

✓ The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck

by John Bolt

I. Introduction: *The Problem and Thesis of the Dissertation*

It is the thesis of this study that the cultural-ethical ideal¹ of the Dutch Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) differs from that of his better known fellow Calvinist and contemporary Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). While he shares with Kuyper a basic trinitarian perspective, Bavinck's emphasis upon the imitation of Christ as a necessary aspect of his cultural-ethical ideal reflects and illumines the distinctiveness of his thought in comparison with Kuyper. This distinctiveness has not always been properly recognized. Contemporaries often judged

the two men to be identical, in conviction and thought and usually spoke of them in the same breath.² Because Bavinck was generally perceived, also by many scholars, simply as Kuyper's follower in the Dutch neo-Calvinist revival of the nineteenth century, his distinctive emphases were minimized.³ This subordination of Bavinck to Kuyper and, on occasion, virtual identification of their thought,⁴ has been sharply criticized in more recent years, especially by Eugene Heideman: "That Bavinck has so often been seen as a reflection of Kuyper is not surprising and perhaps even excusable in the light of the friendship which existed between the two men, the overpowering figure of Kuyper and the superficial similarity of their thought. In the opinion of the writer, it is unfortunate that this identification of the thought of the two men should be allowed to go on unhampered and unchallenged."⁵ However, aside from a few suggestions, primarily in his notes, Heideman did not further pursue this question of the relation between Bavinck and Kuyper but challenged others to do so.⁶

This dissertation originated in direct response to that challenge. It should be noted that the situation in Bavinck scholarship has improved markedly since Heideman's complaint in 1959 about the relative lack of scholarly interest in Bavinck compared to the interest in Kuyper.⁷ In particular, R.H. Bremmer's two volumes on Bavinck as a theologian and Bavinck and his contemporaries⁸ provide a wealth of insight into the content and context of Bavinck's life and thought. These two volumes have especially illumined the relationship between Bavinck and Kuyper by making public a massive amount of correspondence between the two men. Jan Veenhof, in his imposing dissertation on Bavinck's views concerning revelation and inspiration,⁹ leaves almost no area of Bavinck's thought untouched and makes numerous comparisons between the views of Bavinck and Kuyper.

Although the state of Bavinck scholarship has thus improved greatly in recent years, and numerous aspects of the relation between Bavinck and Kuyper have now been examined, a thorough and conclusive study of the differences between the two men in terms of their respective cultural-ethical ideals was still needed. In fact, Kruithof's judgement, in his study of Bavinck's cultural-ethical ideal, was that the mature thought of the two men was fundamentally the same.¹⁰ S. J. Ridderbos, in his study of Kuyper's theology of culture,¹¹ cites Bavinck on several occasions but does not consider the difference between the two men on this question and also fails to include Bavinck in his list of Kuyper's critics.¹² Both Heideman¹³ and Bremmer¹⁴ suggest that the doctrine of common grace is far less significant in Bavinck's thought than in Kuyper's. If this contention is correct, this would of course be very important for their respective cultural-ethical ideals since Kuyper's doctrine of common grace is one of the foundations of his theology of culture.¹⁵ However, Veenhof emphatically denies that the doctrine of common grace plays a less significant role in Bavinck's thought than in Kuyper's.¹⁶ Similarly, Kruithof also considers the doctrine of common grace to be an essential dimension of Bavinck's theology of culture.¹⁷

It is the thesis of this study that Heideman and Bremmer are at least correct in suggesting a shift of emphasis in Bavinck's cultural-ethical ideal in comparison with Kuyper. This shift of emphasis, however, it is argued, is best illumined by focusing not on the doctrine of common

grace, but upon Bavinck's explicit use of imitation of Christ theme as a *valid and necessary but partial* aspect of his total cultural-ethical ideal. Although aspects of the imitation theme such as cross-bearing and self-denial are not absent from Kuyper's reflection on Christian cultural-ethical responsibility,¹⁸ the explicit theme and function in his personal piety¹⁹ of the imitation of Christ is not prominent in his *theology of culture* which is dominated by the doctrines of common grace and regeneration.

Bavinck, on the other hand, wrote two substantial articles on the imitation of Christ theme, **one** at the beginning (1885/86) and the other at the end (1918) of his academic career.²⁰ Because these two studies truly represent an "early" and a "late" Bavinck it was also possible in the dissertation to explore this theme as a key to assessing the development of Bavinck's thought. Furthermore, the imitation of Christ theme plays a significant role in Bavinck's attempt to resolve the fundamental tension in his cultural-ethical thought, the tension between sacrificial world-renunciation on the one hand and world-affirmation on the other. According to Bavinck, the imitation of Christ, involving self-denial and world renunciation is valid and necessary because of sin. However, he also insists, based on his overall *trinitarian* theological perspective, that the imitation of Christ cannot serve as the comprehensive theme for Christian ethics. It must be qualified by the priority given in trinitarian thought to the Father and creation, a priority which suggests an equally valid and proper world-affirmation.

II. *Summary of the Dissertation*

The dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter one is an introductory chapter which sets forth the problem of the dissertation, gives a brief historical comparison of the background, career and significance of both Bavinck and Kuyper, and discusses the relationship between Christ and the law in Reformed ethics. The tension in Bavinck's thought between world-affirmation and renunciation is also introduced.

Chapters two, three and four, which contain the detailed analysis of the two imitation articles and Bavinck's trinitarian system of thought, are each preceded by brief historical orientations. The purpose of these historical overviews is: a) to explore the roots of Bavinck's thought by noting the two dominant influences on his life--the pietism of his Christian Reformed Church community and the modernist theological education he received at the University of Leiden (Chapter two); b) to present the early Bavinck as Kuyper's loyal follower in the neo-Calvinist revival of the late nineteenth century (chapter three); and c) to note the growing distance between Bavinck and Kuyper towards the end of their lives and some key personal, theological, ecclesiastical and political differences between them (chapter four).

The systematic section of chapter two consists of a detailed analysis of the first (1885/86) imitation article. The article, along with other of his writings during the period 1880-1892/3, suggests two distinct streams of thought in Bavinck. On the one hand there is a line which, among other things, stresses the unity of God and his works, creation and law, the kingdom of God as a leaven and mustard seed, grace as the restoration of nature, life on earth as a calling from God, the catholicity of the Christian faith, the interim character of Christ's redemptive mediatorial work and the church, and which re-

jects all forms of dualism between faith and life, church and theology, theology and the other sciences. On the other hand there is the line which emphasizes, among other things, the kingdom of God as a future divine gift, as a pearl or treasure, considers theology as a unique science, highly values pietism which views salvation as primarily mystical union with Christ, exalts the world-denying, cross-bearing spirituality of the early church and Medieval sectarian groups such as the Waldensians, and insists upon a dual citizenship, a double calling for men in which the heavenly fellowship with God is a distinct and higher goal than the earthly task of subjugating creation. In a phrase Bavinck's position is an attempt to hold to a "duality without dualism."

It is precisely in Bavinck's understanding of the imitation of Christ that these two streams come together. Bavinck's anti-dualism line is found in what he rejects in the history of imitation spirituality and his duality line in what he accepts and affirms. Furthermore, Bavinck's own conception of a valid imitation of Christ combines and retains the tension between these two streams. Religiously, mystical union with Christ is the primary sense of the imitation of Christ and the ethical implications must flow forth from it. Thus the duality is affirmed. Ethically, however, the imitation of Christ is seen principally in terms of creation and law. It is the ten commandments which in the final analysis determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus. Here Bavinck affirms his anti-dualism.

It should be noted that in this earlier article Bavinck assumes that the early church's ideal of imitating Christ can be simply applied and lived in different historical and social contexts without difficulty. In particular the potential conflict between the virtues of Jesus and the requirements of a culturally active, socially and politically relevant life in the modern world are ignored. It was this unfinished agenda that provided the impetus for Bavinck's second attempt to deal with the imitation of Christ as an ethical ideal.

Because it is the thesis of this dissertation that the imitation of Christ theme is a *valid and necessary but partial* aspect of Bavinck's total cultural-ethical ideal, it was necessary to place this theme in the larger context of Bavinck's complete system of thought. Chapter three shows how it is the doctrine of the trinity which provides Bavinck with the *theoretical* resolution of the fundamental tension in his cultural-ethical ideal. It is in this trinitarian emphasis that Bavinck reveals himself to be a Kuyperian neo-Calvinist thinker. Bavinck shared Kuyper's passionate opposition to the spirit of modernism, especially in its pantheistic form, and he shared Kuyper's vision of opposing the social and political consequences (uniformitarianism) of such a worldview with what he considered to be a radically biblical one dominated by the sovereignty of God over the entire cosmos. Bavinck's epistemology, Logos speculation and *principia* doctrine, closely parallels Kuyper's at crucial points. Bavinck's explication of his trinitarian thought via the principles of unity and diversity is an attempt philosophically and theologically to ground especially Kuyper's doctrine of sphere-sovereignty. This is clear from the conclusions Bavinck draws from these principles, which are identical to those found in Kuyper's numerous writings. The priority Bavinck gives to creation, his emphasis upon common grace, and thus upon the importance of Christian cultural activity in the world is characteristi-

cally Kuyperian. It is thus one of the purposes of this chapter to demonstrate the basic affinities between Bavinck's and Kuyper's thought.

The chapter also has two other purposes, namely to show how Bavinck's trinitarian reflection resolves the tension in his thought between world-affirmation and world-renunciation, and to demonstrate that the imitation of Christ theme, while a *necessary* aspect of Bavinck's cultural-ethical ideal, is nevertheless only a *partial* aspect of it. By locating the unity of all things in the very being and decree of the triune God, Bavinck achieves at least a *formal* conceptual unity and a reconciliation between the twin poles of world-affirmation and world-renunciation. Such a duality is only relative, he argues, not absolute. That is to say, this duality is consequence of the *temporarily* necessary relativity of all human knowledge in this sinful dispensation rather than an *ontologically* necessary condition.

Finally, the chapter shows that Bavinck does not consider the imitation of Christ as a complete, comprehensive cultural-ethical ideal. To limit oneself to the incarnational specificity of the Logos grounding all reality and the norm for life in the world in the *triune* being and activity of God.

The systematic section of chapter five consists of an analysis of the second (1918) imitation article. Bavinck here considers the imitation of Christ to be an *active* ideal shaping direct Christian involvement in the civil order as well as a *passive* ideal calling for withdrawal from such activity in certain circumstances. The imitation of Christ theme is thus important in Bavinck's overall cultural-ethical ideal. It is an absolutely necessary factor in the Christian life of discipleship. However, it is also quite clear that the imitation of Christ particularly as a passive ideal does not exhaust Bavinck's cultural-ethical ideal; it is a *necessary but partial* aspect of it. According to Bavinck, the role of the passive imitation of Christ in the Christian life of discipleship is directly proportional to the degree of hostility which society in general displays to the Christian gospel and church. The ethic of the New Testament as a whole must be seen in the context of such a hostile culture and society. For this reason Bavinck relativizes the ethic of the New Testament with its emphasis upon passive and negative virtues. It is in this that Bavinck goes beyond the conclusions reached in his first article.

In a socio-cultural situation where the Christian gospel has been a leaven and the hostility has diminished to such an extent that Christians can take active, culturally influential positions within society, the imitation of Christ as such cannot be the comprehensive theme governing the various spheres of life. Norms for political life, business life, science, etc. cannot be drawn from the imitation of Christ nor the gospel, not even Scripture itself, but can only be discovered, as laws of *creation*, by experience and investigation. Cultural life is not a product of Christianity; Christianity presupposes cultural life.

Nevertheless, because all human cultural activity is affected by sin and sin can only be overcome by *spiritual* power, the imitation of Christ remains a *necessary* aspect of the Christian's *active* cultural involvement. To ignore the imitation of Christ as an essential ingredient of the life of Christian discipleship is to court the danger of world-

liness. The imitation of Christ is not a new *law*. The freedom of the Christian, in the Spirit, to apply the imitation principle must be respected. Spiritual discernment is necessary to judge the extent to which the imitation of Christ requires passive or active resistance to evil. But the struggle against sin goes on. In that struggle to do the will of God, the free application of the imitation of Christ remains the key to a proper life of Christian discipleship. In a sympathetic, yet fairly critical review of Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, Bavinck summarizes the true imitation of Christ thus: "The true imitation of Christ occurs when, freely and independently as children of God, in our circumstances and relationships, even when it demands of us the most severe self-denial and a bearing of the heaviest cross, we do the same will of God which Christ explicated and at the cost of his glory and life, even to the death on the cross, perfectly fulfilled, since who²¹ ever does the will of God is Jesus' brother and sister and mother."

Chapter five concludes the dissertation. It is suggested that a trinitarian model is useful for illumining key differences between Bavinck and Kuyper. *Formally* the thought of both Bavinck and Kuyper is thoroughly trinitarian. However the crucial difference between their respective cultural-ethical ideals is that Kuyper's trinitarian thought is dominated by the first and third person (creation and regeneration, common grace and antithesis), shaping and even eclipsing important aspects of the second person, while Bavinck's explicitly includes the second person by way of his emphasis upon the imitation of Christ theme. This emphasis means that Bavinck is properly spared some of the criticism directed at Kuyper especially that leveled against some of the practical consequences (eg. potential triumphalism) his theology of culture (eg. by Haitjema, Van Ruler, Schilder). It also means that on *this* issue Bavinck is closer to Calvin than to the neo-Calvinist Kuyper.

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Footnotes

1 The term "cultural-ethical ideal" in the title was chosen quite deliberately and has a specific meaning. It refers to the *comprehensive* social, political, ethical, cultural vision of Bavinck, rooted in his philosophical-theological system of thought. The term thus includes what is often referred to as theology of culture as well as ethics. Since the focus of this study is on the imitation of Christ theme in Bavinck's thought, and since Bavinck considers the broader socio-cultural significance of this theme as well as the more specifically ethical implications, I consider it best to speak of Bavinck's "cultural-ethical ideal" rather than of his theology of culture or of his ethics more narrowly conceived.

2 According to R.H. Bremmer: "Voor het besef van velen stonden deze twee grote figuren van het calvinistisch Réveil van de negentiende eeuw dicht bij elkaar, zo zeer zelfs, dat zij vaak in één adem werden genoemd" (*Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* Kampen: Kok, 1961, p. 13.).

- 3 The judgement of James Hutton Mackay is typical when he refers to Bavinck as "Dr. Kuyper's loyal and learned henchman" (*Religious Thought in Holland During the Nineteenth Century*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981, pp. x-xi).
- 4 For example: "In their maturity, the fundamental convictions of the two men were the same" (Bastian Kruithof, "The Relation of Christianity and Culture in the Teaching of Herman Bavinck," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1955, p. 12).
- 5 E. P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck*, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959), p. 6. Cf. pp. 143, 178, 196-97, where Heideman takes issue with several Bavinck interpreters for their failure to take the differences between Bavinck and Kuyper more seriously.
- 6 Heideman's own suggestion (*ibid.*, pp. 178, 196-97), is that the doctrine of common grace is the key to the difference between the two men.
- 7 "Bavinck stands in the shadow of his contemporary Abraham Kuyper. It is unfortunate, that no thorough study of the relation of Bavinck to Kuyper has ever been made. It has often been assumed that Bavinck was a more mild, deliberate and peaceful reflection of Abraham Kuyper. On the one hand this serves as a partial explanation for the lack of interest in the work of Bavinck, and on the other hand explains why he has so often been misunderstood" (Heideman, p. 6). It is striking that for up to forty years after his death the major scholarly interest in Bavinck centered around his pedagogy and educational philosophy rather than on his dogmatic-theological works. Although no less than five major works on Bavinck's educational philosophy and pedagogy appeared within sixteen years of his death (Cornelius Jaarsma, *The Educational Philosophy of Herman Bavinck*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936; J. Brederveld, *Hoofdlijnen der Paedagogiek van Dr. Herman Bavinck, met Critische Beschouwing*, Amsterdam: De Standaard, 1927; L. van Klinken, *Bavincks Paedagogische Beginnselen*, Meppel: Boom, 1973; Fr. S. Rombouts, *Prof. Dr. H. Bavinck, Gids Bij de Studie van Zijn Paedagogische Werken*, 's-Hertogenbosch-Antwerpen: Malmberg, 1922; and L. van der Zweep, *De Paedagogiek van Bavinck*, Kampen: Kok, 1935, a major study of Bavinck's theology was not completed until 1953 with the appearance of A.A. Hoekema's dissertation on Bavinck's theology of the covenant ("Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant," Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1953. S.P. vander Walt's study of Bavinck's philosophy (*Die wysbegeerte van Dr. Herman Bavinck*, Potchefstroom: Pro-Rege Pers, 1953), was completed in the same year.
- 8 In 1966 Bremmer published a companion biography to his earlier *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* entitled *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966).
- 9 *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1968).

- 10 "In their maturity, the fundamental convictions of the two men were the same" (Kruithof, p. 12).
- 11 *De Theologische Cultuurbeschouwing van Abraham Kuyper* (Kampen: Kok, 1947).
- 12 *Ibid.*, ch. V., pp. 266-314. Ridderbos examines in some detail the critiques of W.J. Aalders, Th. L. Haitjema, A.A. van Ruler, S.G. deGraaf, H. Dooyeweerd, and K. Schilder.
- 13 Heideman, pp. 178, 196-97.
- 14 Bremmer, *Dogmaticus*, pp. 347, 351.
- 15 S.J. Ridderbos, pp. 29-130. See also S.U. Zuidema, "Common Grace and Christian Action in Abraham Kuyper," in *Communication and Confrontation* (Toronto: Wedge, 1972), pp. 52-105.
- 16 J. Veenhof, pp. 188-89, n, 43.
- 17 Kruithof, pp. 127ff.
- 18 See for example Kuyper's *Pro Rege* (Kampen: Kok, 1911), II, Section One, chs. V, VII, IX.
- 19 See for example Kuyper's *The Holy Spirit*, translated by Henri De Vries, (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls), pp. 459, 504.
- 20 The first article is "De Navolging van Christus I, II, III," *De Vrije Kerk*, XI (1885), 101-13, 203-13; XI (1886), 321-33. The second article is "De Navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven," in *Kennis en Leven: Opstellen en Artikelen uit Vroegere Jaren* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1922), pp. 115-145.
- 21 "Wat Zou Jezus Doen," *De Bazuin*, XLVIII (1900), no. 8.