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Twin Poles: A Review of Bavinck

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Abstract

"We would certainly do well to learn from Bavinck's all-encompassing vision of the gospel's relevance to every area of life."

Posting about the book *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Twin Poles: A Review of *Bavinck*

David Westfall

Title: *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*

Author: James Eglinton

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In his recent biography of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), James Eglinton continues a project of critique and re-evaluation that he began with his earlier study, *Trinity and Organism*, where he argued against the widely influential view that Bavinck’s work exhibits an ideological “schizophrenia,” owing his irreconcilable commitments both to modernity and reformed orthodoxy. According to this reading, Bavinck’s writings supposedly reveal the mind of a highly compartmentalized thinker whose reformed “Dr. Jekyll” is frequently overpowered by a modernist “Mr. Hyde” (depending on your worldview, you might wish to identify these personae the other way around). Whereas Eglinton’s earlier book argues that this fails to do justice to the nuance and complexity of Bavinck’s *thought*, the present biography explores Bavinck’s personal development as a *thinker* faced with the challenge of navigating the tension between orthodoxy and modernity throughout his life. In his words, “My biography has a particular aim: to tell the story of a man whose theologically laced personal narrative explored the possibility of an orthodox life in a changing world” (xx).

In this way, Eglinton's biographical interest holds promise for today's readers in the church who continue to negotiate this tension. It hardly needs to be said that the years and events following Bavinck's death have not alleviated it: the world wars and their cultural fallout have fueled secularism's growth beyond even what Bavinck lived to witness, and the accompanying cultural changes have deepened our society's aversion to transcendent metaphysical commitments as a basis for the social contract. Perhaps the greatest temptation facing those who remain firmly committed to an historically and biblically-rooted expression of Christianity is just the sort of compartmentalization of which Bavinck stands accused. The question driving Eglinton's research, then, is partly a question of what Bavinck represents to the church today: an example to follow, or to avoid?

In his effort to forge a new path for the study of Bavinck, Eglinton repeatedly finds himself parting ways with previous biographers—particularly Valentijn Hepp (1879–1950), whose rapidly-produced biography, published within a year of Bavinck's death, leans heavily on oral sources and the author's own (sometimes erroneous) personal recollections and impressions. Hepp and other biographers present a sometimes overly dramatic portrayal of Bavinck as a figure torn by these allegiances in ways that often provoked intense controversy—even in settings where this hardly makes sense, such as Bavinck's decision as a little-known teenager to transfer his studies from Leiden to Kampen (referred to by one biographer as “the shot heard throughout Holland”). Eglinton deconstructs this as well as other myths: for example, the notion that Bavinck more or less abandoned the discipline of dogmatics in his later years, or that he came to view his endeavors in this area as a failure. While it is true that he found himself embroiled in controversy both in the world of denominational and national politics, and while it is also true that he (like many European intellectuals of his day) found himself blindsided by the rise of the likes of Nietzsche, the evidence indicates that these challenges spurred on Bavinck's further development as a Reformed thinker, rather than prompting him to give up and deem his project a failure. According to Eglinton, this tendency to exaggerate and to represent Bavinck as a tortured individual mired in controversy has contributed significantly to the impression of “two Bavincks.”

If Eglinton is right, and Bavinck does not simply oscillate between the two worlds of modernity and orthodoxy based on the needs of the moment, then Bavinck may provide us with an instructive example of contextualized allegiance to the gospel in a world much like our own. We would certainly do well to learn from Bavinck's all-encompassing vision of the gospel's relevance to every area of life : “The gospel is a joyful tidings not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation” (quoted on 160). According to Eglinton, the story of Bavinck's personal and intellectual development is not without tension and struggle—quite the contrary—but it

nonetheless reveals his remarkable degree of success with which Bavinck put this vision into practice. The resulting portrayal is of “an intellectual who combined the precision and nuance of the late modern world and the polymathic dream of the medieval and early modern eras” (205)—or, in the words of the biography’s pithy concluding lines, “an orthodox Calvinist, a modern European, and a man of science” (291).

Eglinton’s account also situates Bavinck’s development within a denominational context reflecting precisely this tension between orthodoxy and modernity.

The *Afgescheidenen* (“seceders”), who left the established reformed church in the Netherlands in the early 19th century on account of its compromises with the European Enlightenment, were subject to state persecution until 1848, less than a decade before Bavinck’s birth. As a “son of the secession,” Bavinck was born at an interesting time for the members of his religious tradition. On the one hand, they were now the tolerated beneficiaries of the western world’s liberalizing attitude toward religious freedom; and yet, on the other, their theological commitments simultaneously demanded that they define themselves over *against* many of this attitude’s accompanying cultural shifts.

Competing visions within the denomination itself about how this should be done repeatedly proved to be a source of struggle for Bavinck throughout his life. Bavinck discerned “two poles in the Christian Reformed Church of his youth: one that prioritized an otherworldly holiness of life, and another that insisted that the catholic Christian faith necessarily addresses every aspect of life in this world” (215). Bavinck was determined to “hold tightly to both, and not to let go of either” (quoted on 216), despite the conflicts this produced between himself and others of his tradition throughout his life. He was adamant “that the orthodox solution could not simply be a restatement of the theology of a bygone era.... Reformed theology needed progress more than it needed to be repristinated. A new age required a new articulation of dogmatics and ethics” (144). In Bavinck’s words, “To praise the old simply because it is old is neither Reformed nor Christian. And dogmatics does not describe what [used to] be the case, but [rather] what must be the case [now]” (quoted on 198). Orthodoxy cannot be equated with a general principle of religious conservatism.

But neither should this concern for the contemporary realities be confused with the sort of antipathy toward “tradition” commonly and stereotypically associated with Protestantism. Rather, a truly orthodox and reformed dogmatics stands in solidarity with the Body of Christ in every age: “It is rooted in the past, but works for the future” (*Ibid.*). It originates in an ever-renewed commitment to the *vox dei* that sounds forth from Holy Scriptures in the here and now, while humbly listening for the echoes of that divine voice in the story of the church throughout the centuries. Eglinton summarizes:

In Christian history, [Bavinck] argued, “orthodox” had never functioned as a static concept that was hermetically sealed from the host cultures in which it was invoked. Rather, it put down roots in diverse historical locations, just as it was now doing in twentieth-century Dutch culture. Far from being like oil and water—a portrayal of these terms that Bavinck deemed “petty and narrow-minded”—neither “modernity” nor “orthodoxy” precluded the other. Indeed, both notions had evolved in meaning throughout the course of history and continued to do so in the early twentieth century. (260)

Not being an expert in Bavinck, I cannot claim to offer a particularly authoritative word on Eglinton’s superiority to his earlier biographers. Still, the evident care and detail of the book’s research and the quality of its sources have left me broadly convinced, and the biography’s portrayal of its subject is undeniably compelling. The portrait is also deeply personal: we hear not only of Bavinck’s legendary accomplishments in the realms of church, academy, and state, but also of his loneliness as a pastor and his struggles with singleness, his conversations with students around the stove before the start of class, and his *dagboek* entries indicating his fear of iceberg collision at sea. The biography also speaks (albeit indirectly) to many issues we presently face in the North American church context today that are adjacent to the book’s central questions regarding orthodoxy and modernity. For example, Bavinck’s observations about racism in America and the de facto segregation of the American church are as timely now as they were when he first made them (248). More broadly, his conviction that “neither nationalism nor internationalism was inherently evil, but...that both will quickly metastasize in the absence of a higher, universal community” (281) becomes ever more relevant amid the growing tensions between “globalism” and “nationalism” in the western world and the modern church’s troubling tendency to equate Christian faithfulness with allegiance to one or the other.

As someone who has been nourished and influenced by a variety of voices within the reformed tradition, I have come to value both of the twin “poles” that Bavinck describes: the concern for an “otherworldly holiness of life” (here my favorite Puritan writers come to mind), as well as the holism and catholicity of the neo-Calvinist movement that emphasizes the “thisworldly” *telos* of redemption in the new creation. If Eglinton is correct (as I believe he is), Bavinck perceived that both of these poles are vital in navigating the challenges facing the modern church, and that it is naïve to suppose we are faced with a simple choice between our context and our confession.