**Vox Theologiae**  
**Boldness and Humility in Public Theological Speech**

*James Eglinton*  
New College, University of Edinburgh  
*James.Eglinton@ed.ac.uk*

**Abstract**

This article explores the sense in which Christian theology should speak in a manner befitting its nature and content: namely, with humility and boldness in equipoise. The article uses the term *vox theologiae* (the voice of theology) to do so. The article builds on the works of Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth and various earlier theological approaches to virtue and aesthetics, in order to understand the particulars of theology's voice. As such, the article attempts to explain why theology gears its practitioner towards a form of public speech rooted in simultaneous daringness and modesty; in so doing, it enters public theology with a particular focus on the place of dogmatics (as a distinct theological discipline) in the public realm.

**Keywords**

voice – *vox theologiae* – Bavinck – Barth – virtue

**Introduction**

In this article I explore the sense in which Christian theology, as an intellectual discipline, should engage in public speech in a manner appropriate to its nature and content: namely, with humility and boldness in equal measure. As such, I characterize this theological speech under the term *vox theologiae* (the voice of theology); although my attempt to do so will draw primarily on sources that reflect my location within a particular Christian theological tradition, I do not attempt to limit this discussion to that particular tradition. Rather, I will move towards an account of theological speech relevant to what can broadly be called Christian theological discourse. This move towards speech relevant
to Christian theological discourse is grounded in the conviction that Christian theology, by virtue of its nature and content, inclines its exponents towards a form of speech that requires simultaneous daring and modesty. As such, this discourse is significant for public theology. By encouraging public theologians to think theologically about their task, I attempt to undergird their efforts somewhat.

Epistemic Humility and Christian Theology

Although it is no novel issue, the search for epistemic humility (the recognition that while one maintains propositions on the assertion that they are justified, one might also be wrong in so doing) nonetheless occupies a prominent place at the current intersection of debates on religion, politics and civil society. The live topics of social cohesion and integration, religious and confessional pluralism in the secular west and the sense in which the individual is permitted to maintain beliefs alongside the different beliefs of his/her fellow social actors, have seen older philosophical accounts of epistemic humility (Platonic, Socratic and Kantian) revisited with interest.¹ The spheres of Christian philosophy and theology have also been included in this conversation about social cohesion and pluralism. Interaction between the natural sciences and theology has led to the tentative suggestion that both share a basis in epistemic humility, albeit for different reasons.² By way of Christian (and particularly Reformed) philosophy, Alvin Plantinga, a defender of epistemic fallibilism, questions whether Christians need to display epistemic humility in response to religious pluralism.³ However, when noting the contributions of Plantinga in passing, it becomes apparent that his are statements made by a philosopher

---


speaking on theology. The question of what theologians have to say on epistemic humility is a separate and worthwhile issue.

In the theological context, the need for Christian theology to speak for itself in responding to the search for epistemic humility becomes pressing. The broader world of Christian theology, of course, is not without its own explorations in epistemic humility. Efforts have been made to correct the general impression that Christianity is an arrogant religion, for example, by the Roman Catholic theologian Catherine Cornille. At the outset it should be made clear that while I am a Protestant theologian writing within the Reformed tradition, I will, nonetheless, attempt to construe an account of theological boldness and humility in more broadly Christian terms; although this article contains Reformed nuances, the kind of theological speech advocated herein is, nonetheless, one to which all practitioners of (broadly defined) Christian theology should be disposed. In further distinction to Cornille, whose strivings are to rescue the Christian faith from the perception of arrogance, this article has a somewhat different focus: it calls Christian theologians to focus on the nature of Christian theology itself, and upon that basis, to consider the extent to which Christian theology should affect the practice thereof.

Theologians engaging in such debates in a secular, pluralistic western context, with its post-Rawlsian concerns regarding who may say what and how, have resources upon which to draw. The likes of Rowan Williams, Roger Trigg and Jonathan Chaplin contribute much in this regard. However, since I have written this article with a particular focus in mind, namely probing the place of dogmatics in the public domain, I have chosen my primary interlocutor from outside these ranks. I make use of a particular strain of Reformed theology, the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition, and within that, the work of the dogmatician Herman Bavinck. The Dutch neo-Calvinist movement’s roots are found in the life and thought of the anti-Revolutionary theologian-statesman Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876), though its doctrinal identity was firm up

---

5 Ibid., p. 12.
7 Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876) was a Dutch politician and historian who studied at Leiden University and, from 1829 until 1833, served as secretary to Willem I; following this he became a central figure in a movement against the influence of the French Revolution in Dutch life. In that context, his thought would go on to influence what would become
in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily through the contributions of its leading thinkers Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1954–1921). The factors behind my choice to draw on this tradition in particular should be made plain: neo-Calvinism is an historically significant test case within which one can observe the development of a theology of public hospitality towards differing Christian and non-Christian traditions; this point has been noted extensively in contemporary scholarship, by the likes of Chaplin, Harinck and van Keulen. Although it first appeared in a pre-Rawlsian world, neo-Calvinism was nonetheless a movement concerned with the creation of a pluralistic public domain. In addition to this concern, it is also representative of a theological tradition within which one can trace efforts to conform theological speech to theology’s own nature and content. Indeed, recent neo-Calvinist scholarship has continued to draw on its own resources whilst posing questions on the possibility of public theological discourse.

---

8 ‘neo-Calvinism’. Groen’s classic work Ongeloof en revolutie has been translated into English by Harry Van Dyke, Groen van Prinsterer’s Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution (Jordan Station: Wedge, 1989). See also, George Harinck and Jan de Bruijn, eds, Groen van Prinsterer in Europese Context (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2004).


This discourse remains a live issue within neo-Calvinist scholarship, and as such, it seems premature to view Bavinck’s contribution as already outmoded. As will be seen, the factors drawn on by Herman Bavinck in exploring the theological nature of public theological speech are by no means unique to his neo-Calvinist, Reformed tradition; rather, they are richly Catholic Christian resources that show promise in helping Christian theologians in general to think constructively on how their discipline ought to inform their practice of it. In Bavinck’s work, an effort to align the practice of theology with a concept of Christian epistemic humility (and concurrent boldness) can be observed, and as such, he merits inclusion in this discussion. As will be seen, Bavinck had much to say on public theological speech.

**Finding the *Vox Theologiae* in the Christian-Aristotelian and Neo-Calvinist Traditions**

My formulation of an account of Christian epistemic theological humility begins by posing two rudimentary questions: in the first place, conceived in broad terms, what Christian theology is; following this, asking if Christian theology itself can make its practitioner humble. In attempting to shed light on questions of how the nature of theology affects the practice of theology as a discipline, I will draw in particular upon the relationship of form to content as found in Bavinck’s writings. As will be seen, Bavinck’s handling of this relationship evinces a carefully worked out system of aesthetic values, regarding as beautiful an aesthetic that faithfully gives form to its content.

Such a notion, of course, is not novel to neo-Calvinism; rather, it is commonplace in the Christian-Aristotelian tradition. However, Bavinck provides an interesting example of how this paradigm might be applied to theology itself as a discipline. In that context, Bavinck’s work is significant in terms of the development of a theological account of theological speech. In short, his application of this aesthetic axiom to the discipline of theology itself suggests that theology, in its content and subsequently in its aesthetic form, is predisposed to speaking with boldness and humility in equal measure.

To begin with how Bavinck understands the older Christian-Aristotelian relationship of form to content, one turns to his lesser-known publication,

---

'Of Beauty and Aesthetics'. Although this work is not generally regarded as one of Bavinck’s most important essays (the original version, ‘Van schoonheid en schoonheidsleer’ was prepared for the 1914 student almanac at the Vrije Universiteit and was only published posthumously), it has, nonetheless, received attention from scholars of theological aesthetics. Covolo, for example, argues that Bavinck’s aesthetic values went on to influence the likes of Hans Rookmaker, Calvin Seerveld and Nicholas Wolterstorff.\(^1\)\(^3\)

In ‘Of Beauty and Aesthetics,’ Bavinck’s basic assertion on this pattern is the ideal that form must take its lead from content. In the case of beauty and truth, beauty loses its attractiveness when its connection to truth is severed:\(^1\)\(^4\)

Because beauty is such a rich, divine gift, it also must be loved by us. It does not, however, have the same compelling force for us as the true and the good. Because beauty does not have its own content, and because it deals with appearance and observation, it is tied more closely to the luxury of life than the true and the good.\(^1\)\(^5\)

Although Bavinck was critical of various aesthetic trends, he did not merely dismiss the notion of aesthetics. Indeed, his handling of this topic ends with a gentle reaction to the charge that (Dutch) Calvinism had historically undervalued aesthetic categories:

[Aesthetic] education especially deserves our support. Whatever virtues our people may have, we lack the grace of the French and the

---


well-mannered behaviour of the English. Our country is often characterized on the one hand by coarseness that mocks all dignity, and on the other hand by a stiffness that is without any charm. We will not judge here whether Calvinism is to blame for that and has ruined our national song and art and left behind (as is sometimes and still recently declared) ‘a totally uncouth people’. In any case, such a serious accusation must goad us to deny that with our deeds. Along with truth and goodness, beauty also needs to be honoured.16

Bavinck’s thought, it seems, is characterized not by the wilful neglect of form, but rather by its relocation as a consequence of content, and in light of this restored order, by its high view of aesthetics. In this regard, Bavinck is interesting as a theologian in the Reformed tradition writing proactively and positively in favour of aesthetics.

In ‘Of Beauty and Aesthetics,’ Bavinck is dealing with conventional visual aesthetic subjects: art, cultural objects and so on. However, the direction I am taking in this article is to probe the sense in which this form-content relation might be applied to theology as an intellectual discipline. Theology also has a certain nature and distinctive content: it should be asked if it must also take a corresponding form, and if so, what kind of aesthetic category would be most appropriate to the practice of Christian theology. Finally, it should be asked, how one gives form to the nature and content of theology.

The working hypothesis I am applying in this article is that the relationship between form and content is promising in terms of its application to the content and form of Christian theology as a discipline. In that sense one is discussing Christian theology’s distinctive aesthetic, which, according to the aforementioned tradition, must also be informed by its own content and nature. As will be seen, the direction I take herein is that of the aesthetic expression of theology via the category of voice. Accordingly, the thrust of this

article can be summarized in the question of how Christian theology should sound, bearing in mind what it has to say.

In attempting to use Bavinck to answer these questions, it is, of course, necessary to note that although he appropriates an earlier Christian-Aristotelian set of aesthetic values, and that he elsewhere speaks of theology as requiring a particular voice, he does not explicitly draw these concepts together in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. That is not to say, however, that the values Bavinck writes of have no relevance to each other, or that his lesser works say nothing on this topic. Indeed, in his 1901 publication *De Welsprekendheid* (‘Eloquence’), a booklet directed at preachers, Bavinck makes a clear distinction between ‘what one says and how one says it’, and in this regard calls for harmony between the tone and content of pulpit speech:

There should be one such intimate harmony between the content of the speech and its presentation. There must be harmony between body and soul, speech and voice, word and gesture, *between what one says and how one says it*. And what we say, we must say with all of our souls, and with all of our bodies and all of our strength. Everything must speak to us, from us, within us. The tone of voice, the posture of the body, the movement of the hand, the eye’s gaze, each has its own expression and power. Eloquence is produced by the whole person.17

In working constructively with Bavinck’s thought, it becomes clear that his desire to speak theologically in a manner appropriate to Christian theology itself bears a strong resemblance to his more general (visual) aesthetic concerns. In addition, it reflects his belief that the preacher of the gospel should use a vocal aesthetic harmonious with their gospel content.

One can trace a subtle degree of overlap between the notions of theology’s content and voice in a statement made in the *Reformed Dogmatics* on the importance and difficulty of bringing divine self-revelation and the church’s confession into appropriate correspondence: ‘Now one of the greatest difficulties

inherent in the dogmatician’s task lies in determining the relation between divine truth and the church’s confession. No one claims that content and expression, essence and form, are in complete correspondence and coincide.\textsuperscript{18} That Bavinck is willing to invoke the categories of content and expression, and essence and form, in describing this theological task encourages the reader to work constructively in order to understand the sense in which the theological enterprise itself requires a suitable aesthetic.

In formulating such an aesthetic along broadly Christian lines, one notes that Christian theology (in its western guise, at least) is heavily dependent on words and concepts. As such Bavinck, also not uniquely, as will be seen, seems to locate its aesthetic category under the heading of voice.\textsuperscript{19} In observing that Bavinck writes within the context of a specifically Reformed theological tradition, of course, such a primary categorization hardly seems surprising; in said tradition, form is given to theological content in primarily aural and textual, rather than visual, media. In the Heidelberg Catechism, to which Bavinck subscribed, an aversion to the articulation of theological truth in visual, rather than aural-textual, forms, is explicit: ‘Q. But may not images be permitted in churches in place of books for the unlearned? A. No, we should not try to be wiser than God. God wants the Christian community instructed by the living preaching of his Word, not by idols that cannot even talk.’\textsuperscript{20}

The Heidelberg Catechism tradition’s eschewal of visual aesthetic categories for theological concepts no doubt informs Bavinck’s articulation of theological aesthetics (exclusively) via the category of voice. However, that fact does not remove the need for other theological traditions with less aversion to visual theological aesthetics to consider how their theological speech should be informed by theology’s nature. As such, Bavinck’s preference for aural theological aesthetics need not end his contribution to a broader discussion on an aesthetic for theology itself: his contribution remains relevant to those who consider the vocal aspect to be an important factor in theology’s own aesthetic, albeit not to the exclusion of other factors; theirs nonetheless remain traditions marked by homiletics, catechesis and creedal declaration. Voice is a central category in their conception of the theological enterprise. In following the lead of its content, Bavinck understands, theology takes form by speaking

\textsuperscript{18} Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena}, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., pp. 45–6.
\textsuperscript{20} Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 98.
in a particular tone of voice. What theologians say, and how they say it, are crucially important factors as they seek to communicate the content of theology.\textsuperscript{21}

As will be seen, such a concept of theology’s aesthetic as voice is marked by simultaneous emphases on boldness and humility. As those called to appropriate God’s self-revelation, Christian theologians are to speak with boldness and authority. In speaking as theologians, they appeal directly to Deus dixit.\textsuperscript{22} However, as those who present their appropriation of this revelation (rather than the revelation itself), Christian theologians must also speak with humility in recognizing that they present their own appropriation of this revelation, rather than the revelation itself.

A concatenation exists between these factors: boldness without humility soon collapses into arrogance, whereas humility without boldness quickly takes its place on a spectrum of relativism, indifference and unbelief. While this formulation is not expressly articulated in Bavinck’s handling of theology’s voice, his explanation of how to avoid bringing boldness and humility into conflict nonetheless suggests that one move in such a direction. In the context of the relationship between boldness and humility, Bavinck affirms that theologians must learn ‘bravely and boldly’ to ‘avow the authority principle, and speak in an absolute tone of voice’.\textsuperscript{23} According to Bavinck, the necessity of maintaining the correct relationship between boldness and humility, here understood as a concatenation, must immediately be given a twofold qualification. First, an absolute tone of voice must be ‘solely derived from the content of the revelation that it is the dogmatician’s aim to interpret’.\textsuperscript{24} Secondly, this tone may be ‘struck only insofar as [the dogmatician] explicates this content’.\textsuperscript{25} Should these qualifications fail to be met, bold theological speech soon comes ‘into conflict with the demands of modesty’.\textsuperscript{26} That boldness and humility can

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{21} It should be noted that Bavinck understands the various sub-disciplines under the umbrella of ‘theology’ to find their united articulation in the science of dogmatics. Accordingly, in this article I use the terms ‘theology’ and ‘dogmatics’ interchangeably, whilst following Bavinck on dogmatics as speaking for these sub-disciplines.

\textsuperscript{22} Bavinck’s use of the expression Deus dixit is taken from the original Dutch text, rendered ‘God has said’ in the English translation. See Herman Bavinck, 
\textit{Gereformeerde Dogmatiek} 4\textsuperscript{e} druk, 1\textsuperscript{e} deel (Kampen: Kok, 1928), p. 22. Although the Deus dixit axiom is closely associated with the writings of Karl Barth, it should be acknowledged that Barth borrowed this emphasis from Bavinck (see Karl Barth, ‘Gesamtausgabe,’ 

\textsuperscript{23} Bavinck, 
\textit{Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena}, p. 46.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
only be understood (and can only exist) in relation to each other is further suggested by Bavinck. ‘For both the absolute tone of voice and the modesty find their unity in the faith that must guide and animate the dogmatician from beginning to end in all his labour’.27

It seems fair to say that within such a system, a disunited approach to boldness and modesty will fail to produce either. The respective existences of boldness and modesty are co-dependent and as such, it makes sense to account for them organically; an atomistic approach to either boldness or humility risks failing to understand the true nature of either factor. Such an approach to intellectual, epistemic virtues like boldness and humility (within the context of Christian theological speech) is not unique to Herman Bavinck or the broader neo-Calvinist tradition. Rather, Bavinck represents the classical position rooted in Gal. 5:22–23 and 1 Cor. 13:13, and later represented by Augustine and Aquinas, that virtues cannot exist atomistically: in order to possess a single virtue, one must possess the virtues in their entirety.28 Viewed against this backdrop, and that within an effort to encourage virtuous (and distinctively Christian) theological speech, it hardly seems surprising that the virtues of boldness and modesty would need to be pursued concurrently. In addition to this, the hypothesis that theology itself disposes its practitioner to theological speech marked by daringness and modesty in equipoise begins to appear particularly promising.

In developing a case for such a form of theological speech, it is worthwhile to note that neither arrogant nor indifferent speech is appropriate to the content of Christian theology: the former highlights the theologian as overstepping her/his authority; the latter, as speaking as though God has not. As such, exercising the vox theologiae is a process of learning to speak with simultaneous boldness and humility.

Bavinck is aware that maintaining this tension, a tension which stems from the relationship of the church’s fallible theological efforts to infallible divine truth, is no easy task. Bavinck writes that Roman Catholicism, with its category of papal infallibility, makes this balance even harder to maintain. His critique of Protestant theology in relation to this, however, argues that it is generally better placed to account for its flaws modestly. Central to Protestantism’s reader place to speak with boldness and humility, for Bavinck, are its lack of claims towards infallible speech at particular points in ecclesiastical hierarchy.

27 Ibid.
and its elevation of Scripture to make a (more obvious) contrast between the authority of Scripture and the church’s tradition. Accordingly, he believes, Protestantism has an easier time of asking whether Scripture is well appropriated in the church’s theological strivings: ‘On the basis of Protestant assumptions . . . this is much more the case [the question of ‘how far the truth of God has found fully adequate expression in the church’s dogma’], for here the guidance of the Holy Spirit promised to the church does not exclude the possibility of human error’.29

In addition to this assertion, Bavinck also acknowledges that Roman Catholicism does not go so far as to confuse its theological endeavours with divine truth.

The dogma that the church confesses and the dogmatician develops is not identical with the absolute truth of God itself; not even the Roman Catholic Church dares to make that claim. For though the Catholic Church confesses the infallibility of the pope, it makes an essential distinction between papal infallibility and apostolic inspiration; it stands by the matters themselves but not the exact words and, therefore, does not literally elevate dogma to the level of the word of God.30

The Concept of Theology’s Voice

In this article I began by probing the nature of theology itself. In that light, I asked what theology is, and whether its nature equips the theological practitioner for humility. This approach was also central to Bavinck’s insistence that theology must be both bold and modest. Such a conclusion begins with the following rudimentary description of theology: ‘[R]eligious or theological dogma is always a combination of two elements: divine authority and churchly confession’.31

The aesthetic of theology, namely its voice, takes shape between the anchor points of God’s authority and the church’s role in appropriating what God sovereignly reveals of God. In relation to this aesthetic, Bavinck’s fleeting references to a theological voice operate around two central axioms: first, theology

29 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena, p. 32.
31 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena, p. 31.
is the church’s account of divine revelation; secondly, theology is not itself that revelation.

_Theology is the Church’s Account of Divine Revelation_

That theology is the fruit of the church’s ruminations upon God’s self-disclosure is the grounds for its capacity for authoritative speech. Prior to this, however, it should also be noted that its origin in divine revelation is also the basis for its coherent and collective speech. Bavinck writes, ‘[T]he imperative task of the dogmatician is to think God’s thoughts after him and to trace their unity’.\(^{32}\) The theological endeavour presupposes that within the Triune Godhead there exists a perfect, interpenetrating coherence: in addition to the unity of essence and glory, there is a unity of thought and purpose. This much seems evident to Bavinck: immediately preceding the aforementioned statement, he writes, ‘God’s thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily form an organic unity’.\(^{33}\)

In using this basis, outlined by Bavinck, to develop the _vox theologiae_ concept, it seems clear that such a _vox_ should speak with a consistency and symmetry befitting the organic unity of the Triune God’s self-revelation. In working constructively with this aspect of Bavinck’s thought, it becomes evident that the pursuit of clarity in knowing takes on a peculiar importance. If the _vox theologiae_ speaks on the basis of _Deus dixit_, which itself is grounded upon the idea of the divine unity, its special duty is to speak clearly.\(^{34}\)

The factor of this voice as collective or churchly is closely related to that of its coherence. Although the individual is called to be a theologian, no individual can claim to be the sole mouthpiece of the _vox theologiae_. Rather, the individual is a participant in a far wider, older theological tradition. Thus the _vox theologiae_ must also be a churchly voice: it speaks coherently to and for, and is spoken by, a great cloud of witnesses. Indeed, this aspect of theology’s voice is seen in Bavinck’s own dogmatic work; its subtle structural dependence on the Apostles’ Creed and overt affiliation to the Reformed tradition suggest something of a Reformed Catholic spirit.\(^{35}\)

---

32 Ibid., p. 44.
33 Ibid.
34 ‘That such a unity exists in the knowledge of God contained in revelation is not open to doubt; to refuse to acknowledge it would be to fall into scepticism, into a denial of the unity of God’ (ibid., pp. 44–45).
A similar emphasis on the voice of theology as having an essential churchly character is found in the writings of Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* 1.2 (‘The Doctrine of the Word of God’). There, although Barth is not discussing an aesthetic for theology itself, he nonetheless links the concept of theological speech to that of an appropriate tone of (theological) voice; in that context he dwells on the basis for authoritative speech by the church teacher. Like Bavinck, Barth subjects this firm tone of voice with a twofold limitation: first, it is contingent on the speaker’s closeness to *Deus dixit*; secondly, it depends on the speaker’s voice as resonating with that of the church. He states: ‘[W]e have also not to listen to [the theologian] at those points, that is, where everything considered we do not find that his voice agrees with the voice of Scripture and the voice of the Church speaking independently in the Confession’.

The *vox theologiae*’s coherence is safeguarded by its collective, churchly nature (though Bavinck admits that even this safeguard is not fool proof). Bavinck insists:

Naturally, in this reproduction of the content of revelation, a danger exists on many levels of making mistakes and falling into error… The confession of the church and in even greater measure the dogmatics of an individual person, is fallible, subject to Scripture, and never to be put on a level with it. It does not coincide with the truth but is a human, hence a fallible, transcript of the truth laid down in Scripture.

Highly significant is that when Bavinck goes on to assert that the dogmatician ‘can and may… to some extent speak in an absolute tone of voice’, he first chooses to accent that the theologian’s propensity to err ‘should predispose [him/her], like every practitioner of science, to modesty’, and immediately afterwards cautions against arrogance by reminding the theologian that s/he may only so speak on the basis of ‘God has spoken’. In so framing the concept of theology’s ‘absolute tone of voice’, Bavinck carefully introduces this aspect of the theological voice to the theologian. Christian theologians are entitled to speak with the greatest of boldness; indeed, they must speak in this manner in order to be true to the subject and object of revelation. To declare the virgin

---

36 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 167. In this context, Barth’s distinction between the *voice* and *voices* of the church is helpful (see ibid., p. 46).
birth and resurrection of Christ as realities in history presupposes this boldness induced by divine authority.\textsuperscript{40}

However, Bavinck barely introduces the reader to the power of bold speech before cautioning against its improper usage. He contends:

\begin{quote}
[Dogmatics] must again become a normative science, bravely and boldly avow the authority principle and speak in an absolute tone of voice. Provided this tone of voice is solely derived from the content of the revelation that it is the dogmatician’s aim to interpret and is struck only insofar as he explicates this content, it is not in conflict with the demands of modesty. For both the absolute tone of voice and the modesty find their unity in the faith that must guide and animate the dogmatician from beginning to end in all his labour.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Although both Bavinck and Barth stress the churchly nature of the voice of theology, an interesting and significant point of divergence is also apparent in this context. While Bavinck admits that great authoritative speech is possible for this churchly voice, he dwells on this possibility for but the briefest of moments before immediately cautioning against its improper usage. He is reticent to dwell on the church’s power to assert its authority in speech. Barth’s account of the churchly \textit{vox} includes a similar recognition that the absolute tone of voice might be misused when speaking in error, but his insistence that one must always listen for the voice of Christ in the voice of the church serves as a useful corrective to what is perhaps an imbalance in Bavinck’s overly modest account of the voice’s boldness:

\begin{quote}
[I]n what I hear as the confession of the Church, I will certainly have to reckon with the possibility of falsehood and error. I cannot safely hear the voice of the Church without also hearing the infallible Word of God Himself. Yet this thought will not be my first thought about the Church and its confession, but a necessarily inserted corrective.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

At this point, one can summarize the consequences of theology’s nature as the churchly appropriation of divine revelation: first it requires theology, on certain topics and in a careful manner, to speak with an absolute tone of voice; secondly, it limits this tone of voice to speech that utterly eschews speculation;

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 46 (my italics).
\textsuperscript{42} Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics 1.2, The Doctrine of the Word of God}, p. 138.
\end{flushright}
thirdly, it is only rendered possible by constant recourse to _Deus dixit_; fourthly, its boldness is vitally linked to its role within the life of the church.\footnote{In relation to this, Bavinck is highly critical of those who ‘establish their own dogma’ with ‘the help of a little psychology and some philosophy of religion’. As they do not submit to participation in the fellowship of the church, Bavinck judges their contributions to be of little value (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, p. 46).}

**Theology is Not Itself that Divine Revelation**

As theology is not itself divine self-revelation, its boldness must also be accompanied by humility: this factor is also a product of theology’s nature; it is accounted for by Christian theology’s doctrines of the divine perfections, God’s practice of self-revelation and the reality of human fallenness.

It should be acknowledged that Bavinck does not judge the need for modesty as unique to his Reformed tradition, or even as exclusively pertaining to Christian theology more broadly. Rather, in espousing the kind of scientific humility that would later be popularized by Karl Popper, Bavinck regards those who practice all scientific disciplines as in need of a humble approach to their assertions: that one uses empirical methodology does not guarantee that one’s results will always be flawless, nor does the arrival at a theory today mean that this theory will never be falsified or improved upon.

In calling for ‘a fundamental revision of the present-day concept of science’,\footnote{Ibid., p. 37.} Bavinck is, of course, looking for the inclusion of dogmatics amongst the acknowledged scientific disciplines.\footnote{See also Herman Bavinck, ‘Wat in wetenschap en religie onder zekerheid is te verstaan’, in Herman Bavinck, *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (Kampen: Kok, 1918), pp. 10–32.} (The background to this call for revision lies in the Higher Education Act (1876), a piece of legislation that pushed theology further from the academic sciences).\footnote{See James Eglinton and Michael Bräutigam, ‘Scientific Theology? Herman Bavinck and Adolf Schlatter on the Place of Theology in the University’, *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 7 (2013), 38–49.} In addition to this, Bavinck is also reminding the other scientific disciplines, as he reminds his own, to consider their frailty and capacity for error.

**The Relationship of Boldness and Modesty**

The question thus arises as to how boldness and humility co-exist in theological speech, particularly in Bavinck’s thought as the focus of this case study. At this point, I recognize that Bavinck offers no clear formula to explain the relationship of these factors in the practice of theology. However, as has already been argued, one can go some way to constructing a model for their relationship
through his reliance on an earlier Christian-Aristotelian tradition concerning form and content, his place within a pre-existing Augustinan-Thomistic tradition regarding the holistic nature of virtues, and his cautions against the improper use of bold and humble speech.

In using his twin emphases on the voice of theology as both absolute and modest in tone, various avenues can be explored regarding the relationship of these factors. A close reading of Bavinck demonstrates a certain reticence to define precisely how this balance works. Perhaps intentionally, he speaks the language of ‘boldness to a certain extent’ (*tot zekere hoogte*). However, it does not seem unreasonable to probe the sense in which the ideal of balanced boldness and humility is found in theological speech. After all, Bavinck is comfortable to write of these two finding ‘unity in the faith that guides the dogmatician’: one must wonder in what sense boldness and humility form a unity.

First, one must consider whether there is a sense in which the boldness-modesty pairing is applicable to the loci of theology upon which Scripture speaks with a considerable difference in clarity. In acknowledging the idea that some parts of Scripture are more perspicuous than others, of course, one introduces nothing new to the Reformed tradition (or indeed, to a number of other Christian theological traditions); rather, this assertion is central to the doctrine of Scripture found, for example, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which states:

> All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

In this context, for example, it seems responsible to infer that Christian theologians should speak with great boldness on the lordship and divinity of Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9–13), whereas they should speak with a more obvious modesty when discussing the identity of the Nephilim (Gen. 6:4); in that sense, the notion of a hierarchy of truths is also no novel introduction in the Christian

---

47 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* 1e deel, 4e druk (Kampen: Kok, 1928), p. 22.
theological tradition. Article eleven of the *Unitatis Redintegratio* acknowledges the place of such a hierarchy in Roman Catholic theology.\textsuperscript{50} The rudimentary principle of a hierarchy of truths is also suggested in Calvin’s *Institutes*.\textsuperscript{51}

However, the task of ascertaining which truths should occupy the highest places in any such hierarchy, and of discerning the extent to which groups of theologians (as social actors) in particular contexts will assent to such an organization of truths, is highly problematic. Calvin, focusing briefly on interactions with such a hierarchy solely within the Reformed tradition, does not develop this idea fully, although the core of such a principle is found in his *Institutes*. Calvin begins with the true doctrine of (the Triune) God, following which the true doctrine of how this God is known (the gospel) is listed. However, Calvin fails to provide any list of prioritized truths to follow these points.\textsuperscript{52} The contemporary Scottish Reformed theologian Donald Macleod goes some way in demonstrating the problematic nature of constructing a hierarchy of truths.\textsuperscript{53} The objections presented to early Protestant supporters of such a hierarchical principle by Roman Catholic theologians, as recounted by Bavinck, perhaps typify the problems faced by such an approach:

> They asked them where in his Word God had made a distinction between essential and secondary truths, where they got the right to distinguish in divine revelation between the fundamental and the non-fundamental. Which truths, then, had to be counted in the category of fundamental truths? Who had to decide?\textsuperscript{54}

An alternative Reformed position is found in the strain of twentieth century Dutch neo-Calvinism influenced by Klaas Schilder (1890–1952). Schilder maintained that Scripture speaks with equal clarity on all points, and that as such, all theological points are of equal significance:


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. In context, this is perhaps linked to Calvin’s attempts to unite, rather than accentuate differences between, fledgling Protestant theologies.

\textsuperscript{53} Donald Macleod, *Priorities for the Church* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2003), pp. 100–16.

The distinction between central truths and the less important, is foolish, unscientific, dated and misleading, because the truth is one garment woven from a single material. One truth is inseparably bound to the other. Whoever lets go of one dogma moves and dislocates everything, and soon comes to a wholly new structure of doctrine.\textsuperscript{55}

A similar approach to Scripture is also found in much pre-Second Vatican Council Roman Catholic theology:\textsuperscript{56} According to the Jesuits at the Regensburg conference on religion (1601), it was also an article of faith “that the dog of Tobias wagged his tail”.\textsuperscript{57}

It should be acknowledged that here, one is discussing two separate topics: the concept of essential and non-essential theological knowledge; and the question of whether such essential truths necessitate a bolder tone of theological voice. Although these are different debates, they are nonetheless closely related and as such, are of consequence to one another: the notion that one particular theological truth is non-fundamental raises questions on the force with which that doctrine is asserted. The former distinction is highly relevant to the latter discussion on the character of theological speech.

The notion that Scripture speaks throughout with equal clarity, and that as such, every loci of doctrine requires equally authoritative, bold proclamation sits ill at ease with the principle of Scripture’s interpretation of itself (\textit{sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres}).\textsuperscript{58} In order for Scripture to interpret itself, it seems necessary that it, at various points, should speak with a heightened degree of perspicuity. Initially, at least, such an admission appears to prompt one towards the hierarchy of truths notion, as a means of dealing with the seeming divergence of authority with which Scripture would have the theologian

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{55} Dutch original: ‘[D]e onderscheiding zelf van hoofdwaarheden en minder belangrijke, is dwaas, onwetenschappelijk, vervlakkend en misleidend. \textit{Want de waarheid is een kleed, dat uit één stuk geweven is}. De ééne waarheid hangt met de andere onlosmakelijk saam. Wie één dogma loslaat, verwirkt en ontwricht álles en komt straks tot een geheel nieuw “leer-gebouw”’ (Klaas Schilder, ‘Ons Arseenaal’, in Klaas Schilder, \textit{Christelijke Brochurenreeks}, 1\textsuperscript{e} Serie No. 3 en 4 (Zutphen: J.B. van den Brink & Co., 1918), pp. 25–6). For a more recent example of work engaging with this tradition, see Barend Kamphuis, \textit{Klare Taal: De Duidelijkheid van de Schrijft} (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1988).


speak of diverse topics. However, as has been noted above, the practical difficulties of devising and using such a hierarchy are considerable. Perhaps more fundamentally, though, it appears that Bavinck approached the acceptance of particular truths as being of greater and lesser importance (in affirming the categories ‘fundamental’ and ‘non-fundamental’), whilst refraining from the construction of a hierarchy of truths.

In this regard, Berkouwer’s reading of Bavinck is helpful in emphasizing that he sees the person of Christ as truth (with Jesus Christ, accordingly, as the centre of all truth), and the New Testament confession of truth as a confession of Jesus Christ.\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena}, 614; see Berkouwer, \textit{The Church}, p. 283.} Although Bavinck regards the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental truths as significant,\footnote{Herman Bavinck, \textit{De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk: Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 Dec. 1888} (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1888), p. 26.} he distances himself from the notion of a hierarchy of truths on the grounds that it makes faith into:

[Assent] to an assortment of revealed truths, which can be counted, article by article, and which in the course of time increased in number. Faith on the side of the Reformation, however, is special (\textit{fides specialis}) with a particular central object: the grace of God in Christ. Here an arithmetic addition of articles, the knowledge of which and the assent to which is necessary for salvation, was no longer an option. Faith is a personal relation to Christ; it is organic and has put aside quantitative addition \ldots faith is trust in the grace of God and is no longer calculable.\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena}, p. 614.}

Against that backdrop, Berkouwer’s categorization of central and peripheral truths stands out as a promising manner of affirming that Scripture speaks with greater clarity on some points, whilst maintaining Bavinck’s Christocentrism and avoiding the problems generated by a hierarchy of truths.\footnote{Berkouwer, \textit{The Church}, p. 283.}

The application of the \textit{vox theologiae}’s boldness-humility pairing through the lens of a hierarchy of truths principle (whereby, for example, the theologian invokes a bold tone of voice for truths occupying a high place in the hierarchy, whilst speaking meekly of lower ranking truths) also raises the significant theological problem of handling individual virtues atomistically. Stated briefly: if one cannot be bold without also being humble, one cannot conceptualize ongoing bold theological speech on a particular doctrinal locus without an equal, ongoing emphasis on the humility with which said topic

\footnotesize

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{59} Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena}, 614; see Berkouwer, \textit{The Church}, p. 283.
  \item \textsuperscript{61} Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena}, p. 614.
  \item \textsuperscript{62} Berkouwer, \textit{The Church}, p. 283.
\end{itemize}
should also be discussed. If boldness without humility becomes arrogance, and humility without boldness becomes relativism or unbelief, one must ask how the individual allocation of these virtues to particular doctrinal topics (based on their ranking in a hierarchy of truths) has any power to maintain the integrity of these virtues. Indeed, affirming that particular doctrines, by virtue of their place on such a hierarchy, require bold, rather than humble speech (and vice versa) sits awkwardly alongside the handling of virtue found in Paul, Augustine, Thomas and Bavinck. Such an approach would require a significantly altered, non-concatenous understanding of virtue quite out of sync with the aforementioned theological enterprise.

Secondly, then, an alternative approach to the conformity of theological speech to Christian theology’s character is suggested. Rather than pitting the virtues of boldness and humility against each other in relation to the hierarchy of truths notion, I instead argue that Christian theologians are required to speak with a deliberate and simultaneous boldness and humility in all theological speech.

In asserting that God, who is one, is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the theologian speaks with tremendous boldness in taking the divine name upon his/her lips, and in declaring this divine existence to the world. Yet, in order that the theologian declare the Trinity in anything other than a spirit of self-abasement, worship, humility and modesty, when speaking with boldness of that which one does not fully understand, and of a glory one cannot contain, one’s boldness must be matched by one’s humility. The act of standing on holy ground is an exercise in maintaining daringness and modesty in equipoise. As such, the fullest application of the understanding that boldness and humility must exist in a concatenation is to maintain that essential, close relationship and apply both to the same doctrinal, dogmatic loci at the same time. Public theological speech’s challenge must be to follow suit.

The Vox Theologiae and Public Theology

The concept of a distinctive vox theologiae is not without consequence for discussions on public theology; its particular relevance is to public practitioners of systematic (or dogmatic) theology. According to Welker, theology, in its academic and ecclesial forms, is prone to naivety in assuming that there is only ‘one public’, rather than perceiving multiple ‘publics’;63 this is likely true. Practitioners of Christian theology must strive for greater nuance in

---

63 Welker, ‘Is Theology in Public Discourse Possible outside Communities of Faith?’, p. 120. For multiple publics, see David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and
understanding the ‘public’; in tandem with this, they must also work towards a more theological practice of speech in those publics. As such, the challenge presented by a *vox theologiae* project to those who speak about theology as theologians in the public domain is that they must think and act theologically as they go about their task.

Consideration of theology’s voice in relation to public theology is not entirely virgin territory; Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero, for example, explores the kind of voice that should be sounded by theologians as public intellectuals. Zabatiero’s account of public theological speech could perhaps be characterized as theological speech ‘from below’; for that reason, it is of interest to this project. He writes: ‘We cannot assume a non-existent epistemological privilege of revelation; we do not look at life from the place of God, yet we speak from the word of God, but the “word” in human form, fragile, incarnate and plural’. As a consequence, theologians, ‘as public intellectuals, are voices in tune with the cries of the people; their voices are organically linked to the cry of the excluded, the citizens whose rights are denied and/or whose responsibilities cannot be exercised’.

While I support Zabatiero’s insistence that theology’s voice be prophetic, and that to serve justice for the oppressed, I nonetheless question two aspects of his approach. First, although his claim that theologians do not speak from God’s perspective is undoubtedly true, one must ask if this necessarily negates any epistemological privilege granted by access to divine self-revelation. This is to say, if theology is not itself divine speech, it should be questioned whether it can, therefore, only be characterized in humble terms (humanity and fragility), and if so, how this humble discipline prompts bold prophetic speech.

In trying to develop a theological account of boldness and humility in theological speech, my driving conviction is that, although the theological endeavour is not itself *Deus dixit*, it remains nonetheless grounded in *Deus dixit*, and this is the basis for all authoritative (in this case, prophetic) theological speech. Attempts to ground authoritative theological speech either ‘from above’ or ‘from below’, as is perhaps the case with Zabatiero’s article, serve as useful examples of the point I made earlier on in this article: one assumes too much epistemological privilege, and the other assumes too little; in neither case is it...
clear how the elements of boldness and humility will sustain each other. In any case, these handlings require an account of virtue quite different from that of the Christian tradition I rely on in this article.

Part of the promise in applying the *vox theologiae* to public theological speech is that it creates space for the individual theologian to recognize that they might be wrong on certain points: its insistence on humility as ever present stops bold speech from turning into arrogance. Indeed, in Bavinck’s teaching, this makes the individual theologian quite willing to speak in this way (albeit with less frequency when discussing dogmas); it also creates the space to admit that one’s tradition might also be wrong in particular instances.

The more one speaks within the great cloud of witnesses, for Barth and Bavinck, the possibility for error decreases. Despite this, in freeing one to admit the possibility of error, one is not, therefore, plunged into relativism and relentless uncertainty. The safeguard against relativism is *Deus dixit*. While this system affords one the liberty to admit possible error at the level of the individual or a particular tradition, it does not permit one to level the same charge against God’s self-revelation. Although the theologian is left able to say, ‘perhaps I have, or my tradition has, understood point X wrongly’, that theologian is also left committed to saying, ‘but God has not misunderstood point X’. In that context, awareness of possible error encourages the individual theologian and a given theological tradition to follow the contours of God’s self-disclosure more closely. The *vox theologiae* provides a constant reminder to centre one’s theological speech on God.

In addition to this reminder, that this understanding of the *vox theologiae* commits the speaker to simultaneous accents on boldness and humility is of particular importance regarding the sanctification of the theologian’s (public) speech. Christian theologians must speak as Christian theologians. Quite simply, Scripture has nothing positive to say about arrogance; it is regularly associated with unjustifiable and untrue forms of speech (principally boasting, but also loveless speech, Ps. 94:4; Isa. 10:12), it is linked to pomposity and pride (Ps. 101:5; Pro. 16:5; 21:24; Isa. 13:11) and is contrasted by Paul with love (1 Cor. 13:4). Indeed, Paul warns Titus that an elder must be one capable of articulating the Christian faith to those within and outside the church (Tit. 1:9), and must not be arrogant (Tit. 1:7), which stands in contrast to the ‘empty talkers’ (RSV, Tit. 1:10) of the circumcision party.

Scripture records Peter and John praying specifically for boldness in their proclamation of the gospel (Acts 4:29–31). Paul writes of his daringness in the same regard (1 Thess. 2:2). Similarly, Scripture extols the virtues of humility and modesty, traits closely associated with wisdom and contrasted with pride and pomposity (Pro. 11:2), and linked to a high view of God and realistic view of
one's self (Isa. 66:2). Paul also writes that he was humble in his speech towards the Corinthians (2 Cor. 10:1).

Barth reminds theologians of their calling by drawing a distinction between exegesis (as an exploration of the biblical text) and dogmatics (as the consistent exegesis of Scripture in its entirety): ‘Dogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets’.67 To Barth’s statement, perhaps one might add the following: careful exegesis of theological speech acts in Scripture requires us not simply to ask what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets, but also how we must say it.

67 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1/1.16.