

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE ACCORDING TO EMIL BRUNNER AND HERMAN BAVINCK

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ABSTRACT

Several scholars have written on Bavinck's view of Scripture and revelation. However, no recent studies have been done comparing and contrasting Bavinck and neo-orthodoxy regarding the authority of Scripture. The thesis of this article will be demonstrated in four main parts. First, a summary of the background of recent scholarship on Bavinck and the issues at stake will be briefly described. Second, an account of Brunner's neo-orthodox doctrine of Scripture will be provided. Third, Bavinck's view of Scripture will be examined. Last, a response to the crisis of Scripture in neo-orthodoxy based on Bavinck's view of Scripture will be spelled out. I suggest that the doctrine of Scripture according to neo-orthodoxy (represented by Brunner) neglects the divine character and authority of Scripture leading to a low view of Scripture as a flawed human book, and the doctrine of Scripture according to Bavinck leads to a proper view of Scripture as God's authoritative special revelation because it emphasizes both the human and the divine characters of Scripture.

KEYWORDS

Scripture; Revelation; Neo-orthodoxy; Emil Brunner; Herman Bavinck.

INTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century Protestant theology has tried to recover the place of Scripture in revelation. Theologians such as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf

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Bultmann, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich, among others, wrote on the subject, but their views call for reexamination.¹ Their theology has been called “neo-orthodoxy”² and briefly, in the understanding of this movement, God does not reveal knowledge of himself through the words of Scripture, but He only reveals himself through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Scripture is seen as human record of this personal revelation of God in Christ. In other words, Scripture has been detached from revelation.³ As Avery Dulles observes, “the concept of revelation as a permanently valid body of truths communicated by God in biblical times, preserved and commented on by the Church... is widely questioned in the twentieth century.”⁴ Even today, many Christian scholars and pastors have been influenced by neo-orthodoxy, questioning whether the words of Scripture are God’s authoritative revelation or only a flawed human record of revelation. Consequently, Christian churches today have been affected by neo-orthodox teachings.

The Dutch neo-Calvinist Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) is a Reformed theologian whose insights are helpful for addressing neo-orthodoxy, even though he long pre-dated the movement. In this article, I explore the doctrine of Scripture according to Bavinck in contrast with the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian Emil Brunner (1889-1966). I attempt to demonstrate how Bavinck’s understanding of Scripture properly contributes to correcting a misunderstanding

¹ Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), ix. Cf.: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961); Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, vols. 1,3 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949); Rudolf Bultmann, “The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert Ogden (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1960); H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1974); Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol.1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951).

² According to Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, “The neo-orthodox movement was characterized by the attempt of theologians to rediscover the significance for the modern world of certain doctrines that had been central to the older Christian orthodoxy. Consequently, its proponents stood in a complex relationship to the liberalism that preceded the newer thinking.” Stanley J. Grenz, Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 63. Cf. also: David L. Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 27-40; Robert M. Montgomery, “Liberalism and the Challenge of Neo-Orthodoxy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 15, 3 (1947): 139-142; E. J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); L. Giussani, *American Protestant Theology: A Historical Sketch* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013).

³ Cf. Richard A. Muller, “Christ – The Revelation or the Revealer? Brunner and Reformed Orthodoxy on the Doctrine of the Word of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, 3 (1983): 307-319; Walter M. Horton, “Neo-Orthodox Conceptions of Biblical Authority,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 5 (1948): 42-56; Joseph J. Smith, “Emil Brunner’s Theology of Revelation,” *Landas* 20 (2006): 22-53.

⁴ Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 6. Cf.: Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 7, 64; Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 27-40; Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 107-113.

concerning the authority of Scripture in contemporary Protestant theology. It is the thesis of this article that the doctrine of Scripture according to neo-orthodoxy (represented by Brunner) neglects the divine character and authority of Scripture leading to a low view of Scripture as a flawed human book, and the doctrine of Scripture according to Bavinck leads to a proper view of Scripture as God's authoritative special revelation because it emphasizes both the human and the divine characters of Scripture.

On the one hand, Brunner was a representative and co-founder of neo-orthodox theology. In fact, it is likely that English-speaking people came to know neo-orthodoxy mainly through the works of Brunner.⁵ His theology claims that God does not directly reveal knowledge of Himself in Scripture but only through a personal and subjective encounter between Jesus Christ and the human being. The only true Word of God is the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ, and Scripture is seen as a human record of God's revelation. On the other hand, Bavinck, as a representative of Dutch neo-Calvinism, helps us to place Scripture in its proper place as God's revelation, not only a testimony of it. Bavinck wrote that modern theology totally detached Scripture from divine revelation so that Scripture "became no more than an accidental appendix, an arbitrary addition, a human record of revelation."⁶ Against this modern theology of his day (and against neo-orthodoxy), Bavinck affirms that the right view of Scripture "is one in which Scripture is neither equated with revelation nor detached from it and placed outside of it."⁷

Several scholars have written on Bavinck's view of Scripture and revelation.⁸ However, no recent studies have been done comparing and contrasting Bavinck and neo-orthodoxy regarding the authority of Scripture.⁹ The thesis of this article will be demonstrated in four main parts. First, a summary of the background of recent scholarship on Bavinck and the issues at stake will be

⁵ Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 30.

⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:381.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:382.

⁸ Cf. Anthony A. Hoekema, "Kuyper, Bavinck, and Infallibility," *The Reformed Journal* (1961): 18-22; Richard B. Gaffin Jr. *God's Word in Servant-Form* (Jackson, MS: Reformed Academic Press, 2008); Henk van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the Autopistia of Scripture," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 32-43; Jack B. Rogers; Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); Bruce Pass, "Upholding Sola Scriptura Today: Some Unturned Stones in Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of Inspiration," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, 4 (2018): 517-536; Thiago M. Silva, "Scripture as Revelation in Herman Bavinck's Theology" *Puritan Reformed Journal* 10, n. 1 (2018): 154-171.

⁹ A partial exception is the work of Eugene Heideman comparing revelation and reason in Brunner and Bavinck. Cf. Eugene P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E Brunner and H Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959).

briefly described. Second, an account of Brunner's neo-orthodox doctrine of Scripture will be provided. Third, Bavinck's view of Scripture will be examined. Last, a response to the crisis of Scripture in neo-orthodoxy based on Bavinck's view of Scripture will be spelled out.

1. A BRIEF SUMMARY IN RECENT BAVINCK SCHOLARSHIP

Anthony Hoekema describes Bavinck as a man of balance. As a Reformed theologian he always remained faithful to the authority of Scripture, but at the same time, he sought "to avoid one-sidedness, and to do justice to all aspects of the truth."¹⁰ Hoekema says that, for Bavinck, Scripture describes "the history of God's revelation; it reports only what belongs to that revelation; the purpose of its history is to enable us to know God in His seeking of and coming to mankind."¹¹ For Hoekema, Bavinck correctly does not restrict revelation to Scripture but he also does not deny Scripture as the revealed Word of God.

John Bolt refers to Bavinck's use of the metaphor of "two books" to explain his view of Scripture. For Bavinck God reveals knowledge of himself in two books: one is nature (general revelation) and the other is Scripture (special revelation). As Bolt states, "both books speak the same language and point to the same God... [and that] to know our sin and salvation we need the additional special revelation given in Scripture."¹² Therefore, according to Bolt, Scripture is a book of God's revelation and it must be studied within the realm of special revelation.

Richard Gaffin argues that Bavinck does not separate the person of Christ from the Word of Scripture as if one was more revelation than the other or one has more authority over the other. Bavinck's emphasis is on "the close, inner bond between Christ and Scripture, giving rise to the servant-form of the latter, and the indivisibility of divine and human elements in Scripture... [Scripture is not just an] accidental addendum to revelation."¹³ According to Gaffin, while Christ has authority in himself as the incarnate Word of God, the Bible also has the authority of God as the Word that became Scripture. As Bavinck says, "The Word (*logos*) has become flesh (*sarx*), and the Word has become Scripture; these two facts do not only run parallel but are most intimately connected."¹⁴ The servant-form of Scripture does not contradict its authority as divine revelation. However, one needs to be careful not to equate Christ and revelation as neo-orthodoxy did; Christ is revelation, but revelation is not restricted to Christ.

¹⁰ Hoekema, "Kuyper, Bavinck, and Infallibility," 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² Bolt, "Getting the 'two books' straight," 321.

¹³ Gaffin, *God's Word in Servant-Form*, 80, 57.

¹⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 434.

Henk van den Belt states,

Bavinck understands the *autopistia* of Scripture as the objective counterpart of the *testimonium internum*... God's objective revelation in Scripture has an inherent power to convince and triumph over the world. This power only becomes effective through the work of the Spirit in the hearts of believers.¹⁵

This implies that the same Spirit who inspired the authors of Scripture also gives believers an internal witness to Scripture.

Jack Rogers and Donald McKim in *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* understand that Bavinck's theology was a reaction against Reformed scholasticism and that his view of Scripture was functional instead of philosophical. They affirm that Bavinck, along with Kuyper, "reforged their links with the Reformed tradition."¹⁶ Rogers and McKim point that Bavinck, "perpetuated a theological method which, particularly with regard to Scripture, followed the line of Augustine and the Reformers rather than that of the post-Reformation scholasticism preferred by the Princeton theology."¹⁷ Although Rogers and McKim mistakenly conclude that Bavinck's focus was not on the human form of Scripture but only on its divine content, they correctly affirm that, with respect to the doctrine of organic inspiration Bavinck "was attempting to do full justice to both the divine and human in Scripture as Augustine and Calvin had with the concept of accommodation."¹⁸

Bruce Pass provides a sketch of Bavinck's doctrine of inspiration of Scripture and tackles the disagreement between Rogers and McKim and Richard Gaffin over whether or not Bavinck upheld the concept of biblical inerrancy. According to Pass, holding to the concept of organic inspiration and the notion of an Augustinian inerrancy, "Bavinck affirms that Jesus did not err in what He taught and affirms that the same may be said of Scripture."¹⁹ Thus, Scripture is the final authority for faith and practice. As I have argued elsewhere, Bavinck's doctrine of organic inspiration provides a Reformed basis to deal with Scripture as revelation because it gives Scripture its correct place as God's complete special revelation.²⁰

¹⁵ Henk van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck and Benjamin B. Warfield on Apologetics and the Autopistia of Scripture," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 42.

¹⁶ Cf. Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 380-399; Richard Gaffin, "Old Amsterdam and inerrancy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44, n. 2 (1982): 250-289.

¹⁷ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 389.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 392. See also Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, 435.

¹⁹ Pass, "Upholding Sola Scriptura Today," 536.

²⁰ Silva, "Scripture as Revelation in Herman Bavinck's Theology," 156.

Therefore, it is clear from the scholarship mentioned above that Bavinck holds a high view of Scripture as God's inspired revelation. Now we turn to comparing and contrasting Brunner's doctrine of Scripture with Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture in order to demonstrate how Bavinck's understanding of Scripture properly contributes to correcting a misunderstanding concerning the authority of Scripture in the neo-orthodox theology.

2. EMIL BRUNNER ON THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

In order to understand Brunner's concept of Scripture, we need to understand his dialectical theology and how it was the basis for such doctrine. Brunner argues that only through dialectic can the Word of God be understood. Dialectic is the process of thought or argument that involves contradictions and resolutions, sometimes in the form of questions and answers. It states that between God and the world there is a great void where the fact is not possible to prove by human reason. In this way, dialectical theology does not seek to reconcile God and humans, but to reinforce the contrast and paradox between God's transcendence and human weakness. Its main characteristic is to emphasize the transcendence of God in relation to humans and the world; it is a theology that works with dialectic oppositions.²¹

Dialectical theology is a way of doing theology that rejected the notion of God as an object accessible to human capacities and "domestication" by reason, feeling, morality or spirituality. Our speech about God depends on the grace of God. Divine revelation, like the burning bush drawing Moses towards it, is to be approached in fear and trembling, pointing beyond itself. Scripture functions as this pointing finger. . . Dialectical theology declines any claim of human enlightenment or rationality to define God. It also refuses to allow a deification of any text or institution, albeit Scripture or church. They may "become" witnesses to God as the Spirit acts.²²

Theology, therefore, can never be anything other than an attempt to transcribe, in some way, the controversy between the Word of God and the thought of man. It is for this reason that Brunner says that human intellect is unable to solve men's problems. Thus, the starting point of human knowledge is not his own being but God's revelation. Based on his dialectical theology, Brunner developed a theology of personal correspondence between man and God. In

²¹ Cf.: David Andrew Gilland, *Law and Gospel in Emil Brunner's Earlier Dialectical Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013); Timothy Bradshaw, "Dialectical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 255-258; Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947).

²² Bradshaw, "Dialectical Theology," 257.

his theology, man is a responsible being who is able to respond. And the revelation happens when God gives his answer, through his self-manifestation.

According to Brunner's dialectical theology, Scripture is only a witness of the revelation but not revelation itself. Brunner believes that "the orthodox view of the Bible... is an absolutely hopeless state of affairs."²³ He writes,

Jesus, the Christ, meets us as the true Word of God in the witness of the Scriptures. We do not believe in Jesus the Son of God because the Bible teaches this, but we believe in the Bible because, and in so far as, through it we have come to know Jesus as the Christ. The Bible is not the authority, on the basis of which we believe in Christ, but the Bible is the means, which shows us and gives us the Christ.²⁴

According to Brunner, revelation is not a communication of truths and doctrines, but the person of Jesus Christ, "the man in whom God Himself meets us."²⁵ Against the traditional view, Brunner describes Scripture and revelation not as communication of truths about God but as God's self-communication. Revelation is Jesus Christ himself, Brunner claims:

He is not a "Word"; He is not "speech", or a summary of sentences like the prophetic utterances; and it is this very fact which is joyfully proclaimed: that for this very reason, just because He is quite different from a speech, namely, God Himself present, acting in His own Person, that He is the consummation of the revelation of God. For what the prophets could "only" say, towards which their word could "only" point, as something which was yet to come, a Perfection yet to be realized in the future has now happened: Emmanuel, God with us. God Himself, not only a Word about Him, is now here.²⁶

For Brunner, therefore, all impersonal terms used to describe God, the one who is transcendent, are inappropriate. Thus, the truth revealed about God happens during the crisis generated by the encounter between God and the human person in which God speaks and the person responds. According to Brunner, revelation are facts, not words.²⁷

²³ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), 291.

²⁴ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption: Dogmatics*, vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949), 342.

²⁵ Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 1, 15. See: Emil Brunner, *The Divine Human Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943); *Truth as Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1964); *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946).

²⁶ Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 1: 23.

²⁷ Richard Muller writes that for Brunner the traditional orthodox theology "failed to grasp this great conception in the Johannine prologue, the Word made flesh, and held to the superseded OT view of Word as the revelation of doctrine." And Muller further concludes that according to Brunner, "in the advent of Jesus all spoken words about God... are manifest as indirect revelation, as witness to the

For Brunner, “Scripture is an absolute authority in so far as in it the revelation, Jesus Christ himself, is present here.”²⁸ That means that the text of Scripture may have more or less authority depending on whether Christ is present there or not. Brunner separates the testimony of Christ and Christ the Revealer, Scripture and revelation. He writes, “although the connection between the testimony of Christ and Jesus Christ Himself is very close, they are not identical. Jesus is not the testimony, but He is the revelation.”²⁹ Scripture only becomes the Word of God when Jesus Christ, the Revealer in person, speaks and reveals himself.

According to Brunner, Scripture is “a word inspired by the Spirit of God; yet at the same time it is a human message; its ‘human character’ means that it is colored by the frailty and imperfection of all that is human.”³⁰ In other words, Brunner believes that the Bible has some authority, but not the highest authority. Scripture is revelation by God and about God, but not the final and most authoritative revelation; that it, in all human frailty, still directs us to the Word of God, without being synonymous with the Word of God. Brunner claims,

We are not required to believe the Scriptures because they are the Scriptures; but because Christ, whom I am convinced in my conscience is the Truth, meets me in the Scriptures – therefore I believe. Scripture is not a formal authority which demands belief in all it contains from the outset, but it is an instrumental authority, in so far as it contains that element before which I must bow in the truth, which also itself awakens in me the certainty of truth.³¹

Brunner suggests that the Reformation principle of Scripture is inadequate because

[...] in this theology, alongside of the right view of the authority of Scripture, which distinguishes the revelation in Jesus Christ from the Biblical testimony to it, an erroneous, ‘orthodox’ doctrine of the authority of Scripture was at work, which became increasingly effective.³²

And he concludes that, “when the Scriptures are absolutely identified with the Word of God, this axiomatic authority of the doctrine of Scripture, and its absolute character as norm, are taken for granted and need no basis.”³³

Christ... Consequently, the Word of the Bible cannot be equated any longer with the Word of God.” Muller, “Christ – The Revelation or the Revealer? Brunner and Reformed Orthodoxy on the Doctrine of the Word of God,” 310.

²⁸ Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 1: 57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 110.

³² *Ibid.*, 1: 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1: 45.

It seems that Brunner offers a double position in relation to the Scriptures. On the one hand, the Scriptures are an absolutely indispensable testimony of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they are both a source of faith and of theology. But, on the other hand, the Scriptures are not verbally inspired by God and neither is the Word's infallible proposition to humanity.

Being only a witness to the revelation of Jesus Christ, Scripture "is valid, absolutely binding, in so far as it really witnesses to Him Himself."³⁴ The word of Christ is above the word of Scripture, and according to Brunner, "the word of Scripture is not the final court of appeal, since Jesus Christ Himself alone is this ultimate authority."³⁵ Brunner's approach to Scripture caused him to believe that the Reformers "were wrong, when they made the Biblical doctrine their final unassailable authority, by identifying the Word of God with the word of the Bible."³⁶ Scripture is nothing more than the source where one can meet Jesus Christ, the only authoritative revelation of God. This means that revelation occurs when Christ speaks and acts personally. The main point of Brunner's doctrine of revelation is that in Scripture God does not communicate something about himself, but himself.

Brunner does not dispute that God works through Scripture and that the Spirit uses the witness of the Bible. Brunner does not reject Scripture. He insists, for example, that "just as no one can come to the Father save through the Son, so also it is true that no one can come to the Son save through the Holy Scriptures."³⁷ And Brunner insists that no Christian faith can be preserved if one ignores what he calls "Holy Scripture." He agrees with what he calls "the fundamental truth of the Christian faith," that in the Bible "the historical self-manifestation of God is offered to faith in an incomparable, decisive, and unique manner."³⁸ The difference is more subtle: Brunner insists that "God is not a 'Book God'; what matters is not the Book, but the Person."³⁹ In this case, the Bible is simply a discursive human formulation; it is simply a witness to the real revelation. Therefore, if the Scriptures are not divine revelation, consequently they are subject to failure. It is true that Brunner did not completely disregard the Bible. He went so far as to say that it was indispensable for the Christian faith, since it was the first record of revelation and an instrument of revelation. However, from Brunner's perspective, the Christian must listen to the Bible despite the distortions and imperfections because, although Scripture is not the Word of God, one can hear the Word of God in Scripture.

³⁴ Ibid., 1: 47.

³⁵ Ibid., 1: 47.

³⁶ Ibid., 1: 54.

³⁷ Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 136.

³⁸ Ibid., 118.

³⁹ Ibid., 143.

Brunner refused to identify revelation with the words of Scripture. The Scriptures are a unique vehicle and instrument of revelation in the sense that they contain the first testimony of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. However, this meant that not everything in Scripture is of equal value or authority. David Smith writes,

[...] one must lament his [Brunner] rejection of Scripture as objective revelation in favor of its being only the record of revelation... His emphasis on subjective experience, while not as heavy perhaps as Barth's, is little more helpful. It still leaves the individual without absolutes by which to measure his experience.⁴⁰

Therefore, Brunner and the neo-orthodox doctrine, unfortunately, have "removed all of the absolutes. Thus, there is no set standard of truth, and God becomes largely a matter of one's own subjective determinations."⁴¹ For Brunner, revelation is not a book but an event; it is God's self-communication, not the communication of truths or doctrines about God.

3. HERMAN BAVINCK ON THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Bavinck holds both the human and the divine character of Scripture in balance. According to Bavinck, the human character of Scripture does not compromise its authority, because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Unlike Brunner, Bavinck claims that Scripture is the Word of God, fully human and fully divine with ultimate authority as God's revelation. He writes that "the Word has become flesh, and the word has become Scripture."⁴² In light of this statement, Bavinck can certainly help to enlighten the discussion and to deal with this problem of Scripture in neo-orthodoxy.

For Bavinck, it is true that there must be a distinction between God's revelation and Scripture because the event of revelation happened in history before the writing of Scripture, but this distinction does not mean that the former has more authority than the latter, that the event is more important than the registration of it. Although Scripture cannot be equated with revelation, it must not be detached from revelation. God first revealed himself and his works in time and history, and later this event was recorded in Scripture. However, both have the same authority, and the authority of Scripture as divine revelation is due to God's organic inspiration.⁴³ It is not only a flawed human book;

⁴⁰ Smith, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 434.

⁴³ For a description of Bavinck's view of organic inspiration, cf.: Silva, "Scripture as Revelation in Herman Bavinck's Theology," 154-171; Pass, "Upholding Sola Scriptura Today: Some Unturned Stones in Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of Inspiration," 517-536.

there is a textual revelation in Scripture. Bavinck is following the Reformed tradition here.⁴⁴

Bavinck follows the Reformed tradition by accepting textual revelation in Scripture as one form of God's special revelation, although he does not restrict revelation to propositions alone, and he also never used the term "propositions." Through Scripture, God speaks, and knowledge of God is communicated to human beings as special revelation. It consists "in the making known of truth, in communicating the thoughts of God; it is not only manifestation but also inspiration, not only deed-revelation but also word-revelation."⁴⁵ Here, perhaps, one can see one main difference between Brunner and Bavinck's view of Scripture; for Brunner Scripture is seen only as a deed-revelation but for Bavinck it is also a word-revelation that communicates the thoughts of God.

Bavinck stands with the Reformers declaring that "over against all human beings, Scripture occupies a position so high that, instead of subjecting itself to their criticism, it judges them in all their thoughts and desires... And this has been the Christian church's position toward Scripture at all times."⁴⁶ Despite all the difficulties of interpretation and the parts of Scripture that are unclear, "nevertheless, Jesus and the apostles, Athanasius and Augustine, Thomas and Bonaventure, Luther and Calvin, and Christians of all churches have down the centuries confessed and recognized Scripture as the word of God."⁴⁷ Not only a witness to the Word (Jesus), but the written Word of God.

Bavinck believed that "Scripture brings with it its own authority... [and] it is self-based and self-attested as trustworthy."⁴⁸ In fact, "Scripture came from the mouth of God through the ministry of human beings."⁴⁹ And through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, the authority of Scripture is confirmed in the believer's heart and mind.⁵⁰ Bavinck claims that "such a witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers is most clearly taught in Scripture. Included in

⁴⁴ Richard Muller writes that for Luther, Calvin, and the Reformed tradition, "all knowledge of God must rest on authoritative testimony, primarily on that of Scripture." Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 125. The Reformers believed in the necessity of a special revelation of grace, arguing that because of sin, true knowledge of God is inaccessible to human beings "apart from salvation in Christ and the saving form of revelation given in Scripture." Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.1, 125. Scripture, as Berkhof affirms, "has the divine guarantee of its truth in the fact that it is infallibly inspired by the Holy Spirit. In view of this fact it may be said that the whole Bible, and the Bible only, is for us God's special revelation." Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 10.

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 441.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 442.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 583.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 583.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 585.

objective revelation, i.e., in the person of Christ and in Scripture as his word, is everything human beings need to know God and to serve him.”⁵¹

Bavinck makes his thought clear by placing Scripture within special revelation in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, as the *principium* and the foundation of knowledge of God. Bavinck shows his high view of Scripture when he states that “it is the eternally ongoing speech of God to us” and that “Scripture was written by the Holy Spirit. . . it is the living voice of God, the letter of the omnipotent God to his creature.”⁵²

It is true that Bavinck does not limit the scope of revelation. For him, God reveals himself in nature, in history, and in Christ, but he also reveals authoritative truths and doctrines about himself through the words of Scripture, written by flawed human authors divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit. Rightly understood, Bavinck’s view is that all forms of revelation (general or special revelation) are God’s authoritative communication to human understanding, including Scripture organically inspired and divinely revealed to human beings.

The same God who reveals himself in nature and through the incarnate Son, also reveals truths about himself in the Holy Scripture. The Word of God, incarnate and inscripturate, are both forms of divine revelation. For Bavinck, human beings would know nothing about God’s revelation in the days of Israel, in history and in the person of Jesus Christ apart from Scripture. “There is no other primary principle. . . with the fall of Holy Scripture, therefore, all of revelation falls as well, as does the person of Christ.”⁵³ He writes that “for us, for the church of all the ages, revelation exists only in the form of Holy Scripture,”⁵⁴ and therefore, it must “be acknowledged and honored to that extent as an act of revelation.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid., 1: 588. It seems that Brunner has a different view from that of Bavinck with respect to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. Brunner writes, “We do not believe in Jesus Christ because we first of all believe in the story and the teaching of the Apostles, but by means of the testimony of their narrative and their teaching we believe, as they do, and in a similar spirit of freedom. Faith in Jesus Christ is not based upon a previous faith in the Bible, but it is based solely upon the witness of the Holy Spirit.” Cf.: Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 1: 33-34. It appears that Brunner understands the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit apart from the words of Scripture; that is, the Holy Spirit directly unites the believer to Christ not necessarily in connection with the Holy Scripture. Brunner calls the Scripture a human witness to Christ in contrast with the Holy Spirit who is the divine witness to Christ. As for Bavinck, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit does not happen apart from Scripture; in other words, the Holy Spirit leads the believer to the revelation of God in Scripture and illuminates his heart and mind for the truths of God revealed in His word. The Holy Spirit, in Bavinck’s perspective, works in the believer’s heart through the Holy Scripture.

⁵² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 384-385.

⁵³ Ibid., 1: 382.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1: 382.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1: 382.

4. A RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS OF SCRIPTURE IN NEO-ORTHODOXY

The crisis of Scripture in neo-orthodoxy is exactly a crisis of authority. For neo-orthodox theologians like Brunner, as we have shown, revelation is not simply an authoritative declaration of God to man, but a divine-human encounter, a confrontation and an existential dialogue. According to this premise, the Bible cannot be the Word of God; it becomes the Word of God as God speaks to us through it. In this respect, neo-orthodoxy moved away from orthodoxy, which does not deny the authenticity, integrity, historicity, and the inerrancy of Scripture. While for the Reformed orthodox tradition the Bible is infallible, the neo-orthodoxy maintains that the Bible can fail. Furthermore, it seems that neo-orthodoxy has made its peace with theological liberalism's contention that the Bible does not provide historically true accounts. Since faith is independent of history, historical facts have no relevance to the Christian faith and Christianity remains relevant regardless of the historicity or not of Creation, Fall, and Resurrection.

There is a tendency, in neo-orthodoxy, to diminish the authority of Scripture. And this occurs when one denies its divine character and inspiration and reduces its scope to a mere human witness to the revelation. In this way, deciding what is and what is not the Word of God in the Scriptures becomes a subjective task. In light of this, Bavinck can certainly help to enlighten the discussion and to deal with this crisis of Scripture in neo-orthodoxy.

Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture leads us to consider at least three things in order to tackle this crisis. First, Scripture should be understood within the realm of special revelation, as the Word of God and not just as a witness to God's revelation. The problem with neo-orthodoxy is that it tends to separate Scripture from revelation as two opposite things and to restrict revelation to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Bavinck helps to answer the question by not restricting revelation to only one form, but by accepting the various forms of revelation, in nature and history, in Christ and in Scripture; God reveals himself both in general and in special ways.

Second, understanding Scripture within the realm of special revelation leads one to a high view of Scripture as the 'inscripturated' Word of God; that is, in Scripture we have the thoughts of God accommodated and revealed in human language, and for this reason, Holy Scripture is without error, and it not just contains the revelation, but is in fact revelation. The Bible not just becomes the Word of God, but it is the Word of God in written form. Scripture always speaks

in a human way about the highest and holiest matters, about the eternal and invisible things. Like Christ, Scripture considers nothing human alien to itself. But that is why it is a book for all humanity and endures to the end of the age. It

is old, without ever aging; it always remains young and fresh; it is the language of life. *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum* [The Word of God endures forever].⁵⁶

Third, the authority of Scripture is, therefore, objective. Whether or not one is convinced of its authority, the Bible is and remains objectively authoritative as God's textual revelation. Neo-orthodoxy confuses these things and defends the subjectivity of the Bible's own authority.⁵⁷ Thus, according to Bavinck, Scripture is the authoritative Book of God in spite of being written by human writers. The excellence of Scripture's content, the effectiveness of its doctrine and its extraordinary unity are some of the characteristics of the Scriptures that demonstrate its divine authority. Brunner's focus on only one side of God's self-revelation as an encounter between the person of Jesus Christ and human beings caused him to neglect the other side of God's revelation through the written Word. If one takes Brunner's position to the last consequences, the revelation ends up becoming subjective interpretation. The disconnection between Scripture and revelation is what makes neo-orthodoxy's approach unsatisfactory. The attempt to see revelation only as an event of God's personal manifestation in Jesus Christ fails to recognize Scripture as the Word of God and to give the written Word its correct place as authoritative revelation. As Dr. Heber Carlos de Campos wrote,

[...] neo-orthodoxy's denial of historical revelation challenges the very reality of the incarnation of the Word. Besides, the denial of propositional revelation transforms interpretation in revelation, makes revelation untrustworthy, makes the reader determine what is revelation, denies God's sovereignty, suppresses faith in revelation, denies the inerrancy of Scripture, and questions the personal character of revelation.⁵⁸

As one can see, neo-orthodoxy places subjective experience above objective revelation. In this way, neo-orthodoxy is separated from the historical Christian faith not only in some minor doctrines, but also in its basic concepts. We recommend the works of Brunner – as well as other neo-orthodox theologians – for their influence and contribution to the contemporary theological scene, but the reading of these works must be done with caution and a critical spirit. The Reformed position, as seen in Bavinck, accepts the Bible as an

⁵⁶ Bavinck, "Herman Bavinck on Scripture and Science," trans. Al Wolters, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, 1 (1992): 95.

⁵⁷ Cf. John A. Witmer, "Biblical Authority in Contemporary Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118:469 (1961): 59-67; Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Neo-Orthodoxy and the Inspiration of Scripture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 116:461 (1959): 15-29.

⁵⁸ Cf.: Heber Carlos de Campos, "O Impacto da Teologia de Kant sobre a Doutrina da Revelação em Karl Barth," *Fides Reformata* XI, n. 1 (2006): 25-50.

objective truth applicable to all of life in all its content and it is masterfully appropriate to contemplate all the historical events of humanity.

The Bible is a Book of God which contains the thoughts of God, the situation of the human being, the way of salvation, the destiny of sinners and the happiness of believers. The doctrines found in the Scriptures are holy, their precepts are mandatory, their stories are historical truths, and their commands are immutable. Scripture is the voice of God; it governs every area of one's life. In Scripture, one finds everything that must be known and everything that must be done, in order that one may be saved and live in a pleasant way to God. Since we were corrupted by sin, Scripture is the only sufficient means to enlighten our hearts and minds by making us conscious and freeing us from sinful practices reprovved by God in his Word. As Kevin Vanhoozer writes,

The Bible . . . it has God for its ultimate author; it has God (Jesus Christ) as its ultimate content; it has God (the Holy Spirit) for its ultimate interpreter; and it has the church for its ultimate interpretative community... Holy Scripture is written in ordinary language but communicates an extraordinary culture: a set of beliefs, values, and practices that correspond to the new created order "in Christ." God gives us Scripture to help us understand what is in Christ and to render us right-minded and right-hearted readers... Scripture's role in the economy of revelation and redemption is that of finishing school: it is the Spirit's curriculum for uniting believers to Christ and then cultivating the mind of Christ in his disciples by imparting habits of right thinking and desiring that conform to the word of Christ.⁵⁹

Christian theology must affirm, without reservation, the sufficiency and final authority of Scripture as a complete source of information, instruction, and direction. Scripture contains the whole divine will, including the information one needs for salvation, spiritual development, and personal direction. It contains enough information, so that if we obey it completely, we will be doing God's will in all of life. Although our obedience to Scripture never reaches perfection in this life, however, there is no information we need to live a perfect Christian life outside Holy Scripture.

Ultimately, the question of Scriptural authority can be summed up in the following question: who has the last word, God, speaking through the Scriptures, or man, through his traditions, feelings, or reason? Bavinck's response was clear. He recognized the inspiration of the entire content of Scripture, and its full sufficiency and supreme authority in matters of faith and practice. In this way, all doctrines must be submitted to the authority of Scripture. All elements of worship and ecclesiastical practice must be subjected to the Word of

⁵⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Holy Scripture," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 31, 56.

God. Life itself (work, leisure, education, marriage, etc.) should be evaluated in light of the sufficient and authoritative teachings of Scripture. After all, we admit that the Reformed church must always be reforming – not because of the constant conformity to the latest news, but because of the continuous return to and conformity with the authoritative teachings of the Scriptures.

CONCLUSION

I argued in this essay that the doctrine of Scripture according to Brunner neglects the divine authority of Scripture, leading to a low view of Scripture as a flawed human book. By contrast, the doctrine of Scripture according to Bavinck leads to a high and proper view of Scripture as God's authoritative special revelation because it emphasizes both the human and the divine characters of Scripture. I demonstrated that, according to Bavinck, God reveals himself in nature, in history, in human conscience, and in Christ, but he also reveals authoritative truths about himself through the words of Scripture, written by flawed human authors divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, both forms of revelation (general and special revelation) are God's authoritative communication to human understanding, including Scripture organically inspired and divinely revealed to human beings.

RESUMO

Vários estudiosos têm escrito sobre a doutrina das Escrituras e da Revelação em Herman Bavinck. No entanto, nenhum estudo recente foi feito comparando e contrastando Bavinck e a neo-ortodoxia com relação à autoridade das Escrituras. A tese deste artigo é demonstrada em quatro partes principais. Em primeiro lugar, faz-se um resumo dos estudos recentes sobre a visão de Bavinck. Em segundo lugar, é apresentado um relato da doutrina neo-ortodoxa das Escrituras a partir de Emil Brunner. Em terceiro lugar, é examinada a doutrina das Escrituras de Bavinck. Por último, a partir da visão de Bavinck, o autor propõe uma resposta à crise da neo-ortodoxia. A tese defendida pelo autor é que a doutrina da Escritura de acordo com a neo-ortodoxia (representada por Brunner) negligencia o caráter divino e a autoridade da Escritura resultando em uma visão inferior da Escritura apenas como um livro humano falho. A doutrina da Escritura de acordo com Bavinck resulta em uma visão mais elevada da Escritura como a revelação especial normativa de Deus porque acentua tanto o caráter humano quanto o caráter divino da Escritura.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Escritura; Revelação; Neo-ortodoxia; Emil Brunner; Herman Bavinck.