

**Convivium Irenicum 2022:
“Philosophy and the Christian: Seeking Wisdom in the Light of Christ”**

Plenary Speaker: Dr. James Eglinton

Dr. James Eglinton is Meldrum Senior Lecturer in Reformed Theology at the University of Edinburgh. A specialist in Dutch Neo-Calvinism, he has edited and translated numerous works by Herman Bavinck. His book *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Baker Academic, 2020) won the History and Biography Book of the Year Prize in The Gospel Coalition 2020 Book Awards. He also serves as Associate Editor of the *Journal of Reformed Theology*, published by Brill.

Location: Davenport House, 419 Glenolden Dr., Landrum, SC

Date: June 1st-4th, 2022

We are all familiar with Tertullian’s ringing challenge, “What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Frequently invoked as a shorthand for the age-old tension between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, the challenge has been effectively answered by many Christians across the centuries, and particularly in recent years by Protestants rediscovering the philosophical riches of the Christian faith.

But it’s worth pausing to attend to the specificity of Tertullian’s challenge: “What hath Athens...?” After all, although it is one thing to concede authority to the shared universal gift of human reason, why should one place—one pagan city in the fourth century BC—wield authority to rival the Word of God? There is no question that the western philosophical tradition within which Christian theology has grown and matured is a tradition remarkably tied to Athens, and this specificity raises questions for the theologian. Is there *one true philosophy* that demands our assent as urgently as the one true faith? Should the Greek philosophical categories that informed theological debate at crucial junctures—the fourth and fifth centuries, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and again in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—be taken as normative for the work of Christian theology? Must we first re-learn Aristotle in order to speak responsibly as Christian theologians and ethicists today? Or can and should we shake free from this heritage in order to creatively restate the truths of Scripture in our modern age?

At our Ninth Annual Convivium Irenicum, these are the questions we want to attend to. Since its inception, the Davenport Institute has been at the center of a movement of renewal within orthodox Protestantism to retrieve the heritage of natural law, the philosophical rigor of our theological forbears, and the robust metaphysics that make core Christian claims about God and man intelligible. However, there is great risk in such a project: that we will become antiquarians, investing the past with authority merely because it is the past, and not because it illuminates the Word or our world today. Accordingly, the Davenport Institute has sought at the same time to draw attention to creative re-performances of the Reformation, preeminent among them the “neo-Calvinism” of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. Bavinck models the very best of



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the Reformed tradition in his philosophical eclecticism—his ability to deploy the resources of multiple philosophical traditions in service of the theological task. For this reason, Bavinck continues to stand as the preeminent theologian for modernity—a thinker deeply anchored in the old catholic and reformed tradition, but versed in the challenges of his own day and unafraid of appropriating modernity’s own philosophical tools to use against it.

As we look back on Bavinck’s achievements a century after his death, we want to hold him up (though not uncritically) as a model of faithful philosophical theology, and reflect together on what a principled Reformed eclecticism might look like again in our own day. To that end, we are inviting as our plenary speaker Dr. James Eglinton, a world-renowned scholar of Bavinck’s life and work, to anchor our reflections on this theme and guide us in consideration of some of Bavinck’s key writings. We are also inviting, as usual, a wide array of presentations for papers or guided discussions on the broader theme of how Protestants can regain an appropriate understanding of philosophy’s role as the “handmaiden of theology.”

Proposals might address questions such as the following:

- How do we respond to the charge that the Western theological tradition has allowed Greek philosophy to dictate the terms of theology, and that what we need today is a return to a more authentically “biblical theology”?
- To what extent are the categories of classical philosophy normative for the doctrines of “classical theism”?
- Does Christian theology today need to repent of its dependence on modern philosophy and learn anew at the feet of the ancients, or can traditional doctrines be restated in new philosophical idioms?
- What might non-western philosophies (e.g., Confucianism) have to offer to the task of Christian theology? What might this mean for a future (and present!) in which the majority of the church is non-western?
- If we accept that the problems of modernity are the result of philosophical wrong turns, what were those wrong turns and how did theologians of the day address them? Or is this a flawed narrative?
- How does Scripture itself make use of philosophy? Or does Scripture carry within it its own distinctive philosophy (a “Hebraic philosophy,” perhaps)?
- How should we interpret passages of Scripture that seem to warn us against the dangers of “vain philosophy”?

We also welcome proposals that flesh out aspects of Bavinck’s thought on related themes, or that seek to spotlight particular historical exemplars of a faithful integration of theology and philosophy in the magisterial Protestant tradition, and how we might learn from them today.

We welcome paper proposals or guided discussion proposals on any topics that help us toward answering these questions or learning from these exemplars. Papers or sessions may be historical, exegetical, or normative in their approach. Abstracts of between 200 and 300 words must be submitted to b.littlejohn@davenantinstitute.org by February 1, 2022 for consideration.