Summary

This dissertation is a comparative study of two theologians, Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder, focused on a common ethical motif: the imitation of Christ. This study argues that the theological ethics of both Herman Bavinck, a Reformed theologian, and John Howard Yoder, an Anabaptist theologian, in dialogue, can helpfully illuminate ethical discourse on imitating Christ in North American evangelical ethics. Rejecting accounts that understand the relationship between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions as mere polarity, this study argues that the two traditions share important commonalities even on the imitation of Christ, an ethical motif rarely centrally employed in Reformed ethics.

Chapter One of this dissertation, “What would Jesus Do?: Evangelical Ethics and the Imitation of Christ,” identifies and situates the central question: what can a dialogue between Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder on the imitation of Christ contribute to North American evangelical ethics in the twenty-first century? This chapter examines the imitation tradition in North American evangelicalism, with a particular focus on the rise of the “WWJD” movement in the early twentieth century. While popular piety enthusiastically grabbed hold of the motif, the tradition out of which the WWJD movement began, the Reformed tradition, continued to affirm the primacy of the law, not the person of Jesus, in their theological ethics, highlighting a tension in North American evangelical ethics. However, the recent discovery of Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* contains insights that can, arguably, help to bridge this divide. In this work, Bavinck argues that the imitation of Christ is the heart of the spiritual life. Together with John Howard Yoder, an Anabaptist theologian whose work affirmed the imitation of Christ as an ethical motif and had a demonstrable influence on North American evangelical
ethics, this dissertation argues that the ethics of Herman Bavinck is an important addition to Reformed ethics, and to the current ethical discourse in North America. The two are an unlikely pair, but given recent scholarly attention to Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, there is ample groundwork laid for a constructive dialogue between the two theologians on the imitation of Christ.

Both John Howard Yoder, a trained historical theologian, and Herman Bavinck treat the examples of imitating Christ throughout church history as worthy of serious theological examination. Their articulations of a proper imitation ethic cannot be understood apart from these historic forms of imitating Christ. As a way to historically situate the work of both theologians, Chapter Two, “Imitating Christ Throughout the Ages: A Brief Survey of the Imitation Tradition in the History of Christian Spirituality,” will present a survey of the imitation tradition throughout Christian thought: the writings of the New Testament, early Christian martyrdom, the ascetic movement, the mendicant orders, Thomas à Kempis, and the Reformation. These periods (and persons) serve to illustrate the richness of the imitation tradition in early Christian thought, providing an introduction to the thinkers that both Bavinck and Yoder address to in their reflections on the imitation of Christ. Both theologians articulate their understanding of the proper imitation of Christ in conversation with historic forms of imitating Christ; looking to the ways in which Bavinck and Yoder respond to these historic forms of imitating Jesus lays the groundwork for the way in which the two theologians share important affirmations regarding the proper imitation of Christ.

The focus of this dissertation is on the contribution that the ethics of Herman Bavinck, in dialogue with John Howard Yoder, can bring to North American evangelical ethics in the twenty-first century. Thus, Chapter Three, “Imitation in the thought of Herman Bavinck: Law-
Patterned Imitation of the Virtues of Christ,” explores the imitation of Christ in the thought of Herman Bavinck. Establishing Bavinck as not only a dogmatician, but also an ethicist, this chapter surveys the writings of Bavinck on imitating Jesus: his 1885/86 essays, his 1918 essays, *Reformed Dogmatics*, and his manuscript on Reformed Ethics. Throughout Bavinck’s career, the imitation of Christ is a consistent emphasis in his writing. The imitation of Christ is, for Bavinck, the shape of the Christian life. It is a comprehensive ethical ideal, necessarily interwoven into many of the other key theological motifs in Bavinck’s thought: trinity, grace restores nature, and the leavening power of the gospel in the world. This chapter investigates Bavinck’s uniquely Reformed way of understanding and applying the theme of the imitation of Christ.

As a way to understand the import of Bavinck’s thought in the twenty-first century, and to further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, this dissertation seeks to place Bavinck in dialogue with a prominent Anabaptist theologian, John Howard Yoder. Chapter Four, “Imitation in the Thought of John Howard Yoder: Imitating Jesus in his Cross,” establishes Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. This chapter first examines the theological work of Yoder in light of recent revelations regarding his sexual abuse; his theological framework continues to be powerfully influential for many, but it also played a role in his abuse. This chapter then surveys Yoder’s writings, with a focus on *The Politics of Jesus*, demonstrating that throughout his work, Yoder’s unfailing appeal to the imitation of Christ, only in his cross, can be seen. This chapter then explores Yoder’s biblical justification for the normativity of Jesus’ cross for the Christian, and the application of this ethic in concrete Christian life.

Having established both Bavinck and Yoder’s understandings of the proper imitation of Christ, this dissertation seeks to place them in dialogue. Chapter Five, “Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue: Common Affirmations on the Imitation of Christ,” argues that,
despite their differences, Bavinck and Yoder’s imitation ethics ought to be understood through the lens of intra-family dialogue and debate. Situating this conversation in the history of Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, this chapter explores the shared emphasis that Bavinck and Yoder hold on the imitation of Christ: the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians, an ethic grounded in a relationship of restoration between creation and redemption, an ethic for all Christians that encompasses all of life, and a qualified ethic. These shared affirmations lead Bavinck and Yoder to nearly identical rejections of the historic forms of the imitation of Christ. While an ethic of imitation based on the law and an ethic of imitation based on the cross may not initially appear similar, this chapter argues that Bavinck and Yoder’s understandings of the imitation of Christ are grounded in important, common theological affirmations.

The imitation ethics of Bavinck and Yoder are not, however, identical. The two sustain important differences. Chapter Six, “Furthering the Conversation: The Maintained Disagreements between Bavinck and Yoder on the Imitation of Christ,” explores the differences between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ. But even amidst sustained difference, Bavinck and Yoder’s shared theological affirmations emerge. Many of the differences between the two imitation ethics can be seen to flow from common affirmations. Thus, the two theologians can constructively speak to, and critique, one another. This chapter then explores the explicit critiques that Bavinck and Yoder raise toward the other’s tradition. As a means to further the conversation, this chapter concludes by identifying implicit critiques that the two theologians may raise toward the other. Investigating these implicit critiques seeks to further dialogue between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions and understand how these two articulations of the imitation of Christ can shape and challenge one another, as a means of informing a Reformed, evangelical articulation of the imitation of Christ in the twenty-first century.
This dissertation concludes by bringing together insights from Bavinck and Yoder, demonstrating the way that Bavinck and Yoder, in dialogue together, can build bridges among North American evangelicals. Chapter Seven, “Following the Way of Jesus: A Reformed, Evangelical Imitation Ethic in the Twenty-First Century,” argues that the theological affirmations shared by Yoder and Bavinck are also shared in the evangelical ethical traditions that draw from these theologians, traditions that seem to offer opposing perspectives on the imitation of Christ. Placing Bavinck and Yoder in dialogue demonstrates the ways that seemingly disparate ethical traditions can work together, in their shared theological affirmations. But the two in dialogue do not merely serve as a bridge among traditions. Yoder also provides important critiques and correctives to neo-Calvinist ethics. In dialogue, the imitation ethics of Bavinck and Yoder can contribute to a Reformed understanding of the imitation of Christ in the twenty-first century. By articulating the Reformed imitation ethic of Herman Bavinck, neo-Calvinists not only have a seat at the table in the longstanding debate over what it means to properly imitate Christ, but Bavinck can serve as a means to helpfully illuminate ethical discourse in twenty-first century North American evangelicalism, both by building bridges and providing the building blocks for a biblically faithful, contextually sensitive Reformed imitation ethic.