



Cory C. Brock and N. Gray Sutanto, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), pp. xxii + 322, ISBN: 978-1683596462. £30.99

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has witnessed something of a mini-renaissance for Neo-Calvinism in the English-speaking world. No doubt a major contributing factor to this has been the translation of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, a project initiated in 1994 and finally released in the early 2000s. This helped inspire a new generation of Bavinck students, perhaps the most influential of whom has been Dr James Eglinton, who currently serves as Senior Lecturer in Reformed Theology at the University of Edinburgh. Eglinton's research into Bavinck and Neo-Calvinism has forged a path which others have followed, and today a growing school of Neo-Calvinist scholars have studied in Edinburgh. Two graduates from that school, who themselves have gone on to become leading thinkers on Neo-Calvinism, are Cory Brock and Gray Sutanto. Their emerging field of theological study is one into which others are invited, and in *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*, Brock and Sutanto provide a gateway into a rich lowland pasture whose origins are over one hundred years old, but which for many readers today is a new, fascinating and fertile land to explore.

But not only has Neo-Calvinism enjoyed something of a renaissance in the past two decades, there has also been an important reappraisal of how the term 'Neo-Calvinism' should be understood. In their opening pages, Brock and Sutanto highlight that the term has frequently been associated with political and philosophical discourse, and especially with a transformationalist understanding of the Church's mission, rather than focusing squarely on a distinct theological perspective. In true Renaissance-spirit, the primary aim of the book is to return *ad fontes* with attention falling almost exclusively on the dogmatic contributions of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). Their goal is to provide 'a single volume that treats [Kuyper and Bavinck's] distinctive dogmatic theology in an introductory yet summative and textually grounded way' (p. 3).

An introductory chapter orients the reader within the landscape of Neo-Calvinist scholarship today and maps out the pathway to be taken. There follows eight chapters, each devoted to a particular theological subject. Woven through these discussions are three themes which the authors



identify as prominent characteristics of Neo-Calvinism: *orthodox yet modern*, whereby the dogmas of classical Reformed theology are employed to interact with modern theology and philosophy; a commitment to be *self-consciously holistic*, thus formulating a worldview that speaks into all areas of life; and an attempt to explain concepts in language that is *organic*, not *mechanical*, the result of which is a presentation of doctrinal truth that articulates the rich complexity of the Christian gospel.

Chapter Two explores the relationship between Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism and aims to identify what, precisely, is new about the latter. As Brock and Sutanto explain, Kuyper and Bavinck's aim was both to retrieve and pioneer. Taking a cue from the wide-scoped vision of the Genevan Reformer, the Dutch Neo-Calvinists sought to develop Calvin's theology into a fully-orbed world and life view.

Chapter Three is entitled "Catholic and Modern" and outlines the way in which Kuyper and Bavinck sought to navigate a pathway which avoided the pitfalls of dead conservatism on the one hand, and careless liberalism on the other. In outlining this quest for unity-in-diversity as opposed to uniformity-or-else-division, Brock and Sutanto offer a salient reminder of the Church's need to remain faithful to the core doctrines of the gospel while speaking meaningfully to the ever-changing contexts in which she finds herself living.

Chapter Four discusses "Revelation and Reason" and offers a fascinating examination of how Kuyper and Bavinck approached General Revelation. A distinctive element of this involved embracing a romantic sense of absolute dependence, thus exemplifying the modern lens through which orthodox truth could be viewed and described.

Chapter Five moves on to Special Revelation under the title "Scripture and Organism". While insisting on the authority of the Bible, Kuyper and Bavinck utilised organic language to describe the relationship between the divine and human authors of Scripture. The result is Neo-Calvinism to a tee; the rich complexity of a dogma described in organic language that reaches heights from which mechanical terminology falls short.

Chapter Six examines "Creation and Re-creation", rightly identified by Brock and Sutanto as one of the most prominent emphases of Neo-Calvinism. The authors outline the crucial connection in Neo-Calvinism between creation and salvation and the recognition that, in the gospel, grace restores nature.



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Chapter Seven, “Image and Fall”, looks at biblical anthropology. Once again, organic language comes to the fore as Bavinck, in particular, is shown to outline the need for humanity as a whole, in its collective diversity, to share in bearing the *imago Dei*. Additionally, and through Kuyper especially, connections are made to Covenant Theology as the federal headship of Adam is recognised as central to the Neo-Calvinist understanding of humanity.

Chapter Eight examines another key emphasis of Neo-Calvinism: Common Grace. Brock and Sutanto rightly identify this as a key area where the thought of John Calvin is retrieved through the theology of Kuyper and Bavinck. As a key strand in the fully-orbed world view of Neo-Calvinism, common grace, while distinct from special grace, is nevertheless recognised as central to God’s dealings with creation from the Fall to the return of Jesus Christ.

The final dogmatic topic is ecclesiology as Chapter Nine explores “The Church and the World”. This chapter examines how Kuyper and Bavinck understood the Church as both an institute and an organism, related to which is a discussion of the Church visible and invisible. Brock and Sutanto explain that, from a Neo-Calvinist perspective, although the Church stands distinct from the world, part of her mission is to function as a leavening agent in the world as she contributes to the great goal of grace restoring nature.

Finally, a short tenth chapter offers sixteen theses summarising the main emphases of the book. These are immensely helpful, each one a short but rich outline of the primary concerns of Neo-Calvinism to which, no doubt, readers will frequently return.

Overall the book is an immensely impressive accomplishment. While relatively short, the scope of topics examined is wide, yet the depth of analysis is not compromised. Indeed, Brock and Sutanto have offered a very stimulating discussion, not just of Kuyper and Bavinck, but of many of the key subject areas in systematic theology. Such an achievement is admirable. However, strengths are often unable to shake off corresponding weaknesses and it is perhaps the case that the distilled language of the book, while very profound, risks being a little inaccessible to the unfamiliar reader. Indeed, on one or two occasions specific terms (such as the ‘two-Bavinck thesis’) are mentioned without explanation which runs the risk of assuming the kind of knowledge that an introductory volume should really provide.



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From a Scottish perspective, although the roots of Neo-Calvinism lie in the Netherlands, this book frequently strikes notes which harmonise with significant emphases in Scottish theology. Most striking of which is Kuyper and Bavinck's desire for the Church to have a 'leavening' influence on a nation. That's a melody that was frequently sung by Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) half a century earlier. Similarly, organic language frequently germinates in the writings of George Smeaton (1814–1889). Furthermore, Brock and Sutanto note Kuyper's provocative claim that the believers of early centuries were not fathers but children, the fathers are those in the Church of the present day. Whether Kuyper realised or not, he is echoing both Chalmers and William Cunningham (1805–1861). Moreover, Brock and Sutanto highlight other researchers who have suggested that it was only late in the nineteenth century that John Calvin was treated as a defining standard for Reformed orthodoxy. Even a cursory reading of William Cunningham would suggest that that conclusion may need revisiting.

Nothing raised in the previous paragraph should detract from Brock and Sutanto's volume. They have offered a clear and informative introduction to Neo-Calvinism and the book will open the doors for further research which will no doubt discover areas of connection and correspondence that have hitherto remained unseen. *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* is a fascinating volume and a much-needed resource.

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