

A.A. van Ruler and the Point of Connection

Allan Janssen

It is a commonplace to remark that revelation was at the center of theological thought throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The problem of how revelation engaged human existence was provoked and intensified by Karl Barth and his contemporaries. Among them is the Dutch theologian A.A. van Ruler (1908-1970), who addressed the subject first in his doctoral dissertation, "The Fulfillment of the Law: a dogmatic inquiry of the relation of revelation and existence,"¹ only to return later to it a number of times. Recently, the Dutch theological world has been treated to the publication of his collected works (now in the third volume), which include previously unpublished works such as the extended lectures from 1957-1959 on natural and revealed theology. This adds to the few lectures already published that include reflection on such topics as the *aanknopingspunt* ("the point of connection"), and so provides fresh information concerning Van Ruler's position concerning such things as natural theology, the place of philosophy, and the place of reason in the theological project.

Van Ruler's position will be of interest particularly as it responds to the strong *Nein!* that expressed Karl Barth's response to the possibility of natural theology, particularly in reaction to Emil Brunner's affirmation of the possibility of a point of connection. Van Ruler began his theological career in the early 1930s as a Barthian, only to move away from Barth in the mid-forties. This would happen largely because Van Ruler could not remain content with what he saw as Barth's Christomonism. The Spirit was fully part of the Trinity, and fully active not only in salvation, but in the sanctification of the world. This would lead to a more positive valuation of such things as philosophy, and indeed, would lead to Van Ruler's take on the subject of this paper, the point of connection.²

Van Ruler would maintain that a point of connection does in fact exist. The burden of this paper will be to show where that connection exists and how it fits within Van Ruler's larger theological project. It is the case that for Van Ruler, God's action does not reach its destination in Christ, but in the human and in creation. God's concern is for God's beloved creation. Salvation happens for the sake of creation. God does not abandon creation to itself. God wrestles with the human, and that struggle with the human is the connecting point. To see how this is so, we begin with the notion of revelation.

Van Ruler's Concept of Revelation

Presupposed in the notion of revelation is that it discloses both that which stands beyond human knowing *and* the capability of the human to acknowledge and to understand that which is revealed. Hence a point of connection exists of necessity. The

theological problem is to locate that point of connection. Van Ruler does so when he asserts: “God himself – in his wrestling with the human – is the point of connection.”³ This would make philosophy possible, indeed both for the human as she delights in her existence and as reflection on creation in communion with God.

Van Ruler makes this claim in full acknowledgment of the Barth-Brunner contest over the place of natural theology, general revelation, and the possibility or impossibility of a point of connection between God and the human. Indeed, Van Ruler will agree that viewed Christologically, a “no” must be said against a point of connection. However, he claims that *pneumatologically* we must return to ask the question of the point of connection yet again.⁴ This time the answer will be in the affirmative. For it is in the Spirit that God wrestles with the human. Thus the point of connection is made not from the side of the human, but from the side of God. It is nevertheless genuine.

Van Ruler will make this argument because the human lives in relation to God. It is of the essence of the human to be related.⁵ The human does not find God, but is found *by* God. The human cannot find his or her way to God, cannot *climb* toward God. Still, God does not abandon the human. God is and remains permanently with the human. God is active with the human, wrestling with him or her.⁶ This relationship is not limited to the regenerate, but includes all humans; in this context Van Ruler particularly names the pagan.⁷

The *Aanknopingspunt*: Descriptive Analysis of a Concept

I pause to observe how Van Ruler more analytically describes the *aanknopingspunt*. He does so in a part of a series of lectures in 1949. There he makes two sets of distinctions. The first is between a formal and a material point of connection. In regard to the second, he makes a further distinction between a negative and a positive material point of connection. He will find difficulty in each of the resultant three ways of talking about the point of connection, but will return to the notion that it is the Spirit who, wrestling with the human, realizes the connection.

With respect to the first, the *formal point of connection*, Van Ruler points to preaching. The human is a creature of language, receptive to communication through the vehicle of the “word.” There can be no communication from God without this receptivity. However, the word tends to slip into invisibility, and with it the visible church begins to disappear as well. The ever-present danger of Gnosticism reappears.

The “solution to the problem” at this point is that the word as a genuinely human phenomenon is chosen and sanctified to be a vehicle for revelation. That happens in the command and promise that comes from the institution and blessing of Christ. And that occurs not of itself, but is the work of the Holy Spirit. The human is by nature likened to

an “ass at a symphony” (Calvin’s image); nevertheless, “preaching is in essence understandable as the Word of God...only by the activity of the Holy Spirit.”⁸

The second, the *negative material point of connection*, is found in the human consciousness of guilt, in a bad conscience, and in the crisis of existence. These present themselves in the antinomies of reasonable thought, and this as preparation or even as the condition for the proclamation of grace.⁹ In a negative manner, then, the human is receptive to God’s address. The connection is the very impoverishment the human experiences.

The problem is that this construal underestimates the power and reality of sin. He alludes to the Heidelberg Catechism as it reminds believers that they know their misery as they are reminded of the law of God¹⁰ and furthermore that the dynamic of conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Knowledge of human misery or “falling-short” comes only as the human is addressed by God, thus only through preaching. This, too, is the work of the Spirit as it awakens the human heart to its misery.¹²

The negative material point of connection leads to the *positive material point of connection*. Indeed, the negative implies the positive. The crisis in existence points to the origin, where the human has a memory (perhaps faint) of an original connection with God. The human, as such, knows God.¹³

Van Ruler lists several candidates for this point of connection: nature, history, the human conscience, the world, the unconscious (or collective unconscious), race, but also reason, intuition, and speculation. Such a point of connection could function in one of three ways. It could, first, complete what one does not yet know of God in order to participate in salvation. It could, second, clarify what is thus far unclear or vague concerning the knowledge of God. Or, third, it could function critically, distinguishing that which is foolish in what pretends to be one’s natural knowledge of God.¹⁴

At this point Van Ruler turns to the second article of the Belgic Confession as it speaks of two “books” that give us knowledge of God: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Does this present us with a positive point of connection? Van Ruler makes a further distinction, this time between the objective aspect and the subjective. The objective aspect asks whether God reveals God’s self in the work of creation, maintenance, and rule, and furthermore gives God’s self to be known. The subjective aspect asks whether the human does in fact know God as God discloses God’s self in the creation.¹⁵

Van Ruler answers the first question positively. God does in fact reveal God’s self so that, objectively, God can be known from the world as God’s creation. Denial of this would lead down the path of Marcionism. It would contradict what Van Ruler sees as the central point of Biblical religion – the denial of a dualism of spirit and matter, the

acceptance of this physical world and our place in it, and the unity of Old and New Testaments.¹⁶

Still, to the second question, the subjective, Van Ruler responds negatively. What God objectively gives to be known cannot in fact be known by the human. Human sin has made it impossible to see what is in fact the case. From the human side and under the condition of sin there is no point of connection. Notice, though, that this is from the human side. It is not the case that God has not established a bridge.

This negative response is not, however, the end of the matter. Van Ruler goes one step further and asks whether something changes with belief. Here he claims that, yes, the regenerate human can “read” the first book. This is not knowledge of salvation, of God’s way in Christ, but *through* Christ’s salvific work it is knowledge of what God gives to be known of God’s self in the world. It is partial and incomplete, but it is an active knowledge of God.¹⁷ Or put more precisely:

We know the Creator not from his work, nor in belief. We know him as Creator only from the Scripture and that from Scripture as witness to Christ, but then: *in* the work of his creation and that in truth: only in the work of his creation.¹⁸

Set within the broader framework of Van Ruler’s theology, we can understand his appreciation of human reason and the place that philosophy might take in the human enterprise. Reason is, after all, a part of the human as creature. Thus it participates in God’s creation. And God’s creation “may not be understood as a fiasco.”¹⁹ Indeed, salvation, in Van Ruler’s construal, is not to replace this creation with a new one, nor is it to perfect an incomplete creation. It is to rescue this creation, to “save” it, and so to enable it to become the creation that God intended from the outset.

Reason, then, is not a source of knowledge of God, nor is it a “natural” knowledge of God’s salvific action. A general revelation may leave the human with the notion that there is a god, and that such a god must be almighty, eternal, etc. This is not, however, a knowledge of the Triune God, of the Messiah, or of God’s way with Israel and the church. Reason (and not only reason, but conscience, culture, etc. as well) is not the subject but the object of salvation.

Salvation as the Restoration of Created Reality: The Work of the Spirit

At issue is *being*. Indeed, the issue is God’s creational intentions. God’s salvific actions serve this good created being. The wonder is not simply that I am saved, but that *I am there* at all. Created reality rests purely on the good favor of God. It exists. And it has a point, a goal, one given by God. “If [creation] has a sense and an end [*telos*], that lies in the fact that the Creator was so friendly not only to call things into existence but to add

a goal.”²⁰ The point of God’s work is not salvation, but in what salvation issues: the saved human as he or she lives now in relation to God.

Said in Trinitarian terms, the work of the Messiah – salvation – becomes the work of the Spirit – sanctification. In a remarkable essay from 1964, “Structural Differences Between the Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives,” Van Ruler distinguishes between categorical ways of thinking of the work of Christ and that of the Spirit. In Christological terms, for example, one uses the notion of *enhypostia* (and its related *anhypostia*). This does not work as it does with thinking of the human in relation to God because, for Van Ruler, the essence of the human is not found in God, but in the human as him or her self. Rather thinking from the perspective of the Spirit, one uses the notion of *unio personalis*.²¹ The human *qua* human is drawn into full partnership with God. Likewise, while Christology uses the category of “assumption,” in that the Son assumes human flesh, pneumatology uses the notion of adoption. We are not assumed, but are adopted.²² Van Ruler asks: “...is it not the *I* that is being saved? There is something about my freedom, my will, my choice that is at stake.”²³

I add two other structural differences (Van Ruler has ten!). First, when we talk about Christology we use the notion of “substitution” or representation, (he is thinking here of the atonement). But that category does not apply in pneumatology. There we think of “reciprocity.” The Spirit frees our will, frees us to become human, mature. God’s business becomes *my* business!²⁴ As he puts it in another essay on the Holy Spirit, “The Word of God that is spoken to me must become my own word that I speak back to God and that I express from myself. That this happens is the essence, or in any case the goal of the work of the Spirit!”²⁵

The second and final structural difference to which I refer is this: when thinking of Christ, we acknowledge his presence as a discrete event, as *eph’ hapax*. This is necessarily so, given Christ’s humanity. The Spirit, on the other hand, having come once at Pentecost, was poured out, so that his coming is what Van Ruler calls “singularity in continuity.” Now we can say that “through the Spirit I now will and do things along with God.” I act together with God. The kingdom is present in the manner of the Spirit, and we, as humans fully participate. This is the “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

It is the Spirit, then, who enables the regenerate human to think and to reason. This is an “enlightened” reason. This is thinking and reflecting now within the creation understood as the theater of the kingdom of God, seen (yes *seen*) as the inbreaking of the eschaton.

Van Ruler would call this “theonomous reciprocity.” It is theonomous because it is the work of God, now through the Spirit. The Spirit works with the human in such a way

that led by the Spirit the human acts in genuine freedom, and so is enabled to think and act for herself. The dynamic becomes one of a work that is both play and love.

And it is a genuine reciprocity because it is the human who acts in partnership with God. This is because the God who created the human in love desires to have the human as a full partner in the relationship of love and work. Van Ruler uses the nearly untranslatable Dutch word *mannetje* here. Perhaps the Yiddish says it best: little *mensh*. This is someone who stands on her own feet; someone who can stand up to another in her full integrity, and who acts out of an integral sense of self. This human, then, engaged by the Spirit now is fully capable of reason and philosophy as she delights together with God. This is the Spirit who has wrestled with the human all along, now wrestling together with her in full delight.

Again, this must be set within the context of the creation. God did not make a mistake with creation. "God is not an angry (*Kaputtmacher*) in his revelation *vis-a-vis* his creation. God acts in creation, but does so with the "soft violence of grace." God is not intent on acting against reason, against the human as a reflective being, but rather in revelation "heals reason."²⁷ The human, then, can engage reason now as a redeemed person and with redeemed thinking.

One sees something of this in a remarkable stretch in Van Ruler's lectures on natural and revealed theology of 1957-59.²⁸ Van Ruler first argues that philosophy has no independent place in the encyclopedia because it is about the development of metaphysics and worldviews. This role has been taken over by theology.²⁹ Consequently, he can find no place for philosophy. But then in a strategy typical of him, he turns the argument around and asks whether there is not a place outside or beyond "particular revelation," where the human might not reflect on reality as it is.³⁰ He asks rhetorically, "Is particular revelation, is God in his particular revelation, is Christ the end of all God's ways and the ultimate destination of the human? Do God and the human thus remain caught in salvation and authority? Or must we propose with Augustine the series: *ratio - fides - intellectus*? Then *intelligere*, insight, understanding, contemplation, reflection, emerge above *credere!*"³¹ "Philosophy then stands originally and ultimately above theology."

One now can see how Van Ruler can make this claim. For the human, now saved, delights in being. And philosophy is reflection on the nature of being - and on the nature of reflection on being, which is itself a way of being. Of fundamental importance is the fact that I am here, that I exist. One hears here an echo of Bavinck's second Stone Lecture, on "Revelation and Philosophy," where Bavinck claims that "in our self-consciousness we are not only conscious of being, but also of being something definite, of being the very thing we are... Before all thinking and willing, before all reasoning and action, we are and exist, exist in a definite way, and inseparable therefrom have a consciousness of our being and of its specific mode."³² Not surprisingly, Van Ruler

would situate his reflections on the place of reason with the creature in his meditations on Ecclesiastes. There he will assert that “the search for the light of Reason in the totality of reality is indeed the best and most honorable thing there is... Eternal life will without a doubt include specifically the fact that we bathe ourselves in the light of this Reason.”³³ The human will enjoy reality with all her senses alert, now redeemed, including thinking along with God in the play of love. This is not yet the case, of course. We still live under the shadow of sin, our minds darkened. But this does not keep us from thinking.

The Spirit wrestles with us. As the Psalmist put it, “I was always in your presence” (Psalm 73). God’s engagement with the human does not end, and so there is a connecting point, not as the human probes the inner self, but as God engages, saves, and – yes – indwells the human creature. Or as a draft confession of the Reformed Church in America, *Our Song of Hope*, has it:

The Spirit leads us into Truth—
the Truth of Christ's salvation,
into increasing knowledge of all existence.
He rejoices in human awareness of God's creation
and gives freedom to those on the frontiers of research.
We are overwhelmed by the growth in our knowledge.
While our truths come in broken fragments,
we expect the Spirit to unite these in Christ.³⁴

¹ *De veroulling van de wet: Een dogmatische studie over de verhouding van openbaring en existentie* (Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach, 1947).

² For fuller biographical details see my *Kingdom, Office and Church: A Study of A.A. van Ruler's Doctrine of Ecclesiastical Office* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 24-33.

³ “*De theologia naturali et revelata*,” in *Verzameld Werk II* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2008), 170.

⁴ “*De andere zijde van het vraagstuk van de natuurlijke theologie*,” in *VW II*, 245.

⁵ “*Naturali et revelati*,” 147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸ “*Het aanknopingspunt*,” in *VW II*, 122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹⁰ Q.A. 3.

¹¹ Q.A. 88-89.

-
- ¹² "Aanknopingspunt," 124.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 125.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. One needs to understand creation in the broadest sense. It would include the human in her culture, reason, etc.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 126.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 126-127.
- ¹⁸ "Natuur en genade," in *VW II*, 116.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 114.
- ²⁰ Van Ruler, *Dwaasheden van het leven*, Eerst deel (Nijkerk: Callenbach, n.d.), 51.
- ²¹ "Structural Differences between the Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives" in John Bolt, ed., *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics* (Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston, 1989), 30-31.
- ²² Ibid., 31-34.
- ²³ Ibid., 33.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 35.
- ²⁵ "Hoofdlijnen," 33.
- ²⁶ "Structural Differences," 38-39.
- ²⁷ *VW II*, 179.
- ²⁸ On the following paragraph, see *VWII*, 195-199.
- ²⁹ Among other, Van Ruler cites H. Bavink here, from *De wetenschap der H. Godgeleerdheid*, 35 and *Godsdienst en Godgeleerdheid*, 8-9.
- ³⁰ Van Ruler sometimes uses the image of the ice skater to describe a pattern of thinking. One first thinks in one way, and then shifts the weight to approach a problem from a different, albeit parallel, direction.
- ³¹ *VW II*, 198.
- ³² *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 66.
- ³³ *Dwaasheden*, 138.
- ³⁴ Eugene P. Heideman, *Our Song of Hope: A Provisional Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 9. Interestingly Van Ruler was the doctoral promoter of the principal author of this confession, Heideman, who wrote his dissertation on *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen, 1959).