We Do Not Proceed into a Vacuum: J.II. Bavinck’s ‘Missional’ Reading of Romans I

I. Introduction: A Missional Hermeneutic for Bavinck?

II. Preliminary Matters:
   A. Our Task for Today:

   i. As Bavinck answers the question, ‘what is the connection between Religious Consciousness and the Christian faith,’ particularly through his reading of Romans 1, he provides the beginning of a robust and deep answer to a question which remains underdeveloped within missional readings of scripture today, ‘how do we, as those shaped and formed by the narrative of God’s mission in the world understand that world we encounter?’

   B. Definitions

   i. Missional Hermeneutics: Using the definition of Anthony Thiselton of hermeneutics as the “conditions and criteria that operate and try to ensure responsible, valid, fruitful or appropriate interpretation,”¹ mission hermeneutics will primarily refer to the methodological commitment that understands the missio Dei as the condition and criteria for interpreting scripture.

   ii. Missional Readings: Missional readings of scripture are interpretations that are rooted in a missional hermeneutic and flow from the hermeneutical presuppositions of missional hermeneutics.

   iii. Missional-

   1. Broad sense: Drawing on Chris Wright’s definition in Mission of God. Missional is an adjective which denotes “something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities attributes or dynamics of mission.”²

   2. Specifically: The hermeneutical presupposition that God is living and active within both the church and the world and reveals this work through scripture. This definition draws on a long tradition within the church that has been present but not labelled as ‘missional.’ This is how I will use the term when I am discussing Bavinck’s ‘missional’ reading of Romans 1. While, yes, here I have fallen into the anachronistic ‘trap,’ using the term does help us start to draw Bavinck’s insights into today.

   iv. Missio Dei: God is a missionary God, and he is on a long-term mission to “renew the entire creation and the whole of human life.”³ All mission is grounded in him and initiated by him.

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¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, Hermeneutics: An Introduction (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 4


v. World

1. Broadly, for the sake of our purposes today, the world will refer to that arena within which humans live and dwell wherein religion, culture, and worldview come to expression. It is the home of the ‘nations,’ the ‘philosophical worldviews of modernity and postmodernity,’ and religions.

III. J.H. Bavinck: ‘How Do we Regard other Religions.’


B. J.H. Bavinck’s Theological-Biblical Approach

i. And it is a book that brings us to our knees and makes us tremble before the greatness of Him who holds our life and breath in His hands.”

C. Biblical Hermeneutics

D. Romans 1:18-32

i. General Revelation and Religious Consciousness

1. Two Relationships

a. God-Human Dialogue (I-Thou)

b. Human Response: Repression and Suppression

i. “Revelation impinges on them and compels them to listen, but it at the same time pushed down and repressed. And the only aspects that remain connected to human consciousness, even while torn from their original context, become the seeds of entirely different sequence ideas around which they crystallize.”

ii. Religious Consciousness: General and Particular

1. “If I seek to take a [hu]man by storm with general rules and norms derived from books, it is possible that I may miss the mark, and what I say may go over his head, because what he himself finds in his own religion, and the way in which he lives it...”

iii. Structure of Religious Consciousness

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iv. “...his whole way of living already implies an answer, and is an answer. That is why we find these five focus points in every religion and in every human life, even in that of the so-called nonreligious man.”

v. Magnetic Points:
(a) the experience of totality, (b) the notion of a norm, (c) the connection with a higher power/awareness of reality beyond reality, (d) the need for deliverance, and (e) that the course of life is the tension between action and fate.

vi. Religious Consciousness: An encounter with the Gospel

E. What does this mean for today?
   i. God’s mission
   ii. Structured world

IV. Missional Hermeneutics
   A. George Hunsberger: “The framework for a missional hermeneutic (the narrative of the *missio Dei*), the aim of a missional hermeneutic (ecclesial formation for witness), the approach of a missional hermeneutic (socially located questions), and the interpretive matrix of a missional hermeneutic (the gospel as the interpretive key).”

V. Church Planters and Church Renewers: Practical Applications!
   A. There is no Vacuum!
   B. A Broader Perspective
   C. A Shared Humanity
   D. God Beyond Mission

VI. Conclusions

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7 J.H. Bavinck, *Church Between Temple and Mosque*, p. 32.
Romans 1:18-32

Rom. 1:18 ¶ The wrath of God is being revealed (apokalup/ptetai) from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppress the truth by their wickedness, Rom. 1:19 since what may be known about God is plain to (faner/noi) them, because God has made it plain to (e/pane+rwsen) them.

Rom. 1:20 For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse, Rom. 1:21 For although they knew God (gnos/neiβ), they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Rom. 1:22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools Rom. 1:23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles. Rom. 1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. Rom. 1:25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Rom. 1:26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. Rom. 1:27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. Rom. 1:28 Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. Rom. 1:29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, Rom. 1:30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; Rom. 1:31 they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Rom. 1:32 Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.
aÔfqaqar tou qeouv e'n oJmoiwâmati ei ko/noß fqartouv aÔnqrwâ pou kai« peteinwôn kai« tetrapo/dwn kai« e`rpethân. Rom 1:24 Dio\ pare+dwken aujetouß oJ qeolß e'n tâi-ß e`piqumi+aiß twôn kardiwôn aujetôn e'iß aÔkaqarchi+an touv aÔtimâzesquai ta» swâ mâta aujetôn e'n aujetoirô. Rom 1:25 oï'tineß meth/llaxan th'n aÔlh/qeian touv qeouv e'n twô yeul/dei kai« e'sebâqshsan kai« e`laqtreusan thôv kti+seî para» ton kti+santa, oß ê'âsîn eujloqhtoß eiîß touß ai'wônasß, aÔmh/n. Rom 1:26 Dia» touvto pare+dwken aujetouß oJ qeolß eiîß paqâqh aÔtimi+aiß, aî° te ga»r qh/leiaî aujetôn meth/llaxan th'n fusikhôn chrhsin eiîß th'n para» fu/sin, Rom 1:27 oJmoi+wôs te kai« oi'' aûrseneß aÔfe+nteß th'n fusikhôn chrhsin thvß qhleî+aiß e`xeikau/qhsan e'n thôv ojre+xei aujetôn eiîß aÔlîlh/louß, aûrseneß e'n aûrsesin th'n aÔschmosu/nhn katergazo/ menoi kai« th'n aÔtimisqi+an h°n e'deî thvß plagdhîs aujetôn e'n e`autoi'îß aÔpolambakô Norteß. Rom 1:28 Kai« kawô»ôs oujk e`doki+masan toîn qeolôn e'deîsein e'n e'pignwôsei, pare+dwken aujetouß oJ qeolôs eiîß aÔdo/kimon noûv, poieivôn ta» mh\ kaqh/konta, Rom 1:29 peplhrwmè+nouß paqshô aÔdiki+a° pohnri+a° pleonexi+a° kaki+a°, mestouß fça/nou fo/nou e'deîdoß do/lou kakohqeî+aiß, yiqrista»ô Rom 1:30 kataqâlouß qeostugeîv îbJrista»ôs bJperhfaqô nuß aÔlazo/naß, e`feureta»ôs kakwôn, goneusin aÔpeiqeiôv, Rom 1:31 aÔsun+toûs aÔsunq+toûs aÔsto/gouß aÔnelehd/ monaß: Rom 1:32 oï'tineß toi\ dikai+wma touv qeouv e'pigno/nteß oßi îî'' ta» toiauvta praôssonteß â'txoiq qanâq tou ei si+n, ouj mo/non aujet› poiouvssin aÔlla» kai« suneudokouvsin toi'vîß praôssousin.