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GUEST EDITORIAL:  
BAVINCK, DOGMATICS, AND ETHICS

The articles in this issue of the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* first saw the light of day as papers given at the Edinburgh Bavinck Conference, a two day symposium on the work of the Dutch neo-Calvinist intellectual Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) held at New College, the University of Edinburgh, in early September 2011. While the conference was greatly enjoyed by those present, the quality of the papers no doubt merits wider circulation. As such, it is pleasing to see a selection of these papers prepared for publication in this volume.

The conference itself broadly followed the pattern of Bavinck's own career and intellectual development. Beginning as dogmatics professor at Kampen (1883-1902) where his *magnum opus* Reformed Dogmatics took shape, he then relocated to the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1902-21). This period was marked by a profound engagement with ethics in a variety of spheres. Accordingly, day one of the conference focused on Bavinck's *dogmatiek*, and day two on his *ethiek*. The papers included in this bundle follow the progression of these two days.

Under the heading of *dogmatics*, Professor John Bolt's paper wrestles with various critiques of Bavinck's theology from the perspective of purportedly 'biblical' theology. Bolt builds on Bavinck's belief that we all read Scripture as children of our traditions and on that basis challenges the notion that a presuppositionless, 'biblical' theology is possible. Dr Mark Elliott's paper on Bavinck's use of Augustine in relation to Ritschl offers a thoughtful, critical take on Bavinck's engagement with ancient and more recent theologies. Dr Henk van den Belt's article on Bavinck's Reformed understanding of the call to grace is a careful, insightful and thoroughly nuanced piece of work.

Under the heading of *ethics* are papers from Dutch scholars Professor George Harinck and Dr Dirk van Keulen, and Scotland's own Professor Donald Macleod and Dr Paul T. Nimmo. Harinck's thought provoking paper explains the sense in which Bavinck attempted to find his place as a Christian participant in the shifting conceptual environment of modern culture. His conclusion is that Bavinck's experiment in this regard was ultimately a failure—a claim that will no doubt spark further debate and research. From van Keulen we have a paper on the imitation of Christ according to Bavinck. Van Keulen's work is significant in that it challenges us to remember not only that Bavinck's post-Reformed Dogmatics writings were overwhelmingly centred on ethics; his pre-Reformed Dogmatics work (principally his doctoral thesis on Zwingli's ethics) was also

weighted in the same direction. As such, van Keulen challenges us to see Bavinck not simply as a dogmatician who engaged sometimes in ethics, but rather as an important ethicist in his own right. Following this, Professor Macleod's contribution gives a highly stimulating perspective on Bavinck's concept of the certainty of faith. Bearing in mind that lack of assurance in this regard is amongst the perennial problems of Scottish Calvinism (at least in certain strands), Macleod highlights an area where Bavinck offers us something very helpful. Finally, Dr Paul Nimmo's paper on the theology of the eucharist brings Bavinck into dialogue with Karl Barth. This paper highlights that while (or perhaps because) these two theological giants represent considerably different recent trajectories within the Reformed tradition, they are of considerable worth to each other as conversation partners.

It is particularly with regard to day two of the conference, the ethics papers, that the Edinburgh Bavinck Conference and, correspondingly, this *SBET* edition, take on a particular importance. For some time Bavinck has been known in the anglophone world as a dogmatician of some repute. The excellent English translation of Reformed Dogmatics has more than established that fact. However, comparatively little work has thus far been done amongst English speaking theologians to probe his merits as an ethicist. Clearly, a single day devoted to papers on his work in this regard (which, incidentally, included short papers by postgraduates on Bavinck and fashion, education, the human subject etc.) can only scratch the surface. However, it is hoped that such papers will help spur on more work in this regard. Perhaps the key issue facing Bavinck studies (for anglophone theologians, at least) is this: how did the writer of such an extensive systematic theology apply this breadth of theological knowledge to his own life context and culture? We know a great deal about Bavinck's orthodoxy, and now we must ask more questions of his orthopraxy. The challenge in developing the study of Bavinck the ethicist is obvious: we have a standardised English translation of his dogmatic work, but his ethical volume *Gereformeerde Ethiek* (discovered recently by Dr van Keulen) exists only in an unfinished, unpublished, Dutch language manuscript, and the rest of his ethical contributions (of which there are very many) are shorter, similarly untranslated pieces. As such, engagement with his ethics presents perhaps a greater challenge than work on his dogmatics. This, however, is a challenge to which we must rise if we are to develop a well orb'd understanding of Herman Bavinck.

The existence of this Bavinck-themed *SBET*, which allows a wider circle to benefit from the conference proceedings, owes much to the contribution of various people.

In the first place, New College and its staff members (who provided much practical support, in addition to the use of Martin Hall and the Senate Room) deserve a vote of thanks: in particular Professor David Fergusson and Ms Jean Goldring, whose support was invaluable throughout. The conference was financially supported by both New College and the Hope Trust. My colleague Professor George Harinck contributed much by the way of encouragement (to redress the balance of European and North American Bavinck conferences) and advice in the conference planning. Every conference depends on those who attend, and the Edinburgh Bavinck Conference was no exception. A sterling group of postgraduate students representing and supported by various institutions (Princeton, Fuller, St Andrews, Kampen (Broederweg and PThU), Cambridge, Bristol, Aberdeen, Cairo Evangelical Theological Seminary and Calvin Seminary) contributed via their short papers and lively interaction. Dr David Reimer, *SBET*'s regular editor, has been gracious in accommodating a slightly longer than usual cohort of papers and in encouraging their publication in this edition.

*James Eglinton  
Kampen, March 2011*

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