

Book Review
by Wes Bredenhof

Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist, Johan Herman Bavinck [1895-1964] by Paul J. Visser. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003. Pp. 343. \$35.00.

J.H. Bavinck, the subject of this study, is well-known as a pioneering Reformed missiologist. In fact, many have described him as the first Reformed missiologist, or at least the first one from the Netherlands (in North America, Samuel Zwemer provides some competition). Bavinck's *Introduction to the Science of Missions* continues to be used as an introductory textbook for missiology courses in some Reformed seminaries. Regrettably, this and his *Church Between Temple and Mosque* remain the only volumes still in print that have been translated from Dutch into English. One other volume, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World* is presently out of print. Consequently, Bavinck's impact on the English-speaking world has been relatively limited.

The publication of this book should provide at least a partial remedy. Paul Visser, a Protestant (PKN) pastor in The Hague, originally wrote this as his doctoral dissertation for J.A.B. Jongeneel at Utrecht. Its translation into English is a welcome addition, not only to the limited corpus of material on Bavinck, but to Reformed missiology in general.

The first two chapters are biographical, tracing the journey of Bavinck's life, especially drawing the connections with his immediate and extended family. His father and grandfather were both Reformed pastors, as was his more famous uncle, Herman Bavinck. Throughout the book, the theological connections between the uncle and his nephew continue to be elucidated. In fact, only Hendrik Kraemer is referred to more than Herman Bavinck.

Among other interesting elements in the biographical section, we find some discussion on Bavinck's role vis-à-vis the Liberation (*vrijmaking*) of 1944. This event, which led to the separate existence of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated), took place while Bavinck was Professor of Mission Studies in Kampen. The appointment to this position took place under the shadow of some controversy. One of the leaders of the Liberation, Klaas Schilder, objected to Bavinck's candidacy because of his apparent deference to psychological insights over Scriptural ones in an early book. However, to his credit, Bavinck was eager to placate objections and, after his appointment, sat down with the faculty at Kampen to explain his position. This seems to have had its intended result. However, when the split of 1944 took place, Bavinck remained with the larger group – a fact which does have significance for the later development of his missiology, especially with respect to questions of ecumenicity and the World Council of Churches.

In the following seven chapters, Visser systematically maps out the terrain of Bavinck's missiology. The value here is that Visser incorporates a wide assortment of Bavinck's literature into the discussion. This helps to solve a few mysteries for those only familiar

with his *Introduction to the Science of Missions*. For instance, why does Bavinck not mention Jonah in his chapter on the Old Testament? One might expect at least a passing mention, if only to refute the idea that Jonah is somehow an Old Testament missionary. Visser helps English readers solve the mystery. Bavinck dealt with Jonah in an earlier introductory volume, *Zending in een wereld in nood*: "...in the book of Jonah there is no mission in the true sense, because the purpose of Jonah's mission is not 'to found a congregation of God in Nineveh.'" (188).

Visser sees Bavinck as being original in his missiology and gives ample evidence to support this. Bavinck's views on the relationship between word and deed, elenctics (missionary apologetics), *possessio* (a variation of contextualization), and his theology of religions are all clearly explained. The author works with Bavinck's ideas critically, noting the developments of thought throughout his career, particularly with respect to psychology and theology of religions. Moreover, Visser indicates places where there could have been improvement. He also suggests directions for further research; for instance, with Bavinck's trinitarian interpretation of general revelation.

According to Visser, Bavinck has been greatly influential and remains relevant today. With respect to the former assertion, there can be no question. A host of Reformed missiologists trained under Bavinck or were influenced by him. The fact that his *Introduction* is still in use might seem to support the assertion of his continuing relevance. However, Bavinck is still used in some places because there is nothing else available of the same depth and calibre. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* is outdated, first having been published in Dutch in 1954 and then in English in 1960. The time is right for a new seminary-level Reformed textbook on missions. Since it forms an outline of Bavinck's thought, Visser's book will certainly be helpful for laying some basic foundations for such a book, and indeed, for the development of Reformed missiology in general.