REFORMING VIRTUE: BAVINCK'S METHOD OF ENGAGING WITH

VIRTUE ETHICS FROM A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

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APPROVAL SHEET

REFORMING VIRTUE: BAVINCK'S METHOD OF ENGAGING WITH

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Date_____

To Leena, Ilia, Ethan, and Ariel

Through whom I see God's grace

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PREFACE

Reforming Virtue arose from a deeply personal concern for my family, my friends, and my flock. I had observed how the turbulence of the past decade strained relationships to the breaking point, especially in conversations surrounding epistemology, social justice, politics, morality, and apologetical methodology. Yearly, my worldview seminar would be filled with congregants who just wanted to make sense of their torn communities that were increasingly solidifying into polarized, tribalistic factions. In a way, the past few years had cultivated within my circle of friends a desire to make sense of where we are, and find continuity between being and doing, affections and actions. This thesis is the short-term culmination of this desire. My aim in engaging with the work of Herman Bavinck is not to provide a formulaic solution to the various rifts we see in society, but to point to a *person* whose Spirit empowers us to flourish in our moral universe with dignity and meaning—Jesus Christ.

I am especially grateful for the opportunity to dive into the work and life of Bavinck in the process of writing this thesis. His works are, I believe, translated for a time such as this. They are filled with prophetical insight into faith, life, and culture, while being thoroughly centered upon a robust reformed theology. But most importantly, each of his words are sublimely worshipful and filled with a radiant hope that can enlighten Christians living in the moral-ethical fog of postmodernity.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Bryan Baise, for his expertise combined with passion for the study of virtue. His professional supervision and especially his patience has been vital in guiding my steps through what had been for me an unfamiliar field of study. I also want to thank The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for providing an open and gracious academic environment where I was encouraged to engage rigorously with other bodies of thought, which in retrospect, seems

to be a very "Bavinckian" attitude of scholarship. Much gratitude is owed to my mentor, Rev. Eung Ryul Ryoo, who has urged me to preach and pursue Christ for as long as I can remember. He has been and still remains a shining exemplar of faith.

Finally, Leena, I want to thank you for being there for me in all gentleness, patience, and kindness throughout my studies.

David Moon

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In *Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contributions to Contemporary Virtue Ethics*, Pieter Vos notes the valuable contributions that Reformed theology has made to the study of ethics in general, and virtue ethics particularly.[1] But he also points to the need for continued reformed theological input in light of the predominant catholic influence in the study of virtue ethics.[2] In particular, Vos attributes this lack of emphasis on virtue within the Reformed thought to "a common conviction that Protestants have no place or only a limited place for the virtues because of the centrality of the doctrine of salvation."[3] But I additionally argue that this absence of Reformed literature in the study of virtue is but one of the symptoms of a much larger problem in twentieth-century Reformed theology: namely an atmosphere of reluctance to interact with secular scholarship in philosophy, science, politics, and ethics due to, *inter alia*, the dialectical theology of Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth and the presuppositionalism of Dutch-American Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til, both whom regarded natural theology (i.e., the theology of God constructed upon observed

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[1] Pieter Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contribution to Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2015): 201-12.

[2] Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues," 201. Vos observes that the Reformed tradition held ethics as "an ethics of divine commandments, creational orders and—to a lesser extent—(human) rights, whereas theological virtue ethics is in particular developed in the Roman Catholic Church." After World War II, Vos writes, there were only a few isolated attempts to reassess the relation between Reformed theology and virtue by Gerrit Brillenburg Wurth, Paul Ramsey, Richard Mouw, Gilbert Meilaender, and Eilert Herms.

[3] Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues," 204.

facts and experience apart from special revelation) as futile in knowing God apart from God's redemptive grace revealed in Scripture.[4]

In theory, the disagreement seems negligible: both camps of thought acknowledge the bipartite understanding of general and special revelation. Both also agree that general revelation in the natural world must be consistent with Scripture. Doctrinally, all seems well in the Reformed camp; at this point, any difference is merely due to the epistemic priority that is assigned to each when it comes to thinking about ethics, politics, or science. But despite what feels like a tertiary discrepancy between the two camps, recent cultural battles have proven that this ancient fissure can result in seemingly irreparable divisions within numerous areas of Reformed scholarship, as I intend to briefly demonstrate through the following overview.

Apologetics

Within Reformed apologetics, the debate on the relationship between special and general revelation has led to an ever-widening rift between evidentialists and presuppositionalists.[5] The former affirms the value of natural theology *per* Anselm and Aquinas and applies it to the defense of the faith.[6] The latter consists of those who view any reliance upon evidences outside of the framework of God's self-revelation in

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[4] Karl Barth states regarding natural theology: "As the content of proclamation and theology [natural theology] can have no place at all. It can be treated only as non-existent. In this sense, therefore, it must be excised without mercy." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 1 (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957), 168.

[5] For a helpful overview of the details of this conflict, see J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach in Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

[6] For the position that apologetics allows for the utilization of natural theology in apologetics, see William Paley, *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity; Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802; repr., Houston, TX: St. Thomas Press, 1972); John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2015); Gary R. Habermas, *The Case for the Resurrection of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004).

Scripture as erosive to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* and the self-attesting nature of

Revelation.[7] In particular, Van Til explains why natural reasoning cannot arrive at an

accurate notion of God:

> In the first place, when men say that we can reason from nature to nature's God, they usually take for granted that nature as it exists today is normal, and that the human mind which contemplates it is normal. This is not true. Nature has had a veil cast over it on account of the sin of man, and the mind of man itself has been corrupted by sin. Accordingly, *we must not, now that sin has entered into the world, separate natural theology from theological psychology.* After sin has entered the world, no one of himself knows nature aright, and no one knows the soul of man aright. How then could man reason from nature to nature's God and get anything but a distorted notion of God?[8]

However, J. V. Fesko has specifically argued that in taking such a position

which renders natural theology worthless and rejects the doctrine of general revelation,

the Van Tillian camp more closely resembles a Christianized version of German Idealism

rather than the historic Reformed tradition.[9] This has left classical apologists who uphold

the reasonableness and rationality of the Christian faith and utilize theistic arguments to

prove the existence of God in a rather awkward position: They must affirm the primacy

of Scripture to underscore the necessity of a theistic universe as the conclusion of their

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[7] For the position that natural theology and evidences cannot be a neutral ground upon which the defense of the faith can be conducted see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008); Greg Bahnsen and K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles & Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

[8] Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prologomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 133.

[9] Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics*, 141. However, Van Til often took issue with the misplaced foundations of idealism in his statements such as, "For the innate knowledge as Calvin thinks of it is based upon the idea of man's creation in the image of God. And as such it is correlative to the idea of revelation to man mediated through the facts of his environment which are also created by God. In contrast with this the innate knowledge of Descartes and idealist philosophy is based on the idea of the autonomy of man," Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith,* 177. In Cornelius Van Til, "God and the Absolute," *Evangelical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1930): 358-88, he further argues that the Christian God cannot be identified with the idea of the Absolute in idealism.

two-step methodology, and yet simultaneously criticize one of the core tenets of presuppositionalism—that given the noetic impact of the fall, the natural mind cannot start with evidences to know God.[10] I argue that this same rift between special and general revelation as represented in the conflict between evidential and presuppositional apologetics is also manifested in a certain reformed view of ethics—that given the impact of the fall upon our affections and moral epistemology, the fallen conscience cannot start with unredeemed virtue ethics to develop a truly Christoform virtue ethic.

Politics and Social Engagement

This fracture between those who affirm the usefulness of general revelation to the fallen mind can also be traced into the arena of politics and social engagement. While the symptomatic concerns of the past decade seemed to focus on social justice, the underlying issue was whether general theology can complement Scripture when it (special revelation) does not explicitly address contemporary issues. On the one hand, the more conservative position demonstrated a reluctance to apply secular scholarship in the endeavor for attaining biblical justice, while the progressive camp affirmed its utility in understanding and remedying the alleged systematic injustice embedded into today's society. This has been evidenced in the recent discussions surrounding ethnicity (i.e., Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter and Stop AAPI Hate movements), evangelical involvement in politics, diversity, abuse of power, women in ministry, and sexual abuse.[11]

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[10] See R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur W. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1984); R. C. Sproul, *Defending Your Faith: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

[11] These topics were addressed in the recent 2021 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention as well as the 2021 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America.

This tension was brought to the forefront in Voddie Baucham's book *Fault Lines*.[12] Without getting into issues of the author's accuracy on the historical developments of Critical Race Theory, among other things, the mounting controversy surrounding *Fault Lines* demonstrates the tension between those who see the doctrine of Sola Scriptura as the only grounding for Biblical justice, and those who argue that Sola Scriptura must not be confused with *Solo* Scriptura—hence, they would argue that Critical Race Theory, feminist and gender studies, and the LGBTQ movement are valid or useful supplements to the Christian faith wherever Scripture remains silent.[13]

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Ethics

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The rift within reformed thought in the realms of apologetics and political engagement is, as demonstrated above, highly controversial and will remain so until there is agreement on the epistemic priority of general and specific revelation. Now, while this fault line has yet to result in a similar seismic clash in the study of ethics, I argue that it is bound to happen if it has not already occurred. Eventually, without intentional effort to address this rift, the void of Reformed input in the area of personal and collective moral

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[12] Voddie Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem Book, 2021). At the beginning of his book, Baucham states that there is a growing divide between Thabiti Anyabwile, Tim Keller, Russell Moore, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, 9 Marks, the Gospel Coalition, and Together for the Gospel (T4G) being identified with Critical Social Justice on one side, and John MacArthur, Tom Ascol, Owen Strachan, Douglas Wilson, and the late R. C. Sproul on the other (2). This is a highly contested claim that I do not take at face value; rather, I utilize this claim to demonstrate the existence of a growing debate on the ancient issue of the validity and scope of natural theology.

[13] Baucham (*Fault Lines* 114-19) lists the following books as the extrabiblical "New Canon" that proponents of CRT adhere to: Latasha Morrison, *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2019); Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019); David Swanson, *Rediscipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020). Baucham concludes that "[t]he social sciences may be useful tools, but they are far from necessary…. In no area does God require me to walk in a level of righteousness for which the Scriptures do not equip me—including any and all aspects of justice."

behavior will eventually be filled with secular ethical norms that may be inconsistent with Reformed orthodoxy. Why?

At a recent conference titled, "Reformed Apologetics in a Secular Age," R. Albert Mohler Jr. observed in his opening speech how secularization has caused the Church to shift its *apologia* from ontology to epistemology, and from epistemology to morality.[14] He argued that morality is the current battlefield of apologetics, and accordingly, society will engage less with the Church about issues such as the knowability of truth and the veracity of Scripture (epistemology), or even scientific evidences for the existence of God (ontology). Rather, society now confronts the church from a moral/ethical vantage point: It views its holy text, mandate, and impact in terms of *how conducive or detrimental it is to human flourishing*. As such, Al Mohler concludes that the church's new battlefront is now inevitably tied to the moral-ethical sphere.

In order to prevent this epistemological rift from dividing the Reformed church even further on the topic of ethical behavior, I believe the Church must be able to propose a system of ethical praxis that is faithful to Scripture, reformed in theology, yet accounts for natural theology in a way that ultimately encourages rigorous engagement with practical ethical concerns raised by modern socio-political and cultural phenomena.

Thesis and Methodology

I will argue that a Reformed virtue ethic justifiably combines the best of both of the above camps, and that this is best demonstrated in Herman Bavinck's ethical worldview which is confidently reformed yet robustly interactive with natural theories of ethics.[15] To understand why Bavinck was able to do so, I will first examine his life as a

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[14] R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Apologetics in a Secular Age," unpublished notes from the Reformed Apologetics in a Secular Age conference hosted by the SBTS Apologetics Institute at Louisville, Kentucky, May 10-11, 2021.

[15] I address three natural-ethical theories throughout this thesis: virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism.

nineteenth century Reformed theologian who confidently applied his dogmatics to the changing ethical landscape of twentieth-century modernity.[16] Next, I will argue that a correct understanding of the four pillars of Bavinck's theological framework, namely Revelation, Biblical Anthropology, Christology, and Kingdom Theology, will serve to mend the breach between general and specific revelation and thereby reinvigorate the study of virtue ethics from a reformed perspective. Finally, I will discuss how the above four pillars individually and collaboratively inform the study of virtue ethics, and then conclude with some thoughts on how Bavinck's approach can encourage Reformed scholars to utilize, critique, and engage rigorously in the study of virtue (and in natural theology in general) with a confidence rooted in their rich Reformed heritage.

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[16] Grounding Bavinck's theological background in the nineteenth-century and his application to ethics in the twentieth-century is crucial, as most of the rifts have, according to Vos, been ascribed to "neo-Calvinists and dialectical theologians, who rejected the anthropological scope in nineteenth-century liberal theology and regarded the Reformation's doctrine of justification not just as prior but also as opposed to the concept of virtue." Vos, *Calvinists among the Virtues,* 203.

CHAPTER 2

HOW A NINETEENTH-CENTURY REFORMED
THEOLOGIAN RESPONDED TO TWENTIETH
CENTURY ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was born into one of the most dynamically

shifting times in the history of the Netherlands—a society which had just begun

systematically reinventing itself according to the modernist impulse of societal progress.

Just 6 years before Bavinck's birth, a wave of liberal and democratic reform resulted in

the ratification of a new constitution on November 3, 1848, which served to severely

limit the king's powers and protect civil liberties.[1] The resulting socio-cultural fault line

of Bavinck's time was exacerbated not only by the progressive impulse to move *forward*,

but perhaps even more by the cultural shift *away* from "traditional" approaches to art,

science, architecture, religion, and politics. Tradition was considered outdated and only

served to hold society back from progress.[2]

It was not long before theology and religion followed suit. This cultural shift

came as a surprise to no one, since William I, King of the United Netherlands, had

previously convened the National Synod of 1816 to usurp the ecclesiastical authority of

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[1] See Jan William Sap, *Netherland Constitution 1848-1998: Historical Reflections* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2000), for a historical account of how the Netherlands Constitution of 1848 laid the foundation for the current parliamentary democracy it is today.

[2] For Bavinck's own perception of the social circumstances in nineteenth-century Netherlands, see Herman Bavinck, "Theology and Religious Studies in Nineteenth-Century Netherlands," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 281-88.

the Reformed Churches and consolidate them into the Netherlands Reformed Church.[3]
Following that, an 1857 education bill passed which stated that the government would
finance public schools while Protestants and Catholics had to finance their
denominational schools themselves, demonstrating that the liberal party viewed
confessional education as a threat to national unity and educational neutrality.[4] So
pressing was this issue of theological modernism and religious progressivism that when
Bavinck was installed in Kampen Theological School in January 10, 1883, he devoted his
inaugural lecture, "The Science of Sacred Theology" to respond to the Leiden
School professor Lodewijk Rauwenhoff's claim that "theology must be secularized."[5]
Bavinck counterclaimed that theology must be *theologized* from a theocentric
methodology for a theocentric end.[6]

Repeatedly, in an era of progress mingled with uncertainty, Bavinck did not
merely resist change and dialogue but welcomed opportunities to engage in socio-
political discourse with open arms with the intent to espouse his Reformed orthodox
position *contra* modernism. This openness was visible throughout all of his ministerial
and academic life as he comfortably operated along the border where society and culture
interacted with theology. For example, when the Netherland's Higher Education Act of
1876 changed university departments of theology into departments of religious studies,
Bavinck responded in an essay titled, "Theology and Religious Studies in Nineteenth-

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[3] Melissa Petruzzello, "Netherlands Reformed Church," *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
2010), https://www.britannica.com/topic/Netherlands-Reformed-Church.

[4] Jan Jaap de Ruiter and Jeroen Vermeulen, "Religion and Religious Education in the
Netherlands" (paper presented at the International Conference on the Trialogue of Cultures,
Berlin, Herbert Quandt Foundation, November 13-14, 2006).

[5] James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic,
2020), 137.

[6] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 137.

Century Netherlands," wherein he utilizes his formidable knowledge of the legislative history of higher education to argue against the anthropizing impact of the Act.[7] Furthermore, during his tenure at Kampen Theological Seminary in the 1880s, Bavinck utilized his academic position and influence to promote his view of theology as the "queen of the sciences" which he envisioned as an integrative discipline for all the sciences.[8]

 Bavinck's involvement with society despite its pluralistic, progressive, and atheistic tendencies only became more evident from the 1890's and onwards. He entered the political sphere in 1891 to advocate on behalf of the living and working conditions of industrial workers,[9] and wrote his book titled *Christian Worldview* to in order to present an overarching Biblical *world view* which was united with a corresponding *life view* to counter the one-dimensional philosophical extremities offered by Kant, Nietzche, and Marx.[10] In 1903, when Herman Groenewegen argued that theology could not be considered a science if it was founded upon self-referencing theological assumptions, Bavinck responded that "all human knowledge is subjective and rests upon *a priori* assumptions—and that, therefore, theology (practiced by Christian believers) is no less worthy of its place in the academy than any other avenue of inquiry."[11] He also wrote on the psychology of religious phenomenon in 1909 due to his concern about the shift away

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[7] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 138; cf. Bavinck, "Theology and Religious Studies in Nineteenth-Century Netherlands," 281-88.

[8] Wolter Huttinga, "'Marie Antoinette' or Mythical Depth? Herman Bavinck on Theology as Queen of the Sciences," in *Neo-Calvinism and the French Revolution*, ed. James Eglinton and George Harnick (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014) 143-54; cited in Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 169.

[9] Eglinton, *Bavinck,* 180.

[10] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 227.

[11] Bavinck, *Christelijke wetenschap* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok, 1904), 77, quoted by Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 229.

from the objective toward the subjective as a result of Kant and Schleiermacher's influence on religious and philosophical thought.[12] In 1911, Bavinck was elected as Senator to the Netherlands Parliament and shortly thereafter spoke to the First Chamber of the Dutch Parliament on the matter of the budget for the Dutch East Indies for the fiscal year 1912.[13] Even upon Bavinck's death in 1921, William Brede Kristensen, a Norwegian Scholar and a fellow member of Bavinck at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Scientists praised Bavinck for his contributions to the study of science.[14] Nowhere do we see in Bavinck's life a reluctance to engage with society at the level of politics, academia, and science despite his thoroughly reformed dogmatics.

To explain the life of this Reformed multipotentialite and polymath, Bavinck scholar James Eglinton connects Bavinck's social activism with a Kuyperian brand of Calvinism in order to emphasize the holistic nature of the classical reformed tradition:

> The species of Calvinism defended by Bavinck was clearly Kuyperian in character. As alternative iterations of Protestantism, he argued, Lutheranism and Anabaptism failed to promote the moral and religious flourishing of communities and nations: Lutheranism prioritized the individual believer's religious change and neglected the reformation of that believer's cultural location, whereas Anabaptism held culture at arm's length in an effort not to be corrupted by it. *Calvinism, by contrast, was holistic and reformed the individual and the community*.[15]

To Bavinck, his life of engaging with society, ethics, and politics for the purpose of benefitting communities and blessing nations was just a natural extension and

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[12] Herman Bavinck, "Psychology of Religion," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 61-80.

[13] This oral address which was later rewritten and titled, "Christianity and Natural Science," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 81-104.

[14] W. B. Kristensen, "Over den wetenschappelijken arbeid van Herman Bavinck," Levensberichten in *Jaarboek der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, 1921–1922* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: 1923), 1–12, trans. Laurence O'Donnell, "On Herman Bavinck's Scientific Work," *Reformed Faith & Practice* 3, no. 1 (2018), 38-49.

[15] Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 185 (emphasis mine).

outworking of his Reformed faith. Indeed, why not confront contemporary moral issues when God's sovereignty in salvation had awakened an innate but dormant *sensus divinitatis* that could reconcile ethical conundrums by the intuitions of the indwelling Holy Spirit? Why not rigorously pursue the formation of character and virtue when God's grace had implanted within humanity a *semen religionis* capable of acting virtuously in imitation of Christ? From his inaugural speech at Kampen until his final lectures at the Free University of Amsterdam, Bavinck unreservedly demonstrated a life proceeding from thinking to being to becoming; orthodoxy lived out through orthopraxy. He well earned his reputation as "a man of deep piety and great learning who faced head on the challenges posed to Reformed orthodoxy by modernity without forsaking his devout, pietist roots."[16]

So how was Bavinck able to engage so robustly with the political, ethical, and socio-cultural events of his day as a theologian, pastor, professor, and statesman? What specific element of Bavinck's Reformed faith empowered him to extrapolate orthopraxy out of orthodoxy? Why did he not shy away from natural theology when he addressed cutting-edge ethical issues with such biblical conviction?

I argue that it is due to four pillars of Reformed thought that were foundational to Bavinck's ethical thought—namely his philosophy of revelation, anthropology, Christology, and Kingdom theology. While other ethicists have utilized similar biblical "focal points" to espouse their system of ethics,[17] Bavinck was first and foremost a

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[16] John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service*, Theologians on the Christian Life Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 38.

[17] See the focal images of Cross, Community, and New Creation in Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996); see also Jeffery Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), wherein Siker discusses the ethic of liberation espoused by Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone, and the feminist ethics of Rosemary Radford Ruether.

systematic dogmatician who thoroughly worked out the personal, societal, and ethical implications of these central doctrines of the Christian faith *due to his commitment to a high view of Scripture*. It was this firm stance on special revelation which equipped Bavinck to engage in natural theology and general revelation to extrapolate the above pillars of his moral worldview. I will demonstrate in the following chapters that these prominent themes in Bavinck's system of ethics are laced with golden threads that, when understood thoroughly and applied robustly, can mend the widening breach between Reformed theology and practice today in the study and practice of ethics.

CHAPTER 3

REVELATION: REVELATION BEFORE DOGMATICS,
AND DOGMATICS BEFORE ETHICS

Bavinck's understanding of revelation is the bedrock of his biblical ethics. His thesis in *Philosophy of Revelation* is that Christianity either stands or falls upon the reality of revelation.[1] Then how much more so Christian practice? Upon examining Bavinck's metaethical foundations, we see that he assigns utmost priority to the doctrine of revelation, since it is by revelation we see the reality of God's moral character, the moral nature of the universe, and the moral agency of humanity; and it is only upon perceiving this reality that humans *respond* through ethical living. In this chapter, I will particularly demonstrate that for Bavinck, revelation comes before dogmatics, and dogmatics before ethics. Then I will list the ramifications for a reformed virtue ethic.

Revelation before Dogmatics

Bavinck boldly states, "God, the world, and humanity are the three realities with which all science and all philosophy occupy themselves. The conception which we form of them, and the relation in which we place them to one another, determine the character of our view of the world and of life."[2] If this is true, our worldviews must be undergirded by our doctrines of God, Creation, and Anthropology if they are to explain the relationship between the above three realities. However, it is most critical to

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[1] Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation: A New Annotated Edition Adapted and Expanded from the 1908 Stone Lectures Presented at Princeton Theological Seminary*, trans. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), 20.

[2] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 70.

understand that all of these studies, according to Bavinck, are demonstrably and inseparably "bound up with the concept of revelation."[3] In other words, without revelation, we are unable formulate a compelling description of reality.

In his aptly titled subchapter in *Reformed Dogmatics*, "No Religion Without Revelation," Bavinck argues as a *de facto* statement that our knowledge of God (theology), our self-knowledge (anthropology), namely our origin and destiny, relation with God, sin, redemption, and future, and finally our knowledge of the means of restoration (soteriology) all depend upon revelation.[4] His view of world, life, and God can only be constructed from what has been truthfully revealed about it in Scripture.

This was not hyperbole or innuendo: Bavinck saw that the breadth and scope of God's specific revelation necessarily implicates all of metaphysical and physical reality. In his *Philosophy of Revelation*, Bavinck argues that revelation even informs our understanding of the natural world nature (70-91), history (92-116), religion (117-141), the Christian faith in particular (142-163), religious experience (164-191), culture (192-212), and the future (213-246).[5] For Bavinck, revelation is not just a foundation for *supernatural knowledge*, but grants epistemic access to all of the *natural world*. Knowledge of the visible world that we derive from perception, and knowledge of the invisible world acquired through faith— both are owed to God's revelation of Himself. If indeed revelation is the *Principium Externum*—the external and objective foundation of all knowledge and truth—then any system of dogmatics which attempts to explain reality while remaining internally consistent must proceed from revelation.

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[3] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 1, *Prologomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 286.

[4] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:287.

[5] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, Table of Contents.

Even Bavinck's definition of revelation implies a deep and pervasive interconnection between the supernatural and natural by presuming three elements: "(1) The existence of a personal divine being who originates the announcement; (2) a truth, fact, or event that up until the time of its announcement was not yet known; (3) a human being to whom the announcement was made."[6] So while all revelation is supernatural in origin, the noetic manner in which it dawns upon the human mind, as well as the content that it imparts upon our faculties is "natural through and through."[7] It is only when the natural human mind has been infiltrated with divine revelation that it responds by forming rational and theological categories that are subsequently filled with data from the natural world.

Once again, it must be emphasized that natural data cannot stand on its own; rather, it must presuppose an ontological foundation that cannot be found in the natural world, but from beyond. Bavinck notes, "Physical science, which thinks through its own conceptions and fathoms its own nature, issues in metaphysics and rises straight to God."[8] And it is in this process of connecting the perceived world to a revealed supernatural reality that a "worldview" is born. Bavinck cites Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach to note that this worldview formation process is universal to all those who seek to understand their universe: "Not only humankind, but also every individual, finds, as he grows to full consciousness, a view of the world already prepared for him, to the formation of which lie has not consciously contributed."[9] Only when a worldview has been properly anchored upon a revelational basis can it be properly extracted into system of dogmatics without fear of internal or external inconsistency.

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[6] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 295.

[7] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:292.

[8] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 76.

[9] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 71.

Dogmatics before Ethics

Second, just as dogmatics organically proceeds from revelation, ethics proceeds from dogmatics. Editor John Bolt observes, in reference to the connections that Bavinck draws between dogmatics and ethics, "The tripartite structure [of *Reformed Ethics*] clearly demonstrates the thoroughly dogmatic character of the work. Dogmatics precedes ethics, and ethics is completely dependent on dogmatics."[10] In other words, Bavinck believed that only orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy. He provides a more extensive list of reasons that he keeps ethics and practical theology bound together and addressed simultaneously:

1. If ethics is separated from practical theology, the human factor is treated too lightly and ethics is set free from dogmatics, leading to Pelagianism.

2. As we have seen, the only content or the matter of the moral life is the spiritual life of fellowship with God—that is, religion. Considering the spiritual life and moral life together guards us against seeing the moral life as a life unto itself; it protects us from establishing a covenant of works.

3. Even though religion and morality are two distinct things, they are nonetheless bound together. One must manifest itself in the other. What we do must give evidence of who we are. Treating practical theology and ethics together furthers the mutuality of religion and morality; protects us from letting the spiritual life drift into feeling, quietism, or Pietism; and helps it [the spiritual life] to become evident in deeds, in action, in walking according to God's Word. Keeping them together also expresses the conviction that a normal and true life of faith must reveal itself through a strong moral life.[11]

It is noteworthy that according to Bavinck, an unbalanced understanding of the relationship between ethics and theology *necessarily leads to heresy*: Pelagianism on the one hand, and a covenant of works on the other. Distance between the two can also cause the Christian to drift toward quietism and Pietism—indeed, much is at stake in how one views the relationship between ethics and dogmatics! One can borrow relevant insight

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[10] Dirk Van Keulen and John Bolt, "Introduction to Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*," in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, ed. John Bolt, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), xxvii.

[11] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1: 20-21.

from secular academia in the pursuit of ethical living, but how that insight relates with God's self-revelation is informed by an integrational philosophy which must be informed by the dogmatics of the Christian faith found in special revelation.

Bavinck is also careful to distinguish between theological and philosophical foundations for ethics. Borrowing from Richard Rothe, Bavinck states that while speculation that proceeds from the fact of self-consciousness is *philosophical* in nature, speculation from the fact of God-consciousness is *theological*.[12] Therefore, whereas *philosophical* ethical norms derive from some form of social utility (i.e., consequentialism) or intuition (i.e., humanistic virtue), *theological* ethics derives from God's revealed will which is manifested in Scripture and consummated in the life, death, and Spirit of Jesus.[13] It is only when ethics originates from theology that ethics "does not proceed from a nature in humanity, in a principle embedded in creation, but from a revealed principle that comes from God and his deeds, his words for and to us, deeds and words that lead us back to God and find in him their goal."[14] Or in short, "Our ethics proceeds from God, is through God, and is for God."[15]

While it can be argued that both philosophy and theology are able to provide viable foundations for normative human behavior, the point being made in this section is that *ethics cannot be divorced from its metaethical underpinnings*—regardless of whether it originates from the human or divine. The only difference is that theological ethics originates from external and divine revelation, while philosophical ethics originates from an internal and self-referencing moral epistemology, which lead to baseless virtue, utilitarianism, moral positivism, hedonism, or ethical relativism.

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[12] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:25.

[13] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:25.

[14] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:26.

[15] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:26.

Interweaving General and Specific Revelation in Virtue

In connecting revelation to dogmatics, and dogmatics to ethics, Bavinck provides much-needed clarity to the dialogue surrounding the relationship between general and specific revelation.[16] On the one hand, Bavinck seems to argue that specific revelation is the only way to know the supernatural reality of God and His universe, and as such, makes religion incompatible with naturalism:

> But the deity to which a given religion connects a human is a supernatural invisible power. It is inaccessible to ordinary human investigation; science leaves us in the lurch here. If we are to know something about God, he must come forth out of his hiddenness, in some way make himself perceivable, and hence reveal himself. *Naturalism, at least in a strict sense, and religion are incompatible....*[17]

On that note, Bavinck stresses that "Christian theologians are unanimous" in concluding that general revelation by itself is insufficient.[18] In a brief survey of the church fathers, Bavinck suggests that when the Pelagians, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Erasmus, and Zwingli taught natural religion, it was not based on the doctrine of the sufficiency of general revelation, but "on the premise that God was also at work with his special grace among pagans, either in this life or the life to come."[19] Only the eighteenth century deists and rationalists such as Cherbury, Tindal, Colins, Rousseau, and Kant, among others, taught the total sufficiency of general revelation and of natural religion—a

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[16] In the Foreword of *Philosophy of Revelation*, James Eglinton distinguishes between Bavinck's understanding of general and special revelation: "For Bavinck, this process of revelation should be viewed along two lines. Generally, God is revealed in the origin and ongoing existence of the universe itself. The cosmos is a general revelation of God. Macro- and microcosmically, the world itself "makes known to us the power of [God's] mind" (25). Alongside this, God also practices another form of self-disclosure, which Bavinck sees as special revelation. This form of revelation, which centers on God as made known in Jesus Christ, functions as "a disclosure of the greatness of God's heart" (25). We can know that our Creator loves us, because he tells us so quite explicitly."

[17] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:285-86 (emphasis mine).

[18] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:312.

[19] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:313.

thing that does not even exist.[20] He concludes that on truths most necessary to religion, including moral truths, "no adequate certainty can be obtained in philosophy."[21]

But at the same time, Bavinck critiques the prevalent misguided notion that "only the special science of theology concerned itself with God and divine things, and as if all the other sciences other sciences, particularly the natural sciences, have nothing whatever to do with God."[22] He argues that *such a dualism is impossible*, since "God does not stand apart from the world, much less from humanity, and therefore the knowledge of him is not the peculiar domain of theology."[23] Hence, general revelation is important because (1) it explained the universality of religious thought;[24] (2) empowered Christian discipleship, since "special revelation has recognized and valued general revelation, has even taken it over and, as it were, assimilated it;"[25] and (3) it is the common ground that Christians can meet with non-Christians.[26] In summary, general revelation was valuable to Bavinck because it assumed and proved the truth of special revelation.

To explain this provisional value of general revelation, Bavinck observes that although the Reformed tradition assumed a revelation of God in nature, it also assumed that the noetic impact of sin had so darkened the human mind that human beings could not perceive God's revelation in Scripture unless "(1) God again included in special revelation those truths which in themselves are knowable from nature; and (2) that human

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[20] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:313.

[21] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:313.

[22] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 70.

[23] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 70.

[24] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:314-19.

[25] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.

[26] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.

beings, in order to again perceive God in nature, first had to be illumined by the Spirit of God."[27] *Humanity needs the eye of faith to see God in nature*. This is why, for example, biblical anthropology is central to Bavinck's ethics, since only a converted humanity could overcome the noetic impact of the fall and utilize their *sensus divinitatis* to perceive God in nature in a manner that was consistent with special revelation. Bavinck summarizes his understanding of special and general revelation with the following:

> [T]heology especially occupies itself with his revelation, in order that its nature and contents may be scientifically understood so far as possible. But this revelation addresses itself to all of humanity; the religion founded on it is the concern of every human, even of the man of science and the investigator of nature; for all men, without exception, the knowledge of God is the way to eternal life.[28]

If this is true, what then explains the possibility of scientific inquiry when the inquirer does not necessarily presuppose special revelation? Or more practically, how can an atheist scientist launch a rocket to the moon if his algorithms derive purely from nature? First, scientific inquiry is useful even to the pagan when finding naturalistic causes for naturalistic phenomena, since the noetic impact of the fall has demonstrably left our *capacity for acquiring propositional knowledge intact*. This can further be explained by the fact that the subject matter of general revelation is grounded in God's law and order *regardless of whether it is perceived as so or not*. But whenever the inquiry reaches beyond the realm of observable natural phenomenon into the sphere of morality, metaphysics, and the origins of things, the inquirer must engage in what Bavinck termed the "philosophy of revelation." Borrowing from the thoughts of Alfred Dippe and Ludwig Stein, Bavinck states, "Natural science may for a time despise philosophy, by and by it must return to it, because it has itself proceeded from it. When the 'thirst for facts' (*Thatsachendurst*) has been in a way satisfied, the 'hunger for causes'

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[27] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:304.

[28] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 70.

(*Uraschenhunger*) will come to the surface."[29] Because science derives from a philosophical/revelatory precommitment, Bavinck also argues that scientific neutrality is impossible.[30] In fact, science "cannot and may not say in advance what revelation is and which facts conform to that definition" because it would thereby exceed its own jurisdiction.[31]

Although this is a slight deviation, it is important to clarify that Bavinck finds the use of the terms "supernatural" revelation and "natural" revelation unhelpful, since he considers all revelation, including that in nature, to be supernatural—and conversely, not everything that belongs to the area of special grace is supernatural.[32] As such, since the distinction between natural and supernatural revelation is not identical with that between general and special revelation, Bavinck concludes that the latter distinction is preferrable to the former.[33]

In summary, Bavinck views special and general revelation as inseparably connected and interdependent, but gives epistemic priority to special revelation, which in turn should be collaborated and validated by the stuff of general revelation. Special revelation is primary, while general revelation is contingent upon the truthfulness of special revelation. When we apply Bavinck's primacy of revelation to ethics, we can deduce the following implications: (1) Just as physics is preceded by metaphysics, ethics then is preceded by a metaethics rooted in revelation. Normative ethics cannot be grounded in the empirical observation of collective or individual human behavior, *but must have as its metaphysical reference point a divine revelation of what humanity*

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[29] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 74.

[30] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:298-300.

[31] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:299.

[32] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:311.

[33] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:312.

should be like; (2) Just as scientific neutrality is impossible, ethical neutrality is impossible—in other words, ethics does not stem from an autonomous mind that is impervious to specific revelation. Rather, according to Bavinck, ethics stems from a religious mind that derives its content from a religious epistemology.

Bavinck's writing is permeated with the idea that ethics is preceded by dogmatics, which in turn is preceded by revelation—any system of ethics that ignores this is destined to epistemic futility. While such a system may produce a functional framework for virtue which actually achieves good social ends, it cannot be justified without revelation. Therefore, the Christian ethicist must understand that "the ideas and norms which *govern religious, ethical, and social life*, and appear in the self-consciousness and the thought of humanity, are the products of this revelation of God."[34] The consequences for failing to see this are dire: When revelation is ignored, this leads to a baseless theology, which then befuddles any system of normative ethics that derives from it. Bavinck wrote concerning his times that there was "an immense confusion prevailing in the efforts to determine the essence and concept of revelation."[35] The ramifications of this confusion had direct impact upon the "being" and "doing" of his society, as he observes in *Christian Worldview*, "Before all else, what strikes us in the modern age is the internal discord that consumes the self," which leads Bavinck to conclude, "There is a disharmony between our thinking and feeling, between our willing and acting."[36]

The implications of Bavinck's doctrine of Revelation for virtue ethics are simple but profound. If virtue ethics can be defined as an approach to normative ethics by

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[34] Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, 240 (emphasis mine).

[35] Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:295.

[36] Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, trans. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, James Perman Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2019), 22.

its emphasis on the virtues or character of the moral agent, then a Reformed understanding of virtue ethics that accounts for the doctrine of Revelation will look to Scripture to first define what the perfect moral agent is like, instead of merely listing an arbitrary and disembodied list of virtues without a clear point of reference.

For example, virtue ethics under Eudaimonism will ask, "What virtues must a human being possess for him and society to flourish?" whereas a Reformed virtue ethicist will ask, "What virtues should the *Image of God* have which leads to the glory and best representation of the LORD, which in turn flourish society?" Simply because Scripture defines human flourishing differently from the world, the teleological direction of virtue takes on a completely different course of examination when revelation is accounted for. It is only when Eudaimonistic virtue ethics acknowledges the primacy of specific revelation that it can assist the Christian in discovering virtues that promote true human flourishing.

Similarly, when the doctrine of Revelation is applied to Exemplarist virtue ethics—which encourages the moral agent to embody the virtues of someone that they admire as an exemplar—Reformed anthropology would argue that the exemplar himself is also subject to the noetic impact of the Fall and cannot be virtuous apart from special revelation. Even the fact that a fallen exemplar would illicit the admiration of others points to the Biblical fact that our affections are tainted; we cannot be entrusted with the simple task of even defining the exemplar of moral virtue. However, this is not to say that Reformed theology dictates that we discard the whole body of academic thought under Exemplarist virtue ethics due to the primacy of specific revelation. Once again, because general revelation is provisionally valuable when specific revelation is assumed, ethical paradigms such as Eudaimonistic and Exemplarist virtue ethics can be salvaged when its perimeters are set by special revelation. So indeed, for virtue ethics to flourish, revelation must inform dogmatics, and dogmatics must inform ethics.

CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: BEING BEFORE
DOING

At this point, it is worthwhile to retrace our steps. So far, we have established
that a reformed approach to virtue ethics must presuppose revelation before dogmatics,
and dogmatics before ethics. In assessing the validity of virtue ethics then, we must look
to divine revelation to consider (1) if humanity can indeed be virtuous; (2) who or what
has been revealed to be the archetypal virtuous being; (3) if there is a gap between
humanity's current state and the archetype; and (4) how this moral gap can be mended.
Hence, reformed virtue ethics is secondly inseparable from biblical anthropology to the
degree that it is consistent with special revelation.

Being: Recovering the Virtue of the Imago Dei

How does Bavinck contribute to a reformed understanding of anthropology?
Volume two, which coincides with the recently published Book III of Bavinck's
Reformed Ethics, is subtitled, "The Duties of the Christian Life." By itself, this title
would seem to lend itself to a deontological/duty-based approach to ethics rather than a
virtue-based approach. Throughout the book, Bavinck seems to assume that humanity is
capable of dutiful behavior and assigns biblical duties to him. In particular, Part A (chaps.
15-17) relate to our *duties* toward God; Part B (chaps. 18-20) delineates our *duty* to
ourselves; and Part C (chap. 21) deals with our *duties* to others. Indeed, Bavinck's
categorical sense of duty reveals the centrality of deontology to his ethical outlook.

However, what is critically important is that the two chapters prior to Part A

(chaps. 12-13) is titled, "Humanity after conversion."[1] Furthermore, in Books I and II in volume 1, Bavinck's titles are "Humanity before conversion" and "Converted Humanity" respectively. In other words, Bavinck prescribes different duties *depending on the nature and capacity of the moral agent*, which is consistent with how Bavinck structures the various components of his worldview. For him, revelation informs being (ontology), and being informs doing (ethics). Accordingly, what Scripture reveals about humanity will in turn allow us to determine the scope and nature of our ethical duties. On one hand, if God's revelation shows that we are beings that are incapable of moral thought or action, then any attempt to formulate and prescribe any system of ethics would be futile. On the other hand, if we are defined as moral agents who have the capacity to think and act morally, then ethical behavior becomes possible. In other words, *we must know who we are in other to know what we can and should do*. This shifts what could be an otherwise predominantly deontological conversation into the realm of virtue ethics.

Why is this significant? Servais Pinckaers argues that Protestantism replaced virtue ethics with an ethic of law: "What separated Protestantism from the theological tradition preceding it was, first, the refusal to integrate human virtues within the heart of Christian morality through acceptance and assimilation."[2] I argue that Bavinck's approach sharply contrasts with the above view: His overall ethical framework is based upon virtue which only crystalizes into a functional deontological framework. Hence the deontological approach of Book III is meant to characterize only the duties *that can only be carried out by the human being who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit*. Bavinck himself notes the futility of flipping this relationship around into a deontology-first approach when he states that Kant "changed the entirety of ethics into lawful fulfillment

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[1] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 2, *The Duties of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 1-89.

[2] Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

of duty" but in doing so, "failed to consider that we are unable to do this because of the radical evil within us, and that the law alone can never make us moral."[3] For Bavinck, biblical ethics could not be divorced from the notion of personality as revealed in biblical anthropology; rather, any notion of duty or rules must fully take into account what is possible or impossible given God's revelation of humanity's state.

Without an accurate assessment of humanity's moral nature based upon God's revelation, the moral landscape is utterly disjointed and any notion of duty or utilitarianism lacks teleological direction. Alasdair MacIntyre describes a similar phenomenon in the first chapter of *After Virtue*, wherein he hypothetically proposes a world wherein morality has been fragmented and lost its integral substance, but the language and appearances of morality still persist:

> What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality.[4]

In such a world, any recourse to moral duty, virtue, or consequentialism is a merely *the imposition of a subjective moral impulse that has lost its reference point*—a phenomenon that MacIntyre refers to as Emotivism. Bavinck would characterize this as the *prima facie* state of morality for post-Fall and pre-conversion humanity, for how can fallen moral agents driven by emotivism think and act ethically? While a strict Barthian or Van Tillian ethicist would simply conclude that unconverted moral agents are unable to act ethically, Bavinck suggests that our moral-rational nature has remained, even in in the state of sin, in the form of our conscience.[5] In this scenario, "God now binds those

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[3] Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics,* 5

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 2.

[5] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:216.

who are fleeing from him, in their conscience, to the law, still written in their hearts."[6]
Bavinck doesn't abandon the ethical pursuits of post-fall humanity to vanity, but
attributes a different tier of ethical normativity to them.

This could have been the end of the inquiry for pre-conversion ethics, but
Bavinck goes further to categorize these laws in a tripartite distinction as ceremonial,
judicial, and forensic/moral law which "*controls* the entire person, inwardly and
outwardly."[7] However, this law cannot *change* our inner state and our relationship with
God, and therefore has the following three limited functions in our ethical behavior: The
civil use of the law tames and restrains the raging animal within people; the *pedagogic* or
convicting use convicts us of sin, judgment, and punishment; and the *teaching* use
amongst believers instructs and directs all internal and external moral actions.[8]

Why would Bavinck task fallen moral agents with the observation of these
rules which bind upon the conscience? This is due, once again, to his biblical
anthropology of the *Imago Dei*. In his succinct essay on biblical anthropology titled, *The
Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man*,[9] Bavinck traces the nature of the image of God
throughout Scripture to conclude, even for post-Fall humanity, that "Scripture not only
calls fallen men the image of God, but it keeps on regarding and dealing with him as such
throughout. It constantly looks upon man as a reasonable, moral being who is responsible
to God for all his thoughts and deeds and words and is bound to his service."[10] One
noteworthy element of Bavinck's anthropology that we discover here is that post-Fall
humanity is *duty-bound to God's moral law, but is incapable of fulfilling it due to sin*.

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[6] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:217.

[7] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:224 (emphasis mine).

[8] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:227-28.

[9] Herman Bavinck, "The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man" in *Selected Works of Herman Bavinck*, ed. John Hendryx (Portland: Monergism Books, 2015).

[10] Bavinck, "The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man," 31.

The difficulty of a purely deontological approach to ethics, therefore, is that the uprightness and goodness of humanity's *duty* does not actually empower the moral agent tasked with the duty to complete it. Bavinck notes the irony of our moral predicament: "Following the light of conscience and law, human beings are able to achieve a moral walk, some civic righteousness. But even with all that, humans remain dead in a spiritual sense."[11] The crux of Bavinck's argument is less that ethical behavior is impossible for post-fall humanity, but rather that post-fall humanity's ethical behavior lacks an epistemological/axiological foundation. So he continues his inquiry into a divinely-revealed foundation for ethical behavior, "There is however, a life other than the moral one: a spiritual life."[12] This is why Bavinck starts the first chapter of Book two, "Life in the Spirit," by stating, "In this chapter, we move from the morality of sinful people who follow the guidance of natural law to those who have been renewed by the Spirit of Christ."[13]

It is worth noting that in every aspect, Bavinck's framework of ethics faithfully reflects the *Ordo Salutis* of Reformed theology: Human beings were created as the image of God with functioning moral compasses and moral relationships. However, the Fall leading to the total depravity of humanity made virtuous living impossible in our current state. This is overcome by the election of God's people in Christ, who through work of Jesus Christ are regenerated by the Holy Spirit, forgiven, and become a new creation that is restored to the Image of God—only then humanity is capable of virtuous living which is characterized by certain duties toward God, self, and others. John Bolt emphasizes, "Our human capacity for responsible moral agency is structured into our very nature as

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[11] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:240.

[12] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:241.

[13] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:239.

image-bearers of God and the ability to tell what is right from what is wrong."[14]

Therefore, in Bavinck's ethical worldview, biblical anthropology determines ethical prescription. In other words, *how God's revelation defines humanity is primary and prior to what humanity is charged to do*. If Scripture says that we are sinners who cannot live a morally perfect life because of the depravity within us, then a list of rules and duties (even those that derive from God's revelation) can only derive from a tainted conscience, serve to emphasize our inability to live the moral life, and point to the need for divine help—just as the Mosaic law & sacrificial system functioned in the Old Testament. However, if God's Revelation in Scripture proclaims that the fallen Imago Dei can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and now has the full capacity to fulfill the intent and spirit of the law in Christ—as Bavinck assumes of "volume 2-humanity"— then our duties serve more as a *descriptive* manual of what this new creature is capable of. In other words, Bavinck's emphasis on the doctrine of revelation and the doctrine of man function not to bifurcate virtue and deontology, but to merge them.

As such, in a robust Reformed framework of ethics that is faithful to the doctrine of Revelation, deontological ethics (the duties of the moral agent) assumes virtue ethics (the character of the moral agent). Hence, any system of ethics that claims Reformed theological underpinnings should first consider the necessity of regeneration and conversion of the moral agent who is mandated to live ethically, since godly duties can only be fulfilled by a virtuous creature that is (1) made in the Image of God (2) whose being has been regenerated and redeemed from their depravity by sheer grace (3) and having experienced the salvation of Jesus Christ, now desires to live in surrender to the Holy Spirit (4) in the pursuit of sanctification and obedience to God's will expressed in divine duties. So rather than developing a system of ethics surrounding norms and rules, Bavinck's moral vision and his hope for humanity ultimately requires a human

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[14] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:xiv.

being whose "body and soul… will be reunited again in the final resurrection because it is based upon Christ's gracious work of re-creation."[15]

Traditional virtue ethics fall short as well without this Reformed perspective because it merely assumes that mastery over certain virtues would lead to, *inter alia*, a eudaimonistic life while failing to ask questions such as whether human welfare itself is something to aspire to, or whether such living is even possible by fallen human beings. Bavinck demonstrates how his biblical anthropology leads him to ponder the deficiency of traditional virtue ethics in the following argument:

> If, on the one hand, after his fall and disobedience, man continues to be called the image and offspring of God, and, on the other hand, those virtues by which he especially resembles God have been lost through sin and can only be restored again in the fellowship with Christ, *then these two propositions are compatible with each other only if the image of God comprises something more than the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.*[16]

Similarly, Kantian deontology without a Reformed foundation also fails to justify why at least some acts are morally obligatory regardless of the consequences for human welfare, since it is unable to answer whether the moral agent would know which duty to uphold in a conflict of duties scenario. Consequentialist ethics presumed that the collective happiness of all people would approximate the highest "good" of the society, when it fails to ask if the things that make us happy are inherently good or not. All of these approaches mistakenly accept human nature—our fallen conscience, our moral epistemology, our aesthetical values and affections, our teleological commitments—as *prima facie* fixed parameters within which ethical behavior must occur. So at the risk of sounding repetitive, *a Reformed system of ethics should account for biblical anthropology based on God's self-revelation* in order to assess whether we have the capacity to utilize all human moral faculties to be and do good.

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[15] Thiago Machado Silva, "Bavinck's Anthropology on Human Nature and the Resurrection of the Body" *Stromata* 58, no. 1 (2016): 28.

[16] Bavinck, "The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man," 32 (emphasis mine).

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to re-examine Vos's position that there exists "a common conviction that Protestants have no place or only a limited place for the virtues because of the centrality of the doctrine of salvation."[17] Does Bavinck's ethical framework—that the divine revelation of humanity's condition can alone be the foundation for virtuous living—only serve to reinforce Vos's concern? No. In fact, if Bavinck's understanding of Biblical anthropology and salvation is correct—that a saved person can have a basis to think ethically and utilize what has been revealed in nature about ethical behavior—then Reformed ethicists should eagerly delve into the study of virtue because the doctrine of salvation makes virtuous living possible; and according to the doctrine of sanctification, virtue should even be a necessary outgrowth of a regenerated heart. This approach is also aligned with the classical reformed position prior to 20th century Barthian dialectical theology and the neo-Calvinists, namely that the doctrine of justification is indeed prior to virtue, *but not opposed to it*.[18] The Reformation's understanding of salvation ensures that being (virtuous) comes before doing (virtuous deeds).

Doing: The Duties of the Renewed Imago Dei

We now continue with our inquiry: Presuming, in accordance with biblical anthropology, that the fallen moral agent has become regenerated and restored unto the image of God and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, what does virtuous living actually look like? Bavinck's anthropology holds that a virtuous life culminates in the obedience of God's law, for "man can fulfill this calling over against the earth only if he does not

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[17] Pieter Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contribution to Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2015): 203.

[18] Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues," 203. Vos recalls how sixteenth-century Reformed theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli considered virtue to be central and compatible with grace; John Owen utilized a metaphysics of goodness which presumed the sanctification of the believer; and Jonathan Edwards wrote extensively on the true nature of virtue.

break the bond of connection which unites him with heaven, only if he continues to believe God at His word and to obey His commandment."[19] In particular, Bavinck held that the hermeneutical key to understanding the truly virtuous life of the *Imago Dei* can be found in the Ten Commandments.[20] This notion of virtuous living *via* an ethic of Divine Command is more extensively laid out in volume 2 of *Reformed Ethics* as the moral duties of converted humanity, namely (1) a duty toward God expressed in the first four commands (chaps. 15-17), (2) a duty toward others expressed in the latter six commands (chap. 21), and (3) a duty toward self (chaps. 18-20).[21]

For the purposes of this paper, I will not further engage with the specifics of each duty and their implications on ethics since this layout is a rather conventional expression of a deontological ethic of Divine duty. Rather, my analysis focuses on how Bavinck was able to mesh together virtue and duty, being and doing, Christ and Law in his ethical framework in support of my thesis that the Reformed tradition need not withdraw from engaging in the dialogue on virtue.

What justifies the shifts in Bavinck's ethical paradigm which finds its starting point in revelation, proceeds to biblical anthropology, and then concludes in deontology? To summarize Bavinck's ethical framework, because divine revelation reveals that when a moral agent is indwelt by the Spirit he becomes a new moral agent, he is first axiologically justified by having the right affections, desires, and moral impulses because he is indwelled by Jesus and has become capable of virtuous desiring, thinking, and living. Second, because the above reality has taken place, he is now epistemologically justified in relying upon his natural faculties to apply, *inter alia*, Eudaimonistic,

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[19] Bavinck, "The Origin, Essence, and Purpose of Man," 8.

[20] 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: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 314.

[21] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 2, Table of Contents.

consequentialist, or deontological ethics because the Spirit of Jesus within him will

gradually overcome the noetic impact of the fall and permits him to build a model of

ethical judgment and behavior upon a regenerated mind. Therefore, he is both

axiologically and epistemically justified in applying consequentialist or deontological

approaches in accordance with his reborn, virtuous character. Bavinck merely chose the

latter option as the culmination of his ethical praxis, but not because it was the only

ethical system that he felt Scripture supported. Joustra refers to Bavinck's 1918 essay on

the Imitation of Christ to echo the above conclusion:

> 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.[22]

The structure of *Reformed Ethics* proposes that only *being* a virtuous person (a

regenerated human that is capable of virtue) can result in the *doing* of his moral duties

(deontology). In doing so, Bavinck implies that virtue ethics is meant to supplement and

justify the need for moral duties rather than replacing it. Inasmuch that moral duties are

founded upon virtuous character, then virtue and duty do not need to be mutually

exclusive, but rather complement the other.

Built within Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* are two features of reformed virtue

ethics which sets it apart, I argue for the better, from the neo-Calvinist and Barthian

dialectics of the twentieth-century due to Bavinck's sense of harmony between being and

doing. The first appeal of his brand of reformed virtue ethics is that it (1) emphasizes

being as prior but not opposed to doing (*per* virtue), and yet (2) envisions a robust duty-

based ethic (*per* deontology), (3) while allowing a person to utilize natural revelation to

engage in a consequentialist analysis of any moral decision (*per* consequentialism) (4)

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[22] Jessica Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Ethics," *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 315.

because an epistemological and axiological foundation exists in a person whose *sensus divinitatis* is regenerated by the Holy Spirit and thus has access to true knowledge and the right desires to utilize such knowledge (*per* Scripture).

Second, whereas traditional virtue ethics is only able to produce an arbitrary list of virtues without an epistemological point of reference, a reformed perspective of virtue ethics looks to the indwelling of Christ Himself to justify virtue and delineate any prescriptive duties that are characteristic of such a virtuous person. To Bavinck, ethics is tied to the very person of Christ by way of what Jessica Joustra characterizes as a twofold approach to Christlikeness: "[U]nion with Christ, and as a consequence of one's union with Christ, law-shaped imitation of Christ's virtues."[23] But the personhood of Christ has an even more expansive impact on all ethical frameworks: Because Christ *is* (the fulness of the Image of God), there is virtue. Because Christ *does* (lawful obedience to the law), there is deontology. Because Christ *accomplished* (the redemption of mankind and the restoration of creation), there is a teleological standard by which all ethical outcomes are measured. *The locus of the Christian ethical ideal is not found in a paradigm or formula, but in the very person of Christ*. Which takes us to third next pillar of a reformed understanding of virtue ethics: The imitation of Christ.

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[23] Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 314.

CHAPTER 5

CHRISTOLOGY: IMITATIO INCARNATUS CHRISTI
AS VIRTUE

In order to propose the imitation of Christ as a sustainable Christian virtue
ethic that is aligned with the Reformation, it is useful to address the following questions:
(1) does the relationship between Christ and the Law lean more toward a deontological
ethic or a virtue ethic for Bavinck?; and (2) if the imitation of Christ is a sustainable
Christian ethic, then how did Bavinck intend for it to be applied to life?

The prior question is important because there is an actual and perceived
deficiency in the reformed tradition relating not just to the study of virtue, but specifically
in the study of Christoform ethics because the Reformation has predominantly
emphasized duty over virtue as an ethical outlook. Reformed philosopher James K.A.
Smith notes: "in the Reformed tradition, we also speak more about creation than we do
cross, and we speak more about law than we do Jesus."[1] Bavinck, on the other hand,
robustly champions both virtue (*via* the imitation of Christ), and duty (*via* the
Decalogue), giving reformed ethicists the legitimacy to consider the riches of the
literature surrounding virtue ethics in other traditions. Given the stakes, we must have the
integrity to examine if the connection holds.

The latter question is important because of the lack of orthopraxy in the
application of virtue to daily life. In this light, Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* empowers the
ethicist to extract a robust and consistent ethic out of the imitation of Christ because

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[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-anabaptistreformed-dialogue-continuing-our-
conversation-with-richard-mouw/.

Bavinck takes a reformed perspective to critique the previous ways in which the imitation of Christ was practiced throughout church history, and yet acknowledges their practical significance. In other words, Bavinck's reformed understanding of the imitation of Christ is distinctive enough to be distinguished from the church's historical practice of it as a virtue ethic, and yet salvages enough of it for there to be continuity and applicability to the reformed tradition. So after answering these two questions, I will assess how Bavinck's brand of the imitation of Christ encourages Reformed ethicists today to not shy away from the robust study and application of virtue, but confidently delve into it.

Christ and the Law

Kantian deontology asks the question, "What acts *ought* we perform?" His categorical imperative would dictate that all moral norms ought to apply to every person universally instead of depending on the circumstance or outcome of the moral decision; hence, contrary to the central tenet of virtue ethics, deontology values the "rightness" of the act above its "goodness." In the realm of deontology, moral duties therefore arise from objective normativity rather than from internal identity. Traditionally, this has paired well with the Reformed tradition's emphasis on creation, covenant, and law.[2]

However, as Joustra notes, Bavinck manages to "pair the imitation of Christ with a traditional Reformed emphasis on the law."[3] In doing so, I believe Bavinck provides another biblical segue between virtue ethics and deontology in his theology of *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi*.[4] Herein, the normativity of Christ's actions arises from

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[2] See Jessica Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Ethics," *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 311-30.

[3] Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 311.

[4] See Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I (1885/86)," in *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the* Imitation Christi, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2013). Bavinck provides insight into his understanding of the imitation of Christ in a series of articles titled *De navolging van Christus* in *De Vrije Kerk* in 1885 and 1886, then later in 1918 in an essay on the same topic, and finally in his *Reformed Ethics*.

Christ's divine identity, demonstrating that virtue and deontology are not opposed. The only question is, "What does Christ do to the law that allows for Bavinck to consider the imitation of Christ, (extrapolated in volume 1 of Reformed Ethics) as compatible with the duty-centered ethic of the Decalogue in volume 2?"

In particular, Bolt gives voice to the potential concern of virtue ethicists who observe Bavinck's shift to the notion of duty in the Deacalogue: "In fact, any who have turned to virtue and character ethics have done so because they regard the divine command ethical traditions that have traditionally schooled Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians in their discipleship to have failed."[5] Bolt gives the example of John Howard Yoder who goes so far as to bifurcate Christ (kingdom ethics) and the Law (ethics of Sinai supplemented by natural law), wherein Christlike virtue and Creation-based duty cannot coexist: "If there had been no Jesus, our desire or capacity to be good might be defective. But what God wills, what he asks of the person who seeks to please him, would be just the same if there're had been no Jesus."[6]

However, Bolt concludes that Bavinck denies this dualistic understanding of Christ and Law since he recognized that "duties are misconstrued *if they are seen only in an impersonal, abstract, Kantian, deontological sense*. The duties required of us are *personal*; they are duties toward God and bear a profoundly religious character."[7] Specifically, Bavinck looks to Trinitarian theology to maintain that a Christoform ethic necessarily presumes that Jesus really is the second person of the Holy Trinity whom participated in "the moral order of creation brought into being by the Father, through the Son, and in the Spirit."[8] Indeed, Jesus is the Word incarnate; the same decrees that the

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[5] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:x.

[6] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:x.

[7] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:xi (emphases mine).

[8] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:xiv.

Father issued from His mouth, Jesus *became*. Furthermore, in his earthly ministry, Jesus does and says nothing to the effect of abolishing the law. Rather, He gives depth to it, perfects it, and ultimately fulfills it. Hence, observing the duties that arise from the Father's moral decrees and imitating the *Son's life of perfect obedience to those decrees* are perfectly harmonious: Both demonstrate that the ideal ethic fulfills Christocentric virtue and the deontological demands of the Law. The imitation of Christ, in word and deed, fully conforms to God's law because Christ followed the law.[9]

In fact, for Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is central to an ethical framework that alone can sustain a deontological approach. Bolt observes that "[t]he heart of Bavinck's understanding of the Christian life in volume 1 is found in chapter 9 with its emphasis on union with Christ and the imitation of Christ."[10] Hence, the duties that Bavinck discusses in volume 2 (toward God, man, and self) are merely logical extrapolations from his central theme of Christlikeness to the degree that Christ models the "virtues and obligations which conform to God's law."[11] To our great relief, in Bavinck's approach, we discover that Christ and Law, virtue and deontology are not glued together by wishful sentiment, but chiseled out of the same Word of God. No longer does the ethicist need to pledge exclusive loyalty to the reformed platform's divine decree ethics to be considered reformed—rather, he can holistically embrace both duty and character because they are weaved together by the self-revelation of the Triune God.

The Reformed Practice of *Imitation Christi*

Why does this matter so much? Bavinck was deeply grieved at those who "constantly shouted 'Reformed, Reformed,' while their life and conduct stood in sharp

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[9] Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I," 400.

[10] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 2, *The Duties of the Christian Life*, ed. John Bolt, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), ix.

[11] Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I," 400.

contrast to basic Christian morality."[12] This phenomenon of disjointedness between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, which is still very much alive today in the reformed camp, can once again be traced back to Vos's initial observation that due to the radical centrality of salvation to the reformed tradition and the Barthian dialectic of the twentieth century, the neo-Calvinists have failed to extensively develop an *applied ethic for its times* while the Catholic tradition has basically occupied the literature on virtue.[13]

So how *should* the imitation of Christ be practiced? Bavinck lays out the following factors to delineate the contours of a reformed practice of the imitation of Christ: (1) the imitation of Christ consists in literally following Jesus, accompanying him on his travels throughout Palestine; (2) the imitation of Christ, therefore, *is a spiritual-life relationship with Jesus*; (3) precisely because the imitation of Christ is a spiritual communion, Jesus demands that we forsake everything for his sake; (4) the heart of imitation consists of a spiritual, believing communion with Christ, in trusting him, in obeying him; (5) at the same time, spiritual communion as such does not fully capture what is involved in the imitation of Christ but needs to be qualified, described more narrowly, including the concept of self-denial and cross-bearing; (6) following Jesus does have a literal significance in that it already presupposes the mystical union with Christ.[14] Joustra goes further to condense the above framework in tripartite fashion, wherein (1) Christ must be known as savior; (2) Christ's life is not to be slavishly followed, but holistically appreciated; and (3) Imitation of Christ is grounded in the moral law that Christ Himself fulfills.[15]

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[12] John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 17.

[13] Pieter Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contribution to Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 28 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 201-12.

[14] Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I," 321-23.

[15] Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 314.

Bavinck then traces the practice of *Imitatio Christi* throughout early church history, wherein he admits that while "Protestants usually understand this imitation in terms of various virtues such as obedience to God, love, humility, goodness, uprightness, suffering, and holiness… Not a great deal is said about the imitation of Christ because people sought the norm for the Christian life in the law of the Ten Commandments and not in the person of Christ."[16] To him, the Protestant understanding of the imitation of Christ is either overly practical in its understanding of self-denial and cross-bearing, or overly mystical when it applies only to a spiritual-symbolical union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

To reach this conclusion, Bavinck goes back to identify three popular pre-Protestant typologies found in the imitation of Christ—Christ as the martyr, the monk, the mystic. While they are praiseworthy and salvageable, Bavinck argues that they do not encapsulate a fully biblical picture of imitation.[17] The problem with pigeonholing Christian ethics solely into an ethic of martyrdom, for example, was that the Christian life would only be consummated in suffering and dying. *Contra* Christ the Monk, the earthly and bodily life is not to be seen as purely worthless; otherwise the ideal Christian ethic would need to be disembodied of all physical practicability, and the earthly would need to be driven out as through flagellation. Similarly, the mystical tradition of the imitation of Christ also served to draw people away from the world unto a higher vision of Christ, deeper contemplation, and resulting in the subjectification of Christ's life.[18]

In his criticism of mysticism, Bavinck also focuses on Thomas a Kempis's iteration of *Imitatio Christi* in his famous book of the same title, "The Imitation of Christ." His framework of mysticism and asceticism, when infused into the imitation of

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[16] Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 335.

[17] Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I," 372-96; Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:326-34.

[18] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:326-34.

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Christ, led to a disdain for the natural world as well as the human duties born of it.

Bavinck notes, "It's main theme is asceticism, flight from the world, the vanity of all things."[19] Indeed, Chapter 1 of Kempis's book is aptly titled, "On the Imitation of Christ, and of the contempt of the world and all its vanities," and therein is a continuing theme in the mystical sense that Christ is so transcendent and otherworldly that the imitation of Christ has no overlap with worldly philosophy, theology, or other manmade constructs. Kempis's framework cannot merge the study of virtue with the imitation of Christ, but bifurcates it.

However, Bavinck does offer a more reaffirming observation when Kempis shifts his tone and attention to the need to imitate Christ's humility and tenderness—in that one instance when Kempis focuses on ethical practicality and not asceticism, Bavinck remarks, "This is the genuine imitation of Christ."[20] The distinctness of Bavinck's concept of the imitation of Christ arises from his efforts to forge clear connections between reformed ethics and the incarnate life of Christ *in the natural world*: "Salvation does not take us out of creation or elevate us above it, but helps restore creation's brokenness. In theological terms, grace opposes sin, not nature; grace does not abolish nature but restores it."[21] The imitation of Christ very much involves the imitation of Jesus's incarnate ethical behavior because "Christ is also our example and ideal. His life is the shape, the model, that our spiritual life must assume and toward which it must grow…. The result is an ethic rooted in divine love that followers of Jesus must emulate, an ethic of Christian identity and character." [22]

Hence, a better phrase to characterize Bavinck's approach to the imitation of

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[19] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:334.

[20] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:334.

[21] John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 8.

[22] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:317.

Christ is *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi*—the imitation of the incarnate Christ. This emphasis on incarnation overcomes the failures of other fragmented attempts to implement the imitation of Christ based on a narrow, thematic reading of his life. For example, a pure rationalist reading of the life of Christ fails to see how the work of Christ remedied the irreparably fallen situation of man—a condition to which the natural mind by itself is blind to apart from Christ's incarnated ministry. Bavinck bluntly states, "Those who do not know the need of Christ as a mediator and reconciler of sin, do not need his moral example either."[23] Contrary to a mystical interpretation which no longer views Christ as a reconciler with God while overemphasizing him as an "example of the mystical union with God,"[24] the notion of *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi* also demystifies Christ so that the relationship between God and man are not just immediate, but also facilitated by the means of grace. While the monks who fixate upon Christ's example of withdrawing from the world, the incarnate ministry of Christ demonstrates that His followers interacted robustly with the geo-political and cultural hotspots of their world: The synagogue and the marketplace, the desolate wilderness or the bustling parties held by rich rulers. And whereas the martyrs myopically see suffering as the very goal of the imitation of Christ, the study of the incarnate life of Christ reminds us that suffering is merely a consequence obeying God in a fallen world, and not the goal in itself.

In *Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ*, Dirk Van Keulen provides a helpful two-part summary of Bavinck's approach to the imitation of Christ: (1) Imitation of Christ demands the recognition of Christ as a reconciler and mediator.[25] Van Keulen continues to state that "this recognition is a 'condition for the imitation'… this implies

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[23] Bavinck, "De navolging van Christus," *De Vrije Kerk*, 12 (1886): 325.

[24] Bavinck, "De navolging van Christus," 323.

[25] Dirk Van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, no.1 (Spring 2011): 85.

that Jesus Christ can only be an example to those who are born again."[26] (2) Imitation of Christ means that Christ must be reflected in our *inner being* (the passive side of sanctification), but also be shaped in conformity with Christ in our *outer appearance* (the active side of sanctification).[27]

      We must remember that the reformed doctrine of salvation liberates the believer from sin, *but not from nature*. Rather, salvation binds him to a life that was designed to embody the perfect obedience of Jesus who fulfilled the Law in his earthly ministry. Or according to Bavinck, "grace does not abolish nature, but affirms and restores it."[28] Therefore, and only therefore, every body of literature and ethical paradigm which can accurately encapsulate any aspect of Jesus's incarnate life is worthy of study and integration into the Reformed virtue ethic, including the traditions of Jesus as martyr, monk, mystic, or any other focal point which serves to spotlight the life of Jesus. How does this impact the believer's ethical framework? Bolt boldly pronounces the holistic ramifications of *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi* in the believer's life: "Thanks to Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, the world has changed and so has our moral conduct."[29]

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[26] Dirk Van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ," 85

[27] Dirk Van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ," 85

[28] Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (1989): 62.

[29] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:xvi.

CHAPTER 6

KINGDOM OF GOD: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL
FULFILLMENT OF VIRTUE

The fourth and final pillar of Bavinck's ethical system is the eschatological

consummation of the highest good in the kingdom of God. Traditionally, a number of

stances have risen based on a particular understanding of the Kingdom of God: The

Catholic perspective identifies the kingdom of God with the church, which explains

Rome's triumphalist social outlook until the Second Vatican Council.[1] More recently, the

same kingdom narrative-frame has been utilized by progressive evangelicals Glen

Stassen and David Gushee to promote moral action based on teachings in the life of

Jesus.[2] A liberationist iteration of kingdom ethics was also advocated by Gustavo

Gutierrez's political eschatology.[3] Once again, in this marketplace of ethical dialogue, we

see a hesitation of Reformed ethicists to engage with this theme since the kingdom of

God is less of an ethical code than a metaphysical reality which has ethical implications

which reformed ethicists are reluctant to spell out less they dilute the fullness of the

coming eschaton.[4]

However, the kingdom of God is indeed so pregnant with practical ethical

ramifications that reformed ethicists would be remiss not to utilize its riches. For

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[1] Victor Figueroa-Villarreal, "Gustavo Guttierez's Understanding of the Kingdom of God in Light of the Second Vatican Council," *Dissertations* (Andrews University, 1999), 49. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1048&context=dissertations.

[2] David Gushee and Glen Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003).

[3] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans., ed., Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

[4] See the treatment of the Kingdom of God theme in various ethical approaches in D. A. Carson, "Kingdom, Ethics, and Individual Salvation," *Themelios* 38, no. 2 (2013): 197-201.

example, when Herman Ridderbos observes the Sermon on the Mount as a glimpse into

the kingdom of God, he states:

> There is no contradiction, no difference of level, between Matthew 5 and Romans
> 13. Kingdom of God does not mean the abolition of God's previous ordinations for
> the natural and social life…. On the contrary, social life, political order,
> international justice as such belong just as well to the righteousness in all sectors of
> life and that they have to do that in the light of the whole revelation of God in which
> the Sermon on the Mount refers.[5]

It seems that the potential for a reformed praxis that is correctly founded on the

ontological kingdom of God comes from its essence as a point of convergence wherein

heaven and earth, the now and then, and the physical and spiritual merge.[6] Indeed, the

kingdom was a major focal point of Bavinck's ethical worldview for this specific reason;

the kingdom was indeed a spiritual existence, but it was also a physical reality that

changed everything about how we live today. He makes this clear in his essay, "The

Kingdom of God, the Highest Good,"[7] noting how the various ethical systems fall short

of becoming the singular Christian ethic unless it incorporates a practical-eschatological

understanding of God's kingdom:

> Simply knowing what kind of persons we must be is inadequate…, for realizing the
> moral good—the description of which is supplied by the doctrine of virtues. Nor is
> it sufficient to know the duties or laws according to which we must pursue that
> moral good. We also need to understand those moral goods themselves according to
> their nature and essence, in their unity and interconnectedness, in order to realize
> them within and around us.[8]

Bavinck particularly points to a pendulum occurring between two paradigms,

both of which failed to explain the interrelationship between earthly and heavenly goods.

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[5] Herman N. Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 42.

[6] See Lane G. Tipton, *Resurrection & Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008) for a comparative treatment of the kingdom of God theme in the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions.

[7] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," *The Bavinck Review* vol. 2 (2011), 133-70.

[8] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 133-34.

First, "People usually hesitated to include earthly goods in the realm of the moral, thereby running the risk of viewing the moral good only spiritualistically."[9] When the spiritual and heavenly bliss of the future failed to materialize, the ethical pendulum rapidly swung toward the other direction where people "have been trying to recover their loss by bathing in the delights of the moment…, they turned to the temporal and the visible for what they could give!"[10] The resulting deficiency in ethics was that first, "the highest good was viewed variously as being either individualistic or communistic, either exclusively sensual or abstractly spiritual,"[11] and second, that consequentially "none of the ancients got beyond a morality of utility and calculation."[12]

The inadequacy of both paradigms to connect the material and spiritual, the "here and now" versus the "there and then," lead Bavinck to arrive at the "already but not yet" of the kingdom of God as the highest good. It is truer today more than ever that "[t]he notion of a Kingdom of God that fosters the development of both individual and community, that is both the content and the goal of world history, encompassing the whole earth and all nations, such an idea arose in neither head nor heart of any of the noblest of the pagans."[13] In fact, I argue that what Bavinck observed as a pendulum swing between two different paradigms of ethical behavior, we now observe occurring simultaneously in multiple conflicting ethical positions, leading to the previously mentioned distortion of epistemology and ethical behavior encapsulated in Emotivism. Hence, Bavinck's understanding of the kingdom of God as the unifying paradigm to explain ethical behavior is even more relevant and urgently needed today.

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[9] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 134.

[10] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 134.

[11] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 135.

[12] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 136.

[13] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 136.

The Unifying Essence of the Kingdom of God

So how in particular does Bavinck's notion of kingdom ethics remedy the inadequacies of the so-called pagan ethical approaches? Bavinck begins by defining the essence of Kingdom ethics as a unifying reality: "The Kingdom of God as the highest good consists in the unity, the inclusion, the totality of all moral goods, or earthly and heavenly, spiritual and physical, eternal and temporal goods."[14] While sin moves from moral unity to atomism, when the Kingdom of God arrives, all moral good converges into divine being. However, Bavinck also realizes that "[h]ere on earth, all those goods are not yet one; here, holiness and redemption, virtue and happiness, spiritual and physical goods do not yet coincide."[15] But the kingdom of God is *not necessarily hostile to all these goods, even though it recognizes its temporary separation due to the reality of sin in the world*. In pointing to this "already but not yet" aspect of the kingdom, Bavinck encourages the Reformed ethicist to understand that the natural and supernatural, specific and general revelation, and earthly and heavenly goods are separated *not because they are morally incompatible*, but because sin has not yet been eradicated. As such, they need not shy away from the pursuit of virtue or duty, but rather recognize that these are partial fragments of the holistic and highest good that will be brought about in God's kingdom.

The kingdom reunification of these elements will also take place in the *person*. Bavinck argues that in the kingdom of God, a person may fully be a person. While currently "understanding and heart, consciousness and will, inclination and power, feeling and imagination, flesh and spirit, these are all opposed to each other at the moment, and they compete with each other for primacy,"[16] in the kingdom of God, these will be brought into unity through the righteousness of God Himself, "arranged in perfect

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[14] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 141.

[15] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 141.

[16] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 143.

order around the personality at its center."[17]

How does this unifying aspect of God's kingdom inform the study of Reformed virtue? First, Bavinck's vision of the eschatological kingdom man shows us the centrality of virtue in biblical anthropology: personality becomes the locus and origin of virtue which in turn manifests in deontological duty, for "[e]verything moves outward from the center of the personality and returns there."[18] In fact, the kingdom of God is essentially "a kingdom of free personalities where each personality has reached its full development."[19] Without personhood, there is no kingdom, and no need for ethics. For those that see duty as the essence of Reformed ethics, the centrality of personhood in Bavinck's kingdom ethics demonstrates that duty is valid only to the degree that it assumes a moral relationship amongst personalities, even in one's duty toward self.

Second, implied in the above observation is that the kingdom of God provides the study of virtue with a much-needed teleology, similar to what we find in utilitarianist or consequentialist ethics. Eudaimonist teleological theories tend to emphasize the cultivation of virtue or character in the moral agent, while Utilitarian-type theories argue that, in the case of hedonism, the final good consists in the greatest happiness for the most people; in the case of Darwinian evolutionary ethics, the survival of the human species; in the case of existentialism, freedom. However, the problem with such teleological ethical theories is that the intended *telos* is, as Bavinck points out above, fragmented and hence inadequate in capturing the holistic, highest good that encapsulates the sum of all moral goods. Because of the atomizing nature of the Fall, the eschatological moral vision of the above ethical theories are just fragmented shadows of the highest good of God's kingdom. However, the unifying ethical paradigm of the

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[17] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 143.

[18] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 143.

[19] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 143.

kingdom of God is a holistic, comprehensive, and integral moral vision which "could never have grown in pagan soil."[20] In this side of eternity, the ethics of the kingdom of God is too good to be true—in it, flesh and spirit, being and doing, individuality and communality converge into the ultimate singularity: the very person of the Triune God.

Unity in Diversity of Personality in the Kingdom of God

It is worth asking this question: If indeed, as Bavinck states, that personality is the ultimate reality in the kingdom of God, what happens with the numerous personalities that inhabit the eschaton? Not only does all of metaphysical and moral realities merge in the kingdom of God, but Bavinck continues in his essay to argue that ultimately, individual and collective personalities converge, and yet do so in a manner which preserves each personality. In other words, there is unity in diversity of personality in the kingdom of God, "where communal life obtains its highest development and its purest manifestation."[21] The kingdom is a collective but harmonious entity "where the individual parts are built for each other and fit each other, bound together by the most intimate fellowship, dwelling together under one higher authority which forms the law of this entity."[22] Yet "individuality is not thereby destroyed because *it is not an imperfection* but that which supplies the essence of each person and distinguishes one from the other."[23] In the kingdom, individuality is no longer flawed by blind atomism, and community is no longer blemished by arbitrary uniformity.

What significance does this have for us, and how can we apply this to the praxis of reformed virtue ethics today? Traditionally, individuality and communality have been pitted against each other as mutually exclusive ethical ideals: either the individual is

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[20] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 135.

[21] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 143.

[22] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 144.

[23] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 144.

swallowed up in the interest of the collective, or the collective is sacrificed in the pursuit of individuality. However, Bavinck's understanding of the kingdom of God is as a singularity in which divine, individual, and collective personality are seen as synergetic and organically interwoven. Therefore, any virtue ethic that is colored by this understanding of the kingdom of God must, in practice, recognize the value of this "collective-singular" personality. Under this paradigm, the act of attributing Christian ethics to merely duties or their outcomes is but one of many attempts to describe the glorious ontological reality of eschatological personhood—like an artist hurriedly sketching out a grand but fleeting vision, knowing that its vividness cannot be captured by individual pencil strokes. But for Bavinck, the fullness of personality cannot be compromised wherever the kingdom of God touches reality. In fact, as much as Bavinck emphasized the unfixable nature of the fallen *Imago Dei* in pre-conversion humanity, his ethical vision of post-conversion humanity bursts with a desire to celebrate redeemed humanhood and personality:

> This is also the leading principle that now determines the nature of the expansion of the Kingdom of God. *What is genuinely human may never and nowhere be snuffed out or suppressed.* Always and everywhere the genuinely human must be made an organ and instrument of the form in which the divine exists. The Kingdom of God awaits that unity, which we behold in Christ in an entirely unique manner, in every domain of human living and striving, in order to make each thing real according to its nature.[24]

When this moral vision of the kingdom of true personality is carried to its logical conclusion, Bavinck extrapolates what happens to the individual in the second section of his essay, and then the community (i.e., family, state, church, culture) in the third section. For the individual, the top priority that the kingdom of God places upon the moral agent is in "making our personality the only cause of all our thinking and acting… to embed our entire personality in every deed, in every thought, in order to do nothing un-

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[24] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 147 (emphasis mine).

self-consciously and arbitrarily, but to do everything with full consciousness and will, freely and morally."[25] This statement is elaborately packed with implications for virtue ethicists, because under this teleological umbrella of personality, one's emotions, attitudes, affections, habits, and lifestyle— the real "stuff" of personhood—are all morally relevant.[26] In the kingdom of God, individual and collective virtue become paramount descriptions of the deepest metaphysical reality.

In particular, in section two, Bavinck expands on how the Kingdom impacts the individual by emphasizing the eternal significance of one's earthly calling and vocation because it is the "temporal form of our heavenly calling," and enables us to "form ourselves, therefore, with a view to developing our personality and preparing a pure instrument for it in our body and in all things earthly."[27] In this sense, what we do in this world matters, and it definitely does not contradict our heavenly calling, for our calling ultimately shapes the personality which will inhabit and operate in the kingdom. In this sense, any notion of Christian dualism which bifurcates heavenly and earthly calling is an oxymoron which dilutes the power that a reformed kingdom eschatology can have toward the individual's work ethic.

Applied to the level of community, Bavinck argues that the kingdom of God is the highest good for the whole of humanity. One of the objections to virtue ethics is that since virtue describes what human beings should be, rather than do, it is not helpful in prescribing what to do as a *situational, decision-making ethic* especially when other moral agents are involved. However, Bavinck's notion of the kingdom of God demonstrates that what is morally pertinent to the individual is also applicable to for the community as well, because true personality in the kingdom is a collective-singular

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[25] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 151.

[26] See J. J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

[27] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 153.

reality. Virtue is not exercised in a vacuum, but in an ecosystem of free personalities being built into the fullness of Christ. In this side of eternity, this ecosystem exists in three spheres of society: state, church, and culture; and rather than being a fourth and separate life sphere, the family is seen as the foundation and the model of these other three so-called "life spheres."[28]

The notion of the family as the underlying paradigm of all human relationships is crucial to Bavinck's application of kingdom ethics to society. He argues, "State, church, and culture constitute those life spheres that have achieved independence in terms of those elements already present to a smaller or larger degree in the family."[29] Bavinck then adopts a Kuyperian view of society, stating, "There is nothing human that cannot be called Christian"[30] in order to demonstrate that while the three different life spheres are distinct from each other, there is also a real continuity that comes from a different aspect of the kingdom of God being present in each realm. For example, the church exists as a separate community over against the state and culture, and "is not itself the Kingdom of God in its entirety, but the indispensable foundation of the Kingdom of God, the preeminent and the best instrument of the Kingdom of God, the earthly institution, the heart, the core, the living center of the Kingdom of God."[31]

The State has a different connection to the kingdom of God; it is, after the church, "the greatest and richest good on earth" since "[o]nly through the state is that community life required of human beings made possible wherein a person, for the first time, can develop his full personality."[32] The state, in its penultimate state before the

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[28] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 155-56.

[29] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 157.

[30] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 158.

[31] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 158-159.

[32] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 159.

kingdom, exists to secure the full unfolding of human personality; but at the same time, the state is not the highest good but finds its purpose and goal in the Kingdom of God as the highest good.[33] Bavinck sounds eerily prophetical of modern political affairs when he states, "Anyone who misunderstands this [relationship between State and God's Kingdom] *will eventually end up denying the church her noblest calling and instead value the state itself*, viewed as the creator of culture and caretaker of freedom and equality, as the initial realization of the Kingdom of God."[34] Herein, Bavinck provides another segue between Christian ethics and political behavior: *The activities of the State are useful for forming personalities that will occupy the coming kingdom.*

And finally, Bavinck goes to the outermost layer of our concentric life spheres to address culture, which he defines as "the communal calling of the human race to make the world its own and to shape it as the property and instrument of personality."[35] Bavinck argues that in this world, culture takes two forms: Science and art. Both are means by which humanity is called to shape the world into the true personality of the *Imago Dei*. But due to the atomizing effects of sin and the polarizing tendencies of fallen man, their true and final expression can only be found in the kingdom of God wherein the divine personality of the triune God becomes the true expression of everything art and science attempt to manifest. Hence, culture is not something to be avoided, but to be wielded by a redeemed personality to partially exhibit the personality of God until his kingdom comes to converge all culture for God's glory.

While in this world, these three life spheres are compartmentalized and pit at odds with each other due to human limitations and sinfulness, Bavinck explains how the Kingdom of God binds all three spheres together closer and closer until the inauguration

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[33] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 159.

[34] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 159.

[35] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 161.

of the kingdom:

> To the extent that each of these various life spheres answers more and more to its essential idea, it loses its sharpness and isolation from the others and prepares the way all the more the coming of the Kingdom of God… wherein the human personality obtains its riches and most multiform manifestation, a community life of the highest order wherein all oppositions are reconciled and individual and community, state, and church, cultus and culture are integrated in perfect harmony.[36]

We see that from Bavinck's perspective, the kingdom of God is a supernatural reality that casts its glorious light over all of human relationships which, on this side of eternity and for necessity's sake, is merely categorized into individuals and communities, and communities into Church, State, and Culture. But when the kingdom of God is completed, according to the fourth and final section of Bavinck's essay, God's divine personhood—the ultimate reality—will unify Church, State, and Culture into the singularity of his divine personality. Clearly, we can see that character, virtue, and personhood is central to Bavinck's view of the kingdom of God, since it can only be completed when "[a]ll of the moral goods must first come into existence, all of the elect must be gathered together."[37] Eschatological personhood is the bridge which allows the believer to travel freely between the realm of special revelation and the natural world; it gives the redeemed free access into culture, politics, and ethical models because it can be salvaged and utilized for the development of personhood. As such, Reformed eschatology discourages the use of a deontology or utilitarian ethic which does not account for the centrality of virtue and personhood to God's kingdom; rather, it should embrace the teleological ramifications of the kingdom upon our system of ethics—*the fulfillment of true personality*.

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[36] Herman Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 163.

[37] Bavinck, "The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good," 165.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: REFORMING VIRTUE

Back to the issue that this thesis set out to address: How can we reform virtue? How can we mend the breach in the Reformed camp which has led to such seismic clashes in the study of apologetics and political engagement, and predictably the study of ethics? According to David S. Sytsma, people have assumed that the Reformation had shifted the dialogue on ethics away from Aristotelian or Christian theories of virtue to such a degree that "[t]here is a widely held perception today— shared by ethicists, historians of ethics, and theologians—that the Reformation inaugurated a sharp break from earlier forms of Eudaimonist virtue ethics prevalent in the medieval period."[1] Sytsma also notes in the beginning of another essay, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Protestantism,* that while the past generation "has witnessed a remarkable revival of virtue ethics,"[2] Protestants have generally rejected its practice.[3] This chasm between the Reformed camp and virtue ethics has only widened due to (1) Nineteenth-century Barthian dialectics and Van Tillian presuppositionalism which have made it cumbersome for Reformed ethicists to conscientiously engage with the natural world and general revelation; and (2) the centrality of salvation in Reformed thought which renders any

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[1] David S. Systma, "John Calvin and Virtue Ethics: Augustinian and Aristotelian Themes," Journal of Religious Ethics vol. 48:3 (2020): 519-556. Systma argues against this notion of discontinuity by demonstrating John Calvin's reception of Augustine and Aristotle's ethical concepts.

[2] David Sytsma, "Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Protestantism," *Academia Letters*, Article 1650 (2021), 1. https://philpapers.org/archive/SYTANE.pdf.

[3] Sytsma, "Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Protestantism," 1. He quotes similar observations from ethicists Brad S. Gregory, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Geunther H. Haas, and Sebastian Rehnman.

significant dialogue on the topic of virtue redundant—just as sanctification is often taken for granted upon being saved. Indeed, is there even such a thing as reformed virtue ethics?

However, Pieter Vos notes that there have been more positive developments in recent Reformed theological studies that are devoted to "positive explorations of virtue ethics" including contemporary re-examinations of the contributions of Calvin, Edwards, and Barth toward its study.[4] Vos himself devotes the rest of his paper to connecting three MacnIntyrian concepts to Reformed theological core themes—virtue and sanctification: moral growth as reform; law and covenant: teleological and virtue-ethical traces; and natural law and eschatology: virtues outside the church.[5]

This thesis simply notes the contribution of one more Reformed thinker—Herman Bavinck—in the pursuit of iterating a reformed virtue ethic. In particular, I have attempted to demonstrate that Bavinck's four pillars, rather than single-handedly solving the above problem, present a way forward into further studies in virtue ethics from a reformed perspective. In this concluding chapter, I will briefly address how each of Bavinck's ethical focal points, as well as their synergetic whole, encourages Reformed ethicists to engage robustly with the study of virtue without entertaining the thought that they are compromising their rich reformed heritage.

First, the doctrine of Revelation gives us the *epistemological leverage* necessary to discuss and assess the moral nature and condition of humanity. When Bavinck prioritizes revelation before discussing dogmatics, and dogmatics before engaging in ethics, he is simply demonstrating that any moral framework which claims to be both descriptively accurate and prescriptively binding needs to be based upon a deeper moral

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[4] Pieter Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contribution to Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol. 28 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 204.

[5] Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues," 206-12.

ontology. Only then can we even gauge whether humanity is capable of moral behavior (regardless of whether it takes the form of virtue, deontology, or utilitarianism). Without Revelation, ethical frameworks operate out of the atomized, paradoxical, and utterly subjective assumptions of a fallen mind which—without regeneration and the illumination of revelation—is unable to comprehend moral reality.

Second, biblical anthropology necessitates that we consistently apply *Scripture's understanding of the human condition* to our ethical frameworks. For example, without a biblical anthropology, we will operate on a fragmented assumption that human beings are (1) not inherently good; (2) inherently good; or (3) varying degrees of the two. Ethical frameworks which lean toward the former will tend to have a nihilistic or functional teleology which simply encourages ethical behavior, not as a good in itself, but because it is useful and makes the chaos and pain of life more bearable. Frameworks which adopt the latter view are unable to explain, despite numerous iterations of moral prescriptions, why humanity is so self-destructive and incapable of creating a paradise. However, biblical anthropology assumes the dual reality that (1) humanity was created in the image of God and is hence not just capable of, but responsible for their moral thoughts and behavior; and (2) humanity's image-bearing status was compromised by sin, and subsequently, the noetic and axiological impact of the fall requires regeneration prior to ethical behavior. Only when both realities are simultaneously acknowledged can we adopt a virtue ethic that accounts for the potential of the *Imago Dei* and yet shields itself from the pervasive corruption of his fallen state. Only then can we encourage unregenerate moral agents to consider why the tripartite law binds their conscience so effectively (because they are the fallen *image of God*), and only then can we exhort regenerated images of God to repent and submit to the reign of God in their imitation of Christ until the inauguration of the kingdom (because they are the *fallen* image of God).

Whereas the first and second pillars provide an epistemological and axiological *foundation* which defines virtue and makes it possible for the moral agent, the third and

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fourth pillars provide ethics with a much-needed teleological *direction*. Vos summarizes MacIntyre's position in *After Virtue* that "a reappraisal of virtue ethics cannot be achieved without a teleological conception of life," which led MacIntyre to "redefine virtue and telos in terms of practice, narrative, and tradition," that culminated in the good of one's life and the general good of humanity.[6] A Bavinkian *telos* of virtue, on the other hand, would be the *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi* and the kingdom of God. Herein, the ultimate good of humanity consists of ongoing personality-formation and law-fulfillment through the Imitation of Christ, and its completion upon the coming of the Kingdom. In this sense, virtues are to be understood as acquired human qualities that enable us to achieve those goods which contribute to this *telos*. One notable example of such an attempt can be found in Gushee and Stassen's *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context,* wherein the teleological implications of the same two concepts— Kingdom and the Imitation of Christ—are rigorously applied to the Christian understanding of topics such as character, moral norms, war and peace, biotechnology, marriage and divorce, sexuality, gender roles, love and justice, race and economics, *inter alia*.[7] Their main goal is to demonstrate that all of these components of Christian ethics are deeply impacted by the already-not-yet reign of God and the obedience of Christ.

In particular, the Imitation of Christ, just like the Eudaimonistic good of humanity, is a deeply sublime but functional *telos* which guides the practice of virtue. However, whereas Eudaimonistic goodness must be further qualified and filtered by referring back to pillars one and two (Revelation and Biblical Anthropology), *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi* is better situated as a Reformed *telos* since it thoroughly informed by the moral presumptions and framework of God's revelation. Its attractiveness as a *telos*

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[6] Vos, "Calvinists among the Virtues," 205.

[7] David Gushee and Glen Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), Table of Contents.

also lies in its ability to unify virtue, deontology, and utilitarianism in the personality of Christ, hence reinforcing the centrality of virtue over against duty and consequences. The same strength lies in the *telos* of the kingdom of God: (1) its foundation and practice are already epistemologically justified *via* Revelation; (2) its practice serves to reinforce the unity of the abovementioned ethical approaches; and (3) it does so in a manner which bolsters the centrality and the pursuit of virtue.

Together, Bavinck's four pillars of ethical thought have the potential to mend not just the division that Vos referred to, but the wider division in the Reformed camp regarding general and specific revelation, which in turn touches upon innumerable topics: Virtue, deontology, and consequentialism; Christ and Law; individual and community; and Church and State. On this side of eternity, the atomizing effects of sin operate to keep the unifying essence of the Kingdom of God and the personhood of Christ from uniting the above spheres of reality. Hence the world experiences the following birth pangs: personal calling and divine calling seem incompatible; individuality and communality seek to dominate the other; general and specific revelation wrestle for preeminence; and church, state, and culture keep each other at bay. But this divisive power will not taint our relationships forever. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God (Rom 8:19)…, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21)." When the virtuous, regenerated, Christlike personhood of the sons and daughters of God finally inhabit the new heavens and earth, only then will the divisive pains of the world cease and a new, holistic ethic will reign.

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ABSTRACT

REFORMING VIRTUE: BAVINCK'S METHOD OF ENGAGING WITH
VIRTUE ETHICS FROM A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

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There is a distinct reluctance in the Reformed tradition to engage with natural theology and scholarship in the study of, among other things, virtue ethics. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that Herman Bavinck's four pillars of reformed dogmatics allows reformed ethicists to robustly engage in the study of virtue ethics. In chapter 1, I describe the nature and impact of the widening philosophical rift between specific and general revelation in the Reformed camp which can be traced to nineteenth-century Barthian dialectics, Van Tillian presuppositionalism, and Neo-Calvinism which served to bifurcate, and not integrate, general and special revelation. As a result, ethicists are discouraged from the use of evidences, natural theology, and secular scholarship (i.e., Aristotelian-Eudaimonist virtue) in constructing a Biblical system of ethics. In chapter 2, I demonstrate how Herman Bavinck utilized a reformed framework of theology and ethics to robustly engage with the culture, politics, and science of his day. Chapter 3 analyzes the first of four pillars of Herman Bavinck's ethical thought, namely Bavinck's doctrine of Revelation, to demonstrate the classical reformed understanding of special and general revelation. Chapter 4 examines Bavinck's Biblical anthropology to show prescribed ethical outlooks based upon a tiered understanding of humanity's condition. Chapter 5 looks to Bavinck's doctrine of Imitatio Incarnatus Christi to argue that the imitation of Christ bridges mystical and practical ethics. Chapter 6 addresses the last of the four pillars—the Kingdom of God—as a converging ethical paradigm. In chapter 7, I

conclude by discussing the ramifications of applying Bavinck's four pillars to the study of ethics for the purpose of encouraging ethicists to rigorously pursue the study of virtue not despite, but due to their Reformed heritage.

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