

CALL FOR PAPERS

Neo-Calvinism and Barthianism: Controversies and Convergences in Dogmatics and Public Theology

7th European Neo-Calvinism Conference 2026

26-28 August 2026, Theologische Fakultät, Universität Basel, Switzerland

Introduction

Karl Barth was the founder of a movement of a theological renewal branded by some as dialectical theology and others as neo-orthodoxy. This was a *Reformed* orthodoxy, related to Barth's Swiss and Protestant background. From outside Barth's movement of renewal looks similar to an earlier renewal movement in the Reformed tradition in the 19th century Netherlands, often referred to as neo-Calvinism, resulting in free churches and various influential institutions.

Historically, those two movements remained distinct, and the interaction was often controversial or even hostile. When Karl Barth developed his theology in the twentieth century, he might have connected to this earlier movement. Apart from a few sparse remarks, he did not. He even ranked Abraham Kuyper among the theologians of the 19th century he opposed. Bavinck was quoted in a positive way just a few times in of the *Church Dogmatics*.

From the neo-Calvinist side, it wasn't much better. When Barth's insights and books reached the Dutch theologians in the 1920, the first response from neo-Calvinist circles was indeed to see him as an ally. 'Just send him Kuyper's and Bavinck's books and he will become one of us', they suggested. Soon they found out this was not the case: Barth was different. He quickly was seen as a threat by the neo-Calvinists, especially when Barth's thought was adopted by their theological opponents of the established *Hervormde Kerk*.

Both movements have become international theological schools whose influence lasts until this day. PhD's theses on the thought of the founding fathers appear in abundance. The theological divergence has also lasted until this day. Barth studies and neo-Calvinism remain divided fields that see each other with a certain suspicion, or, at best, are ships passing in the night.

There is, however, also historical convergence. The major example is neo-Calvinist G.C. Berkouwer who famously turned from an avid anti-Barthian before the Second World War into the author of one of the best books on Barth (according to Barth), *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (1956). Did Berkouwer betray his neo-Calvinism in doing so? Or is there more convergence than often seen? In the French reception of neo-Calvinism there also seems convergence, to the point that French protestants use the term neo-Calvinism for both Barth and Kuyper. The Kuyperian Auguste Lecerf paved the way for the Barthian Pierre Maury at the Protestant faculty in Paris in the 1930s.

Theologically there are indeed similarities. Both traditions emphasize the authority of Scripture over against theological liberalism. Both underline the sovereignty and

transcendence of God against the backdrop of 19th century Hegelian immanent pantheism. Both see the Calvinistic emphasis of the doctrine of predestination as fundamental for the whole of theology and as essential for a solid doctrine of grace alone. Finally, some of the later Barth's developments, for example in *The Humanity of God*, resonate well with the earlier neo-Calvinist critique.

But there are also fundamental differences. For Barth historical criticism was not an enemy but a given. Kuyper and Bavinck countered this approach of Scripture and founded a stream of Biblical scholarship on a different premise. In the polemics of the 1930s, history and revelation were the focal point of the critique: where was the immanence of God in Barth's account? Does history still matter? Can God truly be known or is Barth the first step towards agnosticism (Schilder, Van Til)? Is there still common ground in Barth's thought or is he a fideist (Van Til)? These questions were at the core of neo-Calvinist thought and closely related to matters of ethics and public theology. Was ethics at all possible with Barth presumptions (Berkouwer, Hepp)? And what about Christian schools and Christian politics, which were indeed criticized by Barth explicitly.

Conference Theme

The theme of this conference is about these two influential theological traditions, their mutual history and their respective theological emphases. The subtitle indicates two domains where the controversy was strongest: dogmatics and public theology. We welcome proposals that deal with the philosophical, theological or historical dynamics of the relationship of neo-Calvinism with the thought of Barth and later Barthianism.

Suggestions for Contributions

- Barth's historical engagement with neo-Calvinism
- The reception of Barth's theology among neo-Calvinists in the Netherlands (Berkouwer, Schilder), Hungary, France and the United States (Van Til)
- Interaction between Barthians and neo-Calvinists in the second half of the 20th century
- The development of Barth's thought in relation to neo-Calvinism
- Doctrinal comparison and exploration of the thought of Barth and Bavinck/Kuyper on
 - o Doctrine of Scripture
 - o Doctrine of revelation
 - o Epistemology
 - o God and history
 - o Predestination
 - o God's immanence and transcendence
- Comparison and evaluation of ethics and public theology in Barth and Bavinck/Kuyper
 - o Apologetics
 - o Public theology
 - o the social issue
 - o World War 2
 - o totalitarianism

- politics
- education

One-page proposals including the presenter's institutional affiliation can be submitted to Dr. Marinus de Jong (marinus.dejong@tuu.nl) before April 15, 2026.

At this conference we value the communal and reciprocal aspect of academic enquiry, we therefore encourage those who present to attend the entire three days conference.

The European Neo-Calvinism Conference is organized by

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Prof. Dr. George Harinck (Neo-Calvinism Research Institute, TU Utrecht)

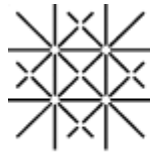
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