

# **Bavinck and Kuyper on Creation and Miracle**

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## **Introduction**

It has been the confession of the Church since its earliest days that God created all things and constantly maintains them in existence. This continuing relationship of God to his creation includes the mighty acts of power performed on behalf of his people, bringing healing and deliverance and providing for many needs. These mighty acts aroused wonder and reverent awe in those who witnessed their unusual power and appropriateness. The people of Israel, and the believers in the early church, had no difficulty in acknowledging the ability and the willingness of God to perform such acts on their behalf, and this is reflected throughout the Scriptures.

However, the Church eventually came into contact with the heritage of Greek thought, which emphasised the analysis of things and events in the world. The biblical perspective was concerned with the ultimate meaning and significance of the creation, and did not give analytical descriptions of things and events. So when the Church Fathers attempted to define more closely the biblical understanding of the relationship between God and the creation, they borrowed concepts from Greek philosophy to do so.

Since the Greek concept of reality was incompatible with the biblical perspective, the blend of these two approaches produced problematic formulations. The principal problem was the concept of substance. Substance or matter was the basic material from which everything was made. It was formless, and had to receive its shape and individuality through the imposition of the activity of non-material forms. Since this matter was eternal and self-sufficient in its own right, it was independent of God, (although some held that God had created matter). The forms which gave shape to matter had a similar independent character, and were used by God in creation but were not themselves created by him. Thus the early church Fathers' view of God's

relationship to the creation unavoidably distorted the biblical message by using these unbiblical themes.

The way in which the relationship between God and the creation is expressed has a profound influence on the formulation of the concept of miracle. If God is to work miracles in a creation which has an independent character, self-sufficient over against God and functioning according to natural law (i.e. a law intrinsic to nature and not established, or at least not sustained continually by God) then God must break into this independent nature. A miracle can then take place only by abolishing or suspending a natural law so that a miracle, assumed on this basis to be contrary to natural law, can occur.

Thus instead of the biblical view of God's intimate and constant relationship with the world, God is exiled from his own creation. This is the fruit of autonomous thought which sets itself over against God and conceives itself and all of reality to be independent of God.

This article will examine principal themes in the doctrine of creation and miracle as developed by Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper, two of the leading figures in the renewal of Calvinism in nineteenth-century Holland. The article will focus especially on the influence of scholastic philosophy on their thought, as well as the insights they gained into the biblical confession of creation and miracle.

## **Bavinck's Doctrine of Creation**

The concept of creation as matter which received its form through the rational activity of God was not wholly avoided in the early neo-Calvinist movement. Kuyper and Bavinck both used the terminology and concepts of neo-Thomistic scholastic thought in this respect, although they also held to a biblically reforming position, which is in conflict with this scholastic view.<sup>1</sup> It is to their credit that they saw the unbiblical

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<sup>1</sup> A Wolters, "Introduction" to J Veenhof, "Nature and grace in Bavinck" (Toronto: ICS mimeo), p. 2. "This is not to say that Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd have not substantially altered the formulation of Bavinck's insight. Bavinck's conceptual apparatus is borrowed

nature of scholastic thought; but, lacking a truly biblical philosophical system there was little they could do to avoid it. However, in spite of this,

Bavinck's thought in general, and particularly his emphasis on creation (understood broadly in terms of creation ordinances for all of life and reality) is also of great significance for understanding the so-called Amsterdam school of philosophy, which builds directly on Bavinck's insights in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

Bavinck's view of creation follows both these trends: a biblically faithful insight into creation, and a scholastic formulation of this insight in his systematisation of his concepts on this subject. The doctrine of creation is crucial to Bavinck's theology. It has been argued that the theme of "grace restoring creation" (the relation of nature and grace) is the centre of his theology.<sup>3</sup> But if the restoration of creation fallen in sin is the centre of his theology, then his doctrine of creation is its foundation.

The creation story in Genesis 1 does not give a philosophical world-view, but it is a historical story, revealed by God to mankind, and it lays the foundation for the Christian religion.<sup>4</sup>

It is certainly, as John Bolt says, the foundation for his anti-dualistic emphasis, his rejection of the Catholic idea that grace is the suppression of the natural.<sup>5</sup> Bavinck also rejected the idea of pantheism on the basis of his doctrine of creation. He saw

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very largely from Neo-Thomism....Where Bavinck speaks of sin as "accidental" to the "substance" of creation, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd speak of a change in the religious "direction" within the subject-side of creation, leaving the law-side unaffected by sin." Cf. J Bolt, "The imitation of Christ theme in Bavinck's cultural-ethical ideal." (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of St Michael's College, Toronto, 1982), p. 199, n. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Wolters, *ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1; Veenhof, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> H Bavinck. **Godsdienst en wetenschap**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1921, pp. 122-123.

<sup>5</sup> Bolt, *op. cit.*, pp. 118, 173. See Veenhof, *op. cit.*, p. 26 n. 6, for further comments on Bavinck's characterisation of Catholicism as "complementation."

pantheism as an obliteration of the boundaries and distinctions in creation, a losing sight of the variety of laws in creation.<sup>6</sup>

The role of the persons of the Trinity in creation is carefully spelled out by Bavinck. The Father takes the initiative, the Son is the mediator, the Word by whom all things exist, and the Spirit gives life, and completes and perfects the creation.<sup>7</sup> The Godhead is the source of all diversity and individuality, as well as the unity of creation.<sup>8</sup> It is the stress on the priority of the Father (and creation) which leads Bavinck to emphasise the idea that salvation is the **restoration** of creation to its original goodness.

The essence of the Christian religion consists in this, that the creation of the Father, devastated by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God, and recreated by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup>

This restoration comes to its culmination in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21:1). However, Bavinck stresses that this new creation is not a radical break with the old creation but its **renewal**. The new heavens and the new earth are formed from the elements of this present world.<sup>10</sup>

The matter from which the world is formed is unknown to us. It is an incomprehensible mystery.<sup>11</sup> However, matter is itself created. It does not exist eternally as an

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<sup>6</sup> Bolt, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> “The unity and diversity of the works of God proceeds from and returns to the unity and diversity which exist in the divine Being.” H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**. Kampen: J H Bos, 1895-1901. Vol. 1, p. 89. Quoted from Bolt, op. cit., p. 162. Cf. H Bavinck. **The Doctrine of God**. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977, p. 319. “All things are originated by the Father, are carried through by the Son, and are brought to completion by the Holy Spirit.” See also Bolt, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**. Vol. 4, p. 704. Cf. H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 566. “But just as man himself is recreated by Christ indeed, but is not annihilated and thereupon created again (2 Cor 5:17) so too the world in its essence will be preserved, even though in its form it under goes so great a change that it can be called a new heaven and a new earth.” See also H Bavinck. **The Philosophy of Revelation**. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**, Vol. 2, p. 378.

independent substance over against God.<sup>12</sup> Neither is there a **necessary** connection between God and the creation. God is self-sufficient, while matter is self-insufficient. Because of this the world is purely contingent, existing through the free will of God, arising out of his creative act.<sup>13</sup> It is this will of God, or his “decrees,” that is the ground of everything. Bavinck sees this as yet another defence against pantheism. “The will of God is, and from the nature of the case must be, the deepest cause of the entire world and all the *varietas* and *diversitas* found in it.”<sup>14</sup>

This will of God is the connection between God and the world.<sup>15</sup> Thus the origin of creation in the will of God is a defence against both pantheism, which identifies God and creation, and deism, which divorces God from creation. This will of God is the connection of cause and result, that is, the fixed ordinances in creation which are a natural order founded in the will of God. This order is dedicated to the service of that will.<sup>16</sup> Through this will each creature exists and is maintained in existence.<sup>17</sup> Just as creation could not arise from itself, so too it cannot sustain itself. Providence is a necessary correlate of creation.<sup>18</sup>

Bavinck categorically denied any notion of a matter which was independent of God, rejecting it as unbiblical.<sup>19</sup> A pre-existent matter would limit God’s power.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, God has called all things into being through the word of his power.<sup>21</sup> However, Bavinck also says it is misleading to say that things were created “out of

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<sup>12</sup> H Bavinck. **Godsdienst en wetenschap**, p. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Bolt, op. cit., p. 195-6.

<sup>14</sup> H Bavinck. “Calvin and common grace,” **Princeton Theological Review**, 7 (1909), p. 450. Reprinted in *Calvin and the Reformation*. Edited by William Park Armstrong. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980. This citation is on p. 113 of this edition.

<sup>15</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**. Vol 2, p. 313. Cf. H Bavinck. **Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing**. Kampen: J H Bos, 1904, p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**. Vol 2, p. 560.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, Vol. 2, p. 570.

<sup>18</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 163, 167.

<sup>20</sup> H Bavinck. **Godsdienst en wetenschap**, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, pp. 162, 166. H Bavinck. **Godsdienst en wetenschap**, p. 116.

nothing.” Scripture simply says that the world was called into being by the will of God.<sup>22</sup> Prior to this things had no existence in reality; they were not merely formed by God from uncreated matter.<sup>23</sup> God created matter by His Word, giving form to this matter by imposing on it the Ideas of things which existed in His Logos.

The creation arises in the counsel of God’s will.<sup>24</sup> This means that God freely chose to create, being constrained by nothing and restrained by nothing. God is the sole and absolute cause of everything.<sup>25</sup> The “formless” state of the earth as described in Genesis 1:2 was strictly a limited condition, according to Bavinck. It was called into being, and was formless (shapeless or undifferentiated), but this condition was put to an end by the works of God described in Genesis 1:3-10.<sup>26</sup>

The totality of the decrees of God, the expression of his will, forms the content of the world-idea. For the real world, the world-idea is the *causa exemplaris*, or the temporal “image of the eternal, the being is the adumbration of the idea, and in its deepest basis everything that is and happens is a reflection of the Divine Being.” The world-idea is similarly the *causa efficiens*, by which all creaturely being comes into existence, namely, by the decrees of God which form this world-idea.<sup>27</sup> But the *causa exemplaris* of itself is insufficient to explain the existence of things. It can only explain their essence. To explain existence, it is necessary to include the *causa efficiens*. The ideas must be put into action by the Word; the decree of God must be put into effect by the Divine Wisdom. Only thus can an idea which was eternally in the Divine consciousness acquire a real existence.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 166.

<sup>23</sup> H Bavinck. **Godsdienst en wetenschap**, p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 167. H Bavinck. **The Doctrine of God**, p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> R H Bremmer. **Bavinck als dogmaticus**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1961, p. 199. Bremmer is citing H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**. Vol 2, p. 386.

<sup>28</sup> H Bavinck. **Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing**, p. 54; H Bavinck. **The Doctrine of God**, p. 233.

The will of God is “the divine, immanent, eternal idea which spreads its fulness in the forms of space and time, and what is one for God is unfolded successively in length and breadth, for our limited eyes.”<sup>29</sup> God gave shape to his eternal ideas, which were concentrated in the Logos, Christ the mediator of creation, through whom the ideas were concretised in creation. R H Bremmer points out here Bavinck’s conscious affinity to Augustine’s Christianised Platonism,<sup>30</sup> although Bavinck’s strong Trinitarian thought is more biblical than dependent on an Augustinian Christianised doctrine of ideas.<sup>31</sup>

These ideas can exist only in the mind of God, and do not have an objective, independent, metaphysical existence outside of God.<sup>32</sup> Following Augustine’s neo-Platonic thought, Bavinck sees the ideas as forms with aspects of both Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. The forms are not only universal concepts which contain the types and shapes of things, but they are also the ideas of each individual thing which already exists or shall exist in time. Following Augustine, Bavinck says that things exist *in rationes*, in measure, number and weight.<sup>33</sup> These things are foreknown by God (*prognosis*) and together form the manifestation (*phanerosis*) of His ideas. The *universalia* are *in re* because they existed *ante rem* in the divine consciousness.<sup>34</sup>

This concept provides Bavinck with the foundation of his epistemology. The world exists only because it has previously been conceived by God. Things exist because God has thought of them, and we can think of things, because they exist. Both being and knowing have their *ratio* in the Word by which God created all things.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> H Bavinck. **Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing**, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**, II, p. 415. Cf. Augustine. **The Literal Interpretation of Genesis**. 6:16:27, 6:18:29. Translated and annotated by J H Taylor. New York: Newman Press, 1982. 2 Vols.

<sup>31</sup> Bremmer, op. cit., p. 209.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> H Bavinck. **Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing**, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 27. Cf. Augustine. **The Literal interpretation of Genesis**, 4:3:7, 4:6:13. Cf. Taylor’s note, Vol 2, p. 257, n. 48.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

The doctrine of the creation of all things by the Word of God is the explanation of all knowing [*kennen en weten*], the presupposition of the correspondence between subject and object.<sup>36</sup>

Bavinck rejects as heathen the idea that matter is something eternal and without form, which resists the domination of the idea. This would be tantamount to the creature resisting the Creator, who creates by imposing ideas on matter. This matter, however, Bavinck sees as created, dependent on God and subject to his will. Therefore it cannot be an unruly independent thing. Neither is matter hostile to spirit, for they are merely two substances of different kinds, both created by God and dependent on him,<sup>37</sup> and therefore related to each other through the Word in which all things have their unity.

This matter or substance of which all things are made is organised differently in different creatures. This is the basis of the individuality of created things. Bavinck contends that it is unbiblical to reduce matter to one, or several, or even a number of, basic elements; not only the substance of things, but also the organisation of their individuality is determined by God; therefore individuality cannot be reduced to variations of one basic thing. Bavinck calls these two aspects, the matter and the organisation of matter, the “being” and the “being-so” of things.<sup>38</sup>

With this supposedly biblical conception in mind to guide him, Bavinck says that the Christian philosopher can take over the Platonic-Aristotelian doctrine of ideas or forms in a modified sense, that is, that they do not have an independent objective existence outside of God. It is in fact impossible, he claims, to do without the concept of form to explain things, since the forms are the objective ideas which give order and coordination to the multiplicity of parts, binding them in an organic unity. God realises his ideas (or Word) in the world in the same way that a sculptor realises his ideas in marble. The essential difference between these two is that the artist’s ideas must

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 28, cf. p. 32. Again Bavinck is dependent on Augustine. **Confessions**, 13:38; **The City of God**, 21:10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-53.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 54.



remain transcendent or external to his work, while God's ideas are immanent. Even God himself is immanent in creation by his Word and Spirit.<sup>39</sup>

Bavinck agrees with Augustine's concept of the creation of the world together *with* time, and not *in* time. Where there is nothing, neither is there time and space. These are not empty forms to be filled with creatures;<sup>40</sup> they are part of the creation, in which the ideas in the mind of God receive measure, weight and number.<sup>41</sup> The days of creation, however, Bavinck conceived differently from Augustine. Bavinck sees the creation as taking place in Genesis 1:1, after which through further creative acts the world is prepared for human habitation.<sup>42</sup> The "days" of creation indicate the order in which creatures came into being, as well as the relationship of rank among these creatures.<sup>43</sup>

Creation is the foundation for all subsequent development. However, sin has entered into that creation and has disrupted the orderly course of this development. Nevertheless God sustains the world in this situation and leads it, through recreation in the Son and the activity of renewal by the Holy Spirit, to its intended destination.<sup>44</sup>

This entrance of sin into creation brings travail and anguish. The lawless and chaotic lies hiding throughout the creation, seeking an opportunity to wreak havoc.<sup>45</sup> But the struggle for creation is not "between man and nature but within the heart of man himself, between his what is and his what ought to be."<sup>46</sup> Bavinck maintains that our perception of nature is dependent on our perception of God and his relationship to us,<sup>47</sup> and that a true relationship to nature is possible only when man stands in his true

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 169.

<sup>41</sup> See note 37 above.

<sup>42</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 171.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 173.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 174.

<sup>45</sup> H Bavinck. **The Philosophy of Revelation**, p. 110.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

relationship to God.<sup>48</sup> Man is one with creation, but not identical to other creatures. He is natural, and thus not alienated by nature, but he is also spiritual, the image and offspring of God.<sup>49</sup>

### **Creation-Order and Miracle**

Bavinck stresses, on the basis of the doctrine of creation by God, that the world displays a certain order. “In creation God has placed in things their ordinances, an *ordo rerum*, by which the things stand in mutual association with each other.”<sup>50</sup> Natural laws, he argues, can exist only when there is a law-giver who stands above nature and decrees its various functions. Apart from their dependence on God, natural laws can be only a fallible human description of the way things operate.<sup>51</sup> But the laws of nature are in fact the way in which God rules all things by His Word. The Old Testament teaches us of a fixed order of nature, ordinances for the heavens and the earth, which record the commands of God given at creation.<sup>52</sup> The laws of nature, of the entire creation, are not restrictions but formulae for the manner in which each thing functions according to its own nature. These powers and elements with their immanent laws are kept in being from moment to moment by God.<sup>53</sup> By this means the creation is maintained. That which was brought into existence God causes to persist in the existence which it was given. Bavinck stresses that this maintenance is not a passive letting things continue to exist, but an active making them exist. If this active maintenance were to cease for a moment, the creation would sink back into nothingness.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**, Vol. 2, p. 570. See also H Bavinck. **The Philosophy of Revelation**, p. 86.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>52</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**, Vol. 1, p. 308.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 340.

<sup>54</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 179.

There is no way we can attempt to explain the creation as though it were a machine functioning in accordance with comprehensible laws. It is completely mysterious.<sup>55</sup> The creation event itself is outside the scope of human knowledge and therefore can never be the object of scientific investigation.<sup>56</sup> Neither is faith in the providence of God, including his miracle power, based on gaps in our knowledge of the working of creation. Therefore we do not need to fear that progress in science will destroy the basis of our faith.<sup>57</sup>

Since Bavinck still works with scholastic concepts, he expresses the activity of God in creation in terms of causality. “God is the First cause of all that happens but under him and through him the creatures are active as secondary causes, co-operating with the First.”<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless there is this distinction between causes: while they are co-operating they are by no means identical.<sup>59</sup> While these secondary causes function independently, they do so within the providence of God. He grants the freedom and power to act, but governs this and directs it to the fulfilment of His purposes. The secondary causes of things do not work independently of God as in a deistic world-view. God is also working through these causes which he himself placed within the creation. They do not intervene between God and natural events.<sup>60</sup> God does not stand outside of nature and is not shut out by the barrier of laws.<sup>61</sup>

A miracle is an act within and subject to the order of creation established by God; it takes place according to the causal relationships normally at work.

[A miracle] is from God’s side a deed which has God as no more immediate and direct a cause than any usual event, and in the counsel of God and in the world-idea takes just as orderly and harmonious a place

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<sup>55</sup> H Bavinck. **The Philosophy of Revelation**, p. 89.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 88. Here Bavinck is quoting Haeckel, **Schopfungsgeschichte**, 1874, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> G C Berkouwer, **The Providence of God**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952, pp. 194-195.

<sup>58</sup> H Bavinck. **Our Reasonable Faith**, p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**, Vol. 2, p. 570.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 340.

as any natural phenomena. In miracles God only brings into action an unusual power, which, like any other power, works in accordance with its own nature and law and thus also has its own product as a consequence.<sup>62</sup>

A miracle then for Bavinck does not involve a breaking of natural laws; neither is it the result of a divine intervention from outside of creation. In this Bavinck is agreed with Kuyper.<sup>63</sup> Miracles, the unusual deeds of God, are a sign of God's presence, and are observable both in creation and in providence. All God's works are miracles, as the Scriptures frequently indicate. Thus a miracle cannot be contrary to the laws of nature, since these are all the work of the same God. But the Scriptures do distinguish between the usual and the unusual works of God, so that there is a distinction between nature and miracle. But for God, nothing is miraculous.<sup>64</sup>

A miracle is called something new, beri'ah, that otherwise would not be seen.<sup>65</sup> But miracles are still the work of God and there fore can not be divorced from his usual work but only distinguished. Neither does Scripture make this distinction an opposition of natural and supernatural. The latter is differentiated from the natural only because it arises in God and not from within the creation.<sup>66</sup> While a miracle is supernatural this is to be understood in the sense of the unusual deeds of God.<sup>67</sup> The whole of creation is miraculous for Bavinck, just as for Augustine.

For the stone it is a miracle that the plant grows, for the plant, that animals move themselves, for animals, that man thinks, for man, that God wakes the dead.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, Vol. 2, p. 570.

<sup>63</sup> Berkouwer, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>64</sup> H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**, Vol. 1, p. 307-8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 308. E.g. Exodus 34:10.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 325.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 327.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 339.

So Bavinck concludes that if everything in creation is a miracle, namely, the result of the sustaining power of God at work in providence, then special miracles are not strictly necessary.<sup>69</sup> Miracles have their foundation in the creation and sustaining of all things, which is itself a constant miracle, since everything that happens has its ultimate ground in the power and will of God.<sup>70</sup> Bavinck quotes Augustine's dictum, "A portent, therefore, happens not contrary to nature, but contrary to what we know of nature" (City of God, 21:8).<sup>71</sup> Like Augustine, Bavinck holds that if we only knew God as the maintainer of and provider for the universe we would recognise everything as a miracle of God: all things occurring within his will, originating with him and functioning according to the laws He has placed within them.<sup>72</sup>

For Bavinck, the power to work miracles was a part of mankind's original aptitude, arising from the laws created by God which govern human nature and ability. This aptitude is recreated in Christ, since it has been weakened by sin, although it manifests itself today in hypnotism and related phenomena.<sup>73</sup>

However, Bavinck rejects the idea of rationes seminales, or created natural potential, which Augustine thought was the origin of miraculous power. This idea confuses the natural with the supernatural, and the supernatural with the religious-ethical. That is, it destroys the distinction between true miracles, worked by the power of God, and those which are worked in unbelief, since in this view all miracles arise from the created potential hidden in nature. Bavinck uses the term nature in a sense different to that of Augustine. Miracles are not contrary to nature, but neither are they the result of the activation of rationes seminales as Augustine held. Bavinck saw nature, which contained the miracles placed in creation by God at the beginning, as the divine world-plan in which the destination of all things is determined by God.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 340.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 308.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 343.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 341.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 343.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 344.

## Kuyper's Doctrine of Creation

In considering Kuyper's view of creation and miracles, we find many of the same themes and ideas which are present in Bavinck. This is not surprising since they had much in common. Bavinck had declared his intention to follow closely in Kuyper's footsteps and to promote and defend the same neo-Calvinist principles and vision.<sup>75</sup>

As in Bavinck, the doctrine of creation is foundational to Kuyper's theology. Thus he attacked the theological error of pantheism on the one hand, and the philosophical and scientific error of evolutionism on the other. Both errors were an assault on the integrity of Revelation and the coherence of the Christian view of reality. Bavinck had also attacked pantheism, and Kuyper's attack followed similar lines. Both saw as its fundamental error the obliteration of boundaries and distinctions, beginning with the fundamental boundary between God and the cosmos.<sup>76</sup>

The most distinctly marked boundary line lies between God and the world; and with the taking away of this line all other boundaries are blurred into mere shadows... God created the boundaries. He is Himself the chief boundary for all his creatures and the effacement of the boundaries is virtually identical with the obliteration of the idea of God.<sup>77</sup>

Kuyper saw pantheism's abolition of the God/cosmos distinction as having disastrous consequences not only in theology, but equally in the social and political realm. His doctrine of sphere sovereignty is rooted in this concept and would be impossible without it.<sup>78</sup> For Kuyper the boundary between God and the cosmos is absolute. There

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<sup>75</sup> Bolt, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> A Kuyper. "Pantheism's destruction of boundaries," quoted in Bolt, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>78</sup> Bolt, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.

are no transitional beings between God and the cosmos; in fact there is nothing at all between God and the cosmos. Any neo-Platonic emanation theory is cut off here.<sup>79</sup>

Creation is not a generation from God, but a divine calling-into- being, and it is other than God.<sup>80</sup> Along with the calling into being of creation, God established the laws for creation as a whole, and for each individual creature.<sup>81</sup> Kuyper contends that it is unthinkable that God could call a single creature into being without also specifying the law for its existence. For God is sovereign over all things, governs all things, determines all things and controls all things through his Law.<sup>82</sup> Therefore nothing can exist without the law by which it is determined and controlled by God. By these laws God established and maintains the order of creation.<sup>83</sup> These laws are his servants;<sup>84</sup> they do not act independently of God once they have been established. Such a deistic idea was as repugnant to Kuyper as pantheism. These laws are themselves subject to God's will and dependent on him.

...nature and each of its powers and each of its laws do not exist in themselves, but from moment to moment are only what they are through the command which proceeds from the mouth of God.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> A Kuyper. **E Voto Dordraceno**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1892. Vol. 1, p. 97. "Between a creature and the creator lies nothing. There are no transitional beings... The boundary between creature and creator is absolute." Cf. A Kuyper. **Dictaten Dogmatiek**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1929. Vol. 2, **Locus de Creatione**, p. 42.

<sup>80</sup> A Kuyper. **E Voto**, pp. 195-196.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, Vol. 3, p. 463. "It is completely unthinkable that God the Lord should call a single creature in life without as well specifying also the life-law for this creature in and through the creation of it. Is this now thus that God the Lord, because he is our Creator, also of itself has given in the creation the law for the existence of all creatures, and that no **creation** of a single creature is thinkable without that of its accompanying life's-law, then it lies in the foundation of the cause, that the Lord our God, who governs everything, has determined everything, and controls everything through his law, is also the lawgiver for the higher existence of mankind."

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 236.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 239. Cf. A Kuyper. **Dictaten Dogmatiek**. Vol. 3, **Locus de Providentia**, p. 76.

And subject to the laws, which are God's servants, are the creatures which have been called into being. By these laws the creatures function; they cannot be separated from the law which governs them. Were they to be separated, creation would be divided in two, and nature would be denied its dependence on God.<sup>86</sup> Neither the creation nor God's law for it are to be separated from God. While the boundaries are maintained, there is an unbroken relationship between God and his creation.

His law rests on his eternal wisdom and thus is perfect; and, once given being as perfect, they rest in the sovereignty of his sacrosanct and supreme will. God the Lord and His Law are not to be separated.<sup>87</sup>

Nature does not stand over against God with its powers and laws; instead it is subject to God.<sup>88</sup> All creatures are determined by the sovereignty of God. He has determined for all creatures what they are and will be and do. God has established a law for all creatures.<sup>89</sup> This law or laws for the creation is the will of God, as it is expressed in his eternal counsel.

The law of existence for the creation, in so far as God has bound himself to his creation, we must now take to be this command, as this was determined in his counsel.<sup>90</sup>

It is the will of God which is the law that governs all things. In God's eternal plan, all things find their unity, including creation and redemption. This is developed in an almost neo-Platonic fashion by Kuyper.<sup>91</sup> Through this emphasis on God's plan, we see how each of the persons of the Trinity is involved in the creation, since, as with Bavinck, Kuyper is strongly Trinitarian on this point. Everything was planned by God

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 191.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 238.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, pp. 189-190.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

<sup>91</sup> P Steen. **The Structure of Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought**. Toronto: Wedge, 1983, pp. 40-41.



the Father, which plan he then spoke forth by the Word, the Son; and after all things have been called into being through the Word, the Spirit leads them to their goal.<sup>92</sup>

This concept of the work of the Spirit in developing created reality is associated with Kuyper's emphasis on the organic character of creation, which he saw as an organism containing the seeds of all things in potency and in an undifferentiated state.<sup>93</sup>

Genesis 1:2 reveals first the creation of matter and its germs, then their quickening... [By] the brooding [of the Holy Spirit] in Genesis 1:2, by which the formless took form, the hidden life emerged and the things created were led to their destiny.<sup>94</sup>

These seeds develop and give form to matter, thus giving rise to individual creatures. This individuality of each creature is governed by its logos, which is the form into which the organism develops matter. The logos or form is the creaturely expression and embodiment of the idea of God for each creature, and is developed according to the counsel of the Father, by the Son through the works of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit uses the seeds in creation, since it is "the manifestation of a potency in creation leading to the completion and restoration of creation according to God's purpose."<sup>95</sup>

Kuyper sees each living creature as a combination of organism and matter. This matter is not eternal, but neither can it be a purely created substance. Here Kuyper's thought is burdened by the scholastic distinction between form and matter, and this distinction is the source of a fundamental dialectical tension in Kuyper's thought, manifest in the contrast of internal/external, tangible/spiritual, and visible/invisible. This contrast is parallel to the duality of God's Being and God's Name, and leads to the duality of God and creation. As the life-principle takes on outward reality in matter, so God's Name is manifest in reality. This contrast of internal/external leads to the duality of

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<sup>92</sup> A Kuyper. **E Voto**, Vol. 1, p. 207. Cf. A Kuyper. **The Work of the Holy Spirit**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956, p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> Steen, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>94</sup> A Kuyper. **The Work of the Holy Spirit**, p. 30.

<sup>95</sup> A Kuyper. **Dictaten Dogmatiek**. Vol 3, **Locus de Providentia**, p. 48.

phenomenon and noumenon in Kuyper's epistemology, although, as Dooyeweerd points out, he gives the subjective critical epistemology of Kant an objective idea-realistic twist through the use of his metaphysical Logos.<sup>96</sup>

The connection within each contrasting pair is organic. There is also an organic bond between the life-principle or organism and matter, and between God and creation. Since all things are created by the Word, the creation can be called an organic whole. There is also a gradation in creation; it ascends in degrees and thereby the Word reveals itself in increasing richness and fullness. This organic connection within creation and between creation and God is seen by Kuyper as the source of life for the creation. There is an implied analogy of being between God and man as is evident from his epistemology. Thus Kuyper is unable to maintain his emphasis on the absolute character of the distinction between God and the creation.<sup>97</sup>

The Logos-speculation evident in this part of Kuyper's theology is derived from Augustinian neo-Platonist idea-realism combined with the ancient logos-speculation of Aristotle and the Stoics. Logos-speculation emphasises the idea that the world finds its origin in God as the highest intellect, the absolute Logos. The world came into being, in this conception, because this divine Logos had conceived the idea of it, and possessed the power to bring these ideas into objective existence. The ideas are the product of the divine thinking subject, and all things depend on the reality of the universal ideas. By this means the world was logicised, and the creaturely order is tied in to logical universals.<sup>98</sup>

### **Creation-Order and Miracle**

Miracles for Kuyper are in no way supernatural interventions by God in the usual course of nature. Rather, they are tied directly to the creation order in Kuyper's

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<sup>96</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd. "Kuyper's wetenschapsleer." *Philosophia Reformata* 4 (1939) p. 223.

<sup>97</sup> W H Velema. **De Leer van de Heilige Geest bij Abraham Kuyper**. 's Gravenhage: Van Keulin, 1957, pp. 70-78.

<sup>98</sup> J Klapwijk. **Honderd jaar filosofie aan de Vrije Universiteit**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1980, pp. 534-535.

thought. Both the laws for nature and miracles are the products of God's will, his sovereign command over the creation. The only difference between the ordinary events of nature and miracles is that while God wills both, and thus both are dependent on God, he mostly wills the usual course of nature, and only rarely wills a miracle to happen.<sup>99</sup>

The idea that God must break into the course of nature from outside to perform a miracle is based on the notion that nature is independent of God, having its own powers and laws. Kuyper rejected both of these ideas. Nature is what it is by the constant command of God.<sup>100</sup>

There is thus no mention of an intervention in the course of things, for nothing happens by a power outside of God, but everything happens solely as it does through God's will, and as soon as he for one moment ceases to will it so, it happens no more; or if he wills it otherwise, it happens otherwise.<sup>101</sup>

Kuyper accepted the idea of supernaturalism only in so far as it meant that God transcends nature. he thus spoke of the supernatural in the sense that the acts of Christ, in that they involved the power of God in confounding sin and evil, possess a supernatural character. A miracle then is not a purely supernatural event, but the supernatural power of God is seen at work in restoring creation, working along side of the powers of nature. Because of sin

...miracles are now necessary, since a miracle is nothing else than the entrance of a new order in the disturbed higher order, and where once the miracle must intervene, and of itself, it indicates that the completion

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<sup>99</sup> A Kuyper. **E Voto**, Vol. 1, p. 241.

<sup>100</sup> Berkouwer, op. cit., pp. 195-196.

<sup>101</sup> A Kuyper. **E Voto**, Vol. 1, p. 240.

of the great work can come into being through nothing other than a miraculous, unexpected event intervening from outside.<sup>102</sup>

Thus a miracle is not the introduction of something new into creation, but the removal of the dislocations in the order of the cosmos introduced by sin and the curse.<sup>103</sup> There are two reasons why Kuyper rejects the idea that a miracle introduces something new. First, the creation itself is complete and cannot increase, and secondly the introduction of something new would destroy the organic nature of creation, since that new thing could not be intrinsic to creation, which would no longer be a single organism.<sup>104</sup> Miracles in Scripture form a whole and find in that their organic connection. They break through sin in proportion to the extent of the influence of sin. However, Kuyper points out that a miracle, even when worked by Christ, is always the power of God. The creation has no power in itself to work miracles; neither has Christ, since he performed these miracles not as God, but as a man whose prayers were answered by God.<sup>105</sup>

This power of God is present continually, but in a miracle it comes to the fore.<sup>106</sup> In a miracle we see the power which spirit possesses over matter restored.<sup>107</sup> Thus a miracle is in no sense an interference in the lawful course of natural events. It happens solely through the will of God, as do all events. But in a miracle we see God willing something other than his usual will. Thus the miraculous lies in our awareness, and our

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<sup>102</sup> A Kuyper. **Van de Voleinding**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1929, Vol. 2, p. 54.

<sup>103</sup> A Kuyper. **Dictaten Dogmatiek**. Vol 3, **Locus de Providentia**, p. 47.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 221.

<sup>105</sup> A Kuyper. **Dictaten Dogmatiek**. Vol. 2, **Locus de Creatione**, pp. 53-54.

<sup>106</sup> A Kuyper. **Pro Rege**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1911, Vol. 1, p. 475. "...also in the period of the completion, the acts of Christ possessed a partly spiritual, partly material, partly social and partly anti-demonic character, and that also then the acts would be above all of a supernatural character. Rather, it must be established, that the acts of the King in the Kingdom of God possess a preponderantly supernatural character; that the miracle is inseparable from this; and that both the body and the soul, and the powers of the spiritual world just as much as the powers of nature, were ruled by supernatural acts. For what we call a miracle, comes not by this but it rises to the fore."

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 185. "Jesus restored human power over nature by the miracle."

surprise when what we are used to is replaced by the unusual. It is something which seizes our attention and it is therefore a sign from God.<sup>108</sup>

But apart from that which is surprising and unusual for us, a miracle is precisely the same as a usual working of nature for they are both a command coming from the mouth of God and it is his servants, the elements and the powers of nature, which also bring them about.<sup>109</sup>

For Kuyper, miracles are above all evidences to mankind of the continuing providence of God for his creation. Since the fall we are unable to discern correctly the dominion of God over nature, and we have lost sight of our forfeited place exercising dominion as God's stewards. Fallen mankind is in awe of the power of nature and is inclined to worship it, since it so directly influences him and he is subject to its capriciousness.

Miracles find their significance in the struggle of mankind, weakened by sin, in a nature strengthened against him by the curse. Without miracles nature rapidly assumes an impression of greater strength, and superior being and higher status than the spirit. This leads to an apostate worship of nature.<sup>110</sup>

Since mankind is subject to the power of nature and appears helpless against it, faith that God has nature under control rapidly dwindles. Instead worship and faith are directed towards evil spirits supposed to be in control of natural forces.<sup>111</sup> The need for miracles arises from this, for only by means of a miracle can the power of God and his control over nature, a nature strengthened against man by the curse, be demonstrated to humankind.

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<sup>108</sup> A Kuyper. **E Voto**. Vol. 1, pp. 240-241.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p. 241.

<sup>110</sup> A Kuyper. **Pro Rege**. Vol 1, p. 143.

<sup>111</sup> A Kuyper. **Pro Rege**. Vol. 1, p. 148. "Since nature appears so strong and dominant over man, then they doubt that God is also more powerful than nature, and its ruler."

Hence the need for miracles; to affirm this truth of God's almighty power and control of a nature strengthened by the curse so it rules over man. ... The fear that God is not supreme over nature drives away faith; this can be restored only through God's miracle power and signs, worked before our eyes.<sup>112</sup>

Kuyper uses this argument to demonstrate the significance and indispensability of the creation. If God goes to such trouble to demonstrate his power over nature, then it is worth striving for its renewal. Else it would be simpler to do away with nature and begin again with a new creation. But the curse on creation can be countered only by a miracle, which in effect reverses the power of sin. Kuyper says that miracles cannot be understood apart from their relationship to sin and the curse.<sup>113</sup> For here we see the ordinances of God for the creation, in that God is working in creation and directing it to a higher goal, and in so doing is countering the effects of the fall. Thus the rage of nature against mankind is controlled by the miracles of God.<sup>114</sup>

The second important point made by Kuyper is that in miracles we see the original power of mankind over nature restored through Christ.<sup>115</sup> Matter was intended to be subject to spirit; through restoration of the human spirit, its power over matter is likewise restored. In a miracle we see matter directly subject to spirit, while in culture we see it indirectly subject to spirit.<sup>116</sup>

The logos-speculation which logicises Kuyper's theories is evident in his contention that the miracle power of Jesus is a consequence of the superior knowledge or science which he possessed, as well as a consequence of his possession of superior power. His

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 144. "This worship of nature or evil spirits supposed to be in nature can be countered only by God's miracle-working power; i.e. his divine power over all the power of nature. Only in this light is the significance and indispensability of nature obvious. Miracle is not to be understood without this connection with sin and curse."

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 185.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 186. "The spirit has dominion directly over matter in a miracle, while the same spirit at present has dominion over matter through means of the development of the human spirit."

dominion over evil spirits was possible because of his knowledge of the spiritual world.<sup>117</sup> Likewise the wise men of Egypt (Exodus 7-8) possessed a secret knowledge of nature which gave them power over nature. However, these wise men were deceitful in that they portrayed their power as the result of sorcery and not simply as natural knowledge (which others did not possess and which, according to Kuyper, has since been lost). This knowledge operated under the common grace of God, since it contributed to the raising of the level of culture, but when it was used against Moses and Aaron it was exposed as vanity compared to the miracle power of God.<sup>118</sup>

The miracles worked by Moses used natural powers. They did not introduce anything new into creation; there was no divine intervention. The plagues are simply the working of nature on a higher plane. The magicians recognised this higher power but did not abandon their unbelief.

They were indirect miracles, because they used natural powers, executing judgement on the pride of Pharaoh. The plagues can be explained by the working of nature on a higher plane. However, this power was so much higher and applied in such a manner as to be recognisably so to the Egyptians. However, having recognised this they sank back into their unbelief. The death of the first-born and the passage through the Red Sea all demonstrate the power of God over all powers of nature, as the Israelites saw.<sup>119</sup>

And so in a miracle we see the power of God working in nature and directing it to a higher goal than the one to which we are accustomed. There is nothing peculiar or

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, Vol. 3, p. 356. "The miracle works which Jesus performed, are not only a revelation of power, but plead as much for a knowledge, a science, which Jesus possessed of created things, which was far above our knowledge. Jesus' dominion over the "evil spirits" from which the victims beseeched him to save them, presupposed that this spiritual world was not an unknown territory for Jesus."

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 150. "The wise men of Egypt had inherited an instinctive knowledge of nature and were familiar with mysteries, which gave them a certain power over nature. This instinctive knowledge has since been lost. The magicians of Egypt portrayed this power over nature as the result of sorcery and not of traditional natural knowledge. This knowledge had its good side in that it raised the level of culture, but when it was used against Moses and Aaron, who had access to the miracle power of God, which exposed the mysteries of Egypt as vanity. This miracle power brought judgement."

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

supernatural in a miracle; it is simply the creation coming under the direction of the Spirit.

Miracle has rescued for the human race faith in the Living God... The significance of miracles is lost if we depart from the ordinances of God for mankind. Man stands powerless and helpless against the rage of nature which has broken out, but by a miracle he sees that God is Lord and master of nature. This can only be shown by miracles. By this means he learns of a power higher than that of nature but working in nature and directing it to a higher goal.<sup>120</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Bavinck and Kuyper follow much the same lines in their development of the themes of creation and miracle. Both were led by the Scriptures to a biblically reforming insight into the work of God, but were hindered in giving this insight full and consistent expression because of their dependence on scholastic philosophy. The task of the spiritual heirs of these two thinkers is to continue their work, diligently uncovering the influences of unbiblical thought in their exposition of the faith, and finding more satisfactory ways of expressing the rich insights which they have gained for us.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 152.