



***The  
Bavinck  
Review***

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# *The Bavinck Review*

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# The Bavinck Review

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Editorial committee:

James P. Eglinton  
George Harinck  
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Brian G. Mattson

John Bolt, Editor

Laurence R. O'Donnell III, Associate Editor

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Please address all *TBR* inquires to:

John Bolt, Editor  
[bavinst@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:bavinst@calvinseminary.edu)

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# Editorial

## The 2011 Bavinck Conference

*John Bolt*

*Calvin Theological Seminary*

This third issue of *The Bavinck Review* is a few months late. Please accept our apologies. Except for the opening essay, the four main articles are the final versions of papers presented by younger Bavinck scholars whose proposals were awarded first prize standing for the 2011 Bavinck Conference, “After 9/11/11 . . . What? Reformed Theology and the Church’s Global Mission Today,” held on October 12–14, 2011, at Calvin Theological Seminary.

The claim of a number of scholars, led by Eugene Heideman and Jan Veehof, that “grace restores nature” is the key theme for understanding Bavinck has come under criticism in recent years. In particular, it has been suggested that “grace restoring nature” contributes to this-worldly triumphalism in which, for example, sin is understood “more as an offense against the creational norms than an offense against our personal relationship with God.”<sup>1</sup> By bringing together under one purview Bavinck’s “grace restoring nature” theme and Jonathan Edwards’s insistence on salvation as “the implanting of something new” (regeneration), Dane Ortlund shows convincingly that these two themes (and thinkers) can be reconciled and hence belong together. Though they lived in different times and fought different battles, their vision of salvation

1. William D. Dennison, “Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (June 1999): 286.

for the individual person and for the eschatological goal of history were not at odds. Ortlund summarizes it nicely by asking, “Could we say, then, that *it is that which is new which restores?*” And further: “Salvation is *new normalcy*. Utter newness; yet also a return to our true home.” That seems just right.

Robert Covolo uses Bavinck’s doctrine of revelation to bring us beyond the Barth-Schleiermacher dilemma: revelation only from divine presence within creation or revelation only as a lightning bolt of illumination from on high—Absolute Dependence or “Nein!” After qualifying this conventional portrait somewhat, Covolo considers Jürgen Moltmann’s theology as a possible way forward only to dismiss it and propose the “Herman and J.H. Bavinck accord” as the better way. This consensus includes the conviction that God continues to reveal himself in two ways, that both forms of revelation are the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that special revelation has an epistemic priority over general revelation. This both-and posture (in contrast with the Barth-Schleiermacher dilemma) is of current value in the battle against secularism, provides for commonness with humanity along with ecclesiastical distinctiveness, and establishes a basis for theology to be both kerygmatic and apologetic. Covolo believes that this is a valuable guide for the future of Reformed theology.

Steven Duby’s paper builds nicely on Covolo’s by looking at Bavinck’s appreciation for the viability of human knowledge as a natural given. Duby provides a helpful survey of Bavinck’s theological-epistemological reflections on rationalism, empiricism, and idealism and applies it to the linguistic constructivism proposed by Stanley Grenz and John Franke in their book *Beyond Foundationalism*. The key to Bavinck’s coordination of nature and grace is his doctrine of the *imago Dei*. The Fall corrupted the *imago Dei* but did not annihilate human nature altogether. The work of the Holy Spirit in renewal therefore does not deactivate human reason but purifies it. The import of all this is the conviction that “the gospel does not impose upon us the task of asking unbelievers to become other than what they are as human beings; rather, it urges us to call unbelievers by faith to shift back toward true humanity as creatures living not by bread alone but by every word



of God.” This also means an end to the faith-reason antithesis; in fact, faith itself is a *habitus* of the mind. We have here an answer to both atheism and pluralism.

Matthew Kaemingk’s paper applies the sort of insights highlighted in my summary of the previous two essays to a Reformed theology of the work place. He borrows insights from Herman Bavinck’s “robust theology of work” and Lesslie Newbigin’s “vocational understanding of ecclesiology” and links them to Redeemer Presbyterian Church’s “model of professional missions in New York City” in order to propose a model for urban church planters. If a theology of cultural engagement such as Bavinck’s is to truly benefit the church, it must also answer ecclesiological questions about mission, preaching, worship, and communal life for urban professionals in today’s world. Here, Kaemingh argues, Newbigin is helpful and provides a “workplace ecclesiology” that has been tried with great success by Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.

The final essay, by Daniel Ahn, uses J.H. Bavinck’s missiology as a template for interpreting the “Term Question” in Korean Bible translation. Does one use the name traditional Korean religions use for the Supreme God or create a neologism? Ahn tracks this discussion from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mission to China (Matteo Ricci and various papal decrees), through nineteenth-century Protestant missions to China (London Missionary Society), to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century mission to Korea (Methodist and, especially, Presbyterian). The story is fascinating, and the conclusion that a more sympathetic and respectful attitude toward Korean indigenous religions which led to using the native name for the Supreme God, *Hananim*, may have been a factor in the rapid growth of the Korean church is surprising and challenging.

This issue also provides two English translations. The first is Herman Bavinck’s 1888 essay on “The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl.” A key passage from this essay has been quoted frequently as an indicator of the double pull on Bavinck’s mind and heart:

Therefore, whereas salvation in Christ was formerly considered primarily a means to separate man from sin and the world, to prepare him for heavenly blessedness and to cause him to enjoy undisturbed fellowship with God there, Ritschl posits the very opposite relationship: the purpose of salvation is precisely to enable a person, once he is freed from the oppressive feeling of sin and lives in the awareness of being a child of God, to exercise his earthly vocation and fulfill his moral purpose in this world. . . . *Personally, I do not yet see any way of combining the two points of view, but I do know that there is much that is excellent in both, and that both contain undeniable truth.*

Now readers have the opportunity to read the entire essay and place this passage in the framework of Bavinck's full analysis of Ritschl's theology.

The second is Herman Bavinck's preface to the life and works of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. Though disagreeing with the Erskine's particular form of polity, Bavinck nevertheless admires the twofold emphasis upon personal salvation and societal renewal that shines through in their preaching, and he views this fruit of Scottish covenant theology as a keynote of Reformed piety.

Two final points. First, readers will notice a small but significant change in the journal masthead: an editorial board. With three issues of *TBR* under our belt we are moving to the next level by becoming a peer-reviewed journal. We will accept proposals for papers for the next issue. Please send them directly to the editor ([bltj@calvinseminary.edu](mailto:bltj@calvinseminary.edu)). Also, finally, a gentle reminder to members of The Bavinck Society who joined in 2009: we would be happy to receive your membership renewals.