

Herman Bavinck on Scottish Covenant Theology and Reformed Piety

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In his introduction to the works of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine, Bavinck shows why the concept of the covenant was so important in Scottish church history.* He also shares some of his own theological ideas on preaching and spirituality. In the first place, Bavinck admires Scottish preaching because in it the idea of the covenant connects the appeal for personal renewal and conversion with an appeal for general societal renewal. Although he did not agree with the Seceders' underlying view of the relationship between church and state, he nevertheless appreciates how the doctrine of the covenant shines through their sermons. The Scottish divines consistently kept an eye on both the people and the country because they held that God's covenant is established not only with individuals but also with nations. This emphasis corresponds with Bavinck's understanding of the catholicity of Reformed faith.¹ Although in his ecclesiology he advocated for a free church, Bavinck sympathizes with the passion for the sanctification of the whole of

*The translator expresses thanks to Laurence O'Donnell for his helpful editorial suggestions.

1. In his address "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church" Bavinck emphasizes the comprehensive character of Reformed theology. "Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity." Herman Bavinck, *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk*, [Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 Dec. 1888] (Kampen: G.Ph. Zalsman, 1888), 32. For the English translation, see Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 238.

life that was expressed in the original concept of an established Reformed state Church.

In the second place, the introduction reflects discussions in the Reformed Churches regarding the relationship between the covenant and election. When Bavinck wrote this preface the churches of the Secession and of the Doleantie had already merged into the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (1892), but some tensions in the new church remained. Within the churches from the Dutch Secession, many people had strong feelings against the idea of a supposed regeneration as the foundation for infant baptism. The Synod of Utrecht (1905) addressed the issue, and Bavinck's advice was very important for the final consensus achieved there.

Before the synod he wrote his *Calling and Regeneration*, originally published as a series of forty articles. At a deeper level the concerns about supposed regeneration regarded preaching. Some complained that "it seems that there are no unregenerate in the church any longer. It seems as though even when a person has continued living for years in an unconverted state, he still must be considered to be regenerated."² They were afraid that the doctrine of presupposed regeneration would rob preaching of its spiritual power. Bavinck understood and sympathized with these cares, but he also tried to convince those from the Secession churches of the acceptability of Kuyper's doctrinal position.³

This tension spills over into this introduction. On the one hand, Bavinck stresses the connection between election and covenant in Scottish theology. The covenant does not stand in contrast to the doctrine of election but makes it shine all the brighter. All the benefits of election flow through the channel of the covenant. This

2. Herman Bavinck, *Roeping en wedergeboorte* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1903), 10. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, ed. J. Mark Beach (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 4.

3. On this treatise see Henk van den Belt, "Herman Bavinck and His Reformed Sources on the Call to Grace: A Shift in Emphasis towards the Internal Work of the Spirit," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, no. 1 (2011): 41–59.

intimate connection between election and covenant was an underlying presupposition of Kuyper's view of baptism. On the other hand, Bavinck shows that this doctrinal position coheres with the kind of preaching that the concerned members of the church longed for. As Bavinck says, according to the Erskines and their sympathizers, church membership and receiving the sacraments were not enough. Personal repentance was necessary, and the covenant must become true in one's own heart and life. Sound preaching descends into the depths of the human heart and places us before the face of God in poverty and emptiness. But it also addresses contrite spirits with the promises of the gospel.

Finally, the introduction also shows a growing concern with superficiality in neo-Calvinist circles. There is an important element in the sermons of the Erskines that Bavinck misses in contemporary spirituality and especially in the devotional literature and Christian novels. These writings may be true, but they are not *real* because the spiritual knowledge of the soul is lacking in them. "It seems as if we no longer know what sin and grace, what guilt and forgiveness, what repentance and regeneration mean. We know them theoretically, but we no longer know them in the awesome reality of life."⁴ In some other writings Bavinck also expresses his concern about the superficiality of his day. In the *Certainty of Faith* he writes about forms of pietistic Spirituality that overemphasize the spiritual life and underestimate the earthly task of the Christian, but he also remarks that "this tradition reveals an emphasis on and estimation for the one thing needful, which we often lack today because we are too busy with this contemporary life. While Christians formerly forgot the world for themselves, we run the danger of losing ourselves in the world."⁵ Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth (1898–1963) recalls a remark from Bavinck with the same tenor. Speaking at a conference for students in 1918, he said: "How much

4. See below, p. 177.

5. Herman Bavinck, *De zekerheid des geloofs*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1903), 102. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry Der Nederlanden (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1980), 94. In the quote this translation is slightly corrected.

progress did we make! How much did we advance compared to the older generation of dissenters! But they had one thing in advance of us. They still knew about sin and grace. Don't we run the risk, with all our increased knowledge and cultural insights, to forget that one thing?"⁶ The older Bavinck seemed to be concerned that the neo-Calvinist optimistic world-conquering attitude would drift away from the spirituality of the Secession tradition in which he was brought up and which he once described as a "healthy mysticism."⁷ At least this gem from Bavinck is important enough for the understanding of his own position to offer an English translation.

—Henk van den Belt

Preface to the life and works of Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine⁸

The history of the church and theology in Scotland after the Reformation is wholly dominated by the idea of the covenant. From the beginning there was not only a deeply religious but also a national and political element in the concept of that covenant.

6. "Wat zijn wij vooruitgegaan! Wat hebben wij wetenschappelijk en cultureel op de oudere generatie van afgescheidenen veel voor! Maar één ding hadden deze mensen op ons voor: die wisten nog wat zonde en genade was. En lopen wij wel eens niet het gevaar, dat wij, bij al onze toegenomen kennis en cultureel inzicht, dat ene gaan vergeten?" Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth, "Ter gedachtenis van Dr. Herman Bavinck," *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 10, no. 24 (1954): 185.

7. Henry E. Dosker, "Herman. Bavinck," *Princeton Theological Review* 20 (1922): 450.

8. Herman Bavinck, preface to *Levensgeschiedenis en Werken van Ralph en Ebenezer Erskine*, by Ralph Erskine and Ebenezer Erskine (Doesburg: J.C. van Schenk Brill, 1905–06), 1–6. For the Dutch text see <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl/hb/essays/hbvoorerskine.html>. All of the subsequent footnotes are translator notes that I have added to provide brief explanations of the figures and events that Bavinck mentions in the text. Unless otherwise noted, the general information regarding persons and historical dates is taken from *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (San Francisco: Wikimedia Foundation), <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

The reformer of Scotland, John Knox, brought it in. He made a distinction between pagans and Christians. Pagans are not God's people. But when a pagan people is converted to Christianity, it has entered as a people into the same relationship with God as did Israel of old, and as a people it is also obliged to obey God in public life; it must walk in the way of God's covenant and is not allowed to make a covenant with the idolatrous inhabitants of the land.

When such a Christian nation disobeys God's commandment and falls back and returns to idolatry, then the ruler of the country is primarily obliged to eradicate idolatry and restore the covenant of God. If the supreme government does not obey this calling, the duty to reform rests on the lower government, the local magistrates. If these fail to answer their calling, the people themselves are obliged to take reform in hand. This obligation, which thus rests on the people not only consists in offering passive resistance but also includes a right to resist the government actively, and, if necessary, to dismiss and replace it.⁹ For the government, by not complying with the covenant, has robbed itself of its rights. In modern words, it has violated the constitution by which both prince and people were bound by a solemn oath. It has thereby voluntarily and willfully broken the bond that tied it to the people. It has dismissed itself and therefore may be dismissed by the people. If the people thus resist their government, they do not do so high-handedly and arbitrarily, but they act under the rights of the covenant, as people of God, in His name, and for the restoration of his service.

The reformation in Scotland was established according to this concept. After Knox had urged the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, to take the reformation in hand without success in May 1556, the Protestant nobility joined in a solemn covenant on 2 December 1557 to defend—with goods and kindred¹⁰ and as the faithful

9. John Knox (c. 1514–1572) was a leader of the Reformation in Scotland. On the importance of the covenant for his ideas regarding the legitimacy of rebellion against tyrannical sovereigns, see Richard L. Greaves, "John Knox and the Covenant Tradition," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24 (1973): 23–32.

10. The Dutch expression "met goed en bloed" stems from the Dutch translation of Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

congregation of Jesus Christ—the Word of God against the Roman Catholic idolatry.¹¹ When this covenant was renewed in 1559 and the Regent died in 1560, the parliament took the reformation in hand, abolished the Mass, and officially accepted a confession of faith that was drafted by Knox. Thus the Reformed Church became the established church, and the right of existence was denied to all other churches in the country.

However, the Reformed Church in Scotland soon had to defend its rights against not only Romanism but also the Episcopalian system of the English state church. Mary Stuart renounced the throne on 24 July 1567, for her one-year-old son James VI.¹² When he started to reign in 1578 at the age of twelve, he first affiliated with the desires of his people. In 1580 the first national covenant was achieved under the king to maintain the Reformed Church and its confession and to defend it against all kinds of Romanism and Episcopalianism. But soon after that his Episcopalian sympathy appeared and became even stronger when he ascended the throne of England as James I after the death of Elizabeth in 1603. Against himself and his son and successor Charles I a tenacious struggle started that resulted in a revolution that ended with the solemn renewal of the covenant, the second national covenant in 1638.¹³ But even then the Scottish church did not receive a time of rest. Charles II and James II followed the footsteps of their predecessors and surpassed them in acts of violence. Thus a new revolution occurred in 1689.¹⁴ In May of that year the parliament declared that James II had forfeited the crown and offered it to William of

11. Marie de Guise (1515–1560) was the second spouse of King James V and served as regent from 1554 to 1560 for her daughter Mary Stuart (1542–1587), the later Queen of Scots. In 1557 a group of Scottish nobles, the so-called “Lords of the Congregation” drew up a covenant at Edinburgh.

12. James VI (1566–1625) was also, as James I, King of England and Ireland in a personal union from 1603 until his death.

13. At a ceremony in Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh, a large number noblemen, clergy and others signed the covenant, it was the first time that a larger group of adult males was invited to sign the affirmation of their commitment to presbyterianism and copies were even sent throughout the country for signing.

Orange, who had already been crowned king of England in February.

A more dangerous enemy of the covenant arose in the division of the Scottish people itself. A large faction in Scotland remained in favor of Rome; others sympathized with the Episcopalian system of the English state church; yet others were attracted by the Independentism in the days of Cromwell.¹⁵ When the government did not act against all these trends as stern as the idea of covenant demanded, differences arose among the supporters of the covenant. Some were moderate and were willing to condemn the actions of government without declaring that it had apostatized from its office, but others such as the Cameronians argued that the king, by acting contrary to the covenant, had lost the right to the throne.¹⁶

In this way the Covenanters themselves became divided in their opinions regarding the relationship between church and state, the right of the king, and the duty to resist. And that division deepened when at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century deism and rationalism also pervaded Scotland. The moderate faction that prevailed in the church employed the right of patronage—a right stemming from the time of Romanism that had been alternately abolished and reintroduced—to impose ministers of the moderate persuasion on congregations against their will. In January of this year, just after the Glorious Revolution, the first case of this kind occurred. In Burntisland in Fife a call was sent by decision of the synod's committee to a minister proposed by

14. The so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 that brought the Dutch stadtholder William III to the throne followed the reigns of Charles II (1630–1685), king of England, Scotland, and Ireland and James VII (1633–1701), king of Scotland, who was also king of England and Ireland as James II.

15. Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) was a political leader with Congregationalist sympathies. He ruled over the Commonwealth of England as Lord Protector and conquered Ireland and Scotland after the execution of King Charles I in 1649.

16. The followers of Richard Cameron (1648–1680) resisted attempts to install bishops in the Church of Scotland, and they formed a separate church after 1690.

the patron, contrary to the choice of the congregation.¹⁷ On May 22 of that year, the patrons were restored in all their rights. In the same year all ministers had to swear with an oath of allegiance to the Toleration Act, which protected the Episcopal clergy and committed the king to maintain the English ceremonies.¹⁸

One of the ministers who refused the oath was Ebenezer Erskine (1680–1754), minister at the Third Church in Stirling since 1731. He, however, did not restrict himself to this negative protest. When he had to preach a sermon as president of the synod of Sterling and Perth in 1733, he dealt with the stone rejected by the builders. He exposed the right of patronage and many other provisions as contrary to the Kingship of Christ over his church and to the right given by Christ to the congregation to choose its own minister. The Synod, however, did not share his feelings and lined up against him.¹⁹ So Ebenezer Erskine did not have any other option than to leave the state church. Three ministers joined him: William Wilson of Perth, Alexander Moncrieff of Abernethy, and James Fisher of Kinclaven.²⁰ Later they were joined by several other

17. It is not completely clear what Bavinck had in mind, but George Johnston was appointed minister in the parish church of Burntisland in 1688 and was suspended later that year because of his episcopalian views. The records of the church show that James Pitcairn was also appointed in 1688 to succeed Johnston. See Iain Sommerville, “Burntisland’s churches: Part 7—The Episcopal Church and George Hay Forbes,” last updated November 21, 2011, <http://www.burntisland.net/churches-article7.htm>.

18. The Toleration Act of 1688 allowed Nonconformists to worship on the condition of pledging allegiance.

19. Bavinck does not include a discussion of the Marrow controversy here. In 1647 a work possibly written by Edward Fisher (1627–1655) titled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was published by Thomas Boston (1676–1732), who was blamed for antinomian sympathies because of the book’s content. The Erskines supported Boston in this controversy. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8) 3:461–462.

20. In Scottish church history the split is known as the First Secession. William Wilson (1690–1741) served as professor for the Associate Presbytery’s theological school (1737–1747). After Wilson’s death Alexander Moncrieff (1695–1761) took his place. James Fisher (1697–1775) was minister in Kinclaven at the

pastors including, in 1732, Ebenezer's brother Ralph Erskine (1685–1752), minister since 1711 in Dunfermline. On 28 December 1743 Ebenezer Erskine renewed the practice of public covenanting in Stirling, and on 11 October 1744 the Seceders united themselves in an "Associate Synod."

The national-political element, however, which originally was included in the idea of the covenant, still maintained its impact after that time. As early as 1747 the Seceders were rent over the Burgher Oath in which allegiance had to be pledged to the Protestant religion "presently professed within this realm."²¹ Some thought that taking this oath included the recognition of the state church as the true church, and they separated themselves from their brethren.

In 1752 a new separation of the state church took place under Thomas Gillespie because the synodical committee again wanted to impose a minister on a certain congregation.²² In 1796 there was renewed struggle among the dissenters over the relationship between church and state, and they became divided into supporters of the Old Light and the New Light. And in 1843 a split from the state church occurred again under Thomas Chalmers as a result of the right of patronage. True, some of the splits were healed, especially by the merge of the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church some years ago.²³ Nevertheless, Protestant Scotland's

time of the First Secession.

21. The Burgher Oath caused a split in the Associate Synod Presbytery in 1747 into Burghers and Anti-Burghers; the latter rejected the rights of civil government in religious affairs.

22. The theologian Thomas Gillespie (1708–1774) disagreed with the ordination of a colleague and was deposed in 1752. He continued to preach, and in 1761 he formed a so-called "Presbytery of Relief," referring to the relief church courts and patronage. This split is also called the Second Secession. This presbytery later united with the United Secession Church to form the United Presbyterian Church.

23. The "Auld Lights" were more orthodox and the "New Lights" more liberal. The withdrawal of a large number of members from the Church of Scotland under the leadership of Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) is known as the 'Disruption of 1843.' Several factions of the New Light party united in the

opinions still remain divided regarding the relationship of church and state, the right of the magistrate concerning religion, and the duty of the people to resist. The content, validity, and purpose of the covenant remain in dispute constantly.

Just as in church history, the idea of the covenant also holds a central place in Scottish theology—a place not in contrast to the doctrine of election but rather one that lets it shine all the brighter in its sovereignty. All the benefits of election, as Ralph Erskine says—and as all Reformed theologians teach—flow to the believers through the channel of the covenant of the promise. Therefore predestination has been treated in Scottish theology with great love and has been strongly defended against all Pelagianism in and outside the Roman Catholic Church. The names of Knox, Boyd, Rollock, and Samuel Rutherford prove this sufficiently.²⁴ They were aware of the fact that the opposition to predestination in and outside of Rome came from the same error; Jameson intentionally published a work titled *Roma Racoviana* in this light.²⁵

Just as the doctrine of the covenant placed election in a brighter light, so vice versa: the doctrine of election benefits the treatment of the doctrine of the covenants, which appears clearly in the works of Samuel Rutherford, Patrick Gillespie, and Thomas Boston and in the sermons of both Erskines.²⁶ Not only the state of the first human being, but also the whole work of salvation—the eternal plan

nineteenth century and merged with the Free Church of Scotland in 1900 into the United Free Church of Scotland.

24. Bavinck is referring to Robert Boyd of Trochrig (1578–1627), professor in the academy of Saumur (1606) and principal of the University of Glasgow (1615–1621) and of Edinburgh (1622–1623); Robert Rollock (1555–1599), first principal of the University of Edinburgh; and Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661), one of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly who was especially known in The Netherlands for his posthumously published letters.

25. William Jameson, *Roma racoviana et racovia romana: Id est, Papistarum & Socinistarum, in plurimis, iisque maximi momenti, Religionis suae capitibus, plena & exacta Harmonia*: (Edinburgh: Andrea Anderson, 1702). In this book William Jameson (1689–1720) claims that Roman Catholicism and moderate Protestantism are forms of Socinianism. The Socinian Racovian Academy was founded in 1602 in Rakow, Poland.

of redemption, the person, the office and the work of Christ, the order of salvation, the doctrines of the church and sacraments—were treated from the perspective of the covenant. More than any other theology, Scottish theology has been covenant theology.

Perhaps this emphasis comes out more strongly in the sermons than in the theological treatises. Led by the concept of the covenant, the minister of the word in his pastoral work consistently keeps an eye on the whole people and the whole country. God did not establish his covenant with a single person or with a few isolated individuals but with all the people of Scotland. That people has repeatedly sworn to be faithful with a solemn oath of allegiance. Scotland has pledged its word to Christ. So it ought to serve and to honor him, not only in its private but also in its public life. It does not stand free in relation to Christ and His Word but has bound itself with an oath to this service. If it abandons him and breaks the covenant, it is guilty of perjury; it destroys itself and provokes the judgment of God.

While a Scottish minister addresses his whole nation in this way, he does not ignore the individual. In contrast with the Independents, however, he proceeds from the whole to the parts, from the people to the individual. Precisely from the national character of the covenant, he derives a strong motivation to insist on personal repentance, personal establishment, and renewal of the covenant. The membership of the people and of the church, the receiving of the signs and seals of the covenant is not enough. Personal repentance is necessary. The covenant must become true in one's own heart and life. This insistence on personal repentance renders the Scottish preaching its specific religious character, its practical tenor. It always moves between the two poles of sin and grace, of law and gospel. On the one hand it descends into the depths of the human heart, unreservedly taking away all apologies and excuses behind which people hide away from the holiness of God, and it places them before the face of God in their poverty and emptiness. On the other hand, it also addresses those of a broken

26. Patrick Gillespie (1617–1675) was principal of Glasgow University during the reign of Oliver Cromwell.

spirit with the promises of the gospel, draws forth the riches of these promises, looks at them from all sides, and applies them to all of life's circumstances.

In the sermons of Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, this all can be retrieved. The exegesis sometimes leaves much to be desired. The form is outdated. Human wit is not always kept within the necessary limits. There is one important element in them, however, that we lack today in many respects. This appears most strikingly if we compare the sermons of the Erskines with the devotional literature of our days, especially in the Christian stories and novels that are published. There the spiritual knowledge of the soul is lacking. It seems as if we no longer know what sin and grace, what guilt and forgiveness, what repentance and regeneration mean. We know them theoretically, but we no longer know them in the awesome reality of life. That is the reason why the devotional literature of former days leaves an entirely different impression than that of recent times. For, though it stands far from us, and its form seems old-fashioned for us, it is and remains natural in the genuine sense, while the literature of our days becomes unnatural and forced when it addresses the problems of the soul. We feel, while reading the old writers,²⁷ that they offer us a piece of life; it is the reality itself that is given to us to behold. If we are interested in real life instead of fantasies—also in the things of the kingdom of God—we, and in particular the Christian storywriters, can do nothing better than take classes from the Erskines and explore their writings for some time. It is not the least part of our people that still refreshes the soul by reading the devotional literature of former days.

The sermons of the Erskines are on the border between the old and modern era in Scotland. In their days Methodism arose, and the great spiritual revivals started. Wesley stirred the whole of England by his powerful preaching, and Whitefield transplanted the religious movement to America and to Scotland.²⁸ At first the Erskines were very favorable toward Whitefield. They invited him

27. The expression "old writers" (*oude schrijvers*) refers to the authors of Puritanism and the Dutch Further Reformation.

to Scotland to preach the gospel there too. Whitefield even held his first sermon in Scotland in the church of Ralph Erskine in Dunfermline. Soon, however, a split occurred. At the conference held by him with the Seceders in August 1741 he was required to preach only in their churches and thus to acknowledge only their churches as the true ones. Whitefield could not meet this requirement, and he replied wittingly that “the devil’s people” needed his preaching more than the people of God. From then on the ways departed.²⁹ Soon afterwards the Seceders denounced the revival that took place in the church of Cambuslang under the minister McCulloch.³⁰ Ralph Erskine even wrote a treatise against it entitled *Faith no Fancy*.³¹ But this protest did not help. Methodism almost completely conquered the Anglo-Saxon race in Britain and America, and it gave the whole church and theology in those countries a very specific character. In the Netherlands, however, a large part of the people remained faithful to the Reformed confession—a confession that is, contrary to Methodism, faithful to covenant theology. This explains the sympathy that is still cherished in this our country for the old Scottish theologians and their works.

28. John Wesley (1703–1791) and George Whitefield (1714–1770) were founders of Methodism.

29. Whitefield came to Scotland in July 1741. On August 5 he met the “Associate Presbytery,” and he wrote in an account of that meeting: “I then asked them seriously what they would have me to do? The answer was, that I was not desired to subscribe immediately to the Solemn League and Covenant, but to preach only for them till I had further light. I asked, why only for them? Mr Ralph Erskine said, ‘They were the Lord’s people.’ I then asked whether there were no other Lord’s people but themselves? And, supposing all others were the devil’s people, they certainly had more need to be preached to; and therefore I was more and more determined to go out into the highways and hedges ; and that if the Pope himself would lend me his pulpit, I would gladly proclaim the righteousness of Christ therein.” Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 2:89–90.

30. During the revival in Cambuslang in August 1742 Whitefield preached to 30,000 people. William M’Culloch (1691–1771) was minister during that time.

31. Ralph Erskine, *Faith No Fancy: or, a Treatise of Mental Images* (Edinburgh: W. and T. Ruddimans, 1745).

The new publication of the Erskines demonstrates that sympathy;
may it also maintain it!

—Herman Bavinck
Amsterdam, Reformation Day 1904