Book Review


John Bolt, an emeritus professor at Calvin College (Grand Rapids, MI) and an expert on Calvinism, endorsed James Eglinton’s new biography of Herman Bavinck with these words: “This will be the definitive Bavinck biography for generations.” Time will tell whether Bolt is correct in this assessment, but after reading this fascinating book I tend to agree. Eglinton, who teaches Reformed Theology at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, is (so far) the last in a series of seven biographers of Bavinck (1854‒1921). Therefore, much was already known about the life and work of this prominent Dutch theologian, but Eglinton was able to access some new sources. The newness of his book is, however, especially due to the fact that he fundamentally disagrees with the widely accepted view that there were “two Bavincks”, who, respectively followed orthodox Reformed theology and allied himself with the modernism of his times (p. xviii). Eglinton wondered whether Bavinck was able to “hold orthodoxy and modernism in some kind of critical equipoise” (p. xix), and concluded that the answer is affirmative: A close examination of Herman Bavinck’s theology and his approach to practical issues shows that he consistently tried to keep the two poles of orthodox Calvinism and the “modern” approach to Christianity together. For him “orthodoxy” was never a static concept. “Rather it put down roots in diverse historical locations” (p. 260). It would seem that this element justifies the term “critical” in the subtitle of the book.

Significance of Herman Bavinck
Herman Bavinck belongs to the group of famous theologians who lived and worked in the Netherlands, but also acquired international fame. To understand his importance, it is essential to know something about the complex history of Dutch Calvinism, and of the development of several Reformed denominations (see note 4). Eglinton does a good job of sketching Bavinck’s
roots in the Old Reformed Church in Germany (where he was born) and, in particular, in describing how the Bavinck family joined the Dutch denomination that in 1834 “seceded” from the national Dutch Reformed church in the so-called “Afscheiding” (literally: secession). While his views would evolve significantly, Bavinck always remained “a son of the Secession” (p. 15).

Putting the epithet of “theologian” on Bavinck does not begin to do justice to his many-faceted contribution to Dutch society and beyond, in many different fields. The suggestion is certainly to the point, that on his simple gravestone these words might have been appropriate: “Here lies a dogmatician, and ethicist, an educational reformer, a pioneer in Christian psychology, a politician, a biographer, a journalist, a Bible translator, a campaigner for woman’s education ...” (p. 291).

Book Structure

Eglinton follows a clear structure in his book. It is divided into five parts, each with two or three chapters (1854–1872). Part one deals with Bavinck’s roots, with a separate chapter on his father Jan Bavinck, who became a theologian and author in his own right, and remained a sounding board and coach for his son. It describes the move of the family from the border town Bentheim in Germany to the Netherlands, where Jan eventually became a pastor in the Secessionist Church (De Christelijk-Gereformeerde Kerk). Another chapter describes Herman’s early years, and his early education. After attending a secessionist elementary school, Bavinck moved to the Gymnasium in Zwolle – a rather elitist kind of school – which was indicative of father Jan’s ambition for his son. In this context Eglinton makes this important observation: “Bavinck’s life ought to be perceived against the wider social trajectory of the Afgescheidenen” (“Secessionists”). This trajectory “moved from a pre-1848 existence (with limited opportunities for participation in society) to a place of toleration and freedom in late modern Dutch culture” (p. 55).

Part two follows Bavinck as a theology student at the University of Leiden (1873–1880). Opting for Leiden for his theological formation made him somewhat suspect in “Seceder” circles. However, he retained close ties with the theological school in Kampen, where he took the exams that would open the road to pastoral ministry in the “Seceder” churches. The first overtures from Abraham Kuyper, the founder of the Free University in Amsterdam, which soon became the centre of so-called neo-Calvinism, date from this period in
Bavinck’s life. From then onwards the lives and careers of Kuyper and Bavinck are increasingly closely intertwined.¹

*Part three* brings us to Bavinck’s short pastoral experience in the Frisian city of Franeker. He was soon appreciated and respected by his parishioners, although he began his work with considerable misgivings. He noted in his diary: “I have accepted the call to Franeker. It is quite a big, and for an inexperienced candidate, a fairly difficult congregation” (p. 114). From the beginning of his pastoral work, he had his eye on a future appointment as a professor in Kampen. “Bavinck’s activities in Franeker maintained a dual focus: he was working hard at ministering to his congregation, while also making moves that kept up a public, scholarly profile” (p. 124).

*Part four* deals with the time of Bavinck’s professorship in Kampen (1889–1902). While initially having a heavy teaching load, he nevertheless found time for other activities and his scholarly star was steadily rising. He began to focus more on writing books and, in particular, to gather materials for what would be his *magnum opus* — his four volume *Christian Dogmatics*, which, he believed, would constitute “a bold effort to meet the theological needs” of the times (p. 198). Bavinck would in this period actively promote a merger of his “Seceder” Christian Reformed Church with the new denomination that resulted from Kuyper’s split from the Dutch Reformed Church (the *Doleantie* in 1886). This merger eventually came about in 1892 (pp. 182ff). Bavinck would, however, never see his fervent wish fulfilled that the two theological centres (in Kampen and Amsterdam, respectively), would become one single institution.

*Part five* chronicles the crowning period of Bavinck’s theological career, when, from 1902 onwards, he taught at Kuyper’s Free University. Through his academic teaching, but also through preaching and lecturing for a wider public, his influence grew further and extended also into the realm of the so-called “Social Question.” Confronted with the challenges of the kind of atheism that was espoused by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Bavinck became more convinced than ever that the world needed the light of Calvinism, “refracted through a neo-Calvinistic prism” (p. 225). He emphasized, however,

more and more the defence of Christianity in general rather than just a particular denominational entity (p. 227). While connected with the Free University (until the end of his life), he authored numerous books, not only of a theological nature but also on topics of psychology, biography, and pedagogy, and on the role of women and other social issues. The first edition of his four-volume *Christian Dogmatics* was completed in 1901. A second, significantly enlarged, edition appeared in 1911 (p. 241). It would not be until 2008 that a full English edition came off the press. In addition, Bavinck entered the political arena. He served one (rather unsuccessful) term as chairman of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, the political party founded by Kuyper, and, subsequently, he was elected to membership in the Dutch Senate.

This section ends with a short description of the deteriorating health, death and burial of Bavinck, followed by a postscript, mostly dedicated to the person and work of Johanna, Bavinck’s wife since 1891. She was not only increasingly active as a powerful voice for women’s rights, but also did what she could to further disseminate her husband’s writings beyond the Netherlands.

**Characterisation of Herman Bavinck**

The picture of Herman Bavinck that emerges in this meticulously researched book is that of a multi-talented, but also very ambitious, scholar, with a grand capacity for work and broad interests – who also ventured into the realm of church politics and national politics. Although of modest descent, he always felt “a powerful drive toward the centre and upper echelons of society” (p. 165). It must have pleased him to be invited to join several highly prestigious Dutch academic and cultural societies. The picture that emerges is also that of someone who valued international contacts, who enjoyed travel, and of someone who appreciated family life and was loyal to his friends. After he failed to win the hand and the heart of his first love, Amelia (p. 91), he enjoyed a happy family life with his wife Johanna and their daughter Hannie. He also maintained some lifelong friendships, as e.g., with Christiaan Snouck Hungronje (1859–1936), who spurned Bavinck’s theological convictions and became an expert of some fame on Islam (p. 81).

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2 Published in 2008 by Baker Academic (Grand Rapids).
One the themes that is constantly reappearing in this biography is how Bavinck sought to relate his Reformed (neo-Calvinistic) theology with contemporary developments in the ecclesial and academic world. He believed that theology was to serve other sciences “as a modern integrative discipline, without which they would be doomed to an unfulfilling future of arbitrary coexistence” (p. 170). Christian doctrine, as he understood it, continued to have an answer to modern challenges, even to Nietzsche’s atheism. At the same time, it also needed to be formulated in such a way that it would be accessible to a wider public than only those with theological expertise. This was why, in 1913, he published a “simple” summary of Christian fundamentals in his *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion* (p. 262).

When following developments in the life and work of Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper is never far away. Their relationship was often complicated. They, in many ways, complemented each other, but there were also controversies and disagreements. “The differences between Kuyper and Bavinck were increasingly evident: While one [Kuyper] remained an idealist, the other [Bavinck] was increasingly open as a realist” (p. 231).

**Evaluation**

While the book offers a wealth of detail, it left me somewhat disappointed with regard to discovering more fully Bavinck’s theological development over time. I would have liked to find more information about the content of his key publications. I am, for instance, intrigued by the fact that Bavinck wrote a book about origins (*Creation and Evolution*; 1901), but disappointed that there is not at least a short summary of his views on this topic (p. 211). This criticism would also apply to some other important books which are just mentioned without much further information. I would also have liked to learn more about the development of Bavinck’s views on the inspiration of Scripture. He wrote in 1883 to his friend Snouck Hurgronje: “I am in no way finished with my view of Scripture” (p. 138). So, where did his thinking on this topic eventually lead him? What I miss perhaps more than anything else is a special chapter on his *Christian Dogmatics*. How did he deal with various traditional doctrines? Where did he break new ground? How did the revision of 1911 differ from the original work, other than in its length?

But, apart from these (what I feel are) shortcomings, Eglinton has produced a wonderful biography. It has very extensive endnotes (81 pages) and a rich
bibliography (35 pages). The list of short descriptions of key figures, churches, educational institutions and newspapers is very helpful. If the reader feels his/her appetite for Dutch church history has been whetted, I recommend an excellent handbook written by a group of scholars and edited by professor H. J. Selderhuis.

And finally: I hope the book may be an inspiration to those scholars who in 2021 seek to connect their theology with the contemporary world. This was the lifelong aspiration of Herman Bavinck and his dealings with this challenge are increasingly appreciated by theologians in the Reformed world and beyond. I agree wholeheartedly with this statement explaining why reading Bavinck is a very worthwhile experience: “[Bavinck’s] expansive, nuanced, and deeply trinitarian theological vision is both intellectually challenging and spiritually nourishing.” The recent publication of the English translation of his magnum opus on dogmatics, with the title *Reformed Dogmatics* (2003–2008), has made this work more accessible to the English speaking world and many recognize the ongoing relevance thereof, as Bavinck was not afraid to deal with major issues in confronting the Christian faith, and value the pastoral and open approach that is found throughout his work.

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3 A chart of the relationship between the various Reformed denominations in the Netherlands (with dates of establishment and of mergers etc.) would also have been useful.
