

Book Reviews

***Restored to our Destiny: Eschatology & the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* by Brian G. Mattson. Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. xii + 258. \$144 hardback.**

Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* by James P. Eglinton. London: T & T Clark, 2012. Pp. xiii + 224. \$120 hardback.

Good scholarship builds on the foundation of what has been done before and takes a conversation a few steps farther. Good scholars, therefore, stay modest in trumpeting their findings, aware that great paradigm shifting scholarship is rare and is often a collaborative affair. The two volumes under review that adjust our understanding of Herman Bavinck in an important way are meant to be read together; it took this reviewer the combined contribution of both to fully gauge the import of the change.

Ever since the deaths of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, in 1920 and 1921 respectively, the Dutch Reformed theological and philosophical tradition that intentionally followed their revitalization of Calvin (so-called neo-Calvinism), worked with a two-Kuypers and two-Bavincks model of interpretation. Led by Dirk Vollenhoven, Herman Dooyeweerd, and Klaas Schilder in the Netherlands (aided by G. C. Berkouwer and his many students) and Cornelius Van Til in North America, the Kuyper/Bavinck tradition was viewed appreciatively for what was judged to be its biblical, “reformational” side and criticized for what it retained of Protestant scholasticism. The latter dimension, so it was argued, needed to be jettisoned as a leftover of synthesis with alien Greek philosophical thought. Among those notions dismissed were the distinctions between archetypal and ectypal knowledge, general and special revelation, the broader and narrower sense of the image of God, the doctrine of the covenant of works, natural law and the two king-

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doms (of *power* and *grace*), and the active and passive obedient suffering of Christ.

The renaissance in Bavinck scholarship after World War II was initiated by two dissertations: Eugene Heideman's *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (1959) and Jan Veenhof's *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (1968). Heideman introduced the theme of "grace restoring nature" as the fundamental theme in Bavinck's theology, a conclusion validated by Veenhof and subsequently repeated by a number of Bavinck scholars including this reviewer. Consequently, "grace restores nature" became the "authentic" reformational note, the biblical side of Bavinck and served as a motivational idea for transformational neo-Calvinism in North America. The net effect of this bifurcation was to separate much of North American neo-Calvinism from the Reformed confessional and theological tradition and to create suspicion against it from the conservative Presbyterian and Reformed community, a suspicion often borne as a badge of honor by reformational neo-Calvinists.

It took two young scholars coming from outside the Dutch Reformed club, doing their work independently in Scotland, the first at Aberdeen and the second at Edinburgh, to provide the definite repudiation of this interpretation of Bavinck. Brian Mattson, Senior Scholar of Public Theology for the Center for Cultural Leadership, produced the first doctoral dissertation after the four volumes of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* were translated into English. He affirms the importance of "grace restores nature" as the interpretive key to Bavinck's theology but provides the necessary qualification that this restoration must be understood eschatologically: what redemption in Christ gains for us is more than what Adam lost; the state of glory has a "plus" that was not present in the state of integrity. But there is more. Mattson shows that for Bavinck this eschatological goal was itself a given of the original creation and, furthermore, that it is implied in the covenant of works. In fact, the covenant of works is essential for maintaining an eschatological understanding of creation. Adam was created for a higher glory, and the path to that destiny was obedience. Bavinck derives this primarily from 1 Corinthians 15 where the Apostle Paul points to the contrast between the *unfallen* Adam in his "psychical, earthy" existence and the *resurrected* Christ in his "pneumatic, heavenly" existence. This is all reinforced by the Adam/Christ parallel in Romans 5.

To grasp what Mattson has accomplished we need to remind ourselves that “grace restores nature” became such an important theme in neo-Calvinism because it is the correct vehicle for combating all nature/grace dualisms, particularly of the neo-Platonic sort. Mattson provides a helpful summary of Bavinck’s appropriation of the Reformation tradition:

For Bavinck, the true genius of the Reformation, especially as pioneered by Calvin is its replacement of Rome’s ontological or vertically hierarchical version of the nature/grace relationship (i.e., “higher” and “lower” realms of reality) with an *historical* or horizontal version of the nature/grace scheme, starting with the state of integrity (nature) and ending in the state of glory (grace). (p. 5)

To move from state of integrity to state of glory requires the redemptive work of Christ, but the redemptive work of Christ is itself structured by and therefore “subordinate to a prior creational eschatology” (p. 103). That all things should come under the Lordship of Christ was intended *from the beginning* and reminds us that our Christology begins with Christ as the pre-Fall mediator of *union* and not as the post-Fall mediator of *reconciliation*.

This is a crucial point. In the crusade to overcome nature/grace dualisms reformational neo-Calvinists often fault classic Reformed orthodoxy with its doctrine of a covenant of works for its failure to be sufficiently Christological. What is usually meant by this critique, so it seems to me, is that the *redemptive* work of Christ must feature more prominently in biblically-based thinking about culture and society. The latter need to be *redeemed* in some sense or other if Christ is to be Lord. What Mattson’s analysis of Bavinck shows is that this reverses the biblical order and pattern. (Incidentally, it also opens a Pandora’s box of mischief, not the least of which is the risk of grandiosity.) The original creational eschatological horizon is not redemptive or soteriological in nature, and this means that the key to overcoming neo-Platonic forms of dualism is to recognize the “organic or historical relationship between the state of integrity and the state of glory” (p. 239). As Mattson puts it, “Creational *anthropology* (image of God) is here wedded, necessarily, to a creational eschatology (covenant of works)” (p. 240).

Mattson proves once for all that one cannot with integrity make hay with “grace restores nature” while rejecting the cut grass of covenant theology as so much disposable straw. In other words, “grace restores nature” is organically united to the doctrine of the

covenant of works, and severing the theme from the latter doctrine “is like enjoying the utility of a beautiful suspension bridge while thinking that architectural engineering is an unimportant, or even dangerous discipline” (p. 107). This conclusion challenges a significant amount of reformational scholarship that picks and chooses approved of elements from Reformed thinkers like Bavinck and Kuyper without acknowledging the architectonic whole of their thought in its organic connections.

And that brings me to the second dissertation by James Eglinton, currently doing a post-doctoral fellowship at the Theological University of Kampen (Liberated). The notion of the “organic” plays a major role in the theology of neo-Calvinism, affecting the thought of both Kuyper and Bavinck, influencing their understanding of the Holy Trinity, Scripture’s inspiration, Christology, ecclesiology (e.g., the institute/organism distinction), and the normative working of human society. Until recently, scholars attributed the source of this organicism in neo-Calvinism to nineteenth-century movements, notably Romanticism and Idealism, with a longer pedigree going back to Aristotle. In Bavinck’s case (as well as in Kuyper’s), there was an assumption by later interpreters that placed neo-Calvinist organicism within a semi-mystical tradition that includes Jacob Böhme and judges it to be “reminiscent of the *Zeitgeist* of Neo-Idealism” (p. 60).

Eglinton builds on Mattson’s work, and, after dismantling the genetic-historical approach to organicism, places Bavinck’s use of the organic firmly in the longer tradition of Augustinian trinitarianism. Not only is Bavinck’s understanding of the organic of one piece with his orthodox trinitarian theology, the notion of the organic is subservient to and flows from the trinitarian foundation, not the other way around. It is Eglinton’s conclusion that Bavinck’s use of the organic motif arises from and expresses his “trinitarian appropriation of reality.” And this conclusion doubles down on the “lesson” to be learned from these two studies.

First, it points to the need to reject definitively the genetic and etymological fallacy in the realm of ideas to which reformational neo-Calvinists are particularly prone. Simply making an association between someone’s ideas and identifying them as “neo-Platonic” or “Thomist” or “Kantian” in order to dismiss them just will not do. We need to put a stop to the method of finding “false” elements in a

great thinker's work and then setting his "genuine" insights at odds with these false elements. A closer look often reveals that there is a fundamental unity of thought which the interpreter missed and that the fault is with the presupposition of the interpreter who failed to find it.

Second, seeing the helpful organic thinking of neo-Calvinism as the fruit of trinitarian theology is an important corrective to what is at best the general indifference and at worst the downright hostility to classic Reformed theology so often seen in reformational neo-Calvinism. The result has been tragic in my view: neo-Calvinism in North America has all too often been alienated from the very church that gave it its life. It is my own firm conviction that Bavinck shows us a better way, and these two revisionist interpretations by Brian Mattson and James Eglinton show us the proper way of following Bavinck's lead. If reformational neo-Calvinism is to have a future as part of a vital orthodox and evangelical Christianity, it must build on the foundation of classic Reformed and Christian theology, especially its Christology and doctrine of the Trinity.

One final observation: as someone who reads books like these with a sharp pencil in one hand for underlining and creating marginalia, it is a burden to my Calvinist conscience to mar by marking volumes that cost as much as these.

—John Bolt