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# Neo-Calvinism and the Beatific Vision: Eschatology in the Reformed Tradition

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**I**ncreasingly, Reformed and evangelical eschatology emphasizes the continuity between this world and the next. The concomitant effect, particularly among those building on the neo-Calvinist tradition, is a focus on the use and enjoyment of this-worldly goods in the eschaton. The underlying theological reason for this is connected, it seems to me, to the nominalist metaphysic that has shaped modern culture. A nominalist separation between natural and supernatural ends makes it difficult theologically to focus on God himself as the ultimate telos of our pilgrimage. By contrast, the earlier participatory ontology that characterized premodern thought treated this-worldly objects as pointing to and participating in the being of God himself—the ultimate supernatural end of human existence.<sup>1</sup> The main theological rationale for the traditional teaching of the beatific vision—despite a variety of modes of presentation of this doctrine—is the awareness that only God himself (rather than any created object) constitutes the legitimate object of human beings' ultimate desire.<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of the beatific vision rightly underscores that rest in God is the telos of human existence, while contemporary neo-Calvinist thought undermines this with its focus on created goods and human action in the hereafter.

In this essay I limit myself to the Reformed tradition. My main argument is that recent eschatological trends within the neo-Calvinist tradition run counter not only to the traditional consensus of

East and West but also to neo-Calvinism's own Reformed heritage. The reason for this marked departure is closely linked to a rejection of the earlier tradition of Christian Platonism, with its emphases on participation in the divine life, on the beatific vision as the final end of human beings, and on God himself as the ultimate object of all human desire.

I begin with a critique of Herman Bavinck, one of the two main theologians at the origin of the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition.<sup>3</sup> Bavinck was sharply critical of the traditional theology of the beatific vision. Though he does make a number of passing positive statements about the eternal vision of God in his *Reformed Dogmatics* (e.g., *RD* 4.722), these acknowledgements are largely perfunctory.<sup>4</sup> Bavinck repeatedly attacks the idea of deification, which is implied in the notion that we will see God *per essentialiam*. He treats the beatific vision as the outcome of what he considers to be the deplorable influence of Neoplatonism and of Dionysius within the Roman Catholic tradition. Bavinck's criticism takes aim at several related issues. First, he opposes the idea that in the hereafter we will see the very essence of God, which, he explains, implies deification, which in turn allegedly denies the creator-creature distinction (*RD* 2.190–91). Such teaching implies a corporeal “melting union” (*RD* 2.539), a “substantial union” between God and the soul (*RD* 4.73). Second, Bavinck objects to the separation between nature and the supernatural, which he detects in Catholic thought, according to which the elevation



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of our intellect through the light of glory turns us into “different beings” (*RD* 2.191). Third, Bavinck objects to the way in which the beatific vision is linked to merit in Catholic thought. The notion that one could earn the vision of God *per essentiam* by way of condign merit is a serious problem in Bavinck’s view (*RD* 2.539). Finally, Bavinck objects to the immediate or direct character of the beatific vision, inasmuch as it leaves Christ behind. Also apart from sin, in the eschaton, Christ is the “mediator of union,” insists Bavinck (*RD* 4.685).

It is not my purpose here to deal with Bavinck’s objections in detail. I am actually sympathetic to some of them. I agree, for instance, that the notion of a vision of the divine essence is problematic—though to say that it denies the creator-creature distinction seems to me too easy a critique of Thomas Aquinas, who tried, at least, carefully to distinguish between *attaining* and *comprehending* the divine essence.<sup>5</sup> Only the latter would undermine the creator-creature distinction. Accordingly, the doctrine of the beatific vision hardly entails belief in a “melting union” or a “substantial union,” while the accusation that the beatific vision would render us “different beings,” is just too outlandish to refute. That said, I sympathize with Bavinck’s desire to uphold the creator-creature distinction, and for this reason I am also keen, with him, on interpreting the doctrine of the beatific vision christologically: in the hereafter, I believe, we will still see God in and through Jesus Christ. Bavinck is probably right that in an important respect the Thomist tradition tends to leave Christ behind with regard to the beatific vision.<sup>6</sup> As I hope to show in this article, however, we need not follow Bavinck (and other neo-Calvinists) in their downplaying of the beatific vision; it is quite possible, and, in fact, important, to articulate a view of the beatific vision that is Christological and in line with the broad tradition of the church.

The American contemporary neo-Calvinist philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff speaks out in support of John Calvin’s

rejection of earlier forms of Christian otherworldliness in his 1983 book *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, arguing that “it is obvious that Calvin’s formulation of the true goal of human existence as the acknowledgement of God in one’s life constitutes a profound turn toward this world and a repudiation of avertive religion.”<sup>7</sup> Wolterstorff ends up sharply critiquing the beatific vision in his plea for a “world-formative Christianity.”<sup>8</sup> Richard Middleton’s recent book *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* presents an eschatology without even discussing the beatific vision.<sup>9</sup> One of the more common tropes in this connection—mentioned among others by theologians such as Anthony Hoekema, N. T. Wright, and Richard Middleton—is the apparently insufferable idea of eternally singing psalms or playing harps on the clouds, which on this understanding was allegedly part and parcel of the otherworldly, Christian Platonist focus on heaven as our eternal destiny.<sup>10</sup>

The underlying framework in these neo-Calvinist accounts is one of continuity between this world and the next (*RD* 4.719–80). Bavinck, for instance, claims that the future rest will be an active rest. It will not be “blessed inaction” (*RD* 4.727). Communion with God, he claims, “no more excludes all action and activity in the age to come than it does in the present dispensation” (*RD* 4.727). For Bavinck, rest and work will coincide in the hereafter. “Biblical hope,” summarizes Bavinck, “is creational, this-worldly, visible, physical, bodily hope” (*RD* 4.715).

This neo-Calvinist (near) rejection of the beatific vision is out of line, not just with the broad premodern tradition, but also with the Reformed tradition itself. The common assumption, for instance—even among notable Reformation scholars such as Richard Muller—is that Calvin “did not discuss the topic” of the beatific vision.<sup>11</sup> In actual fact, despite the muted presence of the topic in Calvin’s *Institutes*, a study of his commentaries demonstrates that Calvin’s scattered (but sometimes

lengthy) treatments of it yield a consistent articulation of the doctrine and that he regarded the beatific vision as the ultimate eschatological telos. For Calvin, the Old Testament theophanies were revelations of the pre-incarnate Christ, and God reveals himself to us “face to face” (*facie ad faciem*) or openly (*palam*) in Christ.<sup>12</sup> In the intermediate state, the saints will have an inchoate vision of God, while they continue to desire the full vision of God’s glory.<sup>13</sup> After the resurrection, however, Calvin argues, Christ’s mediation and lordship will come to an end (1 Cor. 15:27),<sup>14</sup> at which point we will have a full, mutual vision of God’s majesty<sup>15</sup>—which is Calvin’s preferred term for the divine essence. Regardless of what we may think of this (and I have already expressed my reservation about the notion of seeing the divine essence), it is beyond question that Calvin, along with the Western tradition since the high Middle Ages, believed we will one day see the divine majesty or essence. Calvin’s view of the eschaton is, in short, strictly theocentric.

I have not done a careful study of the later Scholastic Reformed tradition, but theologians such as Franciscus Junius, Bartholomäus Keckermann, Antonius Walaeus, William Ames, Johannes Alsted, Franciscus Gomarus, Francis Turretin, Petrus van Mastricht, and Hermann Witsius all discussed, at varying lengths, the future beatific vision.<sup>16</sup>

Among seventeenth-century Anglican and Puritan divines particularly, the doctrine of the beatific vision flourished. The poet-turned-pastor John Donne focuses on the beatific vision in his remarkable poems *First and Second Anniversary* (1611 and 1612), as he laments, not just the death of his wealthy patron’s daughter, Elizabeth Drury, but at the same time the loss of premodern cosmology, which led to the rise of “pure nature” and the Baconian “new philosophy.” Donne, therefore, encourages us both in his poems and in his sermons to turn to the vision of God as our main and final end.<sup>17</sup>

Puritan theologians often treated the beatific vision in a Christological key. Whereas the Thomist tradition focused on the vision of the divine essence, Puritans were often wary of this approach, and maintained that also in the hereafter, we will see God in Christ.<sup>18</sup> Isaac Ambrose’s five-book treatment, *Looking unto Jesus* (1658), describes Christ as the eternal “means of communication” between God and the saints.<sup>19</sup> After the resurrection we will see Christ “as he is” (1 John 3:2), that is to say, we will see “the essential glory of Christ more immediately and fully” than we did on earth.<sup>20</sup>

John Owen’s treatment of the beatific vision, in chapters 19 and 20 of his *Christologia* (1679) and in the final three chapters of his posthumously published *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (1684), is also markedly Christological. He uses adjectives such as “immediate,” “direct,” and “intuitive,” traditionally used in the Thomist tradition to speak of the vision of the divine essence, to describe instead the vision of Christ. He claims that the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*) will enable this vision of Christ. And he interprets the famous text of 1 John 3:2 as speaking of a vision of Christ (rather than of the Father). In each of these ways, Owen deliberately reshaped the Thomist tradition, replacing a vision of the divine essence with a vision of Christ. The Puritan reluctance to acknowledge a beatific vision of the divine essence has to do with a deep awareness of the continuing creator-creature distinction. The acknowledgment that we will see God in and through Jesus Christ was thus at the same time an acknowledgment that it is as finite creatures that we will partake of the infinite God.

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I cannot here discuss in detail either Puritan divines such as Richard Baxter and Thomas Watson or the later theology of Jonathan Edwards, but suffice it to say that all these Reformed pastors and theologians put their final hope in the beatific vision. In general, we may suggest that wherever Christian Platonism came to the fore within Reformed theology, the beatific vision—along with asceticism, allegorical exegesis, and contemplative practices—took centre stage. The result was a largely traditional, otherworldly spirituality, which highlighted the discontinuity between this world and the next, while focusing on God as the final object of one’s vision and contemplation.

In short, the loss of the doctrine of the beatific vision within neo-Calvinism runs counter, not only to the broad history of the Christian tradition, but also to classical Reformed thought—ranging from John Calvin and Reformed Scholasticism to English and American divines such as John Donne, Richard Baxter, Isaac Ambrose, Thomas Watson, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the main architect of Dutch Neo-Calvinism, Abraham Kuyper.<sup>21</sup> Both in his dogmatic work (*Dictaten Dogmatiek*) and in his numerous meditations, the early twentieth-century theologian warmly endorsed the doctrine of the beatific vision. Kuyper’s mysticism has rarely been highlighted, but he was deeply attracted to the tradition of experiential Calvinism and as a result longed for mystical union with God today as an anticipation of the vision of God’s “Eternal Being” (*Eeuwige Wezen*)—Kuyper’s phrase for the vision of God *per essentiam*. Kuyper also followed the broad tradition of Western thought in affirming that Moses and Paul saw the essence of God. Although sharply critical of Russian Orthodox mysticism as well as of Western medieval treatments of meditation and contemplation, Kuyper nonetheless did recognize the value of contemplation, particularly as he had witnessed it in the

experiential piety (*bevindelijkheid*) of traditional Calvinism. Thus, there was much in the spirituality of the earlier tradition on which, in his more mystical moments, Kuyper was able to draw.

Kuyper is *not* traditional, however, when he distinguishes between beatitude (*zaligheid*), which he claims we will have immediately after death, and glory (*heerlijkheid*), which is reserved for the resurrection. He uses this distinction to give a rather unique spin to the doctrine of the beatific vision. While the Western tradition has typically maintained that the saints will obtain the beatific vision—direct, intuitive apprehension of the essence of God—immediately after death, Kuyper does not speak of *any* kind of vision in connection with the intermediate state. It is appropriate, he suggests, for believers to long for heavenly beatitude (*zaligheid*) after death, but for Kuyper this involves only *communion* with Christ, not *vision* of Christ. He never uses the language of vision to describe the soul’s post-mortem state of separation from the body. The beatific vision is reserved for the resurrection life of glory (*heerlijkheid*). Only then will we see the “Eternal Being” of God—the divine essence (which, with an interesting spin, involves for Kuyper spiritual *and* physical vision of God).

Kuyper’s denial of any kind of vision of God in the intermediate state puts him at odds with the broad tradition of the church. In some ways, his theology of the beatific vision is idiosyncratic when compared both to traditional Western (Thomistic) and Reformed (often Christocentric) approaches. Nonetheless, Kuyper did not depart from the tradition inasmuch as he continued to regard God himself as the ultimate object of human desire. Even the main theologian at the origin of neo-Calvinism, therefore, held to an eschatology that differed markedly from that of his later followers.

Kuyper’s wide-ranging reflections on the beatific vision are a reminder that otherworldliness and mysticism are key ingredients of the Christian life. Kuyper was

much too deeply grounded in the theological tradition and was far too careful a thinker simply to dismiss the earlier tradition's focus on the beatific vision as an otherworldly, Platonic holdover from another era.

In many ways, neo-Calvinists in the wake of Herman Bavinck have attempted to remake the Reformed tradition in their own image. But the Reformed tradition—particularly, though not only, the Puritan and experiential strands—did not have in mind a continuing cultural transformation when they thought of the eschatological future. Instead, they followed the mainstream of a Christian tradition whose otherworldliness was a safeguard for the theocentric theology of the beatific vision. **X**

### Notes

1 Nominalism treats universals (such as redness, cat-ness, humanity, and goodness) as merely mental abstractions. By contrast, the realist epistemology of traditional Christian Platonism treats such abstractions as real, transcendent archetypes.

2 Michael Allen rightly underscores this point in his excellent recent book *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

3 I give a more detailed critique of Bavinck in *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 33–40.

4 I am using Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008).

5 *ST I*, q.12, a.7. Cf. *ST I-II*, q.4, a.3.

6 See Hans Boersma, “Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit,” *TheoLogica* 2, no. 2 (2018): 129–47.

7 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at*

*the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 14.

8 Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 125–26.

9 J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

10 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 274; N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 105–6; Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 174. The notion of playing harps in the hereafter goes back to the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:8; 14:2; 15:2).

11 Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 260.

12 John Calvin, *Comm.* John 1:18.

13 John Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, in *Tracts*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 436.

14 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, vol. 1, Library of Christian Classics 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.14.3.

15 *Comm.* Ps. 17:15; 1 John 3:2.

16 I rely here on the doctoral research of Joshua Schendel (Saint Louis University).

17 I discuss John Donne in detail in *Seeing God*, 279–314.

18 For more detailed discussion of a number of Puritan treatments of the beatific vision, see Boersma, *Seeing God*, 315–53.

19 Isaac Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus, a View of the Everlasting Gospel: or, the Soul's Eying of Jesus as Carrying on the Great Work of Man's Salvation from First to Last* (London: Edward Mottershed, 1658), 5.1.8.

20 Ambrose, *Looking unto Jesus*, 5.1.10.

21 The following discussion of Kuyper draws from Hans Boersma, “Blessing and Glory: Abraham Kuyper on the Beatific Vision,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 52 (2017): 205–41.