

THE MULTIFACETED WORK OF CHRIST:
HERMAN BAVINCK'S DOCTRINE OF ATONEMENT AS BOTH
CORRECTIVE AND RETRIEVAL

SARAH KILLAM CROSBY*

McGill University

ABSTRACT: This essay examines Herman Bavinck's doctrine of atonement within his treatment of Christ's humiliation in volume three of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Through an investigation of Bavinck's critiques of key nineteenth century theologians and of Bavinck's own constructive account of the atonement, I show that Bavinck intended his theology of Christ's work to serve as a corrective to the dominant approach to the theology of the atonement in his day. Against what he considered one-sided views of Christ's work, I argue that Bavinck sought to offer an account which emulates Scripture in its multifaceted character. This theology further sought to retrieve and build upon historical Christian theology, most notably that of Anselm and especially the Protestant Reformers, in its focus on Christ's vicarious satisfaction as the central (though not only) concern of his redeeming action. This exploration of Bavinck's doctrine of the atonement not only deepens our understanding of Bavinck's theological method but has relevance for broader studies of nineteenth and early twentieth century conceptualizations of Christ's person and work and shows Bavinck's attractiveness for contemporary constructive approaches to the atonement.

KEY WORDS: Herman Bavinck, atonement, cross, satisfaction, Reformed theology

Introduction

There have been few periods of thought as formative for current conceptions of the doctrine of atonement as that to which the Dutch neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck belonged. The influence of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries upon the formulation of this theological locus has been so indelible that, over a century later, scholars and students of the atonement still frequently find themselves constrained by the framework of this time. In short, key thinkers in this

*SARAH KILLAM CROSBY (MST 2023 at McGill University) is a PhD student in Ecclesiastical History at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. Her research focuses on Herman Bavinck's reception of John Calvin in his doctrine of atonement. Email: sarah.killam@mail.mcgill.ca

period sought to understand the history of Christian theological reflection on the atonement in terms of distinct, incompatible models or theories of Christ's saving work. Theologian Katherine Sonderegger summarizes this phenomenon, saying, 'Adolf Harnack gave voice to an entire generation of Protestant academic theologians when he described Anselm as confined to a "model"—not doctrine—of atonement' (Sonderegger 2017: 176). Harnack, like his earlier contemporary Albrecht Ritschl, viewed Anselm's theology of satisfaction as a distinct theory of atonement which focused ill-advisedly on the work of Christ as securing a legal, objective effect; Harnack and Ritschl saw as opposed to this the preferable view of Peter Abelard, who had instead emphasized the subjective effects of atonement in humankind (Ritschl, 1872: 22–40; von Harnack, 1960: 54–80). Some thirty-odd years after Harnack's work and in response to Ritschl, Gustaf Aulén's famed *Christus Victor* further cemented this paradigm, positing three prominent, competing theories of atonement (Aulén 1956). These consisted of the "classic" or "dramatic" view, focusing on Christ's atoning victory over Satan, death, sin, and powers of evil, which Aulén argued had been utilized by several Patristic theologians and which Luther revitalized, the "Latin" view, typified by Anselm and his inheritors, which stressed the legal effects of Christ's work, and a third view, exemplified by later Protestant liberal theologians who, preferring Peter Abelard, focused on the "subjective" aspect of atonement over and against others (Aulén, 1956: 1–15, 143–158).

These examples represent the overarching trend of much of the nineteenth to twentieth-century theology of the atonement, in which distinct theories of this doctrine were proposed and frequently pitted against each other. This appeared, for instance, in the dichotomization of objective and subjective aspects of atonement, or in the ranging of forensic emphases of Christ's work against other themes, such as his identification with humanity. How, then, did Herman Bavinck—a contemporary of Harnack and Ritschl, and, like them, an influential voice in the dogmatic landscape of the time—fit into this climate regarding the doctrine of Christ's work?

Though treatments of Bavinck's theology of atonement in recent anglophone scholarship have thus far been scarce, it is evident that this doctrine was significant to his thought: the third of his four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (*Reformed Dogmatics*) centers on "Sin and Salvation in Christ," and his theology of atonement occupies a significant portion of this volume (Bavinck 2006). Furthermore, Christ's work in his crucifixion is key to Bavinck's definition of Christianity, which occurs as a refrain throughout several of his works: 'The essence of the Christian religion consists in the reality that the creation of the Father, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God' (Bavinck 2006: 112; c.f. 2013: 48). Bruce Pass has shown the place of Chris-

tology as the ‘heart of dogmatics’ for Bavinck (Pass 2020: 15–17; Bavinck 2006: 274), a doctrine which directly flows into that of the work of Christ in atonement. Given, then, both the significance of the atonement to Bavinck’s thought as well as its prevalence in the theological discourse of his day, it is important both to understand the contours of this doctrine in his dogmatic work and how Bavinck himself understood his contribution to this field considering his own milieu. Did Bavinck, like some of the aforementioned thinkers, adhere to a conception of “models” of atonement or tout a particular theory? And what did he intend his own doctrine of Christ’s work to accomplish in view of the theological questions of his time?

I will posit in this essay that Bavinck’s theology of Christ’s salvific work, which is one of the critical blocks of his dogmatics, was intended to serve as a corrective to what he viewed as the “one-sided” nature of the dominant atonement views of Protestant theological scholarship of his day by offering an account which emulates Scripture in its “multifaceted” character (Bavinck 2006: 354–361, 382–386). Moreover, Bavinck’s doctrine of the work of Christ sought to retrieve and build upon historical Christian theology, most notably that of Anselm and especially the later Protestant Reformers in its focus on Christ’s “vicarious satisfaction” as the central (though not only) concern of his redeeming action (Bavinck 2006: 393). Bavinck’s notion of vicarious satisfaction does not rule out but rather includes both the subjective and objective features of atonement and its ethical dimensions. However, it maintains at its center a substitutionary focus as well as a Reformed understanding of Christ’s threefold office (of prophet, priest, and king) and the doctrine of Christ’s two states (humiliation and exaltation), features which Bavinck believed were essential to treat humanity’s most pressing need, that of dealing with the sin and guilt which impeded reconciliation to God.

[For the purposes of this essay, I will only briefly touch on Bavinck’s doctrine of the two states as a whole and will rather more minutely focus on several aspects included within his view of Christ’s state of humiliation. Likewise, I will occasionally refer to his doctrine of Christ’s threefold office but will not here offer a sustained treatment of this theology within Bavinck’s thought.]

To demonstrate how Bavinck articulates his account of the atonement as both a corrective to modern atonement theology and a retrieval of the Protestant Reformers in his view of vicarious satisfaction, I will first examine his construal of and objections to some of the prominent atonement views of his day, which included those of thinkers such as Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, and others. My purpose here is not to critically evaluate Bavinck’s use of these individuals’ works or to adjudicate between them, but rather to tease out how Bavinck viewed their doctrines of atonement and consequently his own contribution in light of his milieu. Second, I will examine

Bavinck's constructive view of the multifaceted nature of atonement theology, which I argue was meant to provide a corrective to these views in its reflection of the riches of Scripture. Third, I will sketch how Bavinck viewed himself as drawing upon Anselm and especially the Protestant Reformers in emphasizing vicarious satisfaction at the heart of Christ's work. I will examine these themes within Bavinck's chapter concerning the state of Christ's humiliation in volume three of his *Reformed Dogmatics*; here, Bavinck is primarily concerned with how Christ achieved salvation through his substitutionary work and obedience in his life and ultimately in his death.

“One-sided” Views: Bavinck’s Critique of Modern Atonement Theology

What did Herman Bavinck think of the notion of atonement “models” itself? Why had so many theories of atonement arisen? This remains a pertinent question today: in twenty-first century accounts of the atonement, one may hear that the doctrine of atonement was never defined dogmatically via the ancient ecumenical councils of the church, which opens the door to a variety of theories of Christ's work (see, for example, Stump 2018: 14). This assertion is not a new one; Bavinck was familiar with this claim, and though he agreed that this lack of dogmatic formulation had allowed for a proliferation of atonement interpretations, he viewed this multiplicity in a distinct way, saying: “The truth is Scripture is so many-sided in its description of [Christ's] work that in the history of theology there has emerged an array of views, all of which contain a core of truth” (Bavinck 2006: 340). For Bavinck, as we shall see, the doctrine of atonement was at its best when it faithfully expressed the multidimensionality of Scripture. Yet that the multiplicity of atonement interpretations included truth did not mean that they were devoid of error. Bavinck's historical analysis of the development of the doctrine of Christ's salvific work includes critical evaluations of a variety of theologians' views, from Anselm to Luther to the dogmaticians of his own day (Bavinck, 2006: 340–361). His sharpest critiques are for the Socinians, though many of his peers likewise fall under his displeasure for the “one-sided” nature of their accounts; for Bavinck, theologies of the atonement which deny Christ's vicarious satisfaction and view this as opposed to God's love are “spiritual kin” of the Socinians and fall prey to this doctrinal imbalance (Bavinck 2006: 347–360, 374).

As I will argue, if for Bavinck the doctrine of atonement ought to witness to the multifaceted character of Scripture's portrayal of Christ's work, then perhaps the most egregious and yet common error in theological paradigms is neglecting to attest to this via a one-sided theology. James Eglinton's work on Bavinck is significant here, as he argues contra the old “two Bavincks” schema (which saw Bavinck as vacillating between “orthodox” and “modern” positions) that rather, Bavinck's “organic motif,”

in his expression of which he articulates the Triune God's external works as manifest through "unity within diversity", is crucial to comprehending his thought (Eglinton 2012: 27–50). In this organic motif, Eglinton argues that 'Bavinck attempts to understand all of nature and history as a broad sweep of Trinitarian divine self-revelation' (Eglinton 2012: xi). Eglinton's proposal, I argue, is evident both in Bavinck's theology of atonement and in his critique of current doctrines which miss this unity within diversity in attesting to Christ's work, instead proffering one-dimensional accounts that do not do justice to either the complete picture of Scripture or the witness of historical theology. To show this, I will now sketch Bavinck's construal of and objections to the doctrines of Christ's work belonging to several of his contemporaries, including individuals such as Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, and McLeod Campbell.

'In modern theology,' Bavinck asserts, 'there has been no lack of attempts to modify the doctrine of Christ's office and work in line with the many objections lodged against it and to maintain it in a new form' (Bavinck 2006: 351). The objections which Bavinck has in mind here were primarily those occasioned by Socinianism and later Remonstrant teaching and then adopted by many subsequent theologians (Bavinck 2006: 347–351). The Socinians, he believes, had both weakened Christ's threefold office and opposed the doctrine of satisfaction as unscriptural, unnecessary, illogical, and harmful, and the Remonstrants, though attempting to maintain satisfaction in some form, still denied many of what Bavinck sees as its primary tenets (such as Christ's substitutionary suffering of sin's punishment and the securing of "actual salvation") (Bavinck 2006: 347–350). The shift which these teachings and their later developments occasioned led to a change from an objective to subjective understanding of the atonement, and Bavinck holds that many of his contemporaries had absorbed these views (Bavinck 2006: 351–352). Much modern doctrine of Christ's work, according to Bavinck, consists largely of 'the endeavor to replace the juridical doctrine of satisfaction, in which Christ fulfilled the demand of God's righteousness in our place, by that of a personal religious ethical activity of Christ by which he effected a moral change, not in God, who is always love, but in us' (Bavinck 2006: 351).

Two of the most influential modern accounts of Christ's work, which Bavinck addresses at some length as representative of this shift to the solely subjective, are those of German theologians Schleiermacher and Ritschl. For Bavinck, the fact that Schleiermacher and Ritschl both desire to 'secure a permanent place in religion for the person and work of Christ' is laudable (in a way that, for instance, Harnack's view of Christ's work is not), although he ultimately rejects aspects of each of these doctrines (Bavinck 2006: 353–356). Schleiermacher, per Bavinck, formulated a "mystical" view of redemption: 'in Schleiermacher, as it does in Rome, redemption, consisting of regeneration and sanctification, precedes reconciliation, the forgiveness of

sins, and both occur not so much outside us, in Christ, as within us” (Bavinck 2006: 353). While Schleiermacher, unlike Ritschl, is credited as at least maintaining the doctrine of Christ’s threefold office, Bavinck’s final estimation of his view is scathing: ‘at many points he deviated from the teaching of Scripture and the church, did not do sufficient justice to sin and the sense of guilt, and viewed redemption too one-sidedly from the aesthetic perspective as harmony with the world’ (Bavinck 2006: 353–354). This criticism of Schleiermacher’s stance is significant in a few ways: first, Bavinck evaluates Schleiermacher by the standard of Scripture as well as the doctrine of the church and finds him wanting; second, he objects to the fact that Schleiermacher has abandoned what, as we shall later see, Bavinck views as the primary contribution of Anselm and particularly the Protestant Reformers—that of recognizing the need for atonement to deal with sin and guilt; and third, Bavinck asserts that Schleiermacher’s theology is one-sided in its emphasis. These grounds of critique will reoccur at various points in Bavinck’s evaluations of other modern iterations of atonement theology and illustrate that for Bavinck, the atonement ought to attest to the multifaceted nature of Christ’s work as well as to the riches of the Christian and especially Protestant tradition passed down from the Reformers; to fail to do this is to embrace a deficient doctrine.

If Schleiermacher failed in these points, then, Bavinck holds that Ritschl did so to a yet greater extent. Bavinck characterizes Ritschl’s theology of atonement as an “ethical view” which discards juridical elements of God’s judgment or wrath and focuses instead on the love of God and Christ’s identification with his community (Bavinck 2006: 354). It is worth noting that in another work, Bavinck commends Ritschl’s success in “clearly and lucidly describ[ing] the ethical character of Christianity,” yet he ultimately echoes the critique made in *Reformed Dogmatics* of Ritschl’s having erroneously elevated the notion of “humanity’s ethical destiny” above its proper place in his view of the Christian religion and redemption (Bavinck 2012: 151–157). Bavinck also takes Ritschl to task for modifying the doctrine of Christ’s three offices, choosing to view Christ’s life and death as the fulfillment of “a moral calling” rather than a mediatorial work (Bavinck 2006: 354). Moreover, Bavinck avers that Ritschl’s account maintains that Christ’s “moral obedience” did not primarily serve as a propitiation, engendering a change in God’s disposition to sinful people, or even an objective freeing of humans captive to Satan, sin, or death (Bavinck 2006: 354–355). Rather, in Ritschl’s view, the work of Christ was intended to achieve an alteration in the hearts of humans who imitated Christ in acceding to God’s will—a change from their erroneous belief in God’s anger against them to an acceptance of God’s love, which would enable them to be united to God (Bavinck 2006: 354–355). That is, there was not an objective problem in the human-divine relationship which the atonement needed to

solve, but rather a subjective transformation in the human being's attitude towards God. Based on this construal of Ritschl's view, Bavinck concludes: 'No long argument is needed to see that in the theology of Ritschl the person and work of Christ came even less into their own than in that of Schleiermacher' (Bavinck 2006: 355). Thus, Bavinck also faults Ritschl for failing to do justice to Scripture's rich tapestry of Christ's atoning work, negating its objective effects and denying Christ's willing suffering of the penalties of sin in place of humans.

According to Bavinck, 'The school of Ritschl did not advance beyond this religious-ethical assessment of the work of Christ' (Bavinck 2006: 355). Included in this assessment are theologians such as Kaftan and Harnack, with the latter receiving comparatively minor engagement here, perhaps because Bavinck seems to find his view of atonement not worthy of indepth attention: 'Even more bluntly than Kaftan, it was later said by Harnack that for the salvation of the church the death of Christ has no meaning higher than a historical and psychological one [...] he himself is not a constituent of the gospel' (Bavinck 2006: 356). The mystical and ethical accounts (with their elevation of the subjective in atonement) propagated by Schleiermacher and Ritschl did not just impact German theology but had analogues in theologians of Bavinck's own home country, the Netherlands, as well as in scholarship of France, the United States, Switzerland, England, and Scotland: among these are grouped figures such as Horace Bushnell, John McLeod Campbell, and Dutch theologians of the Groningen school (Bavinck 2006: 356–360). Though some of these theologians did not go as far as Ritschl or Harnack, Bavinck nevertheless views with disapprobation what he sees as attempts to undermine the centrality of Christ's death as a vicarious and penal satisfaction, even in apparently more satisfactory views such as that of McLeod Campbell, whose view of atonement as a form of "vicarious repentance" nevertheless denied that in his death Christ had suffered the punishment due sins (Bavinck 2006: 359).

At the heart of these attempts to discard the notion of Christ's death as a vicarious satisfaction and bearing of the punishment of sins, Bavinck argues, is the mistaken assumption that the necessity of Christ's substitutionary suffering for the forgiveness of sins gainsays God's gracious love and perfect freedom (Bavinck 2006: 370, 374). In Bavinck's view, such a position entails the pitting of God's grace against God's justice (Bavinck 2006: 374). He therefore marshals several arguments, drawn from both Scripture and historical theology, to counteract this idea: God's will always agrees with his attributes of holiness, love, etc., not as a restriction on God's autonomy but rather as "the true and highest freedom"; God's law is not a haphazard list of rules but flows from his character; and thus sin is in complete opposition to God's perfection and must be met with just punishment (Bavinck 2006: 371). It is noteworthy that

Bavinck, in countering the notion of grace and justice as opposed, argues for the multidimensional nature not only of atonement but also of God, who not only stands in relation to humans as Father but also as ‘Creator, Maintainer, Ruler, Sovereign, Law-giver, Judge, and so on’, and of sin, which is seen in the Bible as ‘incomprehension, folly, guilt, pollution, impurity, shame, and so on’ (Bavinck 2006: 372–373). Bavinck’s repeated emphasis is that much modern theology of the atonement fails to reflect the full and unified scope of Scripture as well as of orthodox Christian theology; he argues that the opposition of grace to justice is part of a ‘set of opposites’ which ‘is false and has always been rejected in Christian theology as Marcionite’ (Bavinck 2006: 374). The rejection of this opposition in the history of Christian theology is grounded in the Scriptural witness: ‘those who dualistically oppose justice and grace to each other run afoul of Scripture at all points’ (Bavinck 2006: 375). For Bavinck, then, a true Christian theology of the atonement ought to recognize that God’s love and justice are in perfect harmony with each other and are both reflected in the divine nature as well as in the holistic work of Christ (Bavinck 2006: 369).

While Bavinck’s analysis of the trends in atonement theology of his time, epitomized most clearly in Schleiermacher and Ritschl, is sharply critical, the Dutch dogmatician is careful to clarify that it is not the subjective dimension (nor moral and ethical themes) of atonement as such to which he objects, but rather the frequent exclusion of vicarious satisfaction from these accounts of Christ’s redeeming work. However, it would be equally erroneous, in Bavinck’s view, to focus wholly on the objective effects of Christ’s suffering, restricting this to his death (Bavinck 2006: 378–380). To do justice to the full scope of the atonement, theologians must also speak of the nature of Christ’s work as fulfilled through Christ’s entire life and as in identification with humanity, on their behalf as “a public person” (Bavinck 2006: 378–380).

For Bavinck, the subjective and objective within atonement are closely tied to the need to emphasize both Christ’s “active” and “passive” obedience, since those who emphasized only Christ’s objective work generally equated it entirely with Christ’s “passive” suffering on the cross, while those who stressed his subjective work focused rather on his “active” life and incarnation (Bavinck 2006: 377). Brian Mattson, who has written on Bavinck’s treatment of Christ’s obedience through his salvific work as the unifying link between the covenants of works and grace, has noted that Bavinck establishes Christ’s entire obedience in both its passive and active dimensions as the rightful fulfillment of the covenant of works in Scripture (Mattson 2012: 212, 218). Mattson further explains that though Bavinck “finds it helpful to distinguish between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ aspects to Christ’s obedience,” these “are not two distinct types of action, but rather perspectives on the one, undivided obedience of Christ” (Mattson 2012: 219–220). Bavinck censures the lack of integration of these perspectives in the

work of his fellow theologians, noting that “[a]lso among Protestants—in the case of mystics, Anabaptists, Herrnhuter, and others—occur views of the suffering of Christ as “something objective,” views that fail to do justice to his active obedience” (Bavinck 2006: 377).

In contrast to this, Bavinck, like Calvin and other Reformed theologians before him (Calvin 1960: 16.5; Van den Belt 2016: 2:133), emphasized that Christ’s obedience did not just consist in his suffering of the penalties of sin through his death but rather encompassed all of his life, which ‘was substitutionary in nature’; Jesus’s death was ‘not the whole, but the consummation of his obedience’ (Bavinck 2006: 378). In this way, Mattson argues that Bavinck draws upon the Reformed distinctive that Adam’s and humankind’s sin must be atoned for through “what Bavinck calls a ‘double claim’ on humans: both the payment of the penalty (i.e., death) and the positive, perfect compliance with [God’s] law;” Bavinck uses the classic terms ‘satisfaction’ and ‘obedience’ to comprehend this double claim (Mattson 2012: 212–214). Bavinck concludes:

Just as it is one-sided, with [Jacob] Alting, to see the fruit of Christ’s work only in the redemption of eternal death, so it is equally one-sided, with Ritschl, to limit that fruit to the spiritual-ethical dominion of Christ over sin and the world this side of heaven. The whole person of Christ, in both his active and his passive obedience, is the complete guarantee for the entire redemption that God in his grace grants to individual persons, to humanity, and to the world (Bavinck 2006: 380).

It is vital to observe here that Bavinck does not spare “objective” theologians of atonement or those concerned with its forensic emphases from his critiques when they fall prey to the one-sidedness of which he so frequently accuses those interested largely in its subjective or ethical effects.

I have argued that Bavinck’s primary concern with much of the atonement theology of his day pertains to the one-sided nature of these accounts, which he believes fail to witness to the diverse and yet unified (using Eglinton’s apt language) picture of Christ’s work in Scripture as well as to the riches of the Christian and especially Protestant tradition. The error of some of Bavinck’s contemporaries is not in highlighting either the subjective or objective facets of Christ’s work, but rather in making these competitive and exclusive descriptors of the atonement. Likewise, Schleiermacher and Ritschl are not wrong to point to the mystical or ethical components of Christ’s action; Bavinck emphasizes this repeatedly: ‘None of the above-mentioned mystical and ethical views, accordingly, are untrue as such; on the contrary, they are all based on data contained in Holy Scripture’ (Bavinck 2006: 384). However, these theologians err in denying the vicarious satisfaction made by Christ; as Bavinck summa-

rizes: ‘though the mystical and ethical ideas concerning the death of Christ are not incorrect as such, by themselves they are incomplete [...] they cannot even be maintained unless they are linked with another thought that is consistently tied in with the death of Christ in Scripture’ (Bavinck 2006: 385). To counteract this turn in theology, as I will demonstrate next, Bavinck articulates a doctrine of Christ’s multifaceted work—a theology meant to point firstly to the breadth of Scripture and secondarily to the key strengths of the Christian and especially Protestant tradition.

The “work of Christ is so multifaceted”: Bavinck’s Account of the Many Sides of Atonement

As I have begun to propose above, Bavinck’s own view of atonement is a reflection of what he sees as the “many-sided” nature of Scripture’s portrayal of Christ’s work (Bavinck 2006: 340). Where many of his contemporaries did not take this into account in their theologies of atonement, Bavinck is determined to do so, explicitly and thoroughly integrating these themes into a unified doctrine. His account of the historical development of atonement carefully highlights themes in various thinkers which he believes best witness to Scripture’s portrayal of atonement, and his own constructive account of the “multifaceted” work of Christ weaves together a variety of strands in an attempt to illustrate the full breadth of Christ’s work as seen in sacred Scripture (Bavinck 2006: 383). It is this multifaceted account of atonement which I will now examine, looking particularly at Bavinck’s rationale and definition of this view, and then taking a closer look at some of the facets within his doctrine, such as those of Christ’s death as sacrifice and ransom.

Transitioning from his critique of modern doctrine to his own constructive theology of the atonement, Bavinck notes the common argument that the New Testament does not offer a comprehensive “doctrine of redemption” but only the facts of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection; this, in addition to the previously noted lack of conciliar formulation, provided a rationale for why so many atonement theories or models were in circulation (Bavinck 2006: 382). Bavinck clarifies, however, that this idea that Scripture has no clear atonement doctrine and that the New Testament gives “facts and no theory” is not quite true (Bavinck 2006: 382). On the contrary, Jesus himself ‘explained his own person and work. In his teaching and later through the mouth of his apostles, he himself interpreted his suffering and death, and Christian theology is bound to that word’ (Bavinck 2006: 383). Therefore, the crucial point to ascertain regarding atonement theories is “what in all these ideas agrees with Scripture and what Scripture itself teaches concerning the power and significance of the death of Christ” (Bavinck 2006: 383).

What does such examination of the Bible, according to Bavinck, reveal? Bavinck summarizes his biblical theology of Christ's work in this way:

The first thing this study teaches, we may say, is that the Scriptures continually view the suffering and death of Christ from a different perspective and in each case illumine another aspect of it. Like the person, the work of Christ is so multifaceted that it cannot be captured in a single word nor summarized in a single formula. In the different books of the New Testament, therefore, different meanings of the death of Christ are highlighted, and all of them together help to give us a deep impression and a clear sense of the riches and many-sidedness of the mediator's work (Bavinck 2006: 383).

The various parts of Scripture are to be interpreted in light of each other, as a unified canon, which presents multiple sides of Christ's work that likewise together form a cohesive whole. Against the prevailing conception of competing models, Bavinck argues that a single discrete theory is inadequate to convey these varied aspects. Therefore, the task of a theologian when attending to the work of Christ is to faithfully follow Holy Scripture in demonstrating this breadth in manner that is cohesive.

What, then, are these various facets of Christ's redeeming work in Scripture which the Christian theologian ought to hold together in a unified doctrine? Bavinck briefly sums up several of these facets as presented in various books of the New Testament: the Synoptic Gospels' revelation of Jesus as inaugurator and content of the kingdom of God, through whom God's love, forgiveness, and eternal life are offered; Acts' portrayal of Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Israel's Messiah by his death and resurrection; the Pauline emphasis on Christ's cross, through which Christ became a curse for us that we might receive redemption, justification, etc.; Hebrews' view of Christ as both the supreme high priest and final sacrifice to atone for sins (Bavinck 2006: 383–384). Thus, Bavinck concludes, 'one can find in the New Testament different appraisals of the person and work of Christ, which, however, do not exclude but rather supplement one another and enrich our knowledge' (Bavinck 2006: 384). In contrast to the atonement views which he castigates as "one-sided", Bavinck asserts that the New Testament's depiction of Christ and his work is characterized by "many-sidedness" (Bavinck 2006: 383). In Scripture as a whole, then:

The death of Christ is a paschal offering, a covenant offering, a praise offering as well as a sacrifice; a ransom and an example; suffering and action; a work and a ministry; a means of justification and sanctification, atonement and consecration, redemption and glorification; in a word, the cause of our whole redemption (Bavinck 2006: 384).

In this view, as I've noted, several elements of the doctrines which Bavinck critiqued above are affirmed. He avers that Christ became incarnate as humanity's rep-

representative, to ‘fulfill a vocation, to found the kingdom of heaven’; in Jesus’s death ‘the believing community was crucified with him, and in his resurrection this community itself arose from the grave. Christ was never alone; always he stood in fellowship with the humanity whose nature he had assumed’ (Bavinck 2006: 384). Bavinck reiterates that these are all emphases found in the Bible. Therefore, ‘[w]hat matters above all, now, is not to neglect any of them but to unite them into a single whole and to trace the unity that underlies them in Scripture’ (Bavinck 2006: 385). Again, this fits neatly with Eglinton’s arguments on unity-within-diversity as the interpretive key to Bavinck’s thought; the theologian of atonement, in Bavinck’s own words, must strive to uphold this distinctive.

Having highlighted the centrality of a multifaceted conception of atonement for Bavinck, I will now peruse in greater detail a few of these facets. As already indicated by some of Bavinck’s language drawn from Scripture, one significant aspect of Bavinck’s account of the atonement is of Christ’s work as a sacrifice. Sacrifice, in fact, functions as an orientation to Christ’s state of humiliation within the chapter on this aspect of Christ’s work, as well as providing the opportunity for situating the atonement contextually, as Bavinck argues for the universality of sacrifice across history and cultures (Bavinck 2006: 328–340, 403). Bavinck does not only derive this theology from the New Testament, but consciously interprets the Hebrew Scriptures Christologically, arguing that the various types of sacrifices portrayed there attest to the necessity of Christ as the perfect and final sacrifice to atone for sins and to restore communion with God (Bavinck 2006: 331–337, 396–397).

The concept of sacrifice includes several themes related to Christ’s work. Bavinck interprets the Israelite sacrificial system in line with Reformed doctrine as pointing to Christ’s threefold office of prophet, priest, and king; this is one of many recurrences in this volume of the threefold office, an indispensable dimension of the atonement in Bavinck’s view (Bavinck 2006: 335; on the threefold office in Reformed thought, see Calvin 1960: 1:2.15; Van den Belt 2016: 100–128). The priesthood itself is also implicated in the idea of sacrifice; its function of mediating between humans and divinity is seen precisely as what Christ perfectly fulfilled (Bavinck 2006: 332–333, 335). Christ himself is thus the one to whom all sacrifice, directly or indirectly, points (Bavinck 2006: 337). Bavinck’s articulation of sacrifice also illuminates his covenant theology; sacrifice illuminates Christ as the center of God’s new covenant with his people: ‘He is the true covenant sacrifice; just as the old covenant was confirmed by the covenant sacrifice (Exod. 24:3–11), so the blood of Christ is the blood of the new covenant’ (Bavinck 2006: 337). By Christ’s sacrifice, innumerable and manifold benefits have been obtained, both for Christ and for his people (Bavinck 2006: 339). In addition to this multiplicity and that seen in the work of Christ, Bavinck argues,

‘The relation in which Christ’s sacrifice stands to us and our humanity is likewise expressed in very different ways’ (Bavinck 2006: 337, 339). It appears, then, that sacrifice, like atonement itself, is a multifaceted concept: Bavinck locates a variety of themes of Christ’s work within his notion of it, yet these themes are joined together into a cohesive doctrine.

In addition to sacrifice, another of the many attributes of Christ’s work which Bavinck gleans from Scripture is that of his death as a ransom. Bavinck traces the post-New Testament appearance of the thought of Christ’s death as ransom to the Patristic period, noting Gregory of Nazianzus’s opposition to this idea that ‘Christ had delivered himself up to Satan as a ransom, bait, or snare and (Job 40:32) thus conquered him by cunning and snatched people from his control’ (Bavinck 2006: 341). As with previously discussed motifs, the concept of Christ’s death as a ransom is Scriptural: Christ described his own work in this way (Bavinck 2006: 394). The word ransom itself, Bavinck explains, stems from Greek and Hebrew words which signify ‘the price of release, a ransom to purchase someone’s freedom from prison, and hence a means of atonement, a sacrifice by which to cover other people’s sin and so to save them from death’ (Bavinck 2006: 338). This was accomplished by Christ as a sacrificial self-offering, which Bavinck repetitively underscores as being “for many”—performed by Christ ‘on behalf of his people’ (Bavinck 2006: 338). These emphases illuminate the truth “that by nature humans find themselves in the bondage of slavery of sin and that they are only released from it by the costly ransom of the blood of Christ. Christ’s sacrifice, therefore, is at the same time a ransom” (Bavinck 2006: 397).

As in the above quotation, Bavinck frequently connects the concept of ransom with the notion of sacrifice, and elsewhere with that of vicarious satisfaction; he even uses the occurrence and meaning of the idea of ransom in Scripture to explain and defend both of these other ideas, which he also views as connected to one another (Bavinck 2006: 334, 338, 394, 396–397). This is not a matter of conceptual sloppiness but is instead central to Bavinck’s understanding of the atonement. Unlike Harnackian “models”, then, Bavinck’s facets of atonement are not so easily partitioned off from each other and are often treated by him as overlapping. Furthermore, the entwined motifs of ransom and sacrifice are irreducibly substitutionary for Bavinck (I will expand on the theme of substitution at greater length below in detailing his view of vicarious satisfaction) (Bavinck 2006: 395–397).

While it is impossible for this essay to sketch every one of Bavinck’s motifs of atonement which are together combined to form his multifaceted doctrine of Christ’s work, the above themes offer a glimpse of the comprehensiveness of his view. Bavinck takes care to affirm the many sides of atonement which have both been attested to in Scripture and throughout the church’s history, including the productive elements

of theologians with whom he has sharp disagreements. He manages both to affirm the subjective and objective effects of atonement through Christ's representative and identificatory work, done on behalf of humanity, achieving mystical union with God and yet undeniably a sacrifice, ransom, and propitiation for sins that secures reconciliation. In this way, Bavinck counters what he sees as the one-sidedness of his contemporaries' views, presenting a doctrine which seeks to embody the biblical many-sidedness of Christ's work. For Bavinck, the atonement, like Scripture, is a complex whole which holds together, without contradiction, many distinct elements, elements which many wrongly assume to be at odds with one another. Yet, as I will next illustrate, this unity takes a distinct shape through Bavinck's central doctrine of vicarious satisfaction, in which he seeks to emulate both Scripture and secondarily Anselm and especially the Protestant Reformers.

“Vicarious Satisfaction” as the Center of Christ's Work and Inheritance of the Protestant Tradition in Bavinck's Atonement Theology

While Bavinck, as I've shown, reiterates time and again the necessity of a multifaceted account of the doctrine of Jesus' salvific work, I argue that this doctrine has a distinct epicenter, and that is vicarious satisfaction. While the subjective facets of atonement must not be neglected, Bavinck views vicarious satisfaction (which, when rightly construed, maintains a variety of elements, including objective ones, within itself) as the weightiest contribution of the Protestant Reformers to the doctrine of Christ's work and the essence of his own account. Therefore, this section will treat Bavinck's historical development of the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction, his reliance upon Anselm, the Protestant Reformers, and especially Calvin in his construal of this motif, and some of the Scriptural and theological arguments supporting his own doctrine.

To speak of satisfaction in the Christian tradition, one must, of course, speak of Anselm. Nonetheless, many of the themes of Bavinck's interpretation of vicarious satisfaction, by his own telling, originated before Anselm; he notes themes of Christ's substitutionary and sacrificial work as achieving 'atonement, forgiveness, sanctification, and salvation as a whole' having appeared from the Patristic era, as well as the use of juridical themes within the doctrine of atonement (Bavinck 2006: 341–342). Yet Bavinck credits Anselm's doctrine of satisfaction as marking a decisive achievement in the understanding of the doctrine of Christ's work, saying:

Anselm was the first to understand, and to understand most clearly, that the redemption accomplished by Christ was a deliverance, not primarily from the consequences of sin, from death and Satan's power, but above all from sin itself and sin's guilt. Christ's redemption, according to Anselm, consists mainly in reconciliation between God and

humanity. Yet in scholastic and Roman Catholic theology this truth has come into its own much less than in Protestant theology (Bavinck 2006: 344).

Despite the above estimation that Protestant theology has most fully displayed the resources of the doctrine of satisfaction, Bavinck does find commendable elements in Catholic theology after Anselm—for instance, in Aquinas’ construal of satisfaction—even asserting that Aquinas more correctly saw Christ’s satisfaction as entailing ‘his entire obedience’ and articulated ‘better than Anselm’ the gift of merit to those redeemed by Christ (Bavinck 2006: 344). Yet in the end, Bavinck argues that ‘in Christ’s suffering Aquinas fails to see its unity’ (Bavinck 2006: 344). The problem of atonement accounts which do not fully witness to the harmony and breadth of Scripture, then, is not just one germane to Bavinck’s own setting; Bavinck finds the same problem in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

The Protestant Reformers (by whom Bavinck seems to mean especially Luther and Calvin—others, such as Osiander and Carlstadt, are critiqued as opposing the doctrines of these two) likewise dealt with this matter (Bavinck 2006: 345–347). Bavinck explains that at the beginning, the Reformers adopted the Catholic doctrine of satisfaction, having not yet voiced their own distinct atonement theology, and maintained this view ‘against the Socinian attacks’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). However, the Reformers did not unthinkingly receive this theology; they rather interpreted it within ‘a new perspective’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). ‘[A]bove all,’ Bavinck notes, the Protestant Reformers recognized that the severity of sin in earning God’s judgment was so dire that the requirement of divine justice could not be met in any other way than through ‘the satisfaction accomplished by the “God-man”’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). Christ fulfilled this, ‘putting himself in our place as the guarantor of the covenant, taking upon himself the full guilt and punishment of sin, and submitting to the total demand of the law of God’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). As a result of the atonement, the ‘primary benefit, therefore, is the forgiveness of sins and consequently also deliverance from pollution, death, law, and Satan’ (Bavinck 2006: 345).

Per Bavinck, the Protestant Reformers’ elucidation of Christ’s work is the exemplary construal of Scripture’s comprehensive witness, which does not neglect any of the atonement’s dimensions. In their doctrines, Bavinck holds that both the ‘objective and subjective sides of reconciliation, accordingly, are clearly distinguished. Christ accomplished everything’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). In their views, ‘Since by his sacrifice Christ met the requirements of God’s justice, he objectively changed the relation between God and humankind and, consequently, all other relations between humankind to sin, death, Satan, and the world as well’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). Calvin especially is commended for showing this through his doctrine of Christ’s threefold office of prophet, priest, and king (though Bavinck notes that this theology originated in the

Patristic era); Bavinck holds that this treatment inspired many subsequent theologians, both ‘Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic’ (Bavinck 2006: 341, 345). As noted above, Bavinck also appreciates the Protestant Reformers’ emphasis that Christ’s work was completed through his ‘total—active as well as passive—obedience’ (Bavinck 2006: 345). This, Bavinck believed, was an emphasis which Anselm had neglected (Bavinck 2006: 344); thus, in his view, the Protestant Reformers adopted the view of satisfaction yet more fully realized its Scriptural facets, highlighting both the objective and subjective aspects of Christ’s work while maintaining their distinctiveness, and, in Calvin’s case, emphasizing Christ’s threefold office.

While Bavinck believes it critical to sustain the fully rounded idea of Jesus’ salvific work, and that this is what Luther and especially Calvin did, he clearly posits their most weighty contribution to consist in addressing the need for sin and guilt to be atoned for, for reconciliation with God to be achieved, as the heart of atonement. Atonement, in all its facets, is through Christ, wholly God and wholly man, who was obedient in humanity’s stead and suffered the penalties they justly deserved. Bavinck’s own view likewise draws on this central theme; he avers that the ‘scriptural doctrine concerning the connection between Christ’s death and our salvation comes into its own only when his full and complete obedience is viewed as *vicarious satisfaction*’ (Bavinck 2006: 393; emphasis original). In expounding this doctrine, Bavinck again relies upon Scripture to form the basis of his arguments: the Pauline epistles portray Christ satisfying God’s justice by a substitutionary enduring of sin’s punishment; Jesus, as previously shown, saw his own death as a sacrificial offering, which his followers would’ve understood due to the nature of Israelite sacrifices as an atonement for sins, the entire sacrificial system points to a need for a vicarious satisfaction, and the biblical canon as a whole ‘regards the entire work of Christ as a fulfillment of God’s law and a satisfaction of his demand’ (Bavinck 2006: 394). In Bavinck’s words, the other facets of atonement are predicated on this substitutionary center, which must precede them:

The mystical and moral interpretation of Jesus’ suffering and death cannot even be maintained if it is not acknowledged beforehand that in a legal sense he suffered and died *in our place*. Now this is what Scripture teaches in the clearest terms, even though it does not use the expression “vicarious satisfaction” any more than the words “Trinity,” “incarnation,” “God-man,” and so on (Bavinck 2006: 398; emphasis original).

Another striking element of Bavinck’s constructive doctrine of vicarious satisfaction is his Trinitarian grounding of this theology. Christ’s substitutionary work, he argues, sprang from (and thus did not establish) ‘the covenant of grace,’ which ‘has its foundation in eternity, is grounded in the pact of salvation (*pactum salutis*),

and is in the first place a covenant among the three persons of the divine being itself' (Bavinck 2006: 405). He goes on to explain that all three divine persons are active in this covenant and that '[v]icarious satisfaction has its foundation in the counsel of the Triune God, in the life of supreme, perfect, and eternal love, in the unshakeable covenant of redemption' (Bavinck 2006: 405–406). Vicarious satisfaction is thus the will and outworking of the one Trinity. In accord with this, Bavinck elsewhere emphasizes the unity of the Father and Son in Christ's sacrificial death, quoting from Calvin to emphasize that despite Christ's suffering of sin's penalties, God the Father was never 'personally angry with Christ' (Bavinck 2006:389). He asserts, 'Calvin puts it very correctly: "Yet we do not suggest that God was ever inimical or angry toward him. How could he be angry toward his beloved Son, 'in whom his heart reposed' [cf. Matt. 3:17]?"' (Bavinck 2006: 389; Calvin 1960: 2.16.11). Bavinck adds that "on the cross Jesus remained the beloved Son, the Son of his Father's good pleasure" (Bavinck 2006: 389). These assertions in Bavinck contradict current, anachronistic readings of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement that go so far as to see in it a hateful God or a divided Trinity in which the Father abuses the Son (Brock and Parker, 2001: 6–9, 17–31; Williams, 2013: 143–146). On the contrary, Bavinck emphasizes the unity of the Trinity in atonement, and the Son's perfect love and willingness in offering up his life in obedience to the Father (Bavinck 2006: 390).

I have shown that in Bavinck's historical exposition of the development of the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction, he emphasizes Anselm but especially the Protestant Reformers' Scripturally faithful and theologically significant accounts of atonement. In Bavinck's view, Calvin and Luther succeeded at formulating multifaceted doctrines of Christ's substitutionary work which addressed humanity's most crucial need, which is for sin and guilt to be dealt with so that people may be reconciled to God. This, Bavinck believes, can only be met when Christ's death is viewed as a vicarious satisfaction, and when this theology undergirds the atonement's many facets. Vicarious satisfaction, per Bavinck, is the unequivocal testimony of Scripture's varied but integrated language and is a work which expresses the unity of the Triune God.

Conclusion

I began this essay with a look at the importance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for codifying an approach to the doctrine of the atonement that remains influential today: positing discrete and competing "models" of the atonement which ruled each other out. How, then, did Bavinck relate to this approach? I have shown that Bavinck provided an important dissenting voice to the dominant approach to the atonement: examining the doctrine of his day, Bavinck refused to do theology on these terms. This did not mean a wholesale rejection of the content of the atonement accounts of a Schleiermacher or a Ritschl so much as a critique of their

one-sidedness. Against the promulgators of atonement “theories,” Bavinck argued that no “single formula” was sufficient to convey the depth, complexity, beauty, and multidimensional quality of the work of Christ as found in Holy Scripture (Bavinck 2006: 383).

Yet in the language used by Christ’s apostles to explain his death, Bavinck explains, ‘There may be great diversity [...] yet in that diversity is evident a striking unity’ (Bavinck 2006: 390). As I’ve argued, this tallies with Eglinton’s argument on the organic motif as the proper interpretive key to Bavinck’s thought. Thus, in his utilization of this theme within atonement, Bavinck sought to offer a corrective to the pervading methodology and doctrines of his milieu by presenting a theology of atonement which sought to reflect these many facets in a cohesive manner: Christ’s identification and oneness with us, his voluntary obedience and ministry in both life and death, his death as sacrifice, offering, ransom, vicarious satisfaction, and means of conquering death, sin, and Satan, and much more.

Moreover, at the core of Bavinck’s multifaceted theology is a view of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction which sought to retrieve the wealth of the Christian tradition through thinkers such as Anselm, and particularly the Protestant and Reformed tradition, which Bavinck believed had most capably and expansively developed this view. More even than the Reformed tradition or Scripture, however, Bavinck sought to witness to the one to whom these pointed: Christ the Mediator, the ‘heart and core of the Christian confession’ (Bavinck 2006: 361), who by his atonement ‘secured salvation for us’ (Bavinck 2006: 398). As such, Bavinck not only gives a historical example of a theologically-rich minority approach to theorizing the atonement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but also may provide a fulsome methodological resource for contemporary theological accounts of Christ’s saving work.

Bibliography

- Aulén G (1956) *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (tran. AG Hebert). New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Bavinck H (2006) *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*. Bolt J (ed) J Vriend (tran) Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Bavinck H (2013) *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*. Bolt J (ed) Boonstra H and Sheeres G (trans). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Brock RN and Parker RA (2001) *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Calvin J (1960) *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. McNeill JT (ed) Battles FL (tran) Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

- Eglinton J (2012) *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif*. T & T Clark studies in systematic theology; v. 17. London: Continuum International Pub.
- Johnson AJ (2017) *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*. 1st edition. London: T&T Clark.
- Mattson BG (2012) *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics*. Studies in Reformed Theology 21. Leiden; Boston: Brill..
- Pass BR (2020) *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck*. 1st edition. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Ritschl A (1872) *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*. Black JS (tran) Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
- Sonderegger K (2007) Anselm, Defensor Fidei. *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9(3): 342–359.
- Stump E (2018) *Atonement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van den Belt H (ed.) (2016) *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae / Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation: Volume 2, Disputations 24-42*. Faber R (tran) Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- von Harnack A (1960) *History of Dogma*. Buchanan (tran) 3rd ed. New York: Dover Publications.
- Williams DS (2013) *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Anniversary Edition. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.