



## THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE AND THE MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HERMAN BAVINCK'S DOCTRINE OF ANGELS

(O meio excluído e as implicações missiológicas da doutrina  
de Herman Bavinck sobre os anjos)

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### ABSTRACT

The question I ask is: what are the missiological implications of Bavinck's doctrine of angels? It is the thesis of this essay that Bavinck's doctrine of angels is helpful to missions because it takes the middle world seriously and provides Western missionaries with a correct view of the spiritual world based on God's revelation not on superstitions, and with a worldview centered in the sovereignty of the triune God over the spiritual forces. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that in order to be an effective missionary in today's world and to be able to correctly answer the questions that people are doing, one must take into account the existence of the spiritual middle realm, and deal with it within the framework of God's revelation, having the triune God as the sovereign over all the exclude middle and the spiritual forces. Bavinck's doctrine of angels provides these tools and is of great importance in this missiological task.

**Keywords:** Herman Bavinck; Spiritual World; Missiology.

### RESUMO

A tese principal deste artigo é que a doutrina dos anjos, conforme desenvolvida pelo teólogo calvinista holandês Herman Bavinck, é útil para as missões, porque leva a dimensão espiritual a sério e fornece aos missionários ocidentais uma visão correta do mundo espiritual baseada na revelação de Deus, não em superstições, e com uma cosmovisão centrada na soberania do Deus triuno sobre as forças espirituais. O objetivo deste artigo é demonstrar que, para ser um missionário eficaz no mundo de hoje e ser capaz de responder corretamente às perguntas que muitas pessoas estão fazendo, é preciso levar em conta a existência do reino espiritual intermediário, e lidar com ele no âmbito da revelação de Deus, tendo o Deus trino como o soberano sobre todas as forças espirituais – anjos e demônios. A doutrina dos anjos desenvolvida por Bavinck fornece essas ferramentas e é de grande importância para a missiologia ocidental.

**Palavras-chave:** Herman Bavinck; Mundo Espiritual; Missiologia.

### INTRODUCTION

Angels and the spiritual world is not a major topic in Christian theology, and the discussion among Western pastors, theologians, and missionaries is limited to rather they exist or not. Paul Hiebert calls this dimension of the spiritual world, middle level. For him, most missionaries from the Western world have been ineffective in their work among other



countries, cultures, and worldviews because they have excluded this middle realm that deals with the supernatural reality of angels, demons and spirits. Hiebert writes about himself, “I had excluded the middle level of supernatural but this-worldly beings and forces from my own world view... For me these belonged to the realm of fairies, trolls and other mythical beings. Consequently I had no answers to the questions they raised” (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 43).

Yet, Craig Ott asserts that, “the presence and power of these unseen forces is a real part of both biblical theology and the worldview of most of the peoples of the earth” (OTT, 2010, p. 252).<sup>1</sup> Aligned with Hiebert’s view, Craig Ott concludes that,

When missionaries ignored this middle level, many peoples continued to relate to the beings and forces of that level in the old way, untouched by biblical faith in Christ. In some cases people have practiced two kinds of religious faith: a formal religious worship of God and Christ and a folk religion that deals with the spirit world. In other cases a syncretistic blend of the two has developed (OTT, 2010, p. 254).

Herman Bavinck is a Dutch Reformed theologian that takes into account the excluded middle, i.e., the spiritual world, and he deals specifically with the doctrine of angels in the volume 2 of his *Reformed Dogmatics (RD II)*. His doctrine of angels offers some important insights and implications to the task of developing a theology of the excluded middle. He affirms that, “the existence of such a spiritual realm is recognized in all religions. In addition to the actual gods, also a variety of demigods or heroes, demons, genii, spirits, souls, and so on, have been the objects of religious veneration” (BAVINCK, RD II, p. 444). Bavinck does not deny the existence of this spiritual realm of spirits, angels and demons. He does not exclude the middle level. He writes, “belief in a spiritual world is not philosophical but religious in nature. It is intimately linked with revelation and miracle. Religion is inconceivable apart from revelation, and revelation cannot occur apart from the existence of a spiritual world above and behind this visible world, a spiritual world in communion with the visible world” (RD II, p. 447).

On the one hand, Bavinck claims that, “in modern theology... only little is left of angels” (RD II, p. 445). For modern theology, influenced by a naturalistic and materialistic worldview, there is no space for belief in the excluded middle. On the other hand, Bavinck writes, “in opposition to materialism, around the middle of the nineteenth century there arose a reaction in the form of spiritism, which not only acknowledges the existence of deceased spirits but also admits the possibility of communion between them and human beings on earth” (RD II, p. 446-447). With his doctrine of angels rooted in Scripture, Bavinck serves as a solid theological ground, first, to those Western pastors and missionaries who have been influenced by the materialism, excluding the middle realm from their worldview; and second, to correct the wrong approach of the spiritists and the like, concerning the spiritual world.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the presence and power of the spiritual forces for biblical theology and worldview, cf.: Gordon Chilvers, “Angels,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 27, 2 (1955), 108-112; Steven F Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically About Angels, Satan and Principalities* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999); Lawrence Osborn, “Entertaining Angels: Their Place In Contemporary Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 45, 2 (1994), 273-296; Robert P. Lightner, *Angels, Satan, and demons: invisible beings that inhabit the spiritual world* (Nashville: Word, 1998); David Schneider, “Colossians 1:15-16 and the Philippine spirit world,” *South East Asia Journal Of Theology* 15, 2 (1974), 91-101.



That being said, the question I ask is, what are the missiological implications of Bavinck's doctrine of angels? It is the thesis of this essay that Bavinck's doctrine of angels is helpful to missions because it takes the middle world seriously and provides Western missionaries with a correct view of the spiritual world based on God's revelation not on superstitions, and with a worldview centered in the sovereignty of the triune God over the spiritual forces. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that in order to be an effective missionary in today's world and to be able to correctly answer the questions that people are doing, one must take into account the existence of the spiritual middle realm, and deal with it within the framework of God's revelation, having the triune God as the sovereign over all the excluded middle and the spiritual forces. Bavinck's doctrine of angels provides these tools and is of great importance in this missiological task.

To understand the relation between the excluded middle and the missiological implications of Bavinck's doctrine of angels first requires a look at Paul Hiebert's view of the excluded middle, and then at Bavinck's doctrine of angels.

## 1. PAUL HIEBERT'S EXCLUDED MIDDLE

Paul Hiebert points that most people recognize three realms of this seen-unseen dimension. The lowest one is the natural world where humans live and "develop folk sciences to explain and control it" (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 40). Above this natural realm there is the middle level, that is frequently excluded by Western Christians, and where one finds supernatural beings and forces "that cannot be directly perceived but are thought to exist... [And] these include spirits, ghosts, ancestors, demons, and earthly gods and goddesses who live in trees, rivers, hills and villages" (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 41). Above this middle realm there is the transcendent world where one finds "hells and heavens; and other times such as eternity... Here is located the Jewish concept of Jehovah" (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 41).

According to Hiebert, "belief in the middle level began to die in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries with the growing acceptance... of a science based on materialistic naturalism. The result was the secularization of science and the mystification of religion" (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 43). And for this reason he believes that most of Western Christian missionaries and theologians seem to have excluded the middle realm of the spiritual world. A research developed by Barna Group confirms the reality that many Christian Americans have been influenced by this naturalistic and materialistic worldview:

Four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan "is not a living being but is a symbol of evil." An additional two out of ten Christians (19%) said they "agree somewhat" with that perspective. A minority of Christians indicated that they believe Satan is real by disagreeing with the statement: one-quarter (26%) disagreed strongly and about one-tenth (9%) disagreed somewhat. The remaining 8% were not sure what they believe about the existence of Satan... [And] Much like their perceptions of Satan, most Christians do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a living force, either. Overall, 38% strongly agreed and 20% agreed somewhat that the Holy



Spirit is “a symbol of God’s power or presence but is not a living entity” (BARNA GROUP, 2009)<sup>2</sup>

Barna Group’s research confirms what Hiebert said in 1982, “as a scientist I had been trained to deal with the empirical world in naturalist terms. As a theologian, I was taught to answer ultimate questions in theistic terms” (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 43). He was trained to deal with the natural world that can be seen and with the ultimate reality of God himself, but to exclude the middle realm of spirits, angels and demons. He also writes that, “one of the greatest cultural gaps between Western people and many traditional religionists is found along this dimension” (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 42).

The raising of naturalism and the secularization of science caused a dichotomy, as Hiebert suggests, where “science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies” (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 43). For this reason, Hiebert affirms,

It should be apparent why many missionaries trained in the West had no answers to the problems of the middle level — they often did not even see it. When tribal people spoke of fear of evil spirits, they denied the existence of the spirits rather than claim the power of Christ over them. The result, as Newbigin has pointed out (1966) is that Western Christian missions have been one of the greatest secularizing forces in history (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 44).

But why can’t Western Christian missionaries answer effectively to the questions of these different religions, cultures, and worldviews? Hiebert asks, what are the questions of the middle level that Western missionaries cannot answer correctly? And he observes that the middle level raises questions of doubts and concerns about the future, crisis and problems of the present life and things from the past that are unknown. He writes,

Accidents, misfortunes, the intervention of other persons and other unknown events can frustrate human planning... [And] because the Western world no longer provides explanations for questions on the middle level, it is not surprising that many Western missionaries have no answers within their Christian worldview. “What is a Christian theology of ancestors, of animals and plants, of local spirits and spirit possession, and of “principalities, powers and rulers of the darkness of this world” (Ep 6:12)? What does one say when new tribal converts want to know how the Christian God tells them where and when to hunt, whether they should marry this daughter to that young man, or where they can find the lost money? Given no answer, they return to the diviner who gave them definite answers, for these are the problems that loom large in their everyday life (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 45).

The reality is that many Western missionaries were trained to exclude the middle level, but, as Hiebert suggests, it is not enough to know that there is this physical and natural world where we live, work and socialize, and that there is another unseen and ultimate dimension out there, where God is. This kind of thought is prejudiced against mission theology and the missionary work, and as it is the thesis of this essay that mission theology is only complete and the missiological work is only effective when a theology of the excluded middle realm rooted in

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<sup>2</sup> Available in: [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist#.VrC7GMdk\\_eQ](https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/260-most-american-christians-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist#.VrC7GMdk_eQ). Access in 2 feb. 2016.



Scripture is established, we now turn to Bavinck's doctrine of angels to see how he can help one to understand the relation between missions and the excluded middle.

## 2. BAVINCK'S DOCTRINE OF ANGELS

Before getting to the missiological implications of Herman Bavinck's doctrine of angels, it is fundamentally important to understand the development of his doctrine of angels and the spiritual world in order to demonstrate how Bavinck can help one to develop a more effective and relevant missiological thought for today's world. Although he does not deal specifically with demons and other spirits but mainly with angels, it is clear that in dealing with angels, he is dealing with the excluded middle realm. For Bavinck, the physical, material and visible world in which we live in is not everything that exists. There is also a spiritual, immaterial and invisible realm of creation where angels and spiritual beings exist. For Bavinck, "belief in a spiritual world is not philosophical but religious in nature. It is intimately linked with revelation and miracle" (RD II, p. 447). In other words, this distinction cannot be made by natural sciences but by God through revelation alone.

### 2.1 ANGELS AND THE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE

Bavinck begins his writings on the doctrine of angels defining the name. The name "angel," according to Bavinck, "is not a name deriving from their nature (*nomen naturae*) but from their office (*nōen officii*). The Hebrew *mal'āk* simply means "messenger" (RD II, p. 450). Angels have the office of God's messengers.

The first important thing to me mentioned is that angels are part of God's creation, therefore not to be feared as 'divine powers', according to Colossians 1:16. And as Bavinck notes, "about the time of their creation... little can be said with certainty" (RD II, p. 454) but what he affirms with certainty is that "nothing is anterior to the creation of heaven and earth" (RD II, p. 454), it means that the angels, "like the stars, they were sent at the time of creation, but not that they already existed before the beginning of creation" (RD II, p. 454). The second important thing is that angels are all spiritual beings. They do not have bodies. Many scholars and theologians argue for the corporeality of angels<sup>3</sup>, but to this, Bavinck affirms,

Over against all these arguments, however, stands the clear pronouncement of Holy Scripture that the angels are spirits (*pneumata*; Matt. 8:16; 12:45; Luke 7:21; 8:2; 11:26; Acts 19:12; [23:8;] Eph. 6:12; Heb. 1:14), who do not marry (Matt. 22:30), are immortal (Luke 20:35-36) and invisible (Col. 1:16), may be "legion" in a restricted space (Luke 8:30), and like spirits, have no flesh and bones (Luke 24:39) (RD II, p. 456).

Therefore, Bavinck says that despite of all the many distinctions there are among the angels, "Scripture does not discuss them and offers only scant information." What Scripture reveals is that all the angels "have a spiritual nature, they are all called 'ministering spirits,' and they all find their primary activity in the glorification of God" (RD II, p. 454).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description, Cf.: BAVINCK, RD II, p. 455-456.



## 2.2 THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ANGELS

Bavinck understands that “Scripture always maintains the distinction between heaven and earth, angels and humans, the spiritual and the material, invisible and visible things (Col. 1:16)” (RD II, p. 457). And if angels are spirits, according to Bavinck, “they relate differently—more freely—to time and space than humans” (RD II, p. 457). But because they are not infinite and eternal as God, “they do not transcend all space and time as God does, for they are creatures and therefore finite and limited” (RD II, p. 457). For Bavinck, the angels are always in some place, and because they are finite and limited beings, they cannot be in more than one place at the same time. And this is a reality for all other creature that exists in the excluded middle. Bavinck writes, “their presence is not extensive but punctual; and they are spatially so free that they can move at lightning speed and cannot be obstructed by material objects; their translocation is immediate. Of course, such speed of movement and such temporal and spatial freedom that nevertheless is not atemporal or nonspatial, is inconceivable to us” (RD II, p. 457-458).

According to Bavinck, angels are rational beings, with intellect and will, although finite and limited because they are not God. Angels are not impersonal forces or energies. To this Bavinck affirms,

Both of these faculties are repeatedly attributed in Scripture to both good and bad angels (Job 1:6f.; Zech. 3:1ff.; Matt. 8:28ff.; 18:10; 24:36; 2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 6:11; etc.). All sorts of personal attributes and activities occur in their existence, such as self-consciousness and speech (Luke 1:19f.), desiring (1 Pet. 1:12), rejoicing (Luke 15:10), worshipping (Heb. 1:6), believing (James 2:19), lying (John 8:44), sinning (1 John 3:8; etc.). In addition, great power is ascribed to them; the angels are not timid beings but an army of mighty heroes (Ps. 103:20; Luke 11:15ff.; Col. 1:16; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:7; Acts 5:19; Heb. 1:14) (RD II, p. 458).

Angels are moral beings, and “this is evident from the good angels, who serve God night and day, as well as from the bad angels, who did not remain in the truth” (RD II, p. 459). Bavinck says that Scripture reveals very little about the original state of the angels, but “it only testifies that at the end of the work of creation “God saw everything ... and, behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31 KJV). In John 8:44, Jude 6, and 2 Peter 2:4, moreover, the original state of integrity of all angels is assumed” (RD II, p. 459). The angels who have fallen from this state are confirmed as bad angels, evil spirits, and “the angels who remained standing were confirmed in the good” (RD II, p. 459).

## 2.3 ANGELS AND HUMANS

Bavinck states that angels are similar to human beings in all of these characteristics: createdness, spirituality, rationality, and morality. For Bavinck, “both humans and angels are personal, rational, moral beings; both were originally created in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness; both were given dominion, immortality, and blessedness” (RD II, p. 460). The main difference between angels and humans is concerned with the image of God. According to Bavinck, “humans *are*, but the angels are *never*, said to be created in the image of God” (RD II, p. 460). Many theologians and scholars have neglected this reality, but it cannot be



denied. Bavinck cites Augustine as one who did not neglect this difference: “God gave to no other creature than man the privilege of being after his own image” (RD II, p. 461).<sup>4</sup> All the creatures, angels, demons and spirits from the excluded middle, are creation of God, but none of them carry the image of God.

There are some implications to this main difference. First, angels are complete beings as spirits, but humans are a combination of body and soul and they are not complete if one is missing. Therefore, humans are bound to earth and “dominion over the earth is integral to being human... But an angel, however strong and mighty he may be, is a servant in God’s creation, not a master over the earth (Heb. 1:14) (RD II, p. 461-462). Second, angels, as spiritual beings, have no father-son relationship and they are not bound to each other by blood. Bavinck says that, “they are disconnected beings, so that when many fell, the other could remain standing. In human beings, on the other hand, there is an adumbration of the divine being, in which there are also persons, united not only in will and affection, but also in essence and nature” (RD II, p. 462). Third, Scripture teaches that in one man (Adam) all humans fell, but also in one man (Jesus) humans can be saved. Unlike the angels, Bavinck writes, “in humanity there could be an Adam and therefore also a Christ” (RD II, p. 462). As a consequence, there is no salvation or redemption for the spirits from the excluded middle.

Forth, angels are mightier and their intellect and power go beyond human beings. But humans experience a deeper and richer relationship to God and to one another (sexuality, family, work, state and society). Consequently, Bavinck affirms, “the richest and most glorious attributes of God are knowable and enjoyable only by humans. Angels experience God’s power, wisdom, goodness, holiness, and majesty; but the depths of God’s compassions only disclose themselves to humans. The full image of God, therefore, is only unfolded in creaturely fashion in humans—better still, in *humanity* (RD II, p. 462). Fifth, humans stand in a totally different relationship to Christ. Although angels stand under the Lordship of Christ as the head of all creation, Bavinck points that Christ “is not the Reconciler and Savior of the angels... humans alone constitute the church of Christ; it alone is his bride, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling place of God (RD II, p. 463).

## 2.4 BAVINCK ON THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS

Bavinck differentiates between the extraordinary ministry and the ordinary ministry of angels. And for him, Scripture teaches that, “the extraordinary ministry does not begin until the fall, having been necessitated by sin. It is an important component in special revelation” (RD II, p. 463). Bavinck affirms that the angels “especially serve God in the realm of grace, even though the realm of nature is not totally excluded in the process” (RD II, p. 464). And this is the teaching of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. He summarizes his view by saying that,

We first see the angels play a role in guarding Eden (Gen. 3:24); but then they appear to convey revelations, acting to bless or to punish in the history of the patriarchs and prophets and throughout the entire Old Testament. They appear to

<sup>4</sup> Cf.: T. Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, I, qu. 93, art. 3; cf. S. Maresius, *Syst. theol.*, V, 37.



Abraham (Gen. 18), to Lot (Gen. 19), to Jacob (Gen. 28:12; 32:1); they function in the giving of the law (Heb. 2:2; Gal. 3:19; Acts 7:53); they take part in Israel's war (2 Kings 19:35; Dan. 10:13, 20); they announce the counsel of God to Elijah and Elisha, to Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. As if to prove that they are not remnants of polytheism and do not belong to a prehistoric age, their extraordinary ministry even broadens in the days of the New Testament. They are present at the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:13, 26–38; 2:10ff.) and at his temptation (Matt. 4:11); they accompany him throughout his entire earthly life (John 1:51) and appear especially at the time of his suffering (Luke 22:43), resurrection (Matt. 28), and ascension (Acts 1:10). Subsequently they reappear from time to time in the history of the apostles (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7ff., 23; 27:23; Rev. 1:1); then they cease their extraordinary ministry and will only resume a public role at the return of Christ (Matt. 16:27; 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 2 Thess. 1:7; Jude 14; Rev. 5:2; etc.), when they will do battle against God's enemies (Rev. 12:7; 1 Thess. 4:16; [2 Thess. 1:7–8;] Jude 9), gather the elect (Matt. 24:31), and cast the ungodly into the fire (Matt. 13:41, 49) (RD II, p. 463).

It means that the angels work in history accompanying Christ's work of redemption but they do not save. Angels and spirits from the middle realm do not have the power to save or redeem humanity. As Bavinck says, "they transmit revelations, protect God's people, oppose his enemies, and perform an array of services in the kingdom of God... they are ministering spirits in the service of those who will inherit salvation" (RD II, p. 463-464). But the extraordinary ministry of the angels finished when revelation was completed and Christ appeared and Scripture was fully revealed to humanity. In Bavinck's words, "Now Christ has appeared and the Word of God has been fully revealed to us. Consequently, the angels now look to the earth to learn from the church the manifold wisdom of God. What could the angels still give us now that God himself gave us his own Son?" (RD II, p. 464).

Scripture also teaches the ordinary ministry of the angels; a ministry that did not finish when Christ was revealed and Scripture was given to humanity. This ordinary ministry includes the praise and worship of God all day and night (RD II, p. 464),<sup>5</sup> and also "the fact that they rejoice over the conversion of a sinner (Luke 15:10), watch over believers (Ps. 34:7; 91:11), protect the little ones (Matt. 18:10), are present in the church (1 Cor. 11:10; 1 Tim. 5:21), follow it on its journeys through history (Eph. 3:10), allow themselves to be taught by it (Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:12), and carry believers into Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22)" (RD II, p. 464).

## 2.5 THE PROBLEM WITH VENERATION OF ANGELS

Bavinck, along with Calvin and most Reformed scholars, rejects the idea of *guardian angels*. He does not deny the doctrine of protection and intercession of angels, because as he says, "God often and even regularly employs angels, in special as well as in general revelation." He objects the idea that humans have their own guardian angel. It is not true that, "every country and people has its own angel" (RD II, p. 465-467).<sup>6</sup> The consequence of this doctrine of guardian angels is that it leads to "veneration and worship of angels" (RD II, p. 468), as it occurred in Colossians 2:18: "Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in *false*

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: Job 38:7; Isa. 6; Ps. 103:20; 148:2; Rev. 5:11.

<sup>6</sup> Cf.: John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiv.7; *Commentary*, on Ps. 91 and Matt. 18:10.



humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.” Angels are servants that must be honored, but only God may be worshiped.

Throughout history, angel worship was something that had to be dealt with, and still today. Bavinck says that many church father warned the people against the worship and adoration of angels. Even in the New Testament, “the angel rejected John’s worship (Rev. 19:10; 22:9) because angels, though higher in rank, are nevertheless ‘fellow servants’” (RD II, p. 468). And although Scripture prohibits worship and adoration of angels (Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Matt. 4:10; Col. 2:18–19; Rev. 19:10; 22:9), Bavinck claims that, “the boundaries between the worship of God and the respect due to angels were being wiped out” (RD II, p. 468). Here one finds many folk religions and spiritists dealing in a wrong way with the excluded middle, trying to bridge to the other realm of the unseen spiritual world. But as Bavinck alerts, “between this world and the world beyond there is a gap that humans cannot bridge” (RD II, p. 448).

As Bavinck observed before, spiritism is rising around the world with many questions concerning the spiritual world that has been frequently excluded by Western Christians. The question Hiebert raises is how can Western missionaries be more effective in answering the questions that deal with the excluded middle? The question of this essay is how can Bavinck help? What are the missiological implications of Bavinck’s doctrine of angels?

### 3. THE MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Hiebert, in his article, gives an example of what was happening with the Indian villagers that became Christians and how the Western missionaries was responding to it:

What happened to villagers who became Christians? Most of them took problems they formerly took to the saints to the Christian minister or missionary. Christ replaced Krishna or Siva as the healer of their spiritual diseases. Many of them in time turned to Western allopathic medicines for many of the illnesses they took to the doctor and quack. But what of the plagues that the magician cured? What about spirit possession, or curses, or witchcraft or black magic? What was the Christian answer to these? Neither the missionary evangelist or doctor had an answer. These did not really exist, they said. But to people for whom these were very real experiences in their lives, there had to be an answer. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of them returned to the magician for cures (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 39).

For this reason, Hiebert believes that the solution for Western missionaries is to develop holistic theologies that deal with all areas of life, including a holistic theology of the excluded middle. And for him, a holistic theology of the excluded middle “includes a theology of God in human history: in the affairs of nations, of peoples and of individuals. This must include a theology of divine guidance, provision and healing; of ancestors, spirits and invisible powers of this world; and of suffering, misfortune and death” (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 46). Hiebert concludes that, “so long as the missionary comes with a two-tier world view with God confined to the supernatural, and the natural world operating for all practical purposes according to autonomous scientific laws, Christianity will continue to be a secularizing force in the world” (HIEBERT, 1982, p. 46).



As it is the thesis of this essay that Bavinck's doctrine of angels is helpful to missions because it takes the middle world seriously and provides Western missionaries with a view of the spiritual world based on God's revelation not on superstitions, and with a worldview centered in the sovereignty of the triune God over the spiritual forces. The purpose of this essay has been to demonstrate that in order to be an effective missionary in today's world and to be able to correctly answer the questions that people are doing, one must take into account the existence of the spiritual middle realm, and deal with it within the framework of God's revelation, having the triune God as the sovereign over all the excluded middle. Bavinck is of fundamental importance in the task of developing a theology of the excluded middle, and his doctrine of angels provides these important tools to the missionary work.

Thomas F. Torrance, align with Bavinck's view, claims that, "disregard of the ministry of angels will certainly lead to a serious deficiency in Christian spirituality, bringing many forms of shallowness and instability in its train. That modern eyes should be opened to the ministry of angels is very much to be desired" (TORRANCE, 2000, p. 137). It means that in order to be an effective missionary in today's world and to be able to correctly answer the questions that people are doing, one must take into account the spiritual middle realm; and it is true that Bavinck is a great set of tools to help Western missionaries in their missionary work. So, how can Bavinck's doctrine of angels help? What are the missiological implications of Bavinck's doctrine of angels?

In many places in China, Japan, India, Korea, Africa, and some places of the Americas, there are serious problems with people who live in tribal societies where kinship ties are really strong. In those societies, magic and chants, witchcrafts and ancestors play an important role in families lives, and it has been a big challenge for the church and Christian missionaries. What should Christian missionaries do with beliefs regarding ancestors, descendants and spiritual powers worship? Bavinck's perspective is that one should start with a critical evaluation of those cultures in the light of Holy Scripture.

First of all, Western missionaries need to know that the spiritual world exists and most of the questions and concerns of human beings are related to this middle spiritual realm. Bavinck says that, "the transcendence of God, belief in revelation and miracle, the essence of religion—all this automatically carries with it belief in spiritual beings. The world that is present to our senses does not satisfy human beings" (RD II, p. 447-448). With this statement, Bavinck offers a point of contact for the missionaries who are willing to answer the questions of the people and reach the lost. Religion is part of the essence of humanity; God has set eternity in the human heart (Ec. 3:11) and many of their questions are not restricted to this natural world but they have to do with the unseen and spiritual realm. John Bolt claims that, "it is this methodology, placing the content of Christian biblical, doctrinal, theological truth in the context of universal human religious desiring and longing that gives Bavinck's theology its missiological cast" (BOLT, 2014), p. 56). The materialistic view of the world does not fully satisfy human beings. As Bavinck says, "good and evil, both in a religious and an ethical sense, are rooted in a world other than that which appears to our senses. Belief in angels gives expression to that other world" (RD II, p. 447).

Second, to deal with religions such as Spiritism, Western missionaries need to understand that most of their beliefs have to do with superstitions, and they must be confronted not with



experience but with biblical teaching. As Bavinck points, “the spiritism in which this spiritualism today manifests itself in the lives of many people is nothing other than a new form of superstition” (RD II, p. 448). And to the attempt to call and to talk to another spirits or dead family members, Bavinck observes that, “between this world and the world beyond there is a gap that humans cannot bridge. If they nevertheless attempt to cross it, they lapse into superstition and become prey to the very spirits they have conjured up” (RD II, p. 448). According to Bavinck, to try to communicate with to this spiritual world is against Scripture (Deut. 18:11ff.).

Third, Western missionaries need to comprehend that the spiritual realm is a result of God’s revelation and all questions from the excluded middle must be answered having Scripture as the true foundation. As Bavinck affirms,

For the Christian the revelation given in Scripture is the sure foundation also of belief in angels. In an earlier time people sought to prove the existence of good and especially of bad angels historically, that is, from oracles, appearances, ghosts, the demon-possessed, and so on. But these proofs were no more convincing than those based on reason. In Scripture, on the other hand, the existence of angels is taught very clearly” (RD II, p. 450).

He also writes that, “the ultimate ground for our belief in angels, accordingly, lies also in revelation” (RD II, p. 450). Christian missionaries must understand that in order to deal with the excluded middle, they cannot go to the experience as a source of truth and answers but they must go to God’s revelation, having Scripture as the sure foundation to effectively engage in missionary work. Bavinck says that, “Christian experience as such does not teach us anything on this subject” (RD II, p. 450). Scripture affirms that the excluded middle is real, the spiritual world exists and Western Christians must deal with it within the framework of God’s revelation.

Western missionaries should also be empowered with a Christian worldview that does not deny the existence of spiritual forces. In fact, Scripture teaches that there are evil spiritual forces that fight against Christ and his church, but it also teaches that the answer to this spiritual reality is the triune God who is sovereign over all creation, including over the excluded middle. God sent Jesus to save human beings, and both, Father and Son, sent the Holy Spirit to help the Church to overcome the battle against sin and evil spiritual forces. Paul writes that, “we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world” (Galatians 4:3). But God sent his Son Jesus Christ to set the world free from spiritual sin and from the oppression by evil spiritual forces. To Jesus was given all authority in heaven and on earth, in the physical and in the spiritual realms, and in Christ, Paul writes, “you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world” (Colossians 2:20). For this reason Bavinck rhetorically asks, “what could the angels still give us now that God himself gave us his own Son?” (RD II, p. 464).

Therefore, when people raise questions, doubts and concerns about the future, accidents, misfortunes, crisis and problems of the present life and things from the past that are unknown, and that can frustrate their plans for this life, Western missionaries should point them to the triune God of Scripture, because only there they will find the answers they need to deal with their concerns about the future, crisis of the present life and the unknown things from the past.



And then they can find peace. Western Missionaries should teach them that God is the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth sent his Son, Jesus Christ to free us from all the evil spiritual forces on the cross (Colossians 1:13; 2:15), and through the inward work of the Holy Spirit, enables and empowers one to overcome the evil spirits that “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). As the apostle John writes, “You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). The triune God is sovereign over the seen and the unseen universe and all the spirits, angels and demons are subject to Him.

For Bavinck, it is a tragedy when people pursue and deal with the spiritual world independently of God’s revelation. It only leads to mysticism, occultism, spiritism and more superstitions. Belief in Satan, demons, and angels is essential but it should be based on and rooted in Scripture, as Bavinck claims. There is no need for a new theology of the spiritual world. What we need is a mission theology completely grounded in God’s revelation, that takes into account the excluded middle, and missionaries that learn how to deal with the existence of spiritual forces, as Bavinck did, setting aside all superstition and claiming the fundamental relevance of Scripture. He writes that the spiritual world and “the doctrine of angels as Scripture presents it to us gains in value and significance” (RD II, p. 449). Belief in the Spiritual world rooted in Scripture is important to Christian missions because, as Bavinck points, “while in various religions and spiritistic theories this doctrine of angels is distorted, the boundary between God and his creatures erased, and the distinction between revelation and religion denied, yet in Scripture this doctrine again surfaces in a way that does not rob God of his honor and leaves the purity of religion untouched (RD II, p. 449-450). Therefore, one can affirm that the middle realm exists, it is present and it is important, but it no longer dominates.

Bavinck teaches that angels and demons exist, and that people need to know that this world has a spiritual enemy who wants to destroy everything God created, including humanity. Since humans are the only creatures that were created in the image and the likeness of God, they are even more attacked by evil spiritual forces, and this battle can only be overcome by the power and grace of God the Father, through the death and resurrection of God the Son, by the inward work of the Holy Spirit.

## **CONCLUSION**

The missiological implications of Bavinck’s doctrine of angels demonstrate that there are close connections between the spiritual world and missions, thus, in order to develop a complete mission theology, to be an effective missionary in today’s world and to be able to correctly answer the questions that people are doing, one must take into account the spiritual middle realm. As it was seen in this essay, Bavinck’s doctrine of angels is helpful to missions because it takes the middle world seriously and provides Western missionaries with a view of the excluded middle based on God’s revelation not on superstitions, and with a worldview centered in the sovereignty of the triune God over the spiritual forces. People go after spiritual powers and forces for quick answers to their questions and to satisfy their present desires, but only the Gospel can bring eternal answers and satisfaction. Only union with Christ brings



salvation to their souls and forgiven to their sins. Western missionaries should emphasize God's sovereignty over the spiritual powers, Scripture over superstitions, prayer over magic and chants.

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