common sense beliefs that we all already have (which, we should note, is just another way to phrase Plantinga’s argument for theistic belief as properly basic).

Without reproducing Marsden’s penetrating article, we should note carefully his analysis of the failure of the Reidian (via Hopkins et al.) approach. As Hodge (following Reid) remarked in stating his assumptions, common sense truths were “given in the constitution of our nature.” Having been so purposely designed, they could be relied on with perfect security. This is because Reid himself argued that it is possible to establish once for all a universal code of agreed-upon common sense principles.<sup>52</sup> So, asserted Hodge, the design of nature was assumed to involve the creation of a single universal human nature. Hence, the presumption made by Hodge and others was that common sense principles were universal and unalterable.

But there are serious problems with Reid’s assumption. For example, when Darwinism came on the scene, one of its most serious challenges was that it could retain its evolutionary principle without recourse to theism. The problem was not so much that Darwinism needed atheism, which would have been easier (because more explicit) to deal with, but rather Darwinism needed only agnosticism. In other words, it was not that Darwinism had to contend, “There is no God, but there is design,” but only, “We see design in everything, though we are not sure whether or not God exists,” which is far less radical (and thus more challenging) than blatant atheism. So Darwinism challenged Christian theism’s contention of the certainty of God’s existence by postulating agnosticism along with a thesis for design. Tragically, those who adopted Reid’s philosophy could only respond by positing that Darwin’s position excluded an intelligent Designer, which was all too obvious even to need asserting.<sup>53</sup> As Marsden points out, all that Hodge (for example) could do in the face of Darwinism was assert that large parts

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 235

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 243 Plantinga has not gone so far as Reid in assuming that there is a universal code of principles. Some, however, have seen that such is exactly what Plantinga must affirm with regard to theistic belief if he wants to include them in the so-called “paradigm cases” of properly basic beliefs. See Mark S. McLeod, “The Analogy Argument for the Proper Basicity of Belief in God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 21 (1987): 101–38.

<sup>53</sup> Marsden, “Collapse,” 243–44.

of the population still believed in an intelligent Designer. What, then, would happen to this “defense” when the next generation would show belief in an intelligent Designer to be far from universal?

Most damaging to the philosophy of common sense, therefore, and, according to Marsden, the fatal blow to Reidianism, was demonstrated in the nineteenth century in the apologetic responses to the introduction of Darwinism; and the fatal blow is summarized by Marsden in this way: “Common sense could not settle a dispute over what was a matter of common sense.”<sup>54</sup>

Common Sense philosophy, therefore, when tried in the fire of apologetic methodology, and thus also of epistemology, failed in its attempt to defend the truth of Christianity in the face of a hostile science. In other words, the problem with a strict Reidian approach to epistemology is that there is no way, no method or mode, by which one might be able to determine just what beliefs are common and what beliefs are not. One man’s properly basic belief, therefore, could easily be another man’s irrationality. How might we address this problem?

Given Bavinck’s (good and proper) appeal to the Logos as the fundamental principle of knowledge, we need, at least initially, to attempt to discern what the Logos principle is, biblically, in order, further, to ascertain if that principle is consistently applied in Bavinck. Once we understand what the Logos principle is, we can then begin to shore up Bavinck’s realistic approach to epistemology by application and implementation of that principle.

### III. *The Logos Principle*

The Logos principle has a long and varied history in the flow of western thought. This makes it all the more difficult to employ, given that so much philosophical and theological baggage is attached to it. For the Stoics, the Logos was thought to be the divine order of the universe; for Neoplatonists it was that which regulates the material world. Without question, the Logos principle significantly influenced theological development from the first century A.D. on.

Without rehearsing that history, perhaps we can get something of the flavor of that influence by noting part of Van Til’s “Response” to Arthur Holmes in

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 244. Plantinga was not unaware of this problem. In assessing how we might find criteria sufficient to determine which beliefs are properly basic and which are not, Plantinga says: “And hence the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, inductive. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic on the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously not properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples” (Alvin Plantinga, “Rationality and Religious Belief,” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* [ed. Stephen M. Cahn and David Shatz; New York: Oxford University Press, 1982], 276). At least one of the reasons for this is that common sense beliefs were thought to function as *principia*, i.e., basic and fundamental principles of knowledge itself. But it was “common” knowledge that common sense beliefs were only generally common and not absolutely so. Therefore, there was no criterion by which to determine which views were and which were not “common sense.” Or, to say it another way, since these beliefs were thought to be on the level of *principia*, there was no way to give a rationale for such common sense beliefs.

*Jerusalem and Athens* Holmes had pointed out in his essay that the Logos principle played a central role in much of ancient and medieval theology. As a matter of fact, pertinent to our overall concern, Holmes remarks the following

Again we may learn from the medievals. The strength of those who held to a realistic theory of universals lay in their recognition that meaning and ordered unity are intrinsic in God's creation. By contrast the weakness of the nominalists lay in their neglect of this, for from the perspective of God and creation there are no bare facts devoid of relation to other bare facts or to the purposes of God. Things are as they are by and for the Logos of creation. On the other hand the weakness of the realists lay in *assuming that the God-given meaning of things is objectively accessible to every rational mind by virtue of our human potentiality, and that the subject-role of the individual knower makes no difference to his understanding.* By contrast the strength of Ockham lay in his separating the content of faith from the logical necessities of objective reason.<sup>55</sup>

Van Til uses this mention of the Logos in Holmes's article to press him on his own consistency

It was by means of his Logos doctrine, wasn't it, Arthur, that Justin effected a union between Greek philosophy and Christianity? The Logos doctrine of his time was, says B. B. Warfield, 'in its very essence cosmological in intention: its reason for existence was to render it possible to conceive the divine works of creation and government consistently with the divine transcendence: it was therefore bound up necessarily with the course of temporal development and involved in a process in God. The Logos was in principle God conceived in relation to things of time and space. God, therefore, not as absolute, but as relative. In its very essence, therefore, the Logos conception likewise involved the strongest subordinationism. Its very reason for existence was to provide a divine being who does the will of God in the regions of time and space, into which it were inconceivable that the Invisible God should be able to intrude in his own person. The Logos was therefore necessarily conceived as reduced divinity—divinity, so to speak, at the periphery rather than at the center of its conception. This means, further, that the Logos was inevitably conceived as a protrusion of God, or to speak more explicitly, under the category of emanation. The affinity of the Logos speculation with the emanation theories of the Gnostics is, therefore, close.'<sup>56</sup>

Given the above, and Bavinck's employment of the Logos principle in his epistemology, it seems clarity is needed on just what that principle entails. That question can only be answered if we understand just what exactly Scripture

<sup>55</sup> E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 435, my emphasis. The question to be asked, but which cannot be pursued here, is, given Holmes's analysis, whether Bavinck's realism assuming as it does that it is God-given, also assumes that the meaning of things is objectively accessible to every rational mind by virtue of our human potentiality, and that the "subject-role of the individual knower makes no difference to his understanding."

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 441. Van Til's quote comes from Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930), 19-20.

teaches with respect to the Logos.<sup>57</sup> We find that teaching focused for us in the Prologue to John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:1-5, 9-11 ESV)

In order properly to understand just what it is that the Logos does, *as Logos*, and how best to articulate his “enlightening,” or the “light of nature,” we need to look briefly at the Prologue to John's Gospel.<sup>58</sup> Specifically, the verses in the Prologue that give rise to discussions about the “light of nature” are vv. 4 and 9. What does John mean when he affirms that the Logos “was the light of men” (v. 4) and that he “enlightens everyone” (v. 9)? Any answer to that question will determine, to a large extent, the activity of the Logos and the meaning of the “light” which he himself *is* and gives. In what follows, therefore, we will attempt to set those two verses in their context and thus to see their substantial import as we seek to set forth a biblical Logos principle.

### 1. *Vos on the Logos*

In his careful and incisive article on the Prologue in the Gospel of John, Geerhardus Vos concludes with this:

The unique feature of the Prologue consists in this, that it views the cosmical function of the preexistent Christ as a revealing function and places it in direct continuity with His revealing work in the sphere of redemption. Not that the Messiah has a share in the creation of the world or in providence, but that in mediating both He acts as the revealing Logos of God. . . . It not only vindicates for nature the character of a revealing medium through which God speaks, but also links together creation and redemption as both mediated by the same Logos. Verses 4, 5 and 10 taken together are preeminently the *sedes* [seat] for the church-doctrine of natural revelation in its relation to God's redemptive disclosure in Christ. While it is plainly taught that mankind subjectively fails to appropriate this revelation of nature, it is likewise implied that it nevertheless remains objectively valid. . . . Especially in our days, when a potent current of thought seeks to banish all natural theology from religion and to void the Christian mind of all antecedent rational knowledge of God, *the principle just formulated*

<sup>57</sup> It should be remembered here, as we have seen, that as God the Holy Spirit inspires the apostle John to use the word “Logos” for the second person of the Trinity, there was already a long history attached to the term in philosophy and philosophical theology. The true meaning of the term, however, is not to be gleaned from a synthesis of its historical use and its biblical use. God infallibly inspires the use and its true meaning in the writing of his own word.

<sup>58</sup> The Prologue is considered to be vv. 1-18 of ch. 1 of the Gospel. For our purposes, we will focus on vv. 4, 5, 9-11.

*assumes more than ordinary importance, and the old exegesis of the Prologue, in which it finds classical expression, becomes invested with a new apologetic interest.<sup>59</sup>*

In order to attempt to apply the truth of this Prologue to the particular concerns of Bavinck, and of a revelational epistemology, we need to note some of the more salient points of Vos's exegesis of this central and magnificent passage.<sup>60</sup>

The first, and more obvious, point of John's Prologue is that the Logos himself preexisted the creation. This can be seen, in part, from the opening verses.<sup>61</sup> The Logos *was* (ἦν) in the beginning. That is, when creation began, the Logos already existed. As most commentators will recognize, this opening is calculated to refer us back to the beginning of Scripture, in Gen 1. So, John continues, not only is it the case that the Logos *was* in the beginning, but this Logos is both distinct from (πρὸς τὸν θεόν) and identical to, God (θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). This much is non-controversial among orthodox Christians and scholars, and it forms the background for everything else that John will say in this Prologue.<sup>62</sup>

In v. 3, Scripture affirms that it was the Logos through whom everything was made that has been made.<sup>63</sup> As God, he himself is the Creator of all that is.<sup>64</sup> After v. 3, however, interpretations of the Prologue alternate, generally speaking, between attempting to understand whether John is referring, in a particular verse, primarily to the activity of the Logos (as incarnate) in redemption, or if he is referring to the activity of the Logos in creation generally. As the quotation from Vos above notes, he is more inclined to stick with the "older exegesis," which views the verses with which we are concerned primarily from the standpoint of the Logos's activity in creation, or in creation *as well as*, not to the exclusion of, redemption.

After John affirms the Logos to "be" before the foundation of the world, and to be the creator of all that is, he goes on, in v. 4, to tell us that life itself was in the Logos, and that this life was the light of men. The life here referred to is not

<sup>59</sup> Gerhardus Vos, "The Range of the Logos Title in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. Gaffin), 90, my emphasis. This article originally appeared as "The Range of the Logos-Title in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel," *Princeton Theological Review* 11 (1913) 365-419. The reader is encouraged to refer to this entire article for analyses and questions that, due to our more specific focus, must be excluded in what follows.

<sup>60</sup> The material that follows will be summaries and extrapolations from Vos's article, and such statements will cite the page number in Vos's article (in the Gaffin edition) in parentheses. Again, the reader should consult that article for the more careful exegetical work that grounds the material presented here.

<sup>61</sup> Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος οὕτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν (John 1:1-2).

<sup>62</sup> For a helpful summary of the "History of Religions Approach" to the Logos, as well as the notion of the Logos and "Wisdom" literature, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John. A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 27-36.

<sup>63</sup> There is some question whether δὲ γεγονεῖ at the end of v. 3 actually belongs to v. 4. This need not detain us here. Most commentators agree that it belongs with v. 3. See Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 29-30.

<sup>64</sup> According to Ridderbos, there is no strong reason to suggest that δι' αὐτοῦ must be seen as designating the Logos as the medium of creation, see Ridderbos, *John*, 36-37. What v. 3 does note clearly is that the Logos created *everything* (πάντα).

the life that comes by way of redemption, though that will be a central and important point in this gospel.<sup>65</sup> Rather, in following the logic of John's argument here, the life that is in the Logos is referring to the life that is given to all of creation. That John speaks of this life just after affirming the Logos to be the creator indicates that the life itself is the life of creation.<sup>66</sup> According to Vos (p. 65), then, the Logos is not first of all Revealer as presented to us here, but he is first of all the omnipotent Life-Giver, and, given v. 3, he is the One who gives life to all (*τάντα*).

The question now is whether or not the “light” of which John speaks in this verse is the light of redemption or of creation. The indication seems to be that the light here refers to the light that is applicable to man in God's image, that is, to all men. John has yet to introduce the specific activity of redemption as found in Christ at this point. His immediate concern continues to be the cosmic activity of the Logos. So, if we would want to paraphrase John in vv. 3 and 4, the Logos created each and every thing that is created. Not only so, but he gave everything that has life the life that it has. And, even more specifically, having given life to all things that live, he also gave life to man. To man as well, he also gives light, and he gives light to each and every one of them. The life that he gives to man is light, in distinction to the life that he gives to all else. Man's life is the life of light, given by the Logos. According to Vos (p. 75), “by far the simplest exegesis, and that which best avoids all difficulties, is to make the imperfect tense [of v. 4] refer to the point of time fixed by verse 3 and let it describe something that was true at and since that point in time. On this view the connection between verse 3 and verse 4 is so close and self-explanatory, that no particle or adverb of more precise definition is required.” In other words, says Vos, the Logos is the Logos in creation (v. 3) as well as in the activity of maintaining and sustaining the creation; he is the Logos in creation and in providence (v. 4). Life and light came from him, and continue in him.

Vos rightly notes that, had redemption rather than creation been in view here, then priority would have been given to the notion of light. It is the light of the gospel that brings new life, not the reverse. If redemption were in view, John would have said, “In him was light, and the light was the life of men.” But, following on his affirmation of the Logos creating all things, John states the opposite. In this case, the Logos mediates both life and light, *in that order*. “Here the Logos-revelation is actually mediated through the subjective life which man in

<sup>65</sup> We should note here that the Prologue in this gospel, while it has unmistakable connections to the rest of the gospel, is itself unique in its own way. John is, in this Prologue, “setting the stage” for what is to come. In so doing, he will use words, concepts, and ideas, some of which are themselves meant to be seen in the context of the Prologue and not primarily in the context of the rest of the gospel. So, in v. 4, while “life” and “light” play a major role in John's discussion of Christ and the good news of the gospel, John will use these terms in the Prologue in a way that “sets the stage” for their later use, but is not identical to those terms used after the Prologue. In other words, there is a reason that the Prologue is itself its own context within the context of the gospel as a whole.

<sup>66</sup> Note, for example, “In John ζωή is generally eternal or spiritual life, but here it is more comprehensive. In the Logos was life, and it is of this life all things have partaken and by it they exist” (Marcus Dods, TO KATA ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ: ΑΓΙΟΝ ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ, in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* [ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; 5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 1:685).

dependence on the Logos possesses. The life here naturally produces the light. The meaning here is . . . that the life which man receives carries in itself and of itself kindles in him, *the light of the knowledge of God*" (p. 76; my emphasis).

The question that must now be faced is the transition in vv. 4 and 5, from the imperfect tense in v. 4 to the present tense in v. 5. That is, John tells us that life and light *were* in the Logos from the point of creation onward, but then, in v. 5, he moves to the present tense—"the light shines in the darkness." Why the change in tense?

Most commentators today seem to think that the present tense in v. 5 is a clear indication of a reference "to the light that came when Christ entered the world and that now shines."<sup>67</sup> This interpretation takes the subsequent verses, which themselves refer to John the Baptist and his announcement of the incarnate Christ as the light, as themselves indicating the light that shines in v. 5. That is, the author moves to the present tense in v. 5 as he transitions from creation generally to, in vv. 6-8, the announcement of the coming of Christ (τὸ φῶς-v. 8) by the Baptist.

Vos, however, mounts a considerable argument for the fact that the reference here is to the Logos's activity in creation and nature, not simply in redemption. Vos offers two possibilities for the interpretation of the present tense in v. 5 (p. 77). Perhaps the present tense refers to the present "illuminating function of the Logos" (φωίνει) in distinction from his light-giving activity at creation in the past (τὸν). If this were what John meant, however, we would expect the insertion of some temporal adverb or particle (in that he would be moving from creation and providence to Jesus' earthly life), rather than a leap, between v. 4 (in the past) and v. 5 (in the present) without any grammatical indication. But no such indicator is given. The second option, which Vos prefers, is worth quoting here:

The second interpretation of the present φωίνει—the one that in our view deserves the preference—makes the Evangelist advance from the general proposition that the world when created was as such dependent on the Logos as its source of life and light, to the specific reflection, or after-reflection, that this holds true even now under the reign of darkness in the world. The light that functioned at the beginning functions also in a world which is positively darkened through sin. The only difference is that under these circumstances there is a conflict between it and the world. (p. 77)

The point John wants us to see in v. 5 is not, therefore, that the Logos has come as incarnate to overcome sin, at least not specifically (though that will certainly be a theme set out in the rest of this gospel), but that the Logos, who himself created all things and gave life/light to man, continues, even with the entrance of sin in the world, to give this light to all men. The progression in John's thinking here, therefore, is not so much historical but "logical, from the general to the specific" (p. 77). That is, the apostle moves from the general statement of the Logos and his relation to creation generally, to the more specific situation of the world affected and infected by sin. Or, to put it in terms of the background to this Prologue (i.e., the initial chapters of Genesis), John moves

<sup>67</sup> Ridderbos, *John*, 39; see also Kostenberger, *John*, 31.

from Gen 1 to Gen 3. The “and” (καὶ) at the beginning of v. 5 is sufficient to link these thoughts together in this way. Vos goes on to say that, with respect to vv. 4 and 5, “there is no place for the incarnate Christ” (p. 79). It seems likely, therefore, from the structure of John’s Prologue thus far, that he is thinking about the activity of the Logos *at* creation and *in* creation, generally, and more specifically, *in* creation even as it has been affected by sin.<sup>68</sup>

The next reference within our particular purview concerns the activity of the Logos in v. 9. Specifically, we hope to ascertain what John means in v. 9 by the relative clause, “which enlightens everyone.” In order to understand him here, the surrounding immediate verses are a help to us. We have already seen that the Baptist came to bear witness about the light, who is the Logos. The apostle makes clear that this one who is the light is the one who preexists John the Baptist. The Prologue, then, is making a connection, beginning in v. 6, to the fact both of the preexistence of the Logos (cf. vv. 15, 30) and to the announcement of this Logos who is coming. As we have seen, according to Vos, the Prologue is moving, rather seamlessly it seems, between the historic announcement and reality of the incarnation and the truth of the eternal, ontic identity of the One who comes in the flesh. This movement in the Prologue is a natural transition from the identity of the Logos as the Son of God, and therefore as God, to his identity in the flesh, as the Christ.

In v. 9, John reiterates the point already made, namely, that this Logos is the “true light” (*Ὕν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν*),<sup>69</sup> but he also notes that this Logos who is the true light “was coming into the world” (*ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον*). In this latter phrase, the question is whether John is referring to a general activity of the Logos, as one who was coming into the world generally, or if the reference is to the Logos coming as incarnate. The latter seems to be the most obvious meaning. Given that the Baptist has come to announce the incarnate coming of the Logos, it seems natural to assume that the “was coming into the world” refers to the fact that the Logos was in the process of coming as incarnate at the time of the Baptist’s ministry (cf. John 11:27). But how shall we then understand the relative clause? Is the enlightening of everyone by the Logos meant to

<sup>68</sup> When we come to vv. 6-8, however, there can be no question that we have entered the time period of the incarnation. The author turns our attention to John the Baptist, and his announcement of the coming of the Christ. Not only so, but the author links this historical moment to the fact that this Logos who is coming is himself the light. Though, given our particular focus, we need not enter that discussion here, a point or two is worth mentioning. According to Vos, introducing the Baptist brings to the fore the question of the relationship between the ontic and the historic. Vos thinks that the “cosmical light” is represented, at least in part, in vv. 7-9 (p. 80). This can be seen in that, in vv. 15 and 30, the Baptist compares himself and his ministry to the preexistence of the Logos (note the presence of *ὅτι πράτος μου ἦν* in both verses). Though in v. 6 John speaks as a historian, in v. 8 he resumes the tone of the theologian. This alternating between the present, historical situation and the preexistent, metaphysical affirmation of the Logos comprises both the uniqueness of the Prologue, and its connection to what is to follow in the rest of the book.

<sup>69</sup> There is a question as to whether *τὸ φῶς* is the subject and *ἦν . . . ἐρχόμενον* the predicate, or whether the subject is supplied from the previous verses. Without rehearsing the details, we have chosen the latter, which is given in the ESV translation. For more on these two options, see Vos, 80-82.

be connected with the incarnate coming of the Logos, or does it refer to a more general “enlightening”? Kostenberger, following Raymond Brown, chooses the former:

As the “true light,” Jesus is here presented as the source of (spiritual) light. That light enlightens every person. The present verse does not suggest universalism—the ultimate salvation of every person—for John does not speak of *internal* illumination in the sense of general revelation, but of *external* illumination in the sense of objective revelation requiring a response.<sup>70</sup>

So also, Ridderbos:

Because of [Jesus'] uniqueness, it is also true of this light that it “enlightens every person” (cf. vs. 4b). This statement describes the light in its fullness and universality. It does not say that every individual is in fact enlightened by the light (cf. vss. 5, 10f) but that by its coming into the world the light is for every human being that by which alone he or she can live (cf. 8:12).<sup>71</sup>

What is recognized by both of these commentators is the universality necessitated in the relative clause. There can be no question that John affirms that “everyone” (*πάντα ἀνθρώπων*) is enlightened by the true light. What is problematic in both of these interpretations is that the full force of the verb “enlightens” (*φωτίζει*) seems to be undermined. John does not say that the light *could* enlighten everyone, or that it *may* enlighten everyone, or even that it *will* enlighten everyone; rather, he clearly affirms here that the light *enlightens* everyone. The use of this verb, according to Vos, “clearly passes beyond the sphere of objective potentiality into that of subjective effectuation” (p. 82).

Not only so, but, setting aside for the moment vv. 6-8 as a “Johannine intermezzo,”<sup>72</sup> v. 9 seems to be closely connected, terminologically and conceptually, to vv. 4 and 5. The life, which was in the Logos, and which was the light of men (*τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων*), and which itself shines (*φαίνει*) in the darkness, is the selfsame *true* light (*τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν*) who enlightens everyone (*ὁ φωτίζει πάντα ἀνθρώπων*). In other words, if the light *just is* the light of men, even in the midst of the darkness of a sin-stained world, there can be little question, given John’s use of the verb *φωτίζω*, that the true light actually *enlightens* everyone.

The flow of thought in v. 9, therefore, seems to be that this Logos of whom John has spoken so majestically, and who is the one who is life and light for every person, is himself, at the time of the Baptist’s ministry, coming into the world. That is, the Logos is about to embark on a more specific, redemptive ministry in a way that has heretofore been unknown to the world. His “coming” is going to be a coming quite distinct from his universal presence and ministry, in that it will be a new and different “coming” into the world. We see, then, a connection, in v. 9, between the redemptive and the general, or cosmical, aspects of the

<sup>70</sup> Kostenberger, *John*, 35-36

<sup>71</sup> Ridderbos, *John*, 43

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

activity of the Logos. "In other words, the purpose of the relative clause may well be to identify the redemptive light with the cosmical light." Furthermore, says Vos,

If it be objected that such a specific reference to the φωτίζειν to natural revelation would have to be indicated in some way in order to be understood, we answer, that it is sufficiently indicated by the object πάντα ἀνθρώπον. A light of which it is said that it enlightens every man, is thereby clearly enough characterized as the general light which is common to the world as such. (p. 82)

The most natural and obvious understanding of the relative clause, therefore, is that this true Light *actually*, in terms of his *subjective* (not merely objective and potential) activity, enlightens everyone, even as the life which is in the Logos is the light of every person (vv. 4-5).

The question that remains, for our purposes, concerning the general activity of the Logos, as John describes that activity in the Prologue to his gospel, is how specifically to understand his activity in vv. 10 and 11 (since these verses, as we will see, are linked closely to v. 9). Two questions that need clarification in these verses are, just what does John mean in these verses by "the world" (ὁ κόσμος) in v. 10 and, related to that, what does John mean when he says that the Logos came to "his own" (τὰ ἴδια, οἱ ἴδιοι) in v. 11? Is the apostle, in these two verses, referring to the Logos as incarnate, such that his activity in the world and among his own relates to his incarnation, or is John referring us to a more general, cosmic activity of the Logos (or, are perhaps both in view)?

John uses the word "world" seventy-eight times in his gospel, far and away more than any other gospel. Depending on context, it can mean the physical creation (e.g., 17:5), the mass of sinful humanity (e.g., 8:23; 15:18-19), or, as is often the case, the universe as it now resides under the curse of sin (e.g., 9:5; 12:48). Given the uniqueness of the Prologue, in that the apostle sets out to affirm the cosmic activity of the Logos and to relate that activity to his now-new redemptive work as incarnate, it may help us to see how "world" is used in this section. Of the four uses of this word, in the Prologue (vv. 9 and 10), we have already seen that, in v. 9, the apostle is affirming the incarnate coming of the Logos into the world at the time of the Baptist's ministry (which time, given 11:27, would include the entirety of his earthly ministry as incarnate). As v. 9 tells us, the Logos, who is the universal light, is coming in a unique way (and, as stated in vv. 6-8, a unique *redemptive* way). The point thus far, therefore, which should not be underestimated for its theological import, is that this Logos has been active and present since the time of creation, sustaining and revealing, but is now focusing his sustaining and revealing efforts in such a way that his own might be redeemed. Without in any way undermining the uniqueness and once-for-all character of the incarnation, we should not think that, prior to his incarnation, the Logos has been inactive or absent from his creation, only to appear for the first time in these last days. To be clear, he does only appear in these last days as *incarnate*, but his incarnation is summarily his last, climactic act

*in the world*, which itself prepares the way for the new, recreating activity of his Spirit *in the world* in these last days (cf. John 7:32-39).

Given this use of “world” in v. 9, how should we understand the three uses (of four, in the Prologue) of “world” in v. 10? In order to see what the apostle is affirming here, we must also take account of what he says in v. 11, specifically the correlation between “the world” which did not know him (*οὐκ ξύνω*), and his own (*τὰ ἑδια, οἱ ἑδιοι*) which did not receive him (*οὐ παρέλαβον*). There is, obviously, a parallel here between that which did not know him and that which did not receive him. Is it the case, we must ask, however, that John is referring to the same entity or entities in both cases? Is he simply saying the same thing in two different ways?

What is clear in these two verses is that John moves from the more general, “the world,” to the more specific, “his own.” The first question, then, is whether “the world” to which the Logos came as incarnate is that to which John refers in v. 10, or if he is referring again to the more general, cosmic activity of the Logos in the world as his creation. Because v. 9 seems obviously to refer to the incarnate coming of the Logos, it could easily be inferred that the same subject, that is, the incarnate Logos, is the subject of discussion in v. 10.

There are a couple of clues, however, that indicate that John is again bringing together the cosmic activity of the Logos with his redemptive work. First, John notes in v. 10 that the Logos *was* (*ἦν*) in the world. This verb points us back to the discussion of the Logos in vv. 1-5. But why would John affirm, in v. 9, that the Logos was coming into the world (*ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον*), and then move, backwards as it were, to affirm that he *was* in the world? It seems likely that John is wanting us to understand that this world, into which the Logos “was coming” in a uniquely redemptive way, is the same world in which he already *was* and, as John says in the next clause, which “was made through him.” In other words, the clause which points us back to the creation of the world through the Logos interprets for us just what John means, and why he says, that the Logos *was* in the world. He is telling us, to paraphrase, that this world to which the Logos is coming as incarnate is the world that he created, and in which he has always been present.<sup>73</sup>

Not only so, but the more general indictment of the world, in v. 10, itself points to the fact of the presence of the Logos in the world generally, in the context of a world of darkness, which darkness, John has already reminded us, has not apprehended (*κατέλαβεν*)<sup>74</sup> the Logos. When John tells us, therefore, that

<sup>73</sup> Note Bavinck’s remarks: “It was the Son himself who immediately after the fall, as Logos and as Angel of the covenant, made the world of Gentiles and Jews ready for his coming. He was in the process of coming from the beginning of time and in the end came for good, by his incarnation making his home in man” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:208).

<sup>74</sup> Though we have not engaged the discussion over whether *κατέλαβεν* is best translated by “overcome” or “apprehend,” we take the verb in v. 5, *κατέλαβεν*, to best be translated as “apprehend,” given that either translation is, by itself, legitimate. While “overcome” seems to be the standard translation (and is the translation preferred in the ESV), nevertheless, given what we have said concerning v. 10, and given its close correlation with v. 5, *κατέλαβεν* seems best understood as

this world, as created by the Logos and in which the Logos *was*, did not know (οὐκ ἔγνω) the Logos, he is now reiterating, more specifically, just exactly how the world in darkness has responded to this pervasive and universal enlightening presence of the Logos himself. The fact that the world did not apprehend the Logos, even though his presence exhaustively permeates his creation and enlightens everyone, means, at least in part, that the world he created, because of the entrance of sin (darkness), did not know him. According to Vos, “The issue between knowing and not-knowing naturally reminds us of the religion of nature and man’s universal failure to apprehend the light supplied by the Logos” (p. 87).<sup>75</sup> The world, that is, everyone, *knows* the Logos, but everyone refuses to apprehend him. Or, to use Pauline terminology, everyone both *knows* (Rom 1:20-21) and does *not know* (1 Thess 4:5; 2 Thess 1:8) God.

One final interpretive element remains—what does John mean in v. 11 when he becomes more specific with respect to the truths affirmed in v. 10? Not only was the Logos not known by the world, which was his own creation (v. 10), but now, in v. 11, we see that his own, to which the Logos came, did not receive him. What, then, does John mean when he speaks of the Logos coming to “his own”?

According to Vos, the usage of ἴδιος settles nothing as to the import of v. 11 (p. 86). Vos sees a close connection between the words ἴδια and ἴδιοι in v. 11 and the clause καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο in v. 10. “It is certainly most natural to assume that this latter clause prepares the way for and explains the characterization of those to whom the Logos came as His ἴδιοι” (p. 87).

To what, then, do the terms ἴδια and ἴδιοι refer? Do they refer to Israel, thus to the incarnate Christ? Or do they refer to the revelation of the Logos to the world which he has made? Vos thinks the latter, and here his reasoning is subtle, as, he believes, is John’s. Four points are adduced:

- (1) There is a close connection between ἴδια and ἴδιοι in v. 11 and the clause καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο in v. 10. We can assume that καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο prepares the way for and explains the characterization of those to whom the Logos came as his ἴδιοι (p. 87). They were his own because they had been made by him. On the other view, which wants to see a reference to Israel as “his own,” the terms emerge unprepared for and unexplained.

“apprehend.” This is the translation also preferred by Vos: “Of the two interpretations of κατέλαβεν that which takes it as ‘apprehended’ in the noetic sense deserves the preference. Most of the Greek commentators take it in the other sense of ‘laying hold upon’ for the purpose of getting in one’s power. But this latter signification, which the verb undoubtedly has, falls quite short of the proposed rendering ‘overcame it not.’ . . . It is plain that the rendering ‘the darkness has not overtaken it,’ or even ‘the darkness has not laid hold upon it,’ introduces a weakening element into the context. The prelude to the tragic note of verses 10 and 11, which has been justly recognized in verse 5c, also speaks against this interpretation, while it is admirably expressed by the other” (77-78 n. 27).

<sup>75</sup> Note also that Vos argues, with respect to οὐκ ἔγνω in v. 10, that “[i]t is correlated with ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν and, in accordance with our understanding of these words, describes the culpable non-recognition of the Logos by men in the state of nature, not the failure of the world to recognize the incarnate Logos” (89 n. 54).

(2) The pointed parallelism between *ἥν* (v. 10) and *ἥλθεν* (v. 11) on the one hand, and *οὐκ ἔγνω* (v. 10) and *οὐ παρέλαβον* (v. 11) on the other hand can best be seen as a parallelism between the Logos-relation to the natural world and the Logos-relation to the world of redemption. “Our point is that the delicately shaded contrast [between *ἥν* and *ἥλθεν* as indicating the lasting cosmical relationship and the redemptive approach as a unique historical event, respectively] perceptible in the use of these two words by the Evangelist is obliterated by the other exegesis [which wants to see *ἴδια* and *ἴδιοι* as Israel]” (p. 87). The same applies to *οὐκ ἔγνω* and *οὐ παρέλαβον*. “The issue between knowing and not knowing naturally reminds us of the religion of nature and man’s universal failure to apprehend the light supplied by the Logos. On the other hand, the issue between receiving and not-receiving points to a definite, historical act on the part of the Logos [not the Incarnate Christ] whereby he aggressively made his appearance among those who were his own” (p. 87).

(3) In the presence of the highly generalized contrast between nature and redemption which furnishes the keynote to the Prologue, the appearance of Israel here would be more or less anomalous (p. 88).

(4) “The view which understands verse 10 of the presence of the incarnate Logos in the world and verse 11 of His coming to Israel encounters a difficulty when the last clauses of both verses are to be explained as marking two successive and distinctive steps in the ill-reception of the Logos. . . . How or where did the world reject the incarnate Christ, apart from His not being received by Israel? The clearly perceptible climax in the tragic note as between verse 10c and verse 11c requires that the two clauses shall not be related to the same thing. . . . Two distinct failures to appreciate the Logos, by two distinct subjects and two distinct relations are spoken of” (p. 88).

So, given vv. 10-11, we have a “twofold addition to the evidence for a cosmical Logos-function already discovered” (p. 89). The Logos was in the world made through him by nature, and the cosmos is the Logos’s own; it is his. The production of the world through the Logos is not simply a past fact. “It is a fact resulting in a continuous relationship, for only as such could it offer a reason why the world could and should, under normal conditions, have so known and received the Logos as is implied in both verse 10c and verse 11c” (p. 89).<sup>76</sup> The world would know the Logos, not by creation in and of itself, but “only if the origin of the world through the Logos established a perpetual relation of immanence in the world and proprietorship of the world” (p. 89).

But it may be that there is a way to think of the progression of vv. 10 and 11 as having a logical, historical, and theological impetus behind them. Perhaps we could think of the progression of vv. 10 and 11 in this way: the Logos, who made the world and whose the world is, not only made the world, but actually was in the world that he made. Given the darkness of sin, however, the world did not acknowledge him for who he is. Not only so, but, having come to the world which is his (*τὰ ίδια*), even his own people (*οἱ ίδιοι*) did not receive him.

Enough has been said to make at least the following assertions: (1) the Logos, who himself as the second person of the Trinity always was with God and always was God, created all that is and has been making himself known since

<sup>76</sup> Note, as Vos points out, the adversative *καὶ* before both clauses in v. 10c and 11c.

the time of creation; (2) given the entrance of sin, the light of men, which is to say the knowledge of the Logos that has been given to all men, has been received by men though never apprehended by them. Thus, God is both known (because the Logos who made man also enlightens him with such knowledge) and not known (because the power of sin is such that man will not apprehend the Logos as he reveals himself). The light that characterizes who man is—which we have seen to be actual knowledge of God by and through the Logos—has never, since sin entered the world, been acknowledged by men who remain in their sins; (3) even as the Logos has made himself known to all men, he has as well come to his own and they too have rejected him. Thus, as the apostle will set forth in the rest of this gospel, the Logos has come to be the light to those who continue to live in darkness. The “life and light” has come to be “light and life” to those who have not apprehended, and have rejected, him. As John will go on to say (in v. 12) those who do receive him, who believe in his name, all have the right to become children of God, since they themselves are born of God.

Returning, therefore, to our original question—just exactly what does John mean when he tells us the Logos *is* the light of men which enlightens every person—it seems to be the case that the light of men just is the knowledge of the Logos himself, and that such knowledge actually obtains in all who are made in the image of God. Thus, the light enlightens all of God’s human creatures. The Logos principle is not, as is most often thought, a general capacity of reason, or the ability to receive the basic, common sense, principles of the world, at least not directly. Rather, the Logos principle *just is* the knowledge of God, through the Logos, that all men, by virtue of their being created, necessarily and for eternity, *have*. We do not merely have the capacity, by virtue of our reason, to know God; we know him by virtue of his activity through the Logos.

If we couple this truth with Paul’s similar affirmations in Rom 1:18-32, we can begin to see why an epistemology of realism, even if a Christianized version of realism, is insufficient as an application of the Logos principle in epistemology.

Two points of relevance need to be stated here with respect to Paul’s teaching in the opening section of Romans.<sup>77</sup> First, Paul is clear that what all people have by virtue of God’s natural revelation is *knowledge of God*, even in the midst of a sin-darkened world (cf. Rom 1:18, 20-21, 23). There is no hint in Paul’s discussion that people simply have a *capacity* for such knowledge,<sup>78</sup> or that the knowledge of God is only for those who reason and extrapolate in a certain way.

<sup>77</sup> For more on Rom 1, see K. Scott Oliphint, “The Clear and Distinct Knowledge of God,” *Reformation 21*, [http://www.reformation21.org/Past\\_Issues/2006\\_Issues\\_1\\_16\\_/\\_2006\\_Issues\\_1\\_16\\_Articles/PCE/177/](http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/_2006_Issues_1_16_Articles/PCE/177/) (2006); Oliphint, “The Irrationality of Unbelief: An Exegetical Study,” in *Revelation and Reason*, 59-73; Oliphint, “A Primal and Simple Knowledge,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (ed. David Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 16-43.

<sup>78</sup> Note again Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:586, where he speaks of reason, conscience, and the sense of divinity as *capacities* which all of us have.

Second, this knowledge that we have is, by all accounts, a *universal* knowledge, and it is *knowledge*. That is to say, Paul is establishing the fact that, whatever else may be true about people who remain in their sins, they are not, nor have they ever been, ignorant of the one against whom they continue to sin (Rom 1:32).

This knowledge that we all have, by virtue of God's activity of revealing himself, is of such a nature that, if we die in our sins, we are able to offer no defense<sup>79</sup> for our rejection of him. Thus, the knowledge we have of God is clear and is understood by all people (v. 20). This is the case, we should note, because we are all made in his image, and thus remain in a covenant relationship with him (either as *covenant-breakers*, in Adam, or *covenant-keepers*, in Christ).

#### IV. Conclusion: Bavinck's Realism and the *Logos*

All of the above (with respect to the *Logos*), Bavinck seems to affirm, in places. But the affirmation of this surely carries implications that would disallow a realistic epistemology, for the following reasons. First, though Bavinck wants to maintain that anyone not accepting the "first principles" of knowledge cannot engage in a dialogue about such things (*Contra principia negantem non est disputandum*), surely a negation, even if in theory, of common sense principles has meaning only against the background of the knowledge of God that itself can never be erased. There is, therefore, a principle of *knowledge* that is the epistemological bedrock of anything else that is either affirmed or denied. Second, if we allow the teaching on the *Logos* in John's Prologue to inform what Paul affirms in Rom 1:18-32, it must be the case that the knowledge of God that comes to us by way of activity of the second person of the Trinity, as creator and revealer, *alone* must be the *principium cognoscendi internum* of every person. Bavinck affirms this as well, but note his language (in places):

We need eyes in order to see. . . . The *Logos* who shines in the world must also let his light shine in our consciousness. That is the light of reason, the intellect, which, itself originating in the *Logos*, discovers and recognizes the *Logos* in things. It is the internal foundation of knowledge (*principium cognoscendi internum*).

Here Bavinck seems to affirm that what the *Logos* gives, with respect to his "light," is the intellect, more abstractly conceived, so that we are able to recognize the *Logos* in things.

The confusion in Bavinck may be this: it seems in the majority of cases, Bavinck attributes to the *Logos*, not specifically the *principium cognoscendi*, but the *principium essendi*, in much the same way as Thomas Reid did. That is, if what we say about the *Logos* is that he is the originator of the intellect, and of reason, or that (as Reid says), our "first principles" of reasoning "are the gift of heaven," all we have said thus far is that God, or the *Logos*, is the *principium essendi* of knowledge. He is the one who is the *cause* of the knowledge that we have. This, we can now see from our discussion above of Aquinas and his principle of participation

<sup>79</sup> The word Paul uses in v. 20, typically translated as "without excuse," is ἀναπολογήτους.

(with which Bavinck seems to agree), is true enough. God controls “whatsoever comes to pass,” and thus is the one who ordains all things. But this is not a sufficient *epistemological* principle. What we need for an epistemological principle is not simply a *causal* principle (though that is necessary), but rather a principle of *knowledge*. And, ideally, we need a principle of knowledge that has universal application, regardless of circumstances, context, or conditions. That principle, we should now be able to see, is the Logos, and the *knowledge of God* that he provides by virtue of his exhaustive activity in the world that he has made.

In conclusion, we should reiterate here that Bavinck has said much that moves, without question, in the direction we have moved above. He has the remedy to his problems within his own system. However, to be consistent, an epistemology of realism, we should see, is not able to be sustained if what is hoped for is some kind of universal *principia* in which all must participate. Not only so, but, if we take Bolt's article as a faithful representation of Bavinck's epistemological position, then the door has opened wide for a number of false principles to be emended in the discussion. In this regard, note again, finally, Bolt's conclusion:

A strictly biblical-doctrinal approach runs the risk of appearing to non-Christians as privileged communication; a kind of gnosticism that only communicates to the initiated. In short, this approach fails to make universal claims about the gospel of Jesus Christ and makes no argument about the universally true knowledge about God that is the church's mission to proclaim to the world. As an alternative, I appealed to Herman Bavinck's Christian realism, the epistemology that is rooted in the creation of all things, including the human logos by the divine Logos. All truth is from God; we participate in the truth to the degree that our intellects adequately form concepts that correspond to the things of this world including our experience of God. . . . Concretely this means that while the Bible is the final source and norm for Christian theology, the knowledge of God obtained by natural reason, reflected in the religions of the world, as well as legitimate, reasonable inferences from biblical truth, are all part of the theologian's thesaurus of truth.<sup>80</sup>

This paragraph seems to move in the wrong direction. First, the universal knowledge of God is *not*, in the first place, “the church's mission to proclaim.” Rather, the church's mission is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people, *who themselves have the knowledge of God* by virtue of what the Logos does/is doing in and through them. There is, then, no “gnosticism” prevalent, since God ensures that all of his human creatures are “initiated” into covenant relation with him. Second, speaking of an epistemology that is “rooted in the creation of all things,” is to speak of the *essendi*, that is, the *causal* principle with respect to that epistemology, not its *content*. The fact that God (by way of the Logos), by virtue of his creation and providence, is the “root” of all things is true enough, but it does not give us an adequate account of the knowledge situation itself. Third, not only is it the case that “the Bible is the final source and

<sup>80</sup> Bolt, “Sola Scriptura?,” 89.

norm for Christian theology,” but the Bible is the *beginning* point for all discussions of theology, of knowledge of God obtained by natural reason, and for all things “reflected in the religions of the world.” These latter elements can only be a part of “the theologian’s thesaurus of truth” to the extent that we begin with Scripture *alone* as our *principium* and measure all else by its truth. We are back, therefore, to the principle of *sola scriptura* as the ground and foundation for our epistemology. Thus, it is a revelational epistemology, including as it must the Logos principle, and not a realistic epistemology, that alone is able to account for any universality of knowledge, and, more importantly, that alone is able to bring the gospel to bear on the church and on the world.



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