

JBTS

VOLUME 6 | ISSUE 2

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES



HERMAN BAVINCK (1854-1921)
A CENTENARY CELEBRATION

Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of
Christ in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*
by Jessica Joustra

Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*

JESSICA JOUSTRA

Jessica Joustra (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary, Free University of Amsterdam) is assistant professor of religion and theology at Redeemer University and an associate researcher at the Neo-Calvinist Research Institute at the Theological University of Kampen (NL). She is an editor and translator of Herman Bavinck's Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity and associate editor for the Bavinck Review.

Introduction

“*Jesus matters*,” asserts Reformed philosopher James K.A. Smith.¹ A seemingly innocuous claim in Christian scholarship, one might assume he was lauding the Reformed, specifically neo-Calvinist, tradition for its well-known insistence that “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”² Smith’s claim, however, is a critique, not a praise of the Reformed tradition. He continues by offering an important insight into an area of theological deficiency, speaking specifically of theological ethics: “in the Reformed tradition, we also speak more about creation than we do cross, and we speak more about law than we do Jesus.”³ In other words, the Reformed tradition needs to continue to mine its own resources—and the resources of other theological traditions—to explore the ways that Jesus matters, not just as the one who secures our salvation and makes cosmic worldview claims, but as the one who guides our life.

This essay seeks to mine the theological resources within the Reformed tradition on Jesus and theological ethics as a means to respond to Smith’s charge, looking to Reformed dogmatician and ethicist Herman Bavinck’s understanding of the centrality of imitation of Christ in the Christian life. But as we will see, Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ does not stand in isolation; he pairs the imitation of Christ with a traditional Reformed emphasis on the law. Thus, this essay will also ask a question: given his ongoing insistence on the law’s role in Christian ethics, does Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ meaningfully show

1. Richard Mouw and James K. A. Smith, “An Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue: Continuing our Conversation with Richard Mouw,” in *Comment Magazine*, September 20, 2013, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/an-anabaptist-reformed-dialogue-continuing-our-conversation-with-richard-mouw/>.

2. Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

3. Mouw and Smith, “Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue.”

the way that Jesus *matters* in the Christian life? I will argue that because Bavinck ties the imitation of Christ to another central image in his work, grace restores nature, the answer is both yes and no: Bavinck's understanding of the imitation of Christ results in Jesus Christ bringing something *functionally* new (a new understanding of the law), though not *fundamentally* new (for he is not a new lawgiver, rather a law-restorer).

The Imitation of Christ: Herman Bavinck's Interpretation

Best known as a dogmatician,⁴ Herman Bavinck also did substantial work in theological ethics, including his recently rediscovered, unpublished manuscript *Reformed Ethics* that was intended as a companion to his well-known *Reformed Dogmatics*. Throughout his works on ethics, a distinctly Reformed understanding of the imitation of Christ is developed. While the theme is present throughout much of his work, Bavinck treats the imitation of Christ at length on three separate occasions: in 1885 and 1886, in his first essays on the imitation of Christ, in 1918, in his later essays on the same, and in his *Reformed Ethics*. Here, we will briefly survey these three works to understand what Bavinck understands to be a biblical picture of the imitation of Christ and how this theme of imitating Christ interacts with other dominant themes in his theology, particularly the theme of grace restoring nature.

In a series of articles entitled *De navolging van Christus* (The Imitation of Christ) in *De Vrije Kerk* in 1885 and 1886, Bavinck undertakes his first detailed study of the imitation of Christ. This study is primarily focused at a historical/theological overview of the major trends within the imitation tradition throughout church history. As Bavinck takes his readers through the history of the theme, he articulates a four-part typology of the prominent instantiations of the imitation of Christ throughout history: the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the modernist.⁵ None of these four models of imitation, Bavinck argues, encapsulates a fully biblical picture of imitation. But, importantly for Bavinck, none of them are *wholly* aberrant either; he provides a nuanced analysis of each model, finding aspects to praise in each, while also offering serious criticisms.⁶ As he goes through this historical/

4. Henry Zylstra, for example, in the preface to Bavinck's *Our Reasonable Faith*, writes, "Bavinck was primarily the theologian, the dogmatician. His *magnum opus* is the four volumes of his *Reformed Dogmatics*." Henry Zylstra, preface to *Our Reasonable Faith*, by Herman Bavinck, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965), 6.

5. Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I (1885/86)," in *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 372–96. To these four, we might add a fifth. Bavinck briefly praises the "pure" imitation of Christ in the early church, a form that soon gave way to these other four traditions of imitation (374).

6. The martyrs of the early church, Bavinck argues in "Imitation I," exhibited courage and strength in the face of their persecution. This undoubtedly testified to their strong belief. To this praise, he adds that martyrdom became corrupted as some began to focus more on the suffering rather than the *cause* of suffering: they "forgot that what made one a true witness was not martyrdom

theological survey, Bavinck makes it clear that the imitation of Christ is a necessary aspect of Christian discipleship, but to imitate Christ in a biblical way necessitates rejecting much of the historic understanding of the theme.

Bavinck's posture towards the imitation tradition, and his understanding of a biblical picture of imitation becomes even clearer following his historical/theological survey. In these final pages, he puts forward his own understanding of the imitation of Christ, informed by tradition and grounded in scripture. The "true imitation" of Christ consists of two necessary elements: first, it consists of "mystical union . . . spiritual, living communion with Christ;" second, on account of one's spiritual union, the imitation of Christ extends outward to all of one's life.⁷ Christ *is* an example for our day to day actions, modeling the "virtues and obligations which conform to God's law."⁸ As he follows the law, Christ ought to be imitated, in word and deed.⁹

Bavinck's understanding of the imitation of Christ as imitating Christ *as he follows the law* gets to the heart of what he understands as a biblical model for imitating Christ. First, such a model begins with knowing Christ as savior.¹⁰ On account of Christ's saving work, we are called into fellowship with Christ, leading to seeing Christ as not only savior, but example. Second, for Bavinck, understanding Christ to be an example does not merely call one to external, mimetic imitation—that is, a "slavish and narrow copying of [Christ's] personal words and deeds."¹¹ Nor does the imitation of Christ consist in imitating every single one of Christ's actions, for "creation, election, calling regeneration . . . and all miracles are unique

itself but the cause for which a martyr died" (391). This, he argued, laid the foundation for a doctrine of meritorious good works. The monks, in a new context with less persecution, were an important witness against the growing worldliness of the church. Alongside this, they took seriously the call of Jesus to deny themselves. Nevertheless, Bavinck again raises criticisms: the monks, he argued, perpetuated a dual understanding of morality. Only some could truly imitate Christ; those who lived an "ordinary life" could not achieve this "higher level of perfection" (381). He also argued that this form of imitating Christ could lead to an external, mimetic imitation. One could outwardly display the habits of Christ, but inwardly remain "very unChrist-like" (392). As the context changed once again, so too did the picture of biblical imitation. Mysticism, Bavinck argued, displayed a "strong ethical and practical emphasis," alongside its emphasis on union with Christ (388). Alongside these important emphases, however, Bavinck argued that mysticism paid excessive attention to Christ's suffering and can lead to an "exaggerated emphasis on feeling" (393). Finally, Bavinck attends to imitation in his own day: the modernists. Unlike the others, Bavinck's description of this form of imitation is primarily negative (and far shorter). While Bavinck affirms the validity of seeing Jesus as an example, he argues that the modernists understand Jesus to be *only* an example, forsaking the logically primary commitment to Jesus as savior: "only [when we know Jesus as Redeemer] then do we dare look at him and consider him our example" (394).

7. Bavinck, "Imitation I," 397.

8. Bavinck, "Imitation I," 400.

9. Bavinck, "Imitation I," 400.

10. Bavinck, "Imitation I," 397. This is contrary, he argues, to the modernist model, which sees Christ first—and perhaps only—as example.

11. Bavinck, "Imitation I," 396; this is contrary, he argues, to the downfalls of the martyr, monk, and mystic models of imitation which—in one way or another—affirm a "narrow copying" of Jesus's actions.

and inimitable.”¹² For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ penetrates deep into the life of the Christian, laying claim to one’s external actions and internal disposition. It is also comprehensive, for “nothing in Christ is excluded in the demand to follow him,” and concrete, seeing Christ as a tangible example, while not calling for an exhaustive nor literal copying of Jesus’s particular actions.¹³ Third, the imitation of Christ is, for Bavinck, necessarily grounded in the moral law, which Christ fulfills.¹⁴ “That which is required by the law of God,” he writes, “is clearly portrayed for us in the example of Jesus.”¹⁵ Given that the imitation of Christ is grounded in the moral law, which “applies and is valid for all [people] everywhere,” a final piece of Bavinck’s understanding of imitating Christ emerges: the imitation of Christ is a universal ideal. All Christians are called to imitate Christ, in their own circumstances, places, and times.¹⁶

Bavinck’s historical/theological survey of the major trends in the imitation tradition reveals that there is always a hermeneutic at play in discovering what might be assumed to be a straightforward interpretation of the biblical text: suffering, denial, mystical union, etc. In his own exposition of the theme, he articulates the hermeneutical key for how one ought to know what to imitate in Christ’s life rather simply: the Ten Commandments.¹⁷

Throughout these first articles, Bavinck articulates a twofold, biblical model of imitating Christ: union with Christ and, as a consequence of one’s union with Christ, law-shaped imitation of Christ’s virtues. In 1918, near the end of his career, Bavinck published another work on the imitation of Christ, a small booklet entitled *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven* (The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life). While this booklet has a different audience, was written in a different time, and thus has a slightly different focus than his 1885/6 articles, Dirk van Keulen convincingly argues that Bavinck remains consistent in his basic affirmation of a biblical model of imitating Christ.¹⁸

12. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 400.

13. Bavinck writes in *Imitation I*, “Every word and deed of Jesus is useful for our instruction and ought to be taken to heart . . . [but] not every word or deed is in itself to be imitated” (399). Thus, we cannot simply parse out some actions of Christ as useful for an example and others—inimitable as they may be—as excluded from the imitation of Christ. Even those inimitable acts of Jesus “do reveal the glorious perfections which we must take as example since they wholly conform to God’s law” (400).

14. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 396.

15. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 400.

16. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 396. Once again, this assertion runs contrary to the imitation models of the martyr, monk, and mystic, which Bavinck argues are only for *some* Christians to enact.

17. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 400.

18. Van Keulen identifies three primary areas of discontinuity: Bavinck’s extended discourse on war, a “broader elaboration of his historical survey” (highlighting Bavinck’s wider intended audience for these later essays), and a “growing awareness” of hermeneutical questions, particular those surrounding the Sermon on the Mount. (Dirk van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 90–91; for more on

A key component of this booklet is Bavinck's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and its implications for the imitation of Christ. In the Sermon on the Mount, "the nature of this imitation is clarified . . . by means of concrete examples."¹⁹ Rejecting both radical spiritualization and extreme literalism, Bavinck explains that the examples in this text—like plucking out one's eye—are "not to be taken literally," but they are "nonetheless to be understood practically and concretely."²⁰ In other words, Christians seeking to follow these words are not to literally pluck out their eye, but are to mine the practical implications of this command, for Jesus's command remains a concrete illustration of the "virtues which the law requires of us."²¹ Christ is no new law-giver; rather he provides a specific, contextual model of what the law requires.²²

While Bavinck's reference to imitating Christ's virtues in this booklet echoes his reference to virtues in 1885/6, his textual and contextual exploration in 1918 give him further opportunity to elaborate on what exactly these virtues are. Here, Bavinck differentiates the virtues that the Christian is called to imitate into two categories: passive virtues—"truth, righteousness, . . . holiness, purity, modesty, temperance, . . . prayer, vigil, fasting, . . . faith, love, longsuffering, . . . generosity, hospitality, . . . compassion, lowliness, meekness, and patience," which were stressed in the Sermon on the Mount²³—and active virtues, those that are part of the pattern of "reforming and renewing the world."²⁴ Both passive and active virtues, self-denial and world-engagement, are inherent in the call to imitate Christ.

As those charged to imitate the virtues of Christ in law-patterned obedience, seeing Jesus as the normative moral example is nonnegotiable for Christians. But the manner in which one applies his example, Bavinck stresses, is importantly contextual; Christians have freedom in the way that they apply Christ's virtues to their own life.²⁵ As in Bavinck's 1885/6 work on imitation, in his 1918 booklet, Jesus's words and actions are given normative status for the life of the Christian, and the hermeneutical key to understanding how to apply these to one's own life remains the law.

Alongside these two, standalone works on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck treated the theme at length in his unpublished *Reformed Ethics* manuscript. With an

the relationship between these works, see John Bolt, "Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 62–71. Bolt also adds that this booklet is a *systematic* study, rather than a primarily historical study. John Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 83.

19. Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ II (1918)," in *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 413.

20. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 418.

21. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 426.

22. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 419.

23. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 420.

24. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 424.

25. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 438.

in-depth survey of imitation in Scripture and a familiar study of the manifestations of the theme throughout church history, Bavinck affirms a three-part imitation of Christ that closely parallels the two-fold imitation of Christ laid out in 1885/6. First, imitating Christ must flow from union with Christ.²⁶ Second, Christ must “tak[e] shape within us,” as the Holy Spirit “confirms us to Christ in his suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification.”²⁷ Finally, the imitation of Christ comes to outward expression as we “shap[e] our lives in accord with Christ.”²⁸ Again, the rubric by which one shapes their life on the pattern of Jesus is found in the law:

[The true imitation of Christ] consists of shaping the life that exists only in and from communion with Christ, in accord with his moral example; it is acquiring a Christ-*shape* in us, so that others can know Christ from and through us. This correspondence of our life’s shape with that of Christ manifests itself in a variety of virtues, but especially in righteousness and love. Righteousness or holiness is complete agreement with the law, that is, moral freedom. For us believers, the law no long stands over against us abstractly, but in Christ; in Christ, the law is our norm . . . Christ is the moral ideal, the living law.²⁹

Here, the relationship between the imitation of Christ and the law is further concretized: Christ is not only an example of what the law requires, he is the “living law.”

The imitation of Christ, Bavinck argues, is *the* “form of the spiritual life,”³⁰ a necessary aspect of sanctification. Christ must be seen not only as Redeemer (though this is first and foremost!) but as the normative example for the Christian life. In each substantive work on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck never wavers from his basic understanding of a biblical model of imitation: the Christian life ought to be marked by law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. Given the centrality of the imitation of Christ for Bavinck’s understanding of Christian ethics, it is not surprising that this theme is closely related to other central themes in his dogmatics. While we could point to a number of themes—the gospel as a pearl and leaven, the catholicity of the church, common grace, sanctification, etc.—here, I want to focus in on only one: grace restoring nature.

Bavinck’s view of the relationship between nature and grace, Jan Veenhof argues, is a “central part—indeed, perhaps we may say *the* central theme—of his theology.”³¹ Grace, writes Bavinck, *restores* God’s original creational intent; it is

26. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt, Jessica Joustra, Nelson Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, Dirk van Keulen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 339.

27. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 339.

28. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 340.

29. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 341.

30. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 338.

31. Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. Albert M. Wolters (Dordt College Press, 2006), 7.

a “restoration of the form (*forma*) originally imprinted at the creation on humans and creatures in general.”³² Rather than wiping away the works of God’s hands in creation, or introducing foreign elements to it, “grace restores nature and takes it to its highest pinnacle”³³ instead of “nullify[ing] nature,” Christ came to “restore and preserve” the “various spheres of life.”³⁴ For Bavinck, salvation is a story of restoring and renewing the cosmos, in Christ.

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is deeply intertwined with this central theological theme.³⁵ In his 1918 discussion of imitating not only the passive, but active virtues of Christ, Bavinck writes that explicitly affirms that:

[T]he New Testament presupposes the Old Testament, redemption is accomplished on the foundation of creation, the work of the Son is bound to that of the Father, grace follows nature, rebirth can take place only after birth. All the products of culture, marriage, family, state, etc. are good and perfect gifts which come down from the Father of Lights. . . . *Grace does not suppress nature but restores it.* The gospel is not a new law either with respect to the Law of Moses nor to the laws which God has established in nature for the natural dimension of life.³⁶

As such, Christianity “never opposes nature and culture in themselves but only their degeneration,” and thus Christians ought to take a posture of imitating Christ that can be oriented *toward* culture and its renewal, in the “state, society, art, science, agriculture, industry, commerce, etc.”³⁷ Because grace restores nature, imitating Christ can take a distinctly culturally engaged posture, rather than “world-renunciation,” a posture that can emerge in various imitation traditions, or “world-domination.”³⁸ Such a posture is only possible if grace *restores* nature.

Bavinck writes elsewhere that the “Gospel is a joyful tidings, not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation.”³⁹ This picture of the renewing, restoring work of grace that permeates not just the individual Christian,⁴⁰

32. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 578.

33. Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 577.

34. Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1989): 64.

35. Dirk van Keulen also briefly points this out in his essay on the imitation of Christ (van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 90).

36. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 429; emphasis added. Later in the same work, Bavinck again explicitly references this central theme, writing that “grace presupposes and restores nature” (436).

37. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 429.

38. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 428.

39. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 224.

40. Though this is not the full extent of the implications of grace restoring nature, Bavinck does

nor merely Christian institutions, but the whole of creation is possible on account of his understanding that the gospel opposes “all that which was sinful,” rather than “the world as God’s creation.”⁴¹ Christ came, Bavinck argues, to “destroy the works of the devil and thus to renew and restore the works of the Father,” not to oppose “nature and culture in themselves.”⁴² Because of Bavinck’s understanding of the comprehensive, concrete nature of Christ’s example, the works of Christ, distinctly culturally engaging, affirming, and restoring that they are, have direct bearing for how the Christian ought to live: opposed to the corruption of creation from sin, and oriented towards the restoration of God’s creational intent. This picture of sin and grace is beautifully woven into Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. As Christians seek to imitate the virtues of Christ, in law-patterned obedience, they do so patterned after the one whose grace *restores* nature.

Law and Imitation? Historic Neo-Calvinist Responses

Bavinck’s articulation of the imitation of Christ does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it the only instantiation of a Reformed understanding of the theme. While the theme of imitating Christ found prominence in thinkers like Thomas à Kempis,⁴³ John Calvin himself also employs language of imitation, articulating a Reformed, qualified-but-positive treatment of the imitation of Christ. Aware of the potential for abusing the theme, Calvin insists that imitation is *not* a rote copying of Jesus’s actions; imitation is not mimicry.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he affirms that “to imitate Christ . . . is the rule of life.”⁴⁵ Jesus Christ models for us true humanity. He is the example of the goal of our sanctification: the restored image of God. This pattern of sanctification is rooted in the law, and—through the work of the Holy Spirit uniting the believer to Christ—drives us toward conformity with the example of Christ, through self-denial and cross-bearing.⁴⁶

consistently speak of the imitation of Christ as a *restoration* of the image of God in the Christian. In his 1885/6 work on the imitation of Christ he writes, “From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us.” Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 400; see also Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 340.

41. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 426.

42. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 430.

43. While he is not the first to apply this theme—Bavinck himself traces the theme of imitating Christ throughout church history—Thomas à Kempis’s work on the imitation of Christ is rightly noted as a prominent thinker within the imitation tradition. For more on his prominence, see John Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 8 (among others).

44. Calvin poignantly makes this point in his commentary on John 13:15 where he writes that Christians are to be “imitators not apes.” (Calvin, *Commentary on John: John 13:12–17*).

45. Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, quoted in Jimmy Agan, “Departing from—and recovering—tradition: John Calvin and the Imitation of Christ,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (2013): 810.

46. For Calvin on the law as the pattern of obedience, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian*

Prior to the discovery of Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* manuscript, John Bolt argued that "Bavinck's emphasis upon the imitation of Christ . . . thus in part reflects Bavinck's greater fidelity to Calvin."⁴⁷ Excluding Bavinck's work on the imitation of Christ in *Reformed Ethics*, Bavinck's primary works on the theme of imitating Christ, while echoing Calvin's theological emphases, do not actually cite Calvin's work. In his *Reformed Ethics*, however, Bavinck both thematically channels Calvin (emphasizing union with Christ, Christ as the shape of the moral life, etc.) and cites his work explicitly.⁴⁸ Even without a detailed treatment of the relationship between Calvin and Bavinck on the imitation of Christ, we can already see that Bavinck is not alone in his Reformed affirmation of the theme. Bavinck constructs his understanding of the imitation of Christ upon a solid Reformed foundation that includes the work of John Calvin. He both takes up Calvin's dominant themes and builds upon them, placing an imitation model that centers on Christ's law-patterned virtues at the heart of his ethics.⁴⁹

While Bavinck is not wholly unique in his Reformed insistence on the imitation of Christ, among neo-Calvinists—both his contemporaries and those who follow after him—his explicit affirmation of the imitation of Christ remains rare. For leading ethicists within the neo-Calvinist tradition, the imitation of Christ has often played little to no role in establishing an ethical norm for the Christian life. Instead, as James K.A. Smith highlighted, it is the law that ought to guide Christians in their daily living. This emphasis on the primacy of the law can be seen throughout neo-Calvinist ethics. Here, we'll briefly explore the work of three ethicists to highlight the consistent nature of this emphasis: Wilhelm Geesink, Bavinck's contemporary and the principal ethicist at the Vrije Universiteit from 1890–1923; H.M. Kuitert, a later

Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.6.1 and 3.7.1 and John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, trans. Henry J. Van Andel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 25–66. For more on Calvin, sanctification, union with Christ, and imitation, see, for example: I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992) and Joseph Lucien Richards, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974).

47. Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 27. The use of this theme is not only due to the influence of Calvin, Bolt affirms, but Ulrich Zwingli, the subject of Bavinck's own doctoral studies (28).

48. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 335. Here, Bavinck returns to that two-part constitution of imitating Christ found in Calvin: cross-bearing and self-denial.

49. In his 1888 rectoral address on "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," Bavinck argues that Calvin overcame the "dualism" that had emerged throughout church history, affirming that grace restores nature, "re-creation is not a system that supplements Creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves Creation intact, as in Luther, much less a radically new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures" (238). But even amidst his glowing praise of Calvin, Bavinck raises a criticism in *Catholicity* (237), "I do not deny that even in Calvin the negative virtues of self-denial, cross-bearing, longsuffering, and moderation are emphasised." As a means to affirm the full catholicity of the church, or the full implications of grace restoring nature, Bavinck affirms not only the *negative*, or passive, virtues of self-denial and cross-bearing seen in Calvin in his understanding of the imitation of Christ, but also the *positive*, or active, virtues of Christ.

generation neo-Calvinist ethicist who taught ethics at the Vrije Universiteit from 1967–1989; and Lewis Smedes, a North American neo-Calvinist who taught ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary from 1968–1995. Each upholds what has become known as a standard neo-Calvinist theme: the primacy of the law in theological ethics.

Wilhelm Geesink, Bavinck's contemporary and colleague at the Vrije Universiteit, firmly grounds early neo-Calvinist ethics in the law. As John Bolt details, Geesink's focus on the law was not due to a lack of exposure to, or knowledge of, the imitation tradition. On the contrary, Geesink wrote his dissertation on Gerard Zerbolt, a member of the Bretheren of the Common Life and an influence on Thomas à Kempis.⁵⁰ Despite Geesink's familiarity with the theme, the imitation of Christ does not play a significant role in his ethics.⁵¹ Geesink argues that it is in the Ten Commandments that we find "God's revealed will for the existence and behaviour of our direct relationship to him."⁵² Christ confirms the nature of the commandments as those instituted by God at creation as an enduring ethical guide.⁵³ In Geesink's work, the Ten Commandments function as the primary guide for the Christian life, making known the will of God for humanity.⁵⁴

The primacy of the law in neo-Calvinist ethics articulated by Geesink continues in later generations. H.M. Kuitert who, like Geesink, taught ethics at the Vrije Universiteit, displays this same impulse in his work. While Kuitert does not devote all of his writing to Christian ethics,⁵⁵ he is quite clear on the place of Jesus in the Christian life. Responding to "existentialist theology," he asserts the necessity, and historicity, of the resurrection as the linchpin of Christian faith. As he discusses the implications of such a claim, however, we begin to catch glimmers of his understanding of the role of Jesus's life as an example for the Christian life:

50. Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 21.

51. He does, however, reference the theme on occasion. But when he does, Geesink argued that imitating Christ should be understood as submission to God's secret will, not a general ethical norm. James Eglinton, "On Bavinck's Sanctification-as-Ethics," in *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic (Downers Grove, IN: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 173–74.

52. W. Geesink, *The Fourth Commandment*, trans. Gilbert Zekveld (1998), 3.

53. In Geesink, *The Fourth Commandment*, Geesink discusses Christ's reference to work and rest in John 17:5: "My Father worketh hitherto." Here, Geesink argues, Christ refers back to the creational nature of the Sabbath. Sabbath is a creation ordinance which is "a law implanted or 'created within us'" (19–20). Christ does not add to this ordinance, nor is Christ seen as one we imitate in his following of this commandment. Rather, Christ confirms the creational nature of the command. Jesus, too, Geesink argues, kept the Sabbath (58–59, 64–66).

54. For more on this, see Geesink's *Van's Heeren Ordinantiën* and *Gereformeerde Ethiek*. As John Bolt explains, in *Van's Heeren Ordinantiën*, Geesink offers a detailed analysis of the laws of God in the natural and moral world and an exposition of the Ten Commandments. Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 21.

55. He wrote multiple works exploring hermeneutics and dogmatics. See, for example: H. M. Kuitert, *The Reality of Faith: A Way Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Existentialist Theology*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968).

the story of [Christ's] cross and resurrection is told as our story: we are buried and risen with Him (Rom. 6:4). The inclusiveness of Jesus's person and work determines everything for us. We are not dealing with an application of something that is really external to the application made as well as to the thing to which it is applied. We should not try to make Jesus's story significant for us by applying His life to ours in a moral sense.⁵⁶

The life of Jesus, for Kuitert, has abounding soteriological implications for the life of the Christian; he is the "ground of faith."⁵⁷ This, however, does not make Jesus one that a Christian ought to imitate.

Speaking even more clearly on the subject, Kuitert emphasizes the Ten Commandments over and above an imitation of Christ as *the* way to understand God's will for the Christian life when he writes that Christians find "ideas, not norms" in the "humanity of Jesus."⁵⁸ The example of Jesus is a historically conditioned and situated example; to imitate Jesus "as a person from the beginning of our era . . . leads nowhere."⁵⁹ Instead, "remaining faithful to tradition," Kuitert argues that we find God's will in the Ten Commandments, which function as a "summary of what we can call the basic moral principles."⁶⁰ For Kuitert, like Geesink, the Ten Commandments form the guidelines for the Christian moral life.⁶¹

The characteristic neo-Calvinist emphasis on the primacy of the law in for the Christian moral life is not only seen in later generations of neo-Calvinism in the Netherlands, but can also be seen in North American neo-Calvinism. In *Mere Morality*, Lewis Smedes articulates what "God expects of ordinary people," by

56. Kuitert, *Reality of Faith*, 178.

57. Kuitert, *Reality of Faith*, 185.

58. H. M. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts: How to Become a Christian Without Being a Fundamentalist*, trans. John Bowden (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 120.

59. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 120.

60. Kuitert, *I Have My Doubts*, 252; compare with 267–68.

61. A contemporary of Kuitert's, Jochem Douma, also displays this pattern of the primacy of the law in Christian ethics within the neo-Calvinist tradition. Douma, who served as professor of ethics at the *Theologische Universiteit Kampen*, wrote extensively on Christian ethics. But, unlike some of the other neo-Calvinist ethicists surveyed, he *does* treat—however brief—the imitation of Christ as an ethical motif that has a role for the Christian life. In his works, Douma affirms that the Ten Commandments reveal "God's core commandments." Jochem Douma, *Responsible Conduct: Principles of Christian Ethics*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 90. They also provide the "norm for life." Jochem Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, trans. John P. Elliott and Andrew Pol (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Publishing, 1981), 40. Like the others surveyed here, Douma understands the Ten Commandments as the normative guide for Christian behavior. But, the Christian's union with Christ provides an important, alternative motivation for following the Ten Commandments (a critical point for him, given that the Ten Commandments seemingly provide normative guidance not just for Christians, but for everyone). A Christian enacts the moral norms of the Ten Commandments on account of their union with Christ, a transformation that gives the Christian's life "another direction which can be classified as *following Christ*" (Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 52; emphasis original). Here, we find a qualified affirmation of the language of imitation: the Christian's motivation for adhering to the obligations of the commandments is found in following, or imitating, Christ.

appealing to the words of Ecclesiastes: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his *commandments*; for this is the whole duty of man.”⁶² Like the other ethicists surveyed here, Smedes affirms that the Ten Commandments determine how one is to understand God’s will for humanity. The “Thou shalt[s]” of the Ten Commandments, he argues, “can be translated ‘Everyone ought.’”⁶³ While the commandments are for all people, they also detail the “way of life in Christ.”⁶⁴

As Smedes considers of what exactly that way of life in Christ consists, he rounds out this law-based ethic with themes of love and justice, fulfillment of the law in Christ, and an emphasis on the role of grace, but never shies from seeing the Ten Commandments as the guiding norm for ethics. In the commandments, Christians are given a guide for moral action; in Christ, Christians are given a “living model” who demonstrates the way that these ancient commandments from Sinai depend on love and are oriented towards justice.⁶⁵ The Christian’s moral responsibility, under the guiding norms of love and justice, must discern the appropriate and fitting application of the moral laws given in the Ten Commandments.

Geesink, Kuitert, and Smedes each affirm a consistent, dominant emphasis within Reformed ethics: the primacy of the Ten Commandments. Such an emphasis is easily discerned within the thought of John Calvin, who wrote that the law of God is an “everlasting and unchangeable rule to live by;” it is a “perfect pattern of righteousness.”⁶⁶ The “principal use,” or third use, of the law, as a guide for believers, is well known as a key aspect of Calvin’s interpretation of the law.⁶⁷ As Guenther Haas describes, Calvin understands the law to be a guide for believers in two ways: first, as the “best instrument to provide thorough instruction for believers in the nature of the Lord’s will,” and second, to “exhort them to holiness.”⁶⁸ There is simply no denying that the Ten Commandments plays a pivotal role in Reformed ethics. But as we have already seen, for Calvin, a focus on the Ten Commandments does not *exhaust* Christian ethics. “When we come to our Lord Jesus Christ and behold him,” he writes, “it is essential that we follow his example.”⁶⁹ The goal of the Christian

62. Ecclesiastes 12:13, quoted by Lewis Smedes in *Mere Morality: What God Expects from Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 2; emphasis original to Smedes’s quotation.

63. Smedes, *Mere Morality*, 8.

64. Smedes, *Mere Morality*, 12.

65. Smedes, *Mere Morality*, 13. Jesus then shows us that the commandments depend on love. As Smedes articulates on the same page, “Law without love tells us not to kill a stranger; law with love moves us to go out of our way to help a wounded enemy.”

66. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.6.13.

67. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.6.12.

68. Guenther H. Haas, “Calvin’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101; see also Hesselink, *Calvin’s Concept of the Law*, 252. For Calvin’s own articulation of these two ways the law guides Christians, see: Calvin, *Institutes*, II.7.12.

69. John Calvin, “Sermon Six: Deuteronomy 5:13–15,” in *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*,

life (or, the goal of sanctification), the restored image of God, can be seen in the person and actions of Jesus Christ. For Calvin, imitation and law are necessarily linked. He writes:

Only if we walk in the beauty of God's law do we become sure of our adoption as children of the Father. . . . Because the Father has reconciled us to himself in Christ, therefore he commands us to be conformed to Christ as to our pattern. . . . We should exhibit the character of Christ in our lives . . . [and] reveal an imitation of Christ who is the mediator of our adoption.⁷⁰

For Calvin, the law shows us the way of sanctification; in Jesus Christ we see this way fulfilled. Neo-Calvinist ethicists have often emphasized, with Calvin, the law without simultaneously highlighting the way Christ functions as an example of this law.

Responding to the Challenge: The Relationship between Jesus and the Law in Bavinck's Imitation of Christ

Bavinck's affirmation of the centrality of the imitation of Christ in the life of the Christian, demonstrates a distinctive break from his contemporaries and from those who will follow him in the neo-Calvinist tradition. But we still can ask the question: does Bavinck's understanding of the imitation of Christ meaningfully show the way that "Jesus *matters*" in the Christian life? In other words, does the imitation of Christ change the content of Christian ethics?⁷¹

The charge to articulate the way that Jesus affects the content of ethics has not only come from voices internal to the Reformed tradition, like James K.A. Smith. It has also come—in strong form!—from other Christian traditions, including the

ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 127.

70. John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, trans. Henry J. Van Andel (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 15, 18–19.

71. This essay is focused on the *content* of Christian ethics, which corresponds in large part to the second half of Bavinck's two-part definition of the imitation of Christ in his 1885/6 work on the theme: actively following the example of Christ in every aspect of one's life. While not the primary consideration of this essay, it is important to note that there is *also* an important change in the first aspect of Bavinck's definition of the imitation of Christ, a "mystical union . . . living communion with Christ," as it relates to how Christians follow the law ("Imitation I," 397). Because Christ is *first* our Redeemer, when we follow Christ's example, it is the "Spirit [who] fulfills the law of God in us." The pattern for our action does not remain external to us: in Christ, through the Spirit, we are united to the one who *is* the pattern. The law is, as Bavinck reminds us, through God's own work, "writ[ten] on the hearts of men (Jeremiah 31:33)" ("Imitation II, 413). On account of this first, and primary, aspect of the imitation of Christ, our understanding of the law also changes; it moves from something external to us *to* something internal, given our union with Christ. Once again, as we'll see with the content of the law, there is a sense of *restoration* to the creational intent. Bavinck writes argues that Adam "stood *in* the law. . . . Because of the fall, the law came to stand *above* and humanity to stand *under*" (*Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 218). The law standing outside of us, simply as judge and standard, is not the way the law was intended to be. In our union with Christ—the first and primary aspect of the imitation of Christ—our relationship with the law is also restored.

Anabaptist tradition. Theologian John Howard Yoder, for example, affirms that a uniquely *Christian* ethic must take seriously the radical nature of Christ's work and the believer's new life in him. The "morality of the gospel," he argues, "Is concentrated in [the] one word, resurrection."⁷² It is in the life of Jesus, and *only* in the life of Jesus, that a distinctly Christian ethic emerges. Importantly, for Yoder, such an understanding of Christian ethics is in stark contrast to an ethic that is grounded in creation and law. Christian ethics must go beyond the Ten Commandments to take seriously the life and work of Jesus, for Jesus "quite literally fill[s] full the Ten Commandments."⁷³ Yoder writes:

If we are to affirm that God became flesh in [Jesus] alone and was known to us as he could not be known through the words of God's prophets, then this must mean that *the life of Jesus is a revelation of true humanity*—as the Ten Commandments could not be—and a revelation of what it means to do God's will in this world. . . . If, however, our ethics are to be guided by Jesus, then we reject the morality of . . . the "orders of creation" because of its content. . . . It is an inadequate moral guide because its standards are wrong.⁷⁴

The starting point to ascertain the substance of Christian morality, Yoder argues, must be dictated by Jesus and Jesus alone.⁷⁵ Following Jesus asks *more* of Christians than the law could, on account of the radical nature of Jesus's life and teaching.⁷⁶

Bavinck's understanding of the role of Christ in Christian ethics is deeply intertwined with the law. In his law-based imitation ethic, he breaks the categories that Yoder puts forward of an ethic that is either based on the law *or* the example of Jesus. For Bavinck, Christian ethics must include both! But Yoder's critique of the Reformed tradition at large offers an opportunity to reflect on the exact relationship between Christ and the law: does Christ demonstrate the enduring content of the law

72. John Howard Yoder, "Walking in the Resurrection," in *Revolutionary Christianity: 1966 South American Lectures*, ed. Paul Martens, Mark Thiessen Nation, Matthew Porter, and Myles Werntz (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 36.

73. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1977), 44. An ethic grounded in the law, he argues, does not take seriously enough the ways in which Jesus *fulfills* the Old Testament law.

74. Yoder, "Walking in the Resurrection," 39–40.

75. Yoder continues this claim in "Helpful and Deceptive Dualisms" where he takes specific aim at the Reformed tradition, among others, writing that the starting point for Christian ethics is Jesus. "This is important especially in the light of Lutheran, Reformed, and Enlightenment predilections for finding better guidance for ethics in the orders of creation. Those positions argue that social ethics should be drawn from creation more than from redemption, guided by reason more than by revelation, rooted in the work of the Father more than that of the Son. In all of the practices here described, the apostolic communities did it the other way 'round. All of these practices represent the realm of redemption." John Howard Yoder, "Helpful and Deceptive Dualisms," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10, no. 2 (December 1988), 71.

76. See: Yoder, "Walking in the Resurrection" and Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35, no. 4 (October 1961): 286–96.

(that is, introduce nothing substantially new) or does Christ, in some way, transform the content of the law by his word and example?

In both his thesis on the *Imitatio Christi* in Bavinck and his short essay “Christ and the Law in Herman Bavinck,” John Bolt makes the strong case that both law and imitation are critical in Bavinck’s ethics, but the law must be seen as ontologically, and logically, prior to the example of Christ. “Ethically,” Bolt argues, “the imitation of Christ is seen principally in terms of creation and law.”⁷⁷ He expands on that claim in this way, arguing that in Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ,

Clearly, the law — representing universal, creational, human obligations — is ontologically prior. The law, including our obligations to God as well as to our neighbor, is the touchstone for a genuinely human existence. Love, the fulfillment of the law, is constitutive of humanity. However, because sin distorts both our awareness of and our ability to do the good required by the law, Christ the Redeemer, obediently fulfilled the moral law and clarified its true meaning. In a sinful world, self-giving love results in suffering. The *imitatio Christi*, our incorporation into his death and resurrection and following him in a life of sacrificial, self-giving love, is the *sine qua non* both to *knowing* and *doing* the will of God which alone is life indeed for human beings. In short, we are Christian in order to be truly human.⁷⁸

Bavinck’s ethics are not complete without both Christ and the law, Bolt shows—but the law guides Bavinck’s interpretation of the imitation of Christ. As Bavinck himself writes, “The Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.”⁷⁹

One may read this claim and then wonder: is Bavinck’s ethic also functionally a law-based ethic, rather than an ethic based on the life of Jesus? Does Jesus’s life and example actually matter for the Christian life, or do they simply serve as a helpful, illustrative example for what the law requires? Stated even more strongly, we might ask: if the imitation of Christ were removed from Bavinck’s ethic, would anything change?

To get to the heart of Bavinck’s response to this question, it is helpful to examine an extended excerpt from *Reformed Ethics*, where Bavinck discusses the relationship between the law and the gospel in relationship to the obligations of the first commandment. In it, he affirms both the necessary continuity between the two while also taking seriously the weight and importance of the particular teachings of Jesus. Bavinck writes:

77. Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 115.

78. Bolt, “Christ and the Law,” 73.

79. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 400.

But does the commandment also demand the uniquely Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love toward God? This is a difficult question; if one says yes, law and gospel seem to be confused, for the law does not mention faith in the uniquely Christian sense, but then the law is inserted and sought in the gospel. If one says no, then one may decide to join the Socinians in making Christ a new Legislator, who has not only fulfilled the law, but added to it, supplemented it, deepened it, and added new commandments to it, and introduced new virtues. The answer to this should be that the law certainly had no knowledge of Christ at all, knew nothing of saving faith, etc., but as soon as the gospel comes with proclamation— believe in Jesus and be saved— then that believing comes to us as a demand and obligation on the basis of the law. The law requires that we believe and do whatever God may command and demand later; the law considers the command to believe as part of it, as it were, and makes it binding and mandatory for all of us. For it is a command from the God who is also the author of the law.⁸⁰

In this passage, Bavinck recognizes the difficulty that a theologian like Yoder points to in a law-based ethic: there is a potential for law and gospel to be blurred, or the teachings of Jesus to be underemphasized. There is also, he cautions, a potential error in the opposite direction: to divorce Jesus's teachings from those that laid out in the Old Testament. Attempting to avoid each of these pitfalls, Bavinck affirms both the enduring normativity and continuity of the law in Christian morality and the unique ways in which the proclamation of the gospel comes alongside the demands of the law.

Bavinck rejects versions of Christian ethics that divorce Jesus's teaching and example from the moral law, while seeking to maintain the particularity of Jesus's teaching. This is directly tied, once again, to his insistence that grace *restores* nature. "Nature and grace, creation and re-creation, must be related to each other in the way Scripture relates them," he argues.⁸¹ In Scripture, we see that Jesus is "the mediator of both creation and re-creation," a theological claim that, for Bavinck, definitively situates the relationship between grace and nature.⁸²

80. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht: Uitgeverij KokBoekencentrum, 2019). English translation forthcoming in *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 2. ("Maar gebiedt de wet dan ook reeds de eigenaardige christelijke deugden van geloof, hoop [en] liefde tot God? Dit is [een] moeilijke vraag. Zegt men ja, dan schijnt wet en evangelie verward te worden, de wet weet toch van geen geloof enz. in eigenaardig christelijke zin, dan wordt de wet dus in het Evangelie gelegd en gezocht. Zegt men neen, dan komt men ertoe, om met de socinianen Christus te maken tot een novus legislator, die de wet niet maar heeft vervuld, maar aangevuld, vervolledigd, verdiept in nieuwe geboden eraan toegevoegd, en nieuwe deugden ingevoerd. Daarop dient geantwoord, dat de wet zeer zeker niets van Christus, niets van het zaligmakend geloof enz. weet, maar zodra het Evangelie komt met de prediking: geloof in Jezus etc., dan komt dat geloof als eis tot ons en is voor ons verplichtend, op grond der wet. Tot geloven en alwat God bevelen en eisen moge later, zijn we krachtens de wet verplicht. De wet subsumeert als het vare dat geloof onder zich, geeft er een allen bindend, verplichtend karakter aan. Het is toch een bevel van die God, die ook Auteur is der wet.")

81. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 216.

82. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 363. Bavinck's colleague, Abraham Kuyper, wonders

If one were to affirm that Christ “brings with him from heaven another, higher human nature,” as he charges Anabaptism with, that would necessitate that “Adam . . . creation and all of nature is a lower order: material, physical, carnal, impure.” A theological system that teaches this, he argues, “sacrifices nature to grace.”⁸³ Such a sacrifice produces a dualism that devalues the created order on account of Christ’s redemption. This cannot be, argues Bavinck, for “grace does not cancel nature but establishes and restores it.”⁸⁴ Thus, for Bavinck, ethical systems that see the law and creation order as lower, needing to be replaced by the teaching of Christ, make a grave error in the relationship between nature and grace. Because grace restores nature, Christ restores the interpretation and application of the law; he does not replace it.⁸⁵

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ underscores the way that grace does indeed restore nature, and thus Christ, in some way, restores the law. As we’ll see, this results in Jesus both introducing something *new* ethically, and simultaneously affirming the created order. Functionally, Jesus introduces new ethical content. His word and example are importantly different than that which was being taught and practiced in his day. But that new ethical content is, foundationally, what was instituted at creation. In his 1918 essay on imitation, Bavinck unpacks both the continuity and newness of Jesus’s ethical teaching and example:

There is, therefore, no legitimate foundation to the claim of Marcion and many after him that Jesus, rejecting the moral law of the Old Testament, comes as a new law-giver and promulgates an entirely new law in the Sermon on the Mount. The whole tendency of the Sermon is diametrically opposed to such an interpretation.⁸⁶

Jesus does not produce a new *law*, but he does bring something new: a new “*understanding* of the law.”⁸⁷ Bavinck continues:

marvellously at the implications of this in his *Lectures on Calvinism* when he writes: “Can we imagine that at one time God willed to rule things in a certain moral order, but that now, in Christ, He wills to rule it otherwise? As though He were not the Eternal, the Unchangeable, Who, from the very hour of creation, even unto all eternity, had willed, wills, and shall will and maintain, one and the same firm moral world-order! Verily Christ has swept away the dust with which man’s sinful limitations had covered up this world-order, and has made it glitter again in its original brilliancy. Verily Christ, and He alone, has disclosed to us the eternal love of Christ which was, from the beginning, the moving principle of this world-order.” Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 71.

83. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 184.

84. Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 62.

85. Importantly, Jan Veenhof stresses that this *restoration* is not *restitution*. Grace restores nature means that “the natural” is “raised to a higher level than it originally occupied” Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, 24–5. As Bavinck says in “Common Grace” (59), “Christ gives more than sin stole; grace was made much more to abound.” We can see glimmers of a similar impulse in Bavinck in his discussion of the law and gospel.

86. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 414.

87. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 415; emphasis added.

The interpretation of the Pharisees and Scribes is now inadequate. . . . The Pharisees and Scribes not only instructed their followers to adhere to a literal reading of the law but also included traditional explication, implication and application as a binding rule upon the conscience. . . . While it is true that Jesus does not always make specific reference to these interpretations of the Scribes (e.g. as he does in vss. 27, 31, 33, 38), there can be no doubt about the fact that *he takes issue, not with the words of the law itself, but with its incorrect interpretation and application*. Jesus never contradicts what is written in the Old Testament law but always that which his disciples had heard of old from the Scribes, that which had been told to the fathers. It is over against this interpretation and teaching of the Scribes that Jesus sets his, “But I say unto you.” It was because Jesus set aside the traditions of men and returned to the very Word of God that the crowd perceived his teaching as having authority.⁸⁸

Jesus, in his words and examples, thus, does introduce something new—that is simultaneously part of the original fabric and design of creation. He introduces the proper interpretation of the law, which does not contradict the Old Testament nor creational norms, but does contradict and alter the teaching and interpretation of his day.

Bavinck understands Jesus to be the “living law;” in his life there is “no discord with the law.”⁸⁹ Christians imitate him as *the* concrete, perfect example of the virtues that the law requires of them, and the one who fulfills the law. What does it mean for Christ to fulfill the law? Here, again, Bavinck differs from an interpretation like that of Yoder who writes that Jesus “fill[s] full” the law. Instead, “having completely fulfilled the law,” Bavinck argues in his early essays on imitation, the law is “part of [Jesus’s] innermost being. There is thus in him no tension between being and consciousness, between word and deed, since, as the truth itself, he is what he says. All the requirements of the law, knowledge and trust, righteousness and holiness, love to God and to man, are incarnate in him. In him the law itself became personified and lived among us.”⁹⁰ Jesus comes, Bavinck affirms again in 1918, “not to annul the law and the prophets but to fulfill them” or to “concretize” the “demands of the law and prophets.”⁹¹ Fulfilling, for Bavinck, is not primarily about introducing radically different content than the law; it is about fully and perfectly embodying and enacting the law’s demands, inwardly and outwardly.⁹²

In his words and examples, Jesus introduces something importantly corrective to ethical teaching of his day. But he does not introduce these different—or new—ethical ideals by abolishing the old. Rather, the new ethical content that he brings

88. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 415–6; emphasis added.

89. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 341, 337.

90. Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 395.

91. Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 414.

92. See: Bavinck, “Imitation I,” 396, Bavinck, “Imitation II,” 412, and Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics* vol. 1, 337.

to his disciples is a rearticulation of the old. Nothing is lost in the law; the original meaning and intent is gained. Bavinck stresses the way the imitating Christ as he follows the law points back to the original nature of humanity and creation again in the necessary connection he weaves between imitation and the restoration of the image of God, that is, God's original intent and design for humanity.⁹³ "True imitation," Bavinck writes, "is thus a matter of being conformed to the image of God. [Jesus] is not only an example but the archetype."⁹⁴ Thus, as grace restores nature, Christ—in his ethical teaching—restores the original intent and import of the law.

Conclusion

Known for its insistence on the normative place of the law in Christian ethics, the Reformed tradition has not typically highlighted the role of Jesus Christ as an *example* in Christian ethics. While this is the majority report of Reformed ethics, there are examples throughout the Reformed tradition, of theological ethics that continue to stress the normative nature of the law in the Christian life alongside the insistence of the ongoing normativity of Christ's words and deeds for the Christian.

Following, and expanding upon, the work of John Calvin, Herman Bavinck provides one such example, articulating a distinctly Reformed understanding of the relationship between Christ and the law that affirms the normative role of both for Christian ethics. In doing so, Bavinck pre-empts a challenge that emerges both within and outside the Reformed tradition regarding its ethics: *Jesus must* matter in the Christian life, not only as savior, but as example.

For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is the heart of the Christian life; it constitutes the "shape" and form of how the Christian should live.⁹⁵ The Christian life should be directed towards a law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. Bavinck's insistence that *the* form of the Christian life is found in the example of Jesus, and that the example of Jesus must be understood through the lens of the moral law uniquely brings together two dominant themes in Christian ethics, without forcing a binary choice between one or the other: Christ and the law.

Such a picture of the imitation of Christ, firmly rooted in the moral law, does raise a question, however: if we understand the imitation of Christ through the lens of the law, does the example of Jesus really matter for Christian ethics? Or is Bavinck's ethics still, functionally, a law-based ethic that merely sees Jesus as a helpful, concrete example of that law, rather than one who has direct import on the content of ethics?

93. See: Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 340: in the imitation of Christ, "We are conformed to the image of the Son . . . God re-creating us in his image is what Christ has earned and acquired for us. The content of our life, therefore, is nothing other than the image of God—namely, knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, which are ethical qualities that correspond to those in Christ, who is the perfect Image of God."

94. Bavinck, "Imitation II," 412–3.

95. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, 341.

Throughout this essay, we have explored this question, arguing that the answer to this question, in Bavinck's theology, is both yes and no: yes, Jesus *functionally* alters the content of ethics. Without him, we do not, and could not, see the original intent of the law. In word and deed, he presents something meaningfully different and other than the ethical norms of his day, including those based on the law. But, simultaneously, no, Jesus does not *foundationally* alter the content of ethics, introducing something wholly new. Instead, he reintroduces what was instituted at creation, with more clarity than could have been attainable in a postlapsarian world. Without the example of Jesus, we cannot attain a full picture of God's ethical call, but the example of Jesus points us to what was there all along, found in the law.

Bavinck's imitation of Christ continues to stress the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and the ongoing import of the creational norms, while simultaneously affirming the newness that Jesus brings.⁹⁶ As grace restores nature, Jesus restores the intent and application of the law. He is not a new *lawgiver*, but a *law-restorer*.

96. In his essay, "Creational Politics," Richard Mouw briefly responds to this challenge as well. See Richard J. Mouw, "Creational Politics: Some Calvinist Amendments," in *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 122.