

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

by J. Mark Beach<sup>1</sup>

THE YEAR A.D. 2008 has witnessed the completion of the publication in English translation of Herman Bavinck's most important work, his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*). Translated by John Vriend and skillfully edited by John Bolt of Calvin Theological Seminary, this translation of Bavinck's dogmatics, which is published by Baker Academic and represents the most ambitious project of the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, is an accomplishment that holds great promise for Reformed theology. At last, students of Reformed theology have Bavinck's dogmatics available to them in English as a model of Reformed theological scholarship at its best. The year 2008 is also an important year for commemorating Bavinck's legacy, since it marks the 100th anniversary of his delivery of the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. These lectures, which were originally published in Dutch, German and English with the title, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, focus upon one of the primary themes of Bavinck's theology and confirm his reputation at the time as a leading Reformed theologian. In addition to the completion of the English edition of Bavinck's dogmatics, a conference on Bavinck was recently held at Calvin Theological Seminary (18–21 September) under the sponsorship of a number of Reformed seminaries. The time is ripe, therefore, for the Reformed community in North America to (re)acquaint itself with Bavinck's thought and influence. Indeed, it is not saying too much to assert that Bavinck ranks among the premiere Reformed theologians of the Reformed tradition and deserves a place among some of its more prominent names.

Though this is not the place to offer a biography of Herman Bavinck, a few features of his life and work should be noted. Bavinck was born at Hoogeveen, the Netherlands, in the province of Drenthe, on December 13, 1854.<sup>2</sup> His father, Rev. Jan Bavinck, was a well-known and respected pastor in the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk* (Christian Reformed Church). This denomination was originally

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Cornelis P. Venema, co-editor of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, for the first two paragraphs of this introductory essay inasmuch as he penned them and graciously has allowed me to use them in my editor's introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Our brief comments on Bavinck's life and work are based upon the following sources: "Bavinck, Herman," in *Christelijke Encyclopedie*, ed. F. W. Grosheide and G. P. Van Itterzon (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1956), 1: 487-92; Henry Elias Dosker, "Herman Bavinck," *The Princeton Theological Review* 20 (1922): 448-64; John Bolt, "Editor's Introduction," in *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:9-20; idem, "Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck's Reception and Influence in North America," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 263-80; Cornelius Jaarsma, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1935), pp. 15-37; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant*, Th.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953 (repr., Clover, SC: Full Bible Publications, 2007), pp. 7-16; and Valentin Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921). The best biography on Bavinck, to date, is R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966).

formed in 1834 as a result of the *Afscheiding* or “Secession” from the *Hervormde Kerk*, the state Reformed church of the Netherlands that had become increasingly liberal and estranged from the Reformed confessions. Bavinck received his theological education at the seminary of the churches of the Secession, where he studied for one year, and at the University of Leiden, which was perhaps the most liberal, and certainly the most academically prestigious, of the Dutch universities at the time. Bavinck distinguished himself at Leiden as an exceptional student, and was granted the doctor’s degree “with honors,” an achievement that was ordinarily not granted to students upon the completion of their studies. In the course of his studies, Bavinck excelled in language studies, becoming proficient in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic in addition to his previous mastery of Latin, French, English and German. The influence and impact of his Leiden education are evident in the breadth and excellence of Bavinck’s later scholarship as a professor at the seminary in Kampen (1882–1902) and then as Abraham Kuyper’s successor in the area of dogmatics at the Free University in Amsterdam (1903–1920). While at Kampen, Bavinck completed the first edition of his most important contribution to theology, the *Reformed Dogmatics* in four substantial volumes (1883–1901). Bavinck’s work at the Free University continued the labor he had begun at Kampen. During this period of his life, he revised and published a second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1906–1911). He also completed a more popular and abridged dogmatics, entitled *Magnalia Dei*.<sup>3</sup> Though Bavinck often labored in the shadow of his larger-than-life contemporary, Abraham Kuyper, he was arguably Kuyper’s superior as a theologian and contributed much to the neo-Calvinist revival in the Netherlands in this period. In fact, it is fair to observe that no interpretation of this period and its aftermath in the history of Dutch Reformed theology and church life is possible without taking into account the rich contributions of Herman Bavinck.

Yet, surprisingly, only now is Bavinck receiving his due. Less than a century has passed since his death, and during a good portion of that period Bavinck has suffered neglect by pastors and theologians. Although his name is always mentioned alongside of Abraham Kuyper, his predecessor in dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam, and B. B. Warfield, the well-known old-Princeton polemicist, his own work has languished in the hands of his heirs and been ignored by many of his theological kin.

When G. C. Berkouwer launched his eighteen-volume *Dogmatische Studiën* (Studies in Dogmatics) after the Second World War, American students of Berkouwer were quick to find English translators and a publisher for their mentor. Meanwhile, Bavinck, though not forgotten, was certainly neglected. During the post-war years to the turn of the century, Berkouwer, whose theology was in conversation with Karl Barth and more recent developments in Roman Catholic thought, was often regarded as the more significant figure. In this same time frame, Bavinck’s work remained mostly untranslated, though there were some significant exceptions. William Hendriksen, in 1951, translated a portion of volume two of Bavinck’s *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (the material treating the doctrine of God). But this did not generate enough interest to continue the project. In 1956 Henry Zylstra translated Bavinck’s short dogmatical work, *Magnalia Dei*, which is a concise dogmatics, distinct from his larger *Reformed Dogmatics*.<sup>4</sup> This was received warmly, but it did not displace Louis Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* (1938, revised 1941).

---

<sup>3</sup> This abridged version of Bavinck’s dogmatics is available in English with the odd title (the original title in translation means “The Great Works of God”): *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (1956; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> For all matters pertaining to Bavinck’s works, see Eric D. Bristley, *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2008). This is wonderful resource and tool that is sure to enhance and encourage the study of Bavinck’s theology.

No doubt, part of the reason for this lack of interest in Bavinck's work had to do with the high regard extended to Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* (1938, revised 1941), as well as to its companion volumes, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (1933) and *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (1938). Each was highly esteemed and reprinted numerous times. Berkhof's work, in many respects, was a digest of Bavinck's conclusions; perhaps this explains why the massive, four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* remained mostly a closed book to North American pastors and theologians.

Out of a desire to benefit from the theological contribution of Herman Bavinck, this issue of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* is devoted, in part, to commemorating his legacy as a theologian and teacher in Christ's church. Herein readers will find several articles on Bavinck, and one article by Bavinck, besides a variety of other timely materials.

Bavinck's theological perspective in relation to some of Kuyper's accents is explored in an article I have authored that treats the controversy in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederlands (GKN) during the 1890s and beyond that led to the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905, specifically the debates surrounding supralapsarianism versus infralapsarianism, the merits of the doctrine of eternal justification, the strengths and weaknesses of the doctrine of assumed or presupposed regeneration as forming the ground for infant baptism, and the right construal of the doctrine of immediate regeneration. I seek to show how the Conclusions of Utrecht follow in Bavinck's theological trajectory, more so than Kuyper's, and implicit in this analysis a model is presented for Reformed churches today to emulate in resolving more recent and related controversies.

Within Reformed theology a subject of continuing debate, even confusion, has to do with the relationship between the biblical concepts of covenant and election, and more specifically the meaning of the covenantal signs and seals—as set forth in baptism, for example—and the doctrine of divine election. Inasmuch as some recipients of the sacrament of baptism prove themselves not to be among God's elect, how ought we to think about the relationship between these scriptural doctrines? Cornelis Venema presents Bavinck's treatment of these issues and in doing so nicely captures the balance and precision of Bavinck's exposition, which reflects the long-held consensus among the Reformed on this issue. This too provides insight for the contemporary community of Reformed and Presbyterian churches as they seek to capture the fullness of divine revelation on these topics.

John Bolt has performed a service to all English readers of Bavinck (for whom the Dutch language is an obstacle not likely to be overcome) by composing a bibliography on the English writings of Bavinck; i.e., here listed are all the writings of Bavinck that have at one time or another been translated into English, with some explanatory comments. Although some of the sources in which these materials can be found are not readily available to many interested readers, Bolt's work points us where we need to go and alerts us to sources that have long been buried and forgotten in academic journals from yesteryear. Bolt's work also sets an agenda for the potential publication of these diverse English writings of Bavinck in a collected form.

As a dogmatician, Bavinck was an extremely knowledgeable student of the history of doctrine. As a historian of doctrine, he showed himself to be an erudite student of his own Reformed tradition. A sample of Bavinck's historical scholarship is presented here in English translation in his treatment of Calvin on the Lord's Supper. Since Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper continues to generate much debate and analysis, and given that contemporary Calvin scholars continue to engage Bavinck's article on this topic, it is fitting that a wider readership can benefit from Bavinck's study through Nelson Kloosterman's translation of this essay.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone has also been in open discussion more recently, particularly how to relate good works in the Christian life to the believer's righteousness before God through Christ's righteousness alone. Antinomianism and neonomianism are the dual threats to the Reformed doctrine of justification, and each of these errors has periodically surfaced in the history of the Reformed tradition. One example of this conflict took place among Non-conformists in England during the 1690s. The renowned and highly regarded Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius (1636-1708), was solicited to weigh in on the debate and offer his analysis and adjudication. D. Patrick Ramsey presents the contours of this controversy and more particularly Witsius's analysis of the points at issue, and although Witsius's labor did not result in healing the rift, his work continues to be instructive for the church today as it ponders and contends against these same errors.

James Cassidy puts forward an article on T. F. Torrance, and his objectivistic doctrine of salvation as rooted in Karl Barth's theology. While Torrance, who has exercised a powerful influence within Presbyterian circles both in Scotland and North America, is no mere parrot of Barth, he shares many common traits with Barth's work. Cassidy offers a careful analysis, along with a fair-minded and cogent critique of Torrance's work on matter of union with Christ, wherein finally, for Torrance, union with Christ is swallowed up by union in Christ and the *ordo salutis* is collapsed into the *historia salutis*. This essay is useful in engaging a major theologian of the twentieth century, demonstrating how our own theological work is enriched and sharpened when we examine the contributions of one whose work goes beyond a strict confessional perspective. If we do not altogether agree with Torrance on this topic, Cassidy nonetheless points out how our own work can be improved in sifting what is weak and strong in Torrance's contribution.

Consistent with Mid-America Reformed Seminary's continued desire to encourage a vital pulpit, along with a desire to explore the rich heritage of Reformed preaching, under *Homiletica et Homiliae* readers will find two articles on the highly regarded and great French Reformed theologian, Jean Claude (1619-1687). J. Wesley White first introduces us to Claude and his work, and also to the sermonic method of Claude and his contemporaries. This is followed by a translation by Charles Telfer of Claude's sermon on Ecclesiastes 7:14. This sermon is immensely edifying and moving, and demonstrates how God's Word, through the sermon, ought to be expounded and applied to his people for their nurture and edification.

This issue of the journal also presents four popular lectures delivered at Mid-America Reformed Seminary last April, under the sponsorship of the Student Association. These lectures, two by Paul Murphy and two by Phil Grotenhuis, both church planters, offer their insights and strategies on the topic of Church Planting. Included in these presentations are themes that treat commitment and the requisite pastoral traits for doing church planting, as well as a kingdom perspective on this work and an organic, covenantal angle on the work of outreach to our diversified, secularized, and jaded setting of North American culture.

An interesting variety of book reviews and book notices, some on Herman Bavinck, fill out this issue of the journal.