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Bavinck: A Critical Biography

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James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), pp. xxi + 450. \$38.73.

The last decade has witnessed an explosion of scholarship on Herman Bavinck—arguably the most significant Dutch Reformed theologian of the 19th and 20th centuries. This increased interest in Bavinck has led to considerable debate over his theological and philosophical identity—was he “the academic theologian” (*wetenschappelijk theolog*) or “the churchly dogmatician” (*kerkelijk dogmaticus*)?¹ Since Bavinck left the humble seminary in Kampen (of which he would later write, “The education there did not satisfy me”) to study purely academic theology under the famous Professors Scholten and Kuenen at Leiden in 1874, the question of his friend Henry Dosker has haunted Bavinck scholarship: “What can you seek there ... ?”² What could Bavinck, the child of the Seceder Movement and the Old Reformed Church, be seeking in the “lion’s den” of unbelief?³ Was he, as many have since claimed, vacillating between orthodoxy and modernity? What are we to make of his conservative upbringing, scientific theological education, and fascination with Reformed dogmatics, philosophy, politics, and psychology? This perceived tension between modernity and orthodoxy has led some to speak of the “schizophrenic” Bavinck.⁴

In James Eglinton’s *Bavinck: A Critical Biography*, Eglinton has masterfully argued for a single “modern, yet orthodox” Bavinck—a man who, as Eglinton wrote, “explored the possibility of an orthodox life in a changing world.”⁵ In Eglinton’s wake, an army of Bavinck enthusiasts have followed, contending for a non-Schizophrenic Bavinck. The more Bavinck publications pour into Anglophone bookshelves, the more apparent it is that Bavinck does not need a defense, however. It is clear that the Reformed tradition would benefit from his example as it seeks to engage a radically evolving western landscape with the old truths of the Christian faith.

In eleven chapters, James Eglinton has led us behind the scenes of towering works like *Reformed Dogmatics* and *Reformed Ethics* to meet the vacillating, humble, and human mind behind the pen. Chapters 1–3 explore Herman’s early life and the modernizing world he found beneath his feet; chapters 4 and 5 detail his student years and the controversial transition from Kampen to Leiden. His difficult time as a pastor in Franeker is seen in chapter 6, and his transition to professor in Kampen is the subject of chapters 7 and 8. The final years of his life as a professor in Amsterdam, all the way until his quiet and private death in 1921, are explored in chapters 9–11.

¹ John Bolt, “Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck’s Reception and Influence in North America,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 263–80, 267.

² Eglinton, 66, 88.

³ Eglinton, 68.

⁴ Eglinton, *xix*.

⁵ Eglinton, *xx*.

Eglinton's work serves as an unmatched historical introduction to the complex figure and work of Herman Bavinck.