

A Doctrine for Diversity

Utilizing Herman Bavinck’s Theology for Racial Reconciliation in the Church

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In many evangelical circles, racial reconciliation is becoming a celebrated mandate, but the argument for racial and ethnic diversity in churches often rests on sparse proof-texting. This article explores the theme of diversity in Bavinck’s corpus, specifically focusing on the place of diversity in Bavinck’s doctrines of first things, last things, and the church. By rooting racial diversity under the auspices of dogmatic theology, the church gains much-needed rationale for the pursuit of such diversity in practice. Racial diversity is part of God’s created order, protected by God’s providence, redeemed through Christ’s atonement, purified in the eschaton, and preserved through the church’s catholicity. The pursuit of racial diversity within the church is a doctrinally mandated task, not merely part of the cultural zeitgeist. Bavinck’s Reformed legacy smiles upon such a pursuit.

Introduction

Since the rise of modernity, the story of the West is also the story of race.¹ In recent years, there has been an increasing public conversation attempting to reckon with the sins of the past, attempting to overcome racial oppression with programs or policies that advance a diverse representation of races in organizations and institutions. For the church, the question of racial diversity is not simply a sociological issue but is properly a theological issue tapping into fundamental Christian doctrines, such as creation and redemption in Christ. Well-meaning Christians debate the centrality of race to the Christian’s identity, and thus, many Christians struggle to answer the question, “Why diversity?”²

In evangelical circles, much of this discussion is fueled by biblical theology, with pastors invoking texts such as Ephesians 2 or Revelation 7 to encourage their congregations toward diversity. But there has not been a corresponding amount of attention given to systematics. Thus, many pastors put undue weight on proof-texts without much doctrinal support, opening the door to congregational discord and burnout. For example, can a handful of Bible verses bear the intellectual, or even emotional, load of the claim that a local church should look like the surrounding neighborhood?³ To look like the local neighborhood could take, for some congregations, intensive language training for pastors, provisions for multilingual preaching, learning multilingual songs, and hiring multiethnic staff. Can simply invoking a few Bible verses persuade congregations to undertake such an outpouring of resources, time, and energy?

Developing an ecclesiology that embraces diversity is a redemptive project that demands systematic theological reflection. For an ecclesiology strong enough to bear the demands of the Bible and the cost of diversity, we need robust resources; in short, we need a doctrine for diversity. In this article, I seek to demonstrate how Herman Bavinck's theology applies to the contemporary conversation about racial diversity. Specifically, Bavinck's theological focus on diversity provides the necessary components to construct a doctrine of racial diversity. The first component is protology: God's original plan for a diverse creation. The second component is eschatology: God's victory in Christ secures a diverse future. Between these two poles—the beginning and the end—the theological connection is ecclesiology: the church's unity and catholicity provide an ethical mandate to pursue diversity in the present, visible church. These three elements provide a doctrine strong enough to support the biblical mandate to be one in Christ without snuffing out the glory of racial diversity.

Herman Bavinck: Theologian for the Modern Era

Though Bavinck's work was written over a century ago, his thinking offers a strong foundation for our time. Herman Bavinck's academic career occurred during the peak of modernity in the Netherlands.⁴ Like his compatriot Abraham Kuyper, Bavinck was concerned with two contradictory trends in modernity: first, overemphasis on the individual, which had its academic counterpart in philosophical monism; and second, overemphasis on the community, seen most clearly in the political movement of socialism. Bavinck resisted both monism and socialism as being antithetical to biblical Christianity, asserting that the Reformed tradition offered balance between the two impulses. Instead of prioritizing the individual, leading to chaotic diversity, or the community, leading

to uniformity, Bavinck prized unity-in-diversity.⁵ With this conviction, Bavinck sought to position unity-in-diversity within the heart of Reformed dogmatics.⁶ With diversity rooted in theology thusly, we can freshly apply Bavinck's insights to the current situation, acting with a clarion, doxological call in the midst of so much noise.

First Things: Diversity in the Doctrine of Creation

“In the beginning, God created ...”

~Genesis 1:1

At the beginning of all things stands God; thus Bavinck roots his theology of creation in his doctrine of God. The Trinity stands, in Bavinck's work, as the mold for all creation; the entire created order bears the imprint and reflection of God, the Three-in-One.⁷ Thus, to understand creation's diversity, one must first grapple with God's diversity. Following Nicene orthodoxy, Bavinck stresses the unity of the Godhead: “There is in God but one eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient being, having one mind, one will, and one power.”⁸ And yet, this emphasis on unity does not preclude diversity: “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. God's being is not an abstract unity or concept, but a fullness of being, an infinite abundance of life, whose diversity, so far from diminishing the unity, unfolds it to its fullest extent.”⁹ The grandness of God consists in his “absolute unity as well as absolute diversity.”¹⁰ God's unity-in-diversity demonstrates “the fullness of being, the true life, eternal beauty.”¹¹ Thus, the Trinity is eminently worthy of praise, the pinnacle of all things *good*, *true*, and *beautiful*, precisely because of God's unity and diversity.¹²

If the Creator is gloriously both united and diverse, it follows that his creation will reflect these attributes. “Just as God is one in essence and distinct in persons, so also the work of creation is one and undivided, while in its unity it is still rich in diversity.”¹³ Just as in the Godhead, unity and diversity in creation are complementary attributes: “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.”¹⁴ The unity-in-diversity of creation is not merely an incidental feature; rather, for Bavinck, it is the only acceptable interpretation of the Scriptures and the catholic faith.¹⁵ Put succinctly, “this [doctrine of creation] is *the* Christian worldview.”¹⁶ As the Christian worldview, creation's unity-in-diversity explains the beauty of nature,¹⁷ argues against evolutionism,

monism, and Hegelianism,¹⁸ as well as paganism, pantheism, and materialism,¹⁹ and issues in the delight of humanity and the glory of God.²⁰

We can further apply Bavinck's logic: If God is unity-in-diversity, then God's creation is likewise; and if creation is unity-in-diversity, then humanity is likewise. However, humanity's diversity is not merely derivative, being a subset of a diverse creation; humanity is the fullest demonstration of the triune unity-in-diversity by nature of possessing God's image.²¹ This diversity is initially seen in the distinction between male and female (Gen. 1:27; 2:23), which is not simply about sexual differentiation, but a fuller diversity rooted in the body.²² If the doctrine of the image of God quite literally fleshes out the concept of diversity, then racial diversity is inherent within more broad discussions of human diversity. Indeed, "nothing in a human being is excluded from the image of God."²³

Built into this concept of *imago Dei* is the promise of eschatological fulfillment, and thus teleological development.²⁴ From their initial diversity, humanity was to expand into a vastly pluriform diversity, including racial diversity. Meditating on Genesis 2:24, Bavinck writes, "From the beginning, it was the will of God that, as soon as more families arose, the man would leave his father and mother and would choose a wife as his helpmeet ... from another family. The wonderful expansion of the human race, the infinite variety among people, and the inexhaustible richness of relationships between households and families, generations and peoples, are all due to this divine will."²⁵ Thus implanted with diversity from the beginning, humanity was intended to grow in ever-increasing diversity.

The entrance of sin does not alter the primary plan of God to populate a diverse creation with a diversifying humanity. When discussing the plurality of "distinctions and dissimilarities" in humanity and society, Bavinck states that "while all these things have undoubtedly been modified by sin and changed in appearance, they nevertheless have their ... foundation in creation, in the ordinances of God, and not in sin."²⁶ As well, God's providence guaranteed that "in all that division and brokenness unity has been preserved."²⁷ Thus, although in the biblical storyline it appears as though racial diversity is merely a product of sin and judgment (as Genesis 11 describes human diversification as a result of the punishment of God), Bavinck insists that human diversity, and therefore racial diversity, is grounded in God's original intent for humanity. While it is impossible to divorce human sin from the story of race, it is nevertheless necessary to foster a Christian imagination that conceives of the *possibility* of a richly (and racially) diverse humanity emanating from the Garden of Eden as an outflowing of God's creational plan.

This “creation-positive” protology became a hallmark of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist system, and theologians following Bavinck have elaborated upon the theme of unity-in-diversity. G. C. Berkouwer, one of the most prolific Neo-Calvinist theologians, states that Bavinck’s insistence that God is the creator of all things allows him to “honor the mystery of the individual personality . . . and do justice to the organic unity of the human race.”²⁸ Al Wolters builds his ethics around the idea that creation is normative, specifically in the “unity and diversity of creational givens.”²⁹ Finally, Gordon Spykman, in summarizing the creation narrative in Genesis states, “the Genesis account discloses both the coherent unity and the rich diversity of the creation order. This pattern of diversified unity and unified diversity colors the entire story. . . . The life of the human community is also called to display unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Neither uniformity nor fragmentation is normative.”³⁰ Thus, within the Neo-Calvinist tradition, diversity is part of God’s character, an attribute imprinted into creation and sustained through providence, and thus a necessary component of humanity, including our racial differences.

Bavinck’s insistence that creational diversity is and remains good, despite sin, comprises the first component in a doctrine of diversity. To the question, “Why diversity?” Bavinck’s doctrine of creation teaches four things about race. First, racial diversity is rooted in the nature of God, not merely in political correctness; creational diversity is therefore doxological. Second, racial diversity is teleological. It is part of God’s purpose for humanity to multiply in diversity, so the pursuit of racial diversity is simply part of creational maturation toward our eschatological destiny; we honor God’s design as we work “along the grain” of his creational intentions.³¹ Third, true racial diversity is a working-out of unity; in an age characterized by racial tension, Bavinck’s conviction that diversity unfolds unity in all its richness is a word of healing. Fourth, racial diversity is protected by providence; it is not simply a product of the fall, nor has it lost its teleological character as a result of sin, which leads to the second component of a doctrine of diversity: eschatology.

Last Things: Diversity in the Doctrine of New Creation

*“And behold, a great multitude ... from all tribes
and peoples and languages ...”*

~ Revelation 7:9

Because diversity is creational, teleological, and protected by providence, the history of redemption shows God securing redeemed diversity in and for his creation. For Bavinck, “the essence of Christian religion consists in the reality that the creation of the Father, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God.”³² Simply put, “grace restores nature.”³³ Creational diversity becomes redeemed diversity through God’s restorative work, and thus racial diversity anticipates an eschatological completion.

Bavinck’s “grace restores nature” paradigm does not imply merely a return to unfallen creation, but is grounded in the teleological character of creation. Grace allows creation to move toward eschatological fulfillment; “in that way [the world] displays the attributes and perfections of God, in principle already at the outset, to an increasing degree as it develops, and perfectly at the end of the ages.”³⁴ God’s magnificent redemption in Christ is not simply “re-creation” of the original creation, but one in which creation is “raised to a higher glory.”³⁵ That is, God does not return the creation to the same immature glory of the moments before Adam and Eve fell; rather, God raises the creation to the mature, eschatological glory always intended, allowing his glory to shine in the completed creation: “grace restores nature and raises it to its highest pinnacle.”³⁶ This approach helps magnify the abundance of grace present in Christ’s redeeming work: “Christ gives more than sin stole.”³⁷

Bavinck’s theology of redemption—grace restoring nature to its highest glory—has far-reaching consequences for a doctrine of racial diversity. The potential for creational diversity, protected by God’s providence in spite of sin, is brought to maturity and purified, leading to a superabundance of redeemed diversity. “All that is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable in the whole of creation, in heaven and on earth, is gathered up in the future city of God—renewed, re-created, boosted to its highest glory.”³⁸ Such abundance of diversity is most evident in humanity; though there will be but one community—God’s people—in the new creation, “in that community, which Christ has purchased and gathered from all nations, languages, and tongues, all nations, Israel included, maintain their distinct place and calling. And all those nations—each in accordance with its own distinct national character—bring

into the new Jerusalem all they have received from God in the way of glory and honor.”³⁹ Thus in the new creation, humanity, in keeping with its Trinitarian imprint, possesses profound diversity contained within an awe-inspiring unity. By extension, such redeemed diversity includes racial diversity.

This side of the new Jerusalem, racial difference often manifests itself in disunity, but when sin is purged, racial diversity becomes a gift for others: “the great diversity that exists among people in all sorts of ways is not destroyed in eternity but is cleansed from all that is sinful and made serviceable to fellowship with God and each other.”⁴⁰ Human diversity, which includes racial diversity, is cleansed of sin and becomes the servant of human unity: “tribes, peoples, and nations all make their own particular contribution to the enrichment of life in the new Jerusalem.”⁴¹ Bavinck even sees the promise of eternal rewards as contributing to the glorious diversity of the new creation: “just as the natural diversity present in the believing community on earth is augmented with spiritual diversity, so also this natural and spiritual diversity is in turn augmented in heaven by the diversity of degrees of glory present there.”⁴²

The theme of diversity is so integral to Bavinck’s theology that it is found up to the final paragraph of his four-volume *Dogmatics*, where he considers the place of eternal gifts. Here too, diversity is not static; in the Eschaton, God not only protects diversity but ensures that it proliferates. Why, Bavinck asks, would God highlight differences, even going so far as to crown some with greater glory than others?

His purpose in doing this ... is that, on earth as it is in heaven, there would be a profuse diversity in the believing community, and that in such diversity the glory of his attributes would be manifest. Indeed as a result of this diversity, the life of fellowship with God and with the angels, and of the blessed among themselves, gains in depth and intimacy. In that fellowship everyone has a place and task of one’s own, based on personality and character... All creatures will then live and move and have their being in God, who is all in all, who reflects all his attributes in the mirror of his works and glorifies himself in them.⁴³

Thus, the new creation will resound with the fullness of God, who has brought out all the innate fullness of creation in marvelous unity-in-diversity, for the delight of his creation and the glory of his name. The crowning achievement of this redeemed diversity is renewed humanity—diverse, embodied, racial humanity—existing together as one people of God.⁴⁴

This eschatological vision of redeemed diversity is the logical and biblical conclusion to Bavinck’s “creation positive” protology, and the second component

of a doctrine of diversity; knowing the end of the story is just as important as knowing the beginning. As Anthony Hoekema, a biblical theologian from the Dutch Reformed tradition, writes, “the doctrine of the new earth is important for a proper grasp of the full dimensions of God’s redemptive program.... The total work of Christ is nothing less than to redeem this entire creation from the effects of sin. That purpose will not be accomplished until God has ushered in the new earth, until Paradise Lost has become Paradise Regained.”⁴⁵

If Paradise Lost included the promise of racial diversity, then Paradise Regained demonstrates racial diversity redeemed from sin and rescued for God’s glory. The pursuit of racial diversity is thus ennobled by “the gospel of the coming kingdom which sweeps the redeemable aspects of human culture along into the ‘new Jerusalem’”; such redeemable aspects of human culture must include racial distinctions.⁴⁶ This vision of redeemed racial diversity offers yet another answer to the question, “Why diversity?” In the eschaton, rather than being divisive, racial differences are purified to be a gift to others and a valuable contributor to humanity’s worship of God, who is glorified precisely as his racially diverse people are brought together in redemptive unity.

The Church: Diversity in Bavinck’s Ecclesiology

“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

~ Colossians 3:11

After soaring in the heights of this glorious future, one’s attention is immediately brought up short by the fragmentation of modern life. Does our longing for the day when racial strife is put to rest, and racial distinction becomes a glorious gift to be offered to others and to God in worship, shape our life in the present? What bearing do these first and last things have on the church in between? Bavinck’s ecclesiology connects protology and eschatology, offering a robust theology of diversity for the church in the “already/not yet,” the visible church as a multiracial people of God.

Two key aspects of Bavinck’s ecclesiology have bearing on the discussion of diversity. First, there is an indicative truth: the eschatological connection between the present and the future, in which the future is brought, in part, into the present. Second, there is an ethical imperative: because the future is only partially a present reality, the remaining gap between experience and expectation forms an ecclesial mandate for the people of God to continue working to realize God’s redemptive vision in the present.

The indicative truth is that, in Christ, the future Kingdom is brought to bear in the present. According to Bavinck, the future is brought partially to bear in the present; Bavinck sees the Kingdom of God as both a present and a future reality. “The Kingdom is not entirely ‘other worldly’ but has been established by Christ upon earth ... nevertheless, it is just as true that the Kingdom is not exhaustively present in this life, it is not merely ‘this worldly.’ The Kingdom *is* and *becomes*.”⁴⁷ This “already/not yet” character of the Kingdom means that the blessings of salvation, which are distinctly future-oriented, are enjoyed by believers in the present: “All the benefits that Christ has acquired for his own are not just bestowed in the state of glory but are in principle already granted here on earth ... even participation in the divine nature is not something for the future alone but a goal envisaged already by the granting of God’s promises here on earth.”⁴⁸ This eschatological connection establishes a deep communion between God and his people. Here on earth, believers possess fellowship with God, and mysteriously, with the heavenly church and eschatological communion of saints.⁴⁹ Though this fellowship will be perfected in the eschaton, “in principle it already exists on earth.”⁵⁰

The eschatological blessings of salvation include diversity: Bavinck states that “the Kingdom of God is the highest, the most perfect community... There the richest harmony rules with the perfection of beauty. There the most glorious and purest unity reigns among the most inscrutable wealth and the most incalculable diversity.”⁵¹ The church’s diversity points to the redeeming work of Christ, who created “in himself one new man” (Eph. 2:15) out of enemy peoples. Indeed, as Spykman writes, “the redeeming work of Christ in and through the church does not wipe out [diversities in ethnic origin, locality, language, and culture], but sanctifies them by incorporating them into a more encompassing unity.”⁵² Thus, the racial differences that are embedded into humanity as an expression of the *imago Dei* and secured as part of the glory of the new creation are sanctified to form a tangible portion of the church’s identity. As the multiracial Kingdom takes root in the here-and-now, the redeemed diversity of the eschatological Kingdom, marked by beauty and abundance, becomes part of the church’s kaleidoscopic visage in the present-tense.

This is true even with the concomitant reality of racial division. Reflecting on the presence of church division, Bavinck writes,

Undoubtedly, the divisions of the church of Christ are caused by sin; in heaven there will no longer be any room for them. But this is far from being the whole story. In unity God loves the diversity. Among all creatures there was diversity even when as yet there was no sin. As a result of sin that diversity has been perverted and corrupted, but diversity as such is good and important also for

the church . . . [Christ] takes all [of the] differences into his service and adorns his church with them. Indeed, though the division of humanity into peoples and languages was occasioned by sin, it has something good in it, which is brought into the church and thus preserved for all eternity. From many races and languages and peoples and nations Christ gathered his church on earth.⁵³

In this quote, we see a compact treatment of the reality of race from a theological perspective. The “good” of race is present, in seed form, as part of human creation. Though the actual pluriformity of humanity’s racial diversity came about through sin, it was always intended to move in that direction, as the *imago Dei* enclosed within it a teleological promise. Though the world stumbles over racial diversity, allowing it to become divisive, in the church it is purified of its divisiveness to become a true unity-in-diversity. It must be so, for the Kingdom is a reflection of God’s own unity-in-diversity, even in its present, imperfect state.

Thus, in the church’s racial diversity in the present, we see the gradual fulfillment of God’s plan to fill his creation with abundant diversity. The diversity of the church on earth is not an accidental happenstance but a glorious sign of our salvation. However, because of the presence of sin, our diversity often manifests itself in fragmentation rather than doxological pluriformity;⁵⁴ thus, the church possesses her glorious diversity as a diamond in the rough, with the call to bring forth the riches of racial diversity through redemptive action.

This call to pursue redeemed diversity in the present, including within the sphere of racial difference, stems from the second aspect of Bavinck’s ecclesiology: the ethical imperative; seeing our destiny invites us to pursue its realization in the now. This ethical mandate is seen most clearly as Bavinck addresses two attributes of the church: unity and catholicity.

In the *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck addresses the attributes of the church (“one, holy, catholic, and apostolic”) to distinguish the Reformed tradition from the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic position on the church’s attributes over-institutionalizes them, according to Bavinck. According to Rome, the church is united in the institution; it is catholic because it is global as an institution.⁵⁵ Against this, Bavinck insists that the church is first and foremost a community, an organism, not primarily an institution; therefore, the attributes are spiritual in essence. The unity of the church comes from the worship of the same Lord through the same Holy Spirit, celebrating the same baptism, and holding to the same faith. The catholicity of the church stems from the universality of the faith, the call to preach to nations across the globe.⁵⁶

However, though the attributes are primarily spiritual, this does not mean they lack an outward manifestation. Christians cannot content themselves with

holding the attributes spiritually, while denying them in their lifestyle. Bavinck will not allow Reformed Christians to cling to the idea of the invisible church to the detriment of the visible.⁵⁷ Indeed, Christ did not come to institute an invisible church, but a visible one; after all, the visible church is simply “the perspective of [the Church’s] witness and life.”⁵⁸ The attributes are not merely indicatives; they are also imperatives.⁵⁹ Therefore, the church cannot merely possess unity and catholicity spiritually and inwardly; it must pursue their outward manifestation as a goal for the present.⁶⁰ As will be shown, the catholicity of the church bears directly on the issue of race; according to the Scriptures, catholicity “encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life.”⁶¹

These indicative attributes of unity and catholicity call Christians to actively pursue unity-in-diversity in concrete life together. The unity of the church “is in the process of becoming” and is seen “in that which all Christian churches have in common,” including the Apostles’ Creed.⁶² It is hindered by any undue separation of churches, and “Christians cannot humble [themselves] deeply enough over the schisms and discord that have existed all through the centuries in the church of Christ. It is a sin against God.”⁶³ In a world broken by sin and in a culture hounded by racial fragmentation, the unity of the church must be preserved, including racial differences; race and ethnicity cannot divide the church, for Christ relativizes all our differences: “that which unites all true Christians is always more than that which separates them.”⁶⁴

However, unity must be won by embracing diversity, not by papering over it. The catholicity of the church leaves no room for “color-blind Christianity.”⁶⁵ Bavinck insists, “Christianity is a world religion suited and intended for every people and age, for every class and rank, for every time and place.”⁶⁶ Therefore, “that church is most catholic that most clearly expresses in its confession and applies in its practice this international and cosmopolitan character of the Christian religion.”⁶⁷ Seen in this light, catholicity is the only acceptable posture of a church shaped by a gospel that applies to the whole person and the whole of humanity, and as such, it necessarily includes race: “The Gospel is a joyful tidings, not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation.”⁶⁸ In its social and theological catholicity, the church embodies the gospel, which promises nothing less than the redemption of embodied humanity, made in the image of God, and reflecting his unity-in-diversity, in part through racial pluriformity. As the church demonstrates its catholicity in action, “the richness, the many-sidedness, the pluriformity of the Christian faith” is proclaimed to all.⁶⁹

The church's catholicity, therefore, is a prophetic indictment against Christians that refuse to embrace racial diversity; a church that resists racial diversity cannot claim to be a part of the church catholic. For, as Berkouwer states, "it becomes clear that the whole life of the Church—both doctrine and practice—is related to the critical testing of catholicity, for every violation of the mystery of the truth of salvation—in word and deed, in confessional, political, or social heresy—can obscure the outlook on the qualitative richness of the whole," and perhaps the most visible social heresy in the West is the sin of racism.⁷⁰ In Spykman's powerful wording, "catholicity implies the mutuality of Christian fellowship everywhere, reciprocal relations, and solidarity with all who belong to the household of faith in their cross-bearing as well as their crowning achievements."⁷¹ In reflecting on these statements, one is quickly cut to the heart; "none is righteous, no not one" (Rom. 3:10). Catholicity demands *orthopraxy* as much as *orthodoxy*; it demands practical racial inclusion, not merely doctrinal agreement with the early church's ecumenical counsels. It rejects any hint of partiality or prejudice, is repulsed by any whiff of sectarianism. Racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism have no part in God's holy catholic church.⁷² Thus, the two attributes of unity and catholicity demand an ethic of racial inclusion.

"Why diversity?" Because God loves the world—his multiracial creation—and Christians must as well.⁷³ As Christians of different races come together in the church, we show forth our unity and catholicity. Diversity is part of the church's DNA, her attributes: to be truly catholic is to be truly united in diversity, and true unity requires the diversity protected by catholicity.

Conclusion

Through an examination of Herman Bavinck's theology, the church gains a doctrine of diversity composed of three essential pieces: a "creation-positive" protology, a diversity-redeeming eschatology, and an ecclesiology marked by unified catholicity. In these, the silver thread is unity-in-diversity, rooted in God's character, mirrored in God's creation, secured by God's salvation, all for the sake of God's glory. While Bavinck is correct to offer some words of patience—only Christ can accomplish the perfection of unity and diversity and will only accomplish it at his second coming⁷⁴—his theology of diversity is robust enough to hold the weight of Christ's call to be one body, yet still inclusive of racial differences. Can there be outsiders inside God's people, excluded because of race or culture? No, because racism sins against Christ's unified, catholic church. Should congregations and denominations pursue redeemed diversity, even at great expense of energy or resources? Yes, because this redeemed

diversity, where there are “insiders” of all races and cultures, forms the church’s witness to Christ’s redemption for a watching world. Why diversity? Ultimately, because it glorifies the gloriously diverse God. For the Reformed tradition, with its emphasis on pursuing God’s glory, racial diversity in the church must be reclaimed as a central outworking of its primary theological foundations.

Notes

1. Of the more recent works of history tracing the nexus of theology and the development of the concept of race, two noteworthy volumes are Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) and J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
2. At the same time, racial diversity is a foregone conclusion in many other circles, to the extent that Western culture is, presently, largely concerned with representation of sexual minorities in all levels of society and institutions. Instead of wondering, why diversity, other readers may wonder, why *this* diversity and not *that*? While a full exploration of diversity and sexual ethics is beyond the scope of this article, a beginning of an answer starts with the nature of creation and sin. Herman Bavinck, the primary theologian examined in this article, situates ethnicity under a doctrine of creation, an original good subsequently redeemed in Christ. For him, and for the broad swath of the Christian tradition, boundless sexual expression lands under the doctrine of sin; thus normalizing these behaviors and impulses would not properly be included in the scope of true Christian diversity. Interested readers can consult Bavinck’s *The Christian Family*, where he deals with issues of this nature in his context, utilizing the doctrines of creation, common, grace, sin, and Scripture to forge a biblical sexual ethic. See especially chapters 8–10 of Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2012).
3. This popular pastoral vision is articulated in the articles “Diversity for the Sake of the Gospel” and “The Diversity Dance,” which employ a biblical justification for diversity without systematic theology for support. My pastoral concern is that these assertions put undue pressure on young pastors to promote the “diversity agenda” in their churches with few theological resources to support that vision. Without a theological vision for diversity, it is challenging to sustain the cost of diversity in practice, which will lead to ministerial or congregational fatigue. See Susan Fikse, “Diversity for the Sake of the Gospel,” *ByFaith*, April 4, 2016, <http://byfaithonline.com/seeking-diversity-for-the-sake-of-the-gospel/>; Megan Fowler, “The Diversity Dance,” *ByFaith*, July 11, 2016, <http://byfaithonline.com/the-diversity-dance/>.

4. “Editor’s Introduction,” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt and John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:13.
5. See, for instance, James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 67–71.
6. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 25–26.
7. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 54.
8. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:300.
9. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:300. Throughout Bavinck’s corpus, fullness and diversity belong together; clearly Bavinck’s view of God and creation is one of abundance.
10. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:332.
11. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:331.
12. See his article “On Beauty and Aesthetics” for a description of God as the basis for these classical transcendentals; Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 255.
13. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:422.
14. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:436. Note that in describing both God and creation, Bavinck explains that diversity has a role in “unfolding” unity, in a way that brings out its abiding abundance.
15. To support his argument at this section, Bavinck’s references include Athanasius, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Calvin, Zanchius, and an extended meditation on Augustine; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:436–38.
16. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 274, emphasis original. John Bolt, editor of the four-volume full translation, edited this abridged version of the *Dogmatics*. As such, the abridgments offer somewhat of a commentary on the original *Dogmatics*, and here Bolt thought it appropriate to emphasize Bavinck’s commitment to the centrality of his holistic creational doctrine.
17. Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 250.
18. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Ancaster, ON: Alev Books, 2012), 27, 64.
19. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:438.

20. See the essays “Philosophy of Religion (Faith)” and “Of Beauty and Aesthetics” in Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, 30 and 259.
21. “While all creatures display vestiges of God, only a human being is the image of God.” Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:555.
22. “Bavinck presents a unique assertion about the image of God, not seen in his predecessors: the body is an integral aspect of the image of God. In humanity’s embodied creation as the image of God ... Bavinck understands the body as a crucial component of the image. Humans as individuals and humanity as a whole, unified while diverse, are the embodied image of God.” Jessica Joustra, “An Embodied *Imago Dei*: How Herman Bavinck’s Understanding of the Image of God Can Help Inform Conversations on Race,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11 (2017): 17.
23. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:555.
24. “At creation, humanity was still sub-eschatological; humanity was given ... an eschatological vision to anticipate. This eschatological vision humanity anticipated already contained both the unity and the unfolded diversity of all humankind.” Joustra, “An Embodied *Imago Dei*,” 13.
25. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 16. While Bavinck does not specifically address race as the diversification of humanity based on the nexus of cultural and physical differences, his emphasis on “peoples” implicates a view of humanity that is broadly diverse.
26. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:576.
27. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:525.
28. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 287. Berkouwer utilizes Bavinck here in the discussion of traducianism and the creation of the soul.
29. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 10–11.
30. Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 186–87. Spykman continues to show how this particular vision of the Christian worldview was developed by Kuyper and Bavinck and honed through further theologians, such as D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and H. Dooyeverd, notable Neo-Calvinist philosophers; see Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 189.
31. Bavinck, in *The Christian Family*, uses this principle to argue against incest, which would necessarily limit the expansion of human diversity, including racial diversity. Thus, it can also be used to argue in favor of interracial marriage and multiracial church congregations.

32. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:112.
33. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 12. This theme of grace restoring nature, which has become a hallmark of the Neo-Calvinist tradition, is explored in depth in Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. Albert M. Wolters (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2006). Veenhof argues that Bavinck's entire theological project is built on this redemptive relationship between nature and grace, in opposition to Catholic, Lutheran, Anabaptist, and other Christian construals.
34. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:436. This line of thinking is consistent with the broader Reformed conception of a Covenant of Works. Though this was and is an area of intramural debate, the essence involves the belief that Adam's tenure in the Garden involved a probationary period with the expectation of creational growth and maturity as humanity, under Adam's headship, progressed toward the eschaton. For a discussion of the various views present in the Reformed community, see Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 226–32.
35. See Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, 24–25.
36. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:577.
37. Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 59. My thanks to Dr. Jessica Joustra for pointing out this wonderful quote.
38. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:720.
39. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:720.
40. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:727.
41. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:727.
42. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:727–28.
43. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:729–30.
44. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:729.
45. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 274–75. This is the broad consensus of the Reformed community, as indicated by both Berkof and Berkouwer. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 737; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 221.
46. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 558.

47. Herman Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Bavinck Review* 2 (2011): 152, emphasis original.
48. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:542–43. Bavinck cites 1 Corinthians 2:9; 2 Peter 1:4; and Hebrews 12:10 as supporting passages. When discussing the present reality and future promise of the kingdom, Bavinck consistently characterizes the present as possessing the future blessings of God “in principle” now, while hoping for the fullness of the promise in the future.
49. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:723.
50. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:723.
51. Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good,” 144–45. Note again the theme of abundance in Bavinck’s thought.
52. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 444.
53. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:318.
54. Berkouwer, reflecting on the conversation about unity versus uniformity, states, “We sense a certain richness in the doctrine of pluriformity ... [which] makes room for variegation and distinction, both of which are so valuable for all human life: because reality is not captive to uniformity, it is richer, not poorer!” Channeling Bavinck, Berkouwer demonstrates that unity-in-diversity leads to abundance. See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 52.
55. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:320–24.
56. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:321–23.
57. Berkouwer laments the fact that some in the Reformed camp abused “the concept of the invisible church ... not so much to expose the tensions and responsibilities of the visible church as to ‘solve’ those tensions, especially with respect to unity.” Thus, for Berkouwer, as well as Bavinck, the Church’s invisible identity is meant to act as her conscience, not as her bomb shelter. Berkouwer, *The Church*, 38.
58. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:306.
59. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 443.
60. In *Our Reasonable Faith*, Bavinck describes overcoming cultural barriers as one of the primary goals of Paul’s ministry in Acts and in his letters, and thus unity also belongs to the Church as a goal. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 523.
61. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 222.

62. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 523; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:321. Bavinck refers to the Creed, the “Twelve Articles of Faith,” as something that unites all Christians.
63. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:316.
64. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:321. Berkouwer similarly states that, “in light of [the teaching of Acts 10 that God does not discriminate], whatever differences, there is no ‘distinction’ in Christ.” Berkouwer, *The Church*, 125.
65. For insight into the connection between racism and “color blind” ideology, see Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 10.
66. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:323.
67. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:323.
68. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 224.
69. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 250.
70. Berkouwer, *The Church*, 121. Berkouwer’s treatment of catholicity is a profoundly beautiful exposition of the ethical implications of the Church’s confession.
71. Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 447.
72. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 97.
73. Cf. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 246–47.
74. Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 250–51; Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good,” 169–70.