

## Locating the Mystery: Bavinck and Van Til on Immutability and Anthropomorphism

By Lane G. Tipton

### INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to locate and explore the mystery regarding the way anthropomorphic language in Scripture renders the activity of the living and immutable triune God. Herman Bavinck and Cornelius Van Til enable us to grasp something of the ultimate mystery involved in how Scripture reveals the acts of the immutable triune God in terms and categories drawn from the domain of the mutable creation.

**BAVINCK, IMMUTABILITY, AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM**  
Bavinck rightly observes that the Bible reveals the self-contained being and works of the triune God in language and concepts taken from the created order. Scripture depicts the activity of immutable and impassible trinitarian persons in anthropomorphic language borrowed from the mutable and passible creature, without ascribing the mutable and passible attributes of the creature to the personal activity of God (see Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17). By way of example, when the Scripture describes the Son of God as eternally begotten of the Father (John 1:18), the Spirit of God “hovering” over the “formless void” (Genesis 1:2), or the “sound of the Lord God walking” in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8), it employs images taken from the created order to portray the personal activity of the self-contained triune God.

But such uses of anthropomorphic language in the Bible, uses that portray the activity of the immutable triune God in the idiom of the mutable creature, risk being interpreted in a way that ascribes mutability and passibility to the trinitarian persons of the Godhead in their terminal acts that fall in space and time.

Bavinck, representative of classical Augustinian and Reformed theology on the matter, avoids any such inference. The Bible’s use of anthropomorphic language forbids ascribing change to God in his relation to creation, even though on the surface it might appear to

imply such change in God. He says, “Scripture necessarily speaks of God in anthropomorphic language. Yet, however anthropomorphic its language, it at the same time prohibits us from positing any change in God himself.”<sup>1</sup> The immutability of God supplies the interior theological rationale for all of the anthropomorphic language contained in the Scriptures. Scripture’s teaching as a whole, including its theology of anthropomorphism, proscribes attributing change to God in his freely determined relation to creatures. Thus, according to Bavinck and the classical Reformed tradition, the anthropomorphic language of the Bible preserves the immutability of the triune Creator even as it depicts his actions in terms and concepts of mutability.

If the Scripture’s use of anthropomorphism “prohibits” ascribing any change to God, and the immutable triune God sovereignly relates to creatures, then “immutability . . . should not be confused with monotonous sameness or rigid immobility. Scripture itself leads us in describing God in the most manifold relations to all his creatures.”<sup>2</sup> The immutable persons of the Trinity are also living persons who enter freely into “manifold relations” to mutable creatures in time. Bavinck accordingly reasons that in relation to creatures, “There is change around, about, and outside of him, and there is change in people’s relations to him, but there is no change in God himself.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is God immutable apart from his relation to creatures, but he also remains immutable *in* his freely determined relation to creatures.

---

THE AUTHOR: Lane G. Tipton. Dr. Tipton serves as pastor of Trinity Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Easton, PA, and is Fellow of Biblical and Systematic Theology for the Reformed Forum.

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 158.

2. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.158.

3. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.158.

Bavinck, as a true theologian of the Trinity, observes that while the acts of God outside of himself are the acts of the one simple God, there is an order of personal operations within the Godhead. Bavinck affirms both that God's works ad extra are "indivisible" and that those same works manifest an intrinsic "order and distinction of the persons."<sup>4</sup> This entails that while we ascribe numerical unity to the undivided works of the one triune God, we also ascribe distinct terminal acts to the trinitarian persons (e.g., the hovering to the Spirit in Genesis 1:2 and incarnation to the Son in John 1:14). The one living and true God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—relates to creation in various ways without change or limitation in the fullness of impassible and immutable life.

Bavinck, unlike traditional Modernist and contemporary Biblical Evangelicals, does not reason in terms of a dialectic that ascribes immutability to God apart from his relation to creation, but then ascribes mutability to God as he relates to creatures. Bavinck has no place for an internal-external, immanent-economic, essence-person dialectic that attributes no change to God in the former (internal, immanent, essential) yet attributes all manner of change to God in the latter (extrinsic, economic, personal). There is no warrant for assigning immutability to God in one sense and mutability to God in another sense—a hallmark of all species of correlativism or mutualism. Bavinck's absolute and unqualified affirmation of the Creator's immutability supplies the internal theological rationale for a proper understanding of the Bible's anthropomorphic language.

This doctrinal commitment to a living and immutable triune God, who sovereignly relates to creation as such, decisively shapes Bavinck's conception of condescension. He observes, "It is a mark of God's greatness that he can condescend to the level of his creatures and that, though transcendent, he can dwell immanently in all created beings. Without losing himself, God can give himself, and, while absolutely maintaining his immutability, he can enter into an infinite number of relations to his creatures."<sup>5</sup> Bavinck affirms that God remains immutable as he condescends and dwells immanently in manifold relations to his creatures.

The triune God sovereignly enters into the movements of time and occupies all space without being conditioned by time or limited by space. Bavinck is worth citing extensively as he expands on the way that the immutable triune God relates to time and space

without being determined or changed in that relation. He observes,

In fact, God's incomprehensible greatness and, by implication, the glory of the Christian confession are precisely that God, though immutable in himself, can call mutable creatures into being. Though eternal in himself, God can nevertheless enter into time and, though immeasurable in himself, he can fill every cubic inch of space with his presence. In other words, though he himself is absolute being, God can give to transient beings a distinct existence of their own. In God's eternity there exists not a moment of time; in his immensity there is not a speck of space; in his being there is no sign of becoming. Conversely, it is God who posits the creature, eternity which posits time, immensity which posits space, being which posits becoming, immutability which posits change. There is nothing intermediate between these two classes of categories: a deep chasm separates God's being from that of all creatures.<sup>6</sup>

God enters into time as eternal without himself becoming temporal, fills every cubic inch of space as immense without himself becoming spatial, relates to mutable creatures without himself becoming mutable, and although himself "absolute being," he "can give to transient beings a distinct existence of their own." In all of this, there is "not a moment of time" nor a "speck of space" and "no sign of becoming" in God as he relates to the creature. The triune God is not determined in any way as he relates to the creature (impassibility) and he is not changed in any way as he relates to the creature (immutability), yet he has freely determined authentically to relate to the creature (condescension).

Probing the mystery a step further, Bavinck insists there is nothing intermediate between God and the creature in God's freely determined relation to the creature. God, as God, relates to man, as man, and the relational activity of the former is rendered in terms and concepts borrowed from the relational activity of the latter. This means, among other things, that God does not take to himself intermediate properties of a mutable and composite character that somehow enable him to relate to creatures in time. God does not engage in voluntary self-limitation or self-modification in his relation to the creature. There are no such intermediate properties in the Creator-creature relation. The self-contained God mysteriously relates to the creature without voluntary addition or subtraction to his being.

When we grasp Bavinck's doctrine of divine condescension—in which living and immutable trinitarian

4. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.318.

5. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.159.

6. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.158–59.

persons enter into every lock-step movement in time and indwell every cubic inch of space without change or limitation—we come to the heart of the specific mystery enshrined within God’s relation to creation. The triune God enters into the interiority of time and inhabits every crevice of space without being conditioned by time or limited by space. Living and immutable trinitarian persons entirely transcend and exhaustively indwell the temporal process, determining “the Moment” at every point without being determined by it at any point. Thus, the mystery of God’s relation to creation hinges on the way that God determines and indwells all space and time, without at any point being determined by it.

Bavinck then offers clarification regarding the phenomenon of anthropomorphic language in the Bible to depict this mysterious reality. Bavinck says, “While immutable in himself, he nevertheless, as it were, lives the life of his creatures and participates in all their changing states.”<sup>7</sup> When Bavinck says that God “as it were . . . participates in all their changing states,” he is speaking anthropomorphically. God is not ontologically temporal, yet anthropomorphic language portrays his acts in temporal phenomenological terms. God is not ontologically spatial, yet anthropomorphic language describes his acts in spatial phenomenological terms. God is not ontologically mutable, yet anthropomorphic language depicts his acts in mutable phenomenological terms. Yet, the phenomenological terms of space, time, and change in no way suggest that the ontological qualities of space, time, and change are attributes of God. Anthropomorphic language deploys images from the “changing states of the creature” to render the acts of the “immutable” triune God in such a way that “as it were” he participates in their changing states.

The mutable created phenomena deployed in anthropomorphic language ought never to be ascribed to God as “attributes” or “properties” generated or taken on by God in his relation to creation. As Bavinck says when speaking about God in his relation to creation, “There is nothing intermediate between these two classes of categories: a deep chasm separates God’s being from that of all creatures.”<sup>8</sup> God does not assume intermediate, created, mutable properties in his work of creation or in his providential act of voluntary condescension in covenant. He does not need such properties in order to become relatable to creatures. Rather, as we have seen, “Without losing himself, God can give himself, and, while absolutely maintaining his immutability, he can enter into an infinite number of relations to his creatures.”<sup>9</sup> God’s condescension to relate to the creature, and the acts that proceed from it, introduce no loss nor

gain in the triune God. The triune God remains pure act in his tripersonal relation to creation, even though that relation is rendered through anthropomorphic language in the forms of potentiality borrowed from the created order.

Bavinck supplies a concrete example of anthropomorphic language from Genesis 3:9, situating his formulation in light of texts such as Psalm 139:4 and 147:5 that teach God’s exhaustive and definite foreknowledge of all the free actions of rational creatures. Bavinck cites God calling out “Where are you?” to our first parents in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:9). How does an inquiry regarding the location of Adam and Eve cohere with divine omniscience? Bavinck expounds as follows:

In addition God is conscious of and knows all that exists outside his being. Scripture nowhere even hints that anything could be unknown to him. True, the manner in which he obtains knowledge is sometimes stated in striking anthropomorphic language (Gen. 3:9ff.; 11:5; 18:21; etc.), but he nevertheless knows everything. The notion that something should be unknown to him is dismissed as absurd.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, while Scripture portrays God inquiring of the location of our first parents immediately after Adam’s original sin in Genesis 3:9, the Scripture, including Genesis 3:9, “nowhere even hints” that anything could be hidden from his knowledge. While Scripture deploys “striking anthropomorphic language” in Genesis 3:9 regarding God’s “manner” of obtaining knowledge, it would be “absurd” to take that anthropomorphic language to imply any form of divine ignorance. Genesis 3:9 does not supply biblical evidence that God has voluntarily limited his knowledge so that he does not know Adam’s location in Eden. Bavinck labels such views an “absurd” misunderstanding of the nature of anthropomorphic language. Bavinck insists that Genesis 3:9 cannot in any sense be leveraged to teach the doctrine of divine ignorance in God’s covenantal relation to creatures, because God knows all things:

The most minor and insignificant details (Matt. 6:8, 32; 10:30); the most deeply concealed things: the human heart and mind (Jer. 11:20; 17:9–10; 20:12; Ps. 7:10; 1 Kings 8:39; Luke 16:15; Acts 1:24; Rom. 8:27); thoughts and reflections (Ps. 139:2; Ezek. 11:5; 1 Cor. 3:20; 1 Thess.

---

7. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.158.

8. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.158.

9. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.158.

10. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.192.

2:4; Rev. 2:23); human origin, nature, and all human action (Ps. 139); night and darkness (Ps. 139:11–12); hell and perdition (Prov. 15:11); wickedness and sin (Ps. 69:5; Jer. 16:17; 18:23; 32:19); the conditional (1 Sam. 23:10–13; 2 Sam. 12:8; 2 Kings 13:19; Ps. 81:14–15; Jer. 26:2–3; 38:17–20; Ezek. 3:6; Matt. 11:21); and the things of the future (Isa. 41:22f.; 42:9; 43:9–12; 44:7; 46:10), particularly the end of a person's life (Ps. 31:16; 39:6; 139:6, 16; Job 14:5; Acts 17:26; etc.)—all are known to God.<sup>11</sup>

The anthropomorphic language of Genesis 3:9 depicts the authentic relation of the all-knowing and all-determining covenant Lord to fallen Adam in categories borrowed from the created order. Stated another way, while the anthropomorphic language of Genesis 3:9 describes the relation of the immutable and omniscient triune God to Adam in accommodated terms borrowed from the mutable created realm, when understood within the broader context of biblical revelation, such language prohibits ascribing change to God's knowledge.

The triune God in his condescension to the creature is at no point determined by the creature and undergoes no reciprocal change with the creature. Yet the Scripture presents his condescension, and the acts that proceed from it, in the language and concepts derived from the changing creature. Therefore, the precise point of mystery in the employment of anthropomorphic language resides in the rendering of the acts of immutable trinitarian persons in a conceptual framework borrowed from the mutable order of creation. Cornelius Van Til, following Bavinck's lead, embraced and developed the implications of this mystery.

#### VAN TIL, IMMUTABILITY, AND FEARLESS ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Van Til, following Bavinck's guideline that the Bible's teaching as a whole, including its theology of anthropomorphism, prohibits ascribing change to God, advocated for what he termed "fearless anthropomorphism" and set that doctrine directly over against all forms of

correlativism. He says, "We shall not fear to be boldly anthropomorphic because, to begin with, we have, in our doctrines of the ontological trinity and temporal creation, cut ourselves loose once and for all from correlativism between God and man."<sup>12</sup> Again, "A fearless anthropomorphism based on the doctrine of the ontological trinity, rather than abstract reasoning on the basis of a metaphysical and epistemological correlativism, should control our concepts all along the line."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, he reasons, "We need at this point to be fearlessly anthropomorphic."<sup>14</sup> Fearless anthropomorphism, as Van Til understood it, involves rejecting every form of correlativism in God's relation to creation.

In his 1955 work, *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til makes explicit what he means by correlativism. He argued that his "doctrine of God" has been "self-consciously set in opposition to all forms of non-Christian thought which compromise or deny the self-contained character [of God] by thinking of him (or it) as correlative to the universe."<sup>15</sup> Correlativism teaches either that God changes in his relation to creation or that he is in some way determined by his relation to creation. Van Til maintained, against all forms of correlativism, that "we speak of the immutability of God. Naturally God does not and cannot change since there is nothing besides his own eternal Being on which he depends (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17)."<sup>16</sup> Van Til therefore insisted that "the attributes of God are not to be thought of otherwise than as aspects of the one simple original being; the attributes of God are not characteristics that God has developed gradually; they are fundamental to his being."<sup>17</sup> Van Til adds that "no one of the persons of the trinity can be said to be correlative in its being to anything that exists beyond the Godhead."<sup>18</sup> The self-contained triune Creator does not exist in a correlative relation to the universe, with each side of the relation characterized by mutual change. In Van Til's theology of God's relation to the world, there is no correlativism between the Creator and the creature at any point.

As Bavinck insisted that there is no "intermediate category" between the immutable triune Creator and the mutable creature, Van Til insisted there are only two categories in the Creator-creature relation: (a) the ontological Trinity and (b) the temporal creation. It is the ontological Trinity, the self-contained triune God, who relates to the temporal creature. So, when Van Til makes the traditional distinction between the "ontological" and the "economic" aspects of the Trinity,<sup>19</sup> his point is that the economic Trinity is not something or someone other than the ontological Trinity. It is the same Trinity in a

11. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 192.

12. Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), p. 94.

13. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, p. 93.

14. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, p. 73.

15. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), pp. 37, 38.

16. Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p. 25.

17. Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p. 26.

18. Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p. 69.

19. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1974), p. 32.

new relation. The economic Trinity is the immutable triune God in his freely determined relation to creation.

However, the economic works of the “ontological Trinity” are rendered in the idiom of the “temporal creation.” That is Van Til’s way of crisply summarizing the phenomenon of anthropomorphic language. As Bavinck insisted that anthropomorphic language “prohibits ascribing change to God,” Van Til correspondingly urges that anthropomorphic language prohibits any form of “correlativism between God and man.” The theological concerns expressed by Bavinck and Van Til are identical.

Van Til in his *Introduction to Systematic Theology* also cites directly from Bavinck’s discussion in the *Reformed Dogmatics* regarding God’s immutability in his freely determined relation to creation and Scripture’s use of anthropomorphism. He says,

Bavinck points out that the immutability of God has had its enemies. These enemies have been found among those whose thinking has been informed by pagan philosophy such as that of Heraclitus. Dorner, for instance, sought to harmonize the unchangeability of God with the fact of his active concern for the things of the universe by saying that God is immutable merely in the ethical aspect of his being. God is always love and is always holy. On the other hand, God changed when he actually created the world and when, in the person of the Son, he became flesh. Bavinck insists, and rightly so, that all these efforts are foredoomed to failure. The Scriptures speak anthropomorphically of God, and could not do otherwise, but for all that, God, in himself, is immutable. “There is change round about him; there is change in the relation of things to him; but there is no change in God himself.”<sup>20</sup>

Dorner’s view, advocated in varying forms by classical Modernists and contemporary Evangelicals, insists that “God changed when he actually created the world” and when in the person of the Son “he became flesh.” Bavinck insists that such views are foredoomed to failure precisely because of a fundamental misunderstanding of anthropomorphic language. When God relates to the creature, the relation changes and the creature in the relation changes, but “there is no change in God himself.” But God becomes correlative to man if and when he undergoes change as he relates to the creature. When you put together the quotes, Van Til is saying God does not change in the new relation to creation and anthropomorphic language cannot be leveraged to suggest any form of correlativism. The creature changes in the relation and the relation changes, but God does not change.

Yet anthropomorphic language renders his actions in the changing categories that it borrows from the creature. Therein lies the precise locus of the mystery imbedded in Scripture’s use of anthropomorphic language.

Van Til, seeking to demonstrate the apparent contradiction between affirming that God is immutable in his relation to creation and Scripture’s rendering of his acts in language borrowed from the mutable order of creation, observes that “we are entitled and compelled to use anthropomorphism not apologetically but fearlessly. We need not fear to say that God’s attitude has changed with respect to mankind. We know well enough that God in himself is changeless. But we hold that we are able to affirm that our words have meaning for no other reason than that we use them analogically.”<sup>21</sup> It is not an analogical understanding of anthropomorphic language to ascribe change to God. That would be univocal language; it would be to ascribe to God’s acts the creature’s qualitatively different attribute of mutability.

But what precisely does Van Til have in view with regard to the fact that “God’s attitude has changed with respect to mankind”? The answer lies in a lock-step transition in history that occurred upon Adam’s covenant-breaking—a transition from God’s favor to prefall Adam to the revelation of God’s wrath against post-fall Adam. The wrath of God emerged in history by way of general and special revelation given Adam’s original sin (see Genesis 3:8–9; Romans 1:18–21; 5:12–19). Adam’s original sin under the covenant of works occasioned an historical transition from favor to wrath. In Adam’s prefall estate of innocency, God did not relate to him in wrath but in favor. Thus, in terms of the history of special revelation, God’s relation to Adam changed from covenantal favor to covenantal wrath.

For Bavinck and for Van Til, however, the wrath of God is not the metaphysical emergence of new properties in God—properties he did not have prior to the fall. Van Til is explicit that God does not take on new properties in relating to the creature, and Bavinck is emphatic that there is “nothing intermediate” between the Creator and the creature. Therefore, the wrath of God is a revelation in history that does not involve a metaphysical change in God by way of subtraction or addition. The relation changes. The creature in the relation changes. But God does not change in his relation to Adam after the fall. God no more changes given sin than he changes given creation.

Bavinck is helpful at relating the absolute attribute

---

20. Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 211.

21. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, p. 73.

of God's goodness to the changing relations sustained to creatures. He says,

According to Scripture God is the sum total of all perfections (metaphysical goodness)... This goodness of God manifests itself in various forms depending on the objects toward which it is directed.... The goodness of God, when shown to those in misery, is called mercy.... The goodness of God, which spares those who are deserving of punishment, is called forbearance or patience.... God's goodness is much more glorious when it is shown to those who only deserve evil. It then bears the name grace.... In addition, the goodness of God appears as love when it not only conveys certain benefits but God himself.... for all the attributes are equally God's being. In him there is no higher and lower, no greater and smaller.<sup>22</sup>

God's wrath does not require nor entail any metaphysical change in God. The wrath of God is the immutably simple and good triune God in a relation to sinners. Neither God as "good" Creator nor "wrathful" Judge entails any kind of property that emerges as new in God in his pluriform relations to creatures. As Van Til says, quoting in part Bavinck, "The Scriptures speak anthropomorphically of God, and could not do otherwise, but for all that, God, in himself, is immutable. "There is change round about him; there is change in the relation of things to him; but there is no change in God himself."<sup>23</sup>

Van Til also says that we *must* speak analogically and in "fearless anthropomorphism" in terms of God's relation to creation, since the self-contained ontological Trinity alone gives our language in the "Moment" of history its "meaning." What does he mean by this? Two quotations clarify this language.

Thus we have, as Christians, a distinct philosophy of history. All that has happened in the past, all that happens in the present, and all that will happen in the future, rests for its presupposition upon the self-sufficient internal activity of the self-predicating and therefore non-delimited being. The movements of history are not determinative of the self-sufficient activity of God; when God created the world by the determination of his will there was no change in himself. When the second person of the Trinity became incarnate there was no change in God. God gave the world existence alongside

of himself. He could do so just because he is the self-contained infinite being. Thus the doctrine of the infinity of God, so far from leading us into pantheism, is the best possible safeguard against it. Any attempt to safeguard the doctrine of God against pantheism by subtracting from the self-contained internal activity of God is foredoomed to failure.<sup>24</sup>

The significance of our discussion on fact, law and reason for the construction of a Christian philosophy of history may now be pointed out explicitly. The philosophy of history inquires into the meaning of history. To use a phrase of Kierkegaard, we ask how the Moment is to have significance. Our claim as believers is that the Moment cannot intelligently be shown to have any significance except upon the presupposition of the biblical doctrine of the ontological trinity.<sup>25</sup>

Unless God continues to have "non-delimited being" in his freely determined relation to creation, so that the "movements of history are not determinative of the self-sufficient activity of God," and so that "when God created the world by the determination of his will there was no change in him," we cannot find any significance in the Moment of our experience in history.

#### IMMUTABILITY, ANTHROPOMORPHISM, AND TRUE RELIGION

The point before us is not a reified academic issue. Bavinck and Van Til's theological formulations on immutability and anthropomorphism set forth the God the church worships and serves. Believers worship a self-contained, living, and immutable triune God in union and communion with Christ, who "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The sheep hear no other voice speaking in Scripture but the voice of the absolute triune God in Christ. To worship a deity becoming in time and restricted in knowledge is to worship an idol. An idol cannot save himself or others. If God changed in his covenantal relation to creatures, so that he did not know where Adam and Eve were hiding in the Garden (Genesis 3:9) or learned that Abraham trusted him (Genesis 22:12), then both his being and knowledge are in development. If God, like the creature, undergoes development in being and growth in knowledge, then Christian hope cannot abide (see Malachi 3:6). A god who does not know the future cannot control the future; and a god who cannot control the future cannot guarantee anything to his people about the future. True religion shuns as poison a mutable and ignorant God.

*Continued on Page 241.*

22. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.211–15.

23. Van Til, *Introduction*, p. 211.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 212–13.

25. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, p. 7.

**Editorial. Continued from Page 2.**

been retired for an occasional one when suitable material arises (*Opuscula Selecta*), and having none, it takes a hiatus this year. The lengthy offering for *Antiquary* affords the means to present in a different fashion, the published and manuscript versions of several lectures on the Book of the Revelation of John by James Durham (1622–1658), recently published by Naphtali Press and Reformation Heritage Books. This year the regular *In Brief* spots spread throughout the journal focus on Thomas M’Crie (whose substantial and generally hard to find work on the Marrow Controversy appeared in the 2020 issue), David Dickson and John Owen. The entry for *Et Mortuus Adhuc Per Eam Loquitur*, which we include as needed to complete an issue, also focuses on Dr. M’Crie, featuring the last sermon he preached, the Lord’s Day prior to his death.

This seventeenth issue now in the reader’s hand commences a new beginning of sorts. As many longtime followers of the journal know, *The Confessional Presbyterian* has been a self-funded and self-distributed hand to mouth “Little Train that thought it could” for most of its seventeen years. With one year behind, it was always, “I think I can do another year.” About the fifth issue (a huge issue with a full color portrait of Calvin on it, that began the longstanding custom color portrait cover motif), it began to strike your editor that people may want the Journal to continue longer than he might have the endurance or faculties to “think I can.” The growing body and quality of work, exceedingly nice and generous commendations, eagerness of enough folks to contribute articles and reviews each year to make an issue, and editors willing to work for no remuneration beyond free copies, assured it was important to find a institution to serve as publisher to ensure the Journal’s continuance. But two things were nonnegotiable. The Journal was designed specifically to be a high-quality print journal and should continue to have an original print run. At the same time, it was crucial to retain the original *Raison d’être* and focus as *A Journal for Discussion of Presbyterian Doctrine and Practice* for the many denominations that truly claim the label of Confessional Presbyterian, while disagreeing on lesser issues.

At the beginning of 2021 Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary reached out to the editor with a plan that checked all these boxes. From the seminary’s perspective, this is a perfect partnership, since GPTS, like the editors and contributors to the journal, shares the aim of fostering the growth of confessional presbyterian doctrine and worship. This agreement will ensure the journal’s continuance and expand its reach for many years to come, and provides the means for an orderly succession of editors when Mr. Coldwell and his co-editors, most of whom have been associated with the Journal continuously or on and off over its life, retire. The editors look forward to continuing to craft the journal over the

coming years, and are optimistic and happy to see that GPTS is in a position to assure the continuance of *The Confessional Presbyterian* beyond their tenure. The Little Train has rounded the top of the hill and is ready for new challenges that do not include the question of whether to continue another year!

“GPTS is delighted to announce this publishing arrangement to ensure the regular publication of *The Confessional Presbyterian* journal. We take special joy in the fact that Chris Coldwell will stay on in his current role at the journal and work together with our staff. All of us on the faculty of GPTS have admired his editorial work for years, and we look forward to expanding the journal’s reach and ensuring its stability for many years to come.”—Dr. Jonathan L. Master, PhD (President, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary)

“I’m very thankful to GPTS for this exceedingly generous, optimistic, and exciting arrangement.”—Mr. Chris Coldwell (General Editor, *The Confessional Presbyterian Journal*).

**Locating the Mystery. Continued from Page 22.**

The Scriptures, teaching the true religion as they do, make clear that the trinitarian persons do not change in God’s sovereignly willed relation to creation. James says that, “The Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” supplies “every good and perfect gift” in his personal condescension from heaven.<sup>26</sup> James inseparably tethers the Father’s personal immutability to his acts and gifts in time. Geerhardus Vos, Bavinck’s close friend and Van Til’s favorite professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, reminds us of how vitally God’s immutability in his self-revelation to the church bears on true religion:

Let us not forget, however, that as of all theology, so of Biblical Theology, the highest aim cannot lie in man, or in anything that serves the creature. Its most excellent practical use is surely this, that it grants us a new vision of the glory of Him who has made all things to the praise of His own wonderful name. As the Uncreated, the Unchangeable, Eternal God, He lives above the sphere of history. He is the Being and never the Becoming One. And, no doubt, when once this veil of time shall be drawn aside, when we shall see face to face, then also the necessity for viewing His knowledge in the glass of history will cease. But since on our behalf and for our salvation He has condescended to work and speak in the form of time,

26. Bavinck, following the classical Augustinian and Reformed tradition of interpretation of James 1:17, asserts that “in God there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17).” RD, 2.158.

and thus to make His works and His speech partake of that peculiar glory that attaches to all organic growth, let us see to know Him as the One that is, that was, and that is to come, in order that no note may be lacking that psalm of praise to be sung by the Church into which all our Theology must issue.<sup>27</sup>

Locating the mystery in God's acting and relating without undergoing change properly enables the church to worship the triune God as he has revealed himself in the history of special revelation. In his relation to creation "the Unchangeable, Eternal God" is "never the Becoming One." And though he "lives above the sphere of history" yet he "has condescended to work and speak in the form of time" so that no note may be lacking in the church's worship of the living and true God. This God, "who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy" says to his covenant people, "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15). It is this living and immutable triune God who in his covenantal condescension said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14) and who, in the person of his Son, said "I am the Alpha and the Omega," ... "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). It is this living and true God, and not a mutable idol, whom the church worships in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, our Lord (I John 5:21; Revelation 7:11,15-17).

### Reviews and Responses. Continued from Page 182.

to London, his congregation had to relocate—twice—because of its growth.

This volume consists of three parts: Discourses before and after the Lord's Supper; Questions about Salvation, Assurance, and the Lord's Supper; and Sermons Related to the Lord's Supper. An appendix contains a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer.

Part 1 contains the following chapters: "Union to Christ, and the New Creature" (2 Corinthians 5:7); "Christ Going to Gethsemane" (John 18:1-2); "Spiritual Washing" (1 Corinthians 6:11); "The Communion of Christ's Body and Blood" (1 Corinthians 10:16); "The Sin and Danger of Unworthy Receiving" (1 Corinthians 11:29); "Christ's Last Passover and Its Accomplishment" (Luke 22:15-18); "The Feast of Christ's Love" (Song of Solomon 2:4); and "Christ's Cure of a Disciple's Weak Faith" (John 20:27-28).

Part 2 has these discourses: "How Much Assurance Is Necessary to Come to the Table?"; "Two Sacramental Questions

on Our Duty to Take Communion" (Are All Baptized Christians Bound to Partake of the Lord's Supper?; Why Do So Many Good People Live in Neglect of this Ordinance?); "Four Sacramental Questions on Those Unworthy to Take Communion" (Is the Lord's Supper a Means of Converting Souls?; Should I Partake if Unworthy Communicants Are Admitted to the Supper?; What Is an Unworthy Receiver of Communion?; What Is the Danger of Unworthy Receiving?); and "Wasn't Judas Present at the First Celebration of the Lord's Supper?"

Part 3 contains these sermons: "The Purposes of Receiving the Lord's Supper"; "The Cross of Christ, a Christian's Glory" (Galatians 6:14); "The Promise and Oath of God" (Hebrews 6:16, 18); and "Christ's Love for Us Like the Father's to Him" (John 15:9).

As one would expect from a Puritan writer, the material is not only strongly Scriptural and theologically accurate, but also warmly applicatory. Meditating on one of these chapters would be a very profitable exercise in terms of communion preparation. The book compares favorably to similar ones, such as a 1997 offering from Soli Deo Gloria Publications, *The Puritans on the Lord's Supper*, which featured a number of Puritan ministers. ■

27. Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., (P&R Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: 1980), p. 24.