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HERMAN BAVINCK ON THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

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HERMAN BAVINCK: DOGMATICIAN AND ETHICIST

Herman Bavinck is well known as a reformed dogmatician. His four volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, which was recently translated into English,¹ is widely considered as a masterpiece of dogmatic thinking. It is much less well known that Bavinck has also presented himself as a reformed ethicist. In addition to his dogmatics, he also had a deep, career-long interest in (Christian) ethics. This can be illustrated by many documents and examples.

In 1880 he received his doctoral degree for a thesis on *The Ethics of Ulrich Zwingli*.² In the following years (1881-83), when he worked as a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*) at Franeker, he did not have much time to study. In letters to his friend Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje he complains about this lack of time.³ This did not prevent him, however, from publishing a new edition of the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1881).⁴ In his letters to Snouck he also writes: 'When I have time to study, I work on ethics. I have resolved and I have started to investigate for myself the most important ethical issues'.⁵ In February 1881 he delivered a lecture to students at Kampen on the kingdom of God, notably from an ethical perspective.⁶ In the same year he

¹ H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. by J. Bolt, trans. by J. Vriend, 4 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-08); hereafter abbreviated as *RD*.

² H. Bavinck, *De ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman 1880).

³ See for instance: J. de Bruijn and G. Harinck, eds., *Een Leidse vriendschap. De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875-1921* (Baarn: Ten Have 1999), pp. 88, 92f., 95.

⁴ *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae, Disputationes quinquaginta duabus comprehensa ac conscripta per Johannem Polyandrum, Andream Rivetum, Antonium Walaenum, Antonium Thysium*, Editio sexta curavit et praefatus est H. Bavinck (Lugduni Batavorum: Didericum Donner 1881).

⁵ de Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, p. 95: 'Als ik werk, werk ik nog ethiek. Ik heb mij voorgenomen en ben ermee begonnen om de voornaamste kwesties daarin eens voor mijzelf te bestudeeren'.

⁶ H. Bavinck, 'Het rijk Gods, het hoogste goed', *De vrije kerk*, 7 (1881), 185-92, 224-34, 271-77, 305-14, 353-60; also in *id.*, *Kennis en leven. Opstellen en*

wrote an article on human conscience.⁷ During his years as a professor at Kampen (1883-1902), Bavinck was not only responsible for the education in dogmatics, but also in ethics. Two years ago I discovered in the Bavinck Archives an extensive, but unfinished manuscript entitled 'Reformed Ethics' (*Gereformeerde Ethiek*).⁸ Bavinck used it for his lectures in ethics. I am convinced that this *Reformed Ethics* was intended as a companion to his *Reformed Dogmatics*.⁹ Later in his career Bavinck published several times on ethical issues, for instance small booklets and articles such as *Present-Day Morality* (1902), *The Problem of War* (1914), *Ethics and Politics* (1916), and *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life* (1918).¹⁰

Examples like these and many others¹¹ make clear that it would be a biased opinion to consider Bavinck only as a Reformed dogmatician. He has presented himself as an ethicist as well. As far as I know, only John Bolt has paid attention to this.¹²

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST—DOGMATICALLY OR ETHICALLY?

The manuscript of Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* resembles his *Reformed Dogmatics* in several ways. In both works, for instance, Bavinck describes the relationship between dogmatics and ethics in exactly the same way:

artikelen uit vroegere jaren (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d. [1922]), pp. 28-56.

⁷ H. Bavinck, 'Het geweten I-II', *De vrije kerk*, 7 (1881), 27-37, 49-58; also in: *id.*, *Kennis en leven*, pp. 13-27.

⁸ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, in Bavinck Archives, box 13/32; no. 186 (hereafter abbreviated as *GE*). Since the pages are not numbered, I will refer to the paragraph numbers, followed by page numbers where necessary (e.g. *GE*, §1, p. 1). For each paragraph the page numbers will restart at 1 (e.g. *GE*, §2, p. 1).

⁹ D. van Keulen, 'Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*: Some Remarks about Unpublished Manuscripts in the Libraries of Amsterdam and Kampen', *The Bavinck Review*, 1 (2010), 25-56.

¹⁰ H. Bavinck, *Hedendaagsche moraal* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1902); *id.*, *Het probleem van den oorlog* (Kampen: J. H. Kok 1914); *id.*, 'Ethics and Politics', *id.*, *Essays on Religion, Science and Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics 2008), pp. 261-78; *id.*, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d. [1918]).

¹¹ Cf. J. Bolt, 'Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 28 (1993), 45-7.

¹² See besides the article referred to in the previous note also: J. Bolt, 'The Imitation of Christ Theme in the Cultural-Ethical Ideal of Herman Bavinck' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, 1982).

Dogmatics describes the deeds of God done for, to, and in human beings; ethics describes what renewed human beings now do on the basis of and in the strength of those divine deeds. In dogmatics human beings are passive; they receive and believe; in ethics they are themselves active agents. In dogmatics, the articles of faith are treated; in ethics, the precepts of the Decalogue. In the former, that which concerns faith is dealt with; in the latter, that which concerns love, obedience, and good works. Dogmatics sets forth what God is and does for human beings and causes them to know God as their Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; ethics sets forth what human beings are and do for God now; how, with everything they are and have, with intellect and will and all their strength, they devote themselves to God out of gratitude and love. Dogmatics is the system of the knowledge of God; ethics is that of the service of God.¹³

Furthermore, both works are structured in the same way. In both works, Bavinck argues, the same method should be used: the point of departure is God's revelation; Holy Scripture is its principle of knowledge (*kenbron*) and its norm (*norma*).¹⁴ Three steps should be distinguished in the method of approach: (1) collecting and systematising biblical data; (2) describing how these data have been adopted in the church; and (3) developing these data thetically with a view to our own time.¹⁵

Bavinck also carefully divided the subject matter between his *Dogmatics* and his *Ethics*. A good example of this can be seen in his doctrine of sin. In *Reformed Dogmatics* he writes on the nature, guilt and punishment of sin.¹⁶ In his *Reformed Ethics* he designs a detailed system of sins. He distinguishes three types of sin: selfish sins, sins against one's neighbour and sins against God. Each can be divided into sensual (*zinnelijke*) and spiritual (*geestelijke*) sins.¹⁷ This makes clear that Bavinck's ethical doctrine of

¹³ H. Bavinck, *RD*, 1, p. 58; cf. *GE*, §2, p. 5: 'In de dogmatiek: wat doet God voor, in ons? Hij is daar alles. De dogmatiek is een woord Gods aan ons, van buiten, boven tot ons komende; wij passief, luisterend, ons latende bewerken. In de Ethiek: wat wordt er van ons, als God ons zoo bewerkt, wat doen wij voor hem? Wij actief, juist door, op grond der daden Gods aan en in ons, wij psalmzingend en lovend en dankende God. Dogmatiek: God tot ons afdalend. Ethiek: wij tot God opstijgend. Dogmatiek: Hij de onze. Ethiek: wij de zijne. Dogmatiek: zij zullen zijn aangezicht zien. Ethiek: Zijn naam zal op hun voorhoofden wezen. Dogmatiek: uit God. Ethiek: tot God. Dogmatiek: Hij heeft ons liefgehad. Ethiek: daarom hebben wij hem lief.' Cf. van Keulen, 'Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*', pp. 33f.

¹⁴ *GE*, §4, p. 4.

¹⁵ *GE*, §4, p. 5.

¹⁶ *RD*, 3, pp. 25-190.

¹⁷ *GE*, §§10-12.

sin is a supplement to his dogmatic doctrine of sin, and that his *Reformed Ethics* was intended as a companion to his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Something similar can be seen in his views on the imitation of Christ. The imitation of Christ could have been an important theme in his doctrine of sanctification. However, when we read the fourth volume of his *Dogmatics*, in which he writes on calling, regeneration, faith and conversion, justification, sanctification and perseverance, the issue of the imitation of Christ is almost completely absent. Only three times does Bavinck touch upon it. In compiling a list of biblical data he writes: 'But a person obtains such perfection only by conversion, faith, regeneration (Mark 1:15; John 3:3), leaving everything behind for Jesus' sake, taking up one's cross, and *following him* (Matt. 5:10ff; 7:13; 10:32-39; 16:24-26).'¹⁸ A few lines further we read: 'Those who wanted to rally to Jesus' side and *follow him* had to be prepared to give up everything: marriage (Matt. 19:10-12), the love of family members (10:35-36), their wealth (19:21), indeed even their lives (10:39; 16:25).'¹⁹ At the end of the section on sanctification, again in a listing of biblical data, Bavinck writes: 'As beloved children, they [the believers] must be *imitators* of God' ([Eph.] 5:1).'²⁰

In his doctrine of sanctification Bavinck starts off with an analysis of the relationship between justification and sanctification. In justification 'the religious relationship of human beings with God is restored'. In sanctification human nature 'is renewed and cleansed of the impurity of sin'. Although they are distinct from each other, according to Bavinck justification and sanctification may not be separated. Both are given to us in Christ.²¹ Further on he elaborates broadly that sanctification does have passive and active aspects. Sanctification is first of all a work and a gift of God. It is 'a process in which humans are passive just as they are in regeneration'. However, based on this work of God, sanctification also has an active side: 'people themselves are called and equipped to sanctify themselves and devote their whole life to God'. In his analysis of the active and passive sides of sanctification Bavinck carefully seeks a balance. Justice must be done to both sides.²² Finally he writes about the nature of good works and rejects perfectionism.²³

The issue of the imitation or following of Christ thus hardly plays a part in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*. From this we may not conclude

¹⁸ *RD*, 4, p. 233 (italics added).

¹⁹ *RD*, 4, p. 233 (italics added).

²⁰ *RD*, 4, p. 256 (italics added).

²¹ *RD*, 4, pp. 248f.

²² *RD*, 4, pp. 252-6.

²³ *RD*, 4, pp. 256-60, 260-66.

that it was not important to him. According to Bavinck it should be dealt with in ethics. During his career he wrote three texts on this. Two texts date from the very beginning of his academic career. The other text was written almost at the end of his life. In the following sections I will discuss these three texts.

THE FIRST TEXTS ON THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

In 1885-86, two years after his appointment as a professor at Kampen, Bavinck published a series of three articles entitled 'The imitation of Christ' (*De navolging van Christus*) in *The Free Church (De Vrije Kerk)*—a journal of the Christian Reformed Church.²⁴ In the same years he wrote his *Reformed Ethics*, which contains a section on the imitation of Christ.²⁵ I think that both texts are likely to be at least partly a fruit of his studies in ethics in the parsonage at Franeker.

Reading both texts, we immediately understand that they belong together. Many ideas and arguments are similar. Sometimes sentences are even literally identical. However, differences can also be observed. In the series of articles Bavinck offers in particular a historical survey of how Christian thinking on the imitation of Christ has developed over the centuries. By the end of the third article he describes some biblical foundations and briefly indicates his own ideas about the imitation of Christ. Nowhere in the articles, however, does he refer to literature which he has used. In his *Reformed Ethics* the approach is in accordance with the method described before. He starts with a detailed overview of biblical mainlines. This is followed by a historical survey. Finally he develops his own view thetically.

In contrast to the articles, in his *Reformed Ethics* we find the literature which he has used. In the overview of biblical foundations we find one reference to the biblical-theological *Dictionary* of Hermann Cremer (1834-1903) and three references to a book on biblical theology of the New Testament written by Bernard Weiss (1827-1918).²⁶ He has probably also used a concordance to the New Testament. In the historical survey Bavinck heavily leans on the first volume of the *History of Christian Ethics* written

²⁴ H. Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', *De Vrije Kerk*, 11 (1885), 101-13, 203-13; 12 (1886), 321-33.

²⁵ *GE*, §21.

²⁶ H. Cremer, *Wörterbuch der Neutestamentlichen Gräcität*, 3rd edn (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1883); B. Weiss, *Lehrbuch der biblischen Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 4th edn (Berlin: Verlag Wilhelm Hertz, 1884).

by Wilhelm Gass (1813-1889).²⁷ The fact that this book was published in 1881 makes clear that Bavinck used the most up-to-date literature available at that moment.

Bavinck starts his section on the imitation of Christ in his *Reformed Ethics* with an analysis of the Greek verbs *mimēomai* and *akoloutheō* in the New Testament. This results in a distinction between three ways of imitation or following in the Bible: imitation of God, imitation of angels or men and imitation of Christ. In the articles he only mentions the former and the latter.²⁸ The imitation of God means that we should be holy, perfect, and merciful, as is our heavenly father. This kind of imitation is based on the fact that we are God's beloved children and bear his image.²⁹ Bavinck emphasises that the Bible speaks about the imitation or following of Christ far more frequently. He elaborates this extensively.³⁰ I can give here only a very brief summary. According to Bavinck, the following of Christ in its proper sense is literally the following or accompanying of Jesus on his path, as did the disciples. Following or imitation of Christ can also be interpreted in a metaphorical, spiritual sense. Both ways of imitation presuppose a 'spiritual community' (*geestelijke levensgemeenschap*) or a 'mystical union' (*mystieke unie*) with Christ, which is sealed by baptism and which is connected with self-denying and taking up one's cross. It ought to reveal itself in our lives, as becomes clear from the fact that we should follow or imitate virtues like Christ's humbleness and meekness, love and self-denial, holiness and patience.

In the historical survey, Bavinck shows how this has been adopted in the Christian church. After a few remarks on the pure imitation of the first Christians, he makes a very rough distinction between four models of imitation of Christ: (1) the martyrs of the early Christian church; (2) the monks (the hermits in the desert, the monks in the monasteries, and beggars like the Franciscans); (3) the mystics; and (4) the rationalists.

Bavinck's opinion on these four models³¹ is nuanced: positive and critical remarks alternate. The martyrs of the early Christian church, for

²⁷ W. Gass, *Geschichte der christlichen Ethik, I-II* (Berlin: Reimer, 1881-1887). Furthermore we find references to articles in the second edition of *Real-Encyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, to the works of seventeenth century theologians like Witsius, Pictetus, Buddaeus, Ridderus, Vitranga and Voetius, and to the works of Hans Lassen Martensen, Adolf von Harless and August Friedrich Christian Vilmar.

²⁸ *GE*, §21, pp. 1-4; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', pp. 327f.

²⁹ *GE*, §21, pp. 1f.; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 327.

³⁰ *GE*, §21, pp. 3-10; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', pp. 328-31.

³¹ Cf. *RD*, 3, p. 377: 'In the Christian church, the martyrs, the monks, the beggars, the flagellants, were successively viewed as the true disciples of Jesus.'

instance, may be admired on account of their profound belief, their courage and their perseverance.³² Monastic life may be appreciated on account of its protest against the deconsacration of the church, its struggle against sin and its contributions to scholarship and society.³³ Medieval reform movements may be appreciated on account of their efforts to return to original Christianity, their 'high spiritualism' (*hooggaand spiritualisme*), their simplification of Christian doctrine and their emphasis on the 'holiness of life' (*heiligheid des levens*).³⁴ The mystics—Bavinck mentions names like Bernard of Clairvaux, Bonaventura, Tauler and Thomas of Kempen—may be appreciated on account of their 'deep mystical feelings' (*innige gevoelsmystiek*), combined with an ethical strength to follow Jesus in his meekness, modesty, mildness and love.³⁵

However, all four models of imitation of Christ are also severely criticised by Bavinck. The rationalists fall short of the work of Christ and do not have a proper view on the situation of man. This has fatal consequences for the imitation of Christ: 'Those who do not know the need of Christ as a mediator and reconciler of sin, do not need his moral example either.'³⁶ Something similar can be said about mystics, who try to push back all means between God and man and strive after an immediate communion with God. According to Bavinck this leads to a biased opinion on the imitation of Christ: 'those things, which should be sanctified and renewed, are destroyed', and Christ is no longer seen as reconciler of sin but only as 'example of the mystical union with God'.³⁷ Martyrs who have consciously sought martyrdom, for instance to receive honour or merits, forget that it is not suffering in itself that turns someone into a martyr, but only the cause or reason for which one suffers (*causa non passio facit martyrem*).³⁸ The monks are criticised because they think that the imitation of Christ consists in duplicating Christ's way of living literally or physically, and because of their withdrawal from the world.³⁹ This criti-

Ascetism and self-torture were the preeminent Christian virtues. Following Jesus consisted in copying and imitating deeds and conditions from his life, specifically from his suffering'; *ibid.*, p. 508: 'Christian discipleship consisted in copying the life and suffering of Christ, which was vividly portrayed before people's eyes. Martyrs, ascetics, and monks were the best Christians.'

³² *GE*, §21, p. 11; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 104.

³³ *GE*, §21, pp. 12ff.; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', pp. 108ff.

³⁴ *GE*, §21, pp. 12f.; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 205.

³⁵ *GE*, §21, p. 19; Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', pp. 210f.

³⁶ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 325; *GE*, §21, pp. 21, 23f.

³⁷ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 323f.; *GE*, §21, p. 23.

³⁸ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', pp. 106f., 321; *GE*, §21, p. 11.

³⁹ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', pp. 322f.; *GE*, §21, pp. 12ff.

cism is also implicitly directed to the members of Bavinck's own denomination, as becomes clear from his lecture on 'The Catholicity of Christianity and Church' (1888) and from a letter to Snouck Hurgronje.⁴⁰

Finally, several of these four models also show a 'double morality', one for all Christians, and one for those who have chosen to devote their lives to Jesus in a special way, such as monks. According to Bavinck such a double morality, which leads to a distinction between precepts or commands (*praecepta*) and counsils (*consilia*), must be rejected. It advances pride and trust in good works among those who strive for perfection, while on the other hand an average morality would be sufficient for ordinary people and the ideal of perfection and holiness is brought down to the level of practical ordinary life.⁴¹

Based on his analysis of the Greek verbs *mimeomai* and *akoloutheō* and in line with the results of his historical research, Bavinck develops his own view. First, he emphasises, imitation of Christ demands the recognition of Christ as a reconciler and mediator. This recognition is 'a condition for the imitation'. According to Bavinck this implies that Jesus Christ can only be an example to those who are born again. Our life can only be 'in accordance with Christ, if it is *from* and *in* Him'. Therefore the *unio mystica* is the foundation of the imitation of Christ.⁴² Since the *unio mystica* is a gift of God and comes into being by the Holy Spirit,⁴³ this first step in Bavinck's argument is in line with what he argued in his *Dogmatics*, viz. that not only justification, but also sanctification is a gift of God and that sanctification incorporates passive aspects.

Secondly, imitation of Christ means that Christ must be reflected in our inner being. Again this is a work of the Holy Spirit: 'The Holy Spirit conforms us to Christ in his suffering, dying, resurrection and glorification'.⁴⁴ The image of God in us is restored. Again, this is in line with the passive aspects of sanctification. Finally, our lives must also be shaped in conformity with Christ in our outer appearance. This becomes manifest in virtues like righteousness, sanctity, love and patience.⁴⁵ This is the active side of sanctification.

⁴⁰ Bavinck, 'The Catholicity of Christianity and Church', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 27 (1992), 220-51; de Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, p. 136.

⁴¹ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 112; *GE*, §21, p. 12.

⁴² *GE*, §21, p. 24.

⁴³ *RD*, 4, p. 251.

⁴⁴ *GE*, §21, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *GE*, §21, pp. 25f.

However, we may not forget, Bavinck argues, that this process is only initiated during our earthly life. It will be completed in the eschaton.⁴⁶ Implicitly he rejects perfectionism in this way. Again, this is in line with what he has argued in his doctrine of sanctification.

By the end of the articles on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck summarises: 'From Him, our Saviour (*Heiland*) and Example together, a reforming, recreating, renewing power emerges, which conforms us to Himself and restores the image of God in us'.⁴⁷ Through these words two dominant motives of Bavinck's theology resound. The first is Bavinck's view that 'grace does not abolish nature, but affirms and restores it'.⁴⁸ The second is the idea of the gospel as a leaven, an invisible change agent that leaves nothing that it touches unaltered. This makes clear that Bavinck's thinking on the imitation of Christ is closely connected to the heart of his theology.

THE IMITATION OF CHRIST AND MODERN LIFE

In spite of this connection, Bavinck does not write again on the imitation of Christ for a very long time. Over thirty years later, however, he returns to the theme. In 1918 he wrote a small booklet entitled *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life* (*De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*).⁴⁹ One year after Bavinck's death this text was also included in the book *Knowledge and Life* (*Kennis en leven*), which was edited by Bavinck's brother, containing articles dating from the earliest years of Bavinck's career.⁵⁰ In this book it replaces the series of three articles on the imitation of Christ dating from the 1880s. Bavinck's brother thus suggests that the articles and the booklet are more or less equal.

When we compare all these texts, we do indeed find some similar views in *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life*. In his 1918 booklet, Bavinck offers a very brief historical survey of Christian thinking on the imitation of Christ. Here we come across the same models of imitation as presented in the older texts.⁵¹ Furthermore Bavinck offers an analysis

⁴⁶ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 333.

⁴⁷ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus', p. 333.

⁴⁸ H. Bavinck, 'Common Grace', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 24 (1989), 62; *id.*, *RD*, 1, pp. 322, 443; *RD*, 3, p. 228.

⁴⁹ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d. [1918]).

⁵⁰ Bavinck, 'De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven', in: *id.*, *Kennis en leven. Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d. [1922]), pp. 115-44.

⁵¹ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 3f.

of how the Bible speaks about the following of God or the following of Christ. In several ways this analysis resembles what he wrote on the verbs *mimeomai* and *akoloutheō* at the start of his career.⁵² We do not come across his view on the necessity of the recognition of Christ as our Saviour and the *unio mystica* as the foundation of the imitation of Christ. But this view is presupposed, as Bavinck writes that it is principally Christ Himself who, by the Holy Spirit, reforms and conforms us into his image.⁵³ Bavinck also argues that the imitation of Christ should become manifest in virtues.⁵⁴ In the 1918 booklet, his views on the imitation of Christ are also linked to the same central motives of his theology, as was the case in the texts dating from the 1880s. He writes for instance: 'redemption is not annihilation but restoration of nature' and: 'grace presupposes and restores nature'.⁵⁵ We also see the leaven-terminology.⁵⁶ He furthermore rejects perfectionism.⁵⁷ Thus, continuity can be observed on more than one point between the older texts and the booklet *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life*.

However, in the comparison of all texts discontinuity can also be observed. Three interrelated differences catch the eye. Firstly, Bavinck begins his 1918 booklet with some observations on the war question.⁵⁸ Several other publications from the same years make clear that Bavinck was deeply marked by the disastrous events of the First World War.⁵⁹

⁵² Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 7ff.

⁵³ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 20: '[...] het was in de eerste plaats Christus zelf, die door zijn Geest de zijnen hervormt naar zijn beeld, naar datzelfde beeld hen verandert van heerlijkheid tot heerlijkheid, en ze eens naar lichaam en ziel zichzelf gelijkvormig maken zal, als ze Hem zien zullen, gelijk Hij is [...]']

⁵⁴ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, pp. 16, 20f., 30f.

⁵⁵ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 21: '[...] verlossing is niet vernietiging, maar herstel der natuur', and 29: 'de genade ondersteunt en herstelt de natuur'; cf. *ibid.*, p. 23: 'de herschepping is op de schepping gebouwd [...] de genade onderdrukt immers de natuur niet, maar herstelt ze'.

⁵⁶ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 13: '[...] de discipelen van Jezus door hun macht en aanzien geen invloed oefenen op de wereld, maar zij moeten in hunne goede werken hun licht laten schijnen voor de menschen, en zullen dezen daardoor bewegen, om hunnen Vader in de hemelen te verheerlijken [...]']

⁵⁷ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, pp. 1-3.

⁵⁹ Cf. D. van Keulen, 'Herman Bavinck and the War Question', in *Christian Faith and Violence*, ed. by D. van Keulen and M. Brinkman (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005), 1, pp. 122-40.

When we watch him ponder the issue, we cannot but conclude that he struggled fiercely with it. In May 1915, he wrote to his friend Snouck Hurgronje that as a consequence of the war 'all ethical foundations are being overturned'.⁶⁰ At the end of *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life* Bavinck comes back to the issue of the war question.⁶¹ This issue is thus the specific reason for Bavinck to write on the theme of the imitation of Christ again after thirty years.

Closely connected with the issue of the war question is a second difference. In *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life*, Bavinck offers a broader elaboration of his historical survey. He extends the lines to contemporary times by distinguishing three different views on the relationship between Christianity and culture:⁶² (1) those who feel attracted by the Sermon on the Mount and strive to live their lives in accordance with the example of Jesus; (2) those who argue that Christianity can no longer play a part, because no reconciliation is possible between the demands of the Christian gospel and the obligations of modern culture; and (3) those who argue that Christian moral principles are insufficient for public life and should be limited to personal life. This makes clear that, compared with the texts from the 1880s, Bavinck's focus has widened.

The second and third positions are rejected by Bavinck. The Christian community may not withdraw from the world, but also has the task to reform and renew the world in accordance with, what he terms, 'the principles of Christianity' (*beginselen des Christendoms*).⁶³ For that reason—and this is the third difference between Bavinck's earlier texts and the 1918 booklet—he explicitly deals in *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life* with the question of how we should interpret the Sermon on the Mount.

This question was especially urgent because several people at that time in the Netherlands argued in favour of pacifism on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount. A good example of this is a booklet entitled *War and Christianity: a Testimony* (*Oorlog en Christendom: een getuigenis*; 1914), written by the evangelist and publicist Hilbrandt Boschma (1867-1941).⁶⁴ This booklet also influenced members of the Reformed Churches, as can for

⁶⁰ de Bruijn and Harinck, *Een Leidse vriendschap*, p. 179: '[...] alle zedelijke grondslagen worden omgewoeld'.

⁶¹ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, pp. 27ff.

⁶² Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 5f.

⁶³ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 19; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 11, 21.

⁶⁴ A. Schraevesande, 'Boschma, Hilbrandt', *Biografisch Lexicon voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1998), 4, pp. 41-3.

instance be seen in the life story of the Frisian poet Fedde Schurer (1898-1968), who grew up in a reformed family. After reading Boschma's booklet and books by Tolstoy, he opted for pacifism.⁶⁵

In his exposition on how to interpret the Sermon on the Mount, Bavinck carefully seeks a balance.⁶⁶ On the one hand, he argues, we may not spiritualise the texts of the Sermon on the Mount in such a way that they obtain a meaning opposite to what is literally written. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is not only concerned with the disposition of our heart.⁶⁷ On the other hand Jesus' words may not be read literally. Jesus used images which cannot be conceived or applied in a literal sense.⁶⁸ Bavinck seeks a middle course by arguing that the examples of the Sermon on the Mount offer a 'concrete' and 'practical' illustration of what is meant by the imitation of Christ.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus unequivocally forbids his disciples to take a dispute to court, to repay evil with evil, to wreak vengeance, to hate an enemy, to swear an oath, to look at a woman lustfully, etc. In all of this Jesus means exactly what he says and says exactly what he means. He demands that his disciples not only be disposed to follow his instructions, but that they actually *do* as he says.⁶⁹

Furthermore, according to Bavinck we must realise that New Testament morality reflects the situation of an oppressed and persecuted communion. This explains why the so-called 'passive' virtues are prominently emphasised (Bavinck mentions: truth, righteousness, holiness, purity, modesty, soberness, prayer, watching, fasting, faith, love, patience, loving one's neighbour, communion, hospitality, humility, meekness and tolerance) and why the disciples are never called to stand up for their rights or to improve their position in society.⁷⁰ Later when the church was no longer persecuted, Christians also saw it as their task to reform and renew the world. In that situation passive virtues were no longer sufficient and

⁶⁵ J. Liemburg, *Fedde Schurer 1898-1968: Biografie van een Friese koerier* (Leeuwarden: Friese Pers Boekerij, 2010), pp. 44f.

⁶⁶ Cf. J. Bolt, 'Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck', pp. 64f.

⁶⁷ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 13: 'Want het gaat eenzijdig niet aan, om deze woorden zoo te vergeestelijken, dat zij het tegendeel bedoelen van wat er eigenlijk staat.'

⁶⁸ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, pp. 14, 20.

⁶⁹ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 14 (translation: J. Bolt, 'Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck', p. 65; italics by Bavinck).

⁷⁰ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, pp. 14-18.

had to be supplemented with 'active' virtues.⁷¹ As recreation is built on creation, Christians should respect culture, Bavinck argues, and should combat decay, which as a consequence of sin penetrated in it.⁷² This has to be done by spiritual and moral means.

Considerations like these make clear that the booklet *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life* reflects a growing awareness of the hermeneutical question.

CONCLUSION

From what I have argued I will draw three conclusions.

First, we have seen that at the beginning of his career Herman Bavinck develops his views on the imitation of Christ within his *Reformed Ethics*. These views, however, do not stand by themselves, but are closely connected to the doctrine of sanctification, which he develops in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. According to Bavinck both sanctification as well as the imitation of Christ incorporate passive and active aspects. Due to this, there is a close correspondence between Bavinck's (ethical) views on the imitation of Christ and his (dogmatic) views on sanctification. Bavinck also connects his views on the imitation of Christ with dominant motives of his theology, e.g. his thesis that grace does not abolish, but rather affirms and restores nature, his conviction that Christians may not withdraw from the world, but rather do have to fulfill a task in the world, and his use of the leaven-terminology. This is a fine illustration of the close relation in Bavinck's work between dogmatics and ethics. Because of this I fully agree with John Bolt when he argues that 'to do justice to Bavinck as a theologian and Christian thinker, he must be taken serious as an ethicist as well as a dogmatician'.⁷³

Secondly, speaking about the active side of the imitation of Christ, it is striking that during his entire career Bavinck always put emphasis on virtues: humbleness, meekness, patience, purity, holiness, sanctity, righteousness, mercy, love, etc. From this we can conclude that Bavinck's ethics can be characterised as a theological ethics of virtues.

Finally, comparing Bavinck's texts on the imitation of Christ, we observe both continuity and discontinuity. As a Christian thinker Bavinck always works from the inner perspective of Christian faith. The texts dating from the 1880s are written from an ecclesiastical perspective and

⁷¹ Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 19ff.

⁷² Bavinck, *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven*, p. 23f.; cf. p. 26: 'Over heel de linie van den strijd heen hebben de Christenen in de cultuur tusschen het goede en het kwade te schiften'.

⁷³ Bolt, 'Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck', p. 47.

are directed to a limited audience: members and students of his own congregation. The booklet *The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life* is written from another point of view and is directed to a broader audience.⁷⁴ The fact that the 1918 booklet begins and ends with the war question makes clear that Bavinck's perspective has been broadened from church and theology to culture and theology. As this move is characteristic of all of Bavinck's work, we can conclude that the developments in his views on the imitation of Christ reflect the development of his work as a whole. His considerations on how the Sermon on the Mount should be interpreted make clear that this also includes a growing awareness of the hermeneutical problem.

⁷⁴ Cf. Bolt, 'Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck', p. 62.