

Any time you see this asterisk, it means there is a note in the reader's guide for you to look at

[159] In studying the relation between faith and theology, we need to frame the question properly. It should not be: what is the minimum of truths a person must know and hold as true to be saved? Leave that question to Rome, and let Catholic theology decide whether to that end two or four articles are needed. Admittedly, Protestant theology, in the theory of "fundamental articles," has given the impression of wanting to take that road. But it ended with the acknowledgment that it did not know the magnitude of God's mercy and therefore could not measure the amount of knowledge that is necessarily in-

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31. *Council of Trent*, session VI, canon 12.
32. Bellarmine, "De justif.," *Controversiis*, I, 8.
33. Cf. Denzinger, *Vier Bücher*, II, 277ff.; Heinrich, *Dogmatik*, II, 658; Jansen, *Prael. Theol.*, I, 449ff.; Lammenais, *Essai sur l'indifférence*, I, 6, 7; 34.
34. F. Spanheim, *Opera*, III, 1308ff.
35. G. Voetius, *Select. Disp.*, II, 537, 781; F. Spanheim, *Opera*, III, 1291; H. Witsius, *Exercitat. Sacrae in Symb.*, II, §2 and §15; Hoornbeek, *Conf. Socin.*, I, 209.
36. Cf., e.g., Bruining in various publications: "De Theologie in den Kring der Wetenschapper," *De Gids* (June 1884); idem, *Moderne Mystiek* (Leiden: Van Doesburgh, 1885); idem, *Het Bestaan van God* (Leiden: S. C. van Doesburgh, 1892); idem, "De Moderne Richting en de Dogmatiek," *Theologische Tijdschrift* 28 (November 1894). C. P. Tiele, *Elements of The Science of Religion*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1897), I, 152, 156-57; II, 21-22, 25ff.

herent in a sincere faith. In addition, between the theory of "implicit faith" and that of the "fundamental articles" there is, for all their seeming similarity, an important difference. On the Catholic side, that theory was developed with a view to the simple laity, the "donkey" of Job 1:14. But in the theology of the Reformation, it sprang from the fact that a number of different churches emerged side by side with confessions that diverged from each other on many points. For that theology, therefore, the focus was the question concerning the essence of Christianity. Faith, on the part of Rome, is 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 (*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. Rome, therefore, had to determine a minimum without which there could not be salvation. On the side of the Reformation, faith is trust in the grace of God and hence no longer calculable. Every believer, both in the OT and the NT, in principle possesses the same knowledge, which in theology is developed both in breadth and in depth. From this vantage point also the relation between faith and theology can be further elucidated.

First of all, there is strong resemblance between the two. They have in common the principle, the Word of God; the object, the knowledge of God; the goal, the glory of God. Also theology as a science functions on the basis of faith. The role assigned in the other sciences to observation is here assumed by faith. Faith supplies to theology the "stuff" of thought. In secular science the watchword is: sense perception precedes understanding; there is nothing in understanding that was not first in the senses; in theology the slogan is: faith precedes understanding; there is nothing in understanding that was not first present in faith.³⁷ Leibnitz therefore compared faith to experience.³⁸ Concepts without visual content are empty, said Kant; similarly, theology has no content apart from and through faith. The moment it abandons faith, it ceases to exist as theology. Nor does it ever by thinking leave behind the viewpoint of faith. Though in all sorts of ways this has been attempted, it has been in vain. Faith is the beginning as well as the end of theology; it never becomes knowing in the strict sense, i.e., knowing on the basis of personal observation and insight. But this is not to deprive theology of its freedom. Faith simply posits and maintains the relation that ought to exist in this area between subject and object. It situates the theologian under and in the truth that he or she has to examine, not outside and over against and above that truth. It only binds theology to its own object in no other way than every other science is and remains bound to observation and by it exists in relation to its object. Theology is just

37. R. Rothe, *Theologische Ethik*, 2d rev. ed., 5 vols. (Wittenberg: Zimmerman, 1867-71), §267, II, 180.

38. *Leibnitz, *Discourse on the Conformity of Faith with Reason*, chap. I.

as free and just as dependent as every other science. It is free from all bonds that militate against its nature but is totally defined by the object it seeks to understand and has this characteristic in common with all the sciences. The more rigorously it binds itself to its object, the less it runs the risk of degenerating into arid scholasticism and empty rhetoric. By faith theology remains a science of religion, a "theology of facts," which does not think about concepts but about things and does not lose itself in ethereal abstractions but has both feet firmly planted in that world of realities that Scripture reveals to us.³⁹

On the other hand, however, there is a notable difference between faith and theology, not in essence but in degree. Theology remains a science of faith, not only because it lives from the same principle from which faith draws its contents, but also because as a science it retains the same religious character that belongs to the knowledge of faith. "A theology of the unregenerate" is possible in the same sense as a "historical faith," but it corresponds equally as little or as much to true theology as "historical faith" does to "saving faith." But since saving faith includes true knowledge, theology can deepen and expand the latter by ongoing intentional investigation.⁴⁰ In an earlier age the two of them could be easily interchanged, because theology and dogmatics plus ethics were virtually synonymous. But today theology has become the name for a whole cycle of disciplines. The distinction therefore now leaps out at anyone considering the topic. Nowadays theology encompasses a multitude of sciences, which a simple believer does not even know by name. Still, even if theology were understood in the old sense, the distinction would remain substantial. In every area there is a difference between ordinary, everyday, empirical knowing and true, advanced, scientific knowledge. Every human has some empirical knowledge of the sun, moon, and stars, but this knowledge is a million miles removed from the scientific knowledge of the astronomer. The former only knows the facts (*facta*); the latter the reasons (*rationes*). The scientist does not spurn ordinary empirical knowledge; he or she does not overthrow natural certainty; yet he or she has the calling to clarify, to expand, and if necessary to correct and improve that ordinary knowledge. Nor is this different in theology. Faith pauses to consider the facts; theology, on the other hand, attempts to get down to the idea. Faith is content with the *that*; theology inquires into the *why* and the *how*. Faith is always personal; it always relates the object to persons themselves and is directly interested in the religious content of the dogmas. Theology, on the other hand, in a sense "objectivizes" the object; it attempts to

39. Vilmar, *Die Theologie der Thatsachen wider die Theologie der Rhetorik*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1876).

40. This fundamentally answers the question that Dr. Riemens raises concerning the distinction and connection between religious and theoretical knowing: "Principia in de Dogmatiek," *Theologische Studien* 21 (1903): 383ff.; idem, "Intellectuele en Intuïtieve Kennis," *Theologische Studien* 22 (1904): 137-61; see also above, 40-43; *W. Brandt, "Kenvermogen, Goddelijke Geesten Kennis in het N.T.," *Teylers Theologische Tijdschrift*, I, 377ff.

see the truth as it objectively exists in itself. It explores its unity and inner coherence and seeks to arrive at a system. Faith focuses directly on the central object; theology expands its horizon to the entire circumference. But, however diverse the two may be, they cannot do without each other. Faith preserves theology from secularization; theology preserves faith from separatism. For that reason the church and the school (seminary, department of theology and religion), though two entities, ought to be in solidarity with each other. This arrangement, it must be said, in no way detracts from the freedom and independence of theology. Every college or university department does scientific work, not only for its own sake, but also for the purpose of training students for various positions in society. Every science, actually, has to take account of the demands of life. Similarly, theology does not occupy a position high above real life but is situated in its midst, in the life of the Christian community. The distorted relation that everywhere exists today between the church and theology is a disaster for both.

REASON SERVING FAITH

If theology thus has its internal principle not in faith as such but in believing reflection, the task of reason in theological science calls for further definition. In this context we must first of all and fundamentally reject the notion that regards faith and reason as two independent powers engaging in a life-and-death struggle with each other. In that way one creates a dualism that does not belong in the Christian domain. In that case faith is always above (*supra*) or even opposed (*contra*) to reason. Threatening on the one hand is rationalism and on the other supernaturalism. Faith, the faith by which we believe, is not an organ or faculty next to or above reason but a disposition or habit of reason itself. Reason, or if people prefer, thinking, is certainly not a source of theology, not a principle by which or through which or from which or on account of which we believe.⁴¹ Reason is a source, not the source of any science; at most it is only for the formal sciences such as logic or mathematics. Still reason is the recipient subject of faith, capable of faith; faith is an act of the human consciousness; an animal is not capable of believing. Furthermore, faith is not an involuntary but a free act. Christians do not believe on command, out of fear, or in response to violence. Believing has become the natural habit of their mind, not in the sense that there is often not considerable resistance in their soul to that believing, but still in such a way that, though often doing what they do not want to do, they still take delight in God's law in their inmost self [cf. Rom. 7:22]. Believing is the natural breath of the children of God. Their submission to the Word of God is not slavery but freedom. In that sense faith is not a sacrifice of the intellect but mental health (*sanitas mentis*). Faith, therefore,

41. G. Voetius, *Select. Disp.*, I, 3.

does not relieve Christians of the desire to study and reflect; rather it spurs them on to the end. Nature is not destroyed by regeneration but restored.

Believers who want to devote themselves to the study of theology, accordingly, must prepare their minds for the task awaiting them. There is no admission to the temple of theology except by way of the study of the arts. Indispensable to the practitioner of the science of theology is philosophical, historical, and linguistic preparatory training. Philosophy, said Clement of Alexandria, "prepares the way for the most royal teaching." Emperor Julian knew what he was doing when he deprived Christians of pagan learning; he feared he would be defeated by his own weapons. This thinking, thus prepared and trained, has, in the main, a threefold task in theology. First, it offers its services in finding the material. Scripture is the principle of theology. But the Bible is not a book of laws; it is an organic whole. The material for theology, specifically for dogmatics, is distributed throughout Scripture. Like gold from a mine, so the truth of faith has to be extracted from Scripture by the exertion of all available mental powers. Nothing can be done with a handful of proof texts. Dogma has to be built, not on a few isolated texts, but on Scripture in its entirety. It must arise organically from the principles that are everywhere present for that purpose in Scripture. The doctrines of God, of humanity, of sin, of Christ, etc., after all, are not to be found in a few pronouncements but are spread throughout Scripture and are contained, not only in a few proof texts, but also in a wide range of images and parables, ceremonies and histories. No part of Scripture may be neglected. The whole of Scripture must prove the whole system.⁴² Also in theology we must avoid separation. It is a mark of many sects that they base themselves on a small part of Scripture and neglect everything else. The worst and most widespread error is the rejection or neglect of the Old Testament. Marcionism repeatedly reemerged in the Christian church and plays a large role in modern theology as well.⁴³ All this arbitrary use of Holy Scripture leads to one-sidedness and error in theology and to pathology in the religious life. In that setting the full and rich configuration of truth does not come to light. Either the person and work of the Father or of the Son or of the Holy Spirit is then sold short. Injustice is done to Christ either in his prophetic, or his priestly, or his royal office. The Christian religion loses its catholicity. The Christian head, heart, and hand are not harmoniously molded and guided by the truth. Only the whole Bible in its fullness preserves us from all these one-sidednesses. For that very reason, however, the thinking mind has an important role in tracking down the theological material.

Next, the theologian must intellectually process the material thus acquired. The dogmas are not spelled out in Scripture in so many words; they are there

42. J. C. C. von Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis*, 3 vols. (Nördlingen: Beck, 1857-60), I, 1-32.

43. Cf. Diestel, *Geschichte des Alten Testament in der Christliche Kirche* (Jena: Mauke, 1869); H. Schmidt, "Der Marcionitismus in der neueren Theologie," *Neue Jahrbuch für deutsche Theologie* (1893); and later the doctrine of the covenants.

in the thought, not in the letter. They are the conclusions of faith. The doctrines of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, of vicarious atonement, the sacraments, etc., are not based on a single scriptural utterance but are constructed from many givens distributed throughout the Bible. Dogmas are concise summaries in our own language of everything Scripture teaches about the subject in question. Against all sorts of schools that wanted to stick with the literal phraseology of Scripture, accordingly, Catholic as well as Protestant theologians defended the right to use dogmatic terminology. They did this, not because they wanted to be less but more scriptural than these others. To their mind, Scripture above all came into its own in all its splendor—not when a single text was literally cited but—when the whole truth contained in many texts was condensed and reproduced in a dogma. Theology, therefore, is not only a noetic but also a dianoetic science; not an apprehensive but a discursive branch of knowledge. It reflects, compares, evaluates, sums up, infers other truths from the truth acquired, etc. Also Jesus and the apostles followed this procedure (Matt. 22:32, 44f.; John 10:34f.; Acts 15:9f.; 18:28; 1 Cor. 15; etc.); and church fathers, scholastics, Catholic and Protestant theologians followed that example. God has not called us to literally repeat but to *re-reflect* on, what he has antecedently thought and laid out in his revelation.

* Finally, it is the task of the thinking theological mind to gather up and recapitulate all truth in one system.⁴⁴ System is the supreme desideratum in all science. Also theology does not rest until it has discovered the unity underlying revelation. It may not impose that system from without, nor press the truth into a philosophical system that is foreign to its nature. But it keeps searching until the system that is present in the object itself has been reproduced in the human mind. In all this theology operates like other sciences. Like these other sciences, it is bound to its object. In the process of thinking, it is subject to the laws that apply to this process. It too cannot violate the laws of logic with impunity.⁴⁵ For theology, too, the supreme desideratum is the unity of truth, the system of the knowledge of God. Accordingly, however much theology may differ from the other sciences in principle, object, and goal, formally it agrees with them and may rightly claim the name of science. And since revelation does not *per se* clash with human reason but only “on account of the accident of corruption and a depraved disposition,” theology may even in a sense be called “natural” and “rational.”⁴⁶ The Christian religion is a “reasonable form of worship” (λογικὴ λατρεία, Rom. 12:1).

44. See above, pp. 38–46.

45. J. Alsted, *Praecognita*, 186.

46. Voetius, *Select. Disp.*, disp. I. 3. The literature on the use of reason and philosophy in theology is astonishingly abundant. For the church fathers, cf. J. Kleutgen, *Theologie der Vorzeit*, 2d ed., 5 vols. (Münster: Theissing, 1867–74), IV, 143ff.; Denzinger, *Vier Bücher*, II, 574ff.; and in addition, G. Voetius, *Select. Disp.*, I, 1–11; F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, loc. I, qu. 8–13; H. Witsius, *Misc. Sacra*, II, 584ff.; and further literature in M. Vitringa's edition of C. Vitringa, *Doctr. Christ.*, I, 32–34. Cf. also A. Kuyper Jr., *Openbaring en Rede* (Kampen: Kok, 1902).

[160] Although knowledge is attainable in theology, this is not true of comprehension. There is substantial difference between “being acquainted with,” “knowing,” and “comprehending.” True, these words are often used interchangeably. But there are demonstrable differences among them. “Being acquainted with” pertains to a thing's existence, the *that*; “knowing” concerns a thing's quality, the *what*; comprehending relates to its inner possibility, the *how* of a thing. There are few things we comprehend; actually we comprehend only the things that are totally in our power, the things we can make or break. I comprehend a machine when I see how it is put together and how it works, and when there is nothing left in it I still think strange. Comprehension excludes amazement and admiration. I comprehend or think I comprehend the things that are self-evident and perfectly natural. Often comprehension ceases to the degree a person digs deeper into a subject. That which seemed self-evident proves to be absolutely extraordinary and amazing. The farther a science penetrates its object, the more it approaches mystery. Even if on its journey it encountered no other object it would still always be faced with the mystery of being. Where comprehension ceases, however, there remains room for knowledge and wonder. And so things stand in theology. Disclosed to us in revelation is “the mystery of our religion”: the mystery of God's grace [1 Tim. 3:16]. We see it; it comes out to meet us as a reality in history and in our own life. But we do not fathom it. In that sense Christian theology always has to do with mysteries that it knows and marvels at but does not comprehend and fathom.

* Very often, however, mystery in Christian theology has been construed very differently. The word μυστηριον (derived from μυστης, μω, i.e., to close, be shut, of eyes, lips, or wounds) in ordinary Greek is the name for the secret religious-political doctrine that in some fellowships of Eleusis, Samothrace, etc., was communicated only to initiates and concealed from all others.⁴⁷ In the NT the word consistently has a religious meaning and refers to a matter belonging to the kingdom of God, which, either on account of the obscure and enigmatic form in which it was presented (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10; Rev. 1:20; 17:5, 7), or on account of its content, is hidden. This, above all, is the word for the universal (including also the Gentiles) decree of God concerning redemption in Christ (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:9; 3:3; 6:19; Col. 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3), as well as the manner in which it is carried out (Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:51; 2 Thess. 2:7; Rev. 10:7). But this mystery is so called, not because it is still hidden in the present, but because it had been unknown in the past. Now—of all things—it has been made public by the gospel of Christ, is proclaimed by the apostles as the stewards of the mystery

47. E. Hatch, “The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church,” *The Hibbert Lectures, 1888*, trans. A. M. Fairbairn, 7th ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1898), 296. Gustav Anrich, *Das antike Mysteriewesen in seinem Einfluss auf das Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1894); Wobbermin, *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien zur Frage nach der Beeinflussung des Urchristentum durch das antike Mysteriewesen* (Berlin: E. Ebering, 1896).

of God (Rom. 16:25, 26; Col. 1:26; 1 Cor. 4:1; Matt. 13:11; 1 Cor. 4:1), and from now on will be increasingly manifest in history (1 Cor. 15:51, 52; 2 Thess. 2:7). The NT term *μυστήριον*, accordingly, does not denote an intellectually uncomprehended and incomprehensible truth of faith but a matter that was formerly hidden in God, was then made known in the gospel, and is now understood by believers.⁴⁸

In church usage, however, the word soon began to mean something that was incomprehensible, something far surpassing even the intellect of believers, such as the incarnation, the mystical union, the sacraments, etc., and later all the "pure articles" (*articuli puri*), which could not be proven by reason.⁴⁹ Even at that there remained a stark distinction between the pagan and the Christian use of the word. For in the former it denoted a secret doctrine, which had to be kept hidden from the uninitiated; but in the Christian church there had never been a truly "arcane discipline," even though a certain order was observed in the communication of the truth.⁵⁰ Still the dogmas were the uncomprehended and incomprehensible truths of faith, admittedly not contrary to reason, but certainly far above it.⁵¹ In the church's condemnation of Erigena, Raymond Lull, Hermes, Günther, and Frohschammer, it pronounced its disapproval of every attempt to prove the mysteries of faith from reason. And the Vatican Council [I] confessed: "For by their nature divine mysteries so far surpass the created intellect that, even when transmitted by revelation and received by faith, they remain covered with the veil of faith itself, and shrouded in a certain obscurity as long as, in this mortal life, we are exiled from the Lord: for we walk by faith and not by sight!"⁵²

The Reformation admittedly recognized the supernatural character of revelation but nevertheless in fact brought about a great change. In the case of Rome, the mysteries are incomprehensible, primarily because they belong to another, higher, supernatural order, which surpasses the human intellect as such. It therefore has to put a heavy accent on the incomprehensibility of the mysteries, as well as protect and maintain it. The dimension of incomprehensibility seems by itself to be a proof of validity and truth. "It is believable because it is absurd. . . . Certain, because it is impossible."⁵³ But the Reformation replaced this contrast between the natural and the supernatural order by that of sin and grace. It located the essence of mystery, not in the fact that it is incomprehensible to human beings as such but to the intellect

48. Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, trans. D. W. Simon and William Urwick (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), s.v. "pronoia."

49. Suicerus, *Thesaurus Eccl.*, s.v. "μυστήριον."

50. G. N. Bonwetsch, "Arkandisziplin," *PRE³*, II, 51–55.

51. Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, I, qu. 32, art. 1; idem, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 3; IV, 1; Bellarmine, "De Christo," *Controversiis*, I, 2; II, 6; J. B. Heinrich and C. Gutberlet, *Dogmatische Theologie*, 2d ed., 10 vols. (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1881–1900), II, 772ff.; Denzinger, *Vier Bücher*, II, 80–150; J. Kleutgen, *Theologie der Vorzeit*, V, 164ff.

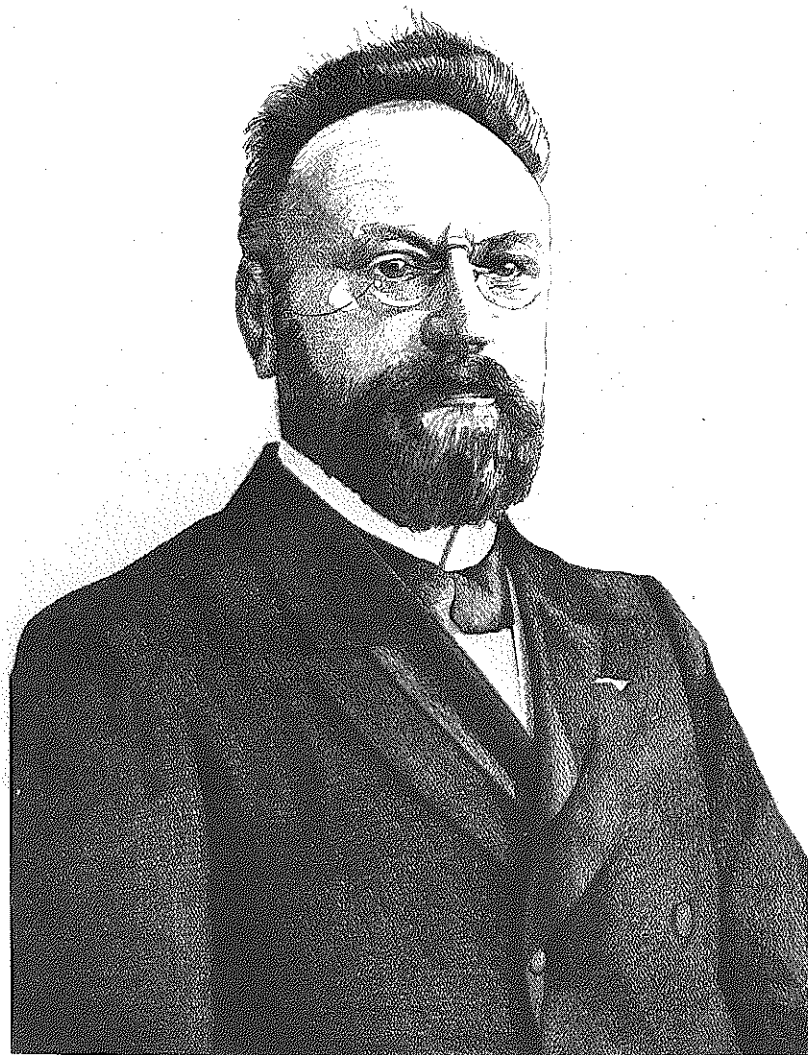
52. Vatican Council I, session III, "De fide," chap. 4.

53. Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, 5.

of the "natural" (i.e., unspiritual) person.⁵⁴ This view is undoubtedly much more consonant with NT usage. Nowhere in the NT is the abstract supernatural and scientifically incomprehensible character of mystery in the foreground. But while it is folly in the eyes of the "natural" person, however wise he or she may be, it is revealed to believers who see in it the wisdom and grace of God (Matt. 11:25; 13:11; 16:17; Rom. 11:33; 1 Cor. 1:30). Naturally it is also not the intent of Scripture to say that the believer grasps those mysteries in a scientific sense. We walk by faith, after all; we know in part and now see in a mirror dimly (Rom. 11:34; 1 Cor. 13:12; 2 Cor. 5:7). But believers *do* know those mysteries; they are no longer a folly and an offense to them; they do marvel at God's wisdom and love manifest in them. "The secret of God ought to produce earnest people, not hostile ones" (Augustine). It does not even occur to them, therefore, that the mysteries surpass their reason, that they are above reason; they do not experience them as an oppressive burden but rather as intellectual liberation. Their faith turns into wonder; knowledge terminates in adoration; and their confession becomes a song of praise and thanksgiving. Of this kind, too, is the knowledge of God theology aims for. It is not just a knowing, much less a comprehending; it is better and more glorious than that: it is the knowledge which is life, "eternal life" (John 17:3).⁵⁵

54. J. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.20; G. Voetius, *Select. Disp.*, I, 3.

55. On *μυστήρια*, in addition to the literature cited above (pp. 619–20 nn. 47–49), also see Bretschneider, *Systematische Entwicklung aller in de Dogmatiek* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1841), I, 168. J. Boeles, *De mysteriis in relig. Christ.* (Gronigen: C. M. van B. Hoitsema, 1843). J. H. Scholten, *De Leer der Hervormde Kerk*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Leyden: P. Engels, 1850–51), I, 223. J. J. van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. J. Watson and M. Evans, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1874), I, 116. Philippi, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. John S. Banks (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1878–79). Grécollat, *Exposé de théol. syst.*, 6 vols. (Paris: Neuchatel: J. Attinger, Librairie Fischbacher, 1885–99), I, 182ff.; II, 183; S. Cheetham, *The Mysteries: Pagan and Christian* (London: MacMillan, 1897); R. H. Grützacher, *Modern-positive Vorträge* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1906), 27ff., 32ff.



Herman Bavinck (1854–1921)
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REFORMED DOGMATICS

VOLUME 1: PROLEGOMENA

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