

**FIVE STUDIES IN THE THOUGHT
OF HERMAN BAVINCK,
A CREATOR OF MODERN DUTCH THEOLOGY**



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Edited by
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EDITOR'S PREFACE

This volume contains the five first-place prize-winning entries in an essay contest associated with the International Conference, "A Pearl and a Leaven: Herman Bavinck for the 21st Century," held on the campus of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary, September 18-20, 2008. Graduate students in theology, religious studies, and history were invited to submit proposals for papers that would engage and contribute to the scholarship on Herman Bavinck. The eighteen submissions were evaluated by a jury of Bavinck scholars, including Ronald Gleason, George Harinck, Eugene Heideman, Henk van den Belt, Cornelis van der Kooi, Dirk van Keulen, Cornelis Venema, and Albert Wolters. The five first-place winners were awarded a \$1000.00 scholarship, opportunity to present their papers in summary, receive feedback from and have opportunity to dialogue with the aforementioned Bavinck scholars for a whole day at a pre-conference gathering on September 18, 2008, and guaranteed publication of their essays. Five runner-ups were also invited to come to the pre-conference event and participate in the scholarly conversation.

For those of us who were "veteran" students of Herman Bavinck's theology, the interest in Bavinck shown by these younger scholars and the quality of their work was gratifying. The larger conference commemorated the centenary of Bavinck's celebrated Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1908-1909, *The Philosophy of Revelation*,¹ along with the completion of an English translation of

¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1909; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

Bavinck's *magnum opus*, the four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*.² The papers of the conference have been published in the *Calvin Theological Journal*,³ and the publication of these essays fulfils the promise made to the essayists that their work would be published by a scholarly press.

The essays themselves represent a significant contribution to neo-Calvinist scholarship in general and Bavinck scholarship in particular. Particularly gratifying, and worth noting is the willingness of the younger scholars to push the envelope by challenging established conventional interpretations of Bavinck and Dutch neo-Calvinism, including respectful disagreement with some members of the Bavinck jury who would be evaluating their proposals and responding to their papers. It is a tribute to the quality of their work that the conversations of that day in September 2008 were passionate, stimulating, and above all, respectful and courteous. Let me elaborate briefly on this with a very short history lesson.

The Dutch neo-Calvinist philosophical and theological tradition during the twentieth century, after the deaths of Kuyper and Bavinck, in 1920 and 1921 respectively, became quite uncomfortable with its own roots, notably the much-maligned "scholastic" character of its philosophical and theological claims. Reformational philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd led the way with double-barreled critique of Kuyper's and Bavinck's philosophical commitment to Augustinian "Logos realism."⁴ Dooyeweerd, and following him, the Westminster

² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, four volumes, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2008)

³ *Calvin Theological Journal* 45/1 (April 2010).

⁴ Herman Dooyeweerd, "Kuypers Wetenschapsleer," *Philosophia Reformata* 4 (1939): 193-232; *idem.*, "De Verhouding Tusschen Wijsbegeerte en Theologie en de Strijd der Faculteiten," *Philosophia Reformata* 23 (1958): 1-21; 49-84. By "Logos realism" I have in mind the epistemological conviction that there is an analogy between the order of creation and the human mind's capacity for seeing that order, an

Theological Seminary icon, Cornelius Van Til, appealed to Kuyper's notion of a radical antithesis between the science of the "regenerate" and the science of the "unregenerate." In Kuyper's famous words: "Two kinds of people, two kinds of science."⁵ Thinkers in this tradition are ever alert for impurities in Christian thought, especially efforts to *synthesize* biblical ideas with those from non-scriptural sources. The inevitable result, so it is claimed, is an unstable "dualism" that must be countered by the integral biblical ground motive of "creation, fall, and redemption through Jesus Christ in communion with the Holy Spirit."⁶ Herman Dooyeweerd, for example, contended that Western Civilization had been formed by a clash of four mutually exclusive, religiously absolute "ground motives." In addition to the biblical motive, he identified: 1) the Greek Matter-Form motive; 2) the Roman Catholic Nature-Grace motive; and 3) the modern Nature-Freedom motive.⁷ With the heightened wariness of "synthesis and dualism" it goes without saying that natural theology and natural law do not play much of a role in this theological and philosophical stance. Reformational thought expresses itself particularly in its opposition to the tradition of Roman Catholic "scholasticism" for its attempt to wed Aristotle with the gospel.

While Abraham Kuyper can be said to be the primary neo-Calvinist "father" of twentieth-century Dutch reformational philosophy, Bavinck became the great stimulator of Dutch Reformed theological

analogy that is grounded in the Divine Logos by whom all things are created and who is "the light that enlightens every man that comes into the world." (John 1:14)

⁵Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954 [1898]), 150-182.

⁶Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, eds. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra; trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), 12.

⁷These are unpacked in *Roots of Western Culture*.

questions in the church and the academy.⁸ Yet, there is something striking about the theological work that followed in the Dutch Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) community. Bavinck's own theological program and method was followed *only in part*. G. C. Berkouwer and his numerous students made much of Bavinck's probing questions in the face of modernity's challenges to the Christian faith; they also appealed to the strong existential (*ethische*) character of his theology. But, they studiously avoided the metaphysical framework in which Bavinck—like Wolfhart Pannenberg at the end of the twentieth century—sought to break away from the Kantian split and think of theological statements as scientific, universal *truth claims* and not mere subjective “values” (Ritschl) or “feelings” (Schleiermacher). Instead, and contrary to Bavinck's explicit repudiation of it, they sought a strictly “biblical theology” with kerygmatic content.

When the reformational philosophers come into the tent of learning with “biblical theologians” and together sit down at table with Karl Barth, natural theology and natural law are not on the menu. The first two essays in this volume serve up a hearty dish of both and, so it seems to me at least, it is a meal that Reformed theologians and philosophers need to eat. The cases presented by David Sytsma and Theodore Van Raalte, for natural theology and natural law respectively, are thorough and compelling. They build on the solid foundation of scholarship that has demanded a reconsideration of the careless pigeon-

⁸ “Kuyper's influence worked through the development of the Philosophy of the Law-Idea [Dooyeweerd]. But Bavinck raised theological questions that continue to play a crucial role in mainstream theology after he had gone.” (G.C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology: Movements and Motives*, ed. and trans. Lewis B. Smedes [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 130)

holing of medieval thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas⁹ and also accents the continuity between Calvin and the Calvinists.¹⁰ What they do in these two essays is to take these insights into fresh areas and challenge some pieties that continue to bedevil many Reformed undergraduates and seminary students alike. Since Jerome Zanchi's *De operibus Dei intra spacium sex dierum creatis*, "De actionibus intellectivae,"¹¹ is one of Herman Bavinck's principal sources for understanding the intellect, David Sytsma has appended a translation to facilitate comparison of Bavinck's with Zanchi's (see pp. 50-56).

It is good to consider the two essays by Adam Eitel and Mark Jones together. Eitel asks us to acknowledge the *umwelt* of nineteenth-century trinitarian speculation as background to Bavinck's own fondness for trinitarian formula as the *essence* of the Christian religion. Did Bavinck learn from Hegel? Eitel suggests he may have. At the same time, Jones's essay reminds us that sophisticated Christological reflection was taking place long before Hegel appeared on the scene. These two essays will not settle the matter; there is plenty here to sort out and for others to weigh in on.

Finally, in all of our enthusiasm for Bavinck as a great man and great theologian, it is very obvious that he was a child of his time. Niels van Driel's examination of Bavinck's profound (and sometimes

⁹ Cf. Arvin Vos, *Aquinas, Calvin, & Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹⁰ Here the work of my colleague at Calvin Theological Seminary, Dr. Richard Muller, is crucial; see his multi-volume *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003 —), especially the methodological chapter 1 in Volume One, *Prolegomena to Theology* (2003), 27-84.

¹¹ Jerome Zanchi, *De operibus Dei intra spacium sex dierum creatis*, Pars tertia, II.vii (cols. 636-38), in *Operum theologicorum*, 8 tom. in 3 vols. (Geneva: Samuel Crispin, 1617-1619), tom. III.

tortuous) wrestling with the status and role of modern women in church and society, in a community committed to an orthodox reading of Scripture, has the great merit of eliciting appreciation while not necessarily agreeing with Bavinck's views. Van Driel shows clearly that Bavinck was his own man, willing to challenge Abraham Kuyper and his own church community, open to the possibility that God was providentially leading history into new and even promising paths. Bavinck's scruples and concerns may be different from ours (or not); his desire to seek creative ways of being true to genuine biblical principle while finding new application remains exemplary for serious Christian believers.

This is the place to express gratitude and appreciation to a number of people. The conference would never have happened without the support of the administration and support staff of Calvin Theological Seminary. A special thanks to Betsy Steele-Halstead for her creativity and skills in conference organization and promotion. A warm thank you also to the individuals and institutions—including those who lead them—that provided financial support to make the conference possible and a great success: Calvin College; Calvin Institute for Christian Worship; Calvin Theological Seminary; Dordt College; Redeemer University College; Trinity Christian College; Mid-America Reformed Seminary; Princeton Theological Seminary; Protestant Reformed Theological School; VU University, Amsterdam; Western Theological Seminary; Dutch Reformed Translation Society; Edwin Mellen Press; Dr. and Mrs. Rimmer and Ruth De Vries; Dr. Joel Beeke; Mr. Henry Witte; Mrs. Hilda Bolt. My own *doctorvater*, Dr. Herbert Richardson, Director of Edwin Mellen Press, deserves a double thanks for a generous contribution to the conference scholarship fund for Ph.D., seminary, and college students (the three-level essay contest was his idea!) and for his willingness to publish the essays in this volume. Finally, thanks

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Ad maiorem Dei gloriam

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Advent, 2010