

## BAVINCKIAN RHAPSODY: THEOLOGICAL METHOD IN BAVINCK'S DOCTRINE OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY

By Gregory Parker Jr.<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *This article argues that Herman Bavinck's doctrine of divine simplicity reflects a principled yet eclectic engagement with theological and philosophical sources. First, I examine Bavinck's articulation of simplicity within the divine names and incommunicable attributes, emphasizing how his nuanced use of sources—including Reformed orthodoxy, Romantic idealism, and ancient Christian thought—positions him as both orthodox and modern. Following this, certain points of continuity and discontinuity are highlighted between Bavinck and Thomas Aquinas, resulting in the acknowledgment of the uniqueness of Bavinck's construction. The conclusion of the work is twofold. First, the article concludes that Bavinck's doctrine of divine simplicity exemplifies his synthetic "Reformed catholicity," offering a constructive model for integrating tradition and modernity. Second, the analysis reveals that Bavinck employs simplicity to provide harmony among God's attributes, facilitating a unity-in-diversity framework that connects his with his Trinitarian theology. Therefore, his treatment of divine simplicity has significance for Bavinck's organic motif and, by extension, Bavinck studies.*

**Keywords:** Herman Bavinck, Divine Simplicity, Organic Motif, Reformed eclecticism

### INTRODUCTION

In his 2012 book *Trinity and Organism*, James Eglinton argued Herman Bavinck was not split between orthodoxy and modernity.<sup>2</sup> He identified the "organic motif" as the conceptual tool that Bavinck used to navigate ideological tensions and deploy various thinkers in an eclectic and principled manner.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Bavinck's disposition towards diverse thinkers and his organic Reformed catholicity became more evident in

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<sup>2</sup> James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 54.

<sup>3</sup> James Eglinton, "Bavinck's Organic Motif: Questions Seeking Answers." *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 51–71, 67; Bruce Pass, "Trinity or German idealism? Reconsidering the origins of Herman Bavinck's organic motif." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 76, no. 1 (2023): 56–70, 65. Pass has challenged Eglinton and Mattson's hypothesis regarding the origin of the organic motif, arguing that "Bavinck incorporates an ostensibly idealist idea into the Reformed tradition and modifies it in ways that make it serviceable to Christian theology."

Anglophone scholarship. This organic hermeneutic was identified as paradigmatic for his Reformed catholicity. Cory Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, in their 2017 article “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Eclecticism: On catholicity, consciousness, and theological epistemology,” contended, in line with Eglinton, for Bavinck as one who eclectically appropriates diverse thinkers as suits his Reformed theological needs.<sup>4</sup> They described Bavinck’s “Reformed catholicity” as follows:

[F]or Bavinck, to be Reformed and catholic, principled and eclectic, is not merely to acknowledge the diversity within the confessional boundaries of seventeenth-century Protestant scholastics or traditional Reformed orthodoxy. Rather, to be Reformed and catholic is to develop a stance in which the fruits of thinking from Aristotle to Kant, from Augustine to Schleiermacher, and from Thomas to Hegel are together considered valuable. To be sure, Bavinck disagrees with some of these thinkers, but he navigates them in a reciprocal fashion where the thought of one may inform another’s.<sup>5</sup>

Brock and Sutanto perceive Bavinck as performing his organic theological task enroute to his goal of reformed catholicity. The task of theology is not one of repristinating but principled re-appropriation enroute to constructive theology for today.<sup>6</sup> Bavinck does this first by engaging Scripture and history. In this way, Bavinck does not universally receive any thinker but proceeds from Scripture to the Reformed tradition. He makes distinctions through polemic engagement in which unity in diversity is sought.

The final task for Bavinck is to seek to affirm truth no matter where it is found. In his essay, “*Confessie en Dogmatiek*” Bavinck writes, “That Knowledge [of God], revealed by God himself in nature and Scripture, was the center and organic principle of all dogma. Therefore, in this science, everything is related directly or indirectly, in this case *recto vel oblique*, with the knowledge of God.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Bavinck engages moderns and ancients alike, looking to

<sup>4</sup> Cory Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Eclecticism: On Catholicity, Consciousness, and Theological Epistemology.” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70, no. 3 (2017): 310–32. See also Jordan L. Steffaniak, “Retrieving Reformed Philosophy of Mind: Herman Bavinck’s Eclectic Harmonism as Gateway to Neo-Aristotelianism.” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (2023): 26–50.

<sup>5</sup> Brock and Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Eclecticism,” 313, 317:

The term “reformed” is, for Bavinck, a catholic nuance. Its scope is limited in relation to the weight of the word “catholic.” The concept “reformed” is a reference to the manner in which catholicity performs, a recognition that one works from a tradition outwards. He believes the Reformed tradition to contain the most relatively pure reflections on theology ever produced.

<sup>6</sup> For an incisive reading of Bavinck’s methodology see Cameron Clousing, *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck: Revelation, Confession, and Christian Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Bavinck, “Confessie en Dogmatiek.” *Theologische Studiën* 9 (1891): 258–75, 274. For further discussion on the centrality of knowledge of God to dogmatics, see Gregory Parker Jr., “Theological Thinking and Loving: Dogmatics and Ethics in the Theology of Herman Bavinck”

appropriate them through Scripture and the Reformed confessions. Most importantly, he continues to develop his theology through the questions and insights of modern thought both inside and outside of theology.<sup>8</sup> This Reformed catholicity, in other words, considers the organic interconnectedness of all knowledge and seeks to appropriate truth wherever it is found while submitting oneself to the material norm of Scripture and the ecclesial nature of theology. In identifying Bavinck's eclecticism, one should not overlook that it may not always generate a satisfying resolution but is more likely to create a tension that must be acknowledged and explored using the theological and philosophical resources of our own time.

Bavinck's organic hermeneutic should be considered akin to a rhapsody, in which the creaturely composer can pull together contrasting styles, tones, and moods into a free-flowing, integrated piece that distinctly bears the mark of the composer. Bavinck's organic hermeneutic—his Reformed rhapsody—pervades all aspects of his theology, including his doctrine of God. This hermeneutic commends reading his divine simplicity as eclectic, resourceful, modern, and unique to the composer while also being confessional and orthodox. Current readings of Bavinck's doctrine of divine simplicity do not fully highlight these eclectic aspects.<sup>9</sup>

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck wrote this: “The foundation of both diversity and unity is *in God* ... here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches.”<sup>10</sup> This statement by Bavinck regarding the superlative unity-in-diversity of God rooted in his divine essence beckons the theologian to scrutinize his doctrine of divine simplicity. With this quote and eclectic hermeneutic in mind, the article proceeds in three parts. The paper will first explore Bavinck's discussion of simplicity in the divine names, then examine how he re-introduces divine simplicity through the incommunicable attributes. In this section, Bavinck is more constructive and situates his divine simplicity among his contemporaries. I will then highlight some continuities and discontinuities between Bavinck and Thomas Aquinas. Finally, the article concludes, reflecting on the implications of Bavinck's articulation of divine simplicity for Bavinck studies.

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(PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2022), 180–86.

<sup>8</sup> Clausing, *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck*, 191–92. Clausing is correct to note that the interpretation of Bavinck as modern partially depends on one's definition of “modern.”

<sup>9</sup> Positively, Jordan Barrett and N. Gray Sutanto give the most attention to Bavinck's own articulation of the doctrine (see Jordan P. Barrett, *Divine Simplicity: A Biblical and Trinitarian Account* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 109–14. See also N. Gray Sutanto, “Organic Knowing: The Theological Epistemology of Herman Bavinck” (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2018), 41–47).

<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. II. trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 437 (Hereafter RD, II).

## Divine Simplicity and the Divine Names

The doctrine of divine simplicity primarily appears in two sections of Bavinck's doctrine of God. The first is his discussion on the divine names. His utilization of the names of God is in line with much of reformed scholasticism, following the pattern of discussing the "name" of something before discussing the "thing" itself.<sup>11</sup> The divine names play an essential role in Bavinck's doctrine of God. He states, "All we can learn about God from his revelation is designated his name in scripture."<sup>12</sup> True identity then is disclosed in the giving of a name.

The doctrine of God begins with God's self-disclosure of himself to his people. Bavinck initiates his fundamental theme of unity-in-diversity; in particular, he highlights the unity-in-diversity of the divine names.<sup>13</sup> "The *one* name of God, which is inclusive of his entire revelation both in nature and in grace, is divisible for us in a great *many* names. Only in that way do we obtain a full view of the riches of his revelation and the profound meaning of his name."<sup>14</sup> Bavinck then introduces his doctrine of divine simplicity to the reader and unfolds his eclectic theological method.

Bavinck begins critiquing several theologians who strayed from the consensus ecclesial position of simplicity, including Eunomius, Gilbert Porretan, William Occam, Duns Scotus, Gregory of Palamas, Baruch Spinoza, and Friederich Schleiermacher. He then turns to the norm of Scripture and the received tradition of the church. He argues that revelation gives believers the duty to confront the opinions of the thinkers mentioned above. They must affirm that every attribute is identical to the divine being and that these attributes can be distinguished from one another. Basil and Gregory of Nyssa are then put forth as examples of those who argued against Eunomius and presented a God who is "simple, and transcends all composition, yet on the other hand, [the attributes] do not differ only in name."<sup>15</sup> Basil and Gregory accomplish this by maintaining that speaking about God as simple while conceptualizing distinctions in the divine nature is possible.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: A Study in Method and Content* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 111, 114–15. See also *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, vol. 1: Disputations 1–31, eds. William den Boer and Reimer Faber (Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> RD, II, 97; see also Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> See also Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 106.

<sup>14</sup> RD, II, 99.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd ed., 4. vols. (Kampen: Kok, 1911) II, 111.

[Dutch/Latin original: *Het is er Augustinus bij deze simplicitas Dei niet om te doen, om God iets te ontnemen, maar integendeel om Hem altijd op te vatten in de volheid van zijn zijn. Daarom spreekt hij ook van de simplex multiplicitas of multiplex simplicitas in God, en noemt hij Gods wijsheid simpliciter multiplex et uniformiter multiformis.*]

The text presents my own translation. Hereafter references to *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* will be cited GD, II. Compare RD, II, 125. See also Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>16</sup> RD, II, 126, 212.

Following his engagement with Basil and Gregory, Bavinck transitions to another early church father, Augustine, to emphasize the manifold abundance of God's essence:

In speaking of the "simplicity of God" it is not Augustine's intent to take anything away from God, but on the contrary, to conceive of God in the fullness of his being. With this in view he speaks of the "simple multiplicity" or the "manifold simplicity" present in God, and calls God's wisdom "simply manifold and uniformly multiform."<sup>17</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Augustine, Bavinck strives for precisely this sort of simplicity, one where simplicity facilitates multiplicity, and God's abundance of attributes harmonizes with the unity of his essence.

Bavinck then lurches his chronology forward to the protestant scholastic distinction of *ratio ratiocinans* (mere reasoning) and *ratio ratiocinata* (rational analysis of a thing). Protestant scholastics used this terminology to attempt to answer the dilemma of the diversity of attributes. Bavinck offers the following solution:

Diversity is rooted in God's revelation itself. For it is not we who call God by these names. We do not invent them. . . . But it is God himself who reveals all his perfections and puts his name on our lips. It is he who gives himself these names and who, despite our opposition maintains them. It is of little use to deny his righteousness: every day he demonstrates this quality in history, and so it is with all his attributes. He brings them out despite us. The final goal of all his ways is that his name will shine out in all his works and be written on everyone's forehead (Rev. 22:4). For that reason we have no choice but to name him with the many names his revelation furnishes us.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, the diversity of the attributes is not merely subjective but corresponds in some way to God himself, who reveals himself in the divine names. However, the concept of divine simplicity is subsumed under the divine names, in which God's essence is identical to his attributes. For Bavinck, then, divine simplicity does not contest the diversity of attributes but rather facilitates it. Simplicity "speaks of him as the absolute fullness of life."<sup>19</sup> It is the doctrine that magnifies before us the profundity of God's infinite essence, "so rich that no creature can grasp it all at once."<sup>20</sup>

At the end of this section on simplicity, Bavinck makes two brief assertions. First, he argues that God's relation to creatures does not change; rather, the creature's relation to God varies. God remains the same, but the creaturely experiences the diversity of God's attributes in the changing relationship. Bavinck references Augustine, Moses Maimonides, Vermigli,

<sup>17</sup> RD, II, 127.

<sup>18</sup> RD, II, 127.

<sup>19</sup> RD, II, 127.

<sup>20</sup> RD, II, 127.

Bernardinus de Moor, and Basil in his support. It is interesting to highlight the heterogeneous nature of this group. Take Maimonides, for example; he is a Jewish theologian and philosopher. It is self-evident that Bavinck does not endorse or adopt his system, yet he wields him here to support his argument. Augustine, Vermigli, and de Moor are theologians who we would naturally expect Bavinck to cite in support of his articulation. Vermigli is often perceived as one of the earliest Reformed scholastics, and de Moor among the very last. This suggests that Bavinck perceived his articulation as uncontested among the Reformed scholastics. Lastly, Bavinck's use of Basil, the early church father, adds another distinct figure to this diverse group of theologians.<sup>21</sup> In many ways, this group is a prime example of Bavinck's theological rhapsody. Bavinck uses an eclectic group of theologians to support his articulation of the doctrine.

Second, he asserts that the analogical tenor of theological language allows creatures to speak of the diversity of the attributes. He writes, "In this connection, we must remember that God can act in so many different qualities and be called by so many different names, because there is kinship between him and his creatures. If this kinship did not exist, all the names would be untrue."<sup>22</sup> This connection between the Creator and the creature allows us to perceive the diversity of the attributes subjectively, in a manner that genuinely corresponds to the object of that revealed confession.<sup>23</sup> As Bavinck states:

So, referring to God by all these names, we indeed speak imperfectly, in finite terms, in limited human ways, yet not falsely. . . it is always the same being that confronts us in these names, each name by itself gives us a succinct statement of what that being truly is in its infinite fullness. . . . There is no name capable of expressing God's being with full adequacy. Given that reality, many names serve to give us the impression of his all-transcending grandeur.<sup>24</sup>

In this manner, we may speak of different attributes, though God is not composed of many attributes. We speak as creatures that must "mind the ontological gap" and recognize that through revelation, God gives us a diversity of names, each of which merely scratches the surface of the manifoldly simple God.<sup>25</sup>

Within the argumentation of *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck introduces simplicity in this section on divine names to facilitate the diversity of the

<sup>21</sup> RD, II, 127.

<sup>22</sup> RD, II, 127.

<sup>23</sup> See also Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. Gregory Parker Jr. and Cameron Clausing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2022), 52 (Hereafter, *GICR*). "And yet, that same high and exalted God stands in an intimate relation to all his creatures, even the smallest and least."

<sup>24</sup> RD, II, 127.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to my friend and former professor Adonis Vidu for the turn of phrase "mind the ontological gap."

attributes. He primarily argued for two aspects of simplicity: (1) God's essence is identical to his attributes, and (2) God's manifold simplicity permits us to talk of distinct attributes. He indirectly upheld these two principles by arguing that the divine names facilitate the unity in diversity of the attributes. It is also clear that Bavinck engaged negatively and positively with a heterogeneous group of theologians, including modern theological articulations.

### Divine Simplicity in the Incommunicable Attributes

The second appearance of divine simplicity in *Reformed Dogmatics* is in his section on the incommunicable attributes. Divine simplicity is the last incommunicable attribute that is treated and follows divine unity.<sup>26</sup> Bavinck puts forth three arguments in this section: (1) he returns to his previous argument concerning simplicity, asserting that it is a doctrine that facilitates divine abundance; (2) that simplicity is not a metaphysical abstraction; and (3) that it is compatible with the doctrine of the Trinity.

#### 1. The Abundance of Divine Simplicity

Returning to his main argument from the previous section, he argues that simplicity facilitates divine abundance.<sup>27</sup> He then catalogs a few biblical references in support of simplicity.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, he asserts, "On account of God's absolute perfection, every attribute is identical with his essence."<sup>29</sup> He follows this by examining how the confessing church has viewed this doctrine, focusing on Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Athanasius.<sup>30</sup> These four church fathers share similar conceptions of simplicity and support Bavinck's classical articulation of the doctrine, though he is most interested in engaging with Augustine.

Bavinck links the norm of the doctrine of divine simplicity to Augustine. He cites Augustine's *The Trinity*<sup>31</sup> and *The Confessions*,<sup>32</sup> arguing that ". . . there

<sup>26</sup> RD, II, 170.

<sup>27</sup> RD, II, 173.

<sup>28</sup> The Scripture listed is not explicitly defending simplicity; they defend the predication of a substantive with God in defense of the identification of God with his attributes (Jeremiah 10:10; 23:6; John 1:4–5, 9; 14:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 1 John 1:5; 4:8).

<sup>29</sup> GD, II, 166, cf. RD, II, 173.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck's citation of Irenaeus *Against Heresies* is interesting since only recently have scholars suggested that the main thrust of *Against Heresies* may be divine simplicity (see Richard A. Norris, "The Transcendence and Freedom of God: Irenaeus, the Greek Tradition and Gnosticism," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant*, eds. William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken, *Theologie Historique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), 88. See also Barrett, *Divine Simplicity*, 39–40.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), Book V, 4; VII, 5. Augustine contrasts being and nonbeing and argues that God is a single simple substance not composed of accidents. God is not composed of parts.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), VII, 11; XI, 4. In these two sections Augustine exalts the immutability of God, and another that waxes of the mutability of the created world.

are differences between existing, living, knowing, and willing” among creatures, “but in God everything is one; God is all, that he is. He is his own wisdom, his own life; being and living coincide with him.”<sup>33</sup> Bavinck views his summation as the confession of *the church* since Augustine, noting in his favor John of Damascus, the scholastics, and the various traditions of Christianity. Bavinck clearly does not perceive his construction to be out of alignment with the church catholic.

Following this, Bavinck engages a myriad of thinkers who have rejected or been critical of divine simplicity. It is worth listing the wide-ranging group of thinkers that Bavinck engages: Eunomius, Anthropomorphites, Arabian philosophers, Duns Scotus, Socinians, Remonstrants, pantheists, and various modern theologians.

The two groups he spends the most space addressing are the Socinians and Pantheists. In this article, I will limit my engagement to the pantheists. When Bavinck turns to pantheism, he focuses on the pantheism of Friedrich Schleiermacher.<sup>34</sup> I am primarily concerned with Bavinck’s critique of Schleiermacher’s understanding of divine simplicity. However, it is worth mentioning that others have suggested that Schleiermacher does present a fully orbed conception of divine simplicity.<sup>35</sup> Schleiermacher defines divine simplicity as “the non-separated and inseparable being intertwined of all divine attributes and of all divine activities.”<sup>36</sup> Bavinck evaluates Schleiermacher’s simplicity as occupying a lower place among the attributes. “Schleiermacher refused to put simplicity on par with the other attributes.”<sup>37</sup> This is likely because of §56, in which Schleiermacher claims:

Among the divine attributes customarily adduced, the oneness, infinity, and simplicity of God would be particularly pertinent here, though they bear no relation to the aforementioned contrast that takes place in the stirrings of religious consciousness. They cannot,

<sup>33</sup> *GD*, II, 166–167. This too he supports with citations from Augustine this time from the *City of God*, trans. William Babcock (New York, NY: New York City Press, 2012), VIII, 6; X, 10. See also, Augustine, *The Trinity*, XV, 5.

<sup>34</sup> For an in depth consideration of Schleiermacher and Bavinck see Cory Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck’s Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020). See also Gregory Parker Jr., “Encyclopedia Bavinck: The Case of the History of the Theological Encyclopedia,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 293–310, 301–04.

<sup>35</sup> See Gerhard Ebling, “Schleiermacher’s Doctrine of the Divine Attributes.” In *Schleiermacher as Contemporary*, ed. Robert Funk (New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 1970), 125–75; Daniel J. Pedersen, “Schleiermacher and Reformed Scholastics on the Divine Attributes.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 4 (2015): 413–31. It appears to me, that Schleiermacher allows both a diversity of attributes (reflecting the effects of divine causality on our consciousness), but also divine simplicity (reflecting the singular causality of God).

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, vol. 1 trans. Terrence Tice, Catherine Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), §56. I went with the updated translation because of its clarity, rather than the one present in *RD*, II, 175.

<sup>37</sup> *RD*, II, 175.



however, be regarded as divine attributes in the same sense as those treated so far.<sup>38</sup>

Schleiermacher then does not straightforwardly treat simplicity in *The Christian Faith* because he believes that simplicity does not produce dogmatic content that arises from the religious consciousness. For Bavinck, this is unsatisfactory, and it will become clearer why when he addresses the following critique.

Bavinck mentions several other modern theologians who opposed the doctrine of divine simplicity for two reasons: “[I]t is a metaphysical abstraction and inconsistent with the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>39</sup> He transitions to addressing the first critique—namely, that divine simplicity is a metaphysical abstraction—within his modern context.

## 2. *The Critique of Metaphysical Abstraction*

He asserts that simplicity is taught in Scripture not only wherever God is called “light,” “life,” and “love” but also because it is a necessary implication of the other attributes.<sup>40</sup> He then provides an introduction to simplicity. He states:

Simplicity here is the antonym of “compounded.” If God is composed of parts, like a body, or composed of *genus* (class) and *differentiae* (attributes of differing species belonging to the same *genus*), *substantia* (substance) and *accidentia* (accidents), *materia* (matter) and *forma* (form), *potentia* (potentiality) and *actus* (actuality), *essentia* (essence) and *existentia* (existence), then his perfection, oneness, independence, and immutability cannot be maintained. On that basis he is not the highest love, for then there is in him a subject who loves—which is one thing—as well as a love by which he loves—which is another. The same dualism would apply to all the other attributes. In that case God is not the One than “*quo melius nihil cogitari potest*” (whom nothing better can be imagined). Instead, God is uniquely his own, having nothing above him. Accordingly, he is completely identical with the attributes of wisdom, grace, and love, and so on. He is absolutely perfect, the One whom nothing higher can be thought.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §56. See also §167, “[I]n God there can be no distinction between essence and attributes.”

<sup>39</sup> RD, II, 174–75.

<sup>40</sup> The set of Scripture that Bavinck is alluding to is the group cited at the beginning of his discussion on simplicity.

<sup>41</sup> GD, II, 169. Bavinck may have Aquinas in mind here with basic metaphysical terms that he references each being referenced in Question 3 of Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* (see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1948), I, Q3 [Hereafter ST]). However, it may also be suggested that Bavinck has simply inherited this terminology from Reformed orthodoxy. See Sebastian Rehnman, “The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy,” in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 353–401, 377–78; Anselm, *St. Anselm's Proslogion*, trans. M.J. Charlesworth (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 14, 134–35. Moreover, Bavinck's reference of Anselm's description of

After asserting the validity of the doctrine of divine simplicity from Scripture, Bavinck suggests that simplicity makes sense of the whole of what we know to be true of God. Namely, if God were composed of parts, it would undermine what Christians hold to be self-evident: that God is immutable, perfect, independent, and so on. He argues that failing to uphold divine simplicity would lead to dualism, in which God's attributes are external to him.

He then models his eclectic method by drawing on Augustine and Richard St. Victor for his own purposes. In book V, section 10 of *The Trinity*, Augustine argues that God does not participate in his greatness, as if greatness were something external to God, but that God is his greatness. He states, "God is not great by participating in greatness, but he is great with his great self because he is his own greatness."<sup>42</sup> Augustine further explains that this principle can be applied to all of God's attributes. Bavinck cites Richard St. Victor for a similar purpose. Richard St. Victor, in his *On The Trinity*, reasons that God himself must be the source of everything that he is.<sup>43</sup> Bavinck uses these two theologians to showcase that rejecting simplicity would imply dualism in God and to support his assertion that God must be simple.

To emphasize the truth that God is distinct and different from his creation, Bavinck introduces the Creator-creature distinction. God is being, whereas creatures participate in being. God is his own existence, while creatures participate in existence. God is infinite, and all that is in him is infinite; creatures, however, are finite, and all that is in them is finite.<sup>44</sup> In this short section, Bavinck cites French Jesuit theologian Dionysius Petavius, whose work *De Theologicis Dogmatibus* chronologically traces the development of doctrines.<sup>45</sup> In *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*, Petavius argues that simplicity may be deduced from God's excellence, eternity, aseity, and boundless infinitude.<sup>46</sup> Petavius' argument stretches nine pages as he catalogs the historical development of the doctrine. Most notably, for Bavinck's purposes, Petavius asserts, in line with tradition, that all that is created is compounded and divisible, but there is no composition in God, for God is supremely simple and indivisible.<sup>47</sup> Bavinck concludes that what he has argued so far is sufficient to answer the critique of the doctrine of divine simplicity as a metaphysical abstraction.

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God as "*quo melius nihil cogitari potest*" is a clear indication that Bavinck is not limiting himself to a particular source but is broadly resourcing the historic church.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, V, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Bavinck mistakenly cites Hugo St. Victor rather than Richard St. Victor. Richard of St. Victor, *On the Trinity*, trans. Ruben Angelici (Cambridge, UK: James Clark & Co., 2011), Book I, XII.

<sup>44</sup> RD, II, 176; "All his attributes are divine, hence infinite and one with his being." All creatures are compound; God is simple. God is infinite, "all-sufficient, fully-blessed and glorious within himself."

<sup>45</sup> Dionysius Petavius, *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*, vol. I–II (Paris: Vives, 1865–1867) II, ch. 2, *en toto*.

<sup>46</sup> Petavius, *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*, II, 185.

<sup>47</sup> Petavius, *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*, II, 193.

By “metaphysical abstractions,” Bavinck understood the opponents of divine simplicity to mean the process of “eliminating all the contrasts and distinctions that characterize creatures and describing him [God] as the being who transcends all such contrasts.”<sup>48</sup> This, Bavinck tells us, is what modern philosophers have called the “Absolute” and what philosophers of old called “substance.”<sup>49</sup> Alternatively, simplicity, for Bavinck, is not abstract. Rather, the doctrine of divine simplicity is “the end result of ascribing to God all the perfections of creatures to the ultimate divine degree.”<sup>50</sup> The difference here is subtle but important. Bavinck asserts that simplicity is indeed a cataphatic doctrine. In other words, rather than divine simplicity being considered strictly as another doctrine of what God is not (apophatic), it is also a positive description of the fullness of God’s being—an “unbounded ocean of being.”<sup>51</sup>

Bavinck contrasts his viewpoint of the Absolute against Ferdinand C. Baur, a disciple of the romantic idealist, G.W.F. Hegel. Baur asserts that divine simplicity leads to pantheism, while Bavinck counters that divine simplicity is fundamentally opposed to pantheism.<sup>52</sup> In pantheism, God has no existence apart from the world. In other words, simplicity, rather than leading to pantheism, defends the doctrine of God from that very critique. Bavinck makes this point by critiquing Hegel. He states, “In the thought of Hegel . . . the Absolute, pure Being, Thought, Idea, does not exist before the creation of the world, but is only logically and potentially prior to the world. All the qualifications of the Absolute are devoid of content—nothing but abstract logical categories.”<sup>53</sup> Here, the critique of abstraction is turned on its head.

Bavinck also draws on the work of the German theologian Arthur Drews, citing *Die deutsche Spekulation seit Kant* in support of his interpretation of

<sup>48</sup> RD, II, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Here I make a modest contribution to the ongoing conversation regarding the Absolute in Bavinck. See Gayle Doornbos, “Bavinck’s Doctrine of God: Absolute, Divine Personality,” *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 311–48. Cf. Clausing, *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck*, 191–209.

<sup>50</sup> RD, II, 176.

<sup>51</sup> RD, II, 176.

<sup>52</sup> F.C. Baur, *Die christliche lehre von der Dreieinigkeit und menschenwerdung Gottes in ihrer geschichtlichen entwicklung*, vol. II (Tubingen: C.F. Oslander, 1842), 634–35n58. Baur asserts that the pantheistic element in Thomas system is his divine simplicity.

<sup>53</sup> Bavinck critiques Hegel’s Absolute as pantheistic throughout his RD, II, 49, 115, 155–56, 166, 176–77, 185–87, 193–96, 411, 413, 516, 613; *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 275, 568–69 (Hereafter, RD, II); Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1985), 97. Hegel would deny being a pantheist in his first volume of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*: “It has never occurred to any man to say, all is God, that is things in their individuality or contingency much less has it been maintained in Philosophy.” Bavinck seems aware that it was not exactly pantheism. “Hegel, too, openly acknowledged his adherence to pantheism, not in the pantheism that regards finite things themselves as God but in the pantheism that in the finite and accidental sees the appearance of the absolute, the fossilized idea, frozen intelligence” (see RD, II, 411).

Hegel.<sup>54</sup> In the chapter “Radical Atheism,” Drew engages Ludwig Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel’s Absolute. “God,” Hegel said, “is only in thought and thought.” However, Feuerbach views thinking as something only humans do, and thus quickly concludes that the Absolute must be nothing more than a product of human thought. As a result, Feuerbach perceives the highest essence of the theology of his time—the Absolute—as nonsense, reducing it to nothing more than an abstraction.<sup>55</sup> It is this same critique that Bavinck adopts and utilizes to critique Hegel’s Absolute as an abstraction.

In Hegel’s Absolute, nothing remains but “pure being,” yet this “being” is merely an abstraction. The Absolute becomes a concept “for which there is no corresponding reality and which may not be further defined. Every further qualification would finitize it, make it into something particular, and hence destroy its generality.”<sup>56</sup> Thus emerges Hegel’s phrase, “All determination is negation,” which Bavinck references.<sup>57</sup> The principle is part of Hegel’s dialectical movement from pure being, to nothing, to becoming, to determinate being. The process of negation is central to this progression from pure being to determinate being.

Rather than asserting that God is the being who transcends all description, Bavinck contends that God is a unique being who remains determined, though not in the manner that Hegel suggests. Bavinck rejects Hegel’s abstraction and argues that simplicity not only entails a variety of names for God but demands it. In this way, the attributes ascribed to God do not denote different realities within God; rather, each attribute designates the manifold being of God under a particular aspect:

God is so abundantly rich that we can gain some idea of his richness only by the availability of many names. Every name refers to the

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Drews, *Die deutsche Spekulation seit Kant mit besonderer Rücksicht auf das Wesen des Absoluten und die Persönlichkeit Gottes* (Berlin: Paul Maeter, 1893), I, 249.

<sup>55</sup> Drews, *Die deutsche Spekulation seit Kant*, 238–55. In this section, Drew demonstrates Feuerbach’s shift away from Hegel’s Absolute into his critique of it. Marx Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 356–57. Wartofsky agrees with this reading of Feuerbach stating:

But if the Absolute or the *Idea* in itself which speculative philosophy posits as an essence beyond actual or concrete thinking, is not simply the objectification of thought, what is it? Feuerbach sees in this conception of hypostatization of a particular capacity of thought, namely, the capacity for *abstraction*. The Absolute is therefore the projected or mystified form in which *abstraction* is posited as an object for thought. The Absolute, as infinite, unconditioned, necessary Being is therefore nothing but the objectification of the infinity, the unconditionedness, the necessity, the absoluteness of abstract thought, posited as thought’s own object, and as an object that is beyond thought itself.

<sup>56</sup> RD, II, 177.

<sup>57</sup> “*Omnis determinatio est negatio*.” This phrase of Hegel’s he claims to have picked up from Spinoza (see Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 536. “Determinateness is negation – is the absolute principle of Spinoza’s philosophy.” There has been some discussion on whether or not Hegel understood Spinoza’s use of it well. See: Robert Stern, “‘Determination is Negation’: The Adventures of a Doctrine from Spinoza to Hegel to the British Idealists,” *Hegel Bulletin* 37 (2016): 29–52.

same full divine being, but each time from a particular angle, the angle from which it reveals itself to us in his works. God is therefore *simple in his multiplicity and manifold in his simplicity* (Augustine).<sup>58</sup>

The Absolute of Hegel is countered as Bavinck makes Augustine's divine simplicity mantra his own. This becomes clearer in the following sentence, where Bavinck states, "Hence every qualification, every name, used with reference to God, so far from being a negation, is an enrichment of our knowledge of his being."<sup>59</sup> In other words, while Hegel's Absolute is an abstraction free from all qualification, Bavinck's God has named himself and is, therefore, a self-determined being. Thus, to talk of God and his multiplicity of attributes or variety of names does not reduce God or impose external determination upon him. Instead, it allows us to glimpse the inexhaustible fullness of God's being. Writing on this elsewhere, Bavinck puts it like so:

Similarly, our knowledge does not limit God because (1) it is grounded in him, (2) can only exist through him, and (3) especially has as its object and content God as the infinite One. Furthermore, if absoluteness precludes all limitation, and all determination is negation, it is not only not permissible to speak of God as personality, but it is equally wrong still to call him the Absolute, unity, the good, essential being, substance (etc.). Pantheism suffers from the illusion that it has completed its God-concept if only the ideas of personality and self-consciousness are removed from it as contradictory elements.<sup>60</sup>

Bavinck also footnotes Aquinas' defense of God as a self-determined being. In this section of Aquinas' commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*, he argues that God is a self-determined being because no "additions can be made to" him. Therefore, neither "the diversity of relations of God himself to creatures" nor the "personal names" establish any composition in God.<sup>61</sup> For Bavinck, in line with Aquinas, God remains a determined being, avoiding the addition of any parts as an independent, perfect, and eternal being.

In the same footnote, Bavinck cites German Catholic thinker Joseph Kleutgen's work *Die Theologie der Vorzeit*.<sup>62</sup> This section of Kleutgen's work engages pantheism in relation to divine simplicity. Most interestingly, Kleutgen quotes the same section of Aquinas that Bavinck references while also going beyond it, referring to the thoughts of Francisco Suarez. Suarez suggests there are two ways to view "pure being." The first is to remove all characteristics, leaving only something akin to Hegel's Absolute, which

<sup>58</sup> RD II, 177. Italics mine.

<sup>59</sup> RD II, 177.

<sup>60</sup> RD, II, 49.

<sup>61</sup> RD, II, 177n119; Aquinas, "Concerning God's Simplicity." In *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, trans. John Laumakis. Accessed March 3, 2018. <http://hosted.desales.edu/w4/philtheo/loughlin/ATP/Sententiae/ISentd8q4a1.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Kleutgen, *Die Theologie der Vorzeit*, 2nd ed. (Münster: Theissing, 1867), I, 204.

Suarez also concludes is pure abstraction and not truly God. Alternatively, the second way one may view pure being is to think of God as a peculiar and unique being—not characterized by the absence of qualifications but by the fullness of His being.<sup>63</sup>

In this manner, we have an Absolute being that is opposed to that of pantheism—an Absolute that “is the fullness of being, not an abstraction, but concrete, not universal, but peculiar, not mingled with others, but independent from everything, existing in itself.”<sup>64</sup> It is reasonable to posit that Kleutgen’s definition, borrowed from Suarez, serves as the positive definition of Absolute that Bavinck is operating within his *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>65</sup> It is also clear that, in Bavinck’s purview, pantheism—whether Hegel’s or Schleiermacher’s—would result in the loss of divine simplicity. In composing his defense of simplicity from the modern charge of abstraction, Bavinck theologically resources Augustine, Arthur Drew (and by proxy Ludwig Feuerbach), Thomas Aquinas, and Joseph Kleutgen (and by proxy Francisco Suarez).

### 3. The Critique of Simplicity as Inconsistent with the Doctrine of the Trinity

In the final sentences of this section of *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck defends simplicity against the second critique—that it is inconsistent with the doctrine of the Trinity. Bavinck states, first, that simplicity is not inconsistent with “twofold” or “threefold” but rather is the antonym of “composite.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, simplicity does not conflict with the diversity of persons. The divine essence is not composed of three persons, nor, as Bavinck argues, is each person of the Trinity composed of the personal properties of the essence. Rather, the same simple being exists in three persons. Bavinck writes:

Now the Divine being is not composed of three persons, nor is every person composed of the being and the *personalis proprietas* (personal property); but the same simple being exists in the three persons, every person or personal property is not a distinction *re* (in the matter of) the essence but according to *ratione* (reason); every personal property is certainly a *relatio realis* (real relation) but does not add *aliquid reale* (anything real) to the *essentia* (essence). The personal properties *non componunt sed solum distinguunt* (do not compose but only distinguish) [the essence].<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Kleutgen, *Die Theologie der Vorzeit*, 207–08. For a fine reading of Kleutgen and Bavinck, see Brock, “Herman Bavinck the Neo-Thomist? A Reevaluation of Influence” in *Neo-Calvinism and Roman Catholicism*, eds. James Eglinton and George Harinck (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 114–33.

<sup>64</sup> Kleutgen, *Die Theologie der Vorzeit*, 208.

<sup>65</sup> See for example, RD II, 121.

<sup>66</sup> RD, II, 177.

<sup>67</sup> Bavinck, *GD*, II, 171. (translation mine)

The use of *personalis proprietatis* refers to the personal relations between the persons of the Trinity—the Father (*paternity*), the Son (*filiation*), and the Spirit (*procession*). In other words, the property of filiation belongs properly to the Son but not to the Father. These personal properties identify real relations in God but do not add anything to the essence. In this way, the personal properties individuate or distinguish the persons without creating a compound in God. By distinguishing between essence and personal properties and between properties themselves, Bavinck defends the doctrine of divine simplicity from the charge that it is inconsistent with the doctrine of the Trinity.

In this short quote, peppered with scholastic terminology, Bavinck pulls from two additional thinkers: Petavius and Jerome Zanchius. In this section of Petavius' work, he defends distinguishing the persons through their relations or personal properties. Similarly, Zanchius argues that simplicity is compatible with the doctrine of the Trinity. First, he asserts that the incarnation does not conflict with divine simplicity because it introduces nothing new to the essence. Second, he argues that the personal relations of the Trinity are compatible with simplicity, as they do not create a composition of essence but rather a distinction of persons: "God is the essence and the real relations." Zanchius supports this with the scholastic distinction, which Bavinck deployed above, that the relations of the persons are real but do not add anything substantive to the essence.<sup>68</sup>

This brings Bavinck's articulation of simplicity, under the section incommunicable attributes, to a close. This section highlighted the eclectic nature of Bavinck's Reformed catholicity. It also clarified that his doctrine of divine simplicity should not be strictly identified with one source. Rather, he pulls from various sources, both ancient and modern alike. While levying a host of heterogeneous voices to support his articulation, Bavinck is also keen to align himself with Augustine. Through his engagement with contemporary philosophers and theologians, Bavinck seeks to construct the doctrine in such a way as to meet the traditional and modern critiques of the doctrine. It is important to note that Bavinck's doctrine of God includes, rather than precludes, modern elements like personality and self-consciousness. In the next section, I will articulate a few discontinuities and continuities between

<sup>68</sup> Petavius, *De Theologicis Dogmatibus*, II, chs.3–4. Jerome Zanchius, *De operum theologicorum*, vol. II (Geneva: Samuelis Crispini, 1649), 67–69. Zanchius, *De operum theologicorum*, 69: "At Deo est essentia, & relationes reales." See also Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. I. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 199 (PRRD, hereafter):

Zanchi would carefully define an attribute as "something that we attribute to God on our part" rather than as an incidental or separable property of the divine nature. Zanchi's discussion set the stage for subsequent Reformed scholastic analysis of the problem of the attributes with its clear declaration that there are no accidents or natural passions in God, and that there is no diversity or division in the divine essence. God has simply chosen to accommodate his revelation in the Scriptures to our way of knowing, revealing there a series of attributes that are applied to him by created order.

Bavinck and Thomas Aquinas to demonstrate further that Bavinck should not be strictly identified with any one source.

### Continuities and Discontinuities between Bavinck and His Sources

This section of the article will identify points of similarity and dissimilarity between Bavinck and Thomas Aquinas in his doctrine of divine simplicity. Evaluating these points of continuity and discontinuity will demonstrate for us that Bavinck cannot be strictly identified with his sources (beyond differing contexts) but must be envisioned as engaging in his own unique theological project, even if the content of *Reformed Dogmatics* remains within the bounds of confessional thinking.

The structure and order of the divine attributes in Bavinck's theology reflect a discontinuity with Aquinas. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas begins with *simplicitas* (simplicity) in question 3. He then proceeds to *perfectum* (perfection) in Question 4, *bonitas* (goodness) in Questions 5–6, *infinitum* (infinity) in Questions 7–8, and continues with the other attributes.<sup>69</sup> Rather than beginning with simplicity, as Aquinas does, Bavinck concludes his discussion of the incommunicable attributes with simplicity and ends his overall discussion of the attributes with perfection, where Aquinas began. These differing starting places suggest that Bavinck may not have Aquinas directly in view.<sup>70</sup>

A further discontinuity is the categorization of the different attributes. It is evident that Bavinck and Aquinas grouped attributes differently. For example, Aquinas understood simplicity, perfection, and goodness to be fundamental attributes. Alternatively, Bavinck situates his attributes under three headings: intellectual, ethical, and sovereign attributes, with perfection as the attribute that summarizes all the attributes. Furthermore, rather than introducing the discussion of the attributes through simplicity, Bavinck commences, in a Reformed manner, with the divine names and, therefore, begins with God's independence or absoluteness.<sup>71</sup>

In terms of the actual construction of the doctrine of divine simplicity, Bavinck and Aquinas have much in common, yet there remains a point of discontinuity. Both utilize the same metaphysical categories and articulate that God has no "real" distinctions. Rather, distinctions between the attributes are understood through rational analysis (*ratio ratiocinata*). These distinctions we perceive as finite creatures grasping at the infinite and necessarily categorically splitting God into many parts.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, "they

<sup>69</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q3–10.

<sup>70</sup> Muller, *PRRD*, 58; *RD*, II, 254. Two other points are of significance here: First, Bavinck specifically places himself in opposition to Aquinas in other places in his discussion of the attributes, namely the attribute of glory. Second, Bavinck never moves away from the Reformed distinction of incommunicable and communicable attributes (see *GICR*, 55).

<sup>71</sup> See *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, I, 56–59.

<sup>72</sup> For more on Aquinas' distinctiveness see Glenn Butner, *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Baker Academic, 2022), 76, 78–79.



signify him under diverse and multiple concepts, which are not synonyms.<sup>73</sup> Bavinck critiques Ockham and Scotus but not Thomas and, therefore, is (perhaps) implicitly linking himself to Thomas. However, despite this, Bavinck was no epigone of Thomas but a distinctly Reformed theologian. To point out a discontinuity in construction is to identify Bavinck's use of the phrase "absolute simplicity," which is absent from Aquinas but present in constructions of Reformed orthodoxy.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the fact that Bavinck goes beyond Aquinas and limits his retrieval of him suggests that Bavinck should not be strictly identified with Aquinas. Instead, Aquinas served as one reliable guide among others.<sup>75</sup> This is in line with Brock's evaluation regarding Bavinck and the influence of neo-Thomism:

[T]he label "neo-thomist," posited by a number of Bavinck's commentators as a critical underlying influence must be shed. This does not mean that neo-Thomism did not have any influence upon Bavinck. Rather, equating one tradition wholesale as a ground-motif or conceptual framework for the entirety of one's thought lacks the nuance needed as regards specific aspects of both tradition and the thinker.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, it ought to be noted, per the above argumentation, that Bavinck gravitates more readily toward Augustine and the early church fathers than Aquinas in his citations.

### CONCLUSION: Bavinck's Eclectic Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

If the above analysis of Bavinck's doctrine of divine simplicity is correct, the following conclusions may be drawn.

First, perhaps more should be made of Bavinck's uniqueness with regard to divine simplicity. To suggest Bavinck's uniqueness beyond his synthetic eclecticism is to highlight his appropriation of a modified Absolute. Bavinck's adaptation of the Absolute and his engagement with modern thinkers support the hypothesis of Bavinck as one who is both orthodox and modern. Sutamto has previously argued for Bavinck's "Absolute Personality" as a modest contribution to Reformed confessional thinking.<sup>77</sup> Cameron Clausung's work on Bavinck and the "Absolute" and "Absolute Personality" raises the question of

<sup>73</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q.28, art. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Muller, *PRRD*, 54, 279. Muller indicates Aquinas "does not use the phrase 'absolute simplicity'—indeed *simplicitas absoluta* is not a term that one often encounters in traditional presentations of the doctrine of simplicity."

<sup>75</sup> See also, Gregory Parker Jr., "Reformation or Revolution: Herman Bavinck and Henri de Lubac," *Perichoresis* 15, no. 3 (2017): 81–95.

<sup>76</sup> Brock, "Herman Bavinck the Neo-Thomist? A Reevaluation of Influence," 130–31.

<sup>77</sup> Sutamto, "Organic Knowing," 45; see also Clausung, *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck*, 210. "One wonders if relying on older formulae may not have served Bavinck better here. Nevertheless, the desire to see the doctrine of Trinity answer the questions of the day was noble. However, it seems Bavinck's response had the potential of causing more problems than it solved."

whether the modern features of Bavinck's simplicity served Bavinck well here.<sup>78</sup> To this, I would answer yes and no.

Insofar as Bavinck's "Absolute" is infused with Augustine's "fullness of his being," "simple multiplicity," "manifold simplicity," and "unbounded ocean of being" and is read alongside the background of Reformed orthodoxy's use of absolute simplicity, it is undoubtedly beneficial.<sup>79</sup> However, one must ask whether embracing the terminology of Absolute is ripe for confusion. Moreover, it raises further questions about the role of philosophy in Bavinck's theological program,<sup>80</sup> which has increasing significance in Bavinck studies.

Second, it should be recognized that the function of simplicity among the attributes is to provide *harmony*. In Bavinck's divine attributes, he employs divine simplicity to facilitate the unity-in-diversity of the attributes. Christian theology has often attempted to balance the incommunicable and communicable attributes or, in the language of Bavinck, the absoluteness and personality of God.<sup>81</sup> For Bavinck, perfect harmony exists among the attributes because of divine simplicity.<sup>82</sup>

Elsewhere in Bavinck's corpus, the concept of harmony is utilized in connection with the organic motif. This suggests that the doctrine of divine simplicity plays a foundational conceptual role in how the organic motif ought to be understood. For Bavinck, God is Triune, yet his unity does not limit God's diversity but facilitates it. As Bavinck states, "The glory of the confession of the Trinity consists above all in the fact that that unity, however absolute, does not exclude but includes diversity... whose diversity, so far from diminishing the unity, unfolds it to its fullest existence."<sup>83</sup> Eglinton identifies this connection in his work *Trinity and Organism*, arguing, "Trinity *ad intra* leads to organism *ad extra*."<sup>84</sup> In this manner:

[O]ne finds that [Bavinck] evokes the organic motif to explain the sense in which the archetypal (Trinitarian) unity of the godhead acts as the foundation for all consequent (triniform) unity in the creation. The motif is thus viewed as an agent of conceptual unity, one grounded in Trinitarian foundations and moving towards a triniform goal.<sup>85</sup>

With Eglinton's point in mind, it is necessary to take it one step further by highlighting how unity-in-diversity's foundational (archetypal) reality lies at the conceptual heart of Bavinck's doctrine of divine simplicity. Bavinck infers this in *Reformed Dogmatics* when he speaks about the

<sup>78</sup> See also Clausing, *Theology and History in the Methodology of Herman Bavinck*, 210.

<sup>79</sup> *GD*, II, 111 and *RD*, II, 176.

<sup>80</sup> George Puchinger, *Is de Gereformeerde wereld veranderd?* (Delft:Meinema, 1966), 209.

<sup>81</sup> *RD*, II, 118–19.

<sup>82</sup> *RD*, II, 110.

<sup>83</sup> *RD*, II, 300.

<sup>84</sup> Eglinton, "Bavinck's Organic Motif," 64; Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism?," 63. Pass contends for incarnation as a constitutive principle of Bavinck's organicism.

<sup>85</sup> Eglinton, "Bavinck's Organic Motif," 81.

polytheistic worldview in relation to divine simplicity.<sup>86</sup> For Bavinck, certain metaphysical realities pave the way for the world's diversity. Notably, in this context, Bavinck does not appeal here to God as Triune to provide this reality (as he does elsewhere) but instead grounds this discussion in God's attributes. Put differently, not only does Trinity *ad intra* lead to organism *ad extra*, but *divine simplicity ad intra* leads to organism *ad extra*.<sup>87</sup> This metaphysical understanding facilitates a further richness to Bavinck's deployment of the unity-in-diversity motifs, building not only on the unity-in-diversity of God's divine relations but also on the unity-in-diversity of his attributes.

Bavinck's unity-in-diversity motif raises an interesting question concerning the ongoing debate about the source of Bavinck's organicism.<sup>88</sup> Does the above discussion shed any light on the source? It does not, nor does it need to. Pass has sufficiently addressed this. However, it does suggest that Bavinck's engagement with philosophy has clear "Reformed catholic" ends. Bavinck's doctrine of divine simplicity should be considered an example of his eclectic "Reformed catholicity," in which he sources modern, Reformed, and ancient thinkers to construct theological doctrine in a principled manner. As Bruce Pass has stated, "Bavinck is a synthetic and eclectic thinker who strove for a reconciliation of historic Christianity and modern culture."<sup>89</sup> Bavinck's structure and articulation of simplicity resonate primarily with Reformed orthodoxy while reflecting dialogue with Romantic idealism and the broader church catholic in his construction.

Finally, Bavinck's description of divine simplicity is polemical, as he defends it from the charge of metaphysical abstraction while positively asserting its consistency with the doctrine of the Trinity. He affirms that the attributes may be distinguished through rational analysis (*ratio ratiocinata*), as God reveals himself in his word. While Bavinck's articulation is apologetic for his time, it may not offer anything substantially new for more modern (21st-century) opponents of the doctrine. However, it provides a synthetic model for moving forward for those who desire to uphold traditional articulations of divine simplicity with a modern tune.

<sup>86</sup> RD, III, 588.

<sup>87</sup> Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism?," 63. It is relevant to note that Pass has also persuasively argued for a Christological element to be added to this phrase.

<sup>88</sup> For my own part, I have recently hinted at the more Romantic idealist features in Bavinck's organicism, but this is put forth much more convincingly by Pass. See Parker, "Theological Thinking and Loving," 64 (58n), 147–154. See also Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism?," 56–70, 69–70.

<sup>89</sup> Pass, "Trinity or German Idealism?," 66.