

How Is God Known? : General Revelation in the Theology of Abraham Kuyper

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[Abstract]

The purpose of this article is to examine Abraham Kuyper's (1837-1920) doctrine of general revelation, focusing on his understanding of the insufficiency and the significance of general revelation for a post-Eden humanity. In order to perform substantive study of Kuyper's doctrine of general revelation in the context of Reformed tradition, this study particularly compares Kuyper with two representative Reformed theologians, John Calvin(1509-1564) and Herman Bavinck(1854-1921).

The comparative study of doctrine of general revelation between Kuyper, Calvin, and Bavinck shows two things in detail. First all three theologians agree that even after the fall, God continues to reveal Himself through general revelation and human beings see and comprehend it both inside and outside one's own being. Despite the objective sufficiency of general revelation, however, the effects of sin are so devastating that general revelation never produces any saving knowledge of God apart from regeneration through special revelation. All three theologians also affirm the ongoing utility of general revelation after the fall. Thus, contrary to previous scholarship on Kuyper's general revelation, Kuyper is essentially in agreement with Calvin and Bavinck on the subject of general revelation. Namely, Kuyper's view of general revelation is more in continuity with the classic Reformed tradition than with Karl

Barth's(1886-1968). Second, even though all three theologians essentially agree on the subject of general revelation, there is a more positive attitude of general revelation in Calvin and Bavinck than in Kuyper. This is particularly clear in their discussions of the ongoing significance of general revelation after the fall. Despite some differences, however, the similarities far outweigh the differences. Kuyper is different from Calvin and Bavinck in some minor points, but he still works as a Reformed theologian.

Key Words: Kuyper, Calvin, Bavinck, Barth, General Revelation, Knowledge of God

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I. Introduction

The concept of general revelation has become a point of greater conflict than ever in the twentieth century.¹ In particular, one of the most controversial issues in the doctrine of general revelation concerns the ability of human beings to know God through general revelation. The issue presents itself as follows: If indeed there is any such knowledge, can God be universally known through general revelation, to what extent do humans know God from general revelation, and what are the results of this knowledge? Can God through general revelation be known to humanity as Redeemer or only as Creator? These questions have been at the center of debates.²

Since the doctrine of general revelation contains such fundamental issues of Christianity, many Reformed theologians have tried to solve these theological questions throughout much of the half-millennium. Abraham Kuyper(1837-1920) was one of those Reformed theologians who addressed them and the related issues mainly through his systematic exposition of Christian doctrine, *Encyclopedia of Principles of Sacred Theology*.³ Kuyper has been evaluated as “Holland’s greatest Calvinist,” and “the greatest Calvinist since Calvin.”⁴ Indeed, his theology had wide and significant impact on Reformed theology.⁵ Thus, Bruce A. Demarest says that “No figure

1 Concerning this, see Bruce A. Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 13-23.

2 Demarest, *General Revelation*, 13-23.

3 Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898; repro. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

4 Cf. “As a pastor, theologian, educator, politician, and statesman, Kuyper was one of the most versatile and talented men of modern times.” Demarest, *General Revelation*, 135.

had a greater influence on Dutch theology in the twentieth century than Abraham Kuyper.⁶ In particular, his idea of general revelation served as a “catalyst” to the confessional method of Gerrit C. Berkouwer(1903–1996) and the presuppositional approach of Cornelius Van Til(1895–1987).⁷ Therefore, to gain an understanding of general revelation especially with respect to Reformed doctrine, the study of Kuyper’s doctrine of general revelation would seem to serve as a valuable and necessary exercise.

The purpose of this study is to examine Abraham Kuyper’s understanding of general revelation focusing on his understanding of the insufficiency and the significance of general revelation for a post-Eden humanity.⁸ In particular, this paper will investigate his contributions to the subject of general revelation within the theological context of John Calvin(1509–1564) and Herman Bavinck(1854–1921). The basic questions to be explored in each of

5 Del Ratzsch “Abraham Kuyper’s Philosophy of Science,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27/2 (1992), 277. Concerning the life and work of Kuyper, see Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960); James Edward McGoldrick, *God’s Renaissance Man: The Life and Work of Abraham Kuyper* (Auburn: Evangelical Press, 2000), Richard J. Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper: A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Cf. McGoldrick presents useful annotated bibliography of Kuyper’s materials in English.

6 Demarest, *General Revelation*, 135.

7 Demarest, *General Revelation*, 135.

8 Scholars have given less attention to Kuyper’s doctrine of general revelation. So far, Bruce A. Demarest is the only one who has explicitly taken up the matter of Kuyper’s understanding of general revelation. See Demarest, *General Revelation*, 135–42. Recently, David Van Drunen discussed Kuyper’s view of general revelation. However, it was briefly dealt with in just 2 pages in the course of his discussion of Kuyper’s view of natural law. David Van Drunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 279–80. In his treatment of Neo-Calvinists’ view of general revelation, Sutanto also mentioned Kuyper briefly in just a few sentences. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Neo-Calvinism on General Revelation: A Dogmatic Sketch” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20/4 (2018), 495–516.

the theologians include the effect of sin on humanity, the knowledge of God in fallen humanity, the insufficiency of general revelation, the possibility of natural theology, and finally the ongoing significance of general revelation after the Fall.

In doing so, I will especially demonstrate two things in detail: First, Kuyper, Calvin, and Bavinck agree that even after the fall, God continues to reveal Himself through general revelation and human beings see and comprehend it both inside and outside one's own being. Despite the objective sufficiency of general revelation, however, the effects of sin are so devastating that general revelation never results in worshipful service of God apart from the redemptive working of the Holy Spirit. All three theologians also affirm the ongoing utility of general revelation after the fall. Thus, contrary to previous scholarship on Kuyper's general revelation, Kuyper is essentially in agreement with Calvin and Bavinck on the subject of general revelation. In sum, Kuyper's theology of general revelation follows more closely that of Calvin's, more in continuity with the classic Reformed tradition, than the characteristics of Karl Barth's(1886-1968).

Second, even though all three theologians essentially agree on the subject of general revelation, there is a more positive attitude of general revelation in Calvin and Bavinck than in Kuyper. This is particularly the case when we examine their understandings of the continuing significance of general revelation after the fall. However, in spite of some differences, one must not miss the fact that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Kuyper is different from Calvin and Bavinck in some minor points, but he still works as a Reformed theologian.

II. The Objective Character of General Revelation

There can be no doubt that Abraham Kuyper held to the reality of objective general revelation. In *Encyclopedia*, this fact is taken for granted and made plain. Unlike Barth, Kuyper postulates a revelation of God in the objective cosmos. He teaches that creation and history manifest numerous truths about the sovereign God. God reveals Himself in nature and the history of human beings.⁹

General revelation has the same subject as revelation in general: the personal, living, true God.¹⁰ Its content and purpose are also all about God Himself because it is His self-revelation.¹¹ God, apart from His self-revelation, is absolutely unknowable.¹² Thus, Kuyper states as follows:

He (human beings) cannot investigate God. There is nothing to analyze. There are no phenomena from which to draw conclusions. Only when that wondrous God will speak, can he listen. And thus the Theologian is absolutely dependent upon the pleasure of God, either to impart or not to impart knowledge of himself. Even verification is here absolutely excluded.¹³

⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 251.

¹⁰ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 341-48. Here, Kuyper strongly affirms that God is the subject of all revelations.

¹¹ This is clearly presented throughout *Encyclopedia*. Cf. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 341-48.

¹² Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 251. Cf. Kuyper denies any postulate of analogy of being between God and human beings. "Standing before God you do not find an analogy in our own being to His being, because He is God and you are man." Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 250. Therefore, Kuyper emphasizes that since "the vast gulf" between the finite creature and the infinite Creator, human beings cannot know the reality of God without God's self-revelation. Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 250.

¹³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 251.

However, God has in fact revealed Himself. In this sense, general revelation is, first of all, self-revelation from God. It is always mediate and therefore it is always an “ectypical” rather than an “archetypical” knowledge that can result from it.¹⁴

God’s objective revelation as Creator comes to humanity from both inside and outside means. As inside means, Kuyper claims that, before the fall, God can be known by the internal element: the *sensus divinitatis* (the sense of divinity), or *semen religionis* (the seed of religion). First of all, God places within all persons a *sensus divinitatis*.¹⁵ Hence, an inescapable *sensus divinitatis* comes from within the depth of human beings.¹⁶ As a Calvinist, to alter the analogy, Kuyper also insists that God has sown in all human hearts the unfailing seed of religion.¹⁷ It was engraved on human hearts by nature before the fall. Concerning this, Kuyper states as follows:

Thus the first man lived in an innate knowledge of God, which was not yet understood, and much less expressed in words, just as our human heart in its first unfoldings has a knowledge of ideals, which, however, we are unable to explain or give a form to. Calvin called this the seed of religion (*semen religionis*), by which he indicated that this innate knowledge of God is an ineradicable property of human nature, a spiritual eye in us, the lens of which may be dimmed, but always so that the lens, and consequently the eye, remains.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 254.

¹⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 265.

¹⁶ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 265.

¹⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 268.

¹⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 265.

Since he does not explain the term, it is difficult to define exactly what Kuyper means by the sense of divinity or the seed of religion. Therefore, we must be content with a few characteristics. First, it is not a knowledge originating from within us. Second, it is universal. Third, this sense of divinity is a sense of one God. Fourth, this is perceived directly rather than by ratiocination. Beyond these descriptions Kuyper does not go on defining the term further.¹⁹

Kuyper also teaches that general revelation comes externally through nature and history. His discussion of the opera Dei as the second aspect of general revelation is not treated in detail in the Encyclopedia. Nevertheless, it is clear that Kuyper holds it to be an element of God's general revelation.²⁰

As with Kuyper, Calvin's and Bavinck's insistence that God has revealed Himself as Creator in his creation is so evident and firmly presented that it cannot be ignored. Their understanding of the objective aspect of general revelation in fact shows virtual agreement among them. Calvin and Bavinck also teach that the subject, the content, and the purpose are God Himself.²¹ Moreover, both assert that God's objective revelation as Creator comes to humanity from both inside and outside. Thus, general revelation comes externally through nature and history, the opera Dei, which are apparent to

¹⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 265–68. Thus, it seems that Kuyper's major occupation with the sense of divinity is not in analyzing the how and what of its knowledge content, but with its empirical effects.

²⁰ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 251.

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I. V. 9; 62. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 34–5.

all persons.²² It also comes internally by means of the God that he created in all, the *sensus divinitatis*.²³

As such, Calvin and Bavinck are almost identical to Kuyper concerning the objective character of general revelation. However, while Kuyper does not deal with the conscience as an internal element of general revelation, Calvin clearly connects human conscience with general revelation. In *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin states as follows:

Now that inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables. For our conscience does not allow us to sleep a perpetual insensible sleep without being an inner witness and monitor of what we owe God, without holding before us the difference between good and evil and thus accusing us when we fail in our duty.²⁴

Bavinck also thinks of human conscience as an internal means of general revelation.²⁵ And he elaborates the means of general

²² There are many references by Calvin and Bavinck on this matter. For Calvin, Calvin, *Institutes*, I.V. 1: 51-52. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), I: 313. For Bavinck, see Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, trans. G. Vos, N. Steffens, and H. Dosker (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 265; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 1. *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 340-41.

²³ For example, see Calvin, *Institutes*, I. iii. 1: 43-44, Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 19; *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 341.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, II. Viii. 1: 368.

²⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 319. Concerning this, Bavinck states that "Man was originally created after God's image, and bore the moral law in the innermost recesses of his heart; even in the state of sin he is still bound to the ideal world by his reason and conscience." Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 260.

revelation as follows:

The means that God employs in his general revelation are the whole of nature and all of history, the history not only of the human race and the various peoples of the earth, but also of the generations, families, and persons; the history of states and societies not only, but also of religions and morals and all of culture. Since nothing has durability except in and through God, nothing is excluded from his revelation... But ultimately nothing is excluded from general revelation... And while nature and history in this personal sense are the external objective means God employs for this revelation, intellect and reason, conscience and heart are the internal subjective means by which God makes his revelation known to us.²⁶

Likewise, Bavinck ultimately includes almost everything into the means of general revelation that discloses to all humans God who created and sustains the universe.

In sum, Kuyper, Calvin and Bavinck are essentially in agreement on the objective character of general revelation. All three clearly teach an objective general revelation. They all argue that general revelation comes through both internal and external means that mediate the revelation to humans.

III. The Subjective Character of General Revelation

We turn now to human being as recipient to whom the revelation

²⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 340-41.

is given, to examine the subjective side of this revelation. We will specifically look at the effects of sin on human nature, on the reception of general revelation, the possibility of natural theology, and the continuing significance of general revelation.

1. The Image of God

That human beings are created according to God's image is vital to understand Kuyper's doctrine of revelation because the image of God is what makes subjective perception of God's revelation possible.²⁷ It is the image of God that is the basis of all relationship between God and his human creation:

If I we were not created after God's image, this manifestation would affect us strangely and cause us fear; but since in virtue of our creation there is an affinity between our own ego and that other Ego revealing itself to us, the manifestation of that mighty Ego affects us pleasantly, it fascinates and satisfies us with a feeling of infinite rest. It appeals to us. And as all revelation finds its completion only in this, this appeal becomes at length a speaking to us.²⁸

Kuyper claims that this image is the basis for receiving revelation and thus the knowledge of God. Even before the fall, knowledge of God was the result of God's self-revelation to humans whose essence was that they were God's image. Revelation does not begin with the fall but from creation. As with Kuyper, both Calvin and Bavinck also make the connection of revelation and the image of God.²⁹ It is

²⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 267.

²⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 267.

significant that all three understand the image itself from the viewpoint of revelation.

2. The Effects of the Fall on the Image of God

Before the fall, God can be known sufficiently through general revelation to human beings. However, Kuyper strongly claims that sin corrupted not only nature but also humanity. First of all, the fall's effect went beyond humanity to the whole of creation. In view of the widespread effects of sin and the curse, Kuyper states that "disturbance has convulsed nature to cloud the transparency of God in the cosmos."³⁰ Second, sin also subjectively influenced the heart of the sinner so that "the Divine impulse encounters an evil cataract, which prevents the entrance of light."³¹ The darkening effects of sin, in a word, effectively interfere with the natural man's reception of general revelation. Thus, Kuyper states that "As soon as sin had entered in, revelation had to work without inward, since sin had fast bolted the door which gave manifestations of God in the soul."³² When he deals with general revelation in *Encyclopedia*, Kuyper does not specifically say how sin has an effect on the image of God. However, he firmly asserts that the stark reality of sin opposes human beings' determined search for God.

Consequently, God's revelation in the objective cosmos undergoes a degenerate development. Although human beings try to find God's

²⁹ For example, see Calvin, *Institutes*, I. xv. 3; 188; Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 24; 205-07.

³⁰ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 220. As with Kuyper, Calvin and Bavinck also assert that Adam's first sin severely vitiated the objective revelation. See Calvin, *Institutes*, II. V. 309, Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 230; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 273.

³¹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 378.

³² Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 284.

truth behind nature and history, they “can never attain to a positive knowledge, nor ever produce anything that falls outside of the scope of philosophy.”³³ General revelation only results in idolatry or false philosophies. Thus, fallen humanity only falls into the false theology of paganism.³⁴ In a word, general revelation produces no “true knowledge” of God in fallen human beings. Kuyper argues that it is absurd to suggest “that the natural knowledge of God without enrichment by the special, could ever affect a satisfying result.”³⁵

As with Kuyper, the most casual examination of Calvin and Bavinck also makes clear that sin has disastrously interfered with the intended result of general revelation. However, unlike Kuyper, Calvin and Bavinck elaborate on the effects of sin on the image of God. First, Calvin insists that despite the darkening effects of sin on humanity, the image was not totally destroyed.³⁶ Since “the supernatural gifts” are completely lost, however, fallen humanity cannot attain true knowledge of God only through general revelation.³⁷ Thus, there can be no pure piety for God the creator without special revelation and regeneration. It, nevertheless, does not mean that the image of God in fallen humanity is so damaged that it cannot perceive any of the light from general revelation. According to Calvin, a remnant of the image of God remains in fallen humanity by God’s grace.³⁸ Thus, he teaches that, even in the case of fallen human beings, they can comprehend something of God’s truth.³⁹ However, the remnant and

³³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 222.

³⁴ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 222.

³⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 377.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. xv. 4: 189.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, II. ii. 12: 270.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, II. ii. 12: 270-71.

³⁹ Calvin clearly teaches that it is God’s truth which fallen humans still perceive, not

the resulting knowledge are so severely corrupted that one cannot attain true knowledge of God.⁴⁰

Following Calvin, Bavinck develops this issue further. He claims two facts: (1) even after the fall human beings continue to be called the image of God in a broader sense, but (2) they have lost the image and it must be restored in a narrower sense:

Man has lost no substance because of sin. In this sense man is still man even after the fall. But because of the loss of original righteousness, he lost the harmony, the soundness of his nature, he has become wholly and entirely a sinner; his nature in the sense of substance or essence has remained, but the moral qualities unique to his nature were lost.⁴¹

Here, Bavinck follows the Reformed tradition distinguishing the broader and narrower aspects of the image. The image in the narrower sense, exhibiting such characteristics as spiritual wholeness, righteousness (*justitia originalis*), and holiness were destroyed by sin. In contrast, the image in the broader sense, human nature with its basic qualities such as understanding, reason, conscience and heart was not totally destroyed by sin. Even though it was terribly marred and corrupted by sin, the image of God in

merely some sorts of natural truth which has nothing to do with God's general revelation. Regarding this, for example, he states that "Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God." Calvin, *Institutes*, II. ii. 15: 273-74.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. ii. 1: 40.

⁴¹ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 210.

the broader sense still remained by God's general grace.⁴² These faculties, which are a part of the image of God in the broader sense, constitute the subjective ability to perceive and understand God's general revelation.⁴³ Thus, Bavinck asserts that because of the remnant of the image in the broader sense, fallen humanity perceives something of God's truth.⁴⁴ General revelation is severely corrupted by sin and one never comes to pious knowledge of God through it.⁴⁵

In short, all three men agree that sin distorted both nature and humanity. However, unlike Kuyper, Calvin and Bavinck discuss in detail the effects of sin on the image of God in their discussion of God's revelation and human perception of it.

3. The Knowledge of God in Fallen Humanity

Even though he denies any saving knowledge of God from general revelation apart from regeneration, Kuyper claims that sinners still can see and comprehend God through general revelation.⁴⁶ He argues the persistence of the internal means of general revelation: though it was darkened by sin, the sense of divinity and the seed of religion still exist in humanity.⁴⁷ Since God continues to reveal himself in nature and history, there is still knowledge. Thus, Kuyper teaches

⁴² Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 210-211.

⁴³ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 210-211.

⁴⁴ Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 169; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 71-72.

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 312-14.

⁴⁶ Even though Kuyper does not explicitly mention it as much as Bavinck does, it is clear throughout *Encyclopedia*. Concerning this, see Ratzsch "Abraham Kuyper's Philosophy of Science," 277-302.

⁴⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 265.

that this subjective illumination of the soul persists in the fallen sinner by virtue of common grace and accounts for the universal phenomenon of religion.⁴⁸

However, Kuyper insists that these inner perceptions of the sinner cannot reach the “true” knowledge of God.⁴⁹ Because of the effects of sin, the divine operations on the sinner’s heart cannot produce any sufficient knowledge of God. Instead of leading sinners to the living God of the Scriptures, the natural light of the soul leads them to idolatry.⁵⁰ Therefore, he consistently states that the knowledge of sinners through general revelation without the aid of special revelation is not “true” or “pure” knowledge of God.⁵¹

Calvin, like Kuyper, teaches that some knowledge of God’s truth remains in fallen humanity. According to him, even though the sense of divinity, the seed of religion, and the conscience are constantly suppressed, perverted and denied, they persist.⁵² Moreover, since God continues to reveal Himself in nature and history, there is still knowledge.⁵³ Hence, fallen humanity can clearly retain some conception of God. However, as with Kuyper, Calvin does not overlook the perverted character of this knowledge. In the strongest of terms, Calvin denies any saving knowledge of God from general revelation apart from faith. It leads only to idolatry rather than piety.⁵⁴

Bavinck again follows Calvin’s main lines of thought in this issue. There is no doubt that he teaches that God remains knowable to

⁴⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 279.

⁴⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 258.

⁵⁰ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 378.

⁵¹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 258; 375.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, I. iv. 1; 47, I. iv. 4; 51, II. ii. 22; 281-2.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. v. 11; 63, I. v. 2; 53, I. v. 4; 55, I. v. 11; 64.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. iv. 1; 47.

fallen humanity through general revelation even after the fall. He argues that some understanding and some knowledge of God through the sense of divinity remains in sinful persons.⁵⁵ Thus, even though it is weakened and corrupted by sin, some sparks persist. Bavinck also claims that fallen humanity receives the continuing revelation from the opera Dei.⁵⁶ God reveals Himself even to the unregenerate not only from outside the person, but from within as well through the continuing working of the Spirit or the Logos. Hence, he denies that sinners have no knowledge of the Creator springing from general revelation:

...there existed in paganism a continued revelation through nature and reason, in heart and conscience, an illumination of the Logos, a speech from the wisdom of God through the hidden works of grace... No doubt among the heathen this wisdom has in many respects become corrupted and falsified; They retain only fragments of the truth, not the one, entire, full truth. But even such fragments are profitable and good.⁵⁷

We clearly see that Bavinck holds firmly to a persistent, though perverted, knowledge of God in fallen humanity, that is, there is knowledge that God is near. However, this knowledge neither produces a saving knowledge nor results in piety. Because of the fall, the knowledge of God through general revelation bears the evil fruit of idolatry.⁵⁸ Therefore, Bavinck refuses to call it true knowledge

⁵⁵ Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 169.

⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 56-57: 68-69; 71-72.

⁵⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Calvin and Common Grace* (Scarsdale, NY: Westminster, 1996), 103.

⁵⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 313.

of God.

In sum, all three theologians claim the fact that God, by his grace, continues to reveal Himself objectively in nature and history, and also subjectively in humanity, and both serve as the basis for the continuing significance of general revelation. According to them, even in the case of fallen humanity, God's general grace keeps all persons in a personal though sin-marred relationship with Himself. They agree that, even after the fall, human beings see and comprehend God's general revelation both inside and outside one's own being. However, it does not produce saving knowledge. Because of the effect of sin, this knowledge leads humans only to idolatry or false religions. In this regard, all three theologians conclude that general revelation produces no "true" knowledge of God in fallen human beings.

4. The Insufficiency of General Revelation for Fallen Humanity

As noted above, all three theologians strongly claim that the corruption resulting from sin has made human beings unable to respond properly to God's self-revelation in nature and history. Therefore, this revelation is not sufficient to accomplish its original purpose. In particular, they all argue that general revelation is fundamentally insufficient because fallen humanity needs redemption in Christ which cannot be drawn from general revelation. For them, natural human beings untouched by saving grace exist in an abnormal and deprived condition.

Therefore, Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck assert that, in order to know God from His works, the sinner's rational incapacity and moral bias must be remedied by the power of regeneration.⁵⁹ If true

knowledge of God is sought, regeneration must be acknowledged as “the only valid starting point.”⁶⁰ Only those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit can approach nature and history from the right perspective and truly know God. Hence, Kuyper states that “In our sinful state we could never attain to a true theology, i.e., a true knowledge of God, unless the form of revelation was soteriological.”⁶¹ Clearly, then, the unregenerate cannot attain true knowledge of God only through general revelation.⁶²

The crucial point in Kuyper’s doctrine of general revelation is that fallen human beings can perceive true knowledge of God from general revelation only through the superadded light of special revelation. The knowledge of God through general revelation has been “veiled from and darkened” in us by the effects of sins.⁶³ Kuyper’s position regarding the true utility of general revelation is clear:

Hence it is only by the special knowledge that the natural knowledge becomes serviceable. By the light of the Scripture the sinner becomes able to give himself an account of the “seed of religion” in his heart and of the “divine things” visible in the cosmos; but, where this light hides itself even upon the Areopagus I advance no farther than to the Unknown God.⁶⁴

59 Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 223.

60 Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 223. Cf. Concerning this, Kuyper states that “the fact of sin was always taken as the point of departure, and thus the starting-point for Revelation was found in the soteriological necessity of using light to arise in our darkness.” Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 258.

61 Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 258.

62 Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 258.

63 Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 378

64 Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 378.

According to Kuyper, God employs the form of a special revelation to make Himself known to human beings. If God is to be truly known in the post-Fall state, humanity needs the fuller disclosure of the divine will in the written Word of God.⁶⁵ Kuyper continues as follows:

When we viewed inspiration in relation to individual man, we said: In the sinner, so far as pertains to the knowledge of God, the natural principium has been maimed, so that no more new or sufficient knowledge of God comes to man through this channel. This is remedied by a second principium which as principium speciale is provisionally added to the first... Applying this to the central Revelation, we now say: Our human race, once fallen in sin, can have no more supply of pure or sufficient knowledge of God from the natural principium. Consequently God effects an auxiliary revelation for our human race, which, from a special principium of its own and under the necessary conditions, places a knowledge of God within the reach of the sinner which is suited to his condition.⁶⁶

In addition to the necessity of special revelation, Kuyper also mention the importance of the mighty initiative of God in the form of the Incarnation of the Son. Kuyper insists that “The self-manifestation had to be transferred from the mystery of the soul-life to the outer world, with the incarnation as its central point.”⁶⁷ Kuyper’s point is that valid knowledge of God must contain the rich display of God in sinless flesh. Unless any knowledge comes from

⁶⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 380.

⁶⁶ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 361.

⁶⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 280.

faith in Christ, it simply is not “true knowledge” of God.⁶⁸

As with Kuyper, Calvin teaches that since the fall did occur, this fruit never comes. He states the necessity of special knowledge as follows:

In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us... Nevertheless, it is one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings – and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ.⁶⁹

Without that knowledge which comes only through special revelation, there is no worshipful response.⁷⁰ Only special revelation can overcome the powerful effects of sin.⁷¹ Calvin states that one cannot reach a true knowledge of God only from the testimonies of general revelation. Calvin raises this question and answers as follows:

However this question arises, whether men can reach a genuine and clear knowledge of God by nature. For Paul means that it is only due to their own sloth that they cannot feel the presence of God, because, even if they close their eyes, yet He Himself is, as it were, palpable. I reply that such perverseness is mingled

⁶⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 385.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. ii. 1; 40.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. vi. 3-4.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. vi. 3-4.

with their ignorance and stupidity that, devoid of proper judgement (sic), and with no true understanding, they disregard all the signs of the glory of God that plainly shine out in heaven and on earth. Yes, and since true knowledge of God is a special gift of His, and faith, by which He is properly known proceeds only from special illumination of the Spirit, it follows that with nature alone as guide our minds cannot penetrate to Him.⁷²

Calvin teaches that natural knowledge of the Creator never leads to true knowledge of God when it is alone. Any benefit of general revelation comes by the illumination of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel.⁷³ The preaching of God's word is the sole means of coming to the true knowledge of God.⁷⁴ He states that "faith is not conceived by the bare observation of heaven and earth, but by hearing of the Word. It follows from that that men cannot be brought to the saving knowledge of God except by the direction of the word."⁷⁵

In a similar vein to Kuyper and Calvin, Bavinck also claims that general revelation is not sufficient to achieve its original purpose: to know, serve and honor God. And he elaborates on the insufficiency of general revelation by dividing it into three parts:

In the first place, it is evident from the fact that this revelation at most supplies us with knowledge of God's existence and of some of his attributes such as goodness and justice... In the

⁷² John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, eds. D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance, trans. John W. Fraser. vol 2. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 119.

⁷³ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2, 121.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2, 121.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2, 19.

second place, the knowledge that general revelation can supply is not only meager and inadequate but also uncertain, consistently mingled with error, and for far and away the majority of people unattainable... In the third place, the insufficiency of natural revelation is clearly demonstrated by the fact that not a single people has been content with so-called natural religion.⁷⁶

These statements clearly show the insufficiency of general revelation in Bavinck's theology. Thus, as with Calvin and Kuyper, Bavinck also strongly affirms that fallen humanity needs special revelation which provides knowledge of Christ who is the only way to the Father.

In short, Kuyper, Calvin, and Bavinck affirm that the insufficiency is neither the result of the cessation of objective general revelation nor the result of an essential inability of humanity to receive it. Rather, the basic reason is that sin's corruption has made human beings unable to respond properly to God's self-revelation in nature and history. General revelation is inherently insufficient, because fallen humanity needs redemption in Christ, and Christ is not part of the content of general revelation. All three theologians strongly insist that special revelation is indispensable.

5. The Possibility of the Natural Theology

We have seen that Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck emphasize the necessity of special revelation to perceive true knowledge of God. For them, this fact is vital to examine the possibility of natural theology. First of all, Kuyper asserts that natural theology is

⁷⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 313-14.

insufficient apart from special revelation.⁷⁷ Such a natural theology does not exist nor could it exist. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, no one by means of reason alone can come to know God.⁷⁸ The effects of sin marred human reasoning. Thus, the normal function of general revelation is impaired.⁷⁹ He claims that since our knowledge of God is darkened by sin, “without a special revelation no sufficient knowledge of God for the sinner is deemed obtainable.”⁸⁰ Kuyper continues as follows:

Natural Theology can exhibit itself as a regnant power only when human nature receives the beams of its light in their purity and reflects them equally completely. At present, however, the glass has been impaired by a hundred cracks, and the receiving and reflecting have become unequal, and the image that was to reflect itself is hindered in its clear reflection and thereby rendered untrue. And for this reason you cannot depend upon natural theology as it works in fallen man; and its imperfect lines and forms bring you, through the broken image, in touch with the reality of the infinite, only when an accidens enables you to recover his defective ideal for yourself, and natural theology receives this accidens only in special revelation.⁸¹

Furthermore, Kuyper claims that it is absurd to do natural theology only through general revelation because general revelation and special revelation are ultimately one.⁸² Consequently, he concludes

⁷⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 373

⁷⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 384–85.

⁷⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 381.

⁸⁰ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 349.

⁸¹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 307.

⁸² Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 373.

that “natural theology of itself is unable to supply any pure knowledge of God.”⁸³

Bavinck also denies any possibility of natural theology only through general revelation.⁸⁴ One cannot examine dogmatics by using human reason alone because the nature of dogmatics requires special revelation.⁸⁵ One should begin his/her theological study from Holy Scripture as principium unicum.⁸⁶ By doing so, a dogmatician can understand nature and history from that vantage point of special revelation. Regarding this, Bavinck states as follows:

(The Christian) Stands in the Christian faith, in revelatio specialis, and from there looks out into nature and history. And therefore he discovers tracks of the same God whom he learned to know as Father in Christ. Through the faith, he sees the revelation of God in nature much better and clearer than he could earlier.⁸⁷

However, it does not mean that one uses special revelation to fill out what reason began. Rather, he means that no one finds God from reason alone.⁸⁸ As with Kuyper, Bavinck clearly asserts that human beings cannot find the saving knowledge of Christ through natural theology alone.⁸⁹

Unlike Kuyper and Bavinck, Calvin “neither explicitly affirms nor

⁸³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 373.

⁸⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 74.

⁸⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 286.

⁸⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 321-22.

⁸⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 324.

⁸⁸ Bavinck states this in many contexts. For example, Bavinck, *Philosophy of Religion*, 23-25; 187-88; 307-09.

⁸⁹ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 32-33; 61-62; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 74-75.

denies” the possibility of natural theology.⁹⁰ As noted earlier, he claims that, even after the fall, the knowledge of God is still knowable from general revelation not only from outside the person, but from within as well. For Calvin, despite the objective general revelation, however, sin distorts and undermines all right knowledge of God.⁹¹ Thus, as with Kuyper and Bavinck, Calvin strongly argues that apart from special revelation, no general revelation can contribute to human salvation.⁹² Concerning the matter of natural theology in Calvin, Richard A. Muller summarizes as follows:

Calvin, therefore, testifies not only to the existence of natural revelation and to the fact of pagan, idolatrous, natural theology, but to the real possibility of a natural theology of the regenerate. He also appears to have a sense that humanity in general, apart from the issue of sin and regeneration, does have enough logical and rational apparatus to develop some valid teachings concerning God, creation, and providence from examination of the natural order. Yet there is a double problem with natural theology. First, such theology is not saving: it exists as praise rather than proclamation. Second, it is not dependable in its religious result and contains errors concerning God and his work that can only be corrected through the use of Scripture. Here again, the problem of natural theology reflects the problem of the *imago Dei*; it is not utterly lost, but it provides no basis for man’s movement toward God.⁹³

⁹⁰ Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformed Reformation Dogmatics Vol.1. Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 273. Cf. In his writings, Calvin never used the term *theologia naturalis*. Muller, *Prolegomena*, 273.

⁹¹ Concerning this, see Calvin, *Institutes*, I. i. 5-6.

⁹² Muller, *Prolegomena*, 275. For example, see Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 308-09.

⁹³ Muller, *Prolegomena*, 276.

Indeed, while Kuyper and Bavinck explicitly deny the possibility of natural theology, Calvin makes no clear statements on the subject. Nevertheless, they all agree that natural theology cannot provide a saving knowledge of God.

6. The Ongoing Significance of General Revelation after the Fall

The insufficiency of general revelation and necessity of special revelation for human salvation raise a question for the next discussion. What is the significance of general revelation after sin entered in and special revelation was given to humanity? Kuyper tries to find a value of general revelation from the relation between general revelation and special revelation. As noted earlier, Kuyper claims that human beings need special revelation in order to find true knowledge of God. However, he denies the dualistic distinction of general revelation and special revelation: "This entire representation, therefore, as though grace had produced a knowledge of God of its own, which as competitor runs by the side of natural theology, must be most decidedly rejected. There can be no such special theology; it is simply unthinkable."⁹⁴ Kuyper strongly affirms the organic relation between them.⁹⁵ General and special revelations have "a higher unity" and are connected to one another "by virtue of this unity and relationship." This higher unity is found "(1) in God, (2) in man, and (3) in the purpose for which the life of grace, and consequently the special knowledge, comes forward."⁹⁶

Kuyper claims that without the natural knowledge of God by the

⁹⁴ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 374.

⁹⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 380.

⁹⁶ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 376.

semen religionis, special revelation is not possible for humanity.⁹⁷ Special revelation unites itself to general revelation to make God known to humanity. Concerning this, Kuyper states as follows:

Special revelation does not begin, therefore, by ignoring what has already been effected by natural revelation, but unites itself to this in so positive a sense, that without these sparks (scintillae) or remnants (rudera) it were itself unthinkable; and for this reason Reformed Theology has ever resisted the Lutheran representation as though the sinner were merely “a stock or block.” If the “seed of religion” did not operate in the sinner, he would not be susceptible to special revelation.⁹⁸

Indeed, for Bavinck, the objective means of general revelation such as the sense of divinity or the seed of religion persist in sinners and they are foundations upon which special revelation is “embroidered.”⁹⁹

For Kuyper, special knowledge is, of course, a new and proper principium and it is different from general knowledge in quality. Nevertheless, special and general knowledge are one “in disposition of nature.”¹⁰⁰ He states that “You may not say, therefore: This is my natural revelation, in addition to which comes the special. For as a result, you obtain but one knowledge of God, the content of which has flowed to you from both sources, whose waters have mingled themselves.”¹⁰¹

According to Kuyper, the natural knowledge of God should be

⁹⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 307

⁹⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 376.

⁹⁹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 375.

¹⁰⁰ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 376.

¹⁰¹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 377.

enriched by the special knowledge in order to bring a satisfying result.¹⁰² Just as general revelation cannot be separated from special revelation, he asserts that special revelation does not exist apart from general revelation. Even though it undergoes a degenerate development, general revelation is still significant in that “the special revelation is embroidered on the canvas of his natural knowledge of God itself.”¹⁰³ Kuyper states that “It must be indicated that the natural principium lays the foundation of all knowledge, and that the special principium either fails of its purpose or must adapt itself entirely to the provisions that are original in the creation.”¹⁰⁴ General revelation should not be ignored even after the fall. General revelation became insufficient because of sin. However, it is temporarily insufficient.¹⁰⁵ In God’s fundamental plan, it will last permanently, whereas special revelation “falls away” as soon as its task is accomplished.¹⁰⁶ Kuyper insists that “the eternally enduring knowledge of God, possessed by the redeemed, shall not be after the nature of the special, but according to the nature of the natural principium.”¹⁰⁷ The natural knowledge of God alone would ultimately survive.¹⁰⁸ In short, Kuyper finds the continuing significance of general revelation in that it provides the foundation for special knowledge of God. Yet, other than this point, he does not specifically

¹⁰² Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 375-77.

¹⁰³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 375.

¹⁰⁴ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 378.

¹⁰⁵ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 370.

¹⁰⁶ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 369. For Kuyper, special revelation is also of temporary character and the role of special revelation is not to dismiss general revelation but to restore it. He explains this in detail by using the analogy of “throat and stomach,” and that of “scaffolding and gable.” Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 379.

¹⁰⁷ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 369.

¹⁰⁸ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 275.

discuss any further benefit of general revelation for human beings.

Unlike Kuyper, to my knowledge, Calvin does not explicitly mention the unitary relation between general and special revelations. Thus, he does not try to find a continuing significance of general revelation from the relation between the two revelations. Nevertheless, Calvin affirms ongoing values of general revelation in several respects. First of all, he insists that general revelation is significant in that the natural knowledge of the Creator through general revelation primarily results in inexcusability of sinners before God.¹⁰⁹ This point is found in many places of his writings. For example, when he deals with the *opera Dei*, Calvin states that “Therefore, we are justly denied every excuse when we stray off as wanderers and vagrants even though everything points out the right way.”¹¹⁰ His discussion of general revelation certainly shows that inexcusability is the primary importance of it.¹¹¹ Calvin addresses other significances of general revelation as well. He notes that, because of God’s general grace, the natural capacities remaining in the image of God make it possible to understand God’s truth in science, medicine, and the like.¹¹²

Furthermore, Calvin speaks of the importance of general revelation as a point of contact with non-believers.¹¹³ His teaching about a point of contact is clearly found in many contexts. For example,

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. iv. 1: 48.

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, I. v. 15: 69.

¹¹¹ Wilhelm, Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 49.

¹¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, II. ii. 13: 271-72

¹¹³ It is widely debated among scholars. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to deal with previous scholarly debates on it. Concerning this, see G. E. Breshears, *Faith and General Revelation in the Tradition and Theology of G. C. Berkouwer* (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984), 72-81.

in his exposition of Paul's speeches to the Gentiles in Acts 14, Calvin states as follows:

We know that in teaching the right order requires a beginning to be made from things that are better known. Since Paul and Barnabus were preaching to Gentiles, it would have been useless for them to attempt to bring them to Christ at once Therefore they had to begin from some other point, not so remote from common understanding, so that, when assent was given to that, they could then pass to Christ.¹¹⁴

Likewise, Calvin teaches that one cannot reach a true knowledge of God only from the testimonies of general revelation.¹¹⁵ However, he clearly argues that although it is seriously perverted and suppressed, one can use the natural knowledge of the Creator as an initial common ground for the preaching of the gospel.¹¹⁶

Calvin also speaks of the usefulness of natural knowledge as the so-called theistic proofs for Christians.¹¹⁷ The elements of the theistic proofs through general revelation are clearly presented throughout his works.¹¹⁸ For example, in his interpretation of Psalm 19, Calvin explains:

David shows how it is that the heavens proclaim the glory of God, namely, by bearing open testimony that they have not been put together by chance, but were wonderfully created by the supreme

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2, 10-11.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2, 13.

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, vol. 2, 13.

¹¹⁷ This was also deeply controversial issue among scholars. Concerning the debates, see Breshears, *Faith and General Revelation*, 82-89.

¹¹⁸ This is particularly case in the fifth chapter of the first book of Calvin's *Institutes*.

Architect... the beautiful arrangement and wonderful variety which distinguish the courses and station of the heavenly bodies, together with their beauty and splendor which are there manifest in them, cannot but furnish us with an evident proof of his providence.¹¹⁹

Calvin does not try to prove the existence of God apart from God's special revelation by means of reason.¹²⁰ As we have seen earlier, he repeatedly affirms that fallen humanity cannot attain true knowledge of God without the illumination of the Holy Spirit through special revelation. According to Calvin, the primary utility of the proofs is to "destroy the arrogance of the sinners who refuse to honor God who reveals himself as Creator to all humanity through general revelation."¹²¹ The theistic proofs through general revelation result in inexcusability for the sinner.

Bavinck also discusses ongoing benefits of general revelation even after the fall in many regards. In *Our Reasonable Faith*, Bavinck states that one should avoid not only the errors of overestimation of the value of general revelation but also underestimation of the value of it.¹²² Namely, general revelation must not be overvalued because it does not contain a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.¹²³ At the same time, it must not be underestimated because it is part of "God's continuing revelation in general."¹²⁴ On this basis, Bavinck divides the value of general revelation into two parts: the significance for

¹¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol.1, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Printing Company, 1845), 309.

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, II. i. 18; 208.

¹²¹ Breshears, *Faith and General Revelation*, 89.

¹²² Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 44.

¹²³ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 44.

¹²⁴ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 44.

the heathen world, and for Christianity.

Regarding the significance for non-believers, Bavinck first of all claims that even though they are severely perverted and darkened by the effects of sin, we can find much truth and wisdom in the heathen religions and philosophies.¹²⁵ He explains that since God continues to reveal himself to humanity through general revelation even after the fall, it is possible for them to have a great deal of truth and wisdom in them. If we do not acknowledge the significance of general revelation, we cannot explain the existence of these truths in the heathen religions and philosophies.¹²⁶ Thus, we should not undervalue the ongoing importance of general revelation. In order to prove this, Bavinck enumerates numerous biblical passages regarding an illumination of the Logos, a working of God's spirit behind the Heathen.¹²⁷

Bavinck also entirely agrees with Calvin's understanding of the primary utility of general revelation for fallen humanity. He insists that the result of general revelation is that fallen humanity was left without excuse before God. Concerning this, Bavinck states as follows:

The Holy Scripture teaches that God reveals himself certainly, consciously and intentionally in nature and history, in heart and conscience of man, and it adds that whenever man does not acknowledge or understand this revelation because of the

¹²⁵ Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 169.

¹²⁶ Concerning this truth in the heathen world, see Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 170-92; Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 45-55.

¹²⁷ Bavinck presents passages such as Gen.6:17; 7:15; Ps.33:6; 104:30; 139:2; Job 32:8; Eccl.3:19; Prov.8:22f; Mal. 1:11, 14; John 1:9; Rom.2:14; Gal.4:1-3; Acts 14:16, 17; 17:22-30. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 318.

darkening of his understanding, it therefore makes him without excuse.¹²⁸

Concerning the significance of general revelation for Christians, Bavinck discusses three points. First, he teaches that it serves as “a point of contact” for gospel.¹²⁹ Since the truth through general revelation provides common ground for all humans, Christians can meet all non-Christians on that foundation:

In general revelation he still has a point of contact (aanknoopingspunt) with all who bear the name man. As a classic propaedeutics lays a common basis among all men of science, so general revelation holds all men together despite differences in religion...general revelation prevents man from reducing himself to beast. It binds him to the transcendental world. It maintains in him the idea that he is created in God's image so that he finds not rest other than in God. Revelatio generalis keeps humanness in order that he may be found and restored by Christ.¹³⁰

Indeed, for Bavinck, general revelation functions as “a point of contact” by providing a vast common ground. Again, we see that Bavinck follows Calvin's line of thought.

Second, general revelation is still significant because it provides the basis of the theistic proofs. Here, Bavinck neither overvalues nor undervalues the value of the theistic proofs again.¹³¹ As with

¹²⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 319. Cf. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 59-60.

¹²⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 321-22.

¹³⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 321-22. Cf. Bavinck, *Calvin and Common Grace*, 103.

¹³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 76. Concerning his discussion of the theistic proofs, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 60-80; Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*,

Calvin, he insists that one cannot come to a true belief in God by means of such proofs. As opposed to the possibility of natural theology, Bavinck strongly claims that “the proofs, taken as real proofs, are not sources, but rather products of faith.”¹³² Thus, he states as follows:

Although the proofs may be insufficient to move someone to believe in the truth of Christianity, on the other hand belief in that truth would certainly have no right to exist if this revelation could be proved unhistorical. For faith is not only trust, it is also knowledge and assent and cannot live by cunningly devised fables.¹³³

Nevertheless, the testimonies of God's existence have significance for the Christian.¹³⁴ In particular, Christians can use these proofs as weapons to repel the inadequacy of other philosophies and religions:

Christian theologians have always made use of these proofs in order to silence opponents and clear a way for faith. They give the defenders of Christianity the weapons with which to repel all kinds of scientific attacks. These proofs enable them to skillfully defend themselves against criticism that subjects the object of their faith to science.¹³⁵

Third, general revelation is significant for the Christian in that it

40-42, and Herman Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980), 57-60.

¹³² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 90.

¹³³ Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*, 59.

¹³⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* II, 90-91; Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 41-42.

¹³⁵ Bavinck, *Certainty of Faith*, 58.

binds together “nature and grace,” and “creation and re-creation.”¹³⁶ By affirming general revelation, Bavinck argues that the religious life is not separated from the ordinary human life, the image of God does not become a *donum superadditum*, the supernatural is not foreign to human nature, grace does not stand hostile to nature, and Christianity retains its catholicity.¹³⁷

Meanwhile, in a similar vein to Kuyper, Bavinck also avoids the dualistic distinction between general and special revelations. And he emphasizes the organic unity between them. Bavinck argues that God’s self-revelation is “one single historical and organic whole.”¹³⁸ For him, general revelation and special revelation are, of course, essentially distinguished from each other. While all nature and human history disclose God as the Creator, a special revelation reveals God as the Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Unlike general revelation, special revelation is historical and progressive for centuries and reaches its climax in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God himself comes to earth to save us. And He communicates truth and doctrine to humanity through this revelation. These are unique characteristics of special revelation that distinguish itself from general one.¹³⁹ However, for Bavinck, general and special revelations are ultimately related and connected because the Creator and Redeemer are one.¹⁴⁰ This shows that Bavinck and Kuyper share a similar view concerning the organic unity between general and special revelations. In spite of the similarity, Bavinck does not seek

¹³⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 322.

¹³⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 322.

¹³⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 340.

¹³⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 342–46.

¹⁴⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* I, 342.

to find a value of general revelation from the relation between general and special ones. That is, he makes no mention of it.

In short, regarding the value of general revelation, Kuyper states that general revelation is significant in that the special revelation is “embroidered” on the foundation of his natural knowledge of God itself.¹⁴¹ In contrast, Calvin and Bavinck state more benefits such as theistic proofs and a point of contact which Kuyper does not mention in his work. This indicates that even though all three theologians essentially agree on the subject of general revelation, there is more positive attitude of general revelation in Calvin and Bavinck than in Kuyper.

IV. The Problem of the Previous Scholarship on the Theology of General Revelation in Calvin and Kuyper

It has been a generally held belief that Kuyper’s theology is posited squarely within the classic Reformed faith. However, in his *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues*, Bruce A. Demarest claims that Kuyper’s doctrine of general revelation is in more continuity with Barth than Calvin. He particularly argues that considering the issue of utility of general revelation and the knowability of God through general revelation reveals that Kuyper was closer to Barth than to Calvin.¹⁴²

However, Demarest’s argument is problematic in several points. First of all, unlike Barth, Kuyper does not utterly deny general

¹⁴¹ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 375.

¹⁴² Demarest, *General Revelation*, 141; 244.

revelation. Kuyper explicitly claims that God's revelatory activity through general revelation continues even after the fall. Second, Demarest argues that Kuyper and Barth share the same view in denying the usefulness of general revelation. Kuyper, however, does not completely deny the utility of general revelation. It is true that as Demarest points out, Kuyper does not mention the point of contact between fallen humanity and holy God through general revelation. Nevertheless, Kuyper affirms the ongoing significance of general revelation as the foundation of special revelation. Moreover, even though he does not clearly say that it has to do with a utility of general revelation, Kuyper, in a similar vein to Calvin, clearly states that natural knowledge of God only leaves human beings "without excuse" before God.¹⁴³ Third, Demarest insists that for both Kuyper and Barth, since the rational ability of human beings to know God was destroyed by sin, they could only know God through supernatural experience. Kuyper, however, insists that although they cannot reach a 'saving' knowledge of God only through general revelation, fallen human beings still can see and perceive some knowledge of God through general revelation. For instance, Kuyper clearly states that "Thanks to common grace ... knowledge of God is still possible" and "has been found in generous measures in the midst of paganism, in its mysteries as well as with its poets and philosophers."¹⁴⁴ In Kuyper's understanding, the problem is that human sinfulness distorts general knowledge of God into idolatry and false philosophy. And this is what Calvin exactly recognizes in his doctrine of general revelation as well.

¹⁴³ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 302.

¹⁴⁴ Kuyper, *Encyclopedia*, 302.

Overall, in addition to all these, Kuyper in fact expressed standard Reformed views on most of the key features of the classic Reformed view of general revelation. As we have already seen, contrary to Demarest, Kuyper is essentially in agreement with Calvin on the subject of general revelation.¹⁴⁵ It is erroneous to connect Kuyper with Barth because of the former's less positive stance on the usefulness of general revelation after Adam's fall. It is true that in comparison to Kuyper, Calvin formulates his ideas on the subject in more positive ways. However, considering the whole picture, this is only a small difference. Moreover, Kuyper's substantial disagreement with many aspects of Barth's doctrine of general revelation must be acknowledged. Consequently, Kuyper's theology of general revelation follows more closely that of Calvin's, more in continuity with the classic Reformed tradition than with the characteristics of Barth's.

V. Conclusion

Having examined general revelation in the theology of Kuyper in comparison with Calvin and Bavinck, we can conclude this study by reviewing similarities and differences among them. First of all, there are many lines of continuity between Calvin, Kuyper and Bavinck. All three men emphasize the objective reality of general revelation. They all believe that creation and history manifest numerous truths about the sovereign God. God is the subject, the

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Richard Muller, "General Revelation and Contemporary Issues by Bruce Demarest, A Review." *Reformed Journal* 33 (July, 1983), 31.

purpose and the content of general revelation. General revelation comes through certain means which mediate the revelation to human beings. Three theologians stress the *opera Dei* in creation and providence as a means of this revelation to reveal God's power and divinity. All agree on the reality of the *sensus divinitatis* as a means of general revelation, as well.

All three theologians insist that despite the objective sufficiency of general revelation, the effects of sin are so devastating that general revelation never produce any saving knowledge of God apart from regeneration through special revelation. The revelation of God's power and divinity becomes a revelation of wrath. Human reason is darkened by sin until the illumination of the Holy Spirit opens the eyes. In this sense, even though Calvin neither explicitly affirms nor denies it, Kuyper and Bavinck strongly deny any possibility of natural theology. Accordingly, all these continuities show that, contrary to Demarest's argument, Kuyper is clearly line with the classic Reformed tradition.

However, there are also the elements of differences between Calvin, Kuyper and Bavinck. For example, in the case of conscience, we find a difference among them. Whereas Calvin and Bavinck see conscience as a faculty within all persons that testifies to the part of God's law, particularly of the Second Table yielding another voice of the judgment of unrighteousness, Kuyper does not mention conscience a means of general revelation.

Another area of difference concerns the significance of general revelation. All three affirm the continuing significance of general revelation after the fall. However, unlike Kuyper, Calvin and Bavinck are more open to the benefits of general revelation such as theistic

proofs and a point of contact. This reveals that Calvin and Bavinck retain a more positive view of the knowledge of God through general revelation than Kuyper. In spite of these differences, however, it is certain that the similarities far outweigh the differences. Therefore, even though Kuyper has a different view from Calvin and Bavinck in some small respects, Kuyper still works as a Reformed theologian.

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[초록]

하나님을 어떻게 알 수 있는가? : 아브라함 카이퍼의 일반계시론에 대한 연구

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본 논문의 목적은 타락 후 일반계시의 중요성 및 불충분성에 대한 이해를 중심으로 아브라함 카이퍼(1837-1920)의 일반계시론에 대해 연구하는 것이다. 특별히 본 논문은 카이퍼의 일반계시론을 개혁주의 전통의 배경 속에서 이해하기 위해서 대표적인 개혁파 신학자인 존 칼빈(1509-1564)과 헤르만 바빙크(1854-1921)의 일반계시론과 비교하여 연구한다. 이러한 비교 연구는 다음과 같은 두 가지 결론을 보여준다. 첫째, 카이퍼, 칼빈, 바빙크는 타락 후에도 일반계시가 인간에게 여전히 주어지고, 이를 통해 불신자들도 어느 정도 하나님에 관한 지식을 얻을 수 있으며, 타락 이후에도 여전히 유용성이 있다고 주장한다. 하지만 이들 모두는 타락의 영향 때문에 특별계시를 통한 중생이 없는 인간이 일반계시를 통해 구원에 이르는 것은 불가능하다는 점에 모두 동의한다. 이러한 사상들은 카이퍼의 일반계시론은 칼빈이나 바빙크의 일반계시론과 본질적으로 일치함을 보여준다. 따라서 이전 학계의 평가와는 달리 카이퍼의 일반계시론은 칼 바르트(1886-1968) 보다는 역사적 개혁주의 전통과 연속선상에 있다. 둘째, 카이퍼, 칼빈, 바빙크는 일반계시론에 있어서 대체로 일치되는 견해를 보이지만 칼뱅과 바빙크는 카이퍼보다 일반계시에 대해 좀 더 긍정적인 입장을 취한다. 이러한 차이점은 타락 후에도 계속되는 일반계시의 중요성에 대한 논의에서 분명하게 확인된다. 하지만 이 세 신학자들의 비교연구는 이들의 일반계시론에서 발견되는 차이점이 크지 않고, 전체적으로 볼 때 카이퍼의 일반계시론이 전통적 개혁주의 신학의 입장을 충실하게 따르고 있음을 입증한다.

키워드: 카이퍼, 칼빈, 바빙크, 바르트, 일반계시, 하나님에 대한 지식