

Clarion



REMEMBERING HERMAN BAVINCK 1854 - 1921

What's Inside

This summer marks 100 years since the death of Herman Bavinck, an important figure in the history of Dutch Reformed churches. To commemorate this, two of our editors, Rev. Matthew Van Luik and Dr. Jason Van Vliet, have put together a special issue. On these pages you will find details about his life and ministry, his writings and points of view. We also bring readers a book review by Dr. Wes Bredenhof on a Bavinck biography. In addition, readers will find a Mission News update, a letter to the editor, and a press release.

Laura Veenendaal

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On the cover: Herman Bavinck illustration, from the *Bavinck Review*, Volume 9. Used by permission.

Clarion

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ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

CLARION Premier Printing Ltd. One Beghin Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB Canada R2J 3X5

Phone: 204-663-9000 | Fax: 204-663-9202

Subscriptions	subscriptions@clarionmagazine.ca
Advertisements	ads@clarionmagazine.ca
Website	clarionmagazine.ca

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	 	Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada		\$49.00*	\$ 82.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds		\$69.00	\$102.00
International		\$98.00	\$171.00

*Applicable GST, HST, PRT taxes are extra. GST/HST no. 890967359RT

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Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd. Winnipeg, Manitoba

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We acknowledge the financial support
 of the Government of Canada.

Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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LEAD ARTICLE



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I Have Kept the Faith

Herman Bavinck

December 13, 1854 – July 29, 1921

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Herman Bavinck. Some of our older readers may recognize his name; for younger ones, he may be unknown. Herman was an important figure in the Dutch Reformed churches from 1883 until his death in 1921. He was professor of dogmatics first at the Reformed seminary in Kampen and later at the Free University in Amsterdam. He faithfully served the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, training ministers of the Word and serving on commissions to help direct the affairs of the church through some difficult times. It was his desire that the Netherlands should be shaped by a Reformed world-and-life view that is often referred to as Neo-Calvinism. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the last years of his life he became an influential statesman after he was elected to the Senate of the Dutch parliament.

Herman Bavinck was a prolific writer and wrote on a wide variety of topics. He was a much-loved preacher of the gospel, who had the ability to apply the Scriptures to the lives of the people. His seminal work was his four-volume book on Reformed dogmatics. In this work he interacted with leading liberal and Roman Catholic theologians, critiquing them on the basis of God's holy Word. Many claim that it is a work that is unrivaled to our present day. It is a testament to his work that, nearly 100 years later, his *Reformed Dogmatics* has been translated (2003-2008) into the English language and is now exerting a great influence on the theological scene in the English world.

In this article I will give a brief overview of the life of Herman Bavinck. I am indebted to Ron Gleason for his very readable bibliography. You will find a review of another biography in this issue that may also be of interest to those who would like to learn more.

Humble beginnings

The story of Herman's life begins with his father, Jan. Jan was born on February 5, 1826, in the small German village of Bentheim, near the Dutch border, to Hermanus and Fenna Bavinck. When Jan was three years old, his father died unexpectedly and Fenna was left to raise her six children. Fenna raised her children to love God and sent her children to a Christian school, where Jan learned the Heidelberg Catechism. Later Jan wrote that he did not recall being called to faith and repentance when he attended the Dutch Reformed state church in his early life. In his youth he was introduced to the preaching of Jan Sundag, a minister in the Secession churches. These churches had seceded from the Dutch state church. He decided to leave the state church and desired to become a minister of the Word. The family's financial situation made that impossible, but the Lord in his providence opened a path to the ministry when the churches in his area decided to give support to a man to study for the ministry. Out of five candidates, Jan was chosen. Soon he was ordained to be a minister for four small congregations in the Bentheim area. During his ministry, the Secession churches decided to establish a seminary in Kampen; he was appointed as one of the professors, but he declined.

Herman Bavinck was born to Jan and Gesina on December 13, 1854, in Hoogeveen. He grew up in a household where he learned about a living relationship with God, and he was encouraged to apply his biblical faith to his daily walk of life.

His solid Christian upbringing would serve as a firm foundation from which he could face the challenges in his life. He held on to this spiritual foundation until the end of his life.

Herman – A student of theology

Herman began his theological studies at the Reformed Seminary in Kampen in 1873, but for various reasons he enrolled the following year at the seminary in Leiden. This decision was not well received by members of the secession churches to which he belonged. This was because the seminary at the University of Leiden belonged to the state church, from which the Secession churches had freed themselves. Leiden was considered at that time to be one of the leading seminaries in the world; some of the professors were renowned theologians. Professors like Scholten, Keunen, and Tiele were all well trained in the scientific method of the study of Scripture.

The greater concern was that these liberal scholars had let go of the basic teachings of the gospel. While the scientific method was a blessing for a better understanding of the biblical message, it also became a curse as it led these men to reject such fundamental teachings as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The attraction for Herman was twofold; to learn the best current methods for the study of Scripture and, secondly, to better understand liberal positions in order to counteract their teachings.

The leaders in the Secession churches put great pressure on Jan, his father, to forbid his son from going to Leiden, but his parents supported him in his decision. Many understandably vehemently opposed his decision, for they rightly understood that Herman was walking into grave danger. He did very well in his studies and even gained the respect of liberal teachers while he maintained his orthodox position.

From minister to professor

After he completed his studies at Leiden, Herman had to submit to a candidacy exam by the seminary in Kampen. In spite of some misgivings, he passed the exam and accepted a call to the church in Franeker. He was well liked, displaying a pastor's heart, and was highly respected as a preacher. His ministry in this congregation was short, for after one year he was appointed as professor of dogmatics at the seminary in Kampen. In spite of his liberal training, the churches recognized that he had remained faithful to the gospel and that he was well qualified to teach at the seminary that was desperately in need of new professors.

Professor in Kampen 1883

On January 9, 1883, Herman was installed as professor of dogmatics at the age of twenty-nine. The next day he delivered his inaugural address, entitled, "The Science of Holy Theology." The study of theology is foundational for the study of all other sciences. In the scientific world today, theology is separated from science, but Herman Bavinck argues that all science is dependent on theology. At the beginning of his tenure at Kampen, he also began communicating with Abraham Kuyper, who was leading a reform movement in the Reformed state church that was called the Doleantie.

Herman's work as a professor was productive and well received. In fact, many students were drawn to study at Kampen because of his work. He was also active within the church federation and involved in spearheading a union with the Doleantie churches that were led by Kuyper. While there were several issues that needed to be addressed before union could take place, one of the most contentious was the question of the education of seminary students. The Secession churches had their seminary in Kampen and the Free University was the seminary for the Doleantie churches. The Secession churches were of the opinion that the church should maintain her own institution for educating her students, while the Free University was independent from the churches and had other departments of learning attached to the University.

The Union took place in 1892 without settling this thorny issue. Herman Bavinck was appointed to a commission to resolve the issue, but because of mistrust and differences of approach between the two factions in the church, the matter was never resolved. Much tension developed between the members of the faculty at the seminary in Kampen that made the working atmosphere strained. On several occasions, Herman received appointments as professor at the Free University, but he declined them because of his concern for the seminary at Kampen. He was concerned about what would happen to the students who came to study at Kampen because of his reputation but his main concern was to do what he felt was in the best interest of the church. Herman was a man of principle and therefore did not do what was convenient but what he believed was best for the church and for the kingdom of God.

During this time in Kampen, Herman married Johanna Schippers on July 2, 1891. She was ten years his junior. By all accounts it was a happy marriage; Johanna would be a "godly

Herman was
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wife and Christian companion." Three years later the Lord gave them a daughter, their only child, whom they named Johanna.

While Herman was very much involved in many of the affairs of the church, his first task and love was the teaching of Reformed dogmatics and ethics. During this time, he published his *Reformed Dogmatics* in four volumes; the first came out in 1895 and the fourth edition in 1901. Herman was a prolific writer and was a popular speaker for important events, yet his *Reformed Dogmatics* is considered by many to be his most important work. While handbooks on Reformed dogmatics have been written by others since, none have written with the depth and insight of Herman Bavinck. Herman understood the philosophical underpinnings of society and therefore challenged them from a biblical perspective. He understood liberal thought, as he had studied under some of the foremost liberal theologians, and he also engaged the thinking of Roman Catholic theologians. Turning to the relationship between dogmatics and ethics, he understood: "Dogmatics proceeds from God; ethics returns to God." Dogmatics teaches what God reveals about himself and ethics is man's response to God.

Once this work on Reformed dogmatics was completed, he never reworked it or made edits to it. The work was described by Dr. J. I. Packer in this way: "Solid but lucid, demanding but satisfying, broad and deep and sharp and stabilizing."

Amsterdam – 1902

When it became clear after the Synod of Arnhem that the thorny question of two seminaries could not be resolved, Herman again received an appointment to be professor of Dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam. The aftermath of the decision of Synod was that the antagonism and mistrust between professors Lindeboom and Bavinck grew. Herman now felt free to accept this new position at the Free University. This would have consequences for the seminary in Kampen, as the seminary lost half of the student body.

Herman took over the position of Abraham Kuyper, filling his role as professor of dogmatics. These two men had written extensively to one another during this time and became good friends. Although they were friends, yet Bavinck could be critical of Kuyper's ideas. Kuyper tended to be more speculative in his theological constructions while Bavinck was much more careful and precise in his formulations. Bavinck was critical of his teaching concerning "presupposed regeneration," a teaching that later would lead to a schism in the church. Their friendship fell under considerable strain later in their lives on account of some actions taken by Kuyper, which undermined the relationship.


A highlight for Herman and his wife was a trip (his second) to North America in 1908. He had been invited to deliver the prestigious Stone Lectures at Princeton. They toured the US, visiting places such as New York, Niagara Falls, Grand Rapids, Chicago, Louisville, and Washington, where he enjoyed a short audience with the President, Teddy Roosevelt. At Princeton, which was the school for the Northern Presbyterian Church, he delivered his lectures under the title, "The Philosophy of Revelation." Their observations of the American culture and church life were not very flattering. It seemed to them that church life was more worldly, that the sermons were "thin" on content, and the singing in many churches was Vaudeville-esque, more geared to entertainment than worship.

Politics

Bavinck, together with Kuyper, had a vision for neo-Calvinism to gain influence over the Netherlands. The churches were very much involved in the political questions of the day and even had their own political party. The Anti-Revolutionary Party, organized by members of the Reformed Churches, became a powerful force in the country. Abraham Kuyper was leader of the party and became Prime Minister of the Netherlands in 1901. Bavinck became president of this political party for a time at the insistence of Kuyper and later in 1911 he was elected to the First Chamber of the Dutch Parliament. There he became a respected member and important political voice.

I have kept the faith

One of the questions often debated is whether Herman Bavinck changed at the end of his life. Did he turn away from the orthodox teachings of his early life and become more liberal in his way of thinking? While scholars can delve into his later writings, Herman Bavinck testified about himself at the end of his life, "I have kept the faith." It is remarkable that he says the faith in which he grew up is the faith in which he will also die. While he may have changed his stand on certain issues, those changes would have been based on a careful understanding of God's word, not a turning away from faith in Christ Jesus.

The concern when he decided to study theology at Leiden was that his faith would be destroyed by the liberal theology that was taught there. By the grace of God, he remained steadfast in his faith and was equipped to expose the dangers of liberal theology by directing people to the glorious truths of the gospel. He also faced spiritual dangers when confronted with mistrust and opposition both within the seminary community and the churches. Instead of becoming embittered, he remained faithful to his Lord and faithfully laboured for the well-being of the seminary to train future ministers of the gospel. He generously gave his time to the churches even when his work was not always appreciated, for he saw himself as a servant of Jesus Christ. His work in the political world was not about expediency and power but about the promotion of the will of God for all of society. The Herman Bavinck who grew up with a simple faith in Christ Jesus also passed away in that same faith on July 29, 1921. He had faithfully laboured in the service of his Lord and now looked forward to being received in glory with his resurrected Lord. 

Called to Be Free

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” (GALATIANS 5:13)

I love mountains. I love my busy city, and I love my busy family even more. But on a mountain, the stress of work and life melts away. And that’s even more appreciated after this most claustrophobic of years.

I don’t have the equipment, time, or skills to climb anything huge. But I like stories about those who do. These stories reveal a scary side of mountains. Everest, the 2015 film, or the even better book *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer on which it is based, shows the terrifying dangers of extreme mountaineering.

Why do it? Mountaineers talk about how freeing it is to be up on top of the world, conquering your fears and weaknesses. But listen closely, and you realise that they are not really free. They are trapped. They have to keep going back. On to the next mountain. Leaving family, friends, and safety behind them. Perhaps forever. They are not free, but slaves.

In a very similar way, sin keeps us trapped. We hear its siren call. We keep returning to it. We think we choose to sin and we like it, but we don’t realise that we are its slave.

In contrast, says our text, we are called to be free. Christ has set us free (v. 1). The only truly free people in the whole world are those who are justified in Christ by faith.

In Christ we are no longer forced to sin. The Holy Spirit breaks our addiction to harmful pleasures and lusts. Instead of being a slave to sexual immorality, impurity, fits of rage, and selfish ambition, we are free to love, rejoice, be at peace, and be kind (v. 19-23).

But we must be careful. We must stand firm. Sin is cunning. No sooner are we free than sin starts trying to convince us to use our freedom to sin. “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature” (v. 13).


Sin says “If you’re free, then you’re free to sin. Why not give free reign to your sexual immorality or your anger?” It sounds logical. But it’s actually a devious lie. Think, for example, about an alcoholic or opioid addict who after many years finds sobriety. Rejoice! They are finally free!

But are they free then to go drink alcohol? Use drugs? No! Because as soon as they do, they will be addicted again, and no longer be free. The only way to be set free from something that is addicting and harmful (like all sin) is to no longer do it.

Verse 15 warns particularly that we are often tempted to use our freedom to bite, devour, and destroy each other. We think our freedom means we can insist on our way, looking down on those who think differently, using our words to destroy those who dare to disagree with us.

And haven’t we seen that in the Christian community over the past year!

The way of true freedom is to “serve one another in love” (v. 13). And the ultimate example of that is our Lord Jesus Christ who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28). Love is to serve others, to put them first. To give up our rights for the good of others. Sacrifice our own way, not even thinking less of those who act different (Rom 14:3). And even where we must debate and disagree, do so in love, in a way that builds our brother or sister up, and does not bite, devour, or destroy them (v. 15).

Such love is the way of freedom. Do not use your freedom as an excuse to indulge the pride, anger, discord, or jealousy, etc. of your sinful nature. Instead, humbly serve one another in love. Do that as Christ served us when he gave his life for our sins on the cross. 

For Further Study

1. Do you feel free, in Christ? What ways do you use your freedom to love?
2. What ways do you use your freedom to indulge sin, bite or devour others?



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Dinner *with the* Bavincks

An Imaginary Visit with a Doctrinal Discussion

At one time or another you have probably been invited over for dinner at the home of a family you did not previously know. Maybe you were worshipping with another congregation while on vacation, and a family spontaneously invited you over for dinner.

Meeting new people can be slightly awkward at times. But some opening questions help to orient everyone in the room. What are the names of your children? What kind of daily work do you do? Where does your extended family live? All things being well, after half-an-hour or so, the joy of conversing with fellow believers transcends any uncomfortable unfamiliarity, the atmosphere relaxes, and the conversation drifts into different, and at times enlightening, directions.

In this article I would like to take you on an imaginary visit to the household of Herman and Johanna Bavinck. Elsewhere in

this issue of *Clarion* you can read a brief biography of Bavinck called "I Have Kept the Faith" by Rev. Matthew Van Luik. If you have not read it already, I recommend that you read that article first and then come back to this one. The biographical article on Bavinck is like the first half-hour of a dinner visit, a time to get to know each other on a basic level.

Once you are familiar with the Bavincks, another opportunity opens. Dr. Herman Bavinck was one of the most respected Reformed theologians of his day. Wouldn't it be wonderful to ask him a couple of doctrinal questions and see what his answer would be? We all have certain theological questions that are not entirely settled in our minds. Could Professor Bavinck help? In our minds let's head off to the Bavinck home at Vloeddijk 15 in Kampen and see. Along the way, we will be introduced to some interesting quotes from the professor's most well-known

publication, his *Reformed Dogmatics*. (Yes, the insertion of those quotations within a “dinner discussion” may sound a bit contrived, but I hope you will find them edifying nonetheless.)

So, we imagine that after a delicious meal cooked by Hanny Bavinck, and a few good chuckles prompted by their cute three-year-old daughter Johanna (named after her Mom), we settle into a more theological discussion over apple pie and coffee. Here we go...

You: *Professor Bavinck, from time to time I still wonder about original sin. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned, and yet so many generations later we still suffer the consequences. Somehow, it just does not seem fair!*

Bavinck: Yes, you are right, the doctrine of original sin is extremely hard to understand. In fact, you might even wonder if it contradicts what we read in Ezekiel, “The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son” (18:20).

With all of this in mind, I once wrote, “There can be no doubt that nothing shocks our reason more than to say that the sin of the first man made guilty those who, so far from that source, seem incapable of having taken part in it.... Nevertheless, without this most incomprehensible of all mysteries we are incomprehensible to ourselves” (*Reformed Dogmatics* [RD] 3.100-101). You see, the pages of history, and even of our own lives, are filled with so much pride, greed, tragedy, and misery that sin must be more than a bad habit we learn. Instead, it is something deeply embedded within our human nature, and that’s what we call original sin. If we do not acknowledge this, the history of this world really does not make logical sense!

At the same time, that does not fully answer your question either, does it? Perhaps what I wrote elsewhere will help more: “Much misunderstanding could be avoided if in original sin we differentiated between an *originating* sin and the sin *originated*. Actually, by original or hereditary sin, one should only understand the moral depravity that people carry with them from the time of their conception and birth from their sinful parents” (RD 3.101).

Of course, we all realize that we were not there with Adam and Eve in the garden. So, as such, we did not personally participate in that *originating* sin, as I called it, when our first parents disobeyed God, took the forbidden fruit, and ate it.

But we cannot stop there, because a sinful nature *originated* from Adam and Eve’s *originating* sin and that *originated* sin is then passed down from parents to children. In fact, that sinful

nature is as close and personal to us as anything ever could be. It is so embedded in the very fiber of our hearts and minds that it never leaves us so long as we are in this life. Also, contrary to what the Roman Catholic Church teaches, this sinful nature, in and of itself, leaves us so guilty in God’s sight that he would be entirely just if he condemned us just because of our sinful inclinations. This is also what we confess in Article 15 of our Belgic Confession.

So, in the end, the doctrine of original sin does not contradict the verse from Ezekiel. The prophet is speaking about the actual, daily sins that we commit, and then it is true that “the son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father.” But original sin – or I hope it is somewhat helpful if I also call it the *originated* sin – of our corrupt nature is passed down from parents to children. Only the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit breaks that tragic chain of the sinful nature that we pass down to our children. But we can certainly be thankful for that, can’t we? Does that help you a bit to understand original sin better?

You: *Yes, thanks. I’ll need to think some more about your distinction between originating and originated sin, but yes, properly understood, that may well help me. By the way, I have another question, if you don’t mind.*

Bavinck: No, of course, go ahead.

You: *It is about covenant and election. From time to time, I have heard ministers remind us that the circle of the covenant is bigger than the circle of the elect. I am quite sure they mean that all those who belong to the covenant and are baptized are not necessarily, head-for-head, elect persons. After all, there are also hypocrites in the church, as we confess in the Belgic Confession. But then how does this relationship between covenant and election work out, also in practical terms? That relationship seems to be at the heart of so many debates in Reformed church history and still is today!*

Bavinck: Yes, you are right, that is another difficult question. Of course, to begin with, we understand that our heavenly Father does not necessarily reveal everything we would like to know. We do well to remember the words of our confession, “As to God’s actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us” (BC 13). In the first place, those words are about God’s providence, but they also apply to this topic of covenant and election.

Having said that, historically Reformed theologians have made some distinctions as they connect covenant and election. For example, some have said that non-elect church members are part of the *external* covenant but not the *internal* covenant, or others have suggested that non-elect members are part of the *administration* of the covenant but not its *essence*. In this way, theologians have tried to explain how covenant and election are closely related but not identical.

You: Okay, thanks. Distinctions can be helpful. But is that also the way that you personally see it, Professor Bavinck? More than that, if parents are anxious about their own children who may be straying away from the Lord, subtle theological distinctions do not always give the comfort for which we yearn. Can you say any more?

Bavinck: Sure, I will do my best to explain a bit more. There is an old Latin saying: *the one who distinguishes well also teaches well*. But caution is also in order here! Whatever we distinguish, we can easily, and perhaps even unintentionally, *separate*, and that can quickly become a problem. You see, we do not read about internal and external covenants in the Bible, just *one* covenant of grace. So, once I put it this way: “The covenant of grace is one, and the external and internal sides of it, though on earth they never fully coincide, may not be split apart and placed side by side” (RD 3.232). Even our Lord Jesus Christ said that there are weeds *among* the wheat (Matt 13:29-30) and bad branches *on* the vine (John 15:2).

Of course, it will not stay that way forever. The weeds will be removed, and the bad branches pruned. But the key question is: *who* will separate the weeds from the wheat and *when*? Here we must remember our place and our limitations. That is why I added, “But we do not have the right and the power to separate the two: in the day of the harvest, *God himself* will do this” (RD 3.232). Both as theologians and as parents we must be careful that we do not try to see things from the perspective that God alone can see. We should also avoid an attempt to get ahead of our God, so to speak. Sadly, at a certain moment, a covenant child may show little to no fruit of faith. It may even come to the point that church discipline must be administered. But let us not forget, even church discipline is administered with a view to repentance. We do not know what the Lord will yet do in the life of those who stray away from him. Case in point: Peter vehemently denied his Lord, even calling down curses upon himself, but later the Lord brought Peter to repentance and reinstated him. What the Lord did with Peter, he can do with anyone.

That is why I have emphasized in my writing that we walk “in the way of the covenant” (RD 3.232). We cling to our Lord’s promises. We urgently pray to our heavenly Father on the basis of those promises. We take our obligations seriously. By the power and wisdom of the Spirit, we live in love and holiness, also appealing to those who stray away.

Yet, at the end of the day, the LORD gives us the revealed path to walk: the way of the covenant, as I call it. We certainly confess that the Lord’s eternal decree of election is the fountainhead of our salvation. But he has not told us who is elect or who is reprobate within that decree. So, we cannot walk in what we do not know.

Yes, as the father of our dear little Johanna, I do understand. Theological discussions and distinctions are helpful, but they also have their limitations. When a covenant child turns his or her back on the Lord, it is a very heavy cross to bear. What can we say? With empathy and love we say, “Keep walking *in the way of the covenant*. Pray in the way of the covenant. Love in the way of the covenant. Encourage and admonish in the way of the covenant. And above all, focus your faith, not on yourself and not on your child, but on the God of that covenant, *our LORD*, who is faithful, gracious, and powerful to save.

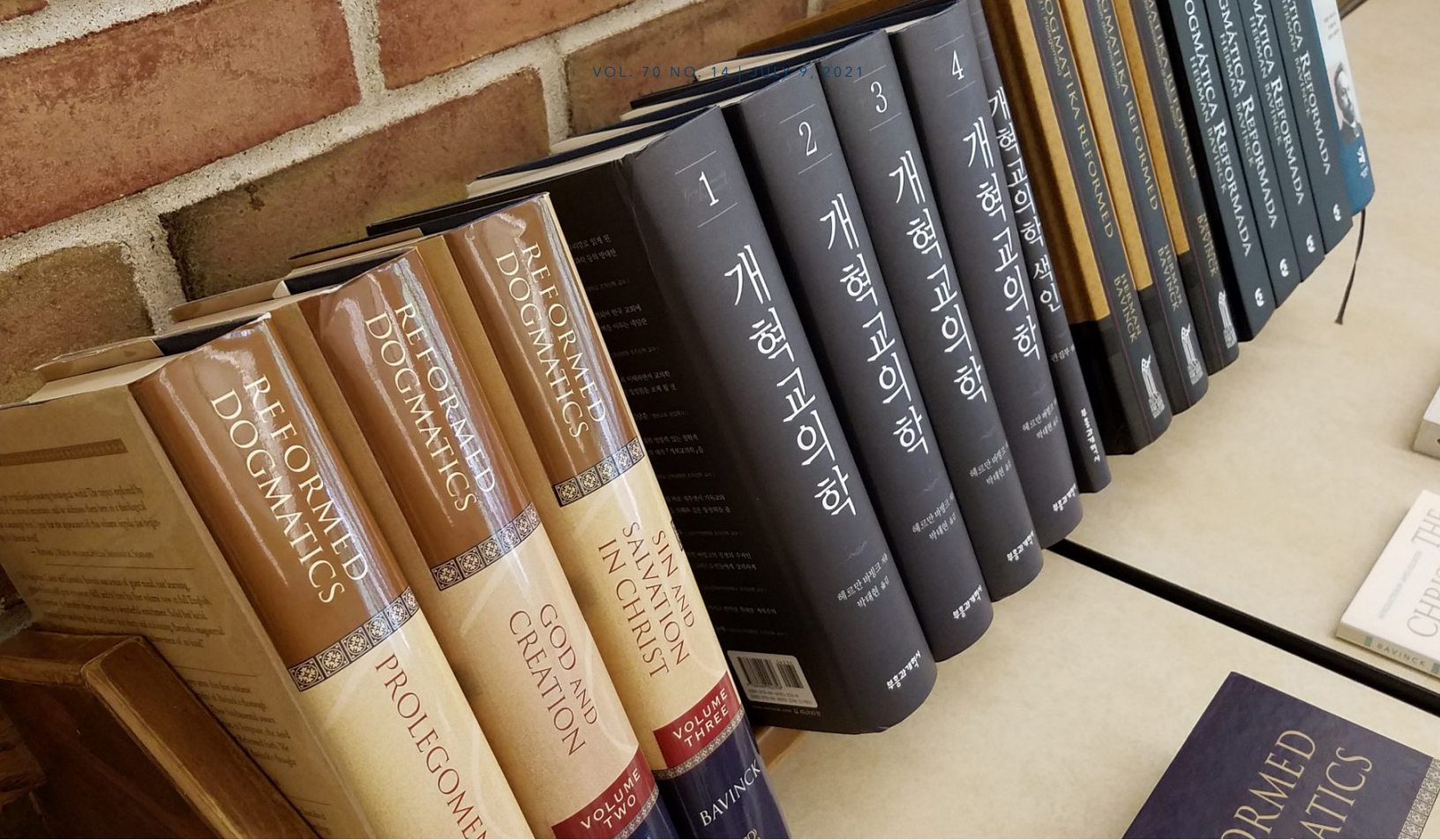
You: Thanks, professor. Yes, that is the focus we need. It is not easy to maintain it, but I can see how important it is. Thanks for taking some time to answer my questions.

Bavinck: You are more than welcome. I hope it helps in some small way. Remember, also as professors, we do not understand it all either. We also need his forgiveness because sometimes we do not get it quite right. Thankfully, the Lord gives us to each other in his church. I also learn things from conversations like these. So, I would say, thanks for asking.

But shall we leave the doctrinal discussions for now? I think your coffee is getting cold ... [professor smiles and winks] and you have hardly touched my wife’s famous apple pie. It is tasty, isn’t it? I certainly love it. In fact, sometimes my wife says that I love her apple pie *too much*, but I personally don’t know how that would even be possible ... [professor chuckles heartily]. ☺



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Translations of *Reformed Dogmatics* by John Bolt. Used by permission.

A Brief Introduction to Some Writings of Herman Bavinck

Anyone interested in learning more about what Dr. Herman Bavinck wrote should consult *Guide to the Writings of Herman Bavinck* by Eric D. Bristley (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008). Of course, Bavinck wrote in Dutch and many of his articles and books remain untranslated. However, some have been brought over into the English language. To orient you to these translated works, Bristley includes a helpful section in his book entitled “Herman Bavinck Speaks English.” Here is a brief description of his two widely-read publications, both available in English.

***Reformed Dogmatics*, four volumes. John Bolt, general editor; John Vriend, translator. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008.**

This is Bavinck’s *magnum opus*, the crowning work of his many publications. The first version of this set was written over a six-year period from 1895 to 1901. The fourth and final edition appeared in 1928-1930. Allow me to quote an endorsement from Richard B. Gaffin, jr, on the cover of the English translation.

Arguably the most important systematic theology ever produced in the Reformed tradition. I have found it to be the most valuable. English-speaking theology throughout the twentieth century until now has been singularly impoverished by not having at its disposal a translation of Bavinck's *Dogmatiek* in its entirety. The appearance of this volume will be an incomparable boon for generations of students, pastors, teachers, and others, serving to deepen understanding and enrich reflection in both historical and systematic theology.

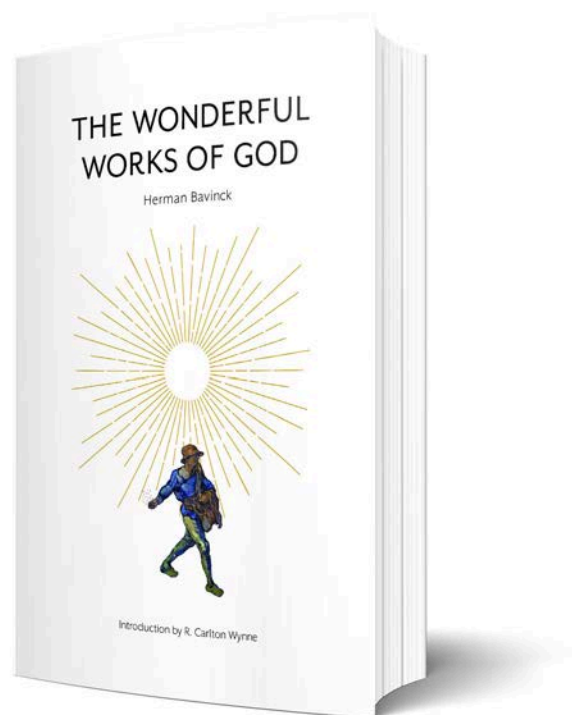
Having read this glowing review, you may wonder, "Do I fit into Gaffin's mention of 'and others'?" To be sure, Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is geared, in the first place, towards theological students, pastors, and professors. Gaffin specifically refers to that.

At the same time, it is not surprising, but perhaps intentional, that Gaffin adds "and others." Allow me to share a personal anecdote. On my shelf I also have a copy of Bavinck's *Dogmatiek* in the original Dutch language. I received that copy from one of my older relatives. This man never was a theological student, nor a minister, nor a professor. You could probably best describe him as a blue-collar worker with strong entrepreneurial spirit and love of Reformed theology. He owned a copy of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, in Dutch, and read it for personal edification and good insights to share at men's Bible study.


Be prepared, if you pick up a copy of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, to set aside some time and be prepared to dig in. It will not always be easy reading. You will run into Latin and Greek and even some Hebrew, but those phrases are translated as well. If you are looking for some more meat in your diet of Reformed theological reading, well, perhaps you will want to join the ranks of Gaffin's "and others."

***The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession.* Henry Zylstra, translator. Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019.**

Written by Bavinck in Dutch in 1909, this book originally had a Latin title, *Magnalia Dei*, which translates as, "The great, or wonderful, works of God." As happens more often, if a professor writes a complete systematic theology, aimed in the first place for the seminary setting, he will also produce a simplified and abridged version that serves a wider audience. That is how we can think of Bavinck's *The Wonderful Works of God*, or, as it



appeared earlier from another publisher, *Our Reasonable Faith*. In twenty-four chapters, Bavinck surveys all the main areas of doctrine from how we receive knowledge about God (revelation), through to the person and work of Christ (Christology), eventually arriving at eternal life (eschatology), and everything in between.

Richard Gaffin also contributed an endorsement for this volume of some six hundred pages. This time he says, "a book that belongs in the libraries of every church" and John Bolt, one of the foremost Bavinck scholars of our day, adds, "*The Wonderful Works of God* reads devotionally, speaking directly to the heart as well as the mind ... a great introduction to the Reformed tradition for church study groups and college classes." Once again, it may not be the quickest and easiest read available today. But for those who are looking for something to sink their teeth into, you will not be disappointed. Your theological appetite will be satiated! 



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BOOK REVIEW

A Sometimes-Forgotten Figure in Our Church History

In my corner of the Reformed world, figures in church history are often categorized as heroes or villains. If you're either one, you stand a chance of being remembered. For example, Abraham Kuyper is considered a villain because of the way his views were imposed on the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, especially in the 1940s. Klaas Schilder is a hero because of the way he resisted the imposition of Kuyper's views. But if you can't be neatly categorized, even if you've made important contributions, more than likely your name and however God may have used you will be forgotten.

I'm afraid that's been the case with Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). I had a look through my childhood church history textbook, *Young People's History of the Church* by W. Meijer (published in Launceston!). Figures like Schilder and Kuyper dominate. But Bavinck isn't mentioned at all, not even once. P. K. Keizer's *Church History*, a textbook for high schools and colleges, doesn't fare much better. Bavinck is mentioned once, just in passing. I first discovered Herman Bavinck in university by reading Cornelius Van Til, the pioneer of Reformed apologetics. Van Til

claimed he wasn't being all that innovative, just building on what others had done before, and especially Bavinck.

Who was Herman Bavinck? Without spoiling the book, he was a highly-respected Dutch theologian. After a short pastorate, he first taught at the seminary of the churches established out of the Secession of 1834. Bavinck was instrumental in discussions leading up to the Union of 1892, when the churches of the Secession merged with the churches of the Doleantie of 1886. In 1902, he accepted a position to teach theology at the Free University of Amsterdam. He was also actively involved in politics, being elected as a senator to the Dutch parliament in 1911. He wrote dozens of articles and books, the most notable being his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (which has been translated into English).

I'm hopeful that this new biography by James Eglinton will spark renewed interest in this influential figure from our Reformed church history. While it's scholarly and careful, it's also exceptionally readable. A few years ago, James Bratt published a biography of Abraham Kuyper (*Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*). This too

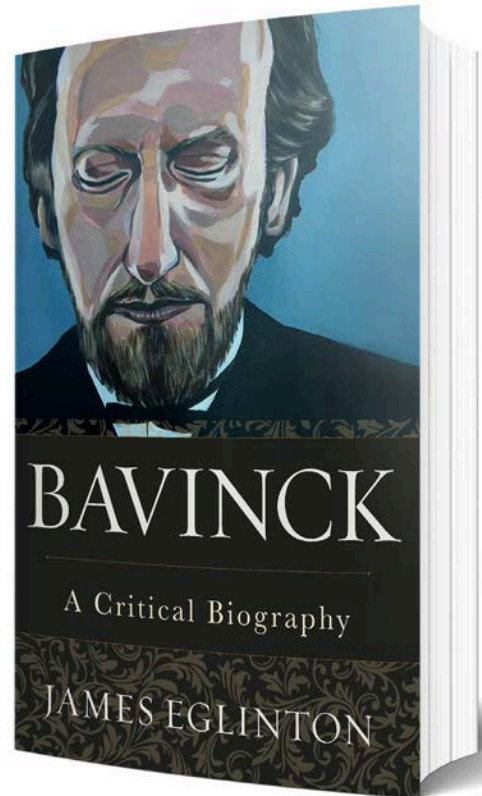
was a scholarly biography, but it suffered from assuming too much about the reader's prior knowledge of Kuyper's context. Eglinton, on the other hand, explains everything well for the reader new to Bavinck. Eglinton has helpful features, including a map, chronology, and a list of key figures, churches, educational institutions, and newspapers.

This isn't the first Bavinck biography to appear in English. In 2010, we saw Ron Gleason's *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman and Theologian*. Eglinton's biography is different in that it claims to be a critical approach to Bavinck – "critical" in the sense of being analytical. Eglinton presents Bavinck as a theologically orthodox believer trying to come to terms with the modern world, a world which began to change radically after 1848. The author doesn't shy away from some of the weaknesses, inconsistencies, or doubts of his subject. Eglinton also corrects some of the inaccuracies of previous biographers, not only Gleason, but also Dutch biographers such as R. H. Bremmer. Eglinton does this by going back to the original sources, especially Bavinck's journals and letters.

As a result of this original research, some new details of Bavinck's life have emerged. For example, Eglinton reveals the tragic obsession the young Bavinck had with Amelia den Dekker. His journals tell the story of his apparently unrequited love for Amelia and how she broke his heart. These sorts of details fill in more of the human side of Herman Bavinck.

It also becomes clear how Bavinck isn't easily boxed. He was a "son of the Secession," but chose to study at the University of Leiden, a hotbed of theological liberalism. Bavinck was always confessionally Reformed, yet one of his closest friends was an atheist. He was a friend and colleague of Abraham Kuyper, yet was publicly and privately critical of Kuyper. Bavinck edited and republished a classic Reformed theological textbook known as *The Leiden Synopsis*, but when he wrote his own dogmatics he wasn't just regurgitating past formulations.

Readers may also be surprised to discover that Bavinck was ahead of his time on some issues. For example, Herman Bavinck argued that there was no Scriptural basis on which women should be prevented from voting, whether in society or in the church. He wasn't the first to make such arguments, but his voice did carry some heft in the Reformed Churches of The



Bavinck: A Critical Biography
James Eglinton. Grand Rapids:
Baker Academic, 2020.
Hardcover, 450 pages.

Netherlands. Eglinton adds some context to these views with his fascinating description of Bavinck's wife Johanna, a woman who certainly had an independent spirit and a sharp mind of her own.

Scholars of Dutch Reformed church history are lauding this work, and rightfully so. But I'd also highly recommend it to all pastors and church leaders, as well as teachers of church history in Christian schools. Not only is it informative, but it's an enjoyable read. Best of all, it'll leave you with a more nuanced view of how Christ has been working through complex people to gather, defend, and preserve his church. **C**



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METF News

Middle East Reformed Fellowship—"Declaring the Whole Counsel of God"

May 2021



Reaching Farsi-speaking People

by Graham Lodge, Vice-Chair METF Board



Iranian shopkeeper & friends enjoying tea

In mainstream media, **Iran** is negatively presented. The focus is largely hostile politics. It is not wise or just, however, to shape views of the Iranian population by the politics of the country.

Iran is historically a very diverse society. The people include a mix of various regional ethnic groups. Ethnic Persians make up a majority of the population, but also there are other Aryan, Turkic, Kurdish and Arab tribes. The vast major-

ity are raised as Shi'ite Muslims. Yet, there is historic evidence of Christian influences such as in some of the oldest architecture. Visitors are often surprised to discover ancient church buildings.

Geography

Iran sits between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea with a wealth of resources, ranging from caviar to oil. It could make a great holiday destination with historic culture, interesting architecture, much wildlife and

beautiful landscapes.

The country has also had its share of earthquakes. In March, a relatively mild one could be felt all the way to Dubai. It occurred not far away from a nuclear power plant, but no damage was done. Severe quakes took many lives in 2017 & 2012.

Gospel Online

Farsi is the Persian language. Although written using Arabic lettering, it is a totally different language. Farsi has a rich cultural theme of poetry with an artistic flare. With this

understanding, METF's Farsi Media Ministry Team uses such themes online to share the gospel. They both share the gospel with those who have never heard and also encourage Farsi-speaking Christians to grow in faith.

Formats include daily radio podcasts, links to media via Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Other links are also shared via Twitter, SoundCloud, Telegram and WhatsApp. Additionally, apps are made available for free download on Google Play and Apple App Store.



Literature & Follow-up

English-speaking Christians are blessed with many theologically sound books, booklets, and leaflets. Several of these have been translated into Farsi, as well as doctrinal statements and articles and are available electronically.

With a good number of resources published and many listeners, the Farsi online radio ministry offers more direct contact to those interested. Follow-up opportunities are either by phone, email or private chats over the internet. Listeners have many questions. The follow-up team responds to the questions and provides additional support. Electronic files of Scriptures and Christian literature are shared with the aim of lead-

ing them to faith in Christ and discipling them.

Iranian believers and Christ seekers are given the additional opportunity of further Bible Study online. Sensitivity to their safety requires this to be done either as a personal one-to-one study or for an individual family. As the ministry grows, more Farsi spiritual leaders and Bible teachers are needed.

The various online channels developed by the team now have recorded testimonies from some of those who have come to faith through this wonderful work that God has blessed. These testimonies greatly encourage those who are searching and seeking the one true God.

The Stats

Although we acknowledge that God works in wonderful ways and he is in control and his Kingdom is not measured with statistics, it is wonderful to use technology and get a measure of the impact and views that the wealth of media material has on the Farsi-speaking peoples of Iran and beyond.

Shadkami.org (Rejoice) has a theme of outreach.

Roshdino.org (Growth) has more of a discipling and follow-up theme. They have 781 videos, over 250,000 views, and 2000 subscribers between them.

To keep these websites engaging, new material is developed and uploaded regularly. In a typical month about 20 new programmes, 26 videos, and 37 photo posts are added.

Producing new materials and following-up large numbers of contacts requires careful, hard work. Those involved are based in different locations around the world. Modern technology allows them to keep in touch by video calls. This provides safer and closer contact with more viewers, listeners and website visitors.

Beyond Iran

Numerous Iranian Christians have left their country seeking refugee status for more freedom and safety. Pray for the Lord to guide them to good Christian fellowship and to become better grounded in the faith wherever they end up in the world.

What a wonderful benefit that all these good Farsi resources are available online throughout the world. They encourage and bless the converts and give them opportunities to share the gospel with family and friends back home.

Praise God that his Kingdom is growing and continues to grow among Iranians inside the country and also in different parts of the world. Please pray for more Iranians to be exposed to the

*"I love those
who love me,
and those
who seek me
diligently
find me."*

— Proverbs 8:17

Farsi online ministry and be blessed by it. Opportunities are so rare to hear in Farsi the gospel that provides salvation and hope in Christ. Please also uplift the Farsi team in your prayers and ask for more trained workers for follow-up activities.

In the past, ease of travel provided opportunities for training conferences and the baptism of Iranians who had come to faith in Christ. Currently this is not possible. May God free up travel again and allow these fantastic events to take place alongside the fruitful witness of the Farsi Media Ministry.



Graham Lodge with his wife Catherine

MERF-Canada

Thank you for your faithful support! Please make cheques payable to MERF-Canada and send them to the address at the bottom of the page.

Online donations can be made to Middle East Reformed Fellowship (Canada) Inc. through www.merf.org/support



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

What a joy it was to read the recent foreign mission issue of Clarion. We were able to learn so much about the missionaries and mission projects and churches. It is a privilege for us at "the home front" to support our brothers and sisters by our daily prayers. May the Lord bless all this work for the salvation of many, for the expansion of the kingdom of heaven, and for the growth of the church, unto the glory of his name.

I would remind the readers of Clarion about the Reformed Missions blog which provides regular updates on the various Canadian Reformed mission projects, both at home and abroad. Point your browser at reformedmissions.net. From there you can subscribe to a push notification, which you will receive on your computer, phone, or tablet whenever we post a new article.

Sincerely,
George van Popta
Hamilton, Ontario

PRESS RELEASE

Classis Ontario West May 19 & June 02, AD 2021

Opening of Classis

On behalf of the church at Glanbrook, br. James Koning opened the meeting in a Christian manner at 8:30 AM, May 19. In prayer he remembered the long-standing health concerns of Dr. Gootjes, the gradually improving health of Dr. VanRaalte, the ongoing work of CRTS, the needs of missionary Rev. DeGraaf and his family, the vacant church at Glanbrook, the challenge of dealing with restrictions surrounding COVID-19, and the students being examined. The credentials were found to be in good order. Classis was declared constituted.

The following brothers formed the moderamen as per the suggestion of the previous classis: chairman – Rev. A. Vreugdenhil; vice-chairman – Rev. P. H. Holtvlüwer; clerk – Rev. K. Kok. Rev. Vreugdenhil thanked the church at Glanbrook for convening Classis and completing all the preparatory work. After arranging which agenda items would be dealt with on May 19 and which on June 2 (DV), the agenda was adopted as proposed.

Licensure examinations

Five CRTS students each presented a sermon, and each was deemed sufficient to proceed with the examination of doctrine and creeds. After being examined, the following brothers were granted permission to speak an edifying word: Caleb Kos, Dathan Pleiter, Timothy Slaa, Matthias Schat, and Adam Werkman.

Correspondence received

A request to extend the permission to speak an edifying word was requested by the following brothers: Bryan Vanderhorst, Kevin Starr, Rodney den Boer, Timothy van Beek. Each in turn was granted. This permission is given for a one year (twelve month) period.

Reports

The treasurer's year-end report was gratefully received along with a review of the books of the treasurer. Since all was in order, Classis discharged the treasurer for the period covered by the report.

Personal question period (for May 19)

This opportunity was made use of.
Classis adjourned until 8:30 AM June 2, 2021

Re-opening of Classis

The chairman called the meeting to order. After the roll was called, all properly credentialed delegates were found to be present. The chairman led in opening devotions.

Candidacy examination

Br. Ruurd Offringa presented a sermon and in closed session classis deemed it sufficient to continue the examination. Br. Offringa was then examined in open session in the areas of OT exegesis, NT exegesis, and doctrine and creeds. In closed session Classis determined that Br. Offringa did not sustain the examination. Classis decided to extend br. Offringa's license to speak an edifying word for a one year (twelve month) period.

Question period ad Art. 44 CO

All the churches indicated that they are continuing the ministry of the office-bearers as well as honouring the decisions of the broader assemblies. No church sought the advice of Classis.

Proposals

The church at Ancaster presented an overture to articulate the priority of psalm singing in Articles 55 CO. The overture proposes to add the following line to open Art. 55: "The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches." After a round of discussion, the overture was adopted and will be forwarded to the convening church for Regional Synod East to ask for its support and to forward it to General Synod 2022.

Appointments

The church at Grand Rapids was appointed to convene the next classis on Sept 8, 2021, or, if cancelled, then Dec 8, 2021. Suggested officers for the next classis are Rev. P. H. Holtvlüwer (chair); Rev. K. Kok (vice-chair); Rev. J. Poort (clerk). The following appointments were made:

- Treasurer – Br. Brian Vanderhout
- Church for Auditing the Books of the Treasurer – Hamilton (Cornerstone)
- Church for the Archives – London
- Church for Inspecting the Archives – Kerwood
- Church Visitors – Revs. K. Kok (convenor), J. Louwerse, P. H. Holtvlüwer
- Committee of Examiners – Revs. K. Kok (convenor), J. Louwerse, A. Witten
- Church to Administer the Fund for Needy Churches – Ancaster
- Church as Contact for Ecumenical Relations – Kerwood

Closing of Classis

Personal question was not made use of. The chairman declared that censure according to Article 34 CO was, thankfully, not necessary. The Acts and the Press Release were each read and approved by the assembly. After the chairman led in thanksgiving prayer, Classis was declared closed.

*For Classis Ontario West May 19 & June 2, 2021 -
Rev. P.H. Holtvlüwer (clerk at that time)*

Clarion

To equip God's people for his glory,
in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized
in the Reformed confessions, Clarion
adheres to the following core values:

Confessionally Reformed
Loving in manner
Attuned to current issues
Readable and Reliable
In Submission to Scripture
Open to constructive criticism
Nurturing Christian living

