REFORMED AND ANABAPTIST DIALOGUE ON THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

EXPLORING THE THOUGHT OF HERMAN BAVINCK AND JOHN HOWARD YODER
ON FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

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For what is it to follow [Christ], except to imitate him.

—Augustine

It is precisely all those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law that Christ in his words and deeds leaves as an example for us.

—Herman Bavinck

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

—Philippians 2:1-8
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, unpublished manuscript GE


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CHAPTER ONE

What Would Jesus Do?
Evangelical Ethics and the Imitation of Christ

“WWJD?”: When Imitating Christ Became Cool

In the 1990s, thousands of Christians teenagers were asking the question, “What would Jesus do?,” as a way of patterning their life on the example of Christ. This question was in no way new, the theme of imitating Christ has an enduring history in Christian thought, but it was re-popularized in North America in the form of an acronym. Four letters, WWJD, were embroidered into bracelets that became a staple of both fashion and young adult discipleship in North American evangelical circles in the 1990s. By 1997, a major Christian bookseller was selling 57,000 bracelets a week; WWJD bracelets had “caught the evangelical imagination.”¹

The trend of reminding oneself to ask “What would Jesus Do” in everyday situations by emblazoning the acronym WWJD on bracelets grew to include other items, such as necklaces, key chains, coffee mugs, compact discs, devotional books, journals, and Bibles.² These four letters became ubiquitous in North American evangelicalism in the 1990s.

The WWJD acronym, which gained an enormous reach and influence, had a relatively small beginning. In 1989, Janie Tinklenberg, a youth leader at Calvary Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan was introduced to, and captivated by, the question “What would Jesus Do?” by reading Charles Sheldon’s classic work In His Steps.³ In this popular novel, Sheldon tells the

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story of Rev. Henry Maxwell who challenged members of his congregation to “pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’” The practice intrigued Tinklenberg; she wanted a tangible reminder for the teenagers in her youth group to ask this same question, a “personal reminder that they had made a conscious decision to live life by a new standard.” As that reminder, Tinklenberg asked another church member to make a few hundred bracelets so that the teenagers, too, could participate in Sheldon’s challenge. From there, the bracelets – and the slogan – exploded. Production of the bracelets skyrocketed, going from few hundred bracelets to 20,000 bracelets a week by 1997. With this increase in popularity, WWJD bracelets were seen not only in the sub-culture of North American evangelicalism, but in popular, mainstream culture: on the radio, on the wrists of sports stars, and even during presidential elections. The question, “What would Jesus do?”, had become firmly embedded in the minds of North Americans, especially young evangelicals.

The Imitation Tradition in North American Evangelicalism

It is not a great surprise that the question, “What Jesus would do?”, and thus the theme of the imitation of Christ, was captivating. The theme of imitating Christ had become quite prominent in North American evangelical ethics in the 20th century. Sheldon’s novel, which captured the attention of Tinkleberg in the late 1990s, has had long-standing influence in North

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7 Graff, “Four letters that shook the world.”
8 Graff, “Four letters that shook the world.” Paul Harvey, a popular radio broadcaster mentioned these bracelets in the spring of 1997; in 1999, as he was campaigning for the White House, Al Gore told a reporter that the one question that guided him was “What would Jesus do?” The slogan was even adopted and adapted by non-religious groups, like t-shirts with a picture of basketball player Michael Jordan asking the question, “What would Jordan do?”. The popularity of the WWJD products also spread beyond North America.
American Christian thought. *In His Steps* was a best seller, one of the “great American tracts.”

While Sheldon’s novel introduced the specific question that took hold of the evangelical imagination (“What would Jesus do?”), the Christocentric focus of the evangelical tradition, emphasizing Jesus as the pattern of the Christian life, was already prominent in Sheldon’s day. This turn from the older, theocentric tradition (also seen in Sheldon’s novel), toward a focus on Christ in ethical discourse is often associated with the work of Horace Bushnell, who “turned his attention to a fresh analysis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ . . . he placed an emphasis upon Jesus’ sacrifice as an example of God’s love for the Christian and the Christian’s love of the neighbor.” B.B. Warfield similarly emphasized the importance of imitating the example of Christ. Warfield began one of his well known sermons, preached at Princeton Theological Seminary, with these words:

“Christ our example.” After “Christ our Redeemer,” no words more deeply stir the Christian heart than these. . . . In [Christ], in a word, find the moral ideal historically realized, and we bow before it as sublime and yearn after it with all the assembled desires of our renewed souls.

While the theme of Christ as a moral ideal was not universally emphasized during the twentieth

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9 James H. Smylie, “Sheldon’s *In His Steps*: Conscience and Discipleship,” *Theology Today* 32 (April, 1974), 32-33. While the exact number of copies of *In His Steps* that have been printed is unknown, the number is certainly in the millions. Estimates range from 2,000,000 to 30,000,000 (see also Paul S. Boyer, “*In His Steps*: A Reappraisal,” *American Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 1971), 61).

10 Daniel Shore, “WWJD? The Genealogy of a Syntactic Form,” *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Autumn, 2010), 14. This theme is generally traced back to Sheldon’s work. The novel begins with Rev. Henry Maxwell’s sermon on 1 Peter 2:21 which reads, “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow his steps.” A parishioner then asks “what would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following in His steps?” (Sheldon, *In His Steps*, 12).

11 Smylie, “Sheldon’s *In His Steps*, 34.

12 Smylie, “Sheldon’s *In His Steps*, 36; see Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice*, 2 vols. (New York, 1903). In *American Christianity*, Smith, Handy and Loetscher further clarify that what Bushnell began was a “distinctly evangelical type of liberalism,” later identified as “liberal Christianity”, a movement which “deliberately endeavored to construct their system of thought in terms of the person and work of Jesus Christ.” (H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity* vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 255.). While Sheldon is a part of this “broader liberal movement,” (Smylie, “Sheldon’s *In His Steps*, 43), his ideas had great reach. Daniel Shore noted that “among North American Protestants, ‘what would Jesus do’ has become the dominant form of *imitatio Christi* in modernity.” (Shore, “WWJD?”, 3).

century, many prominent theologians continued the trend toward a focus on Christ in theological ethics. Influential North American evangelicals, such as Carl F.H. Henry, the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, discussed Jesus “as the ideal of Christian ethics.” Henry traces the reception of Christ as example through many periods of history. Henry concludes that the “true picture of Christian morals is lost whenever Jesus is not taken as the moral example” for, “the example of Jesus defines the will of God in action.” Other influential theologians, such as John Howard Yoder, continue this trend, as seen in *The Politics of Jesus* where Yoder lays out a view of the Christian life that considers Jesus “normative for a contemporary Christian social ethic.” Throughout the twentieth century there was a continued emphasis on imitating the example of Christ in the life of the Christian believer in North American evangelicalism – an emphasis which continues today.

14 James Gustafson, in his discussion on Jesus as the moral ideal, notes that there are prominent theologians during this time that instead echo the refrain “Jesus expresses no conception of a human ideal.” (James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 154, citing Bultmann, *Jesus and the World* (New York, 1934), 53). Gustafson’s work on *Christ and the Moral Life*, however, is yet another example of a thorough exploration of Christ as the pattern of the moral life of the Christian during this time. Carl Henry also notes the trend to “simply ignore Jesus” in discourse on ethics, including Bultmann, Barth, and Brunner (Carl F.H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 404-405).


16 In this, Henry references Sheldon’s work (Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 398). Many discussions of imitating Christ during this time cite Sheldon, as either fodder or foil, but not all; others came to prioritize the theme outside of his popular work.

17 Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 410, 413.

18 Yoder, *PoJ*, 11. Yoder also references Sheldon’s important work on the theme, expressing his challenge to the methodology of Sheldon, but affirming the impulse to ask how one ought to imitate the example of Christ.

19 In the introduction to his chapter on “Jesus Christ, The Pattern,” Gustafson lists just a few of the many theologians during this time period that discussed Christ as an example: Newman Smyth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Joseph Sittler. (Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life*, 151). Carl Henry also mentions other prominent twentieth century North American evangelicals, such as Hillyer H. Straton who says “Christian ethics has been centered in Jesus” (Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 398, citing Hillyer H. Straton, *Thinking Where Jesus Thought* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1945), 59). Very recent books, including *Imitating God in Christ: Recapturing a Biblical Pattern* by Jason Hood (2013) and *Reflect: Becoming Yourself by Mirroring the Greatest Person in History* by Thaddeus J. Williams (2017), again draw on this theme for the pattern of discipleship. These works focus on the practice of imitating Christ, rather than the methodological questions that will be asked in this dissertation. Interestingly, while both draw from a broad range of theologians, neo-Calvinist thought occurs in both books. The epigraph of the first chapter of Hood’s book is a quote from Herman Bavinck, though Hood does not mention Bavinck’s understanding...
The theme of imitating Christ in the life of the Christian is, of course, not newly introduced in North American ethics. In his novel, Sheldon introduced the question, “What would Jesus do,” a phrase which became “the ethical question par excellence” for Christians “inside and outside of the evangelical community.”\textsuperscript{20} The popularity of adorning one’s wrist with a colorful bracelet emblazoned with this reminder demonstrates pervasiveness of the imitation motif in North American evangelicalism. But, reflecting on how the believer ought to model their actions on the example of Christ – a tradition of which Sheldon is a part – has a much longer history in Christian ethical teaching.\textsuperscript{21} The question of what Jesus would do, or how to apply the actions of Christ to our own life, is an old question, one already asked by Christ’s own disciples. In Matthew 4, Peter and Andrew, then James and John heard Jesus call to follow him. All four immediately responded to that call leaving behind what had come before to follow in the way of Jesus. Again and again, throughout the New Testament, believers are called upon to follow – and to imitate – Jesus. Paul charges his readers to “become imitators of us and the Lord.”\textsuperscript{22} In John’s first epistle, the instruction is similarly clear: “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} Daniel Shore recounts that this question has “become the ethical question par excellence” for Christians “inside and outside of the evangelical community (Shore, “WWJD?”, 2).\textsuperscript{21} In his essay, \textit{WWJD? The Genealogy of a Syntactic Form}, Daniel Shore looks more closely at the exhortations given in the New Testament, as compared to that of Sheldon’s exhortation. In the New Testament, believers are exhorted to “imitate what Christ did do, not what he would do” (emphasis original). Sheldon adds the subjunctive, what \textit{would} Jesus do? (Shore, “WWJD?”, 5) Here, we are simply looking at the tradition of imitation broadly, a tradition to which Sheldon and the New Testament witness both belong.\textsuperscript{22} 1 Thessalonians 1:6, emphasis added; see also 1 Corinthians 11:1, among other verses: “be followers of me, as I am of Christ.” All Biblical references are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.\textsuperscript{23} 1 John 2:6; the biblical charges to follow in the ways of Christ, or be conformed to the image of Christ, continue throughout the New Testament.
The New Testament’s repeated charge to walk in the ways of Christ, or, to imitate Christ, continues throughout church history. Ignatius exhorted his fellow believers with these words: “let us imitate the Lord.”

Augustine claimed, “For what is it to follow [Christ], except to imitate him.”

Antony, one of the great Desert Fathers, charged his followers to “draw inspiration from Christ always.”

Bernard of Clairvaux understood imitating Christ to be a key aspect of Christian faith, using the word of John’s gospel to elaborate: “if you imitate [Christ] you will not walk in darkness; you will have the light of life.”

Francis of Assisi began his Earliest Rule by instructing the brothers to “follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Thomas Aquinas argued that Christ is the “infallible standard of truth” who has “[given] himself as an example.”

Many others throughout church history have also championed this important, biblical theme, including Thomas à Kempis whose work, De Imitatione Christi or The Imitation of Christ, was – and continues to be – widely circulated as devotional material for both Catholics and Protestants.

Thomas began this popular devotional with these words: “He who follows Me, walks not in darkness.”

The imitation of Christ has been employed relatively consistently throughout Christian history, although the practice of imitating Christ varied greatly.

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30 See, for example, the word of Origen, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Abelard as other influential theologians that consistently wrote of the Imitatio Christi. The thinkers listed here are primarily in line with four important periods in Christian spirituality – the writings of the New Testament, early Christian martyrdom, the ascetic movement, and the mendicant orders. Each of these four periods will be surveyed in chapter two.

throughout different times and places.

The Oddity of Imitating Christ in the Dutch Reformed Tradition

The imitation of Christ is an enduring theme throughout Christian history that gained great traction in twentieth century North American evangelical theology. Thus it should not surprise us that atmosphere was ripe for a rapid spread of the WWJD trend among North American evangelicals.  

What is surprising, however, is that this re-popularizing of the question, “what would Jesus do?”, came out of a Reformed congregation, from a denomination with its roots in the Dutch Reformed tradition. As Richard Mouw has noted, the Dutch Reformed tradition, specifically the neo-Calvinist tradition, has not developed a robust understanding of theological ethics. In the theological ethics that the tradition has developed, a focus on what Jesus would do – that is, on imitating Christ – has not been prominent; the imitation of Christ has often played little to no role for leading ethicists seeking to establish an ethical norm for the Christian life. Rather, neo-Calvinist ethicists have tended to highlight the

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33 The Reformed Church in America (RCA) began in 1628, originating from the Netherlands. Until 1764, ministers were sent to congregations in North America from the Netherlands. The RCA declared its independence from the Gereformeerde Kerk in the Netherlands in 1792 (Robert P. Swierenga and Elton J. Bruins, Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Nineteenth Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 43).

34 Richard Mouw and James K.A. Smith, “An Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue: Continuing our Conversation with Richard Mouw,” in Comment Magazine, September 20, 2013. https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/an-anabaptist-reformed-dialogue-continuing-our-conversation-with-richard-mouw/. Here, Mouw says, “one of the problems in Neo-Calvinism is that we've never really developed an ethics. We have politics and we have a good economic theory and a lot of other things. But how do you live your life? We really don't have the kind of Calvinist ethics that can stand alongside of a Hauerwasian ethics.” In Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport, he similarly argues that “One area, for example, where I believe Calvinism has been embarrassingly weak is in ethics” (Richard Mouw, Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 114). Wilhelm Geesink made a similar claim, already in 1897 in an address entitled “Ethics in Reformed Theology,” stating that there was a “dearth in our time of specifically Reformed ethical studies.” (W. Geesink, De ethiek in de gereformeerde theologie. Rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat der Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam op 20 October 1897 (Amsterdam: Kirchner, 1897), 6: “Deze armoede van onzen tijd aan specifiek Gereformeerde ethische studie.”) Bavinck makes a similar claim in Hedendaagsche moral, “In our circles, we are greatly lacking in publications which discuss and elucidate the moral principle and questions of the present day” (Herman Bavinck, Hedendaagsche moraal (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1902), 7).
primacy of the law (the Ten Commandments) within ethics.

The irony of the focal point of the imitation trend in young evangelicals, the WWJD bracelet, beginning in a Reformed church can be seen in Tinkelberg’s own church, which clearly demonstrated the neo-Calvinist tendency towards focusing on the law in its own practice. While the youth were asking “what would Jesus do?” as a guide for their daily actions, they were being instructed in the Sunday service to look to the law for their ethical guide. In fact, a sermon entitled “What does God want me to do?” was preached in May 7, 1989, the same year the church youth group began to wear the bracelets. This sermon, a message on Acts 15:36-16:10, addressed the same question: how ought a Christian determine what God requires of them in daily life. But here, the instructive example is Paul, not Jesus. Congregants were given four ways to know the will of God for their lives: (1) through the circumstances of their life, (2) in the needs of those around them, (3) by “simply set[ting] out,” as Paul does in this scripture passage, and (4) by listening to God through his written word, in the clear and unequivocal teachings of Scripture.35 This sermon did not hold up Christ as an example to follow. Similarly, an order of worship from the same time period shows a basic pattern for Sunday Worship: prelude, greeting, call to worship, congregational singing, prayer of confession, assurance of pardon, the will of God for our lives, more congregational singing, and then on to the hearing of God’s word and response to God’s word. While most of the bulletins from this season of the church’s life were not preserved in the archives, “special service” bulletins were, including a service from June 30, 1985 where the will of God for our lives took the form of a responsive reading, entitled “God’s Commandments.” The congregation’s practice embodied the traditional neo-Calvinist emphasis: the law of God is the means by which we know how God would have us act; the law is the basis

for theological ethics.

**A Brief History of the Imitation of Christ in Neo-Calvinist Ethics**

Wilhelm Geesink, the principal ethicist at the Vrije Universiteit from 1890 to 1923 and thus the leading ethicist of early Dutch neo-Calvinism, demonstrates the primacy of the law within neo-Calvinist theological ethics in his two major ethical works, *Van’s Heeren Ordinantiën* and *Gereformeerde Ethiek*. As John Bolt details in his book on the imitation of Christ, Geesink’s focus on the law was not due to his lack of knowledge or exposure to the imitation tradition; on the contrary, Geesink wrote his dissertation on Gerard Zerbolt, a Dutch writer who was a member of the Brethren of the Common Life and an important influence on Thomas à Kempis. It would have been impossible to be immersed in the life and thinking of Zerbolt and not be exposed to the imitation theme. Indeed, the influence of Zerbolt on Geesink’s thought has been demonstrated by his biographer, Hepp.

Despite much exposure to the theme, the imitation of Christ does not play a significant role in Geesink’s ethics. When he did reference the imitation of Christ, Geesink argued that imitating Christ ought to be thought of as submission to God’s secret will, not an ethical norm.

In *Van’s Heeren Ordinantiën*, Geesink offers a detailed analysis of the laws of God in the natural and moral world (Volume I) and an exposition of the Ten Commandments (Volume II). Here, Geesink comes closest to mentioning the imitation of Christ in his exposition of the eighth

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37 As John Bolt describes, Hepp “claims that ‘devotion’ was ‘the band of fellowship’ between Geesink and Zerbolt and that Geesink’s dissertation work was ‘of inestimable influence for his latter life’ especially as a ‘training school for his instruction in ethics’” (Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 20-21).
commandment, but this discussion does not substantively employ the theme of imitating Christ as an ethical norm for the life of the believer. Similarly, In Gereformeerde Ethiek, Geesink focuses on the law. In this work, he referenced imitation (navolging) on two occasions, in his discussion of the first and fourth commandment; only in his use of navolging in reference to the first commandment, is Geesink referring to the imitation of Jesus. His other references to imitation are referring to the imitation of God. Neither of these references, however, amount to a robust concept of imitating Christ as a guide for the Christian life. For Geesink, the law is the unequivocal guide for the life of the Christian.

Geesink’s adherence to the primacy of the law can be seen throughout his works, including his writings directly on the commandments. In his work on the fourth commandment, we again see his appeal to the primacy of the law, and Jesus as the one who again confirms the creational nature of the commandments. In this work, he also elaborates on the way in which each of the Ten Commandments proclaims God’s will. Speaking of the first three commandments, he writes that these commandments “contain God’s revealed will for the

42 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 21.
43 For his only reference to the imitation of Christ in this volume, see: Geesink, Gereformeerde Ethiek, vol. 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1931), 246. Here, Geesink is discussing the cross of Christ, and the believer’s resulting willingness to undergo suffering in their own life, submitting to the will of God. Geesink also, on occasion, refers to the charge to be imitators of God, as he does in the fourth commandment (Geesink, Gereformeerde Ethiek, 365-366, 370-371). For more on the relationship between Jesus and the fourth commandment, see: W. Geesink, The Fourth Commandment, trans. Gilbert Zekveld (1998), 57-66; see also: Bolt, Theological Analysis, 22 for a discussion on Geesink and the imitation of Christ. As Bolt points out, Geesink “speaks to an ‘imitation of Jesus’ in the context of the first commandment and the obligation of Christian submission to the sovereignty of God. . . . Geesink specifically distinguishes self-denial and submission on the one hand from obedience on the other. The cross of Christ represents his submission to God’s (hidden) will of decree in contrast to obedience which has to do with the revealed will of God. Thus ‘imitation’ involving self-denial is not an ethical norm, it has to do with submission to the hidden will of God.” In the context of the fourth commandment, Geesink says that because God rests on the seventh day, we are also to rest, for we are called to imitate God. Here, his only other use of navolging is as an imitator of God.
44 In his work on the fourth commandment, for example, Geesink discusses Christ’s reference to work and rest in John 17:5: “My Father worketh hitherto.” Here, Geesink argues, Christ refers back to the creational nature of the Sabbath. Sabbath is a creation ordinance which is “a law implanted or ‘created within us.’” (Geesink, The Fourth Commandment, 19-20); Christ does not add to this ordinance, nor is Christ seen as one we imitate in his following of this commandment. Rather, Christ confirms the creational nature of the command. Jesus, too, Geesink argues, kept the Sabbath (Geesink, The Fourth Commandment, 58-59, 64-66).
existence and behaviour of our direct relationship to Him.” The fourth and fifth commandments continue to express God’s “revealed will,” not only related to humanity’s relationship to God, but also our relationship to one another: they “contain God’s revealed will for our existence and behaviour in our direct relationship to Him, as well as to our fellowman, and so not only embody a religious, but also . . . a moral or ethical character.”45 The last five commandments, Geesink argues, “teach us how according to God’s will, we must behave toward our fellowman.”46 All together, then, the Ten Commandments determine how humanity is to conduct themselves religiously and ethically.47 They determine what constitutes right relationship with God and neighbor. Thus, the Ten Commandments remain, for Geesink, the guide for the Christian life; they make known the will of God for humanity.

The primacy of the law in neo-Calvinist ethics continues in later generations of ethicists; this emphasis can be found in both Dutch and North American neo-Calvinists. Lewis Smedes (1921-2002), a well-known North American theologian, is a prominent neo-Calvinist ethicist from the twentieth century whose work displays the same emphasis. In his primer on Christian ethics, Mere Morality, Smedes lays out “what God expects of ordinary people,” appealing to the words of Ecclesiastes, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.”48 For Smedes, Ten Commandments determine how we understand God’s will for humanity. The law is the guiding norm for human

45 Geesink, The Fourth Commandment, 3.
47 Geesink differentiates between commandments that have a “religious character,” a “moral character” and a “religious and moral character.” Commandments one, two, and three have an “exclusive religious character,” commandments four and five have primarily a religious character, but “also, to a lesser extent, a moral or ethical character,” and the rest of the commandments “contain an exclusive moral character.” (Geesink, The Fourth Commandment, 3-4, 11).
48 Ecclesiastes 12:13, quoted by Lewis Smedes in Mere Morality, 2; emphasis original to Smedes’ quotation.
behavior. The Ten Commandments, given to the people of Israel at Sinai, are also given to us. As seen in Geesink, a primacy of the law in Smedes’ discussion of ethics does not negate a discussion of Christ; for Smedes, the commandments are the “way of life in Christ.” Smedes nuances his law-based ethic with themes of love and justice, fulfillment of the law in Christ, and an emphasis on the role of grace, but never shies from seeing the Ten Commandments as the guiding norm for ethics. In *Mere Morality*, Smedes never uses language of *imitating* Christ. Rather, he speaks of Jesus as the “living model” of love who highlights that these ancient commands given at Sinai depend on love. The believer, then, acting under the guiding norms of love and justice, must discern the appropriate and fitting application of the moral laws given in the Ten Commandments. Throughout his work, Smedes upholds this basic neo-Calvinist ethical theme: the primacy of the law in theological ethics.

H.M. Kuitert (1924-2017), Professor of Ethics and Introduction to Dogmatics at the Vrije Universiteit from 1967-1989 and well known Dutch theologian, is another theologian from within the Reformed, neo-Calvinist tradition who asserts the primacy of the law for Christian morality in his work. While Kuitert is another prominent Reformed theologian, and thus, it is fitting that we briefly look to his work to establish the primacy of the law in Reformed thought, the majority of his work does not primarily attend to the law and the imitation of Christ. Much of Kuitert’s writing explores questions of hermeneutics and dogmatics, themes which he finds

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50 Smedes, *Mere Morality*, 12.
51 Smedes, *Mere Morality*, 13-14, 48-50. This theme is also present in Smedes’ other works. See, for example, Lewis B. Smedes, *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 81; Lewis B. Smedes, “The Christ of the Present Time [I],” *Reformed Journal* 16, no. 9 (November 1, 1966): 6-7.
necessarily connected. But, in the midst of works on these themes, we can find glimpses of his continuity with the Reformed tradition on the question of Christian morality: he affirms the Ten Commandments as the ongoing, universal revelation of God’s will for humanity and rejects the imitation of Christ as a proper ethical motif to guide Christian life. While Kuitert does not devote all of his writing to Christian ethics and, in particular, the imitation of Christ, he is quite clear on the place of Jesus in theology and the Christian life. Responding to “existentialist theology,” he asserts the necessity, and historicity, of the resurrection. On this, and the person of Jesus, faith is grounded. But as he discusses the implications of Christ’s death and resurrection, we begin to catch glimmers of his rejection of an ethic based on the imitation of Jesus. He writes that

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

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53 H.M. Kuitert, *The Reality of Faith: A Way Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Existentialist Theology*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 10; this work is a translation of H.M. Kuitert, *De realiteit van het geloof* (Kampen: Kok, 1966). He writes: “Hermeneutical questions are dogmatical kinds of questions, just as dogmatical questions have a hermeneutical aspect. The job of hermeneutics is to set up rules for reading the Bible; therefore, it also sets up rules for building a dogmatics.”

54 The survey that follows is not an attempt to summarize the whole of Kuitert’s writing. Rather, it is a very brief survey of Kuitert’s references to imitation, which are predominantly found in his early work. Thus, his latter work, where many have noted a shift in his thought, is not covered. For brief commentary on the shift in Kuitert’s thought, see: Gerard C. den Hertog, “Christian Social Ethics as a Form of Missionary Ecclesiology: A Case Study of the Dutch Reformed Experience,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 49 (2014): 174-185; John Bolt, “An Opportunity Lost and Regained: Herman Bavinck on Revelation and Religion,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24 (2013): 81-96; Gijsbert van den Brink and Stephan van Erp, “Ignoring God Triune? The Doctrine of the Trinity in Dutch Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (Jan. 2009): 72-90; and more. Van den Brink and van Erp perhaps articulate the shifts in Kuitert’s thinking most succinctly: “Given the ongoing development of Kuitert’s thinking, it should be realized that this book does not state his views in general, but only his views at that moment” (79).

55 Kuitert, *The Reality of Faith*, 163; see also H.M. Kuitert, *Do You Understand What You Read?: On Understanding and Interpreting the Bible*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 40; this work is a translation of H.M. Kuitert, *Verstaat Gij Wat Gij Leest?* (Kampen: Kok, 1968). Here, Kuitert writes: “Faith begins at the only point possible – with what the evangelists and the apostles tell us about Jesus. That God has revealed Himself as the Saviour of our world in the words and work of Jesus of Nazareth, in His suffering, His cross, and His resurrection – that is where faith begins. Without the message of Jesus Christ, there would be no faith.”
its significance in itself as history. . . . by the power of His loving identification with us, 
*His story* can now be told as *Our story*. . . . The ‘for me’ dimension is implicit in the 
gospel; indeed, it is inherent there because Jesus wanted Himself understood as He willed 
Himself to be, and was, - *for us.*

The life of Jesus, then, is already defined as having a particular dogmatic importance, but Jesus’ 
ought not be directly applied to the life of the believer “in a moral sense.” This is a 
misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus’ life. Jesus is the “ground of faith,” but not to be 
understood as moral exemplar. To properly understand the nature of faith, and the morality 
inherent in the Christian faith, one must properly understand the person and work of Christ.

In *I Have my Doubts*, Kuitert is more explicit in his rejection of imitation motifs, 
particularly popular modes of claiming Jesus as an example. In this work, Kuitert most clearly 
emphasizes the ongoing importance of the Ten Commandments as the way in which Christians 
understand God’s will for our lives. These commandments, not the imitation of Christ, determine 
the way in which a believer ought to live. Kuitert frames the question of Christian morality in 
this way:

so is Jesus the true man and therefore normative for us? But that too doesn’t help. Jesus 
was unmarried . . . He didn’t know from experience what being a father means . . . he 
lived as a Jewish male in an agricultural culture, in a world in which slaves were a regular 
phenomenon, and so on. I don’t see how we could construct a normative picture of 
humanity from his life and world. . . . So is the children’s song ‘I want to be like Jesus’ 
nonsense? Not at all, but here we’re talking about an ideal that we want to follow, and 
ideals are given content from demands of the time. ‘So humble and so good’ children 
sang in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth they sing ‘so challenging and 
revolutionary’, and yet other contents will follow. These are ideals, not norms that we 
derive from the humanity of Jesus. We find norms in what Jesus does and suffers, 
especially in the exemplary way in which he loved God and his neighbor to the death. 
But even of these I have to say that they are so closely connected with his calling that it’s 
impossible for us to make them a general model.

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Bowden (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), 79-80. This work is a translation of Kuitert’s original, 
Even the disciples, Kuitert argues, who were much closer to Jesus’ historical situation, did not understand him to be an exemplar in every life situation. Even for them, Jesus’ example was to be followed in a “much more restrictive sense than is often imagined,” that is, in his sacrifice and suffering.\(^{59}\)

Kuitert argues that the example of Jesus is not normative for Christians. Instead, drawing upon Luther and Calvin, among others, and thus remaining “faithful to tradition,” Kuitert argues that the Ten Commandments “form a summary of what we can call the basic moral principles.” In them, we see “God’s will.”\(^{60}\) As he explains what it means to understand the Ten Commandments as guiding moral principles for life, and the place in which we see “God’s will . . . for human beings in the world,” he reiterates that these commandments are a “summary” of God’s will, most often stated negatively.\(^{61}\) They are generally prohibitive, rather than offering a positive formulation of God’s will. For this, we must look to the command to love: Kuitert argues that “‘loving’ is the positive side of God’s will”; it is the “fulfilling of the law.”\(^{62}\) In Kuitert’s works, the primacy of the law can again be seen. The Ten Commandments, not the imitation of Christ, form the guidelines for the Christian moral life.

Jochem Douma, Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics at the Theological University in Kampen (1931 – ) is one final example of a neo-Calvinist theologian whose work displays the primacy of the law in neo-Calvinist ethics. But, unlike some of the others we have surveyed here, Douma does treat, however brief, the imitation of Christ as an important ethical motif in his

\(^{59}\) Kuitert, \textit{I Have My Doubts}, 120. Again discussing the potential for a charge towards imitation, he writes: “My question is: isn’t Jesus, then, according to the Christian tradition, an example to be followed? Certainly, but following by means of an imitation of Jesus as a person from the beginning of our era rests on a misunderstanding and leads nowhere. Moreover the striking thing is that the New Testament authors (who were still very close to Jesus’ historical appearance) saw discipleship in a much more restrictive sense than is often imagined. They limit it to following his tenacity and readiness for sacrifice in his suffering.”

\(^{60}\) Kuitert, \textit{I Have My Doubts}, 252; cf. 267-268.

\(^{61}\) Kuitert, \textit{I Have My Doubts}, 267; cf. 269.

work. In his many works on Christian ethics, Douma affirms that the Ten Commandments reveal “God’s core commandments.” He argues that the Decalogue was not only “important for ancient Israel, but also that the New Testament church derives her norm for Christian living from the Decalogue.” The law is the “norm for life.” These brief excerpts begin to paint a picture of how Douma understands the normative use of the Ten Commandments as the guide for Christian moral behavior. But, for Douma, Christians cannot understand the law without also looking to Christ; Douma’s discussion of the Ten Commandments is richly Christ-filled. It is because of Christ that Christians follow the law and it is on account of Christ’s fulfilling of the law that Christians can know the depth of the commandments call on our lives.

63 The relationship between Douma’s work and imitation is further explored in his festschrift entitled Nuchtere Noodzaak: Ethiek tussen Navolging en Compromis. Again, the editors highlight that Douma’s position is not one that is in line with a strict imitation ethic that takes certain characteristics of Jesus’ life and imitates those, such as poverty and singleness (J.H.F. Schaeffer, J. H. Smit, and Th. Tromp, “Woord Vooraf,” in Nuchtere Noodzaak: Ethiek tussen Navolging en Compromis, ed. J.H.F. Schaeffer, J. H. Smit, and Th. Tromp (Uitgeverij Kok: Kampen, 1997), 9). Undertaking this type of radical ethic, necessitates a radical posture toward the world, often including withdrawal. This, of course, is not the posture of Douma. But, neither is Douma’s position one of compromising the gospel in order to be in line with the world. Between these two poles lies something akin to imitating Christ in the world, or radical understandings of sanctification without withdrawal. These essays reflect on these ethical themes, in honor of Douma’s own work which strove to engage the world, while following Jesus (This compilation of essays can be found in: Nuchtere Noodzaak: Ethiek tussen Navolging en Compromis, ed. J.H.F. Schaeffer, J. H. Smit, and Th. Tromp (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1997)).

64 Jochem Douma, Responsible Conduct: Principles of Christian Ethics, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 90; This work was originally published as Jochem Douma, Verantwoord Handelen (Kampen: Uitgeverij Van den Berg, 1984). Douma’s Register provides insight into the places where Douma not only speaks of the law, as seen here, but also the imitation of Christ (Jochem Douma, Register (Kampen: Uitgeverij Van den Berg, 1993), 40). As seen in the Register, in Verantwoord Handelen, he references the technical term, navolging, infrequently, as a way in which to understand the Christian’s following of the law, which remains the universal and normative guide for human life. See also Christian Morals and Ethics, where Douma describes the Ten Commandments as “central commandments.” (Jochem Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, trans. John P. Elliott and Andrew Pol (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Publishing, 1981), 39). Douma is clear in this work, and in others, such as The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life that the teachings of the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus “do not stand in tension with one another”; rather, Jesus has taught [the Ten Commandments] to us in their fullest depth” (Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, xi, 5).

65 Douma, Responsible Conduct, 90


67 See Douma, Responsible Conduct, 97-99; Douma argues that Christ, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, points to the depth of the commandments. Christ shows the ways in which the commandments pierce our heart and are not simply commanding external compliance; in Christ, we see the full extent and meaning of the law. Christ also shows the unity of the commandments “by pointing us to love as the fulfillment of the law” (98; Douma repeats these claims in Christian Morals and Ethics, 42-43, 57-61). Finally, in Christ, we see the way in which one must live for “every action that is commanded or forbidden in terms of ‘Moses’ obtains a Christocentric character because we are living in Christ.” (Douma, Responsible Conduct, 99). In Christ, we are “truly free from the yoke and curse...
Douma’s work, while clearly displaying the primacy of the law, includes reference to the imitation of Christ in the Christian life. As Douma discusses the law, he asks an important question: given that the Ten Commandments provide normative guidance that is, seemingly, not only for Christians, but (especially in regard to the second table) actions that non-Christians ought do as well, how can we claim that the Christian’s actions are uniquely Christian? He affirms that “in many respects Christians act exactly like non-Christians.” The Christian’s actions in the world are not merely incomprehensible to non-Christians. Throughout Scripture, one sees reference to the way that non-Christians may recognize the behavior of Christians (virtues such as “friendliness, modesty, moderation,” etc.) Even so, Douma contends that “the full picture of the conduct of the Christian would still look different from that of non-Christians.” It is here, in explaining the ways in which the Christian’s actions remain different from the non-Christian, even if outwardly they might look the same, that Douma appeals to following – and imitating – Jesus.

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68 Douma’s Register indicates that he made reference to the imitation of Christ (navolging van Christus) in two works: Verantwoord Handelen (page 87) and Christelijk Levenstijl (pages 13 and following).
69 Douma, Responsible Conduct, 115; Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, 50-52. Demonstrating Douma’s understanding of the rift between Anabaptist and Reformed thought, he argues that only one who is involved in an Anabaptist flight from this world, in which by definition everything must be different, is not satisfied with this.” (52)
70 In Douma’s discussion of the Ten Commandments, he again shows his understanding of the difference between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions. Anabaptists, he argues, imitate Christ’s suffering and toleration of persecution; this is not the way one ought to imitate Christ (Douma, The Ten Commandments, 202).
71 Douma, Responsible Conduct, 116. As Douma articulates: “[t]he cross of Christ is an offense to the Jews and a stumbling block to the Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23), but apparently it is also possible through the Spirit to be a servant of Christ and as such to be acceptable to God and approved by men (Rom. 14:18).” (Douma, Responsible Conduct, 115-116).
72 Douma, Responsible Conduct, 117.
73 Douma still firmly argues that the Christian’s life will look outwardly different from non-Christians. Here, his reasoning is instructive: the difference does not lie in different norms for the Christian and the non-Christian, all are accountable to, and ought to live in line with, the Ten Commandments. The difference comes from the Christian’s adherence to law’s normative, universal standard (Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, 52-56).
A Christian’s actions, argues Douma, are different because of Christ; allegiance to Christ necessitates a different, Christ-following motivation for one’s actions.\(^7^3\) One’s union with Christ is transformative and renewing. On account of this transformation, the Christian’s life “receives another direction which can be classified as *following Christ.*”\(^7^4\) The newness in direction, Douma argues, is not a new mooring for ethical behavior; the Christian still follows the Ten Commandments. Rather, it is a new motivation to follow the law: one of gratitude, marked by the following of Jesus Christ.\(^7^5\)

Douma continues to contend that the guide for the Christian life ought to be found in the Ten Commandments, but he argues that one’s motivation for *adhering* to the demands of the Ten Commandments ought to be found in following, or imitating, Christ.\(^7^6\) Douma clearly illustrates

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\(^7^3\) Douma, *Responsible Conduct*, 117-118.
\(^7^4\) Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 52, emphasis original. Douma continues, clarifying the nature of this “following:” In this he does not do ‘strange’ things by imitating Christ’s life (no permanent home, not married, seeking martyrdom, etc.) but instead he becomes a follower of Christ by seeking the advantage of the other and not his own (1 Corinthians 10:32-11:1), by forgiving the other (Ephesians 4:32), by not seeking to escape suffering when being a Christian has that consequence (1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14). It is a new disposition which characterizes his life: the disposition which there was in Christ when He, by coming to earth, sought not His own interest, but that of the other (Philippians 2:5f.).” (Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 52-53).

\(^7^5\) Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 53; Douma continues, arguing that this acceptance of the Decalogue, though it is, in theory and sometimes in practice, knowable to those who are not Christians, means that the Christian will have a different appearance in society: “When he accepts the Decalogue as the rule of thankfulness for his life, that is nothing out of the ordinary. But what is normal and what is meant to bring human life redeemed by Christ to new development can nonetheless be unusual in this world, because most men hold to a different type of life.” The transformation of the Christian is not merely an *inner* transformation; this inner transformation leads to outward change, for the Christian is called to be a light to those with whom they live. Thus, although Christian morals are simply those natural, “normal morals” that God has called humanity to in the Ten Commandments, they nevertheless look different in the world, because of sin; “The Christian has a different inner life and also a different way of life. But this being different is the consequence of the aversion there is in a diseased world with respect to the commandments of God. Accordingly, that which is completely normal and human is regarded as being something foreign and uncommon.” (Douma, *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 54, emphasis original).

\(^7^6\) Douma understands the imitation of Christ to include three aspects: First, Christians are to “follow Christ by fulfilling the task or calling that He has given us. We follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” This means that following Christ is not simple mimicry (see also Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, 368, 373 and *Christian Morals and Ethics*, 52-53); instead, the call to follow Christ is a call that takes the Christian into their “daily occupation within which we fulfill our calling.” One ought to fulfill their God-given calling with “patience and perseverance,” as Christ did. Second, following Christ means living out the commands of God – that is, the law – “not out of self-interest, but for the sake of God and neighbor. . . . The love that drove Christ is found in us as well.” Finally, following Christ means “accepting suffering, even as He did not flee tribulation.” The call to follow Christ is a call to bear the cross, but here again Douma is specific in regard to exactly what that cross refers to. Again, following Jesus is not simple mimicry, or an understanding that equates our cross with Christ’s cross. The cross that following Christ demands “refers to our cross and not to the very same cross that Christ bore. . . . Christ’s followers do have the same attitude
this point using the words of Ephesians 6. In this passage, Paul instructs children to “obey your parents in the Lord [Jesus].”77 As Douma reflects on this passage, he explains “the motive here is following Christ. Christians must walk differently than the pagans, not (only) because the Ten Commandments require that, but because they have learned to know Christ (Eph. 4:20).”78 The law remains normative for Christians,79 but the imitation of Christ shapes the way in which one continues to obey the law. Because the Christian is transformed, or has “received another inner nature,”80 through Christ, “he accepts the Decalogue as the rule of thankfulness for his life.”81

The Ten Commandments, the normative, natural, universal guide for human living remains the guide for the Christian’s life, but the Christian follows the normative guidance of the law because they have been transformed, through Christ, to a life of following Christ. While Douma’s work includes specific treatment of the imitation of Christ, he still displays a characteristic neo-Calvinist emphasis on the law as the universal, guiding norm for the Christian life.

Given the enduring primacy of the law in neo-Calvinist ethics, the tradition is prone to, in the words of James. K.A. Smith, “speak more about creation than we do cross, and we speak more about law than we do Jesus.”82 If this is so, it seems difficult to reconcile – for better or for worse – neo-Calvinist ethical discourse with the prevailing ethical themes in North America evangelical thought today. Neo-Calvinist theologians have rightly raised concerns, both explicitly and implicitly, regarding the prominence of imitation of Christ, but the traction that the imitation of Christ has in the life and faith of North American evangelicalism is undeniable. The

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77 Douma, Responsible Conduct, 78; emphasis original.
78 Douma, Responsible Conduct, 78; Douma repeats this example in his work on the Ten Commandments (374).
79 Douma notes that “we are indeed free from the yoke and curse of the law, but that doesn’t mean we are free from the commandments and norms of the law” (Douma, Responsible Conduct, 95).
80 Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, 52.
81 Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, 53.
82 Mouw and Smith, “An Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue.”
felt tension between the predominantly law-based ethics of neo-Calvinism, and much of the Reformed tradition more broadly, and ethics based upon the imitation of Christ is important to grapple with. Given the prominence of the imitation motif, neo-Calvinists ought to ask how an ethic primarily, or solely, based in the law find common ground with an ethic primarily, or solely, based in the imitation of Christ? Given that the imitation of Christ continues to be an important aspect of ethical discourse, including within evangelical ethics, how do neo-Calvinists enter into that conversation?

**Neo-Calvinists and the Imitation of Christ**

Neo-Calvinists, as we’ve seen, have been reticent to use language of imitation. Most, even those who are quite familiar with historic imitation traditions, like Geesink, understand the guiding, universal norm for the Christian life to be found in the Ten Commandments, not the example of Christ. The example of Jesus is a historically conditioned and situated example, the argument proceeds. Kuitert is a prime example of this line of argumentation. He writes that “following by means of an imitation of Jesus as a person from the beginning of our era rests on a misunderstanding and leads nowhere.” Even the disciples, Kuitert continues, who were close to Jesus’ time and social location, remained quite restricted in the scope of their imitation.\(^\text{83}\) If this is true for Jesus’ disciples, how much more true ought it be for Christians today! How would we possibly discern what of Jesus’ life is to be imitated, and what is either historically conditioned or an aspect of his inimitable works, most obviously, those that granted our salvation? And, why is it necessary, when God has clearly laid out his will for our lives in the Ten Commandments?

The questions surrounding imitation as an ethical motif, then, are both christological and moral in nature: who is Christ? What did he do? and, the resulting question, can I be like him

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\(^{83}\) Kuitert, *I Have my Doubts*, 120.
and, if so, what of his actions ought I to do? The answers to these questions, as can be seen throughout Christian history, have been troubling at points. Some have been deeply individualistic, a pathology of some interpretations of the WWJD trend, among others. Others have been strikingly literalistic, as seen in some iterations of martyrdom and monasticism, historical interpretations of the imitation motif that we will explore in chapter two. The contemporary hesitancy to apply an imitation ethic, explicit warnings against such an approach, and problematic interpretations of this motif are helpfully summarized by Jason Hood, in his book *Imitating God in Christ*. Hood argues that there are three basic, contemporary approaches to imitation:

The latitudinal ‘left’ side of Christianity uses the imitation of Jesus liberally, insisting on, say, embracing the marginalized as Jesus did. But this sphere of Christianity often misses the gospel basis for the imitation of Jesus, along with important aspects of the broader biblical framework. . . . Then there is a massive “middle” of Christianity, full of WWJD bracelets and “be like” sermons. Here the focus on imitation often seems disconnected from God’s work for sinners. . . . We can also discern a reluctant or resistant “right” that is highly suspicious of any significant emphasis on imitation.84

Jimmy Agan, a Reformed thinker who writes on imitation, summarizes the cautions against imitation in this way: “Why would we want to train people to read Scripture in a way that might lead them to emphasize works at the expense of grace, or to emphasize Jesus' moral example at the expense of his unique work as Savior?”85 Among those who often opt not to draw upon the imitation of Christ as a guiding ethical framework, are neo-Calvinist theologians, as we have seen. Their cautions often stem from one of our first objections: the collapsing of imitation motifs into mimicry and literalism.86

86 And, indeed, the language of imitation does lead, understandably, toward literalism. Given this, we can perhaps understand why even Yoder was reticent to use this language at the beginning of his career, arguing that he prefers to speak “not of imitation but participation.” (John Howard Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” in *Revolutionary Christianity: 1966 South American Lectures*, ed. Paul Martens, Mark Thiessen Nation, Matthew Porter, and Myles
We can see neo-Calvinist warnings for how an understanding of imitating the life of Jesus, or following the example of Jesus, can lead the Christian’s moral life astray in many of these theologian’s discourses on imitation, even in those who are more prone to employ imitation language: Douma, for example, cautions that “following” Jesus – the same language he uses to define the directional character of the Christian’s life – must be understood in a particular context. The Christian may not “do ‘strange’ things by imitating Christ’s life (no permanent home, not married, seeking martyrdom, etc.)”; instead, the Christian models their life on the disposition of Christ, a disposition marked by forgiveness and suffering, as seek in the Gospels and Pauline Epistles. These types of warnings go back to Calvin, who similarly urged his readers to stay away from a following characterized by mimicry. Christians, Calvin writes, are to be “imitators not apes.”

Bavinck, too, cautions against an imitation marked by mimicry, arguing that “every word and deed of Jesus is useful for our instruction and ought to be taken to heart . . . [but] not every word or deed is in itself to be imitated.”

These warnings certainly have merit, and ought to be heeded. As a neo-Calvinist, I am mindful of the cautions of my tradition regarding the imitation of Christ. The ethical motif of imitating Christ, as all ethical frameworks do, needs hermeneutical guides and proper theological frameworks. There have been misapplications and misunderstandings in the imitation tradition that Reformed thinkers have been right to be wary of. Like these voices, there are aspects of the imitation tradition that I do not affirm as biblically sound interpretations of the theme, however faithful those who sought to enact the example of Christ in the world were. But, as Agan notes,

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Wertz (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 41). As we will see, Yoder does eventually use the language of imitation.

87 Douma, Christian Morals and Ethics, 52.
88 Calvin, Commentary on John: John 13:12-17.
89 Bavinck, Imitation I, 399, emphasis added.
“abuse does not negate proper use.” By this Agan means that a history of the misapplication of the imitation theme does not logically negate any use of an imitation motif in Christian ethics. He argues that we must contend with the language of imitation in Scripture, and the calls to follow and imitate Christ. The problematic interpretations, and applications, of the imitation of Christ need not push us away from the imitation motif. They could also push us towards a better, more biblically grounded understanding of the theme. The Reformed tradition, while offering important warnings regarding improper applications of imitation, also aids in this attempt. John Calvin himself warms against literalism and mimicry, while still contending that Jesus is an example that Christians ought to imitate. “When we come to our Lord Jesus Christ and behold him,” Calvin writes, “it is essential that we follow his example.” Rejecting mimicry, Calvin argues that Christ “invites each member of his body to imitate Him,” giving Christians a rule for how they ought to imitate him. Imitation, properly understood and applied, “consists in two aspects: denial of ourselves and the voluntary bearing of the cross.” Bavinck later picks up these two aspects of imitation as critical for a proper, biblical application of the theme.

This dissertation seeks to understand and articulate a proper, biblical interpretation of the imitation of Christ, through the work of both Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder. As a neo-Calvinist, I necessarily must come to this theme with caution: there are many who have come before me who have warned against this theme, for important reasons. But, this caution does not, as we have seen, necessitate abandoning the theme. Instead, this dissertation seeks to explore a distinctly Reformed voice on the imitation of Christ, Herman Bavinck, in dialogue with

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90 Agan, “Toward a Hermeneutic of Imitation,” 32.
John Howard Yoder, to work towards a biblical interpretation of the theme. Christ himself, in the Gospel of John, claims that he is an example for his followers with these words: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” Paul then uses the language of imitation to describe his posture towards Christ’s example, charging his followers to “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

The question then is how one can uphold the biblical charge to follow Christ’s example, without falling into the dangers that many thinkers have noted regarding the imitation of Christ. Part of this task involves properly situating the task of imitating Christ, theologically. As a way to guard against the misapplications of the theme that give rise to moralism, we must understand imitation in light of God’s gracious work in salvation; imitation is a response to God’s grace, and must be understood in the context of one’s union with Christ. As a way to guard against understanding Christ only as exemplar, not savior, one must heed Bavinck’s own warning that to understand Christ as example, one must first know him as savior. Only through this ordering is the call to imitate Christ an understandable call; in Christ’s justifying work as savior, and in the Spirit’s work of regeneration, we are enabled to to imitate Jesus. And, against the tides of literalism and mimicry in the imitation tradition, a robust hermeneutical framework is necessitated. As we will see, in both Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder, we can find examples of such a framework. Both theologians understand the imitation of Christ to be applied to the life of the believer through a hermeneutical framework; not every action of Christ’s is imitable, only those actions that, for Yoder, typify Christ’s cross, or, for Bavinck, are emblematic

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93 John 13:15.
94 1 Corinthians 11:1.
95 Here, we note some of the problems inherent within Sheldon’s thought, among others. See Chapter Two (pages 45-47) for a discussion of the response to “liberal Christianity’s” understanding of the imitation of Christ, which often calls for imitation of Christ without participation in Christ.
of Christ’s virtues as he follows the law, ought to be followed.

At least one more question remains of this project, I imagine. Given that I approach this topic as a neo-Calvinist, looking to a prominent neo-Calvinist, Herman Bavinck, for guidance on how one can understand the imitation of Christ as a Reformed thinker, what is the need for John Howard Yoder in this project? Would it not be sufficient to merely mine the thoughts of Bavinck for a proper imitation of Christ? Certainly there is enough merit in Bavinck’s thought to warrant a study of that sort. But, there is also an importance in Yoder’s voice, especially given the North American context of this project.96

As we will see, John Howard Yoder is a prominent example of imitation thought in North America, and the timing of his project is important. At the time of Yoder’s writing, there is significant momentum back toward imitation. The imitation tradition, even in North America, was certainly prominent before Yoder. We see this in the popularity of Sheldon, among other things. But, at the time of Yoder’s writing (the first edition of Politics of Jesus came out in 1972 and second edition in 1994), evangelicals in North America are clamoring back towards imitation; they are re-reading Sheldon and, as a result, donning WWJD bracelets. As this evangelical enthusiasm for imitation grew, Yoder also became popular with evangelicals.97 They

96 There are, of course, important differences between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, which will be further explored in Chapter Six. In this dissertation, I am not seeking to negate or diminish these real differences in ethics, Christology, and soteriology, among others. But, neither do I seek to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion towards those with whom I disagree. While different, this dissertation will seek to show that there are important things we can learn from the Anabaptist tradition on the imitation of Christ.
97 See, for example, Swartz’s discussion of the “full potential of these Anabaptist themes in broader evangelical circles,” themes that were advanced by John Howard Yoder, among others: David R. Swartz, Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 165, 204, 261. Yoder’s influence was far-reaching. The extent of his reach can also be seen in Budziszewski’s study, who names Yoder as one of the four “premiere influences” on American evangelical social thought (Budziszewski, Evangelicals in the Public Square, 39). The influence of Yoder’s book, The Politics of Jesus, was even felt in the American Senate, through Mark Hatfield, a Republican Senator from Oregon. Richard Mouw details the ways in which Hatfield was a “convert” to Yoder’s pacifism in “Learning from Kuyper, Following Jesus: A Conversation with Richard Mouw,” Comment Magazine, September 13, 2013. https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/learning-from-kuyper-following-jesus-a-conversation-with-richard-mouw/.
found something important in Yoder, a substantive theology that went beyond the modernism of Sheldon and others, that was captivating. Yoder’s theological insights help to ground and champion a desire for social action, alongside what was a dominant emphasis personal piety.

Yoder, as an Anabaptist theologian, comes from a tradition that is historically more receptive to the imitation tradition than my own, neo-Calvinism. While I, as a neo-Calvinist, remain cautiously optimistic about the import of imitation for the Christian life as a critical and biblical theme, but one that has often been misapplied in Christian living, the Anabaptist tradition, and Yoder himself, have expressed more surety in the theme. We do, Yoder claims, have a “Messianic ethic,” an “ethic of imitation.” My own theological proclivities present a strong pull back to the Ten Commandments as the grounding of our moral action, and I remain unpersuaded that we must depart from that strong tradition. But, alongside a Reformed notion of the moral law, as Bavinck beautifully argues, we can also uphold the example of Jesus. Bavinck is an important voice for Reformed Christians seeking to understand and apply an ethic of imitation. Although his work comes before the re-gained popularity of the theme in North America, his criticisms of the imitation tradition remain incisive aids in seeking out the biblically faithful – and the problematic – interpretations and applications of the theme. As I seek to articulate a Reformed imitation ethic, using the work of Bavinck as a guide, however – both on account of the contextual importance of Yoder in North American evangelicalism and the historic Anabaptist attention to the theme of imitation – it is fitting to do so in dialogue with an Anabaptist voice. In some ways, Bavinck’s own posture, which emphasized the catholicity of the church and robust engagement with dominant, alternative Christian voices, demonstrates one of the reasons that it is imperative to take the insights of our Anabaptist brothers and sisters

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98 Yoder, PoJ, 1, 5.
seriously. As I seek to explore a Reformed understanding of the imitation of Christ, it is important to also grapple with the insights of Anabaptism on the theme, to take them seriously, as we seek to formulate Reformed answers to the question, how do we imitate Jesus? The neo-Calvinist tradition, steadfast in its affirmation of the normative nature of the Ten Commandments for ethical life today, also needs to ponder about the ways that, as James K.A. Smith articulates it, “Jesus matters;” to understand the ways that Jesus Christ not only secures our salvation, but also guides our life.

**Thesis**

The question that drives this dissertation is: 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? It is the contention of this dissertation that the ethics of Herman Bavinck, in dialogue with John Howard Yoder, can helpfully illuminate ethical discourse in present-day North American evangelicalism. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was a Dutch Reformed Theologian whose influence, specifically in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, is enduring in the neo-Calvinist tradition. Bavinck, while maintaining many of the traditional neo-Calvinist ethical distinctions, incorporates a robust understanding of the imitation of Christ as an ethical norm in surprising and instructive ways. Bavinck understands the imitation of Christ and the law to be the guiding norm for the Christian life.

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100 Mouw and Smith, “An Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue,” emphasis original.

101 While Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is unique among neo-Calvinists, this dissertation ought not suggest Bavinck is the only Reformed theologian to employ this theme. B.B. Warfield and Horatius Bonar are two prominent Reformed thinkers that also discuss this theme. B.B. Warfield preached a sermon on Philippians 2:5-8 entitled “Imitating the Incarnation,” where he proclaimed that “‘Christ is our example.’ . . . Only, when, like Christ, and in loving obedience to His call and example, we take no account of others, but freely give ourselves to others, we shall find, each in his measure, the saying true of himself also: ‘Wherefore also God hath highly exalted him. ’ The path of self sacrifice is the path of glory.” (B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1950), 563, 575). Bonar asked his readers, “But how can we imitate [Christ], whose life was one
This dissertation argues that the ethics of Herman Bavinck, with its focus on both the law and the imitation of Christ, is an important addition to Reformed ethics, and to the current ethical discourse in North America. Although Bavinck is a Dutch theologian, his reception in North America has been impressive. The current zeal around Bavinck’s theology in North America makes him a fitting conversation partner not only for his 19th century European colleagues, but also for North American evangelical theology today.\(^{102}\)

Bavinck’s understanding of the role of the imitation of Christ and the law as guiding norms for the Christian life differs from the traditional neo-Calvinist understanding of ethics; he does not lack a focus on the law, but instead adds a robust understanding of the imitation of Christ to this norm. In this, Bavinck articulates an *enduring* formulation of the imitation of Christ, an imitation ethic that affirms both the creational, normative will of God and the pedagogical, exemplary function of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ as a central focus and norm within Christian ethics presents neo-Calvinists with the potential to join the ongoing ethical conversation regarding the imitation of Christ with a uniquely Reformed viewpoint. Put in dialogue with prominent Anabaptist thought on the imitation of Christ, John Howard Yoder, this dissertation hopes to highlight the importance of robust dialogue between the neo-Calvinist tradition and prominent voices in American evangelical ethics today.

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A New Discovery: Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*

While Bavinck wrote on the imitation of Christ at the genesis of the neo-Calvinist tradition, his thinking on the theme has been relatively unknown. Bavinck is well-known for his teaching and writing on Reformed Dogmatics; it is not well-known that he also taught and wrote on Reformed ethics. These documents had remained a mystery to Bavinck scholars until a conference at Calvin Theological Seminary in 2008, “A Pearl and a Leaven: Herman Bavinck for the Twenty-First Century.” At this conference, Dirk van Keulen presented a paper describing his discovery of a large manuscript of Bavinck’s in the Bavinck archives of the Vrije Universiteit.\(^{103}\) As Dirk van Keulen describes, several of the documents that Bavinck used for his lectures on ethics, including a small lecture notebook, are stored in the Bavinck archives.\(^{104}\) In addition to these smaller documents, Bavinck wrote an extensive manuscript entitled *Gereformeerde Ethiek* (*Reformed Ethics*), which was van Keulen’s most intriguing discovery.\(^{105}\) Evidence suggests that Bavinck used this manuscript as the basis of his ethics courses during the academic years 1884-1886 and 1894-1895.\(^{106}\) This unfinished work on ethics had only recently been re-discovered by Dirk van Keulen, who has then worked to prepare an transcribed electronic, workable version of the manuscript (over 1,100 pages in total!) so that Bavinck’s manuscript on Reformed ethics might be able to be published, even in its unfinished state. This manuscript is now also being translated into English, to be published in three volumes; the anticipated release of the first volume will be in the fall of 2018. In his *Reformed Ethics*, Bavinck discusses many matters, 


\(^{104}\) Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 25. This small lecture notebook likely dates back to the beginning of Bavinck’s career in Kampen, if not earlier.

\(^{105}\) This larger document is difficult to date, but its length, elaborate references – both to Scripture and theologians – and differing handwriting throughout the document suggest that Bavinck must have worked on this manuscript for many years (Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 27).

\(^{106}\) Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 28-29. This evidence is found in course notes from two of Bavinck’s students, Reinder Jan van der Veen and another student, perhaps Cornelis Lindeboom.
including the “heart of the spiritual life: the imitation of Christ.”

However, Bavinck’s insistence on the importance of the imitation of Christ ought not be seen as a full endorsement of the entirety of the imitation tradition. Bavinck rejects much of the historic imitation tradition as an improper understanding of the imitation of Christ. He then incorporates the imitation of Christ into a Reformed understanding of ethics, grounded in God’s normative, creational intent. Imitation is understood alongside the law; it is the “free, spiritual application of the principles by which [Jesus] lived, completely fulfilling the moral law.” The Christian is to follow the example of Jesus in law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ.

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is an important contribution to Reformed ethics, but it is not only important for discourse within the neo-Calvinist tradition. Herman Bavinck’s robust understanding of the imitation of Christ as an ethical norm is certainly of value within the tradition, but also has potential for dialogue outside of the Reformed tradition. The emphasis on imitating Christ in twentieth and twenty-first century North American evangelical ethics provides fertile ground for discussion between neo-Calvinists, using Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, and traditions more prone to employ this theme. Bavinck’s focus on imitating Christ allows neo-Calvinists to join into the dominant Christ-focused ethics of today. Using his theology as a guide, neo-Calvinists can also employ one of the dominant ethical motifs of our day: imitating Christ.

A Contemporary Voice on the Imitation of Christ: John Howard Yoder

As a way to demonstrate the potential for fruitful dialogue between traditions, especially

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107 Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics.” 38. This manuscript is not the only place in which one can point to Bavinck’s thinking on the imitation of Christ. Bavinck also wrote two lengthy essays specifically on the imitation of Christ, translated in John Bolt’s work, among other works that reference the subject: A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck’s Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi, 372-440.

108 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
current emphases within North American evangelical ethics, this dissertation will bring Bavinck into conversation with a contemporary interlocutor, John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), a North American theologian whose work is demonstrably influential on contemporary evangelical thought. In J. Philip Wogaman’s introduction to Christian Ethics, he names Yoder as one of the “formative Christian moral thinkers” of the twentieth century.109 J. Budziszewski also names Yoder as one of the four “premiere influences” on American evangelical social and political thought.110 Though himself a Mennonite, Yoder’s work was significant in many, broad theological circles, including for evangelicals. Although, as will be discussed in chapter four, important questions must be raised regarding the relationship between Yoder’s theology and practice, in light of recent findings concerning his moral failings, Yoder provided a theological framework for evangelicals seeking to remain faithful to the gospel in a new cultural situation. In light of the sustained influence of Yoder’s theological project and the theological framework he provided, he continues to be an important dialogue partner on the imitation of Christ.

Yoder’s theological project was centered on the politics of Jesus, a theme which was also the title of his best known work. The Politics of Jesus firmly established Yoder’s influence; it was, according to Mark T. Nation, a “watershed in John Yoder’s career; it is what he will always be best known for.”111 The Politics of Jesus was listed as one of the top ten books of the twentieth century by the leading evangelical magazine, Christianity Today;112 it had a monumental impact in both the academy and for evangelical social action.113 In The Politics of Jesus, Yoder lays out his central claim: Christ’s life, teachings, death, and resurrection are

110 Budziszewski, Evangelicals in the Public Square, 39.
113 See, for example, Mark Nation’s claim that The Politics of Jesus has helped to “re-shape the field of Christian ethics over the last twenty-five years” (Nation, John Howard Yoder, 55).
normative in the life of the believer. One can best understand and apply these teachings by imitating Christ. But Yoder is clear, “[o]nly at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross.”

Yoder’s pronounced, emphatic insistence on the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer, and his demonstrable influence on North American evangelical ethical thought and action, make him an ideal example of an ethic of imitation in the twentieth century.

On their own, both Yoder and Bavinck are demonstrably important thinkers. John Howard Yoder’s influence on North American thought, both in the academy and, more broadly, on evangelical social action is well documented by scholars. Herman Bavinck, too, was an important thinker in his own day, whose influence continues to this day. Together, however, the two are not an immediately obvious pair. Bavinck lived primarily in the nineteenth century, from 1854-1921. Yoder was a twentieth century theologian, living from 1927-1997. The two were never alive at the same time, and although only six years separated Bavinck’s death and Yoder’s birth, they lived in remarkably different times. Many events separate the two, perhaps none greater than the Great War.

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114 Yoder, PoJ, 95.
116 The difference in context, not merely cultural, but also theological, between Yoder and Bavinck should not be overlooked. This is clearly seen in Barth’s rise in influence on the theological world, which stands firmly between them. Yoder’s own work testifies to the influence of Karl Barth on his thought (See, for example: John Howard Yoder, Karl Barth and the Problem of War and Other Essays on Barth, ed. Mark Thiessen Nation [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016]. Yoder scholarship, such as the work of Craig Carter, also makes note of Barth’s influence [Craig A. Carter, The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 61-90]. While Barth is certainly influential in the thought of Yoder, they depart on questions of ethics. Carter points out clear similarities between Yoder and Barth’s Christologies, both have a very high Christology [Carter, The Politics of the Cross, 65-66], but Yoder’s application of that high Christology differs from Barth’s. Yoder claims that his view of Christ necessitates that Christ is normative for Christian ethics, saying “what becomes the meaning of the incarnation if Jesus is not normative man?” [Yoder, Politics of Jesus, 10]. Barth does not put the same emphasis on imitation; rather, he tends to emphasize obedience. Barth’s sketch of a sermon on John 13:33-35 underscores this when he writes, “If there can be no imitation of Christ in this respect, something else is all he more urgently commanded: Obedience.” [Karl Barth, Homiletics, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 108; see also Kimlyn J. Bender, Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 211 and George Hunsinger, Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 39, where Hunsinger further qualifies Barth’s
However, it is not only the difference in time and context that makes Bavinck and Yoder an unlikely pair for conversation. The theological traditions of the two theologians may also seem to present a barrier: Herman Bavinck is a Dutch, neo-Calvinist\textit{Reformed} theologian; John Howard Yoder is an \textit{Anabaptist} theologian, with deep roots in the Mennonite tradition. Here, the original words of the Belgic Confession, a Reformed creed, seem to draw a stark line between the two thinkers. Article 36 of this confession reads, in part, “we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people.”\textsuperscript{117} In these words, the history of harsh rhetoric and significant division between the two traditions is on full display.

While it may seem counterintuitive to place a Reformed thinker and an Anabaptist thinker in dialogue together, recent practice suggests that it is not as foreign a concept as it may

\textsuperscript{117} Belgic Confession, Article 36., emphasis added. The original text of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, written above, has been revised by multiple Reformed Churches, including the Christian Reformed Church to omit the statement denouncing the Anabaptists. The revised text of the Belgic Confession adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1958 omits the section specifically naming and condemning Anabaptists.

understanding of imitation by themes of fellowship, participation, and witness]. Dutch Reformed thought was also influenced by Karl Barth. G.C. Berkouwer, a prominent Dutch Reformed theologian who taught at the Vrije Universiteit, is well known for his books on Karl Barth’s work. (See: G. C. Berkouwer, \textit{The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth} [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1956]. Barth notes that Berkouwer’s work was done with “care and goodwill and Christian \textit{aequitas}” [Karl Barth, “Preface,” in \textit{Church Dogmatics} IV.2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), xii]. In this Preface, Barth amends his earlier sweeping statements, what he deems his “fierce attack,” on Dutch neo-Calvinists who he deemed “not among my well-wishers,” who have gone “too far in their attacks,” showing themselves to be “men of stupid, cold and stony hearts to whom we need not listen” [Karl Barth, “Preface,” in \textit{Church Dogmatics} III.4, trans. A. T. Mackay, T. H. L. Parker, Harold Knight, and John Marks (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), xiii]. Berkouwer’s work helped Barth think anew about neo-Calvinists; and neo-Calvinists think anew of Barth. Barth also speaks highly of Berkouwer’s work in Church Dogmatics IV.3 where he writes that “Berkouwer has undoubtedly laid his finger on an important point,” concerning the grace of Jesus Christ. Berkouwer’s work, Barth contends, is deserving of recognition for its “wide range of knowledge and reading, its perspicuous and penetrating mode of exposition and the sharpness and balance of its criticisms” [Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics} IV.3.1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 173]. But, Berkouwer is a prime example of the enduring applicability of Bavinck’s thought, even post-Barth. Absorbing much of Barth’s thought, Berkouwer still returns to Bavinck in his later work (This includes Berkouwer’s work on Christ. In \textit{The Work of Christ}, Berkouwer immediately turns to Bavinck for an explanation of the way Scripture characterizes the work of Christ [G.C. Berkouwer, \textit{The Work of Christ} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 12]). Even after the Barthian turn in the theological landscape, Berkouwer demonstrated that those in the Dutch Reformed tradition still affirm, consult, and apply the theology of Herman Bavinck, as we will do here. The increasing interest in Bavinck’s thought in current North American thought again affirms the notion that although Bavinck lived and wrote in the nineteenth century, separated from current theological trends by time and important world events, the relevancy of his work endures.
appear.\textsuperscript{118} In fact, Yoder himself entered into dialogue with a prominent neo-Calvinist, Richard Mouw. Together, in a co-authored article on Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, Richard Mouw and John Howard Yoder have revisited the ways that Anabaptist and Reformed thought has often been pitted against each other, given the perceived ongoing tensions between the two perspectives.\textsuperscript{119} They argue that a strict polarity between the two traditions is inadequate. Rather, the arguments between the Reformed and Anabaptist perspectives should be seen as “intra-family disputes, as debates between discussion-partners who share some deeply-rooted spiritual traits and impulses.”\textsuperscript{120}

Mouw and Yoder’s work, rearticulating the differences between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions as “intra-family” differences and outlining the importance of the similarities between the two traditions, lays important groundwork to properly view the differences between Anabaptist and Reformed thinkers. Mouw and Yoder laid this foundation by writing on Reformed and Anabaptist ethical perspectives as a whole.\textsuperscript{121} This dissertation, building upon the work of Mouw and Yoder, will address a specific aspect of Christian ethics: the imitation of Christ, in the concrete expression of representative thinkers from the tradition, John Howard Yoder and Herman Bavinck.

Following after the example set by Mouw and Yoder, who paved the way for a robust

\textsuperscript{118} The following survey will focus on dialogue between John Howard Yoder and the neo-Calvinist tradition. There is, of course, a wealth of dialogue and debate between the Reformed tradition at large and the Anabaptist tradition preceding these specific conversations. See, for example, Willem Balke’s work on Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals and Yoder’s own work on the Swiss Reformers and the Anabaptists from 1523-1538 (John Howard Yoder, Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: A Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers, trans. David Carl Stassen and C. Arnold Snyder, ed. C. Arnold Snyder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2004) and Willem Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, trans. William Heynen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981) for two examples of the wealth of literature on this subject. See also more recent examples of neo-Calvinism in dialogue with the Anabaptist tradition: Leonard Verduin’s writings, \textit{Honor Your Mother: Christian Reformed Roots in the 1834 Separation} (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988) and \textit{The Reformers and Their Stepchildren} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1964).

\textsuperscript{119} Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 128.

\textsuperscript{120} Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 121.

\textsuperscript{121} Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 127.
dialogue between neo-Calvinist thought and Anabaptist thought by providing a new framework within which to think of the two traditions, others have joined the conversation. Looking to the ethical thought of both traditions, James K.A. Smith continued this exploration of the importance of Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue with Richard Mouw. Highlighting the importance of what both traditions have to offer, Mouw explained,

>[A]s evangelicals think about getting out of a world-flight, purely personal religion, they're either going to move toward a more creational theology or they're going to move for more robust Christology. Both of those, obviously, are important.

Together, Mouw and Smith identify the potential deficiencies within each traditions’ way of articulating Christian ethics: Reformed ethicists can emphasize the lawful ordering of creation to the detriment of looking to Christ as the ethical model; Anabaptist ethics can lack the space to talk about the commonness necessary to pursue justice and peace in relationships, but emphasizes the importance of Christ. Put into conversation, the two traditions can learn from one another in these deficiencies.

Branson Parler also addresses the importance of a dialogue between the Anabaptist tradition, specifically John Howard Yoder’s thought, and the neo-Calvinist tradition. Parler seeks to further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue on another area of seemingly deep disagreement between Reformed and Anabaptist thought: the doctrine of creation, arguing that there are areas of significant convergence between the two traditions. While much of Parler’s work seeks to articulate Yoder’s own doctrine of creation, he does so in continued conversation with the neo-Calvinist tradition, including thinkers like Albert M.

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122 The two have not only written jointly on this topic. They also wrote, in detail, about these questions separately (Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 128).
123 Mouw and Smith, “An Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue.”
Wolters, Richard J. Middleton, and Abraham Kuyper, with a clear eye towards furthering the Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue.\textsuperscript{125}

Building upon previous dialogues between the two traditions, which established similarities between the two traditions and thus created a framework for understanding the ongoing differences as “intra-family” disputes, this dissertation will identify, articulate, and historically situate two different versions of a proper imitation of Christ, as seen in the thought of John Howard Yoder and Herman Bavinck. The aim of this endeavor is to further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue and place neo-Calvinist ethics in conversation with a dominant ethical voice of the day. For many Christians, there has been a longstanding debate over what exactly it means that we ought to “imitate Christ.” But, at least in matters of imitating Christ as an ethical norm, neo-Calvinist thinkers have not had a seat at this discussion table. A close look at Herman Bavinck’s articulation of how the Christian ought to imitate Christ will create an opportunity for neo-Calvinists to enter into the conversation about this prominent ethical theme in North American evangelicalism today. Given the importance of John Howard Yoder’s thought in modern evangelical ethics, his clear thinking on the imitation of Christ, and the established history of dialogue between Yoder and neo-Calvinists, Yoder is a prime candidate for dialogue on the topic of the imitation of Christ.

A dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ presents two distinct, but complementary views on the imitation of Christ. Articulating these two frameworks, then putting them together in dialogue reinforces Mouw and Yoder’s statements that the ethical disputes between these two traditions ought to be seen as “intra-family” disputes, not simply strong polarities and disagreements.\textsuperscript{126} The dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder’s unique

\textsuperscript{125} Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 72-76.
\textsuperscript{126} Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 125-126.
articulations of a proper imitation of Christ challenges both views of imitation, further pressing
the Reformed tradition to put forward an understanding of imitation that affirms both the lawful
ordering of creation and the importance of the person of Christ. Establishing the dispute between
Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ as an intra-family dialogue also allows us to build
bridges between two ethical traditions that are often viewed in strict polarity, aiding in
articulating a Reformed evangelical imitation ethic for the twenty-first century.

Chapter Summary

The nature of this investigation calls for a comparative study of two theologians, Herman
Bavinck and John Howard Yoder, focusing on one area of their ethics; the imitation of Christ.
Herman Bavinck is the primary focus of this study, with John Howard Yoder as a contemporary
interlocutor. Both theologians present a qualified imitation ethic, affirming some aspects of the
historic imitation traditions, while rejecting others. This dissertation will argue that the two
imitation ethics, though maintaining significant differences, ought to be seen – in line with the
two traditions at large – as an intra-family dialogue. Understood together, these two distinct
understandings of the proper imitation of Christ challenge and refine the other, place neo-
Calvinist ethics in conversation with a dominant, contemporary ethical motif, build bridges
between ethical traditions that seem opposing, and aid in articulating an imitation ethic for North
America evangelical ethics today. In these ways, Herman Bavinck’s understanding of the
imitation of Christ, in dialogue with John Howard Yoder, helpfully illuminates ethical discourse
in North American evangelicalism today.

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) will serve to illustrate the richness of the imitation tradition in early Christian thought, providing an introduction to the thinkers that both Bavinck and Yoder point to in their reflections on the imitation of Christ. Both 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 unpublished 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. Throughout his writings, Yoder’s unfailing appeal to the imitation of Christ, only in his cross, can be seen. This chapter surveys many works of Yoder, focusing on *The Politics of Jesus*, to discern the proper imitation of Christ in Yoder’s thought and Yoder’s definition of “the cross.” Yoder’s work is rooted in robust scriptural exegesis and contemporary application. 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.
CHAPTER TWO

Imitating Christ Throughout the Ages:
A Brief Survey of the Imitation Tradition in the
History of Christian Spirituality

“How am I going to tell what He would do?” The Challenge of Discerning a Proper Imitation of Christ

One, seemingly ordinary, Sunday morning Reverend Henry Maxwell, the beloved preacher in Charles Sheldon’s novel *In His Steps*, intended to preach on following Jesus. His sermon was on “show[ing] the steps needed to follow [Christ’s] sacrifice and example.”

That Sunday morning, the church sang familiar lyrics of beloved hymns: "Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow Thee;" "Where He leads me I will follow, I'll go with Him, with Him, all the way."

But then something unusual happened. The final hymn, again pledging the congregation to follow the way of Jesus, was interrupted by a stranger with a pointed question, deemed by him to be not satisfactorily answered by Rev. Maxwell’s sermon: “What do you Christians mean by following the steps of Jesus? . . . What do you mean when you sing 'I'll go with Him, with Him, all the way'?" 

The words of this stranger echoed in Rev. Maxwell’s mind all week, until the next Sunday when he addressed the congregation, calling them to put into practice the words that they heard preached and the lyrics they had sung, again and again. He charged the congregation to pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” And after asking that question, each one will follow Jesus as exactly as he knows how, no matter what the result may be. . . . Our motto will be, “What would Jesus do?” Our aim will be to act just as He would if He was in our places, regardless of immediate results. In other words, we propose to follow

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129 Sheldon, *In His Steps*, 11.
Jesus’ steps as closely and as literally as we believe He taught His disciples to do.\textsuperscript{130} The Sunday service closed, and, so charged, the congregation went out.

\textit{In His Steps} goes on to detail the stories of congregants who took up Rev. Maxwell’s charge and the “most remarkable series of events that the city of Raymond had ever known.”\textsuperscript{131} As they set out on this year of asking “what would Jesus do?”, the reverend reminded them that the Holy Spirit was to be their guide in discerning what imitating Christ ought to concretely look like in daily life: “After we have asked the Spirit to tell us what Jesus would do and have received an answer to it, we are to act regardless of the results to ourselves.”\textsuperscript{132}

An earnest congregant, Rachel Winslow, posed the question that necessitated Rev. Maxwell’s pointing to the Holy Spirit as a guide for discernment. Winslow asked:

I am a little in doubt as to the source of our knowledge concerning what Jesus would do. Who is to decide for me just what He would do in my case? It is a different age. There are many perplexing questions in our civilization that are not mentioned in the teachings of Jesus. How am I going to tell what He would do?\textsuperscript{133}

Here, Winslow recognizes that this seemingly simple question, “what would Jesus do,” is not so simple; it necessitates a response informed by some form of hermeneutics. Winslow’s perceptive question is one that we all must ask: charged to imitate Christ, how do we discern, concretely, how to apply this motif to our daily lives? In Sheldon’s novel, this discernment is found in the guiding of the Holy Spirit, situation by situation.

Sheldon’s model of discerning a proper imitation of Christ has been replicated in many popular models of imitating Christ in North America, perhaps most notably, in the “WWJD”

\textsuperscript{130} Sheldon, \textit{In His Steps}, 16.  
\textsuperscript{131} Sheldon, \textit{In His Steps}, 19.  
\textsuperscript{132} Sheldon, \textit{In His Steps}, 18.  
\textsuperscript{133} Sheldon, \textit{In His Steps}, 17-18.
bracelet fad, directly inspired by his novel. But his model of discerning how one ought to imitate Christ is notably ahistorical and, while the book was inspired by a sermon series on 1 Peter 2:21, surprisingly lacking in a discussion of biblical evidences for imitating Christ. Of course, we must recognize that Sheldon’s model is communicated within the bounds of a short novel which limits his ability for theological exposition, however the lack of attention to tradition and scripture remains in this answer to his not-so-simple question.

Looking to Scripture: North American Evangelical Trends in Imitation Scholarship

North American evangelical ethics has undoubtedly been influenced by Sheldon’s call to ask “what would Jesus do.” Remnants of the trends from the 1990s remain: worn out WWJD bracelets and other WWJD paraphernalia, aging copies of In His Steps, – along with other classic works in the tradition of imitating Christ – and even multiple movies on the same theme, one as recent as 2015. As Marguerite Shuster reflects, “the [WWJD] movement has proved enormously popular, even as Sheldon’s original sermons were enormously popular, especially with young people.” Today, North American evangelical congregations seem to mirror the setting in the opening of In His Steps, singing beloved lyrics that call the congregation to imitate Christ: “Where you go I’ll go / where you stay, I’ll stay / When you move, I'll move / I will follow you,” “I want to be like Jesus / To walk and talk like Jesus / I want to live like one who follows him,” “My sole pursuit / To know You more / To be like You.”

Evangelical congregations, lyrically guided towards an imitation motif, are still left with

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134 As Gary Scott Smith details, the influence of In His Steps has been substantial (Gary Scott Smith, “Charles M Sheldon’s In His Steps In the Context of Religion and Culture in Late Nineteenth Century America,” Fides et Historia 22 no. 2(1990): 47-48.
137 Chris Tomlin, I Will Follow.
138 Sovereign Grace Music, To Be Like Jesus.
139 Hillsong, To be like You.
Rachel Winslow’s question: how do we know what it is to do “what Jesus would do?” This question has been taken up by some scholars – in the long tradition of the imitation motif – regarding both application and interpretation. While we cannot undergo an exhaustive study of the ethicists who have undertaken the theme in recent North American evangelical thought, we will present a brief survey here.\(^{140}\)

Contrary to Sheldon’s approach in *In His Steps*, which lacked extended biblical evidence, recent scholarship is focused on the biblical and theological basis for the imitation of Christ, such as in E.J. Tinsley’s often cited work, *The Imitation of God in Christ*.\(^{141}\) Tinsley sets out to ground the imitation of Christ in Old and New Testament teachings, countering “modern trends in New Testament studies” which are often “skeptical about the possibility of constructing a ‘Life of Jesus.’” He affirms the possibility of this task, seeking to establish the “biblical basis of the idea of the imitation of Christ . . . to indicate the role which the historical revelation in Israel and in Christ play in the life of the Christian according to the New Testament.”\(^{142}\)

Reflecting on the need to revisit the theme of imitating Christ, establishing a biblical basis for it, Tinsley points to the modern reactions against the imitation of Christ, which “may have sprung from the marked antimystical outlook of the older Liberal theologians” and has

\(^{140}\) Kevin Giles notes that while the ideal of imitating Christ has been popular throughout history, the themes of following and imitating Christ within scholarship “have not, however, until recent times, reflected this interest.” (Kevin Giles, ‘*Imitatio Christi*’ in the New Testament,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 38, no. 3 (September – December, 1979): 65. Many scholars mention the theme in passing, but few treat it in detail. Here, we will focus on those who devote full books and/or articles to the theme.

\(^{141}\) There are also works that focus on the task of applying the imitation motif to our current context. See, for example: the 1998 Princeton Theological Seminary series of lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture on the theme of “Growing up Postmodern: Imitating Christ in the Age of ‘Whatever,’” well-known thinkers, such as William Willimon and Martin E. Marty (Martin E. Marty, “‘Who is Jesus Christ for Us Today?’ As Asked by Young People” and William Willimon, “Imitating Christ in a Postmodern World: Young Disciples Today,” *Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture* (1998)) and more recent works, such as Thaddeus Williams’ *Reflect: Becoming Yourself by Mirroring the Greatest Person in History*, which also focus on application and discipleship.

“suffered from the popular assumption that [the imitation of Christ] must mean literal mimicry of historical episodes.”

143 Alister McGrath echoes the need to revisit the theme of imitating Christ in light of liberal Christianity when he writes, “A similar devaluation of the moral example of Jesus is the effect, if not necessarily the intention, of liberal Christianity. Jesus’ example is approached through a filter of antecedent values and principles, derived from other sources.”

144 Yoder picks up on this critique, specifically applying it to Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* as a “classic of turn-of-the-century popular Protestantism.”

145 The imitation motif present in this text, Yoder argues, is “not materially related to Jesus;” rather, it simply means that the believer ought to do what is right at all costs, but “what is the right thing to do is knowable for Sheldon apart from Jesus.”

146 Like McGrath, Yoder argues that the substance of ethical norms in “liberal Christianity” is found outside of the Gospel. James Gustafson echoes these concerns about the liberal tradition which was “always concerned with the relation of the moral ideal as goal to the moral ideal as idea or form of reality, and with Christ as the one who empowers the Christian life.”

147 Again, Gustafson points to *In His Steps* as the classic, and popular summation of the image of Christ as a moral ideal. In this tradition, exemplified by Sheldon and articulated by theologians such as Newman Smyth, ethics is “basically the study of the *summum bonum,*” asking the question, “What is your ideal of life?”

148 Bavinck, a contemporary of Sheldon and Smyth, was also well acquainted with the conception of Christ as the moral ideal and raised concerns about the imitation motif exemplified in this tradition; imitation becomes reduced to

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143 Tinsley, “The Way of the Son of Man,” 418; in another article, Tinsley adds to this point, referencing the “relative importance” that is placed on Christ in modern interpretations, as opposed to the “traditional normative place assigned to Jesus in Christian tradition.” Tinsley, “Some Principles,” 52.


145 Yoder, PoJ, 4.

146 Yoder, PoJ, 5, fn. 7, emphasis original.


“being filled with and following after [Christ’s] ‘spirit’ in its essence and core.”

The tradition of imitating Christ that Sheldon popularizes reduces the substance of Jesus’ example; Jesus becomes an ideal, the content of what is to be imitated must come from elsewhere. Thus, Tinsley and other scholars – including Yoder and Bavinck – turned to the New Testament to understand what properly constitutes the imitation of Christ.

Citing Tinsley’s work, in The Example of Jesus Michael Griffiths also seeks to present a basis for imitating Christ from rabbinic thought, the Old Testament, and the New Testament. R.E.O White, again, stresses the importance of the imitation of Christ in Biblical ethics, looking to the history of New Testament exegesis and the call to imitate in the New Testament. Following this pattern, Richard Burridge, in Imitating Jesus, argues for an understanding of imitation that leads to inclusion and acceptance. Burridge again focuses on biblical exegesis, not the historic interpretations of the imitation of Christ. He looks to the gospels and Pauline literature to develop a framework for understanding the imitation of Christ in the twenty-first century. Combining application and an investigation into the biblical text, Marguerite Shuster

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149 Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
150 Bavinck elaborates: “In this conception not much is left of the example of Jesus and its imitation. Modern man apparently needs no such example. Those who feel no need of Jesus Christ as mediator and reconciler need his moral example even less. Modern man’s ideal cannot be that of the past, a man who was in every respect a product of his own time, but must be sought in the uncertain future. It must be an ideal established and validated by modern man himself” (Bavinck, Imitation I, 394).
153 Hood characterizes Burridge as a representative of the “latitudinal ‘left’” which “uses the imitation of Jesus liberally, insisting on, say, embracing the marginalized as Jesus did,” while missing “the gospel basis for the imitation of Christ.” (Hood, Imitating God in Christ, 14).
154 Hays praises Burridge for his attention to the New Testament’s ethical witness, while raising significant criticisms of the project, including questions about the example of Christ as chiefly attending to inclusivity. Hays responds, “Jesus is not only friend of sinners but also prophetic nemesis of the wicked.” (Richard Hays, “Response to Richard Burridge’s Imitating Jesus,” Scottish Journal of Theology 63, no. 3 (2010): 332-333).
presents a detailed study of Scripture in her essay, “The Use and Misuse of the Idea of the Imitation of Christ,” to present both the biblical limits on, and affirmation of, imitating Christ.\textsuperscript{156}

Recent studies with a focus on systematic theology also tend to emphasize scriptural evidence for the imitation of Christ over a discussion of the history of the imitation of Christ. Douglas Webster’s \textit{A Passion for Christ} presents an “evangelical Christology.” In this, he demonstrates that the imitation of Christ is an important biblical pattern. The majority of Webster’s chapter on the imitation of Christ is a survey of the biblical evidence for the imitation of Christ, focused on Pauline literature but also looking to the rest of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{157} In his well-known book, \textit{Christ and the Moral Life}, James M. Gustafson also addresses the imitation of Christ at great length. He devotes an entire section to “Jesus Christ, The Pattern,” often invoking language of imitation. He does so with a wealth of both biblical and theological reflection, but rarely invokes history earlier than Thomas à Kempis. His work cites Wesley, Calvin, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, Sheldon, and more – but, again, does not look to the historic models of imitation seen in the martyrs, mystics, and monks.\textsuperscript{158} Jason Hood’s important work \textit{Imitating God in Christ}, echoing the title of Tinsley’s classic text, \textit{The Imitation of God in Christ}, also points to the biblical pattern of imitation: throughout the Old and New Testaments. Hood is again clear that imitation is a necessary category throughout Scripture (and human experience) and is concretely applied to the life of Christ. His work progresses “from the imitation of God [in the Old Testament] to the imitation of Jesus to the imitation of the saints,”

\textsuperscript{157} Douglas D. Webster, \textit{A Passion for Christ: An Evangelical Christology} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 47-64. In this chapter he briefly touches on the history of the imitation of Christ, surveying monastic and mystic models of imitation, alongside the Reformers reflections on the imitation of Christ (Webster, \textit{A Passion for Christ}, 57-59), but these are brief treatments alongside much larger scriptural reflection.
three aspects of imitation that “form the backbone of a biblical theology of imitation.” It focuses on answering the question: “What does the Bible say about imitation,” a question which points to Hood’s emphasis on scriptural texts. However, Hood does not only look to Scripture; he ends this work with a brief history of the imitation of Christ, from “the Epistle to Diognetus to Augustine, from Clement of Rome to Calvin.” He focuses on the early church emphasis on suffering and martyrdom and the Reformers’ interpretation of imitation, pointing to both the faithful witness of the church and the distortions of the imitation of Christ throughout the history of the church.”

Tinsley, Griffiths, and others point to the historic distortions of the imitation of Christ – both in liberal Christianity and throughout church history – as one of the reasons why modern scholars have often been reticent to treat the theme. Kevin Giles, who draws heavily on Tinsley’s work, summarizes the concerns in this way: “a dislike of, or even antipathy to, the idea of imitating Christ arises because it is feared this could induce or encourage the old heresy of salvation by works by bypassing the cross and forgetting grace. Then secondly, many scholars . . . have realized that the idea of imitating Christ is beset with the great danger of unreflective literalism that can carry the devout but unsuspecting into gross excesses.” Correcting both the modern near-silence on, and the historic distortions of, the imitation motif, many more recent North American scholars turn directly to Scripture to properly articulate the imitation of Christ.

Looking to Scripture and Tradition: John Howard Yoder and Herman Bavinck

John Howard Yoder also emphasizes the central role of the imitation of Christ in Christian ethics. His work, as Budziszewski illustrates, is so influential in North American

evangelical ethics that we have chosen him as the contemporary voice to dialogue with Herman Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. As we will see in Chapter Four, Yoder too turns to Scripture in order to understand the content and form of the imitation of Christ. But, unlike many of his contemporaries, his examination of Scripture is in consistent conversation with the historic forms of the imitation of Christ. In doing so, Yoder is both recognizing that the imitation motif has been an important motif for ethical living throughout Christian history (an observation that his contemporaries make as well) and drawing upon the Biblical picture of an imitation motif in conversation with its historic forms – affirming and critiquing the ways that the church has imitated Christ throughout history. Yoder’s substantive interaction with the history of Christian thought should not surprise us, given his training as a historical theologian.

The positive formulation of an imitation motif that Yoder presents is articulated in conversation with the historic forms of the imitation of Christ, often as a response to the misunderstandings that Yoder perceives within the historic practices of imitation. Interestingly, Herman Bavinck begins his work on imitation with the same lens: a look back to the historic forms of imitation and a robust engagement with each of these forms, leading to his own positive articulation of the imitation of Christ. Bavinck, too, demonstrates a desire to represent the sweep of Christian tradition in his *Reformed Dogmatics* and *Reformed Ethics*.164

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163 This is not to say, of course, that modern scholars never speak of the historic forms of the imitation of Christ. Tinsley, for example, briefly refers to both the mystic and martyr as forms of the imitation of Christ (Tinsley, *The Imitation of God in Christ*, 17, 110, 145).

164 This is not to say, of course that Bavinck and Yoder are the only two more recent theological ethicists to look to both history and Scripture as they detail the imitation of Christ. Bavinck’s contemporary, Danish theologian Hans Lassen Martensen briefly details the “false imitation” that is found in martyrdom and the monastic life, and the “great dissimilarity to [Christ]” in the ascetic life (H. Martensen, *Christian Ethics*, vol. 1, trans. C. Spence (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1883), 295-296). The treatment of this history of this theme by Martensen is both brief and generally negative. Echoing Martensen’s concerns, American theologian Franklin Weidner also discusses the history of the imitation in a short section of his *Christian Ethics*, again rejecting the historic distortions of martyrdom, mysticism, and the ascetic life (Franklin Weidner, *Christian Ethics: A System Based on Martensen and Harless* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revill Co., 1897), 72-73). Yoder’s contemporary, Douglas D. Webster is an example of a theologian who again, albeit briefly, discusses “a history of imitation,” surveying monastic and mystic models of imitation, alongside the Reformers reflections on the imitation of Christ (Webster, *A Passion for Christ*, 57-59).
Accordingly, to understand both Yoder and Bavinck, a brief historical typology of the imitation of Christ is necessary. To do so, we will follow the pattern of the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, which presents a helpful guide for wading through centuries of the history of Christian spirituality. As Conon Etienne Ledeur points out in her essay on the spiritual tradition of the imitation of Christ, to identify the breadth of the use of this theme in the Christian tradition is nearly impossible. The imitation of Christ, as an ideal and ethical theme, is incredibly vast, popular, and remains difficult to parse due to wide-ranging interpretations of what exactly the “imitation of Christ” is referring to, ranging from literal copying to union with Christ.\textsuperscript{165} Thus, following the example of Leduer, the author of “Tradition Spirituelle: Imitation du Christ” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, we will survey four important periods in Christian spirituality: the writings of the New Testament, early Christian martyrdom, the ascetic movement as seen in the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and the Medieval mendicant orders.\textsuperscript{166} These four periods are prominent in both Bavinck and Yoder’s historical analyses of the imitation of Christ. Alongside these, we will briefly explore one of the preeminent thinkers on the imitation of Christ, Thomas à Kempis, and the way that the Reformers take up the theme of the imitation of Christ.

**The Imitation of Christ in the New Testament**

While the language of imitation is not often seen in Scripture, the importance of the pattern of Christ’s life is certainly evident. In the New Testament, there is very little use of the word “imitate” in any form, either the verb μιμέομαι (*mimeomai*; follow) or the noun μιμητής.

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\textsuperscript{166} Leduer, likewise, chooses to highlight only a few manifestations of the theme of the imitation of Christ in Christian tradition: early Christian martyrdom, two doctors of the church: Chrysostom and Augustine, examples from the Middle Ages, examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and examples from the eighteenth century. Curiously, Kempis is nowhere mentioned (Leduer, “Tradition Spirituelle,” 1563-1587).
(mimetes; imitator). In fact, these words are not used at all in the gospels. They are, however, found within the Pauline corpus and Johannine literature: μιμέομαι is found four times (2 Thess. 3:7, 2 Thess. 3:9, Heb. 13:7, 3 John 1:11) and μιμητής is found six times (1 Cor. 4:16, 1 Cor. 11:1, Eph. 5:1, 1 Thess. 1:6, 1 Thess. 2:4, Heb. 6:12). In these passages, there are only two cases where imitating Christ is specifically referenced, and in both instances it is mentioned alongside other instructions for imitation: In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul charged his listeners to “[b]e imitators of me, as I am of Christ” and in 1 Thessalonians 1:6 he reflected that the church “became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” In these verses, Paul invites his readers to imitate him as he imitates Christ. In other Pauline instances of imitation language, Paul’s readers are called to imitate God, those who have gone before in the faith, and other churches.

Although the word “imitate” is not used in the Gospels and Acts, the concept of imitation is not altogether absent. In these books, Jesus’ primary call to discipleship is to “follow him,” ἀκολουθεῖν (akolouthein). This verb is used distinctively in the narratives of the calling of

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167 There is also the question of imitation in the Old Testament. Edouard Cothenet argues that the concept of imitation is already visible in the Old Testament, but in the concrete language of the Israelites, rather than the conceptual language of the Greeks, seen in the New Testament. Imitation, then, can be seen in texts like Jeremiah 35:6-7, when sons are to follow in the way of their fathers. Cothenet points to words like derek (derek; the road or the way) and halak (to go or to walk) as examples of the Israelite understanding of imitation. The Israelites are instructed not only to walk in the ways of their forefathers, but also to “walk after the Lord” (Deut. 13:4; Edouard Cothenet, “Dans L’Écriture: Imitation du Christ,” in Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, ed. Marcel Viller, Charles Baumgartner, André Rayez, Tome VII (Beauchesne, Paris, 1937), 1537-1539). Interestingly, though, Cothenet points to rabbinical texts written after the New Testament begin to express direct language of imitating God (Cothenet, “Dans L’Écriture,”1538). See also Tinsley, The Imitation of God in Christ, 27-66.

168 Μιμέομαι is also seen four in the LXX (Wisdom of Solomon 4:2, 15:9; 4 Macc. 9:23, 13:9).

169 All Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted; Scott Spencer, “Imitation of Jesus,” in Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 397.

170 Beyond these ten passages where the word “imitate” is used, Paul teaches an ethical imitation of Christ, albeit using different language, perhaps most poignantly seen in Philippians 2:4-11. Here again we see Paul teaching a theme consistent with imitation language: Christ is the paradigm for how Christians ought to act.

171 This verb is used ninety times in the New Testament. See, for example: Matthew 4:20, 8:23, 9:9, 16:24; Mark 6:1, 8:34; Luke 5:27, 22:39, John 12:26 and more. Alongside this verb, there are other Greek constructions for “following,” as in Matthew 4:19 (even here, though, the verb ἀκολουθεῖν is later present).
disciples, a call that demanded from them an abrupt and total response, as seen in Matthew 4:20 when Simon and Andrew heard Jesus’ call to follow and they “immediately left their nets and followed [ἡκολούθησαν] him.” Following Jesus was not just about learning to live as Jesus did – as the disciples learned, Jesus is not only example; he is Lord – but it was certainly no less than that.\(^{172}\) The unique call of the disciples of Christ is seen again in Acts. Described as people “of the way” (Acts 9:2), the disciples were known as those who followed, or imitated, the way of Christ.\(^{173}\) In the Johannine tradition, too, imitation is present. Jesus taught his followers to love one another “as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Following the concept of imitation, the greatest model of this love was the example of Jesus’ life.\(^{174}\)

These New Testament references only scratch the surface of the depth of the language of imitation in Scripture – both in the literal forms of the word, in “following,” “discipleship,” and other instances of calls to the ethical imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. It is sufficient here, however, to note that these references point to the vast scriptural call towards imitating Christ that fills the New Testament. It is upon this foundation that the historic understandings of imitating Christ are built. In their interactions with these historic understandings of the imitation of Christ, Bavinck and Yoder also appeal to the teaching of Scripture.

**Early Christian Martyrdom and the Imitation of Christ**

In the early church’s interpretation of the New Testament, we already find the concept of the imitation of Christ linked with the act of martyrdom.\(^{175}\) Early followers of Christ interpreted

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\(^{172}\) Spencer, “Imitation of Jesus,” 397.

\(^{173}\) As Bavinck notes in his discussion of imitation in scripture in *Reformed Ethics*, while the verbs “to follow” and “to imitate,” are related, they are not identical. He argues: “The verb μιμησθαι means “to imitate,” “to copy,” and must be distinguished from “to follow” (ἀκολουθέω), Bavinck, *GE*, 285. For more on the relationship between following and imitating Jesus in scripture, see Cothenet, “Dans L’Écriture,” 1536-1562.


\(^{175}\) In John and Acts, the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in enabling the disciples to imitate Christ. Spirit-filled leaders, such as Paul, Stephen and Peter, imitate the ministry of Jesus in their miracles, prophetic witness, persecution, and
Christ’s words in Mark 10:39, “the cup that I drink you will drink” as the grounds for the martyr as one who imitates the passion of Christ.\textsuperscript{176} The early church also regards the stoning of Stephen, recorded in Acts 6-7, as a demonstration of martyrdom as the imitation of Christ. Stephen’s martyrdom drives us from an exploration of imitation within Scripture towards the beginning of the imitation tradition in early Christian spirituality.

While the phrases “to follow” or “to imitate” are not found in Acts 6-7, in Stephen’s death there is a type of imitating of the death of Jesus, as seen in his final prayers.\textsuperscript{177} As he is being stoned, Stephen prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit;” his final prayer was “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”\textsuperscript{178} These final prayers bear striking resemblance to Jesus’ last words on the cross.\textsuperscript{179} Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do,” and, finally, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”\textsuperscript{180} This early example of martyrdom as an act of imitating Christ helps situate the writings of the early Christian fathers, who presented the martyrs as the ideal of the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{181} Irenaeus, for example, says that Stephen “fulfilled the perfect teaching, in all things imitating the Teacher of Martyrdom.”\textsuperscript{182} In his death, Stephen imitated Christ.\textsuperscript{183}

\begin{itemize}
\item martyrdom (Spencer, “Imitation of Jesus,” 397. See, for example: Acts 3:1-10, 4:8-22, 6:8-10, 7:55-60, 9:32-42, 14:8-10, 20:7-12, 22-23.)
\item Cothenet, “Dans L’Écriture,” 1553.
\item Leduer, “Tradition Spirituelle,” 1563. Beyond these more literal aspects of imitation that are found within this narrative, in Stephen’s death his “inner attitude is joined to and flows from the inner life of his risen Lord.” (John L. Boyle, “Preface,” in Imitating Christ, trans. Sister Simone Inkle and Sister Lucy Tinsley (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1974), vi.
\item Acts 7:59-60.
\item Cothenet, “Dans L’Écriture,” 1553.
\item Luke 23:34, 46.
\item Boyle, “Preface,” vi.
\item The early church did not simply understand imitation to be confined to the act of martyrdom. Commenting on Acts 7, Cyprian wrote: “So it was most fitting that the first martyr for Christ who, in preceding by his glorious death the martyrs that were to come, was not only the preacher of the Lord’s suffering, but also the imitator of His most patient gentleness.” (Cyprian, “Treatise IX: On the Advantage of Patience” in Treatises (The Fathers of the Church, Volume 36), trans. Roy J. Deferrari, Sister Angela Elizabeth Keenan, S.N.D., Mary Hannah Mahoney, and Sister George Edward Conway, S.S.J. (New York: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 279.)
\end{itemize}
The relationship between the imitation of Christ and the act of martyrdom is again well demonstrated in Ignatius of Antioch, the first Christian who recorded his thoughts while awaiting his own martyrdom. The intensity of his desire to both be with Jesus and be like Jesus can be seen in his words, “at last I am well on my way to being a disciple.” Later, in the same letter, he wrote, “permit me to be an imitator of my suffering God.” For Ignatius, martyrdom is the final imitation of Christ. This emphasis on the act of martyrdom ought not be interpreted, however, as an understanding that martyrdom is the only way of participating in Christ’s passion; the Christian life, for Ignatius, is already a participation in this passion and an opportunity for imitating Christ. Opportunities for the imitation of Christ in the Christian life are again seen in his letter to the Ephesians, “Let us rival one another in being imitators [mimetai] of the Lord, as to who will suffer more injustice, deprivation, and contempt.” For Ignatius, though, the full manifestation of this suffering, the highest example of the imitation of Christ, is seen in martyrdom. Ignatius’ fervent prayer was to attain this martyrdom, the act where he would be truly found as a Christian.

These excerpts provide a glimpse into the spirituality of the early, persecuted church.

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185 See, for example, his letter to the Smyrnites where he writes of their unshakable faith which is “as if ye were nailed to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, both in flesh and in spirit.” (Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnians 1, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885), 225).
186 Ignatius, To the Ephesians, x, 3, quoted in Bouyer, Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers, 200; the parenthetical addition is inserted by Bouyer. This is not the only occasion for Ignatius to exhort his listeners to the imitation of Christ in this letter, see also his “exhortations to unity” and “exhortations to prayer, humility, etc.” Ignatius, Epistle to the Ephesians: Shorter and Longer Versions, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885), 141, 150).
188 See Ignatius, The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans, chapter III. This fervor was not unique to Ignatius; see also The Martyrdom of Polycarp (Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, as Told in the Letter of the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium, in Early Christian Fathers, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1953), 134). For more on Ignatius, and his motivation for martyrdom see: H. A. Bakker, Exemplar Domini: Ignatius of Antioch and His Martyrological Self-Concept, Ph.D. diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2003, especially pages 59-79, 86-125.
where martyrdom was incredibly important; it was the supreme example of the imitation of Christ in the early church.\textsuperscript{189} Origen summed up the early church’s attitude toward martyrdom well when he stated that martyrs are imitators of God and Christ.\textsuperscript{190}

The martyrs of the early church were willing to give up everything to witness to the reality that Jesus is Lord. They did not waver in the face of death; they faced persecution with courage, strength, and faith. But this steadfastness in the face of death, for some, turned into a yearning for death. Martyrdom did not remain simply focused on the cause for which martyrs died; many also turned their gaze towards the glory of death. For some, it became about the suffering, rather than the cause for this suffering. While both Bavinck and Yoder affirm the glory, courage, and faithful witness of the martyrs, they also caution against a distorted view of suffering and death. Yoder affirms that the church is known by this model of imitating Christ, “over against this ‘world’ the church is visible; identified by . . . martyrdom.”\textsuperscript{191} But he also acknowledges the potential for abuse and the limits of the good of martyrdom: the Christian emphasis on the cross “does not mean that suffering is thought of as in itself redemptive or that martyrdom is a value to be sought after.”\textsuperscript{192} Suffering and martyrdom are not a good in themselves. Rather, the Christian is called to faithfulness and obedience – that may result in suffering and martyrdom.\textsuperscript{193} Bavinck, too, praises the martyrs for their “courage, firm conviction

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Bouyer90} Bouyer, \textit{The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers}, 190, 199.
\bibitem{Bouyer200} Bouyer, \textit{Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers}, 200. Origen’s enthusiasm for martyrdom was well known (Leduer, “Tradition Spirituelle,” 1565-1566.) Origen argues in his \textit{Exhortation to Martyrdom} that Christ gave up his life. Because of this, the Christian must also give up their own life (Origen, “An Exhortation to Martyrdom,” in \textit{The Classics of Western Spirituality}, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 72, in reference to 1 John 3:16). In Origen’s work, martyrdom took on many different parallels to the life of Christ, alongside his sacrifice: martyrdom as the cross of the believer, related to Christ’s temptation, the chalice that Christ drank (Origin, “An Exhortation to Martyrdom,” 49-50, 60, 63, 67-68). He understood martyrdom to be a profound act of imitation and unity with Christ. In the act of martyrdom, one enters into communion with the mystery of Christ.
\bibitem{Yoder982} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 236.
\bibitem{Yoder238} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 238.
\end{thebibliography}
and faithful witness.” Bavinck and Yoder affirm a “pure” understanding of imitating Christ in martyrdom, while warning against potential – and historic – distortions of this model of imitating Christ.

The Ascetic Movement and the Imitation of Christ

In the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, no longer under as strong a shadow of cultural disapproval and recurring persecution, the concept of following – or imitating – Christ began to change form. The totality of commitment to Christ was now also seen in the life of ascetics. These ascetics took upon themselves a poor and celibate life, living in a way to set them free from the constraints of daily life in order to enter into full life in Christ. First in urban centers of Christianity, but gradually seeking places further away from social, political, and economic demands, these followers of Christ found their way to the deserts of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The ascetics in the desert, combining the early ways of Christianity with monastic practices like celibacy, fasting, solitude, silence, prayer, and poverty, became known as the desert fathers and mothers. The desert fathers and mothers left the civilized world to live alone as hermits, or with a few companions; living a life of great simplicity, they went to the desert to draw near to God. Many of these desert fathers and mothers, in their lives of meditation on the Bible, became known for their spiritual and theological insight. In their life and teaching, the importance of imitating Christ is once again seen as a primary motif for the Christian life.

194 Bavinck, Imitation I, 376.
195 Bavinck, Imitation I, 377.
The goal of the monastic life, as articulated by Peter Görg is “absolute submission of his whole being to God by imitating Christ,” most concretely seen in obedience, poverty, and celibacy.\textsuperscript{198} In the desert fathers, we see a radical living out of this imitation motif in their concrete separation from the “world” through their life in the wilderness. A poignant example of this is Antony, whose life is detailed in Athanasius’ hagiographical work \textit{The Life of Antony}.\textsuperscript{199}

Antony was born into a wealthy, Christian family in Egypt in the third century. In his teenage years, he converted to the ascetic life, sold all of his possessions, and devoted himself to a life of discipline.\textsuperscript{200} He first started training himself in the discipline of the ascetic life while living in proximity to the village, then went out into the wilderness. After almost twenty years, Antony briefly left his dwelling and performed miraculous acts: healing the sick and driving out demons. Guided by the words and actions of Christ, Antony lived a life devoted to discipline. He charged his followers to “draw inspiration from Christ always,” to “live as though dying daily.”\textsuperscript{201} Antony’s literal imitation of the acts of Christ, going out into the wilderness, not acquiring personal possessions, driving out demons, curing the sick, highlight the prominent role that the imitation of Christ played in the spiritual practices of the desert fathers. Alongside this, Antony’s goal to imitate Christ in his dispositions, through discipline, shows a multifaceted approach to imitating Christ.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{199} Antony is not the only instance of imitating Christ found in the desert fathers; rather, his story is illustrative of the many ways that the desert fathers and mothers sought to imitate Christ. Imitation of Christ was a common motif for the desert fathers and mothers, whether explicitly stated or implied in their words and deeds. Their words continue to have an influence on the imitation motifs that continued onto the middle ages: “naked to follow the naked Jesus,” a familiar phrase of late medieval piety coined in the fourth century. Jerome, when writing to Rusticus, a desert monk, was first to use this phrase (Jerome, “Letter to Rusticus,” in \textit{Letters}, trans. F.A Wright (Loeb Classical Library, London: Harvard University Press, 1954), 438). See also Helen Waddell, “Introduction,” in \textit{The Desert Fathers}, 6th ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 1.
\item \textsuperscript{200} Here, we begin to see Athanasius introducing an imitation motif into the telling of Antony’s life; Antony’s desire to imitate the life of the apostles and the early Christians is evident (Athanasius, \textit{The Life of Anthony}, 31-32, 66).
\item \textsuperscript{201} Athanasius, \textit{The Life of Anthony}, 97.
\end{itemize}
Antony is only one example of the quest of the desert fathers and mothers to imitate Christ. This quest, often, was fueled by a desire to cultivate humility. As Abba John of Thebes wrote, “first of all, the monk must gain humility; for it is the first commandment of the Lord who said: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’” The desert fathers and mothers strove to incorporate humility, particularly the humility of Christ into their lives, drawing upon the words of Scripture. In this, they attempted to live a life characterized by the self-emptying that was most clearly lived out in the life of Christ.202

Neither Bavinck or Yoder directly treat the desert fathers at length, but both provide an extended discussion on monasticism at large and the literal following of Jesus, characterized by asceticism, that this tradition embodies, as concretely seen in the life of Antony.203 While lauding the critique of “comfortable religion” that the monks provided, Yoder is clear that this tradition attempts to find a “general concept of living like Jesus in the New Testament” that simply does not exist. He praises the nobility of the tradition and the piety it engenders, but argues that “we must be aware that [the monastic tradition] centers the renunciation at another point in the New Testament,” the outward form of Jesus’ life, seeking a “formal mimicking of his life-style.”204 Bavinck, too, praises the monks for their protest against the “worldliness of the church,” but echoes Yoder’s concerns.205 Within monastic practices, he too finds an incorrect understanding of the imitation of Christ, one focused on a literal replication of Jesus’ external actions through ascetic practices. For the monk, Bavinck argues, “Imitation consists of copying the external life of Jesus and then only in some of the outward circumstances of his life which are exaggerated as

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203 Bavinck does specifically discuss Antony as part of an early community of ascetics (Bavinck, Imitation I, 379).
204 Yoder, PaJ, 130; emphasis original.
205 Bavinck, Imitation I, 378.
well." This “slavish copying,” while providing an important corrective to the church, is not emblematic of the true imitation of Christ.

**The Mendicant Orders and the Imitation of Christ**

Similar to the change in practices of Christian spirituality that accompanied the lessening of persecution in the third and fourth centuries, from an emphasis on martyrdom to the ascetic life as seen in the desert fathers, changes in the church in the twelfth century also called for different emphases in practice. Mendicant orders arose, due to earnest wrestling with the question of how best to understanding and apply the gospel and the identification of serious abuses in the church. Francis of Assisi and Dominic of Osma both founded new orders, the Franciscan Order and Dominican Order, each aiming to serve the church through the practice of poverty and a revival of preaching in cities. In these orders, the imitation of Christ remained a consistent theme. The mendicant friars sought to live as Christ had lived, renouncing worldly goods and preaching the good news of the gospel as they traveled.

Imitation of Christ in the Franciscan Order is poignantly displayed in the life of its founder, Francis of Assisi, whose life and teachings are foundational for understanding the spirituality of the Franciscans. The heart of his spirituality is seen in his *Earlier Rule* where he writes, “let us pay attention, all [my] brothers, to what the Lord says, *Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you* (cf. Mt. 5:44) for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must

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207 There is much more to say about the context of the rise of the mendicant orders. For a brief survey, see: Jean Leclerq, François Vandenhove, and Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality II: The Spirituality of the Middle Ages*, trans. The Benedictines of Holme Eden Abbey (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 283-4. This work provides an overview of the “state of religion at the beginning of the thirteenth century,” identifying the return to the sources as seen in the twelfth century, new ways of teaching tradition, and a “passionate straining toward the pure ideal of the Gospel” which left some unsatisfied with the older ways of practicing monastic life. Given this context, some demanded a purer preaching of the gospel and began to teach against the abuses in the church that were being identified, especially the material wealth of the clergy. In this context, poverty seemed to be the clear remedy to these new questions and the abuses within the church.
follow (cf. 1 Pet 2:21), called his betrayer ‘friend’ (cf. Mat. 26:50) and gave Himself willingly to those who crucified him.” Reflecting on his own experience of conversion, Francis also charges the brothers to “follow the humility and poverty of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” While Francis does not use the word “imitate,” the ideal of imitating Christ is clearly captured in Francis’ emphasis on following the footsteps of Christ – in poverty, patience, humility, suffering, and love. Francis urged his followers to be transformed, through the work of the Spirit, into the likeness of Christ.

Francis’ commitment to a life of imitating Christ is not only seen in his writings. It is also concretely seen in how he lived out these teachings. From his conversion on, he sought to be conformed to Christ in concrete ways, taking literally the demands of Christ’s words. He, for example, upon hearing the words of Matthew 10:7-14, which charges the apostles to “[a]cquire no gold or silver or copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics or sandals or a staff. . ..” got rid of his cloak, shoes, staff, and money, donning instead an old rag. Francis continued in this attitude and approach throughout his life. On account of these numerous stories and teachings, Francis’ contemporaries gave him the title of “imitator of Christ.”

209 Francis of Assisi, The Earlier Rule, 127; emphasis original.
210 Francis of Assisi, The Earlier Rule, 117.
211 In the twenty-eight writings that are part of Francis’ legacy, the eleven times Francis uses language of “following,” are seen in multiple forms. “To follow Christ” is the phrase Francis found in the synoptic gospels. Three texts, from Matthew and Luke, are used at the beginning of his first Rule. In his Letters to the Faithful, the idea of following in the footsteps of Christ is again seen. (Francis of Assisi, Letters to the Faithful, in Francis and Clare: The Complete Works, ed. Richard J. Payne, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 68). Then, the phrase “follow in the footsteps of Jesus” is, as noted above, used four times. In two of these instances, Francis does not elaborate. In another, he urges his readers to follow Christ in both his doctrine and his footsteps. In the final, he urges his readers to follow Christ in his footsteps and in poverty. In other writings, he also indicates what Christians are to follow: the will of the Lord, the poverty of the Lord, the humility of the Lord, and his sufferings and death. These are found in his Rule, Letters, and Counsels (Rule 1.22, Letters 3, Rule 1.1, Letters 7, Rule 1.9, Letters 8, Counsels 6, as referenced in Leduer, “Tradition Spirituelle,” 1573-1574.)
212 Matthew 10:9-10; Leduer, “Tradition Spirituelle,” 1574.
213 Nearing his death, Francis was further conformed to Christ upon receiving the stigmata that marked his body with the five wounds that Christ received in his crucifixion.
214 Leduer, “Tradition Spirituelle,” 1574. While Francis often imitated Christ in quite literal ways, he was open to many forms of imitation. An emphasis on imitating Christ is carried forward in the Franciscan tradition, as evidenced in his followers, such as Clare of Assisi. Claire also charged her followers to follow the footsteps of
The Dominican Order also displayed a commitment to the imitation of Christ. In the instructions for the preacher found in the Primitive Constitution of the Order, they are charged to “act, with religious decorum, as men of the Gospel following in the footsteps of their Savior.”

Thomas Aquinas, arguably one of the best known theologians of this order, is a prime example of this theme in the Christian life. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, this emphasis on imitating Christ is seen. Christ, the “infallible standard of truth” who has “[given] himself as an example” (John 13:15) is the one whom believers must follow. The import of the imitation of Christ in his thought is perhaps most aptly summed up in his *Summa Theologicae*, citing Matthew 19 when he says: “[r]eligious perfection consists chiefly in the imitation of Christ.”

Yoder often summarizes the practices of the Franciscan order as “barefoot itinerancy,” an ethic based on seeking to live, literally, as Christ lived. These orders renounced worldly goods, traveling to preach the good news of the gospel; they exalted the practices of chastity, poverty, and obedience. As Bavinck describes, “not only individual prescriptions but the entire life of Jesus must be imitated and copied.” Reflecting on this ethic, Yoder argues that there “is in the New Testament no Franciscan glorification of barefoot itinerancy. . . the concept of imitation is *not* applied by the New Testament at some of those points where Franciscan and romantic devotion has tried most piously to apply it.” The practices of Francis – literal, outward replication of Jesus’ life – are not supported, he argues, in the New Testament.

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219 Yoder, *PoJ*, 95; emphasis original.
220 Yoder, *PoJ*, 132; For Yoder, this understanding of imitation is problematic on multiple levels, – he often appeals to Franciscan devotion as counter to his understanding of imitation – most evident in its inability to speak
Yoder does praise Franciscan piety for its “serious advocacy of Jesus’ exemplarity in social ethics,” over against many modern iterations of Christological ethics.\(^\text{221}\) Bavinck, too, praises the way in which the mendicant orders took the prescriptions of Jesus seriously.\(^\text{222}\) But, like Yoder, Bavinck rejects the ways that the imitation of Christ “amounted to nothing more than a mere repetition of single deeds and circumstances of Jesus.”\(^\text{223}\) While merely seeking to literally, externally mimic the actions of Christ provides an important corrective to those who do not take the life of Jesus seriously in Christian ethics, it is not the true imitation of Christ.

There are many other examples that could be considered, but the four that were briefly examined highlight the consistency of the imitation motif throughout spiritual movements in early Christian history.\(^\text{224}\) The words of the New Testament and the actions of the martyrs, ascetics, and mendicants testify to the consistent refrain of imitating Christ in the early church. The variety in what it meant for disciples of Christ to enact the ideal of imitating Christ gives witness to the contextual differences throughout the early church. In the early, persecuted church, martyrdom was the supreme example of the imitation of Christ. As active persecution waned and life became hurried with social and economic demands, believers in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries strove to imitate the self-emptying of Christ through the ascetic life in the wilderness. Later, in the twelfth century, the believers again understood the ideal imitation of Christ in a different way. Imitating Christ meant following Christ back into the city with the mendicant

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\(^\text{222}\) Bavinck, Imitation I, 387-388; this, he asserts, went against the “prevailing spiritual indifference” of the day.

\(^\text{223}\) Bavinck, GE, 282.

\(^\text{224}\) Here, we focused on the movements within Christian spirituality. But, the teachings of the Church Fathers equally illustrate the prominence of the imitation of Christ for the early church, seen in Eastern and Western Christianity.
orders, renouncing worldly goods and preaching the gospel as they traveled. These important moments in the history of Christian spirituality demonstrate the enduring prominence of the imitation of Christ as an ethical ideal, concretely applying this ideal to the life of the believer with differing emphases in their specific times and places.

**Thomas à Kempis and the Imitation of Christ**

The four examples of imitation throughout history that we have just considered demonstrate the prominence of the imitation ideal throughout Christian history and show the ways Christians have applied this imitation ideal to new and changing historical contexts. In the fourteenth century, the *Devotio Moderna* models a different relationship to history and context. Reflecting on the excesses and distortions that had occurred in the church, the medieval Christians of the *Devotio Moderna* sought to look back, to renew the early piety and practices of the church. The *Devotio Moderna*, founded by Geert de Groote (1340-1384), emphasized a renewal of the piety of the early church. Groote aimed to return to traditional forms of discipleship, to emphasize conversion, and to articulate the importance of practical Christian living and holiness, meditation on the life and death of Jesus, and frequent communion.²²⁵ Prayer, rejection of worldly goods, and the practice of – and growth in – the virtues are the way to God. These three elements can, for Groote, be summed up in one phrase: the imitation of Christ.²²⁶

Given these emphases of Groote, it is no surprise that this phrase, the imitation of Christ, is the title of the famous treatise which best represents the movement, Thomas à Kempis’ *De

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Imitatione Christi (also commonly known as Imitatio Christi), or, The Imitation of Christ. As Albert Hyma argues, The Imitation of Christ “may be called the Gospel of the Devotio Moderna.” Through its writings (such as The Imitation of Christ) and its institutions (such as the Brethren of the Common Life), the christocentric piety of the Devotio Moderna had great reach. Of this great influence and reach, the flagship writer of the movement, Thomas à Kempis, is the most well known. The influence and reach of The Imitation of Christ cannot, in many ways, be overstated; it has achieved world renown. As Van Engen claims, “The Imitation of Christ has undoubtedly proved the most influential devotional book in Western Christian History.” This book popularized the piety of the Devotio Moderna, a piety based on imitating Christ.

227 There has been a vast amount of ink spilled on the question of the authorship of the Imitatio Christi. For just a sampling of the literature on this question, see: Kenneth Michael Becker, From the Treasure-House of Scripture: An Analysis of Scriptural Sources in De Imitatione Christi (Turnhout: Brepols Pub., 2002), 22-29; William C. Creasy, “Introduction,” in Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, ed. William C. Creasy (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), xvi-xxi. Thomas à Kempis and the Imitation of Christi (London: Suttaby and Co., 1883), 3-22; Post, The Modern Devotion, 524-533; Leonard A. Wheatley, The Story of the “Imitatio Christi,” (London, 1891), 112-140; and the commonly used critical edition of the Imitatio Christi, edited by M. J. Pohl: Thomas Haemerken à Kempis, Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ, ed. Michael Joseph Pohl, trans. W. Duthoit (London, 1908). There are also many books on the subject, for example: Victor Becker, L’auteur de l’Imitation et les documents neerlandais (The Hauge, 1882); Samuel Kettlewell, The Authorship of De Imitatione Christi, with Many Interesting Particulars about the Book (Oxford, 1877); and Spitzen, Thomas à Kempis als schrijver der Navolging van Christus gehandhaafd (Utrecht, 1880). While discussing the number of names that have been associated with this work, these authors side with tradition, ascribing authorship to Thomas à Kempis (a stance that is now almost universally accepted) – as do I.

228 Post, The Modern Devotion, 1; Albert Hyma, The Brethren of the Common Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), 48. Hyma writes, “Gerard Groote, as founder of the Devotio Moderna, became to some extent the spiritual father of all the men educated by the Brethren of the Common Life and by their pupils, such as Thomas à Kempis, Gansford, Erasmus, Dringenberg, Hegius, Murmellius, Agricola, Beatus Rhenanus, Wimpheling, Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, and Loyola.”

229 Post, The Modern Devotion, 680. The Imitation of Christ is the “first printed book that deserves the appellation of best-seller (and quickly also became a steady seller)” (Becker, From the Treasure-House of Scripture, 31). Hyma testifies to its reach as well, stating that “so vast is the amount of printed material devoted to this subject that no human being will ever be able to read it all” (Hyma, The Brethren of the Common Life, 145).

230 John Van Engen, Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 8; Van Engen is one of many voices who makes this claim.

231 Thomas à Kempis is a concise and clear representation of the spirituality of the Devotio Moderna, a movement inaugurated by Geert de Groote aimed at renewing the piety and practice of early Christianity (Becker, From the Treasure-House of Scripture, 41; Hyma, Brethren of the Common Life, 26; and Anthony N.S. Lane, A Concise History of Christian Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 141. The movement emphasizing conversion, the importance of practical Christian living and holiness, meditation on the life and death of Jesus, and frequent
In this devotional book, later praised by Herman Bavinck for its strong practical and ethical emphases, Kempis emphasizes key themes for the life of the believer: self-examination and humility, self-denial and discipleship, acceptance of one’s lot, obedience, charity, trust in God, grateful mindfulness of God’s benefits and love for Christ. He stressed the importance of a rich prayer life, detachment from the world, full surrender to God, bearing one’s cross, and contemplating the suffering of Christ. As he wrote in the beginning lines of The Imitation of Christ, believers “are advised to imitate [Christ’s] life and habits.” In the contemplative and spiritual exercises that Thomas à Kempis lived and advocated, the believer grows in virtue. It is in these practices and virtues that the believer embodies the call to imitate Christ’s example. In these ways, disciples of Christ are to grow more and more closely conformed to the pattern of Christ; they are to follow the way of the cross.

For Thomas à Kempis, imitating Christ first necessitates union with Christ. On account of this union, the believer follows Christ, who is the example and pattern of humility, obedience, self-knowledge, and self-denial. These virtues, revealed in the life of Christ, are to be emulated by disciples of Christ. Imitating Christ, then, is following the way of the cross. The disciple ought to continue to withdraw from earthly passions, to focus on the inner life, increasing in their desire to love and serve God. As Bavinck himself helpfully summarizes,

The dominant theme [in Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*] is the denunciation of the world and asceticism, that is, the vanity of all things. Everything must point to the cross and lead to the way of the cross. . . the true imitation of Christ is to pattern oneself after communion (Gründler, “Devotio Moderna,” 179). The spirituality of the movement can be summed up in one phrase: the imitation of Christ (Post, *The Modern Devotion*, 315).

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232 Bavinck, Imitation I, 388.
234 Gründler, “Devotio Moderna,” 183
235 As he writes in the opening sentences of *The Imitation of Christ*, “He who follows Me, walks not in darkness,” says the Lord. By these words of Christ we are advised to imitate His life and habits, if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart. Let our chief effort, therefore, be to study the life of Jesus Christ . . . . [W]hoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ. . . . Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and serve him alone (Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1.1).
[the crucifixion], an imitation made possible by love. In The Imitation of Christ, Thomas à Kempis popularized many themes of the Devotio Moderna, including humility, self-denial, discipleship, love for Christ, which are all to be embodied in the imitation of Christ.

Bavinck’s discussion of Kempis comes under his treatment of the broader category of mystic, given that Thomas à Kempis preaches an imitation of Christ that emphasizes a “denunciation of the world, asceticism, and the vanity of all things” where “everything must point to the cross.” For Bavinck, Thomas à Kempis epitomizes a “spiritual grasp of the imitation of Christ.” As with the rest of the mystic interpretations of the imitation of Christ, Bavinck does not praise all aspects of Thomas à Kempis’ work. Like Yoder, who criticizes the ways that an emphasis on mystical vision internalizes the meaning of the cross and suffering, Bavinck is critical of the ways that mysticism emphasizes the “denunciation of the world, asceticism, and the vanity of all things.” Bavinck remains critical of these emphases in The Imitation of Christ, but he also praises Kempis for his “strong ethical and practical emphasis.” Imitating Christ, in Thomas à Kempis’ thought, is not merely external mimicry that seeks out suffering (a danger of mysticism that both Bavinck and Yoder identify). Rather, Kempis attends to the “necessity of imitating Christ’s humility and tenderness.” Despite the shortcomings of the mystic interpretation of the imitation of Christ – asceticism, the denunciation

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236 Bavinck, Imitation I, 388.  
237 Bavinck, Imitation I, 388.  
238 Bavinck, GE, 283.  
239 Yoder writes: “For medieval mysticism . . . the ‘cross’ is an inward experience in which the self struggles with doubt or with pride until it is brought to that brokenness and surrender that permits the mystical vision” (Yoder, “A People in the World,” in The Royal Priesthood, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 87.  
240 Bavinck, Imitation I, 388.  
241 Bavinck, Imitation II, 409; see also: Bavinck, Imitation I, 388.  
242 Bavinck, Imitation I, 392.  
244 Bavinck, GE, 283.
of the world, an overly internal focus – Thomas à Kempis’ strong ethical and practical focus that looks to the virtues is to be praised.

The Reformation and the Imitation of Christ

The theme of the imitation of Christ undergoes a sharp turn in the Reformation, a final period in Christian history that we will explore. Prior to the Reformation, it was a common interpretation to understand “imitating” as synonymous to “following.” But, as Edouard Cothenet points out, this direct link between imitating and following was challenged in the Reformation. 245 Significant changes in the understanding of imitation began during this time; the most commonly known critique of the imitation of Christ during the Reformation era was Martin Luther. 246 Luther’s understanding of, and reticence toward, language of imitating Christ is not uniformly shared by Reformers, but the shift in interpretative framework regarding imitating and following is one that, though addressed in different ways, is shared.

In his 1519 lectures on Galatians Luther famously penned, “it is not the imitation that makes sons, but sonship that makes imitators.” 247 While Augustine presented Christ’s work as providing “both an exemplum for the ‘outer man’ and a sacramentum for the ‘inner man,’” 248 Luther increasingly emphasized the latter. 249 Luther wrote that, “[w]e do not deny that Christians

245 Cothenet, “Dans L’Écriture,” 1536
247 Martin Luther, In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas . . . commentarius (1519), on Gal 3:14, (WA 2:518.16); John Webster describes this phrase as a “classic statement of his account of the relationship between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ man” (Webster, “The Imitation of Christ,” 101).
248 Lewis Ayres, Augustine and the Trinity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 168
249 For Luther’s full thought on the imitation of Christ, it is important to look more broadly at his Commentary on Galatians, in both 1518/9 and 1535. Interesting changes can be noted between his first version of the commentary and second, particularly in Galatians 3. In both 1518/9 and 1535, Luther references the imitation of Christ in his commentary on this chapter, but the verses he is discussing in relation to direct references of an imitation of Christ differ. In 1518/9, in his discussion of Gal. 3:14, Luther writes his oft-quoted line on imitation: “non imitatio fecit filios, sed filatio fecit imitatores.” (Imitation does not make sons, but sonship makes imitators; Martin Luther, In epistolam Pauli ad Galatas . . . commentarius (1519), on Gal 3:14, (WA 2:518.16). However, this line is omitted from his commentary on the same verse in 1535. In 1535, Luther directly refers to the imitation of Christ in his commentary on Gal. 3:9, a noticeable addition to his commentary on Gal. 3:9 in 1518/9, under the same title, Igitur qui ex fide sunt, benedicentur cum fidelibus Abraham.).
ought to imitate the example of Christ; but mere imitation will not satisfy God. And bear in mind that Paul is not now discussing the example of Christ, but the salvation of Christ.\textsuperscript{250} E.J. Tinsley helpfully summarizes Luther’s challenges to the imitation of Christ: Luther “became convinced that the ‘imitation’ of Christ conflicted with the essence of the Christian gospel. . . . The imitation of Christ he believed must inevitably involve a denial of grace and conceal an incipient doctrine of works. . . . He preferred to speak of \textit{conformitas} to Christ.”\textsuperscript{251}

Calvin, a second generation Reformer, is more wont to use language of the imitation. As James Gustafson describes, Calvin “did not hesitate to use the medieval words ‘imitation of Christ.’”\textsuperscript{252} But there remain broad, sweeping claims about the negative view of the imitation of Christ among the Reformers, including claims that Calvin is hostile towards an understanding of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. In his study on Calvin and the imitation of Christ, Jimmy Agan responds to these claims, acknowledging that Calvin warns against the abuse of the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{253} But, despite Calvin’s recognition of the potential abuses of the imitation of Christ, Agan draws attention to Calvin’s frequent, positive use of the imitation of Christ.

Calvin cautions against abuses of imitating Christ is clear in his insistence that imitation is not a rote copying of action; he clearly differentiates between imitation and mimicry. In his commentary on John 13:15, Calvin poignantly articulates this distinction by saying we are to be

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}[\textsuperscript{250}]
\item Martin Luther, \textit{Annotationes Martini Lutheri in Epistolam Pauli ad Galatas} (1535), on Gal. 3:9 (WA 40.1:389b.16).
\item Gustafson, \textit{Christ and the Moral Life}, 165.
\item Agan points to Calvin’s commentary on Romans 6:4 where Paul “does not simply exhort us here to imitate Christ, as though he had said that the death of Christ is an example which is appropriate for all Christians to follow.” (John Calvin, \textit{The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians}; cited by Jimmy Agan, “Departing from – and recovering – tradition: John Calvin and the Imitation of Christ,” \textit{Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society} 56, no. 4 (Dec., 2013): 804-805). He also points to Calvin’s \textit{Institutes}, 2.1.6, 2.1.5, 4.1.19, and 4.12.20 (Agan, “Departing from – and Recovering – Tradition,” 805).
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“imitators not apes.” 254 This notion of not simply trying to emulate each act of Christ’s is part of Calvin’s careful differentiation between those actions that only Christ can do and those actions that are to be imitated. Calvin writes elsewhere that it is “necessary to know what in Christ is to be our example,” later differentiating that “when [Christ] gave evidences of his power, it was not his object that we should thus imitate him.” 255

Despite his cautions, Calvin’s theology contains a strong understanding of the imitation of Christ. For him, the imitation of Christ (properly defined) has a “central emphasis in the Christian life;” 256 “to imitate Christ . . . is the rule of life.” 257 This emphasis on the imitation of Christ is necessarily tied to Calvin’s broader thought, including union with Christ, sanctification, the positive use of the law, cross-bearing, and self-denial, aspects all highlighted in various parts of his discussion of imitation. 258 Calvin’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, and the prominent role he gives it in the life of the believer, can only be understood in concert with these other aspects of his theology.

Sanctification, union with Christ, and the positive use of the law are three key aspects of Calvin’s thought that are connected to the imitation of Christ. 259 For Calvin, everything that one needs for sanctification is contained in the law. The law outlines the life of obedience to the will of God; it “contains in itself the newness by which [God’s] image can be restored in us.” 260 This

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254 Calvin, Commentary on John: John 13:12-17. Richards elaborates on this differentiation: “to imitate [Christ] was not simply to copy his actions; it was to be inserted into the mysteries of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.” (Joseph Lucien Richards, The Spirituality of John Calvin (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 99).
255 Calvin, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, 89.
258 For a discussion of how Calvin’s trinitarian thought is seen in his understanding of the imitation of Christ, see Bolt, Theological Analysis, 25-27.
pattern of sanctification found in the law and in Christ’s fulfillment of the law moves us toward being sanctified with Christ in glory, through self-denial and cross bearing.  

Self-denial and cross-bearing are the concrete ways that the believer is conformed to the pattern of Christ. But this conformity to Christ is not mere conformity to an example; it is found in close union with the one who is the pattern. One cannot live out the law without the power of the Holy Spirit that is found in union with Christ; conformity to Christ and following his example can, thus, only result from union with Christ. For Calvin, understanding Christ as exemplar necessitates an understanding of sanctification and union with Christ. Union with Christ, the positive use of the law, and following Christ’s example, that is, imitating Christ, in fulfilling the law are then necessarily interconnected and ought to be understood in light of one another in the sanctification of the believer. In the incarnate Christ, Calvin argues, we see true humanity, an example of the goal of our sanctification: the restored image of God. The necessary relationship between sanctification and the imitation of Christ in Calvin’s thought is an important reminder that following the law, imitating Christ as he fulfills the law, is not legalism. Rather, it can only be understood in the Christian life through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. As John Bolt

argues, “It is the new person redeemed by Christ who uses the law created in Christ as a guide and pattern of the restored image of God.”

Calvin’s words in *The Golden Booklet* helpfully summarize his understanding of the imitation of Christ,

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

The imitation of Christ is an important motif in Calvin’s theology of the Christian life, or of union with Christ, but must be understood in concert with the positive use of the law.

**Building on the Foundation of the Reformers: Bavinck and Calvin**

The imitation of Christ is a necessary aspect of Calvin’s view on sanctification and the life of the believer. In his work, he articulates a uniquely Reformed view of the imitation of Christ. As this project considers those who build upon the work of the Reformers, however, we cannot end at Calvin’s thought. We must attend to the relationship between Bavinck – and even Yoder, although he is not part of the Reformed tradition – and Calvin, asking the question: Does Calvin’s thought on the imitation of Christ influence the discussion on imitating Christ within their work?

As a theologian in dialogue with the Reformed tradition, not working from within the tradition, we would expect that Yoder’s thought on the imitation of Christ is not directly tied to Calvin’s thought. Even so, as an ethicist and historical theologian, Yoder remained interested in Reformed thought. One only has to look at Yoder’s doctoral dissertation, later published as

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267 Calvin, *The Golden Booklet*, 15, 18-19. The holiness that we are called to in Scripture, Calvin takes care to point out, is a gift of Christ “which enables us to cling to him, and to follow him.” (Calvin, *The Golden Booklet*, 17).
Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues Between Anabaptists and Reformers, to find Yoder’s knowledge of, and continued interest in, the Reformation and the Reformers. While he does not directly mention Calvin or Luther in regard to his own formation of the imitation of Christ, Yoder does, at times, present his understanding of the application of the imitation of Christ (such as revolutionary subordination) to be contrary to the teaching of the Reformers, who emphasized the orders of creation or natural theology. As we will discuss in chapters four and six, an understanding of what the imitation of Christ is not, which included a Reformed emphasis on the orders of creation, helped Yoder to refine and clarify a proper imitation of Christ.

For Bavinck, a theologian working within the Reformed tradition, an investigation of the relationship between his thought and Calvin’s on the imitation of Christ is apt. Thus, we can ask if, and how, Bavinck draws upon Calvin’s unique, qualified-but-positive affirmation of the imitation of Christ in the life of the disciple? Given the ways that Bavinck is known to draw upon the insights of John Calvin, this question is of particular value. Essays such as “Calvin and Common Grace” highlight the ways that Bavinck directly applied and built upon Calvin’s theological formulations in his own context. We would expect, then, that Bavinck might appeal to Calvin’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in his work.

Exploring Calvin’s influence on Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is not a wholly new endeavor. Prior to the discovery of Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics manuscript, John Bolt asserted that “Bavinck’s emphasis upon the imitation of Christ – which distinguishes him from Kuyper and Kuyperian neo-Calvinist thought, including that of Geesink – thus in part

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268 Yoder, PoJ, 167.
reflects Bavinck’s greater fidelity to Calvin.” In light of the discovery of Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*, in which the prominence that Bavinck gives to the imitation of Christ is clearly on display, we can re-visit Bolt’s assertion regarding the influence of Calvin on Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. Does Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in the newly discovered *Reformed Ethics* manuscript display signs of Calvin’s influence?

The short answer to this question is, simply, yes. In his discussion of the imitation of Christ, Bavinck directly cites Calvin in his section on “The Imitation of Christ among Protestants.” Citing the *Institutes*, Book 3, chapter 7, Bavinck writes:

> 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. For the most part it was discussed only in treatments of cross-bearing and self-denial (Calvin), as well as in discussions of our mystical union (*unio mystica*) with Christ in which we participate in his death and resurrection.

In this passage, Bavinck references a dominant theme in Calvin, the connection between the imitation of Christ and the disciple’s cross-bearing and self-denial. But Bavinck does not simply treat Calvin’s emphases as functioning as an example of how Protestants throughout history understood the imitation of Christ. Rather, Bavinck ends his section on the imitation of Christ, after a broad survey of the imitation of Christ throughout scripture and church history, with his own thoughts on what properly constitutes the imitation of Christ. In this section, although Calvin is not directly cited, his emphases are prominent.

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270 Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 27. Bolt does not only discuss the influence of Calvin. Noting that Bavinck’s doctoral dissertation was on the ethics of Ulrich Zwingli, with an entire chapter devoted to the law and the example of Christ, Bolt argues that “Bavinck’s own understanding of the imitation of Christ theme . . . is clearly influenced by his study of Zwingli as much as it is by Calvin” (Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 28).

271 As chapter three will explore, he devotes an entire chapter to this theme.


Calvin directly – and concretely – discusses the imitation of Christ in relationship to cross-bearing and self-denial. As we have discovered in a survey of Calvin’s references to imitation, for Calvin, imitation cannot be understood outside of his understanding of sanctification. Calvin’s description of the life of the Christian as an imitation of Christ fully rests on his understanding of regeneration and sanctification. The goal of sanctification is the restoration of the full image of God in humanity; to understand what this is, we are to look to Christ, the perfect image of God. Christ is the pattern that the believer ought to follow, and the law. Calvin writes that the “law of God contains in itself that newness by which his image can be restored to us.”

For Calvin, the law must not be separated from Christ and Christ must not be separated from the law. The restored image of God, the goal of sanctification, is seen in the law, and perfectly embodied in Christ’s life. Putting Calvin’s thoughts together, a robust understanding of the relationship between the imitation of Christ and the law emerges, but it is not one that Calvin often explicitly mentions.

Both of these themes in Calvin, self-denial and cross bearing and the relationship between Christ and the law, are made explicit in Bavinck’s work. In his discussion of a proper imitation of Christ, Bavinck writes:

Inwardly, the imitation of Christ consists in Christ taking shape within us (Vilmar), our entering into the permanent communion with him, particularly in the fellowship of his suffering. As such, it has two parts: self-denial and cross-bearing. The Holy Spirit conforms us to Christ in his suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification.

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274 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.6.1. In his essay on catholicity, Bavinck again stresses that Calvin emphasized the negative virtues, “self-denial, cross-bearing, longsuffering, and moderation.” To Bavinck, this emphasis meant that even Calvin did not fully overcome the dualism between nature and grace. (Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 237).


While Bavinck directly mentions Vilmar in this section, his description of the imitation of Christ, also contains the same two-part structure of the imitation of Christ that he had earlier attributed to Calvin.\(^{277}\)

Though it is without direct citation to Calvin, Bavinck also makes explicit the relationship between Christ and the law that Calvin clearly posits in the *Institutes*, but is never explicitly delineated. In Calvin, the reader must put together the pieces that Calvin has clearly laid out: the law as the guide for a restored image, Calvin’s understanding of sanctification and union with Christ, Christ as the example and pattern for the believer. To put together the pieces as we have done here is not a new, or surprising, observation. Many interpreters of Calvin have done the same.\(^{278}\) But Bavinck makes these conclusions of Calvin more explicit in his description of the proper imitation of Christ. Bavinck’s description of the proper imitation of Christ is threefold, and all three points bear striking similar to Calvin’s work. Bavinck’s first point in his discussion of a proper imitation of Christ is that the “imitation of Christ, therefore, is only possible in faith. . . . The mystical union with Christ is the foundation of the imitation of Christ.”\(^{279}\) Calvin similarly emphasized this point, placing his discussion of the imitation of Christ in Book 3 of the *Institutes*, on “the way in which we receive the grace of Christ: what benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow.”\(^{280}\) Point two of Bavinck’s discussion draws straight from Calvin, as we have already discussed; Bavinck asserts that the imitation of Christ has two parts: self-denial and cross-

\(^{277}\) Bavinck’s use of citations should not be seen as exhaustive references to the works he referenced in each section, given that this manuscript remained unfinished. It is certainly possible that Bavinck was directly drawing from Calvin in sections where Calvin is not explicitly referenced. What we do know, certainly, is that Bavinck relies on Calvin for his understanding of imitation, given that Calvin is one of the few references that Bavinck *did* insert into his lecture notes.

\(^{278}\) See, for example: Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 24-26; and Richards, *The Spirituality of John Calvin*, 115-116.


\(^{280}\) Chapter 6 of Book 3 is specifically on “the life of the Christian man.” Calvin stresses the necessity of regeneration for the content that is to follow.
Bavinck’s third point discusses the way in which our life must conform to Christ. In this point, he explicitly references the law, bringing together the person of Christ and the pattern of the law in ways that are similar to Calvin’s discussion. Bavinck writes:

The imitation of Christ is, therefore, not a copy of the person of Jesus; it is not a christification of believers. At the same time, it is also not a matter of conforming to his commandments apart from his person. The true imitation of Christ stands between these two. This consists of shaping the life that exists only in and from communion with Christ, in accord with his moral example; it is acquiring a Christ-shape in us, so that others can know Christ from and through us. . . . For us believers, the law no long stands over against us abstractly, but in Christ; in Christ, the law is our norm (Harless). 

Christ is the moral ideal, the living law. As the moral ideal, he is love, love to God and people, because love is the fulfillment of the law.282

Again, Bavinck is not solely drawing from Calvin here, as evidenced by his reference to Harless. But the correspondence between Bavinck’s thought and Calvin’s thought, alongside the confirmation that Bavinck had indeed known – and previously cited in relationship to the imitation of Christ – the sections of the Institutes where Calvin expounds on these themes, again suggests Calvin’s influence on Bavinck’s thought.

Already it is evident that Bavinck does construct his understanding of the imitation of Christ upon a foundation that is already laid, in part by the work of John Calvin. Bavinck points to Calvin as a key representative of a discussion of the imitation of Christ among Protestants, and directly incorporates Calvin’s two-part treatment of the imitation of Christ (cross-bearing and self-denial) into his own articulation of what properly constitutes the imitation of Christ. In these

281 Bavinck, GE, 288.

282 Bavinck, GE, 290; emphasis added. He writes, “De navolging van Christus is dus geen kopie van Jezus’ persoon, geen Christificering der gelovigen; maar ook geen conformiteit met zijn geboden, afgedacht van zijn persoon. Tussen deze beide in staat de ware navolging. Deze is de formering van het alleen in en uit de gemeenschap met Christus onts taande leven naar zijn zedelijk voorbeeld; het krijgen ener gestalte van Christus in ons, zodat men uit en aan ons Christus kennen kan. . . . De wet staat voor ons gelovigen niet meer abstract tegenover ons, maar in Christus. In Hem is de wet norma voor ons (Harleß). Christus is het zedelijk ideaal, de levende wet. En liefde jegens God en mensen, juist als zedelijk ideaal, is Hij liefde, want liefde is vervulling der wet.” See, too, the correspondence between Bavinck’s discussion of how the believer ought not simply copy the person of Jesus and Calvin’s insistence that we ought to be “imitators, not apes” (see Calvin’s commentary of John 13:15).
direct references to Calvin’s work, it is clear that Bavinck is drawing upon Calvin. But thematically, it is not just in their understanding of cross-bearing and self-denial that Bavinck’s thought resonates with Calvin’s work. In Bavinck’s discussion of the material ways in which our lives are conformed to Christ, through the law, he again displays striking similarities to Calvin’s discussion of imitating Christ in the Institutes, Book Three; Bavinck makes more explicit what is already clear in Calvin’s work. Like Calvin, Bavinck also stresses that regeneration is a necessary condition for the imitation of Christ. In part, the answer to the question of from where does Bavinck draw his understanding of the imitation of Christ, which is unique among neo-Calvinists, is answered: Calvin. Calvin’s influence on Bavinck’s thought is clear; upon the Reformed foundation for the imitation of Christ that is found in Calvin, while also incorporating the work of other thinkers, Bavinck constructs his own understanding of the proper constitution for the imitation of Christ. It is to a deeper exploration of Bavinck’s thought on the imitation of Christ that we now turn.
CHAPTER THREE

Imitation in the Thought of Herman Bavinck:
Law-Patterned Imitation of the Virtues of Christ

Introduction

The Scottish theologian James Eglinton has observed that “in the course of the last
decade, Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* has become a standard text in the theological
diet of Reformed and evangelical preachers in the Anglophone world.”\(^{283}\) The influence of
Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), a Dutch Reformed Theologian, is notable, both within the neo-
Calvinist tradition and within broader evangelicalism.\(^{284}\) Although Bavinck is a nineteenth
century Dutch theologian, his reception in twenty-first century North America has been
impressive; the zeal around Bavinck’s theology in North America makes him a fitting
conversation partner for North American evangelicals today.

In his Hastie Lectures, James Hutton Mackey’s brief remarks on Herman Bavinck shed
light onto the way Bavinck, both in the Netherlands and in the Anglophone world, has been
viewed in light of his contemporary, Abraham Kuyper. Mackey comments that Bavinck is
Kuyper’s “loyal and learned theological henchman.”\(^{285}\) But, given the wide and appreciative
reception of his *Reformed Dogmatics* in North America, Herman Bavinck earned a reputation of
his own. As a thinker, Bavinck certainly merits a reputation outside of Kuyper’s shadow;
Eglinton affirms that Bavinck’s “unique contribution to theology” was “widely recognized,” both

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\(^{283}\) James P. Eglinton, “Introduction,” in *Herman Bavinck on Preaching and Preachers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson

\(^{284}\) See John Bolt, “Grand Rapids Between Kampen and Amsterdam: Herman Bavinck’s Reception and Influence in

\(^{285}\) James Hutton Mackey, *Religious Thought in Holland During the Nineteenth Century* (London: Hodder and
Stoughton, 1911), xi.
in the twentieth century Dutch speaking world and, posthumously, in the anglophone world. The two thinkers, however, cannot be wholly isolated from one another. George Harinck describes the Kuyper and Bavinck in this way: “When mentioned together, we take the names of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck not as the name of two individuals but as a brand name. Kuyper and Bavinck belong together like Goldman and Sachs or Mercedes and Benz. Together they stand for neo-Calvinism.” Rather than Bavinck as Kuyper’s “henchman,” the two stand together as influential neo-Calvinist theologians.

Kuyper’s influence on North American evangelicalism has been well documented by J. Budziszewski, who argues that Abraham Kuyper is one of the “premier influences on American evangelical political reflection.” Kuyper’s acclaimed influence on North American evangelical social action suggests the broader influence of neo-Calvinism within North American ethics. Thus, studying Bavinck in relationship to North American social ethics is not out of the question. Rather, Bavinck’s careful theological analysis and quiet contemplation provides us with important insights into neo-Calvinist ethics.

In this chapter, we will mine the riches of Bavinck’s thought, in his well-known *Reformed Dogmatics* and in his writings focused on Reformed ethics. We will focus on a key ethical insight of Bavinck’s: the proper role of the imitation of Christ in the life of the Christian. While maintaining many of the traditional neo-Calvinist ethical distinctions, Bavinck incorporates a robust understanding of the imitation of Christ as an ethical norm in instructive ways. He understands the imitation of Christ and the law as the guiding norm for the Christian

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288 Budziszewski’s full list of “premier influences” also names John Howard Yoder, Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer (Budziszewski, *Evangelicals in the Public Square*, 39).
life. On account of one’s spiritual union with Christ, the imitation of Christ takes shape in the life of the believer as the believer lives their life in conformity with Christ, in law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life. In order to understand the importance of this theme in Bavinck’s thought, and his theological justification for his understanding of the role of the imitation of Christ, we will examine key texts within Bavinck’s corpus: his 1855/56 and 1918 essays on the imitation of Christ, *Reformed Dogmatics*, and his recently re-discovered, unpublished *Gereformeerde Ethiek (Reformed Ethics)* manuscript. Each of these texts bears witness to the importance of the theme of the imitation of Christ within Bavinck’s thought, and Bavinck’s distinctly Reformed way of understanding and applying this theme.

*Herman Bavinck: Reformed Dogmatician and Ethicist*

In the preface to *Our Reasonable Faith*, Henry Zylstra describes Bavinck’s legacy this way: “Bavinck was primarily the theologian, the dogmatician. His *magnum opus* is the four volumes of his *Reformed Dogmatics*.”\(^2\) Zylstra’s description echoes a common sentiment throughout Bavinck scholarship: Bavinck as primarily a dogmatician. To be sure, Bavinck’s legacy as a dogmatician is of critical importance and leaves an astounding legacy of influence in the Dutch Reformed traditions and beyond. But, Zylstra also references the fact that Bavinck did a dissertation on the ethics of Ulrich Zwingli and “wrote an impressive number of substantial works in the areas of religion and theology, philosophy and applied ethics, and, especially too, psychology and the theory of education.”\(^3\) A picture of Bavinck as not only a dogmatician, but

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\(^3\) Zylstra, “Preface,” 8.
as an ethicist, begins to emerge.²⁹¹

In recent studies, Bavinck scholars have begun to draw more attention to Bavinck as an ethicist. Bolt argues that Bavinck’s “significance as a Reformed, Christian ethicist should not be overlooked.”²⁹² As Dirk van Keulen points out in “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” Bavinck not only taught dogmatics, but also taught ethics during his time as professor in Kampen.²⁹³ While he was writing Reformed Dogmatics, Bavinck also worked on another manuscript: Reformed Ethics, which remained unpublished but was used by Bavinck in his ethics courses.²⁹⁴ This similarly impressive manuscript was intended to be a companion to Reformed Dogmatics.²⁹⁵ Bavinck is clear, in both Reformed Ethics and Reformed Dogmatics, on the differentiated tasks of ethics and dogmatics. Although they are closely related, the two must be distinguished:

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.²⁹⁶

The differentiation between the content of Reformed Ethics and Reformed Dogmatics is divided along this line. As van Keulen identifies, the structure between the two works is similar, and the

²⁹¹ See Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 45, fn. 1 for an overview of secondary literature on Bavinck as a dogmatician.
²⁹⁴ Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” 32.
²⁹⁵ Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” 42.
²⁹⁶ Bavinck, RD 1, 58; in his Reformed Ethics manuscript, Bavinck describes the difference in exactly the same way (van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” 33-34).
content is complementary.\textsuperscript{297} Theology and ethics are for Bavinck, Eglinton argues, “organically linked;”\textsuperscript{298} “the latter [theology] gave shape to the former [ethics].”\textsuperscript{299} To fully understand and appreciate Bavinck as a theologian, it is important to take seriously his work in both dogmatics and ethics.

Throughout his career, Bavinck displayed scholarly interest in ethics, alongside dogmatics. Prior to writing \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, Bavinck wrote his doctoral dissertation on the ethics of Ulrich Zwingli; while writing \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, Bavinck also worked on his \textit{Reformed Ethics} manuscript\textsuperscript{300} and lectured courses in ethics. After writing \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, many of Bavinck’s writings were, as Eglinton highlights, “overwhelmingly centered on ethics.”\textsuperscript{301} Van Keulen also references several of Bavinck’s inquiries into ethical questions:\textsuperscript{302} articles on the human conscience,\textsuperscript{303} articles on the imitation of Christ in the years 1855 and 1856,\textsuperscript{304} \textit{The Imitation of Christ and the Modern Life},\textsuperscript{305} \textit{Present-Day Morality},\textsuperscript{306} a speech on “Ethics and Politics,”\textsuperscript{307} his writing on war during the World War I,\textsuperscript{308} and Bavinck’s role as a

\textsuperscript{297} Eglinton also notes this (Eglinton, “On Bavinck’s Sanctification-as-Ethics,” 174): “Geesink and Bavinck approached constructing Christian ethics in the same neo-Calvinist manner: ethics, like dogmatics, should be written beginning with Scripture, then viewed in historical development through the early, medieval, Reformation and contemporary church, after which one should appraise the current position in relation to Scripture.”


\textsuperscript{300} See van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s \textit{Reformed Ethics},” 42-44, 56 for van Keulen’s speculations as to why this manuscript remained unpublished.


\textsuperscript{303} Herman Bavinck, “Het geweten,” De vrije Kerk 7 (1881): 27–37, 49–58; Also published in Kennis en leven. Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren (Kampen: J.H. Kok s.a. [1922]), 13–27.


\textsuperscript{305} Herman Bavinck, \textit{De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven} (Kampen s.a. [1918]); Also published in Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren (Kampen s.a. [1922]), 115–144.

\textsuperscript{306} Bavinck, \textit{Hedendaagsche moral}.


lecturer on ethics during his years as a professor in Kampen.³⁰⁹

To do justice to understanding Bavinck as a thinker, we must see him as both a
dogmatician and an ethicist. As Bolt argues, understanding Bavinck this way “comports with
Bavinck’s own judgment in his dissertation on Zwingli that theology could only penetrate the
consciousness of the modern world to the extent that it demonstrates its ethical value and
significance.”³¹⁰ Here, we will explore one key theme within Bavinck’s ethics: the imitation of
Christ, discussing the ways that Bavinck discusses and understands this theme throughout his
career, and the ways in which his understanding of the imitation of Christ builds upon the
foundation within the Reformed tradition, laid out by Calvin, for a distinctly Reformed
understanding of the imitation of Christ.

Survey of Scholarship on Bavinck and the Imitation of Christ

Bavinck discusses the imitation of Christ at length on three separate occasions in his
career, though the theme is present throughout much of his work: in 1885 and 1886, in his first
essays on the imitation of Christ, in 1918, in his later essays on the imitation of Christ, and in an
unpublished manuscript of his Gereformeerde Ethiek (Reformed Ethics).³¹¹ The final lengthy
discussion of the imitation of Christ, in his Reformed Ethics, has not yet been the subject of
significant scholarly research, as it was just discovered. To date, Dirk van Keulen is the only
scholar that has written on this text.³¹²

³⁰⁹ Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” 54. Bolt lists other topics in Bavinck with ethical insights
and claims: family, state, the role of women, the kingdom of God, imitation of Christ, common grace, catholicity,
³¹⁰ Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 47, emphasis original.
³¹¹ See: Bolt, Theological Analysis; these essays are: "De Navolging van Christus, I, II, III," De Vrije Kerk, XI
(1885), 101-13, 203-13; XII (1886), 321-33; De Navolging van Christus en iet Moderne Leven, No. 3 in the series
Schild en Pijl (Kampen: Kok, 1918). Reprinted in Kennis en Leven (Kampen: Kok, 1922), pp. 115-144.
³¹² Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” 25-56 and van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of
Christ,” 78-91.
An Unpublished Treasure: van Keulen’s Remarks on Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics

In “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics: Some Remarks about Unpublished Manuscripts in the Libraries of Amsterdam and Kampen,” van Keulen outlines the basic structure of Reformed Ethics, its content and history, and the relationship between Reformed Ethics and Reformed Dogmatics. In doing so, he highlights the importance of the imitation of Christ within Reformed Ethics. Reformed Ethics has four parts, the final section, however was left unfinished. Part one addresses “man before conversion”; it considers human nature, the doctrine of sin, the classification of sins, and the consequences of sin.313 Part two contains Bavinck’s analysis of the spiritual life, “man in conversion.” Here, Bavinck discusses regeneration, faith, growth of the spiritual life, the assurance of faith, the “sicknesses of spiritual life,” and “remedies to restore spiritual life.”314 It is in part two of Reformed Ethics that Bavinck also discusses the “heart of spiritual life: the imitation of Christ—a subject which interested Bavinck during his whole career.”315 Part three of Reformed Ethics then discusses “man after conversion:” sanctification, the duty of the Christian, and the connection between duty and the Ten Commandments.316 Finally, the unfinished part four discusses the way that the Christian life should be lived in social spheres. Bavinck discusses the family, but then does not complete the rest of this section.317

For our purposes in this study, van Keulen’s initial discussion of Reformed Ethics is important both in the way that he draws attention to the prominence of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought and highlights the relationship between Reformed Dogmatics and Reformed Ethics. Regarding the latter, van Keulen postulates that Bavinck worked on both Reformed

*Dogmatics* and *Reformed Ethics* during the same time.\(^{318}\) This can be seen in the similar structure between the two and the way in which, as van Keulen describes, “Bavinck deliberately divided the subject matter between dogmatics and ethics . . . *Reformed Ethics* was intended to be a companion to his *Reformed Dogmatics*.\(^{319}\) Bavinck carefully divided the content between *Reformed Ethics* and *Reformed Dogmatics* according to his understanding of the methodological distinction between the two: dogmatics regards what God has done; ethics considers what humanity then must do.\(^{320}\) Here, we will build on van Keulen’s observations, continuing the investigation of how Bavinck discusses the imitation of Christ in his *Reformed Ethics* – and also exploring the imitation of Christ in *Reformed Dogmatics*, given the complementary nature of the two works.

*An Intuitive Understanding: John Bolt’s Dissertation on the Imitation of Christ*

Others have also written on Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, though not in direct reference to *Reformed Ethics*. These studies primarily reference Bavinck’s two essays on the imitation of Christ. John Bolt’s recently published dissertation goes into great detail regarding Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ.\(^{321}\) Bolt posits, given Bavinck’s two essays on the imitation of Christ, the significance of imitating Christ in Bavinck’s ethics – a hypothesis only confirmed much later upon the discovery of Bavinck’s own ethics manuscript.

In his dissertation, Bolt argues that “Bavinck’s use of the imitation of Christ theme reflects and illumines key theological-historical as well as personal-practical differences between

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\(^{318}\) Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 32.

\(^{319}\) Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 40-41.

\(^{320}\) Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 33.

him and Kuyper.”322 The difference between Bavinck and Kuyper’s cultural ideals were grounded in Bavinck’s explicit, and sustained, appeal to the imitation of Christ as, Bolt contends, a “valid and necessary but partial aspect of his total cultural-ethical ideal.”323 Bolt argues this through his reading of many of Bavinck’s works, specifically focusing on Bavinck’s two essays on the imitation of Christ (1885/86 and 1918), although he did not have one, single text to concretely point to as the proof that Bavinck did indeed understand the imitation of Christ to be a necessary aspect of his cultural-ethical ideal. However, years later, with the discovery of Bavinck’s unpublished manuscript, Reformed Ethics, Bolt’s thesis was affirmed.324

Without the text of Reformed Ethics to defend his contention of the importance of the imitation of Christ in the thought of Herman Bavinck, Bolt instead employed a detailed study of Bavinck’s two essays on the imitation of Christ. Reflecting on Bavinck’s 1855/56 essays on the imitation of Christ, Bolt argues that Bavinck understands the imitation of Christ to be twofold: union with Christ and partaking in “those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law as normative for our moral life.”325 In the imitation of Christ, Bavinck holds together two important streams in his thought: Bavinck’s anti-dualism and his “duality without dualism.”326 Bavinck understands the imitation of Christ through law and creation; the Ten Commandments determines what is to be imitated in Christ’s life.327

322 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 29.
323 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 8; emphasis original.
325 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 95. This theme is then connected to key theological motifs in Bavinck’s thought; see Bolt, Theological Analysis, 96-114.
326 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 115. By this, Bolt means Bavinck’s stress on the “unity of God and his works, creation and law, the kingdom of God as a leaven and mustard seed, grace as 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. This line of thought rejects all forms of dualism.” He is also referring to Bavinck’s other line of thought which emphasizes “the kingdom of God as a future divine gift, as a pearl or treasure, considers theology as a unique science, highly values a pietism that views salvation as primary mystical union with Christ . . . 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.”
327 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 115-116.
Bolt goes on to consider Bavinck’s 1918 essay on the imitation of Christ, where Bavinck presents a systematic treatment of the imitation of Christ, focusing on the Sermon on the Mount. Because of Bavinck’s emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount as a concrete illustration of the imitation of Christ, Bolt argues that it must be “regarded as a partial rather than comprehensive ethic for the Christian life.” It is not merely the Sermon on the Mount that is a partial ethical ideal for Bavinck, however. Bolt argues that the imitation of Christ itself is a “valid and necessary but partial aspect of [Bavinck’s] overall cultural-ethical ideal.” He writes, 

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 would fly directly in the face of Bavinck’s empathic insistence upon grounding all reality and norm for life in the world in the triune being and activity of God.

We will return to these claims about Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in the final section of this chapter.

Scholarship on Bavinck’s view of the imitation of Christ is limited, but not absent. As John Bolt points out, “the significance of [the imitation of Christ] in Bavinck’s thought has been virtually ignored by Bavinck scholars.” The work of Bolt, both in his published dissertation, and multiple other articles on the topic of the imitation of Christ in the work of Herman Bavinck, have charted important ground on this topic and are cited by nearly – if not all – following scholarship that studies Bavinck’s understanding of the theme. Beyond Bolt’s work, there is

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328 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 301; emphasis original.
329 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 320; emphasis original.
330 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 265.
331 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 8.
332 Bolt has written other articles on the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought, where he further elaborates on the relationship between law and the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s ethics. These articles include The Imitation of Christ is Not the Same in Every Age and The Imitation of Christ as Illumination for the Two Kingdoms Debate. (John Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ as Illumination for the Two Kingdoms Debate,” Calvin Theological Journal 48 (2013): 6-34 and John Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ is Not The Same in Every Age,” The Bavinck Review 4 (2013): 103-104). He also discusses the theme in his book Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). In each of these works, Bolt again demonstrates the importance of imitating Christ in the thought of Bavinck and its relationship to the law. In The Imitation of Christ as Illumination for the Two Kingdoms Debate, Bolt again summarizes the content of
still little scholarship on the importance of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought. Dirk van Keulen and James Eglinton discuss the theme in a substantive way; others merely mention the theme of the imitation of Christ in the work of Herman Bavinck.

Bolt, Eglinton, and van Keulen: Other Essays on the Imitation of Christ

In “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” John Bolt again discusses the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s work. Bolt emphasizes the importance of understanding Bavinck as not simply a dogmatician, but also an ethicist. In his examination of Bavinck’s ethics, Bolt focuses on the relationship between Christ and the law. Chapter six of Bavinck’s dissertation, De Ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli, was entitled “The Guiding Norm (Richtsnoer) of the Christian Life: The Law and the Example of Christ,” a title that suggests the importance of both law and imitation in Bavinck’s ethics. Bolt argues that Bavinck emphasizes a relationship between the law and Christ that is similar to John Calvin’s. For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ must be a universal ideal for all Christians. It must also be more than external acts; imitating Christ must not simply be mimicking his actions, this ideal must also lay claim to the internal disposition of the person. Thus the imitation of Christ is twofold: union with Christ and, as a consequence of one’s union with Christ, imitating on the virtues and obligations seen in Christ’s life, which

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Bavinck’s two essays on the imitation, noting that, for Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is the heart of the life of discipleship; the concrete content of the life is found in the law (Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ as Illumination,” 29). Bolt argues that a focus on the imitation of Christ provides an important insight into the relationship between “the spiritual kingdom and the earthly kingdom” (Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ as Illumination,” 22). In The Imitation of Christ is Not the Same in Every Age, Bolt similarly stresses the importance of the theme, arguing that the hermeneutical insights of Bavinck, particularly in his second essay on the imitation, are important guides for public expressions of discipleship today (Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ is Not The Same in Every Age,” 104). Again, in Bavinck on the Christian Life, Bolt highlights the imitation of Christ as the heart of the Christian life, demonstrating the way that Bavinck understood the imitation of Christ as “following Jesus in lawful obedience [that] is grounded and shaped by our union with the whole Christ” (Bolt, Bavinck on the Christian Life, 117).

335 Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 55. Alongside this, as discussed in chapter 3, Bolt suggests that the ethical significance of imitation in the thought of Bavinck may have also come from Zwingli.
conform to the moral law.\textsuperscript{336} 

In his analysis of Bavinck’s two essays on the imitation of Christ, Bolt argues that both essays agree in their depiction of the imitation of Christ as a valid ethical ideal because Christ fulfilled the law. In the second essay, however, there is a shift in Bavinck’s focus, toward the freedom of the Christian in applying the Old Testament law. Followers of Jesus are called to apply the moral law, but the specific duties that the moral law demands from believers vary according to one’s context.\textsuperscript{337} This application of the moral law is guided by the imitation of Christ. Bolt contends that Bavinck understands the relationship between Christ and the law through the lens of the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{338}

Dirk van Keulen also discusses Bavinck’s 1885/86 and 1918 essays on imitating Christ in “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ.”\textsuperscript{339} Like Bolt, van Keulen argues that Bavinck should be understood as both a dogmatician and ethicist and summarizes the content of Bavinck’s discussion of the imitation of Christ. Bavinck’s first essays on the imitation of Christ (1885/86) include historical survey, nuanced commentary on the history of the imitation of Christ, and Bavinck’s own view of the imitation of Christ, which van Keulen summarizes in this way:

First, he emphasizes, imitation of Christ demands the recognition of Christ as a reconciler and mediator. This recognition is 'a condition for the imitation'. . . . 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'. . . . 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.\textsuperscript{340}

\textsuperscript{336} Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 61.
\textsuperscript{337} Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 63.
\textsuperscript{338} Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 73.
\textsuperscript{340} Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 85.
Bavinck’s second essay on the imitation (1918) reiterates his previous historical survey and offers reflections on what it means to imitate Christ in the modern age.

Van Keulen, like Bolt, highlights the continuity and discontinuity between Bavinck’s two essays, but in “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” van Keulen elaborates on the discontinuity between the two essays. He identifies three primary areas of discontinuity: Bavinck’s extended discourse on war, a “broader elaboration of his historical survey” (highlighting Bavinck’s wider intended audience for these later essays), and a “growing awareness” of hermeneutical questions, particular those surrounding the Sermon on the Mount. From this, van Keulen draws three conclusions: first, Bavinck’s view of the imitation of Christ is developed early in his career, in close connection to his understanding of sanctification; second, Bavinck emphasizes the virtues in his ethics; and third, there is both continuity and discontinuity in Bavinck’s early and late texts on the imitation of Christ, on account of audience and Bavinck’s broadened perspective. Van Keulen argues that the changes in Bavinck’s view on the imitation of Christ reflect the development of the entirety of his work, a broadening from “church and theology to culture and theology. . . and a growing awareness of the hermeneutical problem.” Interestingly, though van Keulen draws on Bolt’s work on Bavinck’s view of the imitation of Christ, he does not reference the relationship between law and the imitation of Christ. Rather, van Keulen focuses on the relationship between sanctification and imitating Christ and the connection between virtues and imitation.

James Eglinton also discusses Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in a

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341 Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 88. Though, as noted, Bolt also discusses the differences, and the hermeneutical questions and Bavinck’s discourse on war (Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 62-71).
substantive way in “On Bavinck’s Sanctification-as-Ethics.” Eglinton argues that the relationship between dogmatics and ethics, in Bavinck’s thought, is centered on his doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification is, in turn, intimately related to the imitation of Christ. It is “centered on the imitation of Christ.” Eglinton highlights the importance of the theme of imitating Christ in Bavinck’s work; Bavinck “frames the entire ethical undertaking as the imitation of Christ.” Thus, imitation of Christ and sanctification are necessarily linked, and foundational in Bavinck’s ethics.

Bolt, Eglinton, and van Keulen all testify to the importance of understanding Bavinck as not only a dogmatician, but an ethicist. Eglinton and van Keulen both helpfully situate Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ alongside themes within his *Reformed Dogmatics* – the relationship between ethics and dogmatics and sanctification. Bolt and van Keulen both distill the basic emphases of Bavinck in his two essays on the imitation of Christ (1885/86 and 1918), discussing the context and content of these essays. Bolt also discusses the theological influences that may have informed Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ and the ways in which his view on the imitation of Christ set him apart from other neo-Calvinist theologians.

This study will also survey the various works that Bavinck wrote on the imitation of Christ: his essays on the imitation of Christ, imitation of Christ within *Reformed Dogmatics*, and the ways

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345 Eglinton, “On Bavinck’s Sanctification-as-Ethics.” Eglinton also recognizes the importance of understanding Bavinck as actively engaged in theological ethics in Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 45.
349 Briefly, Eglinton touches on this topic as well in “On Bavinck’s Sanctification-as-Ethics,” 174, 185.
that Bavinck further discusses the imitation of Christ within *Reformed Ethics.*\(^{350}\) We will also consider the ways in which Bavinck’s unique understanding of the imitation of Christ can contribute to modern discourse on imitating Christ.

**Bookending His Career: Bavinck’s Essays on the Imitation of Christ**

In 1885 and 1886, five years after completing his doctoral studies, Bavinck published a series of articles entitled *De navolging van Christus* (The Imitation of Christ) in *De Vrije Kerk.* In 1918, Bavinck published a small booklet entitled *De navolging van Christus en het Moderne Leven* (The Imitation of Christ and Modern Life).\(^{351}\) These two significant essays on the imitation of Christ provide important content for understanding the importance of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought and, most importantly for this study, Bavinck’s understanding of a proper imitation of Christ in the life of the believer.

Bavinck’s emphasis on the imitation of Christ, which remains consistent throughout his career, is striking, given the relative absence of the theme in other neo-Calvinist works of his time. More, of course, could be explored to get to the heart of why Bavinck emphasized the theme, but here, it will suffice to note the uniqueness of this emphasis on imitation. Bavinck’s 1885/6 and 1918 essays on the imitation of Christ, significant essays which nearly bookend Bavinck’s career, highlight the underlying continuity in Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ throughout his career. These two essays also provide insight into the different ecclesial and cultural contexts that Bavinck addressed. In his latter essays (1918), Bavinck attends to the hermeneutical questions surrounding Christ and the law in greater detail than his first essays (1885/6). In Bavinck’s 1885 and 1886 essays on the imitation of Christ (Imitation I), he

\(^{350}\) Van Keulen mentions the importance of the imitation of Christ in his *Reformed Ethics* in his essay, van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics*,” 38.

primarily offers a historical survey of Christian thinking on the imitation of Christ. Following this extended survey, Bavinck describes his own understanding of the imitation of Christ. In his 1918 essay on the imitation of Christ (Imitation II), Bavinck again offers a survey of understandings the of imitation of Christ throughout church history, but this survey is much briefer than his earlier essays. In Imitation II, Bavinck focuses on the hermeneutical and cultural questions surrounding imitating Christ in the early twentieth century; Bolt classifies Imitation II as a “systematic exposition” of the theme of imitating Christ, specifically focused on the Sermon on the Mount.

Imitation I: An Evaluation of Prominent Imitation Ideals Throughout History

In Imitation I, Bavinck’s attention is primarily directed to a historical survey of interpretations of the imitation ideal throughout Christian history. He distinguishes between four main types of imitating Christ in the history of Christianity: the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the rationalist. However, as Bolt observes, alongside Bavinck’s exploration of these types of imitating Christ, there are multiple others: the “pure” imitation of Christ of the early church, the “sectarian protest movement of the late Middle Ages” and the mendicant orders, although it is unclear if Bavinck considers the mendicant orders as a separate category. Bavinck’s depiction of the various types of imitation Christ is not meant to be exhaustive; he focuses on “key interpretations” throughout history. Bavinck evaluates each of these interpretations of the imitation of Christ, offering nuanced commentary on all four models.

Bavinck’s commentary on the four types of imitation – martyr, mystic, monk, and

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352 The classification of these essays as Imitation I and Imitation II follows the pattern of John Bolt, established in Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 55-56, 63 and Bolt, Theological Analysis.
353 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 83.
354 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 83-85.
355 Bavinck, Imitation I, 372.
rationalist – is considerably more detailed than his evaluation of the other significant types of imitating Christ that he identifies. Nonetheless, Bavinck does offer brief commentary on each type of imitation he identifies. Bavinck praises the “pure” imitation of Christ in the early church, defining this form of imitation in this way: “Denying itself and freely taking up its cross, the early church formed itself after the example left by its Lord.”\textsuperscript{356} This was the earliest form of the imitation of Christ, and was soon lost.\textsuperscript{357} The sectarian movements of the late Middle Ages also receive a brief commentary. These groups pointed to the degradation of the church, insisting on renewal, considering the Sermon on the Mount to be the ideal for the Christian.\textsuperscript{358} Within these groups, Bavinck is particularly appreciative of the Waldensians, noting that they are “especially honored by Protestants and regarded as true and pure Christians.”\textsuperscript{359} Bavinck then discusses the mendicant orders. He praises these orders for attempting to live out an imitation ideal within society, rather than in isolation.\textsuperscript{360} But, he is critical of the literal ways in which the mendicant orders understood the imitation of Christ, which resulted, as Bolt describes, in a “Christ-mysticism focused on a realistic appropriation of the actual suffering of Christ,” seen prominently in Francis’ stigmata.\textsuperscript{361}

Bavinck’s commentary on the four main models of imitation – martyr, monk, mystic, rationalist – paves the way for his own articulation of a proper imitation of Christ. In each of these four models, Bavinck’s careful thought is on display. His nuanced analysis, finding aspects of each imitation to praise, while offering serious criticisms, demonstrates Bavinck’s thoughtful wrestling with the theme of the imitation of Christ. Bavinck considers the ideal of the imitation

\textsuperscript{356} Bavinck, Imitation I, 374.
\textsuperscript{357} Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 83.
\textsuperscript{358} Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 84.
\textsuperscript{359} Bavinck, Imitation I, 384.
\textsuperscript{360} Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 85.
\textsuperscript{361} Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 85.
of Christ to be a necessary aspect of Christian discipleship, while rejecting much of the historic understanding of the content of a life of imitating Christ.

Bavinck praises the martyrs of the early church for their courage and strength in the face of persecution. The early martyrs were certain of the cause for which they were suffering. Their conviction in the face of death was a testament to their strong belief; “their dying was life and their defeat was triumph; their death-days were regarded and remembered as birth-days.” Scripture affirms that believers will suffer for the sake of Christ. But Bavinck argues that the early purity of the imitation of Christ in the church, by the earliest Christians and, soon after, the martyrs, became mixed with “sinful attitudes.” Martyrdom became not only about the cause of Christ, but about the honor that was associated with martyrdom; “the history of martyrdom became infused with the heathen notion that fame is the highest good . . . the glorification of martyrdom began to deviate so far from the truth that it was increasingly considered as meritorious.” Martyrs who seek the honor of martyrdom began to focus on the suffering one would endure more than the cause of one’s suffering. They “forgot that what made one a true witness was not martyrdom itself but the cause for which a martyr died.” In this way, Bavinck argues, the glorification of martyrdom became “pathological” and laid the foundation for a doctrine of meritorious good works.

Bavinck then explores the ways that monks adapted the ideal of the imitation of Christ in a different context. Christians no longer faced the persecution of the martyrs; rather, they faced the temptation of luxury. In light of this, Bavinck praises the protest of the monks against the

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362 Bavinck, Imitation I, 376.
363 Bavinck, Imitation I, 391.
364 Bavinck, Imitation I, 376.
365 Bavinck, Imitation I, 377.
366 Bavinck, Imitation I, 391.
367 Bavinck, Imitation I, 377.
368 Bavinck, Imitation I, 378.
worldliness of the church.\textsuperscript{369} He recognizes the biblical ground in the practice of the monk, writing that “in order to follow Jesus, his disciples were expected to deny even parents, brothers, and sisters as well as possessions. It was no surprise that many denounced riches, wealth, and business, while exalting fasting, prayer, celibacy, and the denial of earthly pleasures.”\textsuperscript{370} Monasticism also benefitted society at large, Bavinck argues, in their advancement of schools and universities.\textsuperscript{371} But Bavinck also has serious criticisms for the monk’s model of the imitation of Christ. Monasticism perpetuated a dual understanding of morality; it “never became obligatory for all men . . . the goal was to achieve a higher level of perfection than was possible in ordinary life.”\textsuperscript{372} On account of these differing levels of morality, Bavinck argues, monasticism “promoted pride and trust in good works among those striving for perfection.”\textsuperscript{373} For those who could not live out the ideal of monasticism, it perpetuated “a complacent indifference to the ideals of holiness in the practical daily lives of ordinary people.”\textsuperscript{374} Alongside this double morality, Bavinck charges the monk with an incorrect understanding of the imitation of Christ. The monastic imitation of Christ is an external, mimetic imitation, consisting of “simple repetition and copying of the personal life of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{375} This can allow for one to outwardly display the habits of Christ, but to inwardly remain “very unChrist-like, to appear to be one with him while actually very far from him.”\textsuperscript{376} Bavinck also charges the monk with a life that is withdrawn from the world, rather than in service of it.\textsuperscript{377}

\textsuperscript{369} Bavinck, Imitation I, 378.
\textsuperscript{370} Bavinck, Imitation I, 379; cf. Bavinck, Imitation I, 391: “the truth in this must not be overlooked. Jesus does command his followers to take up their cross, to forsake everything including father, mother, and home, and ever one’s own life for his sake.”
\textsuperscript{371} Bavinck, Imitation I, 380.
\textsuperscript{372} Bavinck, Imitation I, 381.
\textsuperscript{373} Bavinck, Imitation I, 381-382.
\textsuperscript{374} Bavinck, Imitation I, 382.
\textsuperscript{375} Bavinck, Imitation I, 391-392.
\textsuperscript{376} Bavinck, Imitation I, 392.
\textsuperscript{377} Bavinck, Imitation I, 392.
The ideal of the monk gave way to a new ideal in the second half of the Middle Ages: the mystic. Again, Bavinck finds aspects of this ideal to praise. Mysticism “bore tremendous fruit for some.” Mystics have a “strong ethical and practical emphasis,” imitating Christ “in his humility and lowliness, in his meekness and love.”\(^{378}\) Again, he finds scriptural backing for aspects of the mystic model; “a genuine, hidden, mystical union of the soul with Jesus, his suffering and his glorification, is clearly attested by Scripture.”\(^{379}\) But Bavinck argues that the “medieval piety was wholly preoccupied with the cross and focused its attention on the tears, the wounds, the lashes, and the agony of the Lord. . . . Imitation consisted of an empathetic repetition of Jesus’ own suffering.”\(^{380}\) Mysticism paid excessive attention to the suffering of Christ, focusing on an external – and overly realistic – appropriation of Christ’s suffering in the life of the mystic.\(^{381}\)

The piety of the mystics, Bavinck argues, is “clearly one-sided,” an “exaggerated emphasis on feeling.” It presumes an “immediate experience of and fellowship with God apart from normal human consciousness, understanding, and willing. All forms of meditation between God and man . . . must be set aside. God as infinite Being itself, can thus only be appropriate and experienced in feeling.”\(^{382}\) Mysticism substitutes this type of contemplation for proper Christian meditation on God.\(^{383}\)

Finally, the imitation of Christ is seen in the model of the rationalists.\(^{384}\) Bavinck’s
description of the rationalist ideal is brief, and primarily negative. While Bavinck affirms the validity of understanding Jesus as an example, he rejects the rationalists’ characterization of Jesus only as an example.\textsuperscript{385} The rationalist understanding leads to discouragement and judgment; “he who sees Jesus only as an example is overwhelmed and becomes discouraged.”\textsuperscript{386} Rather, we must first know Jesus as Redeemer. “Only then do we dare to look at him and consider him our example.”\textsuperscript{387} The rationalists do not properly understand Christ, therefore they cannot properly look to his example. Bavinck also criticizes the applicability of Christ’s example in some understandings of the rationalist model.\textsuperscript{388} Jesus, many rationalists argue, cannot be “the moral ideal,” no mere human can.\textsuperscript{389} “As a man, an individual,” Jesus was “inevitably limited. . . . Jesus had no family, avoided societal and civil positions, did not indulge in the arts or sciences, and was apparently uninvolved and not interested in countless dimensions of human life.”\textsuperscript{390} Thus, he cannot be our example in these areas; rationalism rejects Jesus as the universal ideal.

Abraham Kuenen, in particular, had a “lasting effect” on Bavinck (Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 61). Bolt elaborates on the context of Bavinck’s education at Leiden in his \textit{Theological Analysis} (see \textit{Theological Analysis}, 62-74), and the Christological teachings of these instructors which was permeated by an “intellectualistic moralism . . . It is the teaching of Jesus that is all-important; he is the ‘wise teacher,’ the \textit{sumnum doctor}” (Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 64, emphasis original). In his later essay on imitation, Bavinck briefly highlights a number of modern thinkers that attend to the question of imitating Christ, including Charles Sheldon and Leo Tolstoy (Bavinck, Imitation II, 407). This is not the only place Bavinck provides reference to Sheldon’s classic work, \textit{In His Steps}. Bavinck’s extended engagement with Sheldon’s text can be found in his review “Wat Zou Jezus Doen,” where he both notes the importance of following in the footsteps of Jesus and the way in which the question “What would Jesus do?” can give rise to many wrong interpretations and answers (\textit{Maar . . . de vraag: wat, zou Jezus doen? onjuist gesteld is en tot vele verkeerde antwoorden aanleiding geeft}; Herman Bavinck, “Wat Zou Jezus Doen,” \textit{De Bazuin} 48:8 (1900). He also makes the point that some of Jesus’ actions both should not, and cannot, be imitated, as in Christ’s work on the cross. Nevertheless, Bavinck does not reject the imitation of Christ. Rather, he posits – as we’ll see – a true imitation of Christ. Bolt provides a translation of the conclusion of Bavinck’s review in \textit{Theological Analysis}: “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 whoever does the will of God is Jesus’ brother and sister and mother” (Bolt, \textit{Theological Analysis}, 319).

\textsuperscript{385} Bavinck, Imitation I, 393.
\textsuperscript{386} Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
\textsuperscript{387} Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
\textsuperscript{388} See Bavinck, Imitation I, 394 for those who see the life of Christ as exemplary and those who deny his sinlessness.
\textsuperscript{389} Bavinck, Imitation I, 394, emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{390} Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
The martyr, the monk, and the mystic represent a “rigorist and elitist ideal which necessarily calls forth a countervailing, less demanding, universal and general ethic.” Each necessitates a double morality; all Christians cannot imitate Christ in the ways prescribed by these imitation models. In Bavinck’s analysis, the rationalist has a similar problem. Because Jesus “was not interested in countless dimensions of human life,” his life, by necessity, cannot be emulated by all people and is thus simply understood as following after his “spirit” in a general sense. While appreciative of aspects of each of these models, Bavinck insists that properly imitating Christ must be an ethic that is for all people. The imitation of Christ cannot narrowly focus on one aspect of Christ’s life, nor can it produce a hierarchy between those disciples of Christ who can follow the ideal and those whose life of discipleship is reduced to a lesser ideal. The imitation of Christ must encompass the whole of Christ’s life and work and be for all believers.

Positively, Bavinck understands the imitation of Christ as twofold. The primary element of the imitation of Christ is the believer’s mystical union with Christ. But the Christian life does “not stand still, it must grow.” Christians must, as Paul instructs, “have Christ formed in them (Gal. 4:19).” This involves fellowship in the sufferings of Christ, the “double demand of denying oneself and taking up the cross.” But in sharing in Christ’s sufferings, the disciple will also share in Christ’s glory. The “primary spiritual fellowship with Jesus Christ” does not remain simply spiritual, for Christ is both savior and example. Disciples “have the privilege of

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391 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 87.
392 Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
393 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 87.
394 Bavinck, Imitation I, 397.
395 Bavinck, Imitation I, 397.
396 Bavinck, Imitation I, 397.
397 Bavinck, Imitation I, 398.
398 Bavinck, Imitation I, 398.
399 Bavinck, Imitation I, 398.
following in [Christ’s] footsteps and walking in the same way in which he walked. Bolt describes the twofold nature of the imitation of Christ in this way:

It is in the first place a mystical union, a spiritual, living communion with Christ sealed by baptism. This life of union with Christ involves a fellowship of suffering and self-denying, sacrificial love and culminates in a fellowship in Christ’s resurrection and ascension in glory. Second, as a direct consequence of and concrete expression of the primary spiritual fellowship with Jesus Christ, imitation involves taking on those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law as normative for our moral life.

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is grounded in his understanding of a moral law which “applies and is valid for all men everywhere; it requires of all men the same virtues and obligation.” But, the application of that moral law “is characterized by a rich diversity.” Thus, Christ is to be followed “in everything” and by all people, but it is not – as the martyr, monk, and mystic understand in their unique ways – “a slavish and narrow copying of [Christ’s] personal words and deeds. Rather it consists of a free, spiritual application of the principles by which he lived, completely fulfilling the moral law.”

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is comprehensive. “Nothing in Christ is excluded in the demand to follow him.” But in his comprehensive claim, Bavinck avoids an external, literal mimicry. He writes, “every word and deed of Jesus is useful for our instruction and ought to be taken to heart . . . [but] not every word or deed is in itself to be imitated.” The acts of Christ that are inimitable, however, “do reveal the glorious perfections which we must

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400 Bavinck, Imitation I, 399.
401 Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 95; van Keulen understands Bavinck’s proper conception of the imitation of Christ to have three aspects: union with Christ, the reflection of Christ in our inner being, and the reflection of Christ in our outward lives. (Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 85). He is intending to capture the relationship between the imitation of Christ and the passive and active aspects of sanctification, which Bolt understands as part of the first aspect of the imitation of Christ.
402 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
403 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
404 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
405 Bavinck, Imitation I, 399.
406 Bavinck, Imitation I, 399, emphasis added.
take as example since they wholly conform to God’s law. It is precisely all those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law that Christ in his words and deeds leave as an example for us.”

Here, Bavinck demonstrates the rubric by which the disciple knows what in Christ’s life ought to be imitated: the moral law. He makes this standard even more concrete when he writes “the Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.” The imitation of Christ is only possible through the work of Christ, as savior and the work of the Holy Spirit, uniting believers to Christ. Throughout their lives, disciples are continually made more and more into the likeness of Christ, who is Lord and example. But this process is ongoing, and will not be completed until the eschaton.

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Imitation II: Upholding the Imitation of Christ in the Modern World

In his later essay on the imitation of Christ, Imitation II, Bavinck presents a systematic treatment of the imitation of Christ, looking especially to the Sermon on the Mount. Bavinck’s focus is apologetic, addressing the question of whether or not one can hold to the imitation of Christ in the modern world. The validity of imitating Christ as an ideal for the Christian life is no longer an assumption, but a hermeneutic problem. Merely articulating a proper imitation of Christ in the life of the disciple is no longer sufficient. In this later essay, Bavinck focuses on a nuanced hermeneutic of the ethics of the New Testament, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, as his method to continue to insist that the imitation of Christ is a valid ethical ideal for the

407 Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
408 Bavinck, Imitation I, 400; as Bolt writes, “mystical union with Christ is the primary sense of the imitation of Christ and all ethical implications must flow forth from it. . . . Ethically, however, the imitation of Christ is seen principally in terms of creation and law.” (Bolt, Theological Analysis, 115).
409 Bavinck ends this essay with these powerful words, pointing to our eschatological destiny: “From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example, proceeds reforming, recreating, power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us. If this is already begun here on earth where we only see him in a mirror, what will it be like when we see him face to face?” Bavinck, Imitation I, 400-401.
modern world.\textsuperscript{411}

Bavinck begins this essay with a reflection on the World War I.\textsuperscript{412} The changing cultural context – particularly, the rise of the great war – resulted in new and important questions surrounding the relationship between Christianity and culture. Bavinck writes, “the conflict between Christianity and war is but one aspect of the tremendous tension that exists between the gospel of Jesus Christ and human culture in its various aspects of state, vocation, industry, business, science, art, etc.”\textsuperscript{413}

Bavinck then goes through a brief historical survey of the imitation of Christ throughout Christian history, discussing the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the rationalist. Unlike Imitation I, in Imitation II Bavinck’s survey is brief, focusing on the context of each model of the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{414} This brings him to the modern world where “many became acutely aware of the great gulf between the life of Jesus and the state of contemporary Christendom.”\textsuperscript{415}

Bavinck adds to his historical survey in his discussion on the various responses to the recognition of this “great gulf.” Three basic views on the relationship between Christ and culture were established. The first wished to still live in accordance with the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount and the example of Jesus, an argument for a return to “original, pure Christianity.”\textsuperscript{416} The second view argued that the ethical demands of Jesus no longer had any connection to the

\textsuperscript{411} Bolt argues that Bavinck’s contention that “the Christian church’s task is not the same always and everywhere, that its ethical ideal needs an adjustment when circumstances change, is the single most important difference between Imitation I and Imitation II” (Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 64).

\textsuperscript{412} Bavinck, Imitation II, 402.

\textsuperscript{413} Bavinck, Imitation II, 404.

\textsuperscript{414} Bavinck, Imitation II, 405-409. Bavinck does, however, in this survey pause to again appreciate and critique the work of Thomas a Kempis: “although excellent in many respects since it [Imitation of Christ] considers the imitation of Christ in terms of an inward, spiritual practice of such virtues as humility, lowliness, compassion, patience, etc., rather than in terms of a simple recapitulation of the life of Jesus, it nevertheless suffers from an enormous one-sidedness. In its call to forsake the world it fails properly to acknowledge the human task on earth.” (Bavinck, Imitation II, 405-6.)

\textsuperscript{415} Bavinck, Imitation II, 406.

\textsuperscript{416} Bavinck, Imitation II, 407.
modern culture; Christianity had “outlived its usefulness . . . reconciliation between the demands of the New Testament and the responsibilities of modern culture was judged to be impossible.”

A third view argued that Christian morality remains important for one’s private life, but no longer is adequate for public life. The ways of Jesus are “wholly different” than the way we are called to engage public life today. Jesus “cannot give us guidance for economic or political life.”

These challenges raise an important question: given the particular challenges of the modern world, can the modern Christian still uphold the imitation of Christ as a valid ideal? As Bavinck writes, “Is there even room in the cultural life of the present for such an imitation? Can it still be taken seriously by people in the state, industry, business, marketplace, stock-exchange, office or factory, in science and art, in war, even at the front?”

To answer this question, Bavinck turns to a hermeneutical discussion of the imitation of Christ in scripture. He quickly surveys Old Testament texts, turning to a discussion of imitation in the New Testament. From this, Bavinck concludes that throughout [Jesus’] life, but especially in his suffering and death and including the foot-washing episode, Jesus held himself up as an example that the disciples were to imitate. The true imitation of Christ does not consist of an external following or mere listening to his words, or even in saying “Lord, Lord,” but in doing the will of the Heavenly Father as he himself perfectly fulfilled it. True imitation is thus a matter of being conformed to the image of Christ. He is not only an example but the archetype for his disciples.

In this description, Bavinck clearly rejects the second and third modern views on the imitation of Christ. Imitation is still necessary in the modern world, and is not confined to personal ethics.

To further understand imitation in the New Testament, Bavinck turns to the Sermon on

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417 Bavinck, Imitation II, 408.
418 Bavinck, Imitation II, 408.
419 Bavinck, Imitation II, 409.
420 Bavinck, Imitation II, 409.
421 Bavinck, Imitation II, 412-413.
the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount, the “nature of this imitation is clarified by means of concrete examples.”422 By describing the Sermon on the Mount as clarifying the call to imitate Christ through concrete examples, Bavinck rejects both radical spiritualization and extreme literalism.423 The examples of the Sermon on the Mount, such as plucking out one’s eye,424 are “not to be taken literally,” but “these examples are nonetheless to be understood practically and concretely.”425 The examples of the Sermon on the Mount are concrete illustrations of the “virtues which the law requires of us, especially love.”426

Bavinck also stresses that Jesus has come to “concretize and heighten the demands of the law and prophets.”427 He is not a new lawgiver, rather he gives a new understanding of the law. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus “takes issues, not with the words of the law itself, but with its incorrect interpretation and application.”428 The law endures; Jesus never contradicts the Old Testament. He merely rejects improper interpretations of the law.

In his discussion of the Sermon on the Mount, Bavinck again returns to an emphasis on context, this time he refers to the context of Jesus’ proclamation of this Sermon. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking to “a relatively small band of disciples who were not members of the upper echelon of society but of the lower classes.”429 This observation is key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount, and the attitudes and actions that Jesus focuses within the Sermon. As Bavinck writes, “when we keep all of this in mind it becomes very easy to understand why Jesus . . . exalts precisely those virtues which his disciples would require about

422 Bavinck, Imitation II, 413.
423 Bavinck, Imitation II, 417-418
424 Matthew 5:29.
425 Bavinck, Imitation II, 418.
426 Bavinck, Imitation II, 426.
427 Bavinck, Imitation II, 414.
428 Bavinck, Imitation II, 415.
429 Bavinck, Imitation II, 416.
everything else in such circumstances.”\textsuperscript{430} This remains true in the social circumstances of the early church, which was primarily composed of the “ignoble and foolish of the world.”\textsuperscript{431} They were people without stature or power; they were an “oppressed and persecuted” community.\textsuperscript{432} The early church understood themselves to be strangers in a foreign land, and were withdrawn from the public life that was “saturated with idolatry and unrighteousness.”\textsuperscript{433} It is in this context that we ought to read the words of the Sermon on the Mount. Bavinck writes, “during its earliest period it was necessary for the church to simply preserve its independent identity and establish its own position in the world.”\textsuperscript{434} To this community, “passive virtues” were emphasized: truth, righteousness, holiness, purity, modesty, temperance, prayer, vigil, fasting, faith, love, longsuffering, generosity, hospitality, compassion, lowliness, meekness, and patience.\textsuperscript{435}

By exercising these passive virtues, the church did influence the world from its position of lowliness.\textsuperscript{436} Therefore, the position of the church in the world has changed. Because of this, Bavinck argues, the church has to adapt a different posture in the world. He writes that “the exercise of negative and passive virtues was no longer sufficient to sustain [the church] in its new task of reforming and renewing the world in accord with Christian principles.”\textsuperscript{437} Alongside passive virtues, active virtues must be undertaken.\textsuperscript{438}

Since the church can no longer have a merely passive, or negative, attitude toward culture, it needs a new posture. Bavinck argues for neither “world-renunciation” nor “world-
domination.” Rather, as grace restores nature, Christianity “never opposes nature and culture in themselves but only their degeneration.” Christians must, then, respect culture – even “gladly and thankfully accept” much of culture – combatting only the decays that are present on account of sin.

In a new, modern context, the Christian does not have the freedom to reject the teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. But they do have freedom. Bavinck’s hermeneutical and contextual sensitivity leads him to the understanding that the Christian does have freedom in the way that they apply the virtues and principles, according to their circumstance, that the Sermon on the Mount concretely illustrates. “While the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same, circumstances may modify the application.” Bavinck’s appeal to the virtues of Christ is one of the important, distinctive emphases in his understanding of the imitation of Christ; in this appeal, Bavinck demonstrates his commitment to a biblical understanding of the imitation of Christ, hermeneutical sensitivity regarding the Sermon on the Mount, sensitivity to context, and commitment to an imitation that encompasses the whole of the human life.

In his later essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck still emphasizes Christ’s obedience to the will of God, emphasizing “those virtues which Jesus exhibited in his life of obedience to

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439 Bavinck, Imitation II, 428.
440 Bavinck, Imitation II, 430.
441 Bavinck, Imitation II, 432.
442 As Bavinck writes, “Christ did not come to resist or set aside this ordinance of God but rather to establish and sanctify it; grace presupposes and restore nature. This is the attitude taken by the Gospel over against nature and all the aspect of culture: marriage, family, vocation, industry, commerce, etc. not to mention the state and civil order which it is called to maintain.” (Bavinck, Imitation II, 436). Thus, the church is called to be a “reforming and renewing presence in the world rather than a revolutionary one. It must conquer by means of spiritual and moral power” (Bavinck, Imitation II, 437).
443 Bavinck, Imitation II, 438. In the same section, Bavinck writes “Those virtues which the disciples of Jesus are called to exercise in their relations with others are essential the same in the Sermon on the Mount as in the apostolic imitation of Christ. Included are virtues of truth, righteousness, love, longsuffering, compassion, etc., virtues that remain powerful through the ages and retain their validity in all circumstances. Naturally the application will vary depending upon circumstances. Although all are subject to one and the same moral law the duties under that law vary considerably.”
the Father’s will;”444 “the example of Christ becomes for the apostles a noteworthy illustration of the most important virtues which the law requires of us.”445 While Bavinck’s discussion of the hermeneutics and application of the New Testament ethic are more sophisticated, he remains committed to the imitation of Christ as a valid ideal in the life of the disciple.

**Continuity in Bavinck’s Thought: The Relationship Between Imitation I and II**

Throughout his career, Bavinck remains strikingly consistent on the imitation of Christ. Early in his career, he affirms the importance of the theme,446 and reiterates its centrality throughout his career. As Dirk van Keulen argues, already in his first essay on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck demonstrates the way in which his “thinking on the imitation of Christ is closely connected to the heart of his theology.”447 This continues throughout his writing, for Bavinck’s reflections on the imitation of Christ in 1885/86 and 1918 bear remarkable similarity to each other, but are – as evidenced by the descriptions above – not identical. In each, Bavinck affirms the imitation of Christ as a valid ideal for the Christian life, while critiquing historic models of imitating Christ: the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the rationalist. In each, Bavinck appeals to Scripture. In Imitation I, he shows how each model of imitation has aspects that are properly found in Scripture. In Imitation II, Bavinck’s study of Scripture is much more detailed. Rather than affirming aspects of imitation traditions that are grounded in Scripture, Bavinck undergoes a study of imitation in Scripture, focused on hermeneutical questions surrounding the Sermon on the Mount and its modern application.

The changes in Bavinck’s approach to the imitation of Christ in his 1885/86 essays and

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444 Bavinck, Imitation II, 426.
445 Bavinck, Imitation II, 426.
446 It is all the more striking that Bavinck affirms this in spite of very little theological attention to the theme in his tradition.
his 1918 essay can be understood, at least in part, through a look to the context in which, and to which, he was writing. Bavinck’s first essays on the imitation of Christ were written in 1885 and 1886 to the Christian Reformed Church, an ecclesial body that was, as John Bolt describes, “relatively isolated from the cultural mainstream of Dutch life.” Assuming the validity of imitating Christ, Bavinck simply addresses the nature of a proper imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. By 1918, Bavinck’s audience had shifted; churches from the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland had united with the Doleantie to form the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland in 1892. Given the changes in the ecclesial and cultural context that Bavinck was addressing, he could no longer simply detail a biblical picture of the imitation of Christ. Bavinck had to argue for the normativity of the example of Christ, resulting in his increased emphasis on hermeneutical and cultural questions; he first had to justify how the imitation of Christ could still be employed in the modern world as a viable motif for the Christian life. Thus, in Imitation II, Bavinck presents an apologetic for the relevance of the imitation of Christ in the modern world, in addition to his biblical, theological, and historical reflections on the theme.

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448 An important avenue for further study remains: as we have noted, already in Chapter One, the theme of imitation is remarkably absent from Bavinck’s generation of neo-Calvinist ethicists. There is undoubtedly further, fruitful exploration to be done regarding the impulse for Bavinck’s interest in this theme, in light of the cultural context of the Netherlands, Bavinck’s cultural curiosity, and his scholarly work.

449 Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 268. In his 1888 rectoral address, “The Catholicity of the Church,” Bavinck continues this theological argument regarding the sectarian nature of churches in his day. It is important to note the nature of this critique, which is primarily (as already noted) theological. Alongside this theological argument, there is the reality of a growing participation with aspects of modern society among some in the Christian Reformed Church. For more on this part of the sociology and history of Bavinck’s ecclesial context, see: Jasper Vree, “Van separatie naar integratie. De afgescheidenen en hun kerk in de Nederlandse samenleving (1834-1892),” in R. Kranenborg and W. Stoker, *Religies en ongelijkheid in een plural samenleving* (Leuven/Apeldoorn: Garant, 1995), 161-176.

450 John Bolt explains the impact of this union in this way: the formation of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland “spelled the end of cultural isolation for the Christian Reformed Church as it was unavoidably drawn under the umbrella of the neo-Calvinist revival led by Kuyper and thrust into the ecclesiastical and socio-political spotlight of Dutch life” (Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 293).

451 The audience that Bavinck addressed in 1918 was even more socially and politically involved. Bolt argues that they were no longer isolated from the critiques of the “strident modernist opponents of the Christian religion,” and were now grappling with the reality of the Great War. (Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 294).

Differing cultural and ecclesial contexts called for a changed approach in Bavinck’s later essay on the imitation of Christ. But Bavinck’s core constitution of the imitation of Christ remains consistent. In both essays, Bavinck affirms an imitation of Christ grounded in the moral law. In his first essays, Bavinck stresses that the Ten Commandments “form the constitution of a life of obedience to God;” the commandments “determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.”453 The example of Christ that the disciple is to imitate is the virtues that conform to the law of God. Bavinck reiterates this point in his later essays: Jesus’ example for disciples is seen in “those virtues which Jesus exhibited in his life of obedience to the Father’s will.”454 But Bavinck’s increased hermeneutical sensitivity is again on display in this later discussion as he emphasizes the application of the virtues, which may be modified by one’s circumstances. While virtues never change, the application may.455 In his later essay on the imitation of Christ, some of the questions Bavinck raises are different (can one imitate Christ in the modern world?). But, as he does in his first essays, Bavinck continues to conclude that the imitation of Christ is valid, and must be understood on account of Christ’s fulfillment of the law.

The relationship between Christ and the law remains consistent in Bavinck’s thought. But, on this consistent point, Bolt recognizes a shift in Bavinck’s emphasis between 1885/86 and 1918. In Imitation I, Bavinck simply points to the Ten Commandments as the criterion for determining what is to be imitated in Christ’s life. In Imitation II, Bavinck still emphasizes the law, but “now stresses Jesus’ concretization and heightening of the Old Testament law” and the “freedom of the Christian in applying the ideal.”456

453 Bavinck, Imitation II, 400.
454 Bavinck, Imitation II, 426.
455 Bavinck, Imitation II, 438.
456 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 297, emphasis original.
Continuity Extended: The Relationship Between the Imitation of Christ and Other Dominant Themes in Bavinck’s Thought

In his discussion on the relationship between Bavinck’s earlier and later essays on the imitation of Christ, Dirk van Keulen identifies, like Bolt, the differences in Bavinck’s emphasis regarding the law in these essays. Alongside these differences, van Keulen highlights important continuity, both in Bavinck’s basic framework of relating Christ and the law in the imitation of Christ, and continuity in Bavinck’s thought in the way that he repeatedly emphasizes and ties together important themes in his work. Van Keulen points to two themes, grace restoring nature and the gospel as leaven, both of which are critical aspects of Bavinck’s’ thought. Similarly, John Bolt weaves together the connections between Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ and other dominant themes in his work: “the relation between Christian faith and ethics, the nature of theology as a science, the kingdom of God and the church, the doctrine of the Trinity, creation and law.” Alongside these themes, particularly grace restoring nature and the gospel as leaven, we will briefly explore two other dominant themes in Bavinck’s work, the catholicity of the church and God’s upholding of creation through common grace, that are related to his understanding of the imitation of Christ.

As Bavinck ends his 1885/86 essays on the imitation he writes, “From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example, proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us.” This powerful statement on the person and example of Christ concretely ties together key themes in Bavinck’s work. In this excerpt, van Keulen identifies two dominant motifs in Bavinck’s thought; grace restores

nature and the gospel is a leavening power in the world.\footnote{Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 86.} These same central motifs are seen in Bavinck’s 1918 essay on imitation. He writes that “grace presupposes and restores nature”\footnote{Bavinck, Imitation II, 436.} and uses “leaven-terminology”\footnote{Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 87; van der Kooi also emphasizes the connection between Bavinck’s essays on the imitation of Christ, especially Imitation II, and the “profound bond” that exists between culture and faith in Bavinck’s thought (Cornelis van der Kooi, “Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth on Christian Faith and Culture,” Calvin Theological Journal 45 (2010): 74.} In each essay, on account of these themes, Bavinck argues that “Christians may not withdraw from the world, but rather do have to fulfill a task in the world.”\footnote{Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 90.} From his analysis of Imitation I and II and these thematic connections, van Keulen argues that Bavinck develops his views on the imitation of Christ early in his career and these views were closely connected to the “dominant motives of his theology.”\footnote{Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 90.} Van Keulen shows that there is continuity in Bavinck’s thought on the imitation of Christ throughout his career; he consistently affirms that Christians must imitate Christ, with the law as a guide. He also continually ties together the imitation of Christ with his views of the relationship between grace and nature, and the leavening work of the gospel in the world. But, as we have seen, Bavinck nuances and modifies the way he presents and applies this theme throughout his career.

Bolt also understands the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought to be connected to other dominant themes in Bavinck’s work. He examines Bavinck’s initial essays on the imitation of Christ in light of other important themes in Bavinck’s work around the same time: the relationship between faith and ethics, theology as a science, the kingdom of God and the church, the trinity, and creation and law.\footnote{Bolt, Theological Analysis, 97.} From his analysis of Bavinck’s imitation essays and other important theological themes, Bolt draws important conclusions on Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. On the relationship between Christ and the law in Bavinck’s thought,
Bolt argues this:

Clearly, the law — representing universal, creational, human obligations — is ontologically prior. The law, including our obligations to God as well as to our neighbor, is the touchstone for a genuinely human existence. Love, the fulfillment of the law, is constitutive of humanity. However, because sin distorts both our awareness of and our ability to do the good required by the law, Christ the Redeemer, obediently fulfilled the moral law and clarified its true meaning. In a sinful world, self-giving love results in suffering. The imitatio Christi, our incorporation into his death and resurrection and following him in a life of sacrificial, self-giving love, is the sine qua non both to knowing and doing the will of God which alone is life indeed for human beings. In short, we are Christian in order to be truly human.465

The imitation of Christ is necessarily related to the law in Bavinck’s thought. He skillfully brings together the particularity of the example of Christ with the universality of the law. In his later essay, he also affirms the hermeneutical questions inherent in the Sermon on the Mount, and emphasizes the importance of applying the moral law according to the specifics of one’s circumstances. Bolt’s summary of the imitation of Christ, as Bavinck relates it to cultural context, is worth citing in full:

The imitation of Christ thus functions as both an active and a passive ideal in Bavinck's ethics. Following Christ may in certain circumstances require Christian passive resistance to an evil civil order, but in all circumstances must shape and influence the Christian's active involvement in society and culture. A passive imitation of Christ in the Christian life of discipleship is directly proportional to the degree of hostility that a 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.466

Bavinck employs an ethic that is shaped by the imitation of Christ. Believers are to imitate the virtues that Christ exemplifies, in obedience to the moral law. These virtues remain consistent in all times and places; the application of these virtues may differ, according to one’s context.

Bavinck consistently appeals to, and applies, union with Christ and the relationship between

465 Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 73, emphasis original.
Christ and the law in his essays on the imitation of Christ.

While there are contextual and hermeneutical nuances between Imitation I and Imitation II, resulting in differing emphases within the essays, the heart of Bavinck’s thought on the imitation of Christ displays great consistency. He consistently upholds the ideal of the imitation of Christ as a necessary aspect of the Christian life, highlighting the importance of union with Christ for the imitation of Christ. Bavinck also demonstrates the way that the imitation of Christ is related to other key motifs in his thought: Christ and the law, the gospel as leaven, and grace restoring nature. Alongside these themes, there are two other important emphases in Bavinck’s thought that are worth briefly exploring as they relate to the imitation of Christ. Two important addresses that Bavinck delivered during his time in Kampen, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church” (1888), and “Common Grace” (1894) similarly display key themes in Bavinck’s work. These two addresses again demonstrate Bavinck’s clarity of thought regarding the relationship between nature and grace, a critical component of his understanding of the imitation of Christ.

In his 1888 address on the Catholicity of the faith, Bavinck argues that there are three aspects of catholicity: the church as a “unified whole,” the church as “inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places,” and the church as “embrac[ing] the whole of human experience.” Of this final aspect, Bavinck elaborates: the church “possesses perfectly all doctrines concerning either invisible and visible things that human beings need to know; it provides a cure for all kinds of sin, either of body or soul; it produces all virtues and good works, and partakes of all spiritual gifts.”467 The third meaning of catholicity, the comprehensiveness of the faith, “religion that encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life,” Bavinck deems

467 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 221.
an “inner catholicity.” Inner catholicity is concerned with the relationship between grace and nature, a key theme in Bavinck’s discourse on the imitation of Christ. Bavinck writes that

How we relate grace to nature, recreation (herschepping) to creation (schepping), determines whether our ecclesiastical vision will be broad or narrow. The affirmation of the catholicity of the church and of the universalism of Christianity is of the greatest significance in our time, which is so rife with errors and schism.469

The Christian faith speaks to all aspects of life, for while “it is true that the Cross casts its shadow over all of creation . . . so does the light of the Resurrection.”470 Emphasizing that the gospel is opposed only to sin, Bavinck writes, “sin does not dominate and corrupt without God's abundant grace in Christ triumphing even more (Rom. 5:15-20). The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin, it is able to restore everything.”471 Because grace restores nature, as we have seen in his essays on the imitation of Christ, following Jesus takes us into every sphere of life. As he writes, “The Gospel is a joyful tiding, not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation.”472 The work of grace to restore nature is evident in Bavinck’s essays on the imitation of Christ. He similarly appeals to this theme in his essays on catholicity.

Inner catholicity also attends to leavening work of the gospel in the world. Bavinck repeats his contention that the kingdom of heaven “may be a treasure and pearl of grace price, but it is also a mustard seed and a leaven.”473 Any dualism that “separates the supernatural from the natural by considering it as transcendent above the natural” must be rejected for it does not fully comprehend the catholicity of the faith.474 Instead, as the Reformers insisted, the Christian

468 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 222, emphasis original.
469 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 221-222.
471 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 244.
473 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 236.
474 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 229.
faith “enters the natural in an immanent fashion and eliminates only that which is unholy.”

Preaching the full catholicity of the church, the Reformers emphasized the gospel as not only a pearl, but a leaven that infiltrates and renews all spheres of life. Thus, we can identify a third aspect of inner catholicity, which rejects a dualism that pits grace against nature: it attends to both negative virtues and positive virtues. For Bavinck, true catholicity encompasses the whole of the Christian life. Thus the Christian, following the example of Christ, is to engage in both positive and negative virtues, as Christ himself did. While Bavinck does not explicitly appeal to the imitation of Christ in his address on catholicity, there are concrete connections between his formulation of the proper imitation of Christ and the true catholicity of the church.

Bavinck’s 1894 address on common grace similarly attests to his clear understanding of the relationship between nature and grace, and its relationship to the imitation of Christ. Bavinck argues that after the fall, God’s revelation is ongoing. God does not abandon his creation, instead, he upholds, renews, and restores it through his grace. Bavinck writes that:

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475 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 236; even here, though, Bavinck points to differences among the Reformers. He writes: “Luther thus, like Calvin and Zwingli, frees the earthly realm from the ecclesiastical. However, he leaves it standing without connection next to the spiritual realm and sometimes speaks as though the external is a matter of complete indiffERENCE and not capable of ethical renewal. Luther's mistake here is that he restricts the Gospel and limits the grace of God. The Gospel only changes the inward man, the conscience, the heart; the remainder stays the same until the final judgment. As a result, dualism is not completely overcome; a true and full catholicity is not achieved. Re-creation (herschepping) continues to stand alongside creation (schepping).” (237) Neither did Zwingli fully overcome this dualism; this was the work of Calvin. Bavinck writes: “Overcoming this dualism completely was the task appointed to the reformer of Geneva. I do not deny that even in Calvin the negative virtues of self-denial, cross-bearing, longsuffering, and moderation are emphasized. . . . it is Calvin whose labors completed the Reformation and saved Protestantism. He traced the operation of sin to a greater extent than did Luther, and to a greater depth than did Zwingli. It is for that reason that the grace of God is more restricted by Luther and less rich in Zwingli than it is in Calvin. In the powerful mind of the French Reformer, re-creation is not a system that supplements Creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves Creation intact, as in Luther, much less a radically new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures. Here the Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity. There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized. Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity.” (237-8)


477 See, for example, Bavinck’s words in his second essay on the imitation of Christ: “The incarnation is a sign of the gracious love of God the Father through the Son. This love extends to the whole world, to the entire creation which was originally good, wholly and completely a work of God, not only in its spiritual dimensions but including the material (Gen. 1:1; John 1:3, 3:16). Christ came not to condemn the world but to preserve it by destroying the works of the devil in it (John 3:17; 9:39, 12:47; I John 3:8)” (Bavinck, Imitation II, 424; cf. Bavinck, Imitation II, 436 and Bavinck, Imitation I, 400-401).
God allows the nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16), yet does not leave them without his witness (Acts 14:17). In him they move and have their being; he is not far from each one of them (Acts 17:27, 28). He reveals himself to them in the works of nature (Rom. 1:19). Every good and perfect gift, also among the nations, comes down from the Father of Lights (James 1:17). The Logos, who created and maintains all things, enlightens each man coming into the world (John 1:9). The Holy Spirit is the author of all life, of every power and every virtue (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Pss. 33:6; 104:30; 139:2; Job 32:8; Eccl. 3:19). 478

In his later essay on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck draws upon this same language for God, the Father of lights, and scriptural reference, James 1:17. He writes that

Creation and fall are carefully distinguished in Christianity; redemption is not the annihilation but the restoration of nature. . . . All good and perfect gifts come down from the Father of lights who satisfies the hearts of men with food and gladness (James 1:17; Acts 14:17). 479

Later, in the same essay, Bavinck reaffirms the work of God, the Father of lights:

There is simply far too much in our present-day culture that we gladly and thankfully accept and which we daily use and enjoy. The discoveries of science, the new vistas opened up by the historical sciences, the wondrous things brought forth by technology, are of such a nature that they cannot but be regarded as good and perfect gifts coming down from the Father of lights. 480

In these essays and Bavinck’s rectoral address on common grace, we find a clear link between common grace, grace restoring nature, and the imitation of Christ in his thought. As Christians seek out the proper application of the virtues exemplified by Christ in one’s own context, they need not be antagonistic to the world around them. God is upholding his creation through common grace; or, as Bavinck often puts it, grace restores nature.

Each of these key aspects of Bavinck’s thought – grace restores nature, gospel as leaven,

479 Bavinck, Imitation II, 427.
480 Bavinck, Imitation II, 432; these good gifts are not just external. They also are internal. God “nurtures a variety of social virtues among people” including love for family, friends, and nation (Herman Bavinck, “General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today,” trans. John Bolt, Journal of Markets & Morality 13, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 440).
common grace, even the imitation of Christ as the heart of the spiritual life, however, central they are in Bavinck’s thought (and we have argued here, that they are indeed at the core of his thought) – displays the heart of Bavinck’s thought: the Triune God. It is the Triune God who displays his normative will in creation, through Christ restores what was established in creation and gives us an example by which to live, preserves his creation through the Spirit, and works in the world, anticipating the coming eschatological consummation. As James Eglinton argues, “The Triune God is the literal center piece of Bavinck’s theology.” Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, necessarily connected to his concept of grace restoring nature and the gospel as leaven, testifies to the centrality of the trinity in Bavinck’s thought.

Bavinck’s 1885/86 and 1918 essays on the imitation of Christ display Bavinck’s consistent conclusion that the imitation of Christ is a necessary ideal in the Christian life. Jesus is not only savior, he is example. All Christians ought to follow Christ – in the fullness of his example – in all of their life. Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ has no room for a double morality, where only some imitate Christ; it also has no room for a literalistic, external mimicry of only some aspects of Christ’s life. The disciple of Christ is to follow all of Christ, as he follows the law, imitating the virtues that Christ exemplifies in obedience to the law of God.

**Imitating Christ in *Reformed Dogmatics***

As he concludes his article on Bavinck’s essays on the imitation of Christ, van Keulen highlights the thematic consistency between Bavinck’s essays on the imitation of Christ and his dogmatic theology. There is a close relationship, as we have seen, in Bavinck’s thought between dogmatics and ethics, although they remain distinct. Bavinck clearly delineates the task

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481 For more on the trinitarian nature of Bavinck’s doctrine of common grace, see Bolt, *Theological Analysis*, 169-195.
482 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 96.
of ethics and dogmatics: “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.” The two tasks are closely related, but must be distinguished.

Given the separation between the two tasks, it ought not surprise us that Bavinck does not reference an ethical motif, the imitation of Christ, frequently in *Reformed Dogmatics*. Nevertheless, he still refers to imitating Christ, albeit infrequently, in *Reformed Dogmatics*. These references shed an important light on the theological framework out of which Bavinck employs the ethical motif of imitating Christ. For Bavinck, imitating Christ is rooted in the atoning work of Christ on the cross; because of what Christ has done, the believer – justified, sanctified and ever being made more into the image of God through their active sanctification, and united with Christ – can, and should, imitate Christ. As he writes in Imitation I, the primary aspect of the imitation of Christ is union with Christ. The theological framework out of which ethical motifs occur is critical for Bavinck.

In Bavinck’s thought, ethics and dogmatics cannot be wholly uncoupled. Ethics is dependent upon dogmatics; as Dirk van Keulen writes, for Bavinck, “dogmatics precedes ethics.” James Eglinton elaborates this point, arguing that:

To understand Bavinck’s ethics, one must begin (rather than end) with Reformed Dogmatics, and use his handling of sanctification-as-ethics under the heading of dogmatics. . . . To grasp the whole Bavinck, one must understand that his identification of sanctification-as-ethics means that sanctification is the linking concept between the writing of dogmatics and of ethics.

Eglinton underscores the importance of sanctification in Bavinck’s thought; he writes:

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484 Bavinck, *RD* 1, 58; As van Keulen points out, Bavinck repeats this difference between ethics and dogmatics in *Reformed Ethics* (van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics,*” 34).

485 Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics,*” 35.


487 See Eglinton, “On Bavinck’s Theology of Sanctification-as-Ethics,” 167-185; van Keulen also points out the important relationship between imitation and sanctification. He argues there is a “close correspondence between Bavinck’s (ethical) views on the imitation of Christ and his (dogmatic) views on sanctification” (van Keulen,
“Bavinck viewed sanctification as centered on the imitation of Christ.”

In *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck explicitly discusses a positive charge to the believer to imitate Christ under the rubric of two categories within dogmatics: “The Work of Christ” and “Sanctification and Perseverance.” Other references to the imitation of Christ reference a historical understanding of the imitation of Christ, as in his statement that in the religious reformation after the tenth century, extending to the twelfth century mendicant orders, understood piety as “an imitation and literal copying of the life of Jesus, especially in his seven days of passion.” While the historical understanding of the imitation of Christ is an important aspect of Bavinck’s exposition on imitating Christ in other works, within the *Reformed Dogmatics*, this instance of Bavinck mentioning the imitation of Christ is less useful to our overall project of discovering the theological framework out of which Bavinck understands a proper imitation of Christ.

**Imitating Christ on Account of the Work of Christ**

Under the broader category of the work of Christ, Bavinck references imitation multiple times, in reference to both Christ’s death and exultation. In relation to the sacrifice of Christ, Bavinck writes that “from [Christ] flow all the benefits, the whole of salvation.” Bavinck expounds, in detail, on the benefits that the Christian obtains from Christ’s sacrifice. The list of benefits is extensive, but can be divided into two basic theological categories, benefits related to

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489 Bavinck, *RD* 1, 144. See also Bavinck, *RD* 3, 344 for Bavinck’s brief discussion of Aquinas’ understanding of imitation: “Reconciliation here does not yet stand out in the foreground, and it is also fully realized only when Christ as a model of virtue and humility spurs us to imitate him, moves us by his love and grace to love, and in faith, delivers us from sin.” He also references the views of the martyrs, monks, beggars, and flagellants, who glorified asceticism and self-torture. Bavinck writes, “Following Christ consisted in copying and imitating deeds and conditions from his life, specifically from his suffering” (Bavinck, *RD* 3, 377).
justification and benefits related to sanctification. Bavinck details the benefits related to justification first: forgiveness of sins, removal of sins, cleansing, justification, righteousness, confident access to God, God laying aside his wrath, a new disposition of reconciliation of God toward the world, and a new disposition of people toward God.\textsuperscript{492}

Christ’s sacrificial, atoning death, does not simply free us from the curse of sin and put us in new relationship with God. The benefits that the Christian obtains from Christ’s sacrifice are twofold; they are also benefits related to sanctification. Not only are the sins of the believer atoned for, the believer receives new life. These benefits include the gift of the Holy Spirit, sanctification, dying to sin, being crucified to the world, the washing away of our sin, walking in the Spirit, participation in the resurrection of Christ, growing freedom from the curse of the law, the inauguration of the new covenant, the resurrection of the last day, glorification, eternal life, and the restoration of all things.\textsuperscript{493} Also included in this list is the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{494} For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is one of the specific gifts directly derived from Christ’s death; all of these good gifts are received by the Christian on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice.\textsuperscript{495} In Christ’s death on the cross, we were reconciled to God.

It is on the basis of Christ’s death that any benefits are received by the believer. Ethical consequences flow from the justification of the believer by Christ’s work on the cross. But, in order to properly understand the ethical imperatives, we must understand them as benefits of Christ’s work. The ethical consequences, such as the imitation of Christ, must not be co-opted

\textsuperscript{492} Bavinck, \textit{RD 3}, 339-340.
\textsuperscript{493} Bavinck, \textit{RD 3}, 340. Later, in the same volume, Bavinck discusses the three main aspects of Christ’s benefits: restoring our relationship to God and all creatures (justification), renewing us after God’s image (sanctification), and preserving us for the day when we are free from all suffering and death and obtain eternal life (preservation; Bavinck, \textit{RD 3}, 594)
\textsuperscript{494} Bavinck, \textit{RD 3}, 340.
into a definition of justification. Rather, Bavinck makes clear that justification necessarily precedes any ethical imperative. Justification is, in Bavinck’s definition,

the imputation of Christ’s obedience as a whole, just as in the writings of Paul the word δικαιούν (to justify) alternates with λογιζεσθαι εἰς δικαιοσύνην (logizesthai eis dikaiosynēn, to reckon as righteousness). And it is still more accurate to have the two parts of Justification consist in the forgiveness of sins and in the attribution of the right to eternal life, since these benefits are based on the imputation of Christ’s obedience as a whole.496

It is a forensic, juridical act. No human work precedes justification. Justification happens only on the basis of God’s good will. It is then only on the basis of one’s justification, which is grounded in Christ’s work on the cross, that the moral benefits of justification flow forth.

Speaking of the work of Christ in his exultation, Bavinck further explains the benefits that the believer obtains from the reconciliation of God through Christ. Emphasizing the necessity of reconciliation between God and humanity through Christ, Bavinck writes,

“reconciliation, therefore, is not unilateral, but bilateral: not only must we be reconciled with God, but God, too, must be reconciled with us, in the sense that, by giving Christ as expiation, he puts aside his wrath and establishes a relation of peace between himself and human beings.”497

This reconciliation occurs in Christ’s work on the cross. Because of Christ’s work on the cross, reconciling God and humanity, the believer is justified. On account of the work of Christ, the believer receives a host of benefits. These “benefits that accrue to use from the reconciliation of God-in-Christ are,” according to Bavinck, “too numerous to mention,”498 but he identifies the six primary categories of benefits that believers receive in this reconciliation:

- the juridical, that is, the forgiveness of sins . . . justification . . . adoption as children . . . the right to eternal life and the heavenly inheritance . . .

- the mystical, consisting in being crucified, buried, raised, and seated with Christ in heaven . .

496 Bavinck, RD 4, 224.
497 Bavinck, RD 3, 448.
the ethical, that is, regeneration . . . being made alive . . . sanctification . . . being washed . . . cleansed . . . and sprinkled in body, soul, and spirit . . .

the moral, consisting in the imitation of Christ, who has left us his example . . .

the economic, that is, the fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant, the inauguration of a new covenant . . . the freedom from the law . . . the cancellation of the bond with its legal demands, the breaking down of the dividing wall, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile and all other existing sets of opposites into unity in Christ . . .

the physical, that is, the victory over the world . . . over death . . . over hell . . . and over Satan.\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{RD} 3, 451; emphasis original, scripture verses omitted.}

Again, Bavinck emphasizes the direct relationship between Christ’s reconciling work on the cross and the charge to the believer to imitate Christ. “In a word, the whole enterprise of recreation, the complete restoration of a world and humanity, which, as a result of sin, is burdened with guilt, corrupted and fragmented, is the fruit of Christ’s work.”\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{RD} 3, 451-452.} It is on account of the work of Christ on the cross that the believer obtains the moral benefits of reconciliation; thus, it is on account of Christ’s atonement that the believer can – and must – imitate Christ.

\textit{“Become What You Are!” Imitation of Christ as Sanctified Believers}

On the basis of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, God justifies the believer. God “must descend from the height of his majesty, seek us out and come to us, take away our guilt and again open the way to his fatherly heart.”\footnote{Bavinck, \textit{RD} 4, 205.} In Christ, this has occurred. Justification is juridical, an instantaneous reconciliation of the believer to God. But God’s plan of redemption does not only include justification; it also includes sanctification and glorification.

Already we have seen Bavinck tie the imitation of Christ to sanctification in the life of the believer. Justification and sanctification are necessarily connected; justification logically comes first, sanctification follows. It is ethical, “continued throughout the whole of life and, by
the renewing activity of the Holy Spirit.” To disconnect justification and sanctification is to fundamentally misunderstand the two; righteousness and holiness are necessarily connected.

Bavinck helpfully elucidates the relationship between the two when he writes:

Those who are born of God increasingly become the children of God and bear his image and likeness, because in principle they already are his children. The rule of organic life applies to them: Become what you are! Jesus and the apostles derive the most compelling reasons for spurring them on to a holy life from what believers now already are by grace through faith in Christ: Jesus is the vine, his disciples are the branches. Those who remain in him bear much fruit, for without him they can do nothing (John 15:5). Members of the church have died with Christ to sin but are alive to God in him (Rom. 6:11).

To become what you are, that is, to be sanctified, includes a charge to imitate.

Sanctification is both passive and active. Believers are sanctified in Christ, being renewed and purified by the Holy Spirit. But sanctification is not simply the work of God toward passive humans. It is an active call to believers to continual repentance and good works. Bavinck writes, “the possession of all the benefits of the covenant (forgiveness, adoption, life, salvation) is secured before any kind of work, yet over and over and with great urgency there is an insistence on good works as if those benefits can only be obtained by these works.” Those who are justified are also sanctified, and sanctification both is the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer and the work of the believer, spurred on to good works by God’s grace. Christians are to “Become what you are!”, that is, the believer is charged to “put away the old self . . . and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and

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502 Bavinck, RD 4, 249.
503 Bavinck, RD 4, 255, emphasis original.
504 Similarly, Bavinck understands justification to be active and passive, “faith is a gift of God and yet people are responsible for their attitude toward God.” Bavinck, RD 4, 253. See also: Eglinton, “On Bavinck’s Theology of Sanctification-as-Ethics,” 182-183.
505 Bavinck, RD 4, 253.
507 Bavinck, RD 4, 255; emphasis original.
holiness.”  

To do this, as Paul writes in Ephesians 5, the believer must “be imitators of God,” acting as Christ did. The imitation of Christ is a necessary aspect of the active sanctification of the believer, on the basis of one’s justification by God through Christ.

The work of Christ on the cross reconciles the believer to God. In this, the believer is justified (a juridical act) and continues to be sanctified (an ethical act). On account of the work of Christ, the believer obtains a new status: a child of God. From this, flows many benefits, including moral benefits. Justification precedes ethical imperatives, but is necessarily connected to sanctification, an ethical act which is continued throughout all of life and manifests itself in good works in the life of the believer (both as the believer is passively renewed by the Holy Spirit in God’s all-encompassing activity and actively participating in their dying to the old self), including the imitation of Christ.

*Further evidence for the Imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s Dogmatics*

Christ’s work on the cross as the grounds for the believer’s justification, and as necessarily preceding the sanctification of the believer, of which the imitation of Christ is an essential part, is further evidenced in *Reformed Dogmatics* when we look to other phrases that Bavinck uses which suggest imitation: the example of Christ and following Christ. Here, we will survey the occasions that Bavinck uses these phrases within his *Reformed Dogmatics*. While this

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509 Ephesians 5:1; Bavinck, *RD* 4, 256.
510 Dirk van Keulen briefly discusses the way in which Bavinck’s understanding of the active and passive aspects of sanctification are reflected in his view on the imitation of Christ. In his essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck spends much more time discussing the imitation of Christ, particularly the condition for the imitation of Christ: recognizing Christ as reconciler and mediator. This is “in line with what [Bavinck] argued in his *Dogmatics*, viz. that not only justification, but also sanctification is a gift of God and that sanctification incorporates passive aspects.” Not only this, but “imitation of Christ means that Christ must be reflected in our inner being. . . . Again, this is in line with the passive aspects of sanctification.” But imitating Christ also, as discussed above, is reflected in the active aspects of sanctification: “our lives must also be shaped in conformity with Christ in our outer appearance.” (Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 85).
survey is not intended to be exhaustive, it again points to the necessary relationship between imitating Christ, the cross, and sanctification. Christ’s work on the cross is the necessary prerequisite for imitating Christ. Because of Christ’s work on the cross, the believer obtains benefits, including justification and sanctification. Sanctification, manifest in good works in the life of the believer, includes imitating Christ.

Discussing the new life of the believer, Bavinck writes: “The content of the new life is hope. . . . [Hope] reaches out and binds believers to the heavenly inheritance (1:4–13). It also enables them to live a holy life in accordance with Christ’s example (1:14ff.).” The believer is charged to live in accordance with Christ, who exemplifies a holy life. Doing so is only possible because of what Christ has done to grant them this new life. Bavinck then discusses the example of Christ in reference to the benefits of justification:

John especially highlights the life (ζωη, zōē) that is obtained through faith in Christ (3:16, 36). James, for practical reasons, urgently warns people against a dead faith (2:14ff.). Peter exhorts believers to follow Christ’s example (1 Pet. 2:21ff.), and the Letter to the Hebrews points above all else to the perfection (τελειωσις, teleiōsis) that has come with the single offering of Christ (10:14). But all of them regard the forgiveness of sins as the great benefit that Christ has won and that is received by faith.

In his exposition on sanctification, Bavinck again references the example of Christ. He writes, “Jesus himself leads the way for his disciples. He left them his example.” But following Christ’s example is only made possible through faith; “by [Christ’s death], he not only won for them the forgiveness of sins; his self-offering, his death, was also a total consecration to the Father, a perfect act of obedience to his will, a sanctification of himself that by his word they too might be sanctified in the truth.”

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511 This is in contrast to the above discussion which referenced each of the instances where Bavinck poses a positive articulation of imitating Christ in the life of the believer.
512 Bavinck, RD 4, 49–50.
513 Bavinck, RD 4, 183.
514 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
515 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
justification and sanctification of the believer, and following the example of Christ are clear. The imitation of Christ ought to be understood in the theological framework of sanctification, which is necessarily preceded by Christ’s work on the cross.

Similarly, examining the ways Bavinck discusses the call to “follow” Christ, highlights this recurring theological framework. The relationship between redemption and imitation is seen in Bavinck’s reflection that “Peter pictures Christ’s suffering as that of a lamb without blemish or spot; and in that suffering he not only bore our sins and redeemed us from our futile way of life but left us an example that we might follow in his steps.” The work of Christ precedes imitation, but the two are necessarily connected. Christ give us new life; believers are “made alive in Christ and called to follow in his footsteps.” Imitation flows from redemption. This imitation is not merely a suggestion, but a necessity for those who have been redeemed: “[Christ] is our captain and leader, but we nevertheless have the duty and the power to conform to his example and to follow in his footsteps.” But the charge to imitate Christ, an affirmation that we can – and must – do as Jesus does, does not negate the differences between Christ and the believer. Bavinck argues that believers can only imitate Christ because of who Christ is and what Christ has done. The imitation of Christ is logically preceded by, and dependent upon, the work of Christ.

Followers of Jesus are charged to conform to Christ’s example in all things, including his suffering. The suffering of Christ, which was begun in his incarnation and completed in his passion is “an example to be followed by his disciples (1 Pet. 2:21), a ransom for their sins

516 Bavinck, RD 3, 384.
517 Bavinck, RD 3, 384-385.
518 Bavinck, RD 3, 385.
519 Bavinck, RD 3, 386. He writes, “if Christ has been anointed as a prophet, priest, and king, he has been appointed by God, been given a work to do, and is above us in a position of authority, to teach us, to represent us before the face of God, and to govern us according to his will.”
(Matt. 20:28; 26:28), a victory over the world (John 16:33; Col. 2:15).”  
It does not follow from this assertion that every aspect of Christ’s suffering and passion is imitable. Indeed, Bavinck notes that while Christ’s passion is an example to be followed, it is also a ransom for sin and Christ’s victory over the world. The ransom that Christ gave for sin is applied to the believer, not imitated by the believer. Nevertheless, believers are to imitate Christ in his suffering. Bavinck helpfully articulates the relationship between the victory that Christ obtained in his suffering and the imitation of Christ by the believer with these words: “Christ suffered doing good and overcame; now let believers follow in his footsteps.” Because of what Christ has done, the believer can imitate him.

The imitation of Christ, only possible because of the work of Christ, is a necessary aspect of the sanctification of the believer. Imitation, justification, and sanctification must be understood together: “a person obtains such perfection only by conversion, faith, regeneration;” on account of one’s justification through Christ’s work on the cross, the believer “leav[es] everything behind for Jesus’s sake, tak[es] up one’s cross, and follow[s] him.” Throughout Reformed Dogmatics, Bavinck affirms that it is through the work of Christ on the cross and the ongoing work of God in the lives of the believer as they are continually sanctified, that the believer can – and must – imitate Christ.

Imitating Christ in Reformed Ethics

In his first essay on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck clearly describes a proper understanding of the imitation of Christ:

It is precisely all those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law that Christ in his words and deeds leaves as an example for us. . . . The Ten Commandments form the

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520 Bavinck, RD 3, 409.
521 Bavinck, RD 3, 481.
522 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
523 Bavinck, RD 4, 233.
constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus. ⁵²⁴

In his second essay on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck repeats his insistence on law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ, emphasizing the need for wise, contextual reflection on the application of these virtues. The example of Christ is a concrete illustration of “the most important virtues which the law requires of us;” ⁵²⁵ but the context of the believer must be taken into account as one enacts these virtues, for “the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same, [but] circumstances may modify the application.” ⁵²⁶

Bavinck understands the imitation of Christ to be twofold: union with Christ and the law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. The imitation of Christ is rooted in the work of Christ; the justification of the believer and the believer’s communion with Christ precedes, and is the driving force of, the ethical imperative to imitate Christ. The imitation of Christ, only possible because of the work of Christ, is thus a necessary aspect of the ongoing, active sanctification of the believer. Grounded in Bavinck’s understanding of the work of Christ in justification and sanctification, the imitation of Christ is necessarily connected to other dominant theological motifs in Bavinck’s work: grace restoring nature and the gospel as both a pearl and a leaven. ⁵²⁷

In “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” Dirk van Keulen argues that Bavinck wrote Reformed Ethics at the same time as he was writing Reformed Dogmatics. ⁵²⁸ The two works resemble one another in structure, the relationship between ethics and dogmatics, and method. ⁵²⁹

In this study, we will not focus on the entirety of Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics, rather, we will

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⁵²⁴ Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
⁵²⁵ Bavinck, Imitation II, 426.
⁵²⁶ Bavinck, Imitation II, 438.
⁵²⁹ Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics,” 32-34.
simply examine Bavinck’s chapter on the imitation of Christ, section 21 of his *Reformed Ethics: De vorm van het Geestelijke Leven (De navolging van Christus)* [The Shape of the Spiritual Life: The Imitation of Christ]. Van Keulen further specifies the date of Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* in “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” where he suggests that:

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. In the same years he wrote his *Reformed Ethics*, which contains a section on the imitation of Christ. 530

Van Keulen’s theory regarding the dating of Bavinck’s *Reformed Ethics* is further confirmed by an examination of Bavinck’s content on the imitation of Christ. As both van Keulen and Bolt point out, Bavinck’s focus in his discussion on the imitation of Christ shifts throughout his career. Earlier in his career, he writes about the imitation of Christ from an ecclesial perspective, toward members of his own church. Later in his career, he writes about the imitation of Christ to a broader audience, as van Keulen writes, his “perspective has been broadened from church and theology to culture and theology.” 531 As we will see, Bavinck’s discussion of the imitation of Christ does not substantively address the cultural questions surrounding the viability of the imitation of Christ in the modern world that his later essay addresses. Bavinck’s discussion of the imitation of Christ in *Reformed Ethics* displays his earlier, ecclesial focus, further confirming van Keulen’s dating suggestion.

Bavinck’s discussion of the imitation of Christ is found in the second section of his *Reformed Ethics*, 532 where he examines the spiritual life of the Christian. The imitation of Christ

530 Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 82.
is at the heart of this section, for Bavinck, it is the “heart of spiritual life.”\textsuperscript{533} Here, we will look to Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, as articulated in section 21 of \textit{Reformed Ethics}: “The Shape of the Spiritual Life: The Imitation of Christ.”

Appealing to the witness of Scripture, Bavinck argues that Christ’s life is the “\textit{shape}, the model toward which our spiritual life must grow and adopt.”\textsuperscript{534} In his section on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck reiterates many of the themes seen throughout his other works on the imitation of Christ. He begins the section with a survey of calls toward imitation in Scripture. Next, he provides his historical survey of the imitation of Christ throughout Christian history, discussing three of the four motifs he examined in his essays on the imitation of Christ: the martyr, the mystic, and the monk. Then Bavinck surveys the imitation of Christ among the Protestants, where he examines the fourth historical motif, the rationalist, alongside other Protestant versions of imitation. After these surveys of various imitation motifs throughout Christian history, Bavinck provides an evaluation of these motifs, laying out what the imitation of Christ does not consist in, and a positive articulation of the imitation of Christ.

Bavinck appeals to Scriptural grounds for his emphasis on the imitation. Scripture speaks of three types of imitation: an imitation of God, an imitation of angels and other human beings, and (most frequently) an imitation of Christ. Bavinck attends to each of these themes in Scripture. His reflections are driven by the content of Scripture, thus the bulk of his reflections are on the imitation \textit{of Christ} in Scripture.

In Ephesians 5:1, Christians are instructed to imitate God, “therefore be imitators of God as beloved children.” But this ideal is not only found in the New Testament. The call to imitate

\textsuperscript{533} Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck’s \textit{Reformed Ethics},” 38.

\textsuperscript{534} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 265; emphasis original: “\textit{Zijn leven is de vorm, het model, waarin ons geestelijk leven ingroeien, dien het aannemen moet.”}
God is present in the Old Testament; the Israelites are instructed to follow God, which is primarily a matter of "listening to [God], walking in his commandments." In the New Testament, the charge to follow, or imitate, God is continued, but believers now have Jesus, placed before us as a "personal example." The imitation of God, as taught by Scripture, is not an imitation of God’s incommunicable attributes, rather it is in the “sphere of the ethical,” in the communicable attributes of God, such as God’s holiness, goodness, and mercy. Our ability to imitate God, Bavinck argues, rests in our being made in God’s image, and the renewing of the image of God on account of the work of Christ.

Scripture also speaks of the imitation of angels and other human beings. Paul, for example, exhorts his readers to “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” The prophets, and believers who have persevered in the faith, are also held up as those to be imitated. Within this category, the charge to imitate is not an absolute charge; rather, the command to imitate comes with qualifications. Christians are to imitate the virtues exemplified in those who are held up as an example: such as faith, patience, perseverance, and suffering.

Scripture speaks of the imitation of Christ much more frequently than the imitation of God, angels, or other believers, teaching that Christ ought to be imitated, in word and deed.

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536 Bavinck distinguishes between the verbs ἀκολουθέω (volgen) and μιμηται (navolgen); to follow and to follow after, or to imitate.
538 Bavinck, GE, 266; “Deze navolging, zoo blijkt duidelijk, heeft plaats in de sfeer niet van het metaphysische (van de onmededeelbare eigenschappen Gods, van Zijn wezen) maar van het ethische, in zijn heiligheid, goedheid, barmhartigheid.”
539 Although not discussed in the section on imitation in the Reformed Dogmatics, Bavinck does reference this concept in his dogmatics. In Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2 he writes that angels are “to be imitated [rather] than called upon.” (Bavinck, RD 2, 468).
540 1 Corinthians 11:1; see also: 1 Thessalonians 5:6, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; and 1 Corinthians 4:16.
541 James 5:10; Hebrews 6:12, 13:7.
542 Bavinck, GE, 267.
Bavinck writes, with Christ,

speaking and doing, revelation and being, doctrine and life, are one and cannot be separated; Jesus is what he says. Jesus, who himself does God’s will and therefore counts all who do God’s will as his brother, sister, and mother (Matt. 12:50), and who is “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt 11:29), and teaches others to be the same, repeatedly demands imitation.⁵⁴³

Scripture indicates that Christ must be imitated in two ways, Bavinck argues. Christ must be imitated in a literal way, that is, disciples must literally accompany or follow after Jesus, as his disciples did in Matthew 4:20.⁵⁴⁴ Disciples must also imitate Jesus in a “moral or spiritual sense.”⁵⁴⁵ The call to follow, and imitate, Jesus is accompanied by the demands of Christ that his disciples take up their cross and deny themselves.⁵⁴⁶

Bavinck’s survey of biblical teaching on imitation leads him to six conclusions regarding the imitation of Christ. First, the imitation of Christ includes a literal following of Christ, which involves “fellowship in his outward life and fate,” a life of “denial, cross-bearing, and opposition to the world.”⁵⁴⁷ But this literal, outward following is not the entirety of the biblical charge to imitate Christ. Following Christ is precipitated by one’s commitment to Christ. Accordingly, Bavinck’s section conclusion is that the imitation of Christ is a “life communion with Christ,”⁵⁴⁸ leading to eternal communion with Christ. Third, on account of this communion, one must forsake everything for the sake of communion with Christ. The biblical calls to forsake all for Christ include self-denial and cross-bearing, which are the “condition for the imitation of

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⁵⁴³ Bavinck, GE, 267; “Spreken en doen, openbaring en wezen, leer en leven zijn bij hem een, kunnen niet gescheiden; hij is wat hij zegt. Jezus, die zelf Gods wil doet en daarom allen voor broeder, zuster & moeder erkent die dien wil doen Mt 12:50, die zachmoedig is & nederig van hart & dat anderen leert 11:29, hij eischt telkens navolging.”
⁵⁴⁴ Bavinck, GE, 268.
⁵⁴⁵ Bavinck, GE, 268; “zedelijk geestelijken zin.”
⁵⁴⁶ Bavinck points to a number of New Testament texts that include the call to follow Jesus: Matthew 4:19, 9:9, 10:38, 16:24, 19:21; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; John 1:37-44, 8:12, 12:26.
⁵⁴⁷ Bavinck, GE, 269; “in eene uiterlijke levens- en lotgemeenschap,” “een leven vol verloochening, kruisdragen, vol tegenstelling met de wereld.”
⁵⁴⁸ Bavinck, GE, 269; “eene geestelijke levensgemeenschap.”
But self-denial and cross-bearing are not the full imitation of Christ; rather, he rightly points to them as “two components of the imitation of Christ” which “do not fully explain the imitation of Christ. Not at all.” Thus Bavinck must continue in his fourth point, the “heart of the imitation of Christ;” imitating Christ is “spiritual, faith-communion with Christ . . . trusting him . . . obeying him.” Following Christ is, at its heart, a spiritual following and communion. But again, Bavinck qualifies this point with his fifth conclusion: the imitation of Christ is not “fully explained by that spiritual communion,” for “Christ always intends to present himself as an example.” Spiritual communion leads to following the embodied example of Christ, entering into his suffering. There are two requirements for fellowship with Christ’s suffering, to which Bavinck returns: self-denial (surrendering everything for the sake of Christ) and cross-bearing (rejection and persecution by the world, which also leads to fellowship in Christ’s glory). This leads Bavinck to his final conclusion, a re-affirmation of his first conclusion: the imitation of Christ has literal significance for the life of the believer. The imitation of Christ is not simply spiritual; imitation includes entering into fellowship with the suffering and glory of Christ, through self-denial and cross-bearing, by faith. It presupposes mystical union with Christ.

Scripture repeatedly bears witness to the importance of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. Imitation of Christ rests on the believer’s union with Christ, sealed in their

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549 Bavinck, GE, 270; “voorwaarde tot navolging Christi.” Bavinck clearly defines these concepts: “negatively, self-denial means forsaking the world; positively, cross-bearing means exchanging the world for a cross” (Bavinck, GE, 269; “Zelfverloochening negatief, de wereld prijsgeven; en positief: kruisdragen = de wereld ruilen met een kruis”).

550 Bavinck, GE, 270; “de twee begeleidende omstandigheden van de navolging. Ze gaat daarin niet op. Neen.”

551 Bavinck, GE, 270.

552 Bavinck, GE, 270; “Toch gaat het in die geestelijke gemeenschap zonder meer weer niet geheel op,” “Christus bedoelt ook, als hij de geestelijke navolging beschrijft & eischt, altijd z.z. ons te stellen als voorbeeld.”

553 Bavinck, GE, 271.

554 Bavinck, GE, 271.

555 Bavinck, GE, 271; “unio mystica,” emphasis original.
baptism. United with Christ, the believer ought to follow the example of Christ, who was an example “in holiness, and patience in his suffering.” Christ is then an example to believers in his virtues: meekness, gentleness, love, patience, joy, endurance, purity, and self-denial. United with Christ, believers are to take Christ as an ethical example, sharing in his sufferings and imitating his virtues.

After his survey of – and conclusions from – imitation in Scripture, Bavinck moves to a survey of the imitation of Christ in church history. As in Bavinck’s essays on the imitation of Christ, he focuses on the martyr, the monk, and the mystic. Bavinck’s description and analyses of these imitation ideals are quite consistent with his imitation essays. Martyrs exhibited self-control and patience endurance in their suffering, but this ideal gave way to a fanatic, often pathological, desire for the glory of martyrdom. Praise for the act of martyrdom, over the disposition and cause of the martyr, paved the way for an understanding of meritorious works.

As circumstances changed, monasticism eclipsed martyrdom as the ideal imitation of Christ. With monasticism came a double morality, precepts for all and councils of perfection for monks. The ideal of imitating Christ was, for the monk, a “slavish copying” of Jesus’ life, following Christ in his poverty, unmarried state, and other particulars of his life. The focus remained on the outward circumstances of Christ’s life, which were at times exaggerated. In the Middle Ages, the mendicant orders intensified the imitation demanded by monks (poverty,

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556 Bavinck, GE, 273.
557 Bavinck, GE, 271; “hier is Jezus dus voorbeeld van lijden, heiligheid en geduld in het lijden.” In the margin, Bavinck also adds meekness (zachtmoedigheid).
558 Bavinck, GE, 272-274. Bavinck references a range of New Testament texts to draw these conclusions.
559 The fourth category that Bavinck discusses in his essays on the imitation occurs later in Reformed Ethics.
560 In Reformed Ethics, Bavinck spends less time finding the biblical grounds for aspects of these ideals. His focus is on the problematic aspects of these ideals.
561 Bavinck, GE, 275.
562 Bavinck, GE, 276.
563 Bavinck, GE, 277; nabootsing.
564 Bavinck, GE, 277.
chastity, obedience) with the abandonment of all possessions.\textsuperscript{565} Not only did they engage in negative imitation of Christ (relegation of property, depriving oneself of food, drink, sleep, speech, and more), they also took on “positive chastisements”\textsuperscript{566} (self-mutilation, flagellation, and other forms of “training” that were systematized with the mendicant orders).\textsuperscript{567} This form of imitation emphasized one’s meditation on, and reenactment of, Christ’s suffering.\textsuperscript{568} Thus, the ideal of imitating Christ transitioned from monk to mystic, one’s contemplation on Christ drawing them away from the world toward a higher vision.\textsuperscript{569} Often, the imitation of Christ was understood as the copying of the individual deeds and circumstances of Christ’s life.\textsuperscript{570} One must conform themselves to Christ by contemplating upon, and imitating, his suffering. Some mystics, however, are praised by Bavinck for their “more pure, more spiritual” grasp of the imitation of Christ.\textsuperscript{571}

After his survey of the imitation of Christ throughout history, Bavinck moves to a survey of the imitation of Christ among Protestants. He is quick to note that not much is said in the Protestant tradition about the imitation of Christ; for Protestants, the norms for the Christian life are found in the Ten Commandments. But the motif is not wholly absent. Calvin, for example,

\textsuperscript{565} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 277.
\textsuperscript{566} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 278; \textit{positieve kastijdingen}.
\textsuperscript{567} Bavinck provides a thorough history of these positive chastisements, from their spread to their prohibition; Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 278.
\textsuperscript{568} Bavinck also provides an extended discussion on the phenomenon of the stigmata, from the first stigmata of Francis Assissi to many others (Gertrude van Oosten, Lindwina of Schiedam, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna, Anne Catharine Emmerich, Maria von Mörl, and Louise Lateau). Not unlike his discussion of positive chastisements, Bavinck’s discussion of the stigmata is quite thorough and detailed. He also spends time discussing an explanation for the occurrence of the stigmata (Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 279-281).
\textsuperscript{569} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 282.
\textsuperscript{570} This led to stigmata and visions, and was quite a subjective means of imitating Christ on account of its reliance on one’s imagination (Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 282-283).
\textsuperscript{571} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 283; “Toch was er van de Navolging Christi onder de mystici hier en daar eene meer zuivere, geestelijke opvatting.” Those praised include Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas à Kempis. Kempis in particular, while still focused on asceticism, proclaims the way of the cross, and attends to the ethical duty to imitate the virtues of Christ, his humility, meekness, and tenderness. Later in the same section, Bavinck criticizes the mystics for simply seeing Christ as an example in mystical union with God.
appeals to the theme “in discussions of cross-bearing and self-denial . . . [and] our mystical union with Christ, in which we obtain communion with Christ’s death and resurrection.” Generally, among Protestants, Bavinck argues, the imitation of Christ is understood as an imitation of virtues, such as obedience, love, humility, and holiness.

Among Protestants, there is one other dominant understanding of the imitation of Christ: the rationalist. Again, Bavinck’s description and analysis of this imitation ideal is quite consistent with his discussion of the rationalist in his essays on the imitation of Christ. In this view, Jesus is merely an example. As mentioned in his essays on imitation, some modern theologians reject even Jesus as an example, for one person cannot be a universal example. Bavinck also identifies a trend in his contemporaries of speaking more about the imitation of Christ, because the norm of the moral law is disappearing. In this trend, what exactly it means to imitate Christ is contested. For some, Christ is an example; for others, Christ ought to be understood as a foundation for ethics, not an example (his life was much too historically, vocationally, and culturally specific to be an example for all). In all of these modern, rationalistic ideals of the imitation of Christ, Bavinck detects an important problem: if Christ is only example, not Redeemer, he comes only to frighten and accuse. Over and above the different historical ideals of imitating Christ, Bavinck affirms that the imitation of Christ is “a life lived according to Christ’s example, in Christ’s power.”

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572 Bavinck, GE, 284; “Ze kwam meestal slechts ter sprake in het hoofdstuk over het kruisdragen en de zelfverloochening en over de unio mystica, in welke we gemeenschap krijgen aan X dood en opstanding.”
573 Bavinck, GE, 283.
574 Bavinck lists the Socinians, the Remonstrants, the rationalists, and the nineteenth-century Gronigen school of theology as examples of this kind of thought.
575 Bavinck, GE, 283.
576 Bavinck, GE, 284. As one uninvolved in much of social and political life, unmarried, and the like, Christ could not be an example for all people. They also reject the claim of Christ’s sinlessness. Jesus is simply an ideal as the founder of a religion, not the ideal for all people.
577 Bavinck, GE, 285.
578 Bavinck, GE, 285.
579 Bavinck, GE, 285; “de navolging X is een leven naar X voorbeeld in X kracht.”
Bavinck’s survey of the imitation of Christ in scripture and church history directs his positive affirmations of what the imitation of Christ does consist in and his rejections of improper articulations of the imitation of Christ. According to Scripture, the imitation of Christ presupposes union with Christ. United with Christ, believers are to take Christ as a literal, ethical example, sharing in his sufferings and imitating his virtues. Thus, Bavinck rejects historic imitation ideals which do not understand Christ as Redeemer (the rationalist), only emphasize union with Christ (the mystic), overemphasize the role of works (the martyr), present a double morality that cannot be upheld by all believers (the monk), or consists in a literal mimicry of the actions of Jesus (the martyr, mystic, and monk).\textsuperscript{580} Bavinck also wrestles with the historic Protestant emphasis on the law as the moral norm for Christians, rather than the imitation of Christ. He upholds the emphasis on law; the law “is and remains the norm for believers.”\textsuperscript{581} But this does not negate the role of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. The imitation of Christ is “Christ taking shape within us,” through the work of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{582}

Bavinck concludes his discussion of the imitation of Christ by asserting the three components which constitute a true imitation of Christ. In order to imitate Christ, Christ must first be Redeemer. Bavinck writes: “Christ is the example not for everyone but for those who are regenerated. Imitating him is only the form of the spiritual life. Therefore, our lives can be directed to Christ only when they proceed from him and abide in him.”\textsuperscript{583} Mystical union with Christ is the foundation for the imitation of Christ.

\textsuperscript{580} As in his essays on the imitation, Bavinck affirms that the imitation of Christ, for the martyr and the monk, may result in someone who outwardly looks like Christ, but inwardly does not (Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 286-287). It is also not wholly ascetic; the imitation of Christ is both world-renouncing and world-affirming, as Christ himself was.

\textsuperscript{581} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 286; “\textit{En in X is en blijft de wet ook voor de gelovigen norma.”}

\textsuperscript{582} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 286; “\textit{Nav. X bestaat daarin dat X een gestalte in ons krijgt.”}

\textsuperscript{583} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 288; emphasis original. “\textit{Christus is voorbeeld niet voor allen, maar alleen voor de wedergeboren. Zijn navolging is alleen de vorm van het geestelijk leven. Ons leven kan dus alleen naar Christus zijn, als het uit en in hem is.”}
Second, the imitation of Christ consists in Christ taking shape within us; followers of Christ must reflect Christ in their inner being. This is the work of the Holy Spirit who, “conforms us to Christ in his suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification.”\(^{584}\) Believers enter into communion with Christ, particularly with his suffering. Thus, the imitation of Christ consists of self-denial and cross-bearing.\(^{585}\)

Finally, the imitation of Christ includes reflecting Christ in the outward expression of our lives; it consists in “shaping our lives in accordance with Christ.”\(^{586}\) The imitation of Christ is aligning our life with the life of Christ, which is manifest in virtues. As image-bearers of God, believers must continually work towards conforming their life to that of Christ, who is the perfect image of God.\(^{587}\) For Bavinck, this is the antidote to two misapplications of the imitation of Christ: literal mimicry of the life of Christ and conforming to the commandments of Christ apart from the person of Christ. Rather, the imitation of Christ consists of shaping the life that exists only in and from communion with Christ, in accord with his moral example; it is acquiring a Christ-shape (gestalte) in us, so that others can know Christ from and through us. This correspondence of our life’s shape with that of Christ manifests itself in a variety of virtues, but especially in righteousness and love. Righteousness or holiness is complete agreement with the law, that is, moral freedom. For us believers, the law no long stands over against us abstractly, but in Christ; in Christ, the law is our norm. Christ is the moral ideal, the living law. As the moral ideal, he is love, love to God and people, because love is the fulfillment of the law. He is the union of receiving and giving love, of active and enduring love, of contemplative and practical love. The apostles continually point to these virtues, especially patient endurance and suffering (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 4:10; Gal. 6:17; Phil. 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:5; Heb.12:2; 1 Pet. 2:21-25; 3:17-18; 4:1,13), love (2 Cor. 8:9; Eph.5:2; Phil. 2:5-11), and holiness (1 Pet. 2:21-25).\(^{588}\)

\(^{584}\) Bavinck, GE, 288; “De H Geest maakt ons X gelijkvormig in zijn lijden, sterven, opstanding en verheerlijking.”
\(^{585}\) While the believer does not imitate Christ’s mediatorial work, the believer does follow all of Christ. “Christ was always Mediator, but always was the moral ideal was well. Therefore, we imitate him in everything, albeit in our own way, with our own individual personality, status, social class, and calling.” (Bavinck, GE, 288). This second aspect of the imitation of Christ corresponds to Bavinck’s understanding of passive sanctification.
\(^{586}\) Bavinck, GE, 289; “formeeren van ons leven naar Christus.”
\(^{587}\) Bavinck, GE, 289.
\(^{588}\) Bavinck, GE, 290; emphasis original.
In these three components of the imitation of Christ, Bavinck rids the imitation of Christ from the problematic aspects in historic ideals of imitating Christ. Imitation presupposes Christ as both example and Redeemer; it is manifest both internally and externally.

In his articulation of the imitation of Christ, Bavinck ties together justification and sanctification, the law and the imitation of Christ, the universality and particularity of Jesus’ life, union with Christ and the believer’s charge to be like Christ. The imitation of Christ is the form of life of the believer. On account of one’s union with Christ, which is sealed in baptism, the Holy Spirit conforms the life of the believer to Christ. Thus, the believer is called to shape their life in accordance with the life of Christ. However, this is not a literal copying of the individual acts of Jesus. Rather, in the particulars of one’s life, the believer is called to live in accordance with form of Christ’s life. The outer conformity of the life of the believer is manifest in virtues: such as righteousness, love, patience, joy, suffering. Christ is the living law. In his virtues, which conform to the moral law, believers are to imitate him.

**A Consistent Theme: Imitation Throughout Bavinck’s Corpus**

Bavinck’s emphasis on the imitation of Christ, understood as union with Christ and, as a consequence of one’s union with Christ, imitating the virtues and obligations seen in Christ’s life, which conform to the moral law, continues throughout his work. As seen in *Reformed Dogmatics, Reformed Ethics*, and Bavinck’s essays on the imitation of Christ, imitating Christ is a key theme of Bavinck’s work, closely related to his other central themes: grace restoring nature, the gospel as pearl and leaven, and the organic motif, which allows Bavinck to see all of creation in light of its triune creator.\(^{589}\) Time and time again, references to the imitation of Christ occur in Bavinck’s writing, both explicitly and implicitly. Here, we will examine an evidence of

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\(^{589}\) For an in-depth exposition of the organic motif, see: Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*. 
both explicit reference to the imitation of Christ, in “Christian Principles and Social Relationships” and “Christ and Christianity,” and an implicit application of Bavinck’s appeal to the imitation of Christ in The Christian Family.590

“Christian Principles and Social Relationships: ” Following the Example of Christ in Society

In “Christian Principles and Social Relationships,” originally published in 1908 as Christelijke beginselen en maatschappelijke verhoudingen in Christendom en maatschappij,591 Bavinck explicitly appeals to the imitation of Christ. Properly understood, the imitation of Christ is the way in which the believer applies Christian principles in everyday life; it is the posture of the believer in society. In this essay, Bavinck provides an extended discussion on the life and teachings of Jesus. Arguing against two extreme views of Jesus’ relationship to society – Jesus as a revolutionary592 and Jesus as indifferent to society593 – Bavinck traces the teaching of Scripture

590 These examples do not exhaust Bavinck’s references to the imitation of Christ in his other lectures, articles, and books. See too: “General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today,” “The Problem of War,” “The Sacrifice of Praise,” and more. “General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today” offers important insight into the relationship between the imitation of Christ and common grace in Bavinck’s thought. He writes, “nonetheless, this endowment of common grace and divine long-suffering is not enough; it restrains human beings but does not renew them” (Bavinck, “General Biblical Principles,” 441). Bavinck references a multitude of virtues that are found among human beings “nature love” between family members, “social virtues” among neighbors, an innate longing for friendship, and the “national virtues of affection for and love of fatherland. (Bavinck, “General Biblical Principles,” 440-441). These are found among all people, so Bavinck’s discourse regarding virtues as a whole is not limited to the regenerated. However, the distinction remains: these are virtues that come alongside God’s restrain of human sin (for sin “breaks off fellowship with God and then, in consequence, all genuine relationships that humans have with all other creatures (Bavinck, “General Biblical Principles,” 443), not the fullness of life that comes with the renewing of human beings through the work of Christ. In Our Reasonable Faith, he further discusses the necessity of rooting one’s love of neighbor in the love of God’s law, for “if the life of service for humanity, of love for the neighbor, is not rooted in the law of God it loses its force and its character. After all, the love for one’s neighbor is not a self-vindicating thing which comes up quite spontaneously and naturally out of the human heart. It is a feeling, rather, and an action, and a service, which requires tremendous will-power and which must be constantly maintained against the formidable forces of self-concern and self-interest.” (Herman Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965), 22).

591 Herman Bavinck, "Christelijke beginselen en maatschappelijke verhoudingen," in Christendom en maatschappij, Serie 1, nr. 1 (Utrecht: Ruys, 1908); a version of this essay was published again in 1921: "Christelijke beginselen en maatschappelijke verhoudingen," in Verzamelde opstellen op het gebied van godsdienst en wetenschap (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1921), 121-150.

592 Or, to use Bavinck’s language: anarchist; Bavinck, “CPSR,” 119.

593 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 119-120.
in order to articulate a proper view of the relationship between Christianity and society.\textsuperscript{594}

Bavinck surveys God’s design in creation, humanity’s fall into sin, and the history of the Israelites. While Israel did not consistently live up to the law of God, God consistently applied it, punishing Israel when they were opposed to his law.\textsuperscript{595} Bavinck points to the sustained, unbroken voice of “the prophets, the psalmists, and the authors of the proverbs”\textsuperscript{596} who called out the moral rebellion of God’s people. These voices, Bavinck argues, did not act as political agents or social reformers, as party leaders, as preachers of a new religion and morality; and yet they take note of all the social abuses, and they measure these by the law of God, which the people know and which is a blessing for all of their lives. Then they fulminate and weep in turn about the sin to which people have surrendered.\textsuperscript{597}

The prophetic critiques seen in the prophets, the cries of the psalmist, and throughout the wisdom of the proverbs expose the ways in which Israel did not live up to God’s law.\textsuperscript{598} They issue a call to return to God and his law, not, Bavinck argues, a political revolution.

Christ fulfills these prophetic expectations. In discussion of Christ, we find the same emphasis that Bavinck has previously appealed to in connection with the imitation of Christ: the mediatorial and reconciling work of Christ and the necessity of regeneration, faith, and conversion.\textsuperscript{599} On account of who Christ is, Bavinck argues, we can understand how Christ speaks to and evaluates society. He is neither ascetic or Epicurean; he does not despise or overly esteem natural goods.\textsuperscript{600} Jesus does not enter into the world as a social reformer. Rather, he

\textsuperscript{594} As Bavinck says, “there is a wide divergence of opinions regarding the attitude of our Lord Jesus Christ toward society and its problems” (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 119). Here, he intends to lay out a proper view.

\textsuperscript{595} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 126-128.

\textsuperscript{596} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 128.

\textsuperscript{597} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 128.

\textsuperscript{598} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 128.

\textsuperscript{599} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 129.

\textsuperscript{600} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 129-130. Again, we find emphases similar to Bavinck’s evaluation of Christ’s relationship to creation in his essays on the imitation of Christ. In the history of imitating Christ, the latter concern (over-esteeem for natural goods) was not a temptation for the models of imitating Christ, but asceticism was. Bavinck reiterates his rejection of this stance.
“leaves all political and social circumstances and relationships for what they are. . . . But while Jesus leaves all of this untouched, he nevertheless comes into the world with the newness of his person and work.” Bavinck’s appeal to Christ’s person and work underscores his insistence that Jesus’ primary purpose for coming to the world was to save people from their sins. Thus, his teaching is of a “religious-moral nature,” not a political agenda.

The religious-moral nature of Christ’s teaching, Bavinck argues, is made explicit in the Sermon on the Mount. In his discussion on the Sermon on the Mount, we see Bavinck’s emphasis on the imitation of Christ most clearly. Bavinck repeats the themes that he highlights in his latter essays on the imitation of Christ: in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ emphasizes the “passive virtues of self-denial and long-suffering, of humility and love;” Christ is not a new lawgiver, but he speaks in continuity with, and fulfillment of, the words of the laws and the prophets; Christ empathizes the “disposition of the heart, inner conformity with the law” thus the believer is charged to enact these virtues; and, on account of these principles, a literal explanation of the Sermon on the Mount violates Jesus’ teaching in the sermon. On account of these teachings, Bavinck reiterates a proper understanding of the imitation of Christ:

The true following of Christ therefore does not consist in copying him, in replicating him, in imitating his life and teaching but is found in the inner conversion of the heart, which gives us a true desire and choice to walk according to all, not just some, of God’s commandments in spirit and truth.

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603 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 132. This is not to say that one cannot learn something from his teaching for the practice of politics.
605 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 132.
606 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133.
607 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133. What Bavinck rejects here is the literal mimicry that he assigns to followers of Jesus who have attempted to copy Jesus’ life and teaching in such a literalistic way that it devolves to a caricature, as in his objections to the martyr, monk, and mystic. In this essay he specifically references the “ascetics of all times, the monks, the Anabaptists…Sheldon…” (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133).
608 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133.
In “Christian Principles and Social Relationships,” Bavinck’s appeal to the imitation of Christ again contains the two primary emphases he lays out in his essays on the imitation and *Reformed Ethics*: conversion and following the example of Christ as he follows the law.

The imitation of Christ is the believer’s posture in society. The words of Christ did not contain an explicit political or social agenda,\(^{609}\) they are “religious-moral commandments” to believers.\(^ {610}\) This does not mean, however, that the teachings of Christ and the lives of believers who are imitating Christ have no influence on social relationships. In this essay, Bavinck’s goal is to identify the primary, internal, spiritual, moral nature of Christ’s teaching. While Christ’s teaching was religious-moral in nature,\(^ {611}\) it *does* have an influence in the world. In all situations, the believer can, and must, imitate Christ, upholding God’s commandments.\(^ {612}\) For the gospel preaches “a principle so deep and rich and extraordinarily powerful that it was bound to exert a reforming influence on all earthly circumstances.”\(^ {613}\)

Accepting the gospel as a religious-moral teaching, without first making it a social system, allows the “permeating power” of the gospel to be unleashed in the world.\(^ {614}\) To this understanding of the gospel, and the role of the believer to imitate Christ in society,\(^ {615}\) Bavinck applies familiar theological themes: the gospel as pearl and leaven and grace restoring nature. These are the same theological themes that van Keulen highlights as dominant motifs in Bavinck’s thought that are found in his essays on the imitation of Christ.\(^ {616}\)

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\(^{609}\) Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133.

\(^{610}\) Bavinck, “CPSR,” 134.

\(^{611}\) By this, Bavinck means that Christ left “all political and social circumstances and relationships for what they are; he never intervenes in any of this, either by word or action.” (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 130). Rather, to “all ranks and classes he preaches the same gospel of the kingdom of God” (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 131). Later, Bavinck also says the gospel “left everything unchanged in natural relationships (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 140).

\(^{612}\) Bavinck, “CPSR,” 137.

\(^{613}\) Bavinck, “CPSR,” 140.

\(^{614}\) Bavinck, “CPSR,” 140.

\(^{615}\) That is, follow the virtues Christ exhibited as he followed the commandments of God.

\(^{616}\) Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 86.
Principles and Social Relationships,” these two themes are woven throughout:

the kingdom of heaven is not only a pearl; it is a leaven as well. . . . In keeping God’s commandments, there is great reward. In its long and rich history, Christianity has borne much valuable fruit for all society in all its relationships, in spite of the unfaithfulness of its confessors.  

The gospel is primarily religious-moral in nature, opposing only sin. But, on account of its opposition of sin, the gospel produces a reformation in society that “retains all that is good,” in all aspects of society: “in the head and in the heart, in the eye and in the hand, in family and society, in science and art, in government and subjects, in rich and poor.” In this, Bavinck affirms that grace restores nature. The posture of the Christian in society is not one of revolution or indifference. Rather, it is the imitation of Christ, united with Christ and following him in law-patterned obedience.

*Imitating Christ’s Virtues in “Christ and Christianity”*

In 1912, Bavinck wrote an essay on Christianity for a series on the “Great Religions.” This series addressed many different religions – including Hinduism, Islam, etc. – where he addresses “in sixty-two pages,” in the words of B.B. Warfield, “all that Christianity is” and the way that Christianity relates to other religions. In a section on of this essay, entitled “Christ and Christianity,” Bavinck discusses a core aspect of the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ: Christ, the living Lord, is also the one the believer is charged to follow. As he discusses this

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617 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 141.
618 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 143.
619 Earlier in the same essay, he explicitly refers to this motif: “the intent of grace, which entered immediately after the fall, always and everywhere has been to maintain and restore these original relationships” (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 141).
620 Herman Bavinck, “Het Christendom,” in *Groote Godsdiensten* 2.7 (Baarn: Hollandia, 1912).
theme, Bavinck first makes clear that Christ is not only example, he is Lord. This claim lays the
foundation for the first aspect of a proper imitation of Christ: union with Christ. Later, in the
same essay, Bavinck explicitly appeals to one’s relationship with Christ when he argues that
“faith and conversion, rebirth and self-surrender, cross bearing and following of Jesus” is the
“only way which leads to and into [Christ’s] Kingdom for the continuous enjoyment of its
blessings.” 622 Within this appeal to following the example Christ, Bavinck directly references
the kingdom of God as a leaven: “The Kingdom of God is, therefore, likened unto a seed and
leaven which gradually develop. Yet it will be fully realized only in the future when the heirs
receive eternal life in Heaven.” 623 Only those who have been united with Christ, and thus live
their lives following the example of Christ, will inherent the wholly-leavened kingdom. The
theological foundation upon which the imitation of Christ is grounded, the reconciling work of
God in Christ, is also clearly detailed in this essay. Bavinck writes:

“For this Christ was truly the Son of God who in the beginning created the world and had
fashioned man in His own image. He was the mediator of redemption who had in His
person and work reconciled and united the sin-cursed world with God, and after His
ascension poured out His Spirit, so that through Word and sacrament He might gather a
church and renew man and the world into a Kingdom of God.” 624

The benefits of Christ’s redemption extend to humanity on account of their union with Christ. In
this passage, Bavinck again points to the juridical, ethical, and moral benefits of Christ’s work.

Humanity is reconciled with God and renewed according to the example of Christ.

While Bavinck does not explicitly appeal to the Ten Commandments in “Christ and
Christianity,” he does affirm the core contention of his appeal to the moral law: Christians are to
follow Christ as he followed the law, by imitating the virtues seen in Christ’s life. In this essay,

623 Bavinck, “Christ and Christianity,” 227; Bavinck also references the theme of grace restoring nature, see:
Bavinck, “Christ and Christianity,” 236.
Bavinck directly references some of these virtues of Christ. Followers of Jesus are to be pure in heart; they are to be peacemakers; they are to be merciful. In Bavinck’s charge to the believer to follow the example of Christ – focused specifically on the virtues of Christ – on account of the reconciling work of God in Christ, we again find his consistent affirmation of the role of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. Disciples are to follow Christ as Christ follows the law, imitating the virtues he embodies.

**Imitation Applied: The Example of Christ in the Life of the Family**

Bavinck’s affirmation of the role of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer is helpfully, and concretely, applied in his discussion of family and marriage. *The Christian Family*, originally published in 1908 as *Het Christelijk Huisgezin*, presents a theological understanding of marriage and family: the origins of the family, the effects of the fall on the family, historic understandings of the family, biblical teaching on the family, and Bavinck’s ethical discourse on the family in the modern day. Throughout the book (and, as to be expected, more prominent when Bavinck turns explicitly toward an ethical application of the theological foundation for marriage and family in the modern world), Bavinck appeals to the example of Jesus as one that is normative for the Christian’s understanding of marriage and family. How Bavinck uses Jesus’ example is instructive for understanding the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer. Again, we see that Bavinck points to Jesus as the living law; Christians are to follow Jesus as he follows the law.

Following the example of Jesus, Bavinck emphasizes, is grounded in creation and moral

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625 Bavinck, “Christ and Christianity,” 228.
law. This not only, he argues, provides positive duties towards marriage and family, it also corrects areas in which his current cultural context has gone astray. As he reflects on the many modern challenges and issues that face marriage and family, Bavinck continually points to God’s created intent in marriage that is reaffirmed in Jesus’ teaching and example. One of the modern distortions of marriage that Bavinck points to is the juxtaposition of idealism and pessimism regarding expectations of marital fulfillment. Literature and story, he writes, can speak of an idealistic, romanticized version of marriage, one that “reach[es] far above the wildest dreams.” But that picture has been met with modern realism where “people take pleasure in describing life after the wedding and in marriage, presenting it as one huge disappointment, as an intolerable cohabitation, as a desperate situation of misery and duress.” What is the modern answer to this juxtaposition and disappointment? “Divorce, open marriage, and free love.” In the midst of these modern challenges and distortions, Bavinck faithfully points back to Jesus, and the created order; the problem is not with others simply not fulfilling one’s expectation, giving license to follow after the next attractive relationship, the problem is “in the conscience of every person.” Bavinck argues:

Such a conscience lays blame not on institutions of society and state, but on the person himself; you are the man! That is how the prophets and apostles spoke; this was the teaching and example of Christ: just like the entire moral law, marriage is wise and holy and good, being of divine origin and rich in blessing for the human race, but human beings have invented many schemes.

The modern propensity toward divorce, and openness to “free love” and other newfangled conceptions of romance are not the only “schemes” and distortions of marriage that Bavinck

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points to in this work. Other conceptions of romantic relationships, such as polygamy, also are to be rejected, in accordance with God’s moral law and creational design, which has been reaffirmed in Jesus. Similarly “immoral entertainment, low art, cheap novels, and sensuous performances” of the day must also be protested. Throughout this book, Bavinck continues to react to cultural trends and ideals, including the notions of liberty, equality, and the primacy of the individual, that were perpetuated in the French Revolution, arguing instead for God’s good design of complementary and difference. In order to reject the particular distortions of the modern age, the Christian must look to the moral law and teachings and example of Jesus; together, these proclaim God’s created intent for marriage and family.

Bavinck not only appeals to the teaching and example of Jesus and the moral law in his rejection of the distortions of his age. He also appeals to Jesus’ example as a positive guide, instructive for patterning one’s marriage and family life. Bavinck emphasizes that the words and deeds of Jesus teach Christians how they ought to regard marriage, family, women, and children. The teachings of Jesus, however, do not present a new vision of marriage and family. Rather, Jesus affirms and fulfills the law of God that was established in creation. Bavinck writes, “Jesus did not come to give a new law, including in relation to marriage, but he came to fulfill the law and the prophets and to bring them to full realization and application.” Jesus, then, is an example for Christians in how they ought to treat women, uphold marriage, and cherish children. As we might have come to expect, given Bavinck’s insistence in his essays on the imitation of Christ on the relationship between imitating Christ and the law, the example of Jesus is directly

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631 Bavinck again points to these distortions later in this work: Bavinck, The Christian Family, 83.
634 Bavinck, The Christian Family, 57-61, 64-70.
635 Bavinck, The Christian Family, 41.
tied to the fifth and seventh commandments: Jesus teaches and exemplifies proper relationships
toward women, in marriage, and with children that are laid out in the moral law.

Jesus is not married. It may seem odd, then, to appeal to Jesus’ example as one that is
normative for marriage. The fact that Bavinck does so highlights his rejection of an imitation that
involves literal mimicry; rather, Bavinck insists that believers follow Christ as he follows the
law, imitating the virtues he embodies. Thus, Bavinck does not appeal to Jesus’ unmarried state
when he is discussing singleness: marriage is not necessary for everyone, Bavinck teaches, but
not on account of Jesus’ marital status. Alongside marriage, singleness is understood as a way
that one “crucif[ies] the flesh with its desires.” In singleness and in marriage, Christ calls his
disciples to self-denial. Jesus is not an example in his marital state, but he is an example for
marriage, in at least three ways. First, in his relationship to the church: “[Jesus] himself was not
married, for his bride is the church, whom he loved and for whom he gave himself.” Jesus is
also an example in the way that he treats women. Bavinck writes that Jesus “honored the woman
and lifted her once again after her fall. At the same time he honors and restores marriage.”
Jesus invited women to be among his followers, spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well,
forgave the adulterous woman in Luke 7; in doing so, he treated women with “complete
openness and freedom.” Finally, Jesus affirms marriage as an institution ordained by God.
All of these examples of Christ for marriage are affirmed in the Sermon on the Mount, where
Jesus reaffirms the seventh commandment, supplying a “moral law” for his disciples. The way

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640 Bavinck, The Christian Family, 40; Bavinck contrasts this with the example of the monk who is “too pious to look at and speak with a woman.”
642 Bavinck, The Christian Family, 42; emphasis original. This moral law directly proceeds from creation.
Jesus understands and affirms marriage is directly tied, in Bavinck’s thought, to the Ten Commandments. As Jesus loves the church, honors women, and affirms marriage, his disciples must too, in keeping with the moral law.

Jesus affirms both marriage and family in his example. Jesus affirms the virtues that one must uphold within a marriage relationship, as set out in the seventh commandment and embodied in Christ’s relationship with the church and his treatment of women. Jesus is an also example for parents and their children, in his great love shown toward children. Jesus “loved children with a grand and profound love,”643 inviting them to come to him, blessing them, rejoicing with them, and healing children. Bavinck writes that Jesus “restor[es] in general the force of the fifth commandment . . . he shows that he has a profound understanding of the tender relationship that exists between parents and children.”644 In his discussion of marriage and family, Bavinck appeals to the example of Jesus. In his proclamation and embodiment of the fifth and seventh commandment, disciples of Jesus are to follow his example.

Jesus, unmarried and childless, is an example to husbands and wives, parents and children. Disciples of Christ must follow his example in the love that he showed children, affirming the bond between parents and children; they must also follow his example in the care that he had for women and his devotion to the church,645 affirming the importance of the marriage covenant. In his life, where he embodied this care, and the Sermon on the Mount, where he taught this kind of love, Jesus was not establishing a new law. Rather, he was upholding the Ten Commandments. In these relationships, Jesus is an example. His childless and unmarried state reaffirms that Jesus is not an example in the literal details of his life; he is an

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643 Bavinck, The Christian Family, 43.
644 Bavinck, The Christian Family, 43.
645 Bavinck again references the example of Christ and the church for husbands and wives, emphasizing self-denial later in this book (Bavinck, The Christian Family, 81-82).
example for believers in the virtues he embodies, as he lives in obedience to the moral law. The example of Jesus, in Bavinck’s thought, is concretely tied to the moral law. Jesus’ example towards marriage and family demonstrates the virtues that one ought to uphold within these relational commitments, in obedience to the Ten Commandments.

In the ethical framework that Bavinck provides in “Christian Principles and Social Relationships” and “Christ and Christianity,” and the application that Bavinck espouses in The Christian Family, he maintains his focus on the proper role of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer: the believer is to follow Christ as he follows the law, imitating Christ’s virtues.

**Bavinck’s Contribution to a Reformed Understanding of the Imitation of Christ**

For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life. It consists in, first, one’s union with Christ, which logically precedes the action that follows. This mystical, spiritual union with Christ is a gift from God, on account of the work of Christ, and comes to believers through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in his suffering, death, resurrection, and glorification. On account of one’s spiritual union with Christ, the imitation of Christ takes shape in the life of the believer as the believer lives their life in conformity with Christ, in law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ.

Bavinck’s survey of Protestant interpretations of the imitation of Christ recognized that imitating Christ is not a common ethical motif within Protestantism; the norm for the Christian life is generally found in the Ten Commandments, not the person of Christ. This is not to say that

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646 As Dirk van Keulen writes, this is “in line with what [Bavinck] argued in his Dogmatics, viz. that not only justification, but also sanctification is a gift of God and that sanctification incorporates passive aspects.” Bavinck’s discussion of the three aspects of the imitation of Christ in Reformed Ethics helpfully points to both aspects of sanctification: Believers are sanctified in Christ, being renewed and purified by the Holy Spirit. But sanctification is not simply the work of God toward passive humans. It is an active call to believers to continual repentance and good works. The initial work of the Spirit in conforming us internally to the pattern of Christ is, as van Keulen points out, part of the passive aspects of sanctification. Our reflection of Christ manifest in virtues is the active side of sanctification (van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 85).
the theme is entirely absent. John Calvin, for example, spoke of the imitation of Christ in relationship to self-denial and cross-bearing. A comprehensive look at Calvin’s theology finds connections between the imitation of Christ and the positive use of the law, particularly in Calvin’s preaching on the Ten Commandments. Bavinck makes this connection between the imitation of Christ and the law much more explicit, in his essays on the imitation of Christ, *Reformed Ethics*, and his application of the ideal in ethical instruction.

On account of Bavinck’s concrete, explicit connection between the imitation of Christ and the Ten Commandments, the relationship between creation and redemption in ethics is made clear. Christ does not bring a new law; he speaks in continuity with, and fulfilment of, the laws and the prophets. Bavinck repeatedly emphasizes this relationship between Christ and the law, giving special attention to Christ’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus “takes issues, not with the words of the law itself, but with its incorrect interpretation and application;” Christ empathizes the “disposition of the heart, inner conformity with the law;” “Jesus did not come to give a new law . . . but he came to fulfill the law and the prophets and to bring them to full realization and application;” “in Christ, the law is and remains the norm for believers.” Christ is not a new lawgiver. He upholds the moral law and is the “living law.” The moral law remains the ground for the ethical life; Jesus is obedient to the moral law. The ethics of creation (the moral law) are upheld, clarified, and fulfilled in the life of Christ.

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647 See Calvin’s sermon on fourth commandment (Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 127).
648 See, for example: Bavinck, Imitation I, 400; Bavinck writes: the Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.” Bavinck also clarifies that self-denial and cross-bearing are two circumstances of the imitation of Christ, not the heart of the imitation of Christ (Bavinck, *GE*, 270).
649 Bavinck, Imitation II, 415.
650 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133.
652 Bavinck, *GE*, 286; “En in X is en blijft de wet ook voor de gelovigen norma.”
653 Bavinck, *GE*, 290; *levende wet*. 
But it is not simply the Ten Commandments that Bavinck appeals to. Perhaps it need not be stated, given his emphasis on the imitation of Christ, but the example of Christ is a necessary aspect of his understanding of the Christian life. Christ’s example is important, for examples often have greater persuasive power than mere doctrines or laws. While the Christian may have an inner delight after the law (Rom. 7:22) it nevertheless judges and slays him. The same law spoke by Christ can bring forth obedience. We are then addressed by our Savior, by the one who bore the curse of the law and fulfilled its demands. The law itself cannot change us, redirect us, or renew us. But Christ, the Lord who is Spirit, changes into his likeness all those who with unveiled face behold his glory from one degree of glory to another (II Cor. 3:18). From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example, proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us.654

Christ is the example. Believers are to imitate Christ’s obedience to the law, made manifest in his virtues, such as righteousness, love, patience, suffering, and joy. The whole of Christ’s life is an example for the believer; Christ’s disciples follow all of Christ, as he follows the law, imitating the virtues that Christ exemplifies in obedience to the law of God. But in this, Bavinck adds nuance to traditional imitation ideals throughout Christian history: Christ does not demand literal mimicry, rather the whole of Christ’s life, his virtues, must be followed, according to the specific circumstances of one’s life. As Bavinck says, “while the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same, circumstances may modify the application.”655

In Bavinck’s emphasis on the whole life of Christ, and the necessary connection between the law and the imitation of Christ, he places a strong emphasis on virtue. Dirk van Keulen observes that it is striking that during his entire career Bavinck always put emphasis on virtues: humbleness, meekness, patience, purity, holiness, sanctity, righteousness, mercy, love,

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654 Bavinck, Imitation I, 415.
655 Bavinck, Imitation II, 438. In the same section, Bavinck writes “Those virtues which the disciples of Jesus are called to exercise in their relations with others are essential the same in the Sermon on the Mount as in the apostolic imitation of Christ. Included are virtues of truth, righteousness, love, longsuffering, compassion, etc., virtues that remain powerful through the ages and retain their validity in all circumstances. Naturally the application will vary depending upon circumstances. Although all are subject to one and the same moral law the duties under that law vary considerably.”
etc. From this we can conclude that Bavinck’s ethics can be characterized as a theological ethics of virtues.656

The virtues exemplified in Christ’s life, and held out to the believer to be imitated, are viewed in light of the moral law.657 The “Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.”658 There is no dichotomy between law and the virtues; law and the virtues come together in the imitation of Christ.659 Bavinck’s contribution is not simply that he upholds the importance of virtue in the Christian life, however. In his later essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck is clear to uphold both negative and positive virtues. The significance of this is, at least, twofold. First, Bavinck points out that while Calvin upheld virtues in the Christian life, in Calvin “negative virtues of self-denial, cross-bearing, longsuffering, and moderation are emphasized.”660 Bavinck himself adds to Calvin, emphasizing the role of negative virtues and, to this, attending to the role of positive, or active, virtues in the life of the Christian. To take up these virtues, again, is to imitate the resurrected Christ who came “not to condemn the world, but to preserve it.”661 Calvin emphasizes the negative virtues of the Christian life; in Bavinck, we find prominent attention to the positive virtues and, following Calvin, the negative virtues. Bavinck himself alerts us to a second significant aspect of his attention to positive virtues. In

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657 For more on this see Bavinck, GE, 538.
658 Bavinck, Imitation I, 400;
659 For more on this, see van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 90. See also: Clay Cooke, “Distinctively Common: Advancing Herman Bavinck’s Theology to Pressure Liberal Democratic Ideals,” in The Kuyper Center Review: Calvinism and Democracy, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), 97-100 and Bavinck’s own words in “Kingdom of God, The Highest Good”: “simply knowing what kind of persons we must be is inadequate, however, for realizing the moral good – the description of which is supplied by the doctrine of the 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” (Herman Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, The Highest Good,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, The Bavinck Review 2 (2011): 133-134.).
661 Bavinck, Imitation II, 424.
attending to these virtues, Bavinck worked to more fully overcome the dualism between nature and grace. Emphasizing negative virtues, he argued, was still bound up in this dualism. Bavinck is clear to praise Calvin’s efforts in countering dualism and witnessing to the true catholicity of the church. He argues that Calvin overcomes dualism more fully than other Reformers; “re-creation is not a system that supplements Creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves Creation intact, as in Luther, much less a radically new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures. Here the Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity.”

But emphasizing the positive virtues as a key aspect of the imitation of Christ further reinforces the way in which the gospel proclaims the renewal of all creation, “not only the church but also home, school, society, and state.” Followers of Jesus imitate the positive and negative virtues of Christ, who proclaims the redemption of the cosmos, opposing only sin.

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ upholds the ethics of creation, the moral law. He upholds the importance of the example of Christ – and the work of Christ for our salvation. In Bavinck’s affirmation of the relationship between the work of Christ and the imitation of Christ, he also upholds the importance of the Holy Spirit in ethics, for the imitation of Christ is only possible through union with Christ, the work of the Spirit. Mystical union with Christ is the foundation for the imitation of Christ; “the life of Christ becomes ours only through our abiding in him.” It is through the work of the Spirit, uniting the believer to Christ, that the imitation of Christ is possible. The Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ, and works in the believer that Christ may be reflected in them.

The imitation of Christ then, in Bavinck’s thought, is a robustly Trinitarian ethic. It is

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662 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 238.
663 Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 238.
664 Bavinck, GE, 286; “‘t leven X t onze slechts wordt door te blijven in hem.”
grounded in God’s creational structure. The primacy of the law is maintained, while the example of Jesus is upheld. Christ’s obedience to the law, manifest in virtues, is to be imitated by those who, through the work of the Spirit, are united to Christ. Mystical union with Christ, sealed by baptism, enables the law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. Bavinck is clear that the imitation of Christ is the shape of the spiritual life. Because of Bavinck’s understanding of the Trinitarian shape and goal of the spiritual life, it is unsurprising that the imitation of Christ would be, in Bavinck’s thought, remarkably Trinitarian. Of the spiritual life of the Christian, he writes,

the principle of the spiritual life is the love of God (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ) in Christ poured out upon us through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). . . .Here, love is a spiritual principle, not only poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), but itself also spiritual by nature. This means that it is not fruit of the field from of our natural life. Nor is it the greatest deed of the human spirit, of our personality, that surrendered self and after thereafter does not live for itself, does not withdraw into itself, but it gives, devotes, and sacrifices itself for others. Its object is also spiritual: God himself in Christ, the Invisible Eternal One. The love of God is therefore stripped of all that is sensuous, earthly, impure, but is now pure and holy. And this foundational principle now flows into all of life, into all the thoughts and deeds of the spiritual person. Love of God gives stature and form to the spiritual life, it organizes and animates it, and turns it into one beautiful organic whole.665

In this excerpt, Bavinck explicitly appeals to another major theological motif in his thought: the organic motif. He understands all of creation in light of its triune creator, including the spiritual life of the believer. Thus, the imitation of Christ is shaped by Bavinck’s “organic worldview;” the ethical life of the believer points to, and depends upon, the Triune God.666

The imitation of Christ is also related to other significant themes in Bavinck’s thought: grace restoring nature and the gospel as a leavening agent in the world. In his essays on the imitation of Christ Bavinck reaffirms that Christ did not come to set aside God’s ordinances, but

665 Bavinck, GE, 203.
to fulfill them; grace presupposes and restores nature. He also affirms that the gospel leaves nothing unaltered that it touches; the gospel is a leaven in the world. As van Keulen argues, the relationship between the imitation of Christ and these themes shows that the imitation of Christ is “closely connected to the heart of [Bavinck’s] theology.”

The imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life. The entirety of the Christian life is the imitation of Christ. For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ must be understood in terms of creation and the moral law; in the life of the Christian, mystical union with Christ is the foundation for the imitation of Christ. Thus, Bavinck constructs a view of ethics that is grounded in the Trinity. It is a creation imitation that endures: it is concretizes and fulfilled in the life of Christ and looks forward to eschatological glorification. Bavinck articulates an imitation ethic that affirms both the creational, normative will of God and the pedagogical, exemplary function of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

At last, we return to Bolt’s landmark study on the imitation of Christ. Bolt argues that the imitation of Christ is a “valid and necessary but partial aspect of [Bavinck’s] overall cultural-ethical ideal.” He continues:

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 would fly directly in the face of Bavinck’s empathic insistence upon grounding all reality and norm for life in the world in the triune being and activity of God.

Given Bolt’s insistence on the relationship between the imitation of Christ and other prominent themes in Bavinck’s thought – including the Trinity, creation, and law – it is not immediately clear what Bolt intends to communicate in this claim. Like Bolt, in this chapter we have argued

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667 Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 86. Bolt similarly connects these themes (Bolt, Theological Analysis, 115).
668 Bavinck continually holds out the concepts of glory and eschatological hope in his discussion on the imitation of Christ. See: Bavinck, GE, 271-273.
669 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 320.
670 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 265.
that the imitation of Christ is a critical theme in Bavinck’s theology; it is a necessary aspect of
the Christian life. The biblical pattern of the Christian life is imitating the virtues of Christ,
guided by the law; the Ten Commandments determines what one may – and must not – imitate in
the life of Christ. But while Bolt argues that, for Bavinck, the theme is valid, *but partial*, this
chapter has argued that the imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life in Bavinck’s
theology. The believer is to live their life in conformity with Christ, in law-patterned imitation of
the virtues of Christ. This raises an important question: what then, for Bolt, relegates the
imitation of Christ to a “partial” aspect of Bavinck’s cultural-ethical ideal?672

The context of these claims, along with further conversations with Bolt,673 provide insight
into exactly what Bolt is claiming regarding the partiality of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s
thought. When referencing the partial nature of the imitation of Christ, Bolt often references
Bavinck’s discussion of the Sermon on the Mount as illustrative, not comprehensive; thus, the
imitation of Christ “must be then regarded as a *partial* rather than comprehensive ethic for the
Christian life.”674 Bolt is arguing then, for Bavinck, the life and actions of Christ, on their own,
do not constitute a comprehensive ethic for the Christian life, nor do the words of Christ on the
Sermon on the Mount. Bolt’s understanding of the partiality of the imitation of Christ in
Bavinck’s thought is further clarified by the relationship between this claim and the four ideals

672 Bolt repeats this statement in several other essays on the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought. See, for
example: “while Bavinck considered the imitation of Christ to be an essential dimension of the Christian life of
discipleship, including life in culture and society, he also insisted that it could not serve as a comprehensive cultural-
ethical theme; it was necessarily partial (Bolt, “The Imitation of Christ as Illumination for the Two Kingdoms
Debate,” 22-23); “the imitation of Christ is thus in some sense a partial rather than a comprehensive ideal” (Bolt,
673 I am grateful to Dr. Bolt for his generosity in conversation with me on these topics. Our conversations together
provided much clarity and insight. Even more, I am grateful to Dr. Bolt for introducing me to the thought and work
of Herman Bavinck while a student at Calvin Theological Seminary. His zeal for Bavinck’s work was, and remains,
contagious. Dr. Bolt has remained a patient teacher, mentor and colleague in my study of Bavinck.
674 Bolt, “Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck,” 65; emphasis original. See also: Bolt, *Theological
Analysis*, 301.
of imitation spirituality that Bavinck surveys. The ideals of the imitation of Christ throughout church history – the martyr, monk, mystic, and the rationalist – all understand the actions of Christ on their own to be the model for the Christian life.

In light of Bolt’s recurring references to the Sermon on the Mount and the models of imitation throughout church history in the context of his claims of the imitation as a partial, not comprehensive, ethic, we can begin to understand what Bolt intends by this distinction. Primarily, this seems to be a reaction to the other models that Bavinck surveys. The “incarnational specificity” of the life of Jesus does not provide a comprehensive ethic. It is necessarily partial. The models that Bavinck surveys claim the opposite; in their unique ways, the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the rationalist claim that the incarnational specificity of the life of Jesus is the comprehensive basis for the Christian life: in Christ’s suffering, in Christ’s poverty, chastity, and obedience, in Christ’s union with God, and the like. Bavinck deems this way of categorizing the imitation of Christ to be incomplete; each model misunderstands something of what it is to properly imitate Christ. In the same way, the contextual specificity of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount cannot be a comprehensive ethical ideal.

For these reasons, Bolt argues that the imitation of Christ is a partial ethic. On its own, the imitation of Christ does not provide a comprehensive ethical ideal. Bolt argues that in Bavinck’s thought, in isolation, the incarnational specificity of the life of Christ does not produce a comprehensive ethical ideal for the Christian life. One cannot merely look to the life of Christ – as the martyrs, mystics, or monks do – and find all of the details basic to the moral law. Bolt’s claim that the imitation of Christ is a partial ideal speaks to the imitation of Christ in isolation, as illustrated in the historic models of the imitation of Christ. It is, primarily, an articulation of

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675 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 265.
Bavinck’s critique of historic models of the imitation of Christ.

It is this claim of Bolt’s upon which we, finally, can add. Bolt’s landmark study of the imitation of Christ in the thought of Herman Bavinck helpfully distills Bavinck’s understanding of the historic models of the imitation of Christ, and his assessment of those models. To it, we can add a positive articulation of Bavinck’s own model of the imitation of Christ. For, while Bavinck rejects the example of Christ, in isolation, as a comprehensive ethical ideal, he puts forward his own understanding of the imitation of Christ as a comprehensive ethical idea. The imitation of Christ, necessarily tied to the moral law, is a comprehensive ethic in Bavinck’s thought. Rather than appealing to the incarnational specificity of the life of Christ as the sum total of the ethical life, Bavinck appeals to the full life of Christ as the example for all people in all circumstances. Rooted in the moral law, the imitation of Christ maintains the primacy of the law and upholds the importance of the example of Christ. Rather than the believer’s life understood as literal mimicry of the actions of Jesus, imitation of Christ consists of “free, spiritual application of the principles by which he lived, completely fulfilling the moral law.”\(^6\)

As an example of true fulfillment of the law, Christ is an example for believers. Christ’s obedience to the moral law is to be imitated in his disciples. In this way, Bavinck upholds the specificity of Christ’s life \textit{and} upholds the relevance of the moral law; he maintains the Reformed emphasis on creation, along with a robust affirmation of Christ and his example. Bavinck also affirms the freedom of believers to apply the virtues of Christ, in accordance with the law, in their own context.

Bavinck grounds the imitation of Christ in the moral law and creation.\(^7\) Given this

\(^6\) Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
\(^7\) Bavinck also, as we have seen, joins together the imitation of Christ with other key emphases in his theology: grace restoring nature, common grace, and the gospel as leaven. In these, we see his continued, Reformed insistence on creation. He brings together Christ and creation through the imitation of Christ, grounded in the moral law. The
grounding, the imitation of Christ is a comprehensive ethic, on account of its relation to the
moral law. The key, for Bavinck, to the proper imitation of Christ is in its relationship to the
moral law. Articulating the necessary relationship between the example of Christ and the
moral law affirms Bavinck’s uniquely Trinitarian understanding of the imitation of Christ. His
tree aspects of the imitation of Christ – union with Christ, the inner working of the Spirit, and
the outward law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ – highlight the role of Father, Spirit,
and Son. The creational will of God is enduring, the work and example of Christ is upheld, and
Holy Spirit applies the benefits of the work of Christ in the life of the believer, uniting us to
Christ that we may experience these benefits.

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, positively articulated, is the shape of
the Christian life. It is a uniquely Trinitarian ethic, grounded in creation and the moral law,
concretized and fulfilled in the life of Christ, hopefully anticipating eschatological glorification.
The entirety of the Christian life is the imitation of Christ: on account of one’s spiritual union
with Christ, the imitation of Christ takes shape in the life of the believer as the believer lives
their life in conformity with Christ, in law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ.

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primacy of the law is maintained, while the example of Jesus is upheld. One looks to Christ and creation, the way that Christ lives out God’s enduring, creational commands, in order to pattern one’s life.

CHAPTER FOUR

Imitation in the Thought of John Howard Yoder:
Imitating Jesus in his Cross

Introduction

“Only at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross.” These words, penned by John Howard Yoder in 1972 in his well-known, influential book, *The Politics of Jesus*, are Yoder’s most concise summary of his understanding of the imitation of Christ; this claim, seemingly simple, has staggering implications for the Christian life. Beyond merely summarizing Yoder’s understanding of a proper *Imitatio Christi*, this phrase also drives to the heart of his ethical project. Yoder sought to articulate Christian ethics *for Christians* that took seriously the significance of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection for the Christian life. In the words of David Weiss, Yoder argued that “Christian ethics begins not by finding ways to set aside the radicalness of Jesus’ ethics, but rather by finding ways in community to take those ethics seriously.”

At the center of Yoder’s project is a robust understanding of what it means for the Christian disciple to follow the example of Jesus— or, in other words, to *imitate* Christ. While imitation is certainly not the only prominent theme in Yoder’s thought, his social ethic can be characterized as an ethic of imitation, that is, an ethic that seeks to draw normative behavior from

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681 Arguably, themes like pacifism remain much more prominent. Yoder scholarship certainly attests to the importance of pacifism in Yoder’s overall thought. As Duncan Forrester argues, “the central, and nonnegotiable, ethical issue for Yoder and the peace churches, of course, was peace and nonviolence.” (Duncan B. Forrester “John Howard Yoder (1927-1997),” in *The Teachings of Modern Protestantism on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr, and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 422). But, as we’ll see, Yoder’s emphasis on peace comes from his robust imitation ethic.
the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ, calling the Christian to follow the pattern of Jesus. \(^{682}\) Yoder ends *The Politics of Jesus* with the words “*Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur:*

“Our Lamb has conquered; him *let us follow.*”\(^{683}\)

Yoder is well known for his claim that Jesus is of central importance in social ethics. Jesus is central within the Christian faith, “not only for doctrine, but also for the moral character of the Christian community.”\(^{684}\) In the *Politics of Jesus*, and throughout his career, Yoder defended the normativity of Jesus for social ethics.\(^{685}\) It is less recognized that this claim can be identified as an ethic of imitation, a label Yoder himself affirms in *The Politics of Jesus*.

Throughout his career, Yoder consistently references the themes related to his vision of the imitation of Christ. A close reading of Yoder’s texts referring to the imitation of Christ

\(^{682}\) While it is certainly demonstrable that Yoder’s ethic can be characterized in this way, discussion of Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is not a prominent topic in Yoder scholarship. This is not to say, of course, that there is no secondary literature on the Yoder’s conception of the proper imitation of Christ. However, many of Yoder’s other key themes, particularly nonviolence, take up much of the attention of Yoder’s interpreters. There are three main ways secondary scholarship addresses Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ: (1) brief, definitional statements regarding the imitation of Christ, (2) referencing the imitation of Christ in connection to another topic in Yoder’s thought, often pacifism, and (3) sustained attention to, and engagement with, Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. For the first, see Natalie Carnes, J. Budziszewski, Craig A. Carter and Mark Thiessen Nation (Natalie Carnes, “‘That Cross’s Children, Which Our Crosses Are’: *Imitatio Christi, Imitatio Crucis,*” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69, no. 1 (2016), 65; Budziszewski, *Evangelicals in the Public Square* 91-93; Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 106-107; Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 115). For the second, see William J. Danaher Jr. and Nancey Murphy who briefly discusses the imitation of Christ in light of Yoder’s pacifism (William J. Danaher Jr., “Pacifism, Just War, and the Limits of Ethics,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 46, no. 3 (2003), 319; Nancey Murphy, “John Howard Yoder’s Systematic Defense of Christian Pacifism,” in *The Wisdom of the Cross*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Hubner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 48). Murphy also references Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in: Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 179. Travis Kroeker points to the theme of imitation in Yoder’s thought, connecting imitation to a broader discussion of Christology (Travis Kroeker, “Is a Messianic Political Ethic Possible? Recent Work by and about John Howard Yoder,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, no. 1 (March 2005), 143). For the third option, see Alain Epp Weaver who goes further into this discussion on the imitation of Christ in Yoder’s thought, correcting Miroslav Volf’s misconceptions of this theme and Richard Mouw who engages Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Alain Epp Weaver, “John Howard Yoder, Body Politics, and the Witnessing Church,” *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 4 (Autumn, 1999), 655, correcting Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 22; Richard Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 111-116.).

\(^{683}\) Yoder, *PoJ*, 242, emphasis added.

\(^{684}\) Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 55.

\(^{685}\) As Nation argues, many of Yoder’s works (*PoJ, The Priestly Kingdom*, “Radical Reformation Ethics in Ecumenical Perspective,” “Anabaptism and History,” etc.) offer an alternative to “mainstream ethics” that do not place Jesus centrally in social ethics.
demonstrates that the relationship between the cross, imitation, and discipleship is a central theme in Yoder’s thought. He consistently affirms this understanding of discipleship, rejecting any other. By examining Yoder’s use of imitation language, Yoder’s critique of the misunderstanding of imitating Christ in mainstream ethics, Yoder’s biblical justification for a proper imitation of Christ, and the application of Yoder’s imitation ethic to concrete Christian life, a picture of Yoder’s conception of a proper imitation of Christ will emerge – one that underscores the importance of imitating Jesus only in his cross in Yoder’s overall ethic.

Beyond Yoder’s incisive quote from The Politics of Jesus, claiming that only in Jesus’ cross ought believers imitate him, there is much to explore regarding what he understands to be a proper imitation of Christ. This is the task of this chapter. We will unpack what Yoder means by the language of imitating Christ, looking primarily to his best-known work, The Politics of Jesus. Before examining the central claims of Yoder regarding how the believer ought to follow the example of Christ, however, it is important to establish two things: first, why Yoder is an important dialogue partner in a contemporary discussion of the imitation of Christ and second, why The Politics of Jesus is appropriate as the central text for defining what Yoder understands as a proper imitation of Christ.

John Howard Yoder and His Influence

Given the wide-ranging influence Yoder’s work has had in evangelical thought, it is not difficult to establish why Yoder continues to be an important dialogue partner in Christian ethics. Nonetheless, it is an important task. In order to situate Yoder’s influence, a brief look to Yoder’s life and the overall themes in his work is necessary.

John Howard Yoder (1927-1997) was a prolific writer; his work spanned from questions

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686 Yoder, PoJ, 95, 131.
of historical theology to social ethics. Regarding the focus of Yoder’s scholarly work, Hauerwas writes, “Jesus is central, of course, but since Jesus is the Son of God, that means he is the center that cannot be summarized, because Jesus makes a difference for how everything is understood.” Yoder’s work may not be systematic, but in it he consistently testifies to the centrality of Jesus for the life of the church. As Nation argues, the “two central theological concerns of Yoder’s vast body of work [are] Jesus and the church.”

Yoder consistently criticized the Constantinian nature of the church, the tendency within Christianity to abandon the call to faithfulness to Jesus and his teachings in order to gain influence in society, often through partnerships with the state. Against the Constantinian turn, as Hays helpfully describes, Yoder calls for the church to “remain faithful to its calling of discipleship, modeling its life after the example of Jesus whom it confesses as Lord.” In Yoder’s own words, “Jesus is, according to the biblical witness, a model of radical political

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688 Stanley Hauerwas, “Foreword,” in Mark Thiessen Nation, John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), xi. In the same work, Stanley Hauerwas writes that Yoder has little use for “methodologism,” that is, there is no center to Yoder’s thought.


690 Dorothea H. Bertschmann, Bowing before Christ - Nodding to the State?: Reading Paul Politically with Oliver O’Donovan and John Howard Yoder (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 42; Michael Cartwright also provides commentary on Yoder’s understanding of the “Constantinianization” of the church. (Michael G. Cartwright, “Radical Reform, Radical Catholicity: John Howard Yoder’s Vision of the Faithful Church,” in The Royal Priesthood (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998), 10-14). Bavinck also attributes growing worldliness of the church to Constantine (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 228). He writes “the church later became more and more worldly, particularly by and after Constantine.”

The centrality of Christ in the life of the believer and relevance of Jesus for social ethics lead Yoder to a necessary conclusion: Christians must follow this example of Jesus.

*John Howard Yoder: Mennonite, evangelical, and catholic*

Yoder ought to be understood as a Mennonite, an evangelical, and broadly catholic. While Yoder is often thought of in light of his Mennonite background and his continuing Anabaptist convictions, Mark Thiessen Nation, one of Yoder’s interpreters, argues for understanding Yoder in this threefold manner. The use of this triptych to describe Yoder underscores the reality that Yoder’s vision for discipleship was not simply a “Mennonite vision” intended only for those believers in his own tradition. In his introduction to *The Priestly Kingdom*, Yoder wrote, “[w]ithout disavowing my ethnic and denominational origins, I deny that this view is limited to people of that same culture or derived in its detail from that experience.” Already Yoder’s predilection towards understanding himself and his teaching as not only Mennonite, but ecumenical can be seen.

Understanding Yoder as a Mennonite is quite straightforward. Yoder was raised in a Mennonite family, was educated largely in Mennonite schools, was ordained in the Mennonite church, and taught at Mennonite schools. As Nation argues, what is “beyond doubt is that Yoder’s theology has deep roots in Mennonite soil.” Yoder’s pacifism, free church commitments, and much more are grounded in his Anabaptist tradition.

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Alongside understanding Yoder as a Mennonite, Nation argues that Yoder should be seen as an evangelical, pointing to the cover of *The Christian Century* in February 1989, where Yoder was pictured alongside Billy Graham, Carl F.H. Henry, Francis Schaeffer, and George Marsden. The cover story read: “The Year of the Evangelicals.” This cover is not the only time Yoder is pictured alongside some of these notable evangelical leaders. In his list of the “four formative voices” in evangelical political action, J. Budziszewski lists Yoder alongside Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer – and Abraham Kuyper. Budziszewski argues these four “premiere influences” have been the strongest, and most formative, voices for American evangelical political thought. Yoder worked with evangelicals, influenced evangelicals, published with evangelical presses, and often addressed evangelical gatherings. While he maintained sustained criticisms of American evangelicalism throughout his career, Yoder also had a great appreciation for it.

Finally, Nation argues that Yoder ought to be understood as catholic. Yoder wrote that “the vision of discipleship projected in [*The Priestly Kingdom*] is founded in Scripture and the catholic tradition.” In his work, Yoder sought to be broadly catholic, working to understand and engage many Christian traditions; he attempted to articulate a catholic vision for the church,

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702 Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, xx-xxi. These addresses include giving the Morgan Lectures at Fuller Seminary in 1980. (Nation, “John Howard Yoder: Mennonite, Evangelical, Catholic,” 366). In *Evangelicals and the Public Square*, Budziszewski argues that one of the reasons that evangelicals are drawn to Yoder is because he takes Jesus so seriously (Budziszewski, *Evangelicals in the Public Square*, 87-88).
calling the church to an “unlimited catholicity.” The vision of discipleship that Yoder articulated was never merely for Mennonites; it is a scriptural call on “all Christian believers.”

Yoder’s scholarly reach was broad. As William Klassen noted, Yoder “opened up the world of the Anabaptists . . . to the ecumenical world.” Nation summarizes:

Using the Anabaptist tradition as a hermeneutic, [Yoder] sought to provide a compelling voice for a catholic, radically reforming way of understanding the Christian faith that he hoped would, in its main outlines, be embraced by all Christians.

Understanding Yoder as Mennonite, evangelical, and catholic allows us to situate the significant influence Yoder has had on theological ethics in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Recent Revelations Regarding Yoder’s Sexual Abuse:

Before exploring Yoder’s continued influence on North American evangelical ethics, and his own understanding of what it meant to imitate Jesus, however, another word is needed. Today, it is impossible to talk about Yoder without also addressing his moral indiscretions, which are also a part of Yoder’s legacy, his sexual exploitations which “ranged from verbal sexual innuendo to physical sexual acts.” In 2013, the Herald Press, a Mennonite publisher, responded to Yoder’s sexual abuse by adding a statement to books by Yoder: “We believe that

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706 Yoder, “Introduction,” in The Priestly Kingdom, 8.
707 Yoder’s audience, as an Anabaptist, was intentionally broad. His writing was not merely for Anabaptists. Rather, he sought to cast an ecumenical vision of discipleship. This broad reach of Yoder’s – far beyond his theological “home” – has resulted in a wide number of dialogue partners for him, both while he was living and in the continuing interest in his work.
709 Nation, John Howard Yoder, 2; see also Nation, “John Howard Yoder: Mennonite, Evangelical, Catholic,” 36.
Yoder and those who write about his work deserve to be heard; we also believe readers should know that Yoder engaged in abusive behavior.” On their website, they elaborate further:

John Howard Yoder (1927–97) was perhaps the most well-known Mennonite theologian in the twentieth century. While his work on Christian ethics helped define Anabaptism to an audience far outside the Mennonite Church, he is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. . . . We hope that those who study Yoder’s writings will not dismiss the complexity of these issues and will instead wrestle with, evaluate, and learn from Yoder's work in the full context of his personal, scholarly, and churchly legacy.”

It is in the spirit of these reflections that this chapter is offered. While not intending to ignore or downplay the actions of Yoder in any way, this chapter also seeks to acknowledge the influence of Yoder in ethical thought, particularly in evangelical circles. As we will discuss in this chapter, the influence that Yoder has is ongoing, and has shaped the current discussion of the role of Jesus in ethics in significant ways. Thus, Yoder remains an important dialogue partner, one who was also a deeply flawed individual.

While Yoder’s influence paves the way for understanding his continued importance as a dialogue partner, particularly on the question of the imitation of Christ, where his influence was profound, reflections on Yoder’s work must also take seriously the fact that his theological framework, which continues to be powerfully influential for many, also played a role in his sexual abuse. Raising the question of how we ought to use Yoder’s thought, in light of the ways he twisted theological reflection to allow for sexual abuse, is an important question that we must grapple with. The vision that Yoder proclaimed, a Jesus-centered, nonviolent posture of discipleship seems to be in direct contrast with violent actions of Yoder towards many women. Yoder affirmed an ecclesiology with a core practice of “binding and loosing,” while refusing to cooperate with accountability structures when accused. There is, indeed, a contradiction

712 Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’” For these insights, Hauerwas builds off the work of both
between Yoder’s words and his actions. But, alongside these glaring contradictions, we must also attend to the ways in which Yoder’s practice may have been consistent with aspects of his theology. Together, David Cramer, Jenny Howell, Paul Martens, and Jonathan Tran reflect on the ways in which Yoder’s radical understanding of the nature of discipleship may have included his “experiments” in human sexuality, to use Yoder’s words. Their reflection on Yoder’s theological works and his practice is worth quoting at length:

We must be willing to consider the possibility that in pursuing these relationships with other Christian women, Yoder just might have been applying his radical theology, though in ways the rest of us had, to his mind, not the courage to imagine. After all, Yoder described the “original revolution” as “the creation of a distinct community with its own deviant set of values and its coherent way of incarnating them”; he described this “alternative community” as the kingdom’s “first fruits”; and he wrote, “The church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately” and that “the confessing people of God is the new world on its way.” Although such a vision of the church has been enthusiastically adopted by many of Yoder’s readers when it comes to low-hanging fruit, like popular versions of Yoderian conceptions of justice, peace, and democracy, this vision can be, and indeed was by Yoder, extended to include what he called “pilot programs” regarding physically intimate relationships between Christian men and women.

Since the early 1970s, Yoder had been circulating for public consideration reformulations of family, sexuality, intimacy, and the like that had to, in his mind, be part of what the Holy Spirit enabled as “church.” In these writings (sometimes sent to the women involved), often under headings such as “Criticism is solicited” or “This paper is circulated with the request for critical responses from all concerned,” Yoder can be seen

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714 Goosen reflects on these experiments, drawing upon unpublished memos from Yoder (Goossen, “Defanging the Beast,” 7-80.)
as submitting his ideas to the “binding and loosing” he understood as the very form of the
politics of Jesus. Yoder in his theology saw himself testifying to a revolution that
challenged everything from economic injustice to the idols of romantic love that
denigrated singleness as a proper Christian vocation. Realization of the vocation of
singleness, just like realization of economic justice, requires of the church practical
considerations, especially if Christian communities are to serve whole persons, a
wholeness that involves sexual needs the church can’t be so squeamish as to ignore.
Hence, in pursuing what he called “non-genital affective relationships,” Yoder may very
well have seen himself “incarnating” the “deviant set of values” of this “distinct
community.” If so, Yoder’s self-deception allowed him to believe that his actions had
been misunderstood as “abusive” when in fact they were serving.\textsuperscript{715}

Advocating for a posture that both takes Yoder’s abuse seriously and does not abandon all of
Yoder’s works, Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran look to Yoder’s own work to
theologically understand Yoder’s failings. As we will discuss throughout this dissertation,
Yoder’s theology of the Powers is a critical aspect of his theological project, and key for
understanding what he means by following Jesus; in his discussion of the Powers, we find his
radical understanding of the effects of sin on the whole cosmos, including both humanity and
the Powers. Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran point to \textit{The Politics of Jesus} as Yoder’s
clearest exposition of the Powers, in which we can also see Yoder’s theological explanation
for the abhorrent twisting of what God has designed as good. In this explanation, they argue,
we also see a theological explanation of Yoder’s sin as rebellion:

In Yoder’s life, such powers might be seen as the structures through which he practiced
his teaching vocation, relational structures that meant a large family where he and his
wife brought up five children and a professionalized theological world through which
Yoder could disseminate his work. \textit{The Politics of Jesus} states, “These structures were
created by God. It is the divine purpose that within human existence there should be a
network of norms and regularities to stretch out the canvas upon which the tableau of life
can be painted.” But then, he continues, “The powers have rebelled and are fallen. They
did not accept the modesty that would have permitted them to remain conformed to the
creative purpose, but rather they claimed for themselves an absolute value.” We might
read Yoder’s failings as a particularly tragic manifestation of this rebellion, where he
twisted his teaching vocation into an infrastructure for predatory behaviors; where he
distorted mentorship and influence for untoward purposes; where he used analytic
stubbornness to isolate himself from community and, as 1 John 1:6 portrays, walked in

\textsuperscript{715} Cramer, Howell, Tran, and Martens, “Scandalizing John Howard Yoder.”
darkness; and where he perverted academic achievement in order to manipulate, distort, and bully.

. . . [I]t is hard not to hear Yoder unwittingly describing himself when he portrays the powers: “[T]he structures fail to serve us as they should. They do not enable humanity to live a genuinely free, loving life. They have absolutized themselves and they demand from the individual and society an unconditional loyalty. They harm and enslave us. *We cannot live with them.*” In these ways, the brilliance of Yoder’s theology became a foothold for the devil, and the structures put in place for Yoder’s theological success gave way to habituation to the fallen powers. Indeed, we find Yoder’s inability to imagine the powers as personalized, as the logic of his theology warrants, indicative of the measure of self-deception that came to possess him.716

As a way to not abandon the entirety of Yoder’s theological project, but also to take seriously Yoder’s abuse, Cramer, Howell, Tran, and Martens attempt to use Yoder’s framework as a lens through which to see the devastating abuses that he perpetrated.

In her detailed history of the abuse of Yoder and the responses to this abuse, Rachel Waltner Goossen similarly points to the distinctive practices of the Christian community, practices that are out of step with the way of the world, as one of the footholds in Yoder’s theology for his abuse. The “freedom of the Gospel,” as Yoder phrased it, was a freedom that allowed for these new ways of relating to one other.717 Goossen details Yoder’s argument in this way:

In present-day society, among people who struggle with inhibitions, Yoder suggested that “there will need to be some experience of therapeutic tension and adjustments.” Further, he speculated that persons plagued either by inhibitions about sexual intercourse or by promiscuity would have difficulty attaining what he termed “the freedom of the Gospel,” which Yoder linked to Jesus’ encounters with women.718

In this excerpt, Goossen already alludes to another aspect of Yoder’s theology that he used as a justification for his experimentation and action: the witness of Jesus.

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718 Goossen, “Defanging the Beast,” 24; later, in the same essay, she writes that: “Yoder was interested in the ethics of communal living, and all through the 1970s, he discussed with participants in intentional Christian living arrangements the biblical, economic, and cultural dimensions of their communities, which typically included both married and unmarried members” (Goossen, “Defanging the Beast,” 28).
Goossen draws upon Yoder’s appeal to the example of Jesus, the crux of Yoder’s theology, to explain his abuse. This underscores, in a powerful way, the importance of a clear, biblical hermeneutic for the imitation of Christ. One cannot simply say: do what Jesus would do. Rather, as this dissertation explores, one must form and apply an appropriate, biblical hermeneutic for the imitation of Christ. Placing Yoder’s theology in dialogue with Bavinck helps, again, to clarify the biblical insights of Yoder, while correcting the harmful aspects of his insight and application. Of Yoder’s propensity to appeal to the example of Jesus for his behavior toward women, Goossen writes:

Through the mid-1970s, Yoder circulated at least a dozen unpublished papers among colleagues, students, and friends. . . . In this same essay, which he cautioned was neither for publication nor quotation, Yoder wrote that in 1974 he had begun to develop “the notion of a distinction between two dimensions of sexuality, the familiar and the genital.” His ideas, he said, were “exploratory and noncommittal,” and he solicited “critical reactions of all kinds” from those to whom he was circulating his work. He noted that “the prude and the pornographer agree that the only genuine or natural expression of bodily affection is genital.” But biblical exegesis offered an alternative to consider: “From Jesus, if we understand him correctly,” Yoder added, “. . . we are now able to say that freedom of bodily affection and intimacy is not necessarily correlated with the satisfaction of genital drives. . . . the freedom of the Gospel, the freedom which Jesus lived out with women who touched him and whose status as sexual victims was an immediate part of his ministry to them.”

Goossen continues, firmly situating Yoder’s “experimentation” with sexuality in the person and example of Jesus:

What explains Yoder’s evolution into this speculative thinking in the decade of the 1970s? Yoder’s popularity as a Mennonite leader was closely tied to his own celebrated work in postwar writings about Mennonite peace theology, which meant that he both wrote about and embodied a normative and laudable form of Mennonite masculinity. This enhanced his status especially with other male leaders and made it unlikely for them to question or critique him. And Yoder’s Christology, centered on a “political” Jesus imbued with social forms of power, offered resources for speaking and writing about the historical man whose spiritual freedom Yoder venerated. Yoder thought speculatively about Jesus’ sexuality as a model for his disciples, for the men who followed in his path.

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In her careful analysis of Yoder’s unpublished papers on Christian sexuality, Goossen provides readers with an important window into Yoder’s justification. Many aspects of Yoder’s abuse, as Cramer, Howell, Tran, and Martens also detail, was strikingly out of line with the heart of his thought; but for his justification, he drew upon core aspects of his theological framework: the person and practices of Jesus, the distinctive practices of the Christian community, and the revolution that Jesus begins.\textsuperscript{721}

Stanley Hauerwas, who was significantly influenced by Yoder and, as he notes, is “often credited with making John Howard Yoder better known among those identified as mainstream Protestants”,\textsuperscript{722} also seeks to shed light on Yoder’s sexual abuse. Hauerwas writes that he understands it as his responsibility to try to say why Yoder's behaviour was so wrong, and yet why he remains such an important theologian for those who, like me, are at best about half-Christian. I owe John Yoder the truth about his abusive behaviour and why such truth cannot help but implicate him in a way of life from which I am sure that God is now giving him all the time he needs to repent.\textsuperscript{723}

In this essay, Hauerwas points to Goossen’s and Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran’s articles on Yoder’s moral failings as two essays that provide important insights into Yoder’s actions. Like them, he affirms both the places where Yoder’s actions were consistent and inconsistent with his theology: while affirming a nonviolent theology, Yoder engaged in violent sexual activities; while affirming an ecclesiology with a core practice of “binding and loosing,” Yoder refused to cooperate with accountability structures; but even more difficult – and

\textsuperscript{721} Here again, we find conformity and inconsistencies with Yoder’s theological framework; while Yoder is clear that the imitation of Christ is the heart of the Christian life, and he points to following Jesus’ example as a guide for exploring sexuality, Yoder is similarly clear that one cannot follow Jesus in every aspect of his life; Christians are to only follow Christ in his cross. In his appeal to Jesus’ example towards women, however, Yoder deviates from his own principle to only imitate Christ in his cross.

\textsuperscript{722} Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’”

\textsuperscript{723} Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’”
important – to grapple with, Yoder’s understanding of the distinct, eschatologically oriented “original revolution,” the way of following Jesus, meant that the church lives in a new way, with a different framework than the world. Hauerwas elaborates:

Yoder understood his exploration of "non-genital affective relationships" to be an expression of the "revolution" inaugurated by the new age. As I have already suggested, and the authors make the same point, given Yoder's account of singleness, such touching could be seen as a way the church has found to meet the needs of the "whole person."

. . . Yoder's account of "non-genital" affection is bizarre. [Cramer, Howell, Tran, and Martens] rightly call Yoder's actions "demonic" which invites a very suggestive account of Yoder's behaviour as a manifestation of the power of the powers over our lives. Not only is Yoder's concept bizarre, but I do not think it can in any way be commensurate with his defence of nonviolence. Yoder's suggestion that Jesus's "touching" of women provides precedence for the abuse with which he engaged is clearly not justified by any of the Gospel stories of Jesus's interaction with women. Jesus may have touched some women but not in the way Yoder was touching women. In marked contrast to nonviolence, there are simply no texts in the New Testament to support Yoder's claims about what is sexually possible between Christians.\footnote{724 Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’”}

Hauerwas affirms that, in a bizarre and twisted way, Yoder used his understanding of the revolution that Jesus called for, one that promoted actions that were out of line with the current ways of the world, to justify sexual assault. There was a way in which his theological framework, for Yoder, perpetuated these activities. Even so, Hauerwas points out that Yoder’s understanding of sexual “experimentations” was inconsistent with his understanding of the radical nature of the Jesus’ revolution, because it was, in fact, strikingly \emph{consistent} with some of the practices of the sexual revolution. While, as Goossen details, Yoder rejected criticisms of his “experiments” on account of the way that these criticisms “reproduced the ‘consensus of our respectable culture,’” Hauerwas highlights that Yoder’s “experiments” were radically in line with the emphasis in Yoder’s time on consent as the factor that determined the acceptability of one’s sexual actions (for Yoder argued that he never acted without consent; an argument that
failed to take into account the power he held on account of his position and reputation).

Hauerwas writes:

If anything, given the sexual revolution, the "consensus," particularly among the children of the middle class, was closer to Yoder's view than that of Miller. Yoder's experimentation could be seen as but one form of the changing sexual mores and behaviour of Americans. From such a perspective his views and behaviour were anything but radical. Rather, what he was doing could be understood, just as the "new morality" could be understood, as quite conventional. Given the changing attitudes toward sexual expression, it was just another step to conclude that you can do what you want sexually as long as you have the other's consent.\footnote{Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’”}

Continuing in a careful critique of Yoder’s theological framework, Hauerwas asks an important question: what is missing in Yoder’s theological framework that allowed him to justify abusive actions? In his strikingly nuanced answer, Hauerwas further undergirds the merit of dialogue between Yoder’s work and a Reformed account of the imitation of Christ alongside an affirmation of creation order. His insights are, again, worth considering at length:

I worry that Yoder may have made too extreme the duality between church and world, particularly when it comes to dealing with our everyday relations with one another. I need to be very careful in making such a criticism because Yoder, contrary to many superficial criticisms of him, never restricted God's redemption to the church. He was always ready to acknowledge that God was doing a new thing among those who were not church - thus my insistence that Yoder always assumed what is a duty for Christians is a possibility for those who are not.

The critical question, however, is whether his emphasis on the distinctive behaviour that is constitutive of what it means to be the church presumes we are capable of being more than we are. The question is whether Yoder failed to understand that, when all is said and done, baptism does not make us angels; we remain human beings.

There are methodological issues at the heart of theological ethics entailed in these issues. The question of "the natural," the characterization of the natural, as well as the status of the natural can be one way these questions can be addressed. Yoder had little use for, or at least he seldom addressed, questions about the status of natural law. He quite rightly worried that appeals to natural law invited modes of moral reflection that were in tension with the Gospel imperatives. But some account of the natural - or, I would prefer, "creation" - is required in order to acknowledge that by the grace of God we exist. That
means that nature is the concept that affirms that God has willed that there exist that which is not God.

That reality makes possible reflections of practical reason that offer wisdom to guide our lives. Hauerwas argues, in light of some creational affirmations. While, as we will discuss in chapters five and seven, there are important insights to glean from Yoder’s reflections on the church and the world, Hauerwas argues that these are perhaps too extreme; not account of the mere presence of a duality, but on account of a lack of attention to creation. Hauerwas is careful in this critique, noting, as we will further explore in this chapter, that Yoder does not consign God’s actions – or, as a result, the actions of the Christian – merely to the realm of the church. Even so, Hauerwas argues, attention to creation could have, perhaps, dissuaded Yoder from the perversion of his theological understanding of the new revolution that Christ brings. Alongside this, he argues that Yoder is missing a focus on the virtues. These insights from Hauerwas further undergird our exploration of Yoder alongside Bavinck. While we can critically learn from Yoder, and undoubtedly note the influence of his theology, we can also ground the insights we learn from the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s robust, postlapsarian attention to creation order and attention to law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Jesus.

These theologians commenting on the moral failings of Yoder are among those who are deeply indebted to Yoder’s work. The insights have been shaped by his work. But as they reflect on the entirety of Yoder’s legacy, they must also attend to his failings, not just his positive influence. In doing so, they are clear to not seek to provide an excuse, or justification, for the sexual abuse that Yoder perpetrated. Rather, they are seeking clarity and correction in

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726 Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’”
understanding Yoder’s theological framework, both those things that advanced a kingdom vision and those things that did serious harm to many women, and others.\textsuperscript{727} They demonstrate a way to critically engage Yoder’s thought, while still taking his influence seriously. Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran ask the question in this way:

Do Yoder’s violations of his own theological claims undermine the content of his theology? Do his sins disqualify him from the major role he has played in modern Christian thought? We certainly understand the seriousness of these questions. It is undoubtedly difficult to know how to receive gifts from sinful people. But ever since the church settled the Donatist controversy in the early fifth century, the church has agreed that such gifts can and should be received.\textsuperscript{728}

Yoder’s ongoing influence in evangelical thought and social action, helping his readers to explore the radical nature of following Jesus’ commands, testifies to the gifts that his work has given to the church. He has indeed perpetrated great harm, and for some, that constitutes a reason to place his books back on the shelf, unread. While I respect the decision of those who choose, for these reasons and more, to no longer read Yoder, that is not the approach of this dissertation. Instead, this dissertation seeks to unpack the theological framework that Yoder has espoused, while remaining attentive to, aware of, and critical of the important omissions within, Yoder’s work. Alongside the deep flaws, moral failings, and significant pain attached to Yoder’s witness, there are also those who have been profoundly impacted by those parts of Yoder’s theology that testify to the call of kingdom of God. For many young evangelicals in the twenty and twenty-first century, Yoder has spurred on a vision of discipleship that has produced immense engagement in social action and a renewed commitment to following the way of Jesus. Despite his moral failings – and the deep hurt that these actions have caused for many women and

\textsuperscript{727} See Goossen, “Defanging the Beast,” 16-20 for a detailed report on these people and communities that were harmed.
communities, – God has, in his great mystery and power, also used Yoder’s work for good. Reflecting on sin and evil, Bavinck rightly testifies to the way in which God works: “Precisely because God is the absolutely Holy and Almighty One, he can use sin as a means in his hand.” While Bavinck’s words attests to the mystery and power of the work of God, this does not excuse the actions of Yoder, nor ought it easily explain them in light of a greater good.

Stanley Hauerwas ends his essay on Yoder’s sexual abuse with these words: “That is it. That is all I have to say about this troubling matter. It surely feels like I am ending with a whimper. That is the way it should feel, because I have ended with a whimper. I did not want to write this article, but I have done it. I am not happy that I have done it, but then nothing about this situation is happy.” In many ways, this section ends similarly: lamenting the great hurt perpetuated by Yoder’s actions, committed to a critical reading of Yoder that takes seriously moral failings and mindful of ways in which his theology has remained influential on more than a generation of North American Christians.

Yoder’s Influence on Social Ethics and Evangelical Activism

In his work on this history of Christian ethics, J. Philip Wogaman named Yoder as one of the “formative Christian moral thinkers” of the twentieth century. James Gustafson echoes the importance of Yoder’s work in Theology and Ethics. In his study of how ethicists use scripture, Richard Hays names five “major twentieth century interpreters,” including John

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729 Bavinck, RD 3, 64.
730 And thus, the critical omissions in his theological framework that may have allowed for these failings. Here, as I have noted, Hauerwas is a critical guide. He asks the important question “what is missing?” and answers with two key insights: an appeal to creation and an emphasis on virtues. For these, we will look to Bavinck (see chapters five, six, and seven).
732 He writes, “the radical Christian ethics of Yoder mark a substantive position for which there are sound defenses; to opt against it is to opt against some of the fundamental claims of traditional Christianity” (James M. Gustafson, Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol. 1, Theology and Ethics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 76).
Howard Yoder. Yoder’s influence in the academy is also marked by his role as president of the Society of Christian Ethics and an ever increasing amount of scholarship on Yoder’s work.

Yoder’s influence is significant not only in the academy; he also influenced social action. As we saw earlier, in his study on the “shapers of Evangelical political thought,” J. Budziszewski names Yoder as one of the four “premiere influences” on American evangelical political thought. For evangelicals seeking to remain faithful to the gospel in a new cultural context, Yoder provided an important theological framework. In Moral Minority, David Swartz elaborates on the reception of Yoder’s thought in “vigorou
work took seriously these historic Anabaptist commitments, while also taking seriously the
democratic, pluralistic conditions of North American culture.\textsuperscript{741} As we will see throughout this
chapter, his theological framework champions a political understanding of Jesus that functions as
an alternative to many theological frameworks that do not take Jesus to be normative for
Christian ethics, including Niebuhr’s political realism\textsuperscript{742} and theological frameworks that, while
affirming Jesus’ normativity, do affirm Jesus as a model for political action.\textsuperscript{743} Against these,
Yoder posits a new way of being political: communally living that follows the ways of God’s
coming kingdom that engages in cultural life through an active witness to those in power.\textsuperscript{744}

*The Particular Influence of* The Politics of Jesus

When considering Yoder’s influence, it is important to take into account his whole body
of work. But, one work in particular, *The Politics of Jesus*, firmly established Yoder’s influence
on the broader theological world. As Nation points out, this book is a “watershed in John
Yoder’s career; it is what he will always be best known for.”\textsuperscript{745} Forrester also affirms this, stating
that *The Politics of Jesus* “caused something of a theological sensation and gave [Yoder] a high
profile as a constructive and critical theological thinker of the highest rank, one whose work had

\textsuperscript{741} For more on Yoder’s response to pluralism, see: John Howard Yoder, “But Do We See Jesus: The Particularity of

Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 317-319; Yoder, “Discipleship in the
and New,” in *Revolutionary Christianity: 1966 South American Lectures*, ed. Paul Martens, Mark Thiessen Nation,

\textsuperscript{743} These include the traditions that adhere to “Franciscan and Tolstoyan” views of imitation, and traditions which
affirm non-engagement in civil life (Yoder, *PoJ*, 5-7).

\textsuperscript{744} For examples of this type of being political, see: Yoder’s discussions on the models of Mordecai, Daniel, and
Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. E. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003),
187.

\textsuperscript{745} Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 25.
to be taken seriously by Christian theologians of all varieties.”

The Politics of Jesus is Yoder’s most-discussed and best-known work.

Not only is Yoder widely known for his The Politics of Jesus, this book has a marked influence on the theology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Stanley Hauerwas claims that “when Christians look back on this century of theology in America, The Politics of Jesus will be seen as a new beginning.” Christianity Today listed this book as one of the top ten books of the twentieth century. Its immense popularity is highlighted in the sheer amount of volumes that were sold. But numbers alone cannot fully articulate the influence of The Politics of Jesus. About ten years after The Politics of Jesus was published, Edward LeRoy Long Jr. stated that it had “become as frequently cited in discussions of social ethics as Paul Ramsey’s Deeds and Rules in the discussion of norm and context.” As Nation argues, The Politics of Jesus has helped to “re-shape the field of Christian ethics over the last twenty-five years.” And, as highlighted by Budziszewski’s study, the influence of this book has not only reshaped academic discussions, it has inspired social action. In the words of Hauerwas, The Politics of Jesus constitutes a “new beginning” in theological ethics, one that “returns Jesus to the center of

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746 Forrester “John Howard Yoder,” 406; Travis Kroeker also calls this book Yoder’s “landmark monograph” in P. Kroeker, “Is a Messianic Political Ethic Possible?, 141.
747 Stanley Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus Makes a Difference,” The Christian Century, October 13, 1993, 982. Hauerwas notes that there are two reasons for this “new beginning”: it “requires theologians to acknowledge that their work makes no sense abstracted from the church.” And “returns Jesus to the center of Christian ethics by freeing us from the political presuppositions sponsored by liberal social orders.” (See also Nation, John Howard Yoder, 126).
749 The first edition of The Politics of Jesus sold roughly 75,500 copies. The second edition had sold another 11,000 copies by spring of 1998 (Nation, John Howard Yoder, 25-26).
751 Nation, John Howard Yoder, 26.
Christian ethics."\(^{753}\)

*The Politics of Jesus* is Yoder’s most well-known book, and most often discussed book. For this reason, when many turn to a discussion of Yoder, their focus is *The Politics of Jesus*. This book has come to be seen as centrally defining of Yoder’s entire theological project. Understanding *The Politics of Jesus* as an articulation of the whole of Yoder’s project is a claim that, helpfully, Nation does not reject. He writes that it is “quite appropriate” that *The Politics of Jesus* came to define Yoder’s theology, for in it Yoder seeks to suggest the contours of the social ethic that Christians should derive from Jesus, an ethic that he believes should be centrally defining for Christians [and] . . . response directly and indirectly to the ways in which Christian ethicists have sought to set Jesus aside when social ethics are formulated.\(^{754}\)

*The Politics of Jesus* offers an important glimpse into the thought of John Howard Yoder. It helps to define the major contours of his thought; this book is, as Hays puts it, a “challenge to the church to remain faithful to its calling of discipleship, modeling its life after the example of Jesus as Lord.”\(^{755}\) The main themes of Yoder’s work – his radical social ethic, the importance of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection, peacemaking, the distinction between the church and the world – are all discussed in *The Politics of Jesus*.\(^{756}\)

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, we too will focus on *The Politics of Jesus* as the central text for defining what Yoder understands as a proper imitation of Christ.\(^{757}\) As we

\(^{753}\) Hauerwas, “When the Politics of Jesus Makes a Difference,” 982, 984.

\(^{754}\) Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 55.


\(^{756}\) In his introduction to *The Royal Priesthood*, Cartwright again points to the “substantial unity” of Yoder’s work. The consistency of his thought again undergirds a focus on one particular piece of Yoder’s work as illustrative of Yoder’s thought. Our examination of *The Politics of Jesus* will be complimented by excerpts from Yoder’s other writings, which will again highlight the unity of his thought on the topic of the imitation of Christ. (Cartwright, “Radical Reform,” 3).

\(^{757}\) This strategy is not unique to the current chapter. See Bertschmann, *Bowing before Christ - Nodding to the State?* as another example of a chapter that “concentrates on Yoder’s . . . *The Politics of Jesus*, complemented by various other essays. (Bertschmann, *Bowing before Christ - Nodding to the State?*, 44).
have already established, there are two main reasons for considering this text as primary. First, this book is considered – and rightly so – to helpfully define Yoder’s theological project. Second, while Yoder mentions imitation at various points throughout his body of work, it is in *The Politics of Jesus* that his most pointed language on imitating Christ is found. In this book, he provides his readers with a detailed discussion of what it means to imitate Jesus – and why imitation matters. Thus, this study will focus Yoder’s discussion of imitating Christ in his best known work, *The Politics of Jesus*, to establish what Yoder understands as the proper imitation of Christ. This is not to say, of course, that *The Politics of Jesus* is the only place where Yoder discusses imitating Christ. Many of Yoder’s other works will also be discussed in order to further mine Yoder’s thought on the subject of imitation. Focusing on *The Politics of Jesus*, rather, affirms that this book is the natural place to ground a discussion of Yoder’s understanding of imitating Christ, as it is the place where Yoder most clearly lays out what imitating Jesus ought to be – and what a proper imitation of Christ does not include.

**Following Jesus: What Other Ethics Misunderstand About Christ**

Yoder begins *The Politics of Jesus* with an indictment: contemporary social ethics does not understand Jesus to be the norm for ethics. Yoder’s goal is to counter this trend, arguing that “Jesus is, according to biblical witness, a model of radical political action.” While this may seem like a simple task, Yoder argues that in contemporary social ethics it is not given that Jesus is directly relevant for Christian ethics. Instead, the “mainstream answer” to questions of

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759 These works include *The Royal Priesthood, He Came Preaching Peace, Body Politics and Discipleship as Political Responsibility*.

760 Yoder, *PoJ*, 3-4. Yoder writes that a “chasm . . . usually separates the disciplines of New Testament exegesis and contemporary social ethics.”

social ethics argues against the direct connection that he is posing between scripture and social ethics, between Christ and Christian ethics. As a way to strengthen his case for an imitation ethic that necessarily asserts the direct relevancy of Jesus for social ethics, Yoder details the “classic defense[s] against an ethic of imitation,” the type of ethic that he is asserting.  

In Yoder’s 1972 edition of *The Politics of Jesus*, he enumerates six reasons that mainstream ethics gives for affirming a norm other than Jesus. Each of these reasons suggests that Jesus is not relevant, at least in any immediate way, to questions of social ethics; they reject an ethic that is centered on the imitation of Christ. These arguments range from a narrow focus on Jesus’ spiritual teaching to claims of the contemporary irrelevance of Jesus’ social teaching because of his context. In mainstream ethics, Yoder argues, Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection are made less relevant – or completely irrelevant – because of these problematic understandings of Jesus and his mission. These problematic understandings of Christ focus on Jesus’ lack of societal power, looking solely to his agrarian context, teachings, and methods, isolating the spiritual focus of his message, and identifying his death as merely forensic are not ways of properly understanding Jesus’ message; the result of these misunderstandings is that Jesus is rendered irrelevant for Christian ethics today. Against these claims, Yoder asserts that Jesus is relevant for social ethics.  

It is not only in *The Politics of Jesus* that Yoder argues against those who would say that Christian ethics ought not be derived from the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

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767 Yoder, *PoJ*, 11. Yoder asserts this “direct significance” of Jesus for social ethics with serious biblical exegesis, in dialogue with biblical scholarship.
This insistence is highlighted in much of Yoder’s work. Mark Nation ties this central critique of Yoder’s to another focus of Yoder’s thought: the Constantinian shift in Christianity.\textsuperscript{768} Prior to this shift, Christians were largely pacifist, an ethical stance derived from the life of Jesus. However, “the post-Constantinian Christians considered imperial violence to be not only morally tolerable but a positive good and a Christian duty.”\textsuperscript{769} This shift, one that Yoder frequently refers to, also included multiple theological assumptions that resulted in “[o]utward behavior, especially as it relates to ways of structuring society, is guided by other norms than the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{770} In his consistent criticism of the Constantinian shift, Yoder again is rejecting a misunderstanding of Christ, one that ignores the normativity of Jesus’ pacifism for life today.

Each of these misunderstandings of Jesus provide a defense against understanding Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection as normative in the life of the believer. Yoder emphatically rejects these claims of mainstream ethics; against their claims, he argues that Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection are indeed directly relevant for questions of social ethics. Any theological understanding that negates the normative role of Jesus for the life of the believer cannot stand. Yoder’s picture of Jesus’ life undergirds his robust understanding of the imitation, confined to Jesus in his cross.

\textsuperscript{768} Nation, \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 64. In brief, Yoder understands this shift as an “identification of the church with the whole of society.” (Nation, \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 155). Yoder argues that this Constantinian shift has undergirded scholarship that affirms a norm for the Christian life that is guided by something other than the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ. (Nation, \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 64-66).


Defining Terms: Yoder’s use of *Imitatio Christi* Language

We return now to Yoder’s statement that “[o]nly at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross.”771 This understanding of imitating Jesus is articulated throughout *The Politics of Jesus* and is continued in Yoder’s other works addressing the same theme. It is not enough, however, to point to this statement and assume that one can grasp the extent of what Yoder understands as the proper imitation of Christ. For this, a careful reading of *The Politics of Jesus* is necessary. This close examination allows us to not only identify the instances of Yoder’s use of imitation language, but also to ask important questions about this language, chiefly: what does Yoder mean by “the cross?” A close reading of *The Politics of Jesus*, accompanied by other works where Yoder addresses similar themes, will enable us to see what understandings of the imitation of Christ Yoder rejects, which in turn, helps to define what Yoder understands as the *proper* imitation of Christ.

The imitation of Jesus is a core emphasis in Yoder’s thought. His overarching ethical project is to affirm the normativity of Jesus for the Christian life.772 Affirming the relevancy of Jesus in social ethics, for Yoder, rests on a robust concept of imitation. There are, of course, many interwoven strands in his thought. Each of these strands – nonviolence, the political nature of the Christian calling, the radical nature of the Christian ethic, the role of the church – all center on the person of Jesus and are thus related to his understanding of imitation. Yoder’s concept of the imitation of Christ can be seen as a core aspect of his thought particularly when it is paired with his concept of discipleship; this pairing is one that Yoder himself makes, arguing that, “the two metaphors of ‘discipleship’ and ‘imitation’ overlap sufficiently in substance.”773

772 And, as we’ve already noted, the direct relevance of Jesus’ life for social ethics.
773 Yoder, *PoJ*, 114
While we will focus on Yoder’s direct use of imitation language, that is, when Yoder specifically references a call to “imitate Christ” or “follow the example of Christ,” we will also look to the other metaphors Yoder uses to discuss this concept – including discipleship.

**Yoder’s Use of Imitation Language: A Survey**

Yoder begins *The Politics of Jesus* by identifying the type of ethic he is advocating for as an “ethic of imitation.” Against those who would argue for the irrelevance of Christ in social ethics, Yoder posits this ethic of imitation, one that takes seriously the role of Jesus in the life of the believer. Jesus is one to be followed. The life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus have direct significance for social ethics, making Jesus normative for Christian ethics.

What Yoder affirms as a correct imitation ethic is often paired together with a form of imitation that he rejects. This pattern is clear already in the first few pages of *The Politics of Jesus*. In these pages, Yoder references one of the defining works on the imitation of Christ in North America, *In His Steps: What would Jesus do?* by Charles Sheldon, arguing that this is an example of the “classically naïve approach” that assumes “an immediate connection between the work or the words of Jesus and what it would mean today to be faithful ‘In His Steps.’” While, on the surface, this text may seem to suggest a similar understanding of discipleship to Yoder’s task, identifying the normativity of Jesus for the Christian, Yoder argues instead that

The classic of turn-of-the-century popular Protestantism which Charles Sheldon published under this title is not a serious sample of the vision of discipleship which I am here describing [in this book]. The values to which the devoted disciple Henry Maxwell is committed are not *materially* related to Jesus. “Do what Jesus would do,” means for Sheldon simply, “do the right thing at all costs”; but *what* is the right thing to do is knowable for Sheldon apart from Jesus. Sheldon is rather an advocate of the mainstream view being characterized here, which finds the substantial norms of ethics elsewhere than

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774 Yoder, *PoJ*, 5.
775 Yoder, *PoJ*, 11.
Against Sheldon, Yoder argues that imitating Jesus must be substantively connected to the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is Yoder’s task in *The Politics of Jesus*: to establish his case that Jesus is normative for Christians and to identify the ways in which the Christian community is to follow the example of Jesus.

It is much later in *The Politics of Jesus* that Yoder explicitly lays out his positive view of the imitation of Christ. In chapter seven, he argues that

> [t]here is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds – but there it holds in every strand of the New Testament literature and all the more strikingly by virtue of the absence of parallels in other realms. This is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility. Thus – and only thus – are we bound by New Testament thought to ‘be like Jesus.'”

One chapter earlier, Yoder introduces explicit, positive language about the imitation of Christ. Yoder repeats his emphatic insistence that the believer ought only to imitate Jesus in the cross.

Here, Yoder articulates his definition in light of prominent examples of imitating Christ in church history, writing that

> the concept of imitation is not applied by the New Testament at some of those points where Franciscan and romantic devotion has tried most piously to apply it, is all the more powerfully a demonstration of how fundamental the thought of participation in the suffering of Christ is when the New Testament church sees it as guiding and explaining her attitude to the powers of the world. Only at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross.

In these two explicit references to a proper imitation of Christ, Yoder is consistent. It is in his cross that we are bound to imitate Christ. In his cross, Jesus is the example for the Christian

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777 Yoder, *PoJ*, 4-5, fn. 7, emphasis original. However, while he was cognizant of the problems surrounding the question “What would Jesus Do?”, in his 1966 lecture “Walking in the Resurrection,” Yoder wrote: “Despite the dangers that beset the naïve, “What would Jesus do?” is still the right question.” He affirms the question, not the answer that Sheldon provides (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 38).


779 Yoder, *PoJ*, 95, emphasis original.
community.

While Yoder only explicitly states that Jesus is an example to be imitated on the cross in these two instances in *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder’s insistence on the relationship between the cross and discipleship can be seen throughout this book. He writes that

[Jesus’] cross is the culmination of that new regime in which his disciples are called to share. . . . *At this one point* there is no difference between the Jesus of *Historie* and the Christ of *Geschichte*, or between Christ as God and Jesus as Man, or between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus (or between the Jesus of the canon and the Jesus of history). No such slicing can avoid his call to an ethic marked by the cross, a cross identified as a punishment of a man who threatens society by creating a new kind of community leading a radically new kind of life.\(^{780}\)

An ethic marked by the cross, is directly tied to the life of the disciple. Yoder frequently reiterates this claim, arguing that “to be a disciple is to share in that style of life of which the cross is the culmination.”\(^ {781}\) Disciples of Christ are called to share in this life of the cross; thus, the entire Christian community is shaped by the cross.\(^ {782}\)

In the cross – and only in the cross – Jesus is a model for his disciples. While he does not use imitation language specifically, Yoder repeats this central claim in *He Came Preaching Peace* where he argues that “the early Christians did not make Jesus an example in his celibacy, or in his not having a gainful occupation or domicile – only in his cross.”\(^ {783}\) Again, Yoder reiterates this in *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*:

Jesus is appealed to as an example not generally but only at the point of the meaning of the cross. On that subject he is always appealed to. Every major strand of New Testament literature has this thought in its foundation.\(^ {784}\)

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\(^{780}\) Yoder, *PoJ*, 52-53, emphasis original.

\(^{781}\) Yoder, *PoJ*, 38.

\(^{782}\) Yoder, *PoJ*, 149.


\(^{784}\) Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, 315, emphasis original. Again in *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* Yoder points to the connection between “following Jesus” and the cross. (Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 21-22).
Without making the connection quite as concrete, Yoder affirms the same basic emphases in *The Royal Priesthood* and *The Original Revolution*; alongside arguing that the life of Jesus is socially and politically relevant, he maintains that the “cross is the meaning of [Christ’s] moral teaching.” In his lecture entitled “Walking in the Resurrection,” Yoder also emphasizes the cross: “it is simple logic when Jesus says of his disciples that his cross is to be the pattern of their life.” This refrain, that Jesus is an example to follow only in his cross, can be found repeatedly throughout Yoder’s corpus.

**Yoder’s Rejection of Historic Versions of the Imitation of Christ**

Throughout *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder articulates a positive, proper understanding of an imitation of Christ: it is in his cross that Jesus’ disciples are to imitate him. While Yoder explicitly mentions the relationship between cross and imitation only twice, this relationship is implicitly shown throughout *The Politics of Jesus*. Yoder’s consistent references to the motif of the cross in the life of the disciple highlight the centrality of this theme in his thought.

However, Yoder does not stop here. He not only affirms imitating Jesus in his cross, he rejects other forms of imitation that have been practiced throughout Christian history. In the introduction to *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder rejects the hermeneutical conclusions of Charles Sheldon. For Sheldon, Yoder argues, doing what Jesus would do is about doing the “right thing.” The problem with this approach lies in the fact that this “right thing” is knowable apart from the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, or, in his words, this “right thing” is not

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787 Yoder, *PoJ*, 4-5, fn. 7.
“materially related to Jesus.”788 This general sense of inner piety, with an ethic grounded in objectives that can be found outside of Christ, does not make up a proper imitation of Christ. For Yoder, imitating Jesus must be materially related to the life of Jesus Christ.

But Yoder does not simply claim that any imitation ethic that is materially and substantively related to the life of Jesus Christ is a proper imitation ethic. He also rejects traditional, historic versions of the call to imitate Christ.789 On multiple occasions, Yoder points to a problematic articulation of an imitation ethic grounded in the life of Christ, often characterized by a Franciscan devotion. He rejects the explanation of imitation by the “Franciscan and Tolstoyan imitators,” “Franciscan glorification of barefoot itinerancy,” who understand Jesus to be a “simple rural figure” operating only in a relational model, where one must know everyone and be able to speak to everyone face-to-face in order to enact change.790 This model, Yoder argues, has no capacity to articulate an ethic that can speak to institutions or power structures.791 Simply mimicking Jesus’ actions is not a proper imitation of Christ.

Throughout church history, many Christians have espoused a general sense of imitation, or an imitation based on mimicry. While Yoder affirms the piety that drives this interpretation of imitation, he argues that an imitation based on mimicry has no grounding in Scripture:

Even when Paul argues the case for celibacy, it does not occur to him to appeal to the example of Jesus. . . . Jesus’ trade as a carpenter, his association with fishermen, and his choice of illustrations from the life of the sower and the shepherd have throughout Christian history given momentum to the romantic glorification of the handcrafts and rural life; but there is none of this in the New Testament.792

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788 Yoder, PoJ, 4-5, fn. 7, emphasis original.
789 In Politics and the Biblical Drama, Richard Mouw helpfully points out that these “romantic” versions of the imitation of Christ have been characteristic of both liberal and fundamentalist ways of understanding how one is to imitate Christ. The question “what would Jesus do” has been unhelpfully utilized by both of these ways of thinking. (Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 112).
790 Yoder, PoJ, 6.
791 Yoder, PoJ, 6.
792 Yoder, PoJ, 95.
In the New Testament, there is an “absence of the concept of imitation as a general pastoral or moral guideline.” Every single action of Jesus is not one that bears imitating. There are many that are not normative (for example, his choice of work, his culinary options, his mode of transportation) and some that would be inappropriate for the believer to attempt to imitate (for example, his description of himself as the Son of man). Unlike the interpretation of many pious believers throughout history, a proper imitation of Jesus does not apply a general category of imitation to all aspects of Jesus’ life. It must be specific.

Yoder contends that prominent models of imitation throughout church history must be rejected: both those that are not materially related to Jesus and those that, while materially related to the life of Christ, are general imitation ethics (which can slavishly adhere to external characteristics of Jesus’ life). In these rejections of traditional imitation ethics, Yoder’s understanding of imitation is underscored: by imitating Jesus only in his cross, the believer is imitating something that is materially connected to the life of Jesus and, as we will see, this imitation is grounded in what the New Testament considers to be the normative aspects of Jesus’ life. Yoder rejects imitations of Christ that are based on external mimicry of Jesus’ actions or are based on only inner piety. Rather, Jesus must be imitated in his cross which, as we will see, is manifest in concrete, vulnerable enemy love.

Yoder’s Early Discussion of Imitating Christ

In his 1966 South American Lectures, Revolutionary Christianity, Yoder again underscores his rejection of common ways of understanding what it means to imitate Christ throughout church history. Highlighting the Franciscan tradition as a problematic interpretation

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793 Yoder, PoJ, 95, emphasis original.
794 Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 112.
795 See also: Yoder, Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution, 315 and Yoder, “The Wisdom and the Power,” 43 for Yoder’s repeated insistence on need for specificity in our understanding of imitation.
of what it means to imitate Christ, Yoder argues that the imitation of Christ found in monastic and mystic traditions is not how the believer ought to conceive of Christian morality.\footnote{In his discussion of monastic conceptions of imitation, Yoder adds this further explanation and caveat: “A long history of interpretation and application which we might designate as ‘mendicant’ has centered its attention upon the outward form of Jesus’ life; his forsaking domicile and property, his celibacy or his barefoot itinerancy. Again, without disrespect for the nobility of the monastic tradition and its \textit{need\textit{ed critique}} of comfortable religion, we must be aware that it centers the renunciation at another point than the New Testament.” (Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 130; emphasis added).}

Discussing what it means that Christian ethics are to be guided by Christ, Yoder writes:

\begin{quote}
    it is simple logic when Jesus says of his disciples that his cross is to be the pattern of their life. He does not share his celibacy, his poverty, his pastoral language, nor his rabbinic profession; he shares his cross with his disciples and they with him. . . . The morality of the New Testament is the morality of sharing in the sufferings of Christ. . . . We are not guided by a picture of the good society nor of the dignity of human humility but by the model of the brokenness of God as he came into the world to bear its sins in his body. The understanding of this call to share in the life of Christ has not been served by those monastic and mystical understandings which sought to imitate Jesus slavishly or externally, e.g., in the barefoot itineration of the radical Franciscan tradition.\footnote{Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 40-41.}
\end{quote}

This lecture highlights a recurring theme in Yoder’s teaching: not all aspects of Jesus’ life are to be imitated. Jesus himself does not commend to his disciples all aspects of his life to follow. In this lecture, Yoder again proclaims the understanding of the central focus of the Christian life: the cross of Christ. The life of the disciple is to take the shape of the cross; Yoder rejects any understanding of the shape of the Christian life that does not focus on the cross.

Yoder’s insistence that the believer must only follow the example Jesus in his cross remains consistent throughout his writings. However, Yoder was not always so willing to use language of imitation that he employs in \textit{The Politics of Jesus}. In his earlier lectures, Yoder displays a tendency that is not seen in his later writings: a hesitancy to use language of imitation. In his two editions of \textit{The Politics of Jesus}, written in 1972 and 1994, Yoder does not shy away from imitation language, although he is quick to tie this language to other motifs, more widely
used in his writing and speaking, such as discipleship and obedience.\textsuperscript{798} In his 1966 South American lecture entitled “Walking in the Resurrection,” however, in his discussion of the broad Christian tradition of imitating Christ (looking specifically to Franciscan iterations of this tradition), Yoder affirms Jesus as the pattern of Christian behavior in these lectures, but hesitates on the word “imitate,” saying:

we speak not of imitation but of participation. We do not mimic Jesus; we live from his life: “As he is, so are we in this world.”\textsuperscript{799}

Even so, already in these lectures, Yoder affirms that the cross of Jesus ought to be the pattern of the disciples’ life.\textsuperscript{800}

While earlier in his career, Yoder is reticent to use imitation language, a tendency which lessens throughout his career, his basic understanding of what constitutes the proper focus of Christian discipleship is consistent. Yoder’s early reticence to use imitation language is still accompanied by unwavering themes surrounding his understanding of the Christian life, themes that Yoder will later associate with the concept of imitation. As Yoder discusses how Christians ought to conceive of the moral life, he urges his listeners to remember that “Christian morality is for Christians,” a statement which he does not understand to be self-evident, given the tendency in church history for Christians to posit a morality that all ought to adhere to.\textsuperscript{801} Underscoring the

\textsuperscript{798} Yoder write that those who hear the message of Jesus are called to “follow, to be incorporated in that same lifestyle. The basic category is not insight, but obedience.” (John Howard Yoder, “Liberating Images of Christ,” in \textit{Imaging Christ: Politics, Art, and Spirituality}, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, PA: Villanova University, 1994), 153, emphasis added). See also Yoder, \textit{Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution} and \textit{Discipleship as Political Responsibility}.

\textsuperscript{799} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41.

\textsuperscript{800} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 40.

\textsuperscript{801} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 36. Yoder is clear that this is not an ethic for all people. The Christian ethic cannot be understood in terms of utility in the world. It also cannot be accepted on the basis of whether or not it is an attainable goal. Instead, it is through the believer’s new life \textit{in Christ} that they are able to live out this command. For Yoder, the “life of obedience” is a “novelty.” (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” in \textit{Revolutionary Christianity}, 40). He writes, “Jesus identifies the stranger, and even the enemy, as our neighbor. We are not called upon to prescribe the kind of behavior which everyone would find possible if we could talk to everyone, or which would lead to a healthy social order if everyone followed it. The disciples of Jesus are called to obey him in a world in which most other people do not. . . . Our obedience must be tested not by whether it can
importance of the title of his lecture, “Walking in the Resurrection,” Yoder also reminds his listeners that the “morality of the gospel is concentrated in [the] one word, resurrection.”

Morality isn’t about human achievements; rather, it is about the work of God. The entire conversation of Christian morality is predicated on the believer’s new life in Christ. This statement has radical implications for Yoder. Because morality is not about what the human can do, it doesn’t need to be concerned with what is humanly possible. Instead, the “measure of Christian obedience is the perfection of the love of God in Christ himself.”

As he has argued before, Yoder is insistent that the pattern of this radical morality, grounded in the work of God, is Jesus. Christian obedience is rooted in the person of Christ, for “the life of Jesus is a revelation of true humanity.”

Obedience, discipleship, suffering, and Christian ethics as a minority ethic are already prominent in Yoder’s early thought. It is not, however, only his positive vision of Christian morality that remains consistent throughout his career. In Yoder’s 1966 lectures, he also displays a remarkably consistency with the versions of Christian morality that he rejects. Yoder

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804 In this passage, Yoder takes issue with an understanding of Christian morality that is grounded in the orders of creation. He writes, “If there had been no New Testament, the intelligence with which humans are able to understand the nature of things, added to the Ten Commandments, would still suffice to describe the good life. Similarly, for most Protestants, the broad outlines of moral behavior are dictated by the orders of creation. . . . what God wills, what he asks of the person who seeks to please him, would be just the same if there had been no Jesus. It is only the free churches that have (not consistently, but in principle) sought an understanding of Christian obedience as rooted in the character of God as manifested in the life of Jesus.” (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 39).
805 Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 39, emphasis original. Here again Yoder takes issue against an ethic rooted only in the Ten Commandments. He states that the Ten Commandments could not be a revelation of true humanity. He writes that this understanding of Jesus as revelation of what it means to do God’s will in the world now is something unique to the free churches, it is “[w]hat Catholics have relegated to the monastery and what Protestants have relegated to the coming kingdom” but, it is “what the free church takes as command.” (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 39).
specifically rejects the mimicking of Christ; this theme is also carried out in his later writings.

Alongside these themes, Yoder underscores his central conviction that “[Jesus’] cross is to be the pattern of [the disciple’s] life,” a statement which is remarkably consistent with the imitation language that continues throughout his career. Yoder points to the core aspect of Jesus’ life that ought to be followed: the love of enemy, which is demonstrated throughout Jesus’ life and poignantly seen in the cross. The believer is called to live a life marked by this type of love. As Yoder writes, “The morality of the New Testament is the morality of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.” This suffering, seen most fully in the cross, is the apex of Yoder’s understanding of the Christian life. The love of enemy was the priority of Jesus in the New Testament. This love is most fully seen in the cross, and it is in the cross that Jesus called his disciples to follow him. The cross is the shape of Christian morality, something Yoder also calls, “the path of obedience.”

Already in these earlier lectures, Yoder’s key emphasis regarding imitating Jesus can be seen: the centrality of the cross. Yoder is unwavering in his affirmation of the core of discipleship. Believers are to imitate Jesus only in his cross. This insistence runs Yoder’s work, and is especially highlighted in The Politics of Jesus. Yoder’s insistence on believer’s only imitating Jesus in his cross raises a crucial question: how does Yoder interpret the cross?

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807 Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 40; Yoder later, in the same essay, writes “the accent in the ethics of Jesus is placed upon dealing with hostility and not upon the preservation of social institutions. For Jesus, the focus of moral concern is . . . what to do about the enemy. . . . Thus, it is simple logic when Jesus says of his disciples that his cross is to be the pattern of their life.” (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41).
The Meaning of “The Cross” in Yoder’s Thought

In order to fully understand Yoder’s definition of a proper imitation of Christ, it is necessary to get to the heart of what “the cross of Christ” means in Yoder’s thought. Yoder’s insistence on the cross as the way in which the believer imitates Jesus is seen throughout his work and aptly demonstrated in *The Politics of Jesus*. Already we’ve seen that Yoder contends that the whole of the New Testament points to Jesus’ death on the cross as the example that the believer ought to follow. For Yoder, the meaning of the cross ought not be abstracted from the meaning that is found within the Gospel’s narrative. It is to his understanding of the cross in the Gospels, particularly Luke, that we now turn.

Beginning in Luke 9, Jesus references his cross. His ministry is one of suffering; Jesus’ disciples must be ready to bear the cross with him. The prominence of the cross grows, until Jesus reaches Gethsemane. Throughout his ministry, Jesus preaches about this cost of discipleship, reiterating to his disciples that he is calling together a “community of voluntary commitment, willing for the sake of its calling to take upon itself the hostility of the given society.” To be a disciple of Jesus is to take upon oneself the life of Christ, a life of voluntary suffering that leads to the cross. Those who follow Jesus will encounter rejection and suffering. Critical to Yoder’s exegesis of the Lucan narrative is the idea that for Christ, the road to the cross – and the cross itself – was a path he chose willingly. So it is with the disciple: to

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813 In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder focuses on a close reading of the Gospel of Luke. The choice of this Gospel is quite purposeful for Yoder. Any Gospel would have been able to demonstrate the relevancy of Jesus for social ethics, but Yoder explains his concentration on Luke’s gospel by saying that Luke’s “editorial stance is often taken to have been a concern to deny that the Christian movement was any threat to Mediterranean society or Roman rule.” (Yoder, *PoJ*, 11) This editorial stance makes the Gospel of Luke the most difficult Gospel to use as a test case for Yoder’s argument. If he can prove the relevancy of Jesus for social ethics through the text of Luke, he could prove this same case with any Gospel (Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 241). Yoder’s concentration on Luke, however, is not to say that he avoids the rest of the Gospels.
815 Yoder, *PoJ*, 37, emphasis original.
bear one’s cross means to undergo suffering voluntarily.

As Jesus nears Gethsemane, he models his new way of living, which includes the renunciation of violence.\(^{817}\) In this we see a critical aspect of Yoder’s understanding of the cross. Not only is it about a willful undertaking of the way of the cross, which includes suffering and rejection, the revolution of Jesus is nonviolent in its approach.\(^{818}\) This is exemplified in Jesus’ prayer on the Mount of Olives: “Father, if you are willing, let this cup pass from me.”\(^{819}\) Yoder interprets this passage as Jesus expressing the temptation of the option of violence as a way to circumvent the cross.\(^{820}\) But Jesus ends his prayer with the words, “not my will, but yours, be done.”\(^{821}\) In this, Jesus accepts the fate of the cross, a distinctly nonviolent fate.\(^{822}\)

Then Jesus reaches the cross, where the way of Jesus is fully seen. In the cross, Yoder argues, the kingdom has come.\(^{823}\) This kingdom is marked by willful, voluntary suffering, the world’s rejection, and the nonviolent way of Jesus. The cross embodies self-sacrificial love:\(^{824}\)

Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who despitefully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come.\(^{825}\)

The cross of Jesus is the “culmination of that new regime” that his followers are called to participate in.\(^{826}\) Through the cross – and in his life, and resurrection – believers receive Jesus’

\(^{817}\) Yoder, PoJ, 39–48; Yoder is again clear to note that the choice of violence as a way to fulfil his mission was a real temptation for Jesus (Yoder, PoJ, 46).


\(^{820}\) Yoder, PoJ, 46, 48.


\(^{824}\) Grimsrud, “Prologue,” 7.

\(^{825}\) Yoder, PoJ, 51, emphasis added.

\(^{826}\) Yoder, PoJ, 52.
gift of “salvation as restored communion and consequently restored capacity to obedience.”

The kingdom, this new way and this new community, is accomplished in the cross. In the cross, Jesus created a new community, and a new way of living marked by servanthood.

In his exegesis of Luke’s Gospel, Yoder identifies core aspects of the cross: voluntary suffering and a renunciation of violence. Thus, following Jesus in his cross has several key marks. First, the cross involves obedience. Obedience, for Yoder, is key to understanding the way in which those who hear Jesus are to participate in the cross. Believers are to imitate Jesus in his new way of living, one that embodies servanthood and suffering for the sake of the other – even the enemy. They are called to bear this cross. It is only because of Christ’s work on the cross, however, that they can do this. In his life and on the cross, Jesus created a “new inclusive peoplehood around the model of [his] humanity, whereby the renunciation of violence was definitive of the integrity of the new way.”

This new way is the way of the cross.

The cross is also marked by a refusal of violence, even as a means to accomplish important ends. To bear the cross of Christ, as a follower of Christ, is to join the community of those who, like Christ, refuse violence.

... Yoder writes that

the one temptation Jesus faced – and faced again and again – as a constitutive element of his public ministry, was the temptation to exercise social responsibility, in the interest of justified revolution, through the use of available violent methods. . . . We understand

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827 John Howard Yoder, Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 312.
828 This new community, in and of itself, is critical to Yoder’s understanding. He writes, “Jesus’ strategy for change began and ended with the creation of a covenant community.” (Yoder, “Revolution and Gospel,” 158).
829 Yoder argues that in the Gospels, we see Jesus’ call to an “ethic marked by the cross, a cross identified as the punishment of a man who threatens society by creating a new kind of community leading a radically new kind of life” (Yoder, PoJ, 53). In The Original Revolution, Yoder again articulates Jesus’ work as the work of a servant. Pointing to Matthew 20:25, Yoder argues that Jesus “also saw this as His disciples’ way.” (John Howard Yoder, “The Original Revolution,” in The Original Revolution (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1977), 29-30).
830 For Yoder, as we’ll see, these are causally linked. A rejection of violence is a rejection of the status quo. This has political ramifications, which will lead to suffering.
833 Yoder clearly joins together the concept of discipleship and carrying the cross, see both PoJ and Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 22.
Jesus only if we can empathize with this threefold rejection; the self-evident, axiomatic, sweeping rejection of both quietism and establishment responsibility, and the difficult, constantly reopened, genuinely attractive option of the crusade.834

While violent ways of accomplishing his task were offered to him, Jesus did not give in to this temptation. He refused to use violence as a way to fulfill his task.835 This refusal of violence in the cross leads Yoder to the conclusion that “at its heart, Jesus’ cross may be seen as embodied pacifism.”836 In the cross, Jesus concretely demonstrated that his way is the way of nonviolence. Jesus refused to turn away from the way of nonviolence, even when it cost him his life. Rather than utilizing the sword, he takes up his cross. As he suffers (and, indeed, suffers violently), he does not retaliate.837

The cross also involves innocent suffering.838 The suffering of Christ on the cross is not tantamount to any suffering a person may undergo in this world. On the cross, Jesus was not suffering for something he had done; Jesus was innocent. Jesus was also not suffering for an inexplicable cause; his suffering was directly related to his actions. Jesus suffered on the cross because he had done the right thing; he suffered because he was obedient to the will of God, not the ways of the world. Yoder writes,

The cross of Christ was the price of his obedience to God amidst a rebellious world; it was suffering for having done right, for loving where others hated, for representing in the

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834 Yoder, PoJ, 97.
835 John Howard Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?,” in The Royal Priesthood, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 147. Yoder argues, “nonviolence is thus not a matter of legalism but of discipleship, not ‘thou shalt not,’ but ‘as he is, so are we in this world’ (1 John 4:17). . . . Every strand of New Testament literature testifies to a direct relationship between the way Christ suffered on the cross and the way the Christian, as disciple, is called to suffer in the face of evil (Matt. 10:38; Mark 10:38f.; 8:34; Luke 14:27).” (Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?,” 148)
838 In Discipleship as Political Responsibility, Yoder repeats this claim: as Jesus innocently suffered, so the Christian is to follow Jesus in innocent suffering (Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 58-60).
flesh the forgiveness and righteousness of God among men both less forgiving and less righteous. The cross of Christ was God’s way of overcoming evil with God.  

The cross is the price of obedience to the way of God in a world that does not follow him; it is the price of embodying the love of God in a world that often acts in hate.

This suffering on the cross is not all Christian suffering. It is not, as mysticism claims, an inward struggle with one’s sin; it is not, as has often been claimed in pastoral care settings, a generalized suffering (illness, poverty, or other circumstances). Instead, Jesus’ suffering on the cross – upon which the church models its own suffering – is the “price of social nonconformity,” Jesus could have avoided the suffering on the cross. He chose to be obedient, a choice that led him to the cross. Disciples, too, willingly choosing the “cost of discipleship” will suffer.

Jesus warns them of this! When Jesus discusses the cross, he warns his disciples to expect persecution.

As Jesus was persecuted, so his disciples will be persecuted; this persecution is directed related to the cross for it is

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840 Yoder, “The Way of Peace in a World of War,” 19. Yoder draws a direct connection between the cross of Jesus and the cross of the Christian. Christians are, similarly, to not resist evil. Jesus commands this in Matthew 5:39-45. Jesus gives this command with full knowledge of what it will cost. To follow his commands means that one will undergo suffering.
841 Yoder lays out a threefold typology to demarcate the ways that the church has interpreted what it means to suffer on the cross. Medieval mysticism understands the “cross” as an inward experience. It is the Christian’s struggle with “doubt or pride until it is brought to that brokenness and surrender that permits the mystical vision.” Yoder rejects this inward emphasis in interpreting the cross. Similarly, Yoder rejects the meaning of the cross in the “theocratic world,” or the way that “cross” has been used in pastoral care settings. Here, the cross is understood to be a suffering that is a product of the Christian’s life that you may or may not be responsible for. Bearing your cross means living with “an incurable illness or a difficult relative or poverty.” In this interpretation, surrendering means “simply the acceptance of one’s being who and where one is as ‘where God has placed you.’” This interpretation of the cross generalizes the suffering of the cross to be any type of suffering that you may encounter. (John Howard Yoder, “A People in the World,” in The Royal Priesthood, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 87. Without highlighting this systematic way of delineating interpretations of the cross, Yoder repeats these emphases in The Politics of Jesus (Yoder, PoJ, 129; see also John Howard Yoder, “The Cross as Social Fact,” in Revolutionary Christianity: 1966 South American Lectures, ed. Paul Martens, Mark Thiessen Nation, Matthew Porter, and Myles Wernitz (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 69). Against these options, Yoder posits the third, correct way of interpreting the suffering of the cross.
842 Yoder, PoJ, 96; Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 60; Yoder, “A People in the World,” 86-87.
843 Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 60.
a normative statement about the relation of our social obedience to the messianity of Jesus. Representing as he did the divine order now at hand, accessible; renouncing as he did the legitimate use of violence and the accrediting of the existing authorities; renouncing as well the ritual purity of noninvolvement, his people will encounter in ways analogous to his own hostility of the old order.\textsuperscript{846}

In the cross, Jesus embodies the love of God; even as he was persecuted, Jesus reaffirmed his love for the enemy. He embodied an enemy-love that runs against to the logic of the world.

The way of the cross is marked by being in direct conflict with the way of the world. On the cross, Jesus suffered the hostility of the world because he was acting in accord with his new kingdom, not the ways of the world. Jesus opted to forgo the use of violence to accomplish his mission. Choosing nonviolence, Jesus rejected the “Zealot Option,” a violent revolution to overcome his oppressors.\textsuperscript{847} By rejecting this option, he went against the order and the expectations of the day;\textsuperscript{848} he gave up political efficacy for the way of the cross.\textsuperscript{849} In his refusal of violence, Jesus acted as a rebel, going against the ways of society.\textsuperscript{850} He refused to actively work with, or cooperate with in any way, evil institutions (those that were marked by the use of violence).\textsuperscript{851} Thus Yoder claims, “the ‘cross’ of Jesus was a political punishment;”\textsuperscript{852} it is the

\textsuperscript{846} Yoder, PoJ, 96.

\textsuperscript{847} In this, he created a new kind of Zealot: a “non-nationalistic, nonviolent ‘Zealot,’” a pacifist revolutionary.” In this, he resists the “Zealot temptation” to use violence to accomplish his mission, instead bringing social change in a nonviolent way. (Bertschmann, Bowing before Christ, 47).

\textsuperscript{848} Yoder, PoJ 125; cf. Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 57.


\textsuperscript{851} Yoder, “Revolution and Gospel,” 157.

\textsuperscript{852} Yoder, PoJ, 125.
“political, legally-to-be-expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society.”

Foregoing the expected, efficacious political options of the day, however, is not opting entirely out of political engagement. Yoder is clear that Jesus’ rejection of the Zealot option is a political option; rejecting political efficacy does not necessitate rejecting political involvement.

The cross is also victory. Jesus’ clash with the Powers of his day, forgoing violence and instead choosing obedience to God unto death, may look like defeat to the world. But Yoder is clear that while contrary to the ways of the world, the cross is Jesus’ victory. Here, the active, political nature of Jesus is made even more clear: in his rejection of political efficacy, Jesus obtained ultimate victory. His posture was not one of mere passive withdrawal. It is an active engagement in political life, actively clashing with the Powers of the day by living out an alternative witness. Yoder’s view of the Powers, and Christ’s victory over them through the cross, is heavily informed by Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof.

Berkhof – and subsequently Yoder, using Berkhof’s own words – argues that “on the cross [Christ] ‘disarmed’ the Powers, ‘made a public example of them and thereby triumphed over them.’” Thus, the cross of Christ is his victory over the Powers, even if it looks like defeat to the world. Rather than subject
himself to the way of the Powers, Jesus “broke their rules, by refusing to support them in their self-glorification.”

Obedience until death is in itself not only the sign but also the firstfruits of an authentic restored humanity. Here we have for the first time to do with someone who is not the slave of any power, of any law or custom, community or institution, value or theory. Not even to save his own life will he let himself be made a slave of these Powers.

On the cross, Jesus disarmed the Powers. By disarming the Powers, he opened up a new possibility for his disciples to follow in his footsteps; the dominion of the Powers was broken.

As Jesus lived, so now they may live. They live as those who “know another regime is normative,” not bound to the customs, institutions, or Powers of the day. Rather than disarming the Powers through the sword, Jesus created a new humanity through the cross. The cross is, finally, the mark of true humanity; to live a cruciform life is to be truly human. Yoder argues that Jesus’ obedience to death is “not only the sign but also the firstfruits of an authentic restored humanity.” In his death on the cross, Jesus demonstrates what it means to live as humanity was intended to live. The way of life in Christ is the way of the cross; the way of the cross is the way of true humanity. Yoder makes this point even stronger in “Liberating Images of Christ” where he writes that “human life . . . conformed to the image of God in Jesus,

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859 Yoder, PoJ, 145.
861 Yoder, PoJ, 187. This leads to a posture of “voluntary subordination” as seen in Jesus on the cross. Mouw connects Christ’s way of confronting the Powers to the Christian’s attitude to the state: “The Christian’s submission to the state grows out of an attempt to imitate the work of Christ on the cross” (Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 112).
862 Yoder also affirms the particularity of Christ’s death: “But Christ’s death was not like any other death. It was the end of the sacrificial system. . . . No more can a society claim that its peace demands the blood of a scapegoat. Enemy love, the cross as a way of life and death, is not merely a moral ideal. . . it is participation in redemption” (John Howard Yoder, “Politics: Liberating Images of Christ,” 163).
863 Yoder, PoJ, 145.
is . . . a revelation of the way things really are. The cruciform life ‘works’ because it goes with
the grain of the cosmos.” Following the cruciform example of Jesus, Christians live as the first
fruits of “restored humanity.”

It is in the cross – marked by servanthood, obedience, nonviolence, innocent suffering,
conflict with the world, victory, and true humanity – that disciples imitate Christ. The cross is the
norm of Christian discipleship; it is paradigmatic for social ethics. As Jesus is centrally defining
for Yoder’s entire theological project, Jesus’ cross is centrally defining for the life of the
believer:

the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power determines the meaning of
history. The key to the obedience of God’s people is not their effectiveness but their
patience ([Revelation] 13:10). The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that
comes to the aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence
and other kinds of power in every human conflict. The triumph of the right, although it is
assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection . . . . The relationship between
the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of God’s cause is not a relationship of
cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.

Jesus chose to be the suffering servant rather than exercise a type of violent power. He chose to
demonstrate love that took him all the way to his death rather than be a part of the power
structures of his day. In the cross, Jesus demonstrates what it means to be truly human. In his
life – and especially in his death on the cross – Jesus demonstrates the enemy-love of God.
The cross is Jesus’

extreme demonstration that agape seeks neither effectiveness nor justice and is willing to

865 Yoder, PoJ, 145, emphasis added.
866 As it is for the church; Yoder writes, “the very nature of the church is to confront evil with suffering, cross-
carrying love.” (Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 26). This, for him is directly connected to the
relationship between the church and the state (see Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 17-48).
867 Yoder, PoJ, 232. Again, Yoder insists on obedience over effectiveness (see fn. 146).
868 Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 39; Forrester, “John Howard Yoder,” 417. He also models this in his life
and resurrection. Jesus’ victory over the Powers results in “an authentic restored humanity.” (Yoder, PoJ, 145).
869 This was not, by the standards of his day or ours, the “effective” strategy. But, it was the strategy that Jesus
chose. Likewise, Yoder stresses that disciples are called to faithfulness, not effectiveness (Yoder, PoJ, 233).
suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience.\footnote{Yoder, "Peace without Eschatology?," 147.}

In the cross, “servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility.”\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 131.} Jesus’ disciples are called to follow him in this example, choosing “the inevitable suffering of those whose only goal is to be faithful to that love which puts one at the mercy of one’s neighbor.”\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 236.} The way of the cross is the way of servanthood, nonviolence, and enemy love;\footnote{Yoder, “The Way of Peace in a World of War,” 20-21; in “Revolution and Gospel,” Yoder clarifies that “we are not to love the enemy simply because we love everyone and make no exceptions. (This Jesus also says.) We are to love the enemy because it is the enemy for whom God suffers the most. \textit{This is the pattern of atonement}; this is also the pattern of wholesome social change.” (Yoder, “Revolution and Gospel,” 157).} it is necessarily at odds with the ways of the world – and to follow this path leads to suffering, following the way of the suffering servant, Jesus.\footnote{Yoder’s view of the cross does not, as some have claimed, downplay the importance of the resurrection. Carter writes that “Yoder fails to give sufficient attention to the resurrection of Christ in \textit{The Politics of Jesus}.” (Carter, \textit{The Politics of the Cross}, 109); Budziszewski also questions Yoder’s understanding of the resurrection, noting Yoder’s doubts about resurrection reports (Budziszewski, \textit{Evangelicals in the Public Square}, 96). However, Yoder unapologetically affirms the relationship between the cross and the resurrection in \textit{The Politics of Jesus’} (Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 232). In an unpublished lecture, he states even more strongly: the resurrection is . . . the Nile of the Bible . . . It is the center around which all the rest of the biblical message rotates.” (John Howard Yoder, “Faith is Resurrection,” Christian Life Week Lectures, Bethel College, January 1964, unpublished manuscript, quoted in Nation, “The Politics of Jesus Regarding \textit{The Politics of the Cross},” 44).}

\textbf{Yoder’s Biblical Justification for a Proper Imitation of Christ}

In his monograph on John Howard Yoder’s thought, \textit{John Howard Yoder: Mennonite Patience, Evangelical Witness, Catholic Convictions}, Mark Thiessen Nation does not devote much space to Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ. In his brief discussion of this topic, however, Nation specifically focuses on Yoder’s methodological approach towards the topic of imitation. In Yoder’s discussion of the imitation of Christ, he deviates from his general pattern in \textit{The Politics of Jesus}. In most chapters, Yoder engages the dominant scholarship, looking to specific books or authors. In chapter seven, where Yoder discusses the imitation of...
Christ, he does not take this approach. Rather than drawing on current scholarship, Yoder focuses solely on the New Testament. Nation argues that this is intentional:

Yoder does this specifically to make a point: the concept of the imitation of Christ — or discipleship or participation or correspondence or whatever term one wants to use — is pervasive in the New Testament.

Yoder’s claim that scripture calls Christians to “be like Jesus” in his cross is firmly grounded in his exegesis of New Testament texts.

Yoder’s overall aim of The Politics of Jesus is to make clear that “Jesus is, according to biblical witness, a model of radical political action.” This gives way to a robust imitation ethic; Christ, understood as a model of political action, necessitates that the believer must follow this model. In The Politics of Jesus, Yoder provides biblical exegesis for both his claim that Jesus ought to be imitated and his claim that Jesus ought to be imitated consistently and universally on only one subject, his cross. Yoder’s biblical justification for the claim that Jesus ought to be imitated is wide-ranging, and comprehensive; in this he shows that the whole of the New Testament witness points to the “exemplary quality of Jesus’ social humanity . . . as a model for our social ethics.”

As he points to the witness of scripture to show the centrality of imitating Christ in the life of the believer, Yoder not only changes his method, but he changes his style. Yoder
simply presents the reader with an outline that shows the biblical proof for understanding imitation as the central tenant of the believer’s life. Through this, Yoder contends that the New Testament as a whole portrays the life of the believer as that of a disciple, or an imitator. Perhaps the best way to understand Yoder’s argument is to replicate his outline here. The main points and their corresponding sub points of this outline make up the bulk of Yoder’s original text in this chapter. In the rest of the chapter, Yoder simply lets Scripture speak for itself. Under each subheading in Yoder’s argument, he shows the vast biblical witness for each of his claims; the references to the texts Yoder cites in full can be found in the footnotes. Yoder’s outline, demonstrating that Scripture proclaims Jesus as an example for the believer (and thus, the one to be imitated), is as follows:

I. The Disciple/Participant and the Love of God
   A. Sharing the divine nature as the definition of Christian existence
   B. Forgive as God has forgiven you
   C. Love indiscriminately as God does

II. The Disciple/Participant and the Life of Christ
   A. Being in Christ as the definition of Christian existence
   B. Having died with Christ and sharing his risen life
   C. Loving as Christ loved, giving himself
   D. Serving others as he served
   E. Subordination

III. The Disciple/Participant and the Death of Christ
   A. Suffering with Christ as the definition of apostolic existence
   B. Sharing in divine condescension

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881 Yoder, PoJ, 115-127.
882 Yoder, PoJ, 115-127.
883 1 John 1:5-7; 1 John 3:1-3; 1 Peter 1:15-16 (citing Lev. 19:2); 1 John 4:17; Colossians 3:9; Ephesians 4:24.
886 1 John 2:6.
890 Yoder provides no direct citations for this point. He writes, “[Ephesians 5:25-28, carrying Christ’s model of servanthood into the concreteness of family life, links us to another body of apostolic thought which is dealt with at greater length in [my chapter on Revolutionary Subordination]]” (Yoder, PoJ, 120; see 162ff).
891 Philippians 3:10-11; 2 Corinthians 4:10, 1:5; Colossians 1:24; 1 Corinthians 10:33-34; 1 Thessalonians 1:6.
892 Philippians 2:3-14.
In this outline, Yoder draws from the full New Testament witness. Surveying the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation, Yoder demonstrates that the New Testament consistently calls Jesus’ disciples to follow him. There is an abundance of language of discipleship, imitation, and participation in the New Testament, language which “characterized not only the motivation but also the shape of early Christian behavior.” In this survey, Yoder appeals to the classic imitation texts, such as the Christ Hymn in Philippians, 

Let your bearing toward one another rise out of your life in Christ. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he . . . made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave.

But Yoder goes far beyond this classic text, also referring to texts like 1 John 4:17, “Even in this world we are as he is,” and 1 Peter 4:1-2, 

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourself with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.

In his survey of New Testament texts, Yoder demonstrates that believers are called to follow
Christ, using the metaphors of discipleship and imitation. They are called to share in the love of God, loving and forgiving as God has; they are called to share in the life of Christ, giving of themselves and serving others as he did; and they are called to share in the death of Christ, suffering and giving their life as he did. In the call to share in each of these aspects of Jesus’ life, the New Testament uses the motif of imitation (or discipleship).

As Yoder concludes his survey of New Testament texts regarding the imitation of Christ, he writes that these texts provide “a rich variety of shadings and emphases within one pervasive thought pattern.”

This “thought pattern” is the disciple’s patterning their life upon the way of Jesus. Yoder then turns to the specific shape of this pattern, writing

If we may posit – as after the preceding [passages] we must – that the apostles had and taught at least a core memory of their Lord’s earthly ministry in its blunt historicity, then this centering of the apostolic ethic upon the disciple’s cross evidences a substantial, binding, and sometimes costly social stance.

In his survey of New Testament texts, Yoder points to the central object of imitation: the cross. Throughout *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder gives further evidence that it is only in the cross that Jesus ought to be imitated, and then he must be imitated consistently and universally.

Yoder clearly demonstrates the depth and breadth of the New Testament witness to the imitation motif, but argues that there is no “general concept of living like Jesus in the New Testament.” Not every act of Jesus’ ought to be imitated, but many imitation traditions misunderstand this concept. Both those “who seek to follow Jesus in a formal mimicking of his life-style and many who use this distortion to argue Jesus’ irrelevance” wrongly adhere to a general concept of imitation in the New Testament. Yoder’s exegesis affirms an alternative

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904 Yoder, *PoJ*, 127.
905 This is echoed in Yoder’s other works: see *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, *The Royal Priesthood*, and *The Original Revolution*.
906 Yoder, *PoJ*, 130, emphasis original.
reading, one which binds the believer to imitate Christ only in his cross.

Yoder’s first reason for this qualified imitation ethic, imitating Christ only in his cross, again draws upon his New Testament exegesis. While tradition states that Jesus was not married, when Paul advocates for celibacy (1 Cor. 7), he does not appeal to the example of Christ; Jesus’ singleness is not the reason for other Christian’s singleness. The same is true for Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 9, when he describes why he works as an artisan to support his ministry. Paul does not appeal to the life of Jesus, his work as a carpenter, to justify his actions; Jesus’ craft is not the reason for others to take up work as an artisan. Many aspects of Jesus’ life are repeated in the lives of other believers, but the New Testament does not portray these general choices as necessary because of the normative character these life choices of Jesus. Again underscoring Yoder’s point, while many have suggested that Jesus’ use of earthy imagery exalt agrarian life, the New Testament does not teach this. And, although followers of Jesus have attempted to imitate Jesus’ extended time in the desert, the New Testament does not hold this out to believers as a practice to emulate. In each of these examples, Yoder’s point is clear: the New Testament does not teach that all aspects of Jesus’ life ought to be imitated.

This brings us to the final aspect of Yoder’s exegesis. He has demonstrated the resounding New Testament calling to the believer to follow the example of Jesus. He has also demonstrated that there are many aspects of Jesus’ life that the New Testament does not hold out for the believer to externally mimic. Finally, in The Politics of Jesus, Yoder demonstrates that it is in the cross that the disciple is called to imitate Jesus.


[Jesus’] withdrawal from [the crowd’s] acclamation is (in all the Gospels) the occasion

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908 Yoder, PoJ, 130-131.
for his first statement that his ministry was to be one of suffering and that his disciples would need to be ready to bear the cross.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 35.}

At the end of this chapter, “the cross is beginning to loom;” the cross is to be further concretized in Luke 12-14, where Jesus shows the cost of discipleship.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 36.} In Luke 14:26, Jesus speaks this word of warning, “if anyone does not hate father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yea, and even his own life, He cannot be my disciple.”\footnote{Luke 4:26, quoted by Yoder in \textit{PoJ}, 37.} Yoder expounds on this warning saying:

Jesus is here calling into being a community of \textit{voluntary} commitment, wiling for the sake of its calling to take upon itself the hostility of the given society [characterized by family ties] . . . to be a disciple is to share in that style of life of which the cross is the culmination.”\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 37-38.}

It is not only the Gospels that point to this motif of the disciples’ cross. Paul picks up this theme, speaking of his own life as “a sharing in the dying and rising of Jesus.”\footnote{Yoder points to 2 Corinthians 4:10-11, “I carry about in the body the dying of Jesus” and Colossians 1:24, “I will fill out what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for his body the church.” (Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 94).} Paul points not just to suffering in his own life and ministry, but to the suffering of all believers. Yoder highlights Philippians 1:29, where Paul writes “To you is given not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him.”\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 94.} Other epistles also share in this theme. Yoder writes

1 Peter speaks of the cross as an example finding concrete imitation when a slave obeys a cruel master; Hebrews 12 describes Jesus as the author and finisher of that faith whose expressions in believers may yet reach to the shedding of blood. 1 John 3 makes the polarity Cain/Christ, hate/love, killing/laying down one’s life, typical of all the meaning of obedience.\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 94.}

In each of these texts, Yoder highlights the consistent call of the disciple to share in Jesus’ suffering and death. The whole of the New Testament testifies that suffering of Jesus, in his
death, is the guiding principle for the life of the believer.\footnote{As Yoder points out in his outline, suffering with Jesus is “the definition of apostolic existence.” (Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 120, emphasis added).}

To imitate Jesus is “not simply to learn from him, but also to share in his destiny.”\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 124.} The New Testament consistently calls the believer to live the life of a disciple, imitating Jesus. In his survey of the New Testament, and detailed exegesis of the Gospel of Luke, Yoder highlights the regularity of the believer’s call to “bear his own cross.”\footnote{Luke 14:27.} Christ, the Suffering Servant, understood his destiny: the cross. Yoder argues that the cross is also the destiny of the believer. Yoder’s survey of the New Testament and biblical exegesis lead to his claim that Jesus ought to be imitated \textit{consistently and universally} on \textit{only one} subject, his cross.

\textbf{The Imitation of Christ as Inherently Political}

In \textit{The Politics of Jesus}, Yoder argues that the New Testament consistently points to Jesus’ renunciation of violence, the normativity and relevance of Jesus’ example for the Christian community; faithfulness to the example of Jesus, then, is a \textit{political} choice: \footnote{Hays, \textit{The Moral Vision of the New Testament}, 240.}

\begin{quote}
[Jesus’ listeners] are called not to understand or to contemplate, but to follow, to be incorporated into that same life style. The basic category is not insight, but obedience or solidarity. That is the reason the Good News we need, which we receive in him, must be the narrative of a real person’s life, servanthood, death, and life. The life was political; the servanthood and death were political, and the new life was political. . . . What Jesus calls his hearers to do, most fundamentally, is not cognitive, but political. They are called, not to understand him, but to follow him; not to master a mantra, but to join a movement, to proclaim “News” and to bear a cross. \footnote{Yoder, “Liberating Images of Christ,” 153.}
\end{quote}

Yoder challenges the assumption that Jesus is \textit{not} normative for ethics by presenting a New Testament witness to the social, political, and ethical relevance of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection. \footnote{Nation, \textit{John Howard Yoder}, 111; Nation, “The Politics of Yoder Regarding \textit{The Politics of Jesus},” 38.}
Yoder argues the political nature of following Jesus by drawing attention to the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. The words of Mary’s *Magnificat* testify to the radical socio-political change that will come with the birth of Christ.\(^{922}\)

> He has shown strength with his arm,  
> He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
> He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
> And exalted those of low degree;  
> He has filled the hungry with good things,  
> And the rich he has sent away empty.\(^{923}\)

The words of Zechariah similarly testify to social change, “we should be saved from our enemies.”\(^{924}\) John the Baptist, too, articulates his hopes of the socio-political change that would come with the Messiah.\(^{925}\) Then, the Messiah is born. Yoder argues that the birth narrative of Jesus re-affirms this witness to the political significance of Jesus.\(^{926}\) Announced at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, an affirmation of the political nature of Jesus’ ministry continues throughout the Gospel.\(^{927}\) From this, Yoder takes his central claim: Jesus’ ministry – his life, teachings, death, and resurrection – was political.\(^{928}\) It has direct significance for social ethics.\(^{929}\)

Yoder’s conclusion to his exegesis of Luke’s Gospel underscores the political nature of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection. Yoder’s incisive claim is worth citing in full:

\(^{924}\) Luke 1:71a; quoted by Yoder in *PoJ*, 22.  
\(^{926}\) This is seen in Caesar’s census, Bethlehem’s identification as the “city of David,” the angel’s announcement of “peace on earth,” Herod’s fear of the coming king and more Yoder, *PoJ*, 23.  
\(^{928}\) In *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, Yoder directly asks the question: “Does the command to follow Jesus apply for the Christian also in the realm of politics?” He answers this question with a resounding, “yes!” (Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 52).  
\(^{929}\) Yoder warns that to not see Jesus as political is to fall into one of two ancient heresies: Docetism or Ebionism. To not view the political aspects of Christ’s ministry as “truly human political decisions” is to fall into Docetism; to affirm these political aspects but “deny them any revelational quality” is to fall into Ebionism. (Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 58; Yoder makes the same point in “The Cross as Social Fact,” 65-66).
Jesus was not just a moralist whose teachings had some political implications. He was not primarily a teacher of spirituality whose public ministry was unfortunately seen in a political light. He was not just a sacrificial lamb or a God-man whose divine status calls us to disregard his humanity. “Jesus was, in his divinely mandated prophethood, priesthood, and kingship, the bearer of a new possibility of human, social, and therefore political relationships. His baptism is the inauguration and his cross is the culmination of that new regime in which his disciples are called to share.”

Yoder argues that the Gospels testify to the socio-political character of Jesus’ ministry. From this claim stems another: the imitation of Christ is inherently political.

As we have already established, for Yoder, properly understanding the imitation of Christ means that the believer only imitates Jesus in his cross (but in the cross, imitates him consistently and universally). The cross of Christ, Yoder argues, is deeply political. It was a political punishment; indeed, Jesus’ decision to go to the cross had a multitude of political implications. While Yoder certainly looks to the whole of Jesus’ life and teachings for a social ethic, in Jesus’ death, he clearly identifies the politics of the Suffering Servant.

Jesus’ cross opened up a new way of conceptualizing how one could effect social change; Jesus embodies a new way of being political. In the cross, Yoder argues, Jesus demonstrates the possibility of nonviolent resistance that has radical social implications. As Yoder explains in his lecture “Revolution and Gospel,” Jewish people understood three distinct options in the face of Roman power. First, the option employed by the Sadducees: align yourself with the powerful people of the day, while still cultivating and preserving the historic faith. Second, the “Zealot option”: use revolutionary military violence to directly attack those who are oppressing you. Finally, the third option: withdrawal in order to devote oneself to the study of scripture and the

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930 Yoder, PoJ, 52, emphasis added.
931 Yoder, PoJ, 112.
932 Yoder, PoJ, 125. See pages 28-30 for more on the political nature of the cross, particularly Yoder’s understanding of Jesus’ plea for God to “let this cup pass from me.” See also: Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility, 56-57.
933 Yoder, PoJ, 45-53.
practices of the tradition. Yoder argues that both options two and three were open to Jesus. He could have joined those gathered in the desert. Even more likely, Jesus could have aligned himself with the Zealot option. But, Jesus did not align himself with any of these options. Rather, he “proclaimed a new order, a kingdom, but rejected violence as a way to bring it into being.”

Jesus chose a new way, a way that Yoder deems the “nonviolent Zealot,” one who willingly and innocently accepts death. He rejected violence, instead displaying the epitome of enemy love. The alternative, the Zealot option, was a real temptation for Christ, one that could have addressed the social and political problems of the day “by means of violent revolution and his own-miracle working power.” Instead, in Jesus’ rejection of the Zealot option, he affirmed a new political option. Yoder writes:

Jesus is from the beginning to end homo politicus. Not only his preaching of the kingdom of God – could there be a more specifically politically tinged term than kingdom? – but also his deeds were of the greatest political relevance. It stood before him as an open possibility that he might achieve his social purposes through the means of political power, combining the support of the Zealots with his own miraculous capacities. Jesus rejected this possibility because that was what God did not desire and this is why he was crucified.

In Jesus’ rejection of the Zealot option, the way of the cross is laid out: nonviolence replaces...
violence, enemy love replaces revenge.\textsuperscript{941} This is the way of the kingdom – and it is inherently political.\textsuperscript{942} Getting to the heart of his claim that the disciple is to imitate Jesus in his cross, Yoder argues that “Jesus died (as we still die today) because people refused to see (as we today refuse to see) that political can mean something more than violent.”\textsuperscript{943}

In his work on the cross, Jesus also confronted the Powers by “accepting powerlessness.”\textsuperscript{944} As Mouw points out, one of the keys to understanding Yoder’s view of Christian political involvement is found in the relationship between Jesus and the Powers.\textsuperscript{945} The manner in which Jesus defeated the Powers guides the believer’s political engagement:

> The Powers have been defeated not by some cosmic hocus-pocus but by the concreteness of the cross; the impact of the cross upon them is . . . the sovereign presence, within the structures of creaturely orderliness, of Jesus the kingly claimant and of the church which is itself a structure and a power in society. Thus the historicity of Jesus retains, in the working of the church as it encounters the other power and value structures in history, the same kind of relevance that the man Jesus had for those whom he served until they killed him.\textsuperscript{946}

Followers of Christ must imitate the posture of Jesus on the cross, “voluntary subordination of one who knows that another regime is normative.”\textsuperscript{947} By refusing the pattern of the Powers, Jesus claimed victory over them.\textsuperscript{948} Jesus’ disciples, too, must accept powerlessness, following his “revolutionary subordination”;\textsuperscript{949} this way of being in the world is political.

To some, Yoder’s insistence on Jesus’ alternative political vision, a vision grounded in

\textsuperscript{941} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 40. Yoder calls the command to love one’s enemies the “novelty of the life of obedience.”
\textsuperscript{942} Jesus’ rejection of the sword (his rejection of the Zealot option), Yoder writes, “was politically relevant, [so] both the Sanhedrin and the Procurator had to deny him the right to live (Yoder, PoJ, 107).
\textsuperscript{943} Yoder, “The Cross as Social Fact,” 65. In his discussion of Christ’s death, Yoder reminds his us that: “But Christ’s death was not like any other death. It was “the end of the sacrificial system. . . . No more can a society claim that its peace demands the blood of a scapegoat. Enemy love, the cross as a way of life and death, is not merely a moral ideal. . . it is participation in redemption” (Yoder, “Politics: Liberating Images of Christ,” 163).
\textsuperscript{944} Yoder, PoJ, 237.
\textsuperscript{945} Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 111; see Yoder, “Christ and the Powers,” 126-128.
\textsuperscript{946} Yoder, PoJ, 158.
\textsuperscript{947} Yoder, PoJ, 187.
\textsuperscript{948} Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 112.
\textsuperscript{949} See Yoder, PoJ, 162-192 and Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 100-107.
voluntary subordination and a rejection of political efficacy, may seem to be promoting a vision
that is radically disengaged with civic and political life. It may seem that Yoder’s vision simply
calls for passive withdrawal from the world.\textsuperscript{950} Indeed, Yoder does call for withdrawal from
some areas; for example, following the way of Jesus who rejected the option of “military
messianity,” Yoder is committed to nonviolence;\textsuperscript{951} as such, he calls for abstention from the
current war efforts of the United States in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{952} He argues that “because the use of the
sword is irreconcilable with the will of God for humans in society,” one must not become an
“agent of governmental violence.”\textsuperscript{953} But this ought not be read as his rejection of all engagement
with government. Certainly, as Yoder affirms, there are strains within the Anabaptist tradition
that would affirm such non-engagement, but this is not the posture that Yoder advocates. In a
brief commentary on whether or not a Christian should vote, Yoder articulates this difference:

To go to the polls is then not, as the Hutterite and the hippie on one side and the
superpatriot on the other contend, a ritual affirmation of moral solidarity with the system.
It is one way, one of the weaker and vaguer ways, to speak truth to power. We may do
well to support this channel with our low-key participation, since a regime where it
functions is a lesser evil (all other things being equal) than one where it does not, but our
discharge of this civil duty will be more morally serious if we take it less seriously.\textsuperscript{954}

Again, in “The Spirit of God and the Politics of Man,” Yoder argues that one cannot remain
entirely separate from the political realm. He argues that “[a] related misunderstanding is the
notion that it might be possible for Christians to avoid or withdraw from the political realm
simply and entirely.”\textsuperscript{955} Rather, as we have seen, the Christian ought to be political as Jesus is

\textsuperscript{950} Hauerwas and Tolonen, among others, cite this common criticism of Yoder (Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Vision and
Miika Tolonen, \textit{Witness is Presence: Reading Stanley Hauerwas in a Nordic Setting} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock,
2013), 108).

\textsuperscript{951} Yoder, “Love and Responsibility,” 82.

\textsuperscript{952} Yoder, “Love and Responsibility,” 77, 91.

\textsuperscript{953} Yoder, “Love and Responsibility,” 82, emphasis added.

https://sojo.net/articles/what-would-yoder-do.

\textsuperscript{955} Yoder, \textit{For the Nations}, 222.
political. This necessitates active engagement in public life, while one’s allegiance and actions are directed to the alternative way of Jesus.

The biblical witness, Yoder argues, testifies to this communal, alternative, actively engaged posture in the public square; he argues that there are “several samples of the way a moral minority can ‘seek the welfare of the city.’”956 The actions of Jesus are normative for the believer; examples of how one lives out this posture can be seen, Yoder argues, throughout the stories of scripture. He looks specifically to Jeremiah, Daniel, and Mordecai, who are, he argues, “models of social leadership without statehood. Each contributes to the health of a pagan political system, and each dramatically wins recognition from the pagan system that the God of the Jews must be the true God;”957 they show that “liberation in the biblical witness is not prudentially justified violence but ‘mighty Acts’ which may come through the destruction at the Red Sea—but may also come when the King is moved to be gracious to Esther, or to Daniel, or to Nehemiah.”958 Each works within the existing governmental structure, modeling “how to live under a pagan oppressor.” There are many biblical examples, Yoder argues, of heeding Jeremiah’s words to seek the good of the city in which you reside, a stance taken

956 Yoder, “Exodus and Exile,” 306. Yoder argues that the political stance of Jesus is nothing new; it is seen already in the models of Jeremiah, Daniel, and Esther. Their “picture of the form of their own life under the powers” continued. There were, however, two important differences: Gentiles were incorporated into this picture and the Powers are now “under the jurisdiction of the Lamb’s Kingship.” (Yoder, “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World,” 134). Again, Yoder stresses faithfulness over effectiveness, but it is a call to faithfulness in the place that God has you. Yoder writes: The minority status of Jews since Jeremiah, far from accepting enclosure within the ghetto, could with integrity express itself in important though non-sovereign participation in pagan power structures, as with Esther or Daniel. The very same legends recounted at once the radical refusal of the Jewish hero to have anything to do with the gentile regime's idolatrous ways and the recognition of the true God by gentiles who asked the Jews to provide leadership on their own terms. There needed to be no tradeoff of a certain amount of faithfulness for a certain amount of effectiveness. These were the non-utopian visions and the success stories of the canon of the early Christians no less than of the other Jews. To "rule the world" in fellowship with the living Lamb will sometimes mean humbly building a grassroots culture, with Jeremiah. Sometimes (as with Joseph and Daniel) it will mean helping the pagan king solve one problem at a time. Sometimes (again as with Daniel and his friends) it will mean disobeying the King's imperative of idolatry, refusing to be bamboozled by the claims made for the Emperor's new robe or his fiery furnace.” Yoder, “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World,” 134-135, emphasis original).
958 Yoder, “Exodus and Exile,” 308.
Joseph, Daniel, and Mordecai each served within existing political orders, but they did so as agents witnessing to the way of God. Christians can – and should – engage in civil order and seek the good of those around them. Far from apolitical, the Christian, following the example of Christ, is driven to be actively engaged in civic and political life, albeit in an alternative – and unexpected – way to the eyes of the watching world.

The imitation of Christ is necessarily political. Yoder claims that Jesus is “the norm of political humanity under God’s sovereignty.”960 Jesus, particularly in his cross, demonstrates a new way of living in the world, one that is directly political.961 He rejects each relevant political strategy of the day, charting a new course that leads him to – and culminates in – the cross. In this, Jesus created a new humanity, one that is to model their actions on the pattern of Jesus’ life. This life is marked by an embrace of the way of the cross: enemy love and a renunciation of violence.962 The cross is political; thus, following the way of the cross is inherently political.

Yoder’s Imitation Ethic in Concrete Christian Life

Yoder articulates an imitation ethic: Christ, in his life, teachings, death, and resurrection,
is normative for ethics, insisting that “[o]nly at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross.”963 As we have seen, this call to imitate Christ’s cross is inherently political. Jesus demonstrates a new way of living in the world: nonviolence replaces violence; enemy love replaces revenge. As a final means of understanding Yoder’s imitation ethic, we will briefly examine the ways that Yoder applies the imitation of Christ to concrete Christian life.

In Yoder’s thought, these concrete applications of the imitation of Christ are normative for Christians; “Christian morality is for Christians.”964 The command to imitate Jesus is not universal; it is only for believers. Imitating Jesus in his cross is necessarily a command for Christians.965 Practices that apply the imitation of Christ, thus, are practices for the Christian community. In them, Christians are to be visibly different from the world, “like a city on a hill;” as they follow Christ, they are modeling Jesus’ new way of living to a watching world.966

There are many concrete ways that Yoder applies his understanding of the imitation of Jesus to the Christian life: “revolutionary subordination,” his consistent emphasis on nonviolence, Yoder’s articulation of the Christian’s engagement with – and witness to – the state, the practices of the church, conflict transformation and much more.967 As a way to illustrate the larger claim that Yoder’s concretizes his imitation ethic in his practical instruction for the

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963 Yoder, PoJ, 95.
965 The command to follow Christ in his cross is a high calling! But, Yoder argues, it is possible for God to command this of Christians because of the resurrection (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 36). Because the morality of the church is grounded in Christ’s resurrection, it must be guided by the life of Christ. As Yoder writes, “‘What would Jesus do?’ is still the right question.” (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 38).
967 John Howard Yoder, 163-179.
Christian life, we will examine two of the ways Yoder applies this understanding of the imitation of Christ: revolutionary subordination and the practices of the church.

Imitating Christ in “Revolutionary Subordination”

In *The Politics of Jesus*, Yoder dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of “revolutionary subordination.” In this chapter, Yoder takes issue with another way that scholarship questions the relevance of Jesus for social ethics. Against the assertion that ethical teaching only arose in the early church, not from the words or actions of Christ, Yoder proposes an alternative reading of the text. Using the *Haustafeln* as his case study for revolutionary subordination, Yoder seeks to demonstrate that these ethical teachings are derived from the example of Jesus. Yoder points to multiple differences between the Stoic thought that scholarship presumes the *Haustafeln* are derived from, including the fact that in the *Haustafeln*, the subordinate is directly addressed – they, too, are moral agents. Focusing in on the *Haustafeln’s* vision for the subordinate, Yoder points out that in the *Haustafeln*, contrary to other ethical systems, moral responsibility is ascribed to those who had no legal or moral status. The *Haustafeln* present a new, elevated view of the subordinate, as one with moral responsibility. Thus, the call to willingly be subordinate to another.

The subordination detailed in the *Haustafeln* is not without cause. Yoder argues that there are several substantial arguments that prove to the hearer why they should engage in this type of subordinate behavior. Each of these motivating reasons is connected to the person of Jesus. A

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969 Yoder, *PoJ*, 162.
970 Yoder argues against the view that these codes are derived from Stoicism (Yoder, *PoJ*, 169-172; 176-177).
972 Yoder, *PoJ*, 172, emphasis original.
973 Yoder writes, “Subordination means the acceptance of an order, as it exists, but with the new meaning given to it by the fact that one’s acceptance of it is willing and meaningfully motivated.” (Yoder, *PoJ*, 172, emphasis original).
few reasons specifically point to the example of Jesus:

1 Peter 2:18-23 [references] the slave who should subordinate himself even to the unjust master, because of the example of Christ who did the same when unjustly accused, and in Ephesians 5:22-25 where the readiness of the husband to give himself for his wife is both motivated and given substance by Christ’s giving himself for his church. 975

This type of subordination differed from common practice; it gave moral responsibility to those who had none. Adding to the revolutionary nature of the Haustafeln, Yoder points to the reciprocal nature of the code: it does not only address the subordinate; the dominant person in the relationship is also called to a type of subordination. 976 Each partner is given an imperative to follow, each submits to the other in some fashion. The motivation for this mutual subordination is based on the example of Jesus. 977

To participate in willful subordination is to follow Jesus’ example; he, too, willingly accepted subordination. Yoder writes that

[Jesus’] motto of revolutionary subordination, of willing servanthood in place of domination, enables the person in a subordinate position in society to accept and live within that status without resentment, at the same time it calls upon the person in the superordinate position to forsake or renounce all domineering use of that status. . . . The subordinate person becomes a free ethical agent in the act of voluntarily acceding to subordination in the power of Christ instead of bowing to it either fatalistically or resentfully. 978

When Christians willingly submit, they are acting as a witness to the rest of the world. With subordination comes a new attitude to the structures of our world; the one who willingly submits frees themselves from these structures that are “passing away.” 979

Revolutionary subordination is

975 Yoder, PoJ, 176.
976 Yoder, PoJ, 177.
977 Yoder does point out that there is one relationship where the mutual submission is not taught in the New Testament: “There was no invitation to the king to conceive of himself as a public servant.” Yoder argues that this may be because “Jesus had instructed his disciples specifically to reject governmental domination over others as unworthy of the disciple’s calling to servanthood.” Here, Yoder points to Mark 10:42-43, Matthew 20:25ff, and Luke 22:25ff as examples of Jesus’ teaching on this subject (Yoder, PoJ, 183).
978 Yoder, PoJ, 186.
979 1 Corinthians 7:31; Yoder, PoJ, 186.
a testimony to the kingdom of Jesus that is coming, rather than living in the shackles of the present world structures. The stance of Christ, as suffering servant, is modeled in the church’s posture of revolutionary subordination. The priority of the church is servanthood, not lordship.

In his discussion of revolutionary subordination guided by the *Haustafeln*, Yoder primarily details the relationship between subordinates and superordinates, such as slave and master. But the pattern of revolutionary subordination can be applied far beyond these personal relationships; it has clear applications to larger, structural questions, too. Revolutionary subordination also dictates the proper way that Christians should engage with the civil order. As Mouw writes, “since [Christians] are realizing their true worth in Christ, Paul is telling them, they should not waste their efforts in attempts to change the patterns of larger society.” This leads Yoder to a stance on the posture of Christians toward civil society that could be characterized as ambivalent – or patient.

As he reflects on Romans 13, Yoder draws on the concept of subordination, noting that subordination leads one to recognize and accept the power that exists. But following the way of revolutionary subordination does not leave one wholly uninterested in matters of civil affairs. Rather, Christians are to submit to the government, while rejecting “governmental domination

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over others.” Mouw writes,

> We can see where the *ambivalence* toward government lies for Yoder. “Patience” with governments does not mean a lack of concern about governmental politics; Yoder is not advocating a quietistic posture of withdrawal. . . . [T]he Christian must “speak to authorities”; but a Christian can never operate as “an agent of government.”

Christians are to speak to those in authority, but not compromise their witness to the way of Jesus’ kingdom (servanthood, subordination, nonviolence). Yoder’s appeal to the example of Joseph, Daniel, and Mordecai again shows the Christian what this looks like. Yoder explains:

The *form* of liberation in the biblical witness is not the guerrilla campaign against an oppressor culminating in his assassination and military defeat, but the creation of a confessing community which is viable without or against the force of the state, and does not glorify that power structure even by the effort to topple it.

The *content* of liberation in the biblical witness is not the "nation-state" brotherhood engineered after the take-over but the covenant-peoplehood already existing because God has given it, and sure of its future because of the Name ("identity") of God, not because of a coming campaign.

The *means* of liberation in the biblical witness is not prudentially justified violence but "mighty Acts" which may come through the destruction at the Red Sea—but may also come when the King is moved to be gracious to Esther, or to Daniel, or to Nehemiah.

The Christian’s engagement in civic life is marked by creative witness, a posture of revolutionary subordination, not withdrawal.

Revolutionary subordination, which dictates the Christian’s posture in individual relationships and in society, calls the Christian to a new way of being in society marked by

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985 Yoder, *PoJ*, 183. This does not, however, mean that the Christian is to approve of governmental politics or comply with every governmental mandate. Submission is to accept the penalties of noncompliance, if necessary (see chapter 10, especially pages 200 and 209.).


988 Yoder, “Exodus and Exile,” 307-308, emphasis original.
Jesus’ willful submission to the Powers on the cross. Jesus chose servanthood in place of domination. By accepting his own call to submission, Jesus triumphed over the Powers, ushering in a new age. It is to this new age that Christians look as they follow the example of Christ: revolutionary subordination. In their way of interacting within personal relationships and in the broader society, Christians testify to the kingdom of Jesus that is coming. By practicing revolutionary subordination, they are imitating Christ’s example in the cross. In this, Christians act in a unique way in society; they witness to the radically other way of Jesus. It is not just in this way, however, that the imitation of Christ is concretized in Christian life. The corporate life of the church is also marked by the imitation of the cross in their unique practices.

*Imitating Christ in the Practices of the Church*

The church is a social and political entity. By faithfully following the example of Christ, Yoder argues, the church acts as a witness to, and a demonstration of, Jesus’ coming kingdom. Though the witness of the church is still imperfect, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it demonstrates a new way of living that is modeled on the life of Jesus. By its very presence in society, the church witnesses to the surrounding, and watching, world. The calling of the church is to be faithful to Jesus, living lives that follow his example in the cross. As the

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989 Yoder, *PoJ*, 146
990 In highlighting the church as political, Yoder rejects two pietistic misunderstandings regarding the church: the misunderstanding that the Gospel only deals with personal ethics, not social structure and the misunderstanding that everything about the structure of the world is impure for the Christian (Yoder, *PoJ*, 153-154). See Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 17-18 for more on the church as political; see also “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics,” 58-80.
991 Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 46-47.
992 And, of course, in this, the ongoing repentance and faith of the members of the church.
993 See Nation, *John Howard Yoder*, 161 and Nation, “The Politics of Yoder in *PoJ*,” 45. Yoder says, “The path of obedience is found in the community . . . is expressed in community . . . is a witnessing community . . . [and] is illuminated by a common hope.” (Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 43). This ecclesial community is marked by practices that are taken from a robust imitation of Christ.
church lives this out in their common life together, they act as a signpost of Jesus’ coming kingdom.\(^{995}\) It is a “sample of the kind of humanity within which, for example, economic and racial differences are surmounted.”\(^{996}\) Their actions tangibly demonstrate Jesus’ new way of living. The practices of the church are grounded in an imitation of Christ.

Yoder identifies specific practices of the church that are central to the life of the church and function as a witness to the rest of the world: binding and loosing, breaking bread, and baptism.\(^{997}\) the fullness of Christ, and the rule of Paul. The first practice that he names, binding and loosing, has another, telling name. Yoder describes binding and loosing as “the rule of Christ.”\(^{998}\) Already in this name, the connection between Jesus’ actions and the practices of the church can be ascertained. Yoder makes this connection more concrete however, when he writes that the “justification for the [binding and loosing] comes from the Christian story”;\(^{999}\) to forgive is “of a piece with the broader theme of suffering servanthood, the theme that stretches from Hosea and Isaiah 42, 49, 52-53 through Jesus himself to the cross bearing of the disciples.”\(^{1000}\) In these practices, the words and actions of Jesus are taken as straightforward, ongoing commands for the life of the church.

The church is to “forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”\(^{1001}\)

\(^{995}\) In his foreword to The Royal Priesthood, Mouw again underscores the importance of ecclesiology in Yoder’s thought. (Richard Mouw, “Foreword,” in The Royal Priesthood (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998), viii).

\(^{996}\) Yoder, PoJ, 150.

\(^{997}\) His complete list details five practices.Alongside these three, he lists the fullness of Christ and the rule of Paul, see: John Howard Yoder, Body Politics (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1992).


Forgiveness is patterned after the example of Christ; it is also the command of Jesus to his disciples. In Matthew 18, Jesus instructs his followers with these words, “If your brother or sister sins, go and reprimand that person when the two of you are alone. If he or she listens, you have won your brother or sister.” At the end of this teaching, Jesus uses the words “bind” and “loose” to describe this practice. In the practice of this rule, believers are given concrete ways to address discipline in the church. Yoder identifies two dimensions to this teaching: first, “Forgiveness: to ‘bind’ is to withhold fellowship, to ‘loose’ is to forgive”; second, “Moral discernment: to ‘bind’ is to enjoin, to forbid or make obligatory; to ‘loose’ is to leave free, to permit.” The discipline, forgiveness, and reconciliation of the church is directly patterned on the example of Christ and his cross.

The church is also marked by the practices of breaking bread together and baptism. Yoder writes that

The breaking of bread, following instructions Jesus is recorded as giving, celebrates the death of Jesus and his expected return. The breaking down of the wall of separation in Ephesians 2 and the making of new creation in 2 Corinthians 5 are brought about by the death of Christ. Baptism celebrates the status called “being in Christ,” brought about by the cross.

In the socio-political acts of the church sharing meals together (Yoder understands this as an economic act, the church meets the basic needs of one another) and coming together as one

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1002 Matthew 18:15; quoted in Yoder, “Practicing the Rule of Christ,” 134 and Yoder, Body Politics, 1. To bind and to loose is also the command of Christ in Luke 17 and John 20 (Yoder, Body Politics, 45).
1003 In this practice, the reality of conflict in our world is addressed (Yoder, Body Politics, 13); again in “The Otherness of the Church,” Yoder points to the distinct practices of the church (discipline, baptism, etc.) as a way that the church is visible in the world. (Yoder, “The Otherness of the Church,” 9).
1004 Yoder, “Practicing the Rule of Christ,” 135.
1006 The practice of breaking bread is not merely what many churches understand as the sacrament of the Eucharist. For Yoder, this practice is about the common meal that believers have together (Yoder, Body Politics, 14-21).
1007 Yoder, Body Politics, 45.
body in Christ (Yoder understands this as an act that reconciles people together as one, demonstrating the equality of all people, regardless of the categories placed on them in our world), the church again patterns their new ways of behaving on the life of Jesus.

These practices of the church are patterned on the life of Jesus. In them, the church proclaims the concrete, socio-political implications of their faith in Christ; the church is guided by the image of Christ, the suffering servant. By living out these practices, the church is embodying an imitation ethic – and witnessing to the watching world. Yoder writes,

The image guiding the Christian presence in the world is not one of sovereignty, whereby we should increasingly bring it about that the world should be ruled by believers (or their ideas), but of servanthood. . . . [A]ll of the five practices spell out in different ways the fundamental decision of Jesus to accept the conditions of suffering servanthood as the shape of his messiahship.

These practices are not only internal practices for the Christian community. They are also outward witnesses to the world, testifying to the way of Jesus’ coming kingdom:

When [Jesus] called His society together Jesus gave its members a new way of life to life. He gave them a new way to deal with offenders – by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence – by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money – by sharing it.

The practices of the church concretize the revolutionary, social practices of Jesus in front of the watching world. In them, the direct relevancy of the example of Jesus for questions of social ethics is made clear. Imitating the example of Christ, specifically looking to Jesus as suffering

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1009 Yoder, Body Politics, 28-32; 34-42; see also Yoder, “Sacrament as Social Process,” 367.
1010 Yoder details two other practices (Yoder, Body Politics, 61; “Binding and Loosing,” 341-342; “Sacrament as Social Process,” 363-364): “the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13; the distribution of gifts to all people in the body of Christ) and “the rule of Paul” (the way that the church ought to meet together).
1011 Here, Yoder is referring to the three practices that we have discussed (the rule of Christ, baptism, and the Eucharist), along with the two other practices that he identifies in Body Politics: the fullness of Christ and the rule of Paul.
1012 Yoder, Body Politics, 75, 77.
1013 Yoder, “The Original Revolution,” 29; see also: Yoder, Body Politics, 77-78.
servant on the cross, believers are formed into a new way of living – one that has concrete ramifications for the social practices of the church.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen throughout this survey of Yoder’s theology, specifically focused on Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, Jesus is central in Yoder’s theological project. This centrality of Jesus extends beyond merely doctrinal concerns; Jesus is central for Christian morality. Social ethics, for Yoder, ought to be derived from Jesus. Throughout Yoder’s corpus, this insistence is clear: Jesus is the centrally defining norm in the life of the believer. Demonstrating both the biblical justification for, and the ramifications of, this claim is Yoder’s project in *The Politics of Jesus*, a task which he continues throughout many of his other works.

The question for Yoder, then, is how the believer ought to apply the life of Jesus to their own life, personally and communally. The form and content of Jesus’ life must matter for the life of the believer; it must be normative. Thus, Yoder’s understanding of ethics ought to be characterized as an imitation ethic. It is by following the example of Jesus that the believer discerns proper action. But a close eye towards tradition, as Yoder gives his readers, demonstrates that not merely any understanding of imitation will do. Imitating Jesus ought not be merely mimicking his actions. It ought not only be some sort of inner, pious striving. Rather, the imitation of Christ must be a pattern for our socio-political witness. The imitation of Christ must be concretized in a *social* ethic. For Yoder, a true imitation of Christ understands one aspect of Jesus’ life as normative: his cross.

This chapter began by saying that Yoder’s words, “Only at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross”, have staggering

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1014 Yoder, *PoJ*, 95.
implications for the Christian life. Throughout this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate why that is the case. In these words, we see Yoder’s articulation of an ethic that understands Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection to be normative for the Christian life. Followers of Jesus are to imitate him in his cross. To understand the radical implications of Yoder’s claim, I have first defined what Yoder understands by “the cross.” Following the witness of scripture, Yoder writes that “the cross of Jesus is the extreme demonstration that agape seeks neither effectiveness nor justice, and is willing to suffer any loss or seeming defeat for the sake of obedience.”1015 In the cross, Jesus is obedient to the will of God – to the point of death. He demonstrates love that goes beyond human convention, a love beyond human reason, a love that takes suffering upon oneself, because he embodies the love of God. Indeed, it is for the enemy that he suffers the most! In the cross, Jesus chooses nonviolence over the “Zealot option.” He chooses servanthood over dominion. He chooses forgiveness over hostility. He forms a new community where the offender and the oppressed are welcomed. This is the cross: servanthood, suffering, nonviolence, enemy love, power through weakness, wisdom where the world finds foolishness, losing one’s life for the sake of saving it. The cross of Christ, which believers are to imitate, is inherently political.

The staggering implications of imitating Jesus in his cross do not end with a definition of the cross. As this chapter has shown, Yoder does more than simply define the cross; he concretely applies the call to imitate Jesus in his cross to the Christian life. Yoder’s definition of imitation and cross calls the Christian to radical social practices; the imitation of Christ in his cross is concretized in socio-political practices and the witness of the believing community to the world. Followers of Jesus imitate the suffering servant in their practices of nonviolence,

1015 Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, 319; Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?,” 147.
revolutionary subordination, breaking bread, forgiveness, and baptism. In his 1966 lecture, “Revolution and the Gospel,” Yoder underscores the practical reality of imitating Jesus in the cross: “The kingdom of God\textsuperscript{1016} is a social and not an invisible order. . . . It is an order of concrete loving and forgiving obedience which people need only to accept, a real possibility of a new order that is announced for today and, allying grace and justice, is open to whomever will accept.”\textsuperscript{1017} To a watching world, the church embodies the new way of Jesus, imitating him in their practice and posture. The charge to follow Jesus, the suffering servant, in his cross may seem simple – but, as we have seen, it has radical implications for the Christian life.

Throughout Yoder’s work, his language varies. At times, Yoder directly invokes language of imitation; in other instances, he uses language of discipleship. But the core of Yoder’s thought remains the same: he issues a consistent call for the believer to follow the example of Jesus, by dying and rising with Jesus, obeying as Jesus did, loving as Jesus did, serving as Jesus did, displaying a radical nonviolence as Jesus did, and suffering as Jesus did. The Christian ethic is centered on the cross, a “substantial, binding, and sometimes costly social stance.”\textsuperscript{1018} The cross is, for the Christian, \textit{the} way of life.

\textsuperscript{1016} Of which he says the cross \textit{is}; in the cross, the kingdom has come (Yoder, PoJ, 51, cf. Hays, \textit{The Moral Vision of the New Testament}, 242).
\textsuperscript{1017} Yoder, “Revolution and Gospel,” 153.
\textsuperscript{1018} Yoder, PoJ, 127.
CHAPTER FIVE

Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue:
Common Affirmations on the Imitation of Christ

Introduction

Both Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder, in their own thought and through their representative traditions, have had significant impact on evangelical social thought and action. One of the dominant motifs that is woven throughout both Bavinck’s and Yoder’s understanding of Christian ethics is the imitation of Christ. Yoder’s often-cited claim that “only at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross” and Bavinck’s insistence in *Reformed Ethics* that “imitating Christ is . . . the form of the spiritual life” highlight their emphasis on this theme. At the heart of both Bavinck’s and Yoder’s ethics is a sustained discussion of, and focus on, the imitation of Christ.

Even when we consider their shared attention towards the imitation of Christ, however, Bavinck and Yoder remain an unlikely pair. As we have noted, there are important contextual differences between the two. Herman Bavinck lived primarily in the nineteenth century, from 1854-1921. John Howard Yoder was a twentieth century theologian, living from 1927-1997. The two were never alive at the same time, and though only six years separated Bavinck’s death and Yoder’s birth, they lived in remarkably different times, differing in part, at least, by the influence of the Great War. But it is not only the difference in time and context that makes the two

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1020 Yoder, *PoJ*, 95.
1021 Bavinck, *GE*, 288; this emphasis recurs throughout Bavinck’s corpus, as seen in chapter 3.
1022 See Chapter One, pages 16-19.
1023 It begs repeating, however, that Herman Bavinck’s thinking on the imitation of Christ in his later essays reflects the influence of, and his reflection on, the Great War.
theologians an unlikely pair; the difference in their theological traditions, on first glance, also presents a barrier: Herman Bavinck is a Dutch, neo-Calvinist Reformed theologian; John Howard Yoder is an Anabaptist theologian, with deep roots in the Mennonite tradition. A long history of harsh rhetoric and significant divisions between the two traditions, as evidenced in the original words of the Belgic Confession, seems to draw a stark line between the two thinkers.

Article 36 of this confession reads, in part:

We believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. . . For that reason we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people, and in general all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice, introduce a communion of goods, and overturn the decency that God has established among men.1024

The harsh rhetoric between the two traditions has carried on long past the penning of this confession, as evidenced in Christian Reformed minister J.K Van Baalen’s 1922 pamphlet, decrying another Reformed minister as an “Anabaptist,” a term described as “scornful” by Calvin Seminary professor William Heyns.1025

The common understandings of the relationship between Anabaptist and Reformed theology echo this rhetoric, offering only strong polarities and disagreements between the tradition. But this is not the only way of viewing the relationship. Richard Mouw and John Howard Yoder have revisited some of the tensions between Reformed and Anabaptist communities. Together, they argue that the differences between the two traditions, often treated starkly, should be seen as “intra-family disputes, as debates between discussion-partners who share some deeply-rooted spiritual traits and impulses.”1026 The intensity of the disputes is not due to the two traditions being so counter to one other, but rather, the intensity should be

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1024 Belgic Confession, Article 36., emphasis added.
1025 Letter from W. Heyns to J.K. Van Baalen, November 3, 1922, quoted in Mouw, He Shines in All That’s Fair, 23.
understood on account of the more “intimate character” of the debates.\textsuperscript{1027} Branson Parler is another contemporary thinker who emphasizes the importance of a dialogue between the Anabaptist tradition, specifically John Howard Yoder’s thought and the neo-Calvinist tradition. But the effort is not simply a contemporary one. Leonard Verduin and Willem Balke, among others, have also worked toward a properly articulated, historically situated, description of the relationship between Reformed and Anabaptist traditions; emphasizing not only the disputes, but the historic continuity within the traditions. Revisiting the relationship between the two is important, not simply in our attempt to go forward, seeking dialogue and common ground on an important ethical motif in contemporary evangelical ethics, but also as we look back. In the words of Richard Mouw, recharacterizing the relationship between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions, both presently and historically, is also “necessitated by the requirements of ecumenical fairness.”\textsuperscript{1028} As Mouw, Yoder, Verduin, and others explain, Calvinists have not always dealt with our Anabaptist brothers and sisters fairly or charitably in our characterization of their tradition.\textsuperscript{1029} These unfair characterizations demand correction. Once these mischaracterizations are corrected, we may have fertile ground upon which understanding and dialogue can grow.

In this chapter, we will survey important voices in Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue within the academy: Richard Mouw, John Howard Yoder, Branson Parler, Leonard Verduin, and Willem Balke. Each scholar seeks to correctly understand the relationship between the


\textsuperscript{1028} Mouw, \textit{He Shines in All That’s Fair}, 22.

\textsuperscript{1029} See for example Mouw, “Creational Politics,” 109, 113-114.
Reformed and the Anabaptist traditions. Balke and Verduin focus on the two traditions broadly, and historically. Mouw, Yoder and Parler focus on the specific area of Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue that we are pursuing in this dissertation: neo-Calvinist thought in dialogue with the thought of John Howard Yoder. We will also examine the ecclesial dialogues between Mennonite and Reformed denominations, which shed further light on the nature of the relationship between the two traditions. Building upon the insights of these scholars and ecclesial dialogues, we will demonstrate the way in which Bavinck and Yoder, in their respective interpretations of the proper imitation of Christ, have significant potential for dialogue and

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1030 The majority of the voices that will be surveyed here are Reformed voices. This is, in large part, an attempt to correct a persistent error within the Reformed tradition: wrongly representing the Anabaptist tradition. As Mouw explains, “differences between Anabaptist and Reformed Christians have been rather consistently misrepresented, especially on the part of Reformed thinkers” (Richard Mouw, “Abandoning the Typology: A Reformed Assist,” TSF Bulletin (May-June 1985), 7. Yoder, Mouw’s long time dialogue partner, also helps us to understand why we might primarily look to Reformed voices in Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue. He reminds his readers that Anabaptists often learn about Reformed thought, attend Reformed schools, and so on. The same is not true of Reformed students and thinkers. Yoder writes that the “few Reformed thinkers who have some notion of what a conversation with Anabaptist thought would be about are those (like Mouw) who have taken it up with a special sense of the reason for doing so” (John H. Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology,” TSF Bulletin (May-June 1985), 3). Given the social context within which these North American Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues are taking place, there is a particular burden for Reformed thinkers to take up these dialogues.

1031 Other thinkers, such as Jared Hiebert and Terry G. Hiebert, have taken up Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue looking to the North American “New Calvinism” tradition (represented in the thought of John Piper, Albert Mohler, J.I Packer, the Gospel Coalition, etc.) and neo-Anabaptist thought in North America (they identify Ron Sider, Shane Claiborne, Jim Wallis, and others). Demonstrating the reach of Mouw and Yoder’s “intra-family” paradigm, Hiebert and Hiebert similarly appeal to this paradigm for understanding the current relationship between new Calvinism and neo-Anabaptism in North America (Jared Hiebert and Terry G. Hiebert, “Neo-Calvinists and Neo-Anabaptists: A Tale of Two Tribes,” Direction 42, no. 2 (2013), 180). They apply the “intra-family” paradigm in terms of a concrete metaphor: sisters, writing that “New Calvinism and Neo-Anabaptism are two sisters commonly mistaken for two tribes” (Hiebert and Hiebert, “Neo-Calvinists and Neo-Anabaptists,” 190). Understood this way, they argue, is instructive for how the two traditions ought to go forward, and work together, in post-Christian cultures. The two have much more in common than has been traditionally held, they argue. They can also work together to correct the weak aspects of the other’s theology.

1032 For a survey of the ecumenical dialogues among Reformed and Mennonite denominations, we will look to Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012, ed. Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015). Representatives from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference met together in Strasbourg in 1984 and in Calgary in 1989. Official reports from the 1984 meeting in Strasbourg can be found in Mennonites in Dialogue, ed. Hans Georg vom Berg et al., Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 7 (Geneva: WARC, 1986), 3-8 and Mennonites in Dialogue, 373-381. Mennonites in Dialogue also details Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue in the Netherlands and in Switzerland. A summary of the insights from the 1989 meeting in Calgary can be found in: Ross T. Bender and Alan P.F. Sell, “Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions: Phase Two” Mid-Stream 31, no. 1 (Jan. 1992), 41-42. These ecclesial dialogues each found areas where the two traditions have more in common than conventional wisdom, and history, has held. They also note areas where there is continuing divergence, and areas where each tradition can challenge the other.
debate between the two traditions. An imitation ethic based on the law, as seen in Bavinck, and an imitation ethic based on the cross, as seen in Yoder, contain clear differences. But, like the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions at large, these differences are based in important similarities and common affirmations. For both Bavinck and Yoder, the imitation of Christ is an all of life encompassing ethic, an ethic for Christians, an ethic grounded in a relationship of restoration between creation and redemption, and a qualified ethic.

**Mouw and Yoder: Reframing the Relationship**

The late twentieth century – and early twenty-first century – has seen a significant rise in evangelical attention to social action.\(^{1033}\) This rise in social action and ethical thought in the last few decades has meant that, alongside activists, evangelical scholars sought out theological traditions within which to root, and form, this action.\(^{1034}\) Little help was found in twentieth century evangelicalism, prompting these newly-engaged social activists to turn to older traditions to help shape how they ought to imagine their social and political call as Christians. This turn is well demonstrated within the *Chicago Call* of 1977, a document which called evangelicals to look to the broader theological heritage of the Christian tradition in their “life and witness.”\(^{1035}\) Included in this document was the “Call for Historic Roots and Community,” calling for a recovery of the “fullness of our Christian heritage.” This charge for theological depth within evangelical thought and action sought the recovery of many theological traditions, among them, Anabaptist and Reformed.\(^{1036}\)

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\(^{1033}\) This is well documented in Budziszewski’s study. See also: Swartz, *Moral Minority*, The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern in 1973, the Chicago Call in 1977; Mouw and Yoder also point to Carl Henry’s *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, new calls in *Christianity Today* for social involvement, and the founding of *Sojourners*, as examples of the increased evangelical attention to social action.

\(^{1034}\) Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 125.


The revived evangelical attention to both Anabaptist and Reformed traditions prompted Richard Mouw and John Howard Yoder to revisit the relationship between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions. But looking to both traditions to inform social action, as Mouw and Yoder note, raises significant questions about the relationship between the two. The two traditions are generally pitted against each other. However, in their analysis of the traditions, Mouw and Yoder argue that a strict polarity between the two traditions is inadequate. Rather, the arguments between the Reformed and Anabaptist perspectives should be seen as “intra-family disputes, as debates between discussion-partners who share some deeply-rooted spiritual traits and impulses.” Revisiting this relationship, Mouw and Yoder argue, “is crucial for the development of a healthier evangelical ethical perspective.”

Clarifying and redefining the relationship between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions by emphasizing not only disputes, but commonalities, aids a more robust evangelical social ethic. Historic confessions, such as the Belgic Confession, attest to standard picture of the relationship between the two traditions, described by Mouw and Yoder as “overt expressions of hostility between the two communities.” While disagreements certainly exist between the two traditions, Mouw and Yoder argue that to “focus, then, on the differences within the family between radical and nonradical visions of what it means truly to be ‘reformed,’ without also attending to their commonalities, is a serious misrepresentation.”

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1037 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 128. The two note the trend toward polarity in other articles, as well. See, for example, Mouw’s “Abandoning the Typology: A Reformed Assist” and Yoder’s “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology.”
1040 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 121; later, they write that this misunderstanding “inhibits the kind of present-day Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue that could help the evangelical quest for ethical clarity to proceed more effectively. It is our contention that by focusing on the proper agenda for mutual Anabaptist and Reformed exploration the way can be opened for the development of a more articulate and coherent evangelical ethic” (Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 130).
of hostility are “profound commonalities.” Others are with respect to geographic changes and transitions in culture and practice. Others are found in theological positions that have carried the traditions throughout their histories. These include: (1) beginning ethical discourse with an affirmation of *Sola Scriptura*, an appeal that is made “against the background of a shared pessimistic appraisal of the unregenerate moral consciousness;” (2) strong affirmations of ultimacy of the will within each tradition, a commonality that is not often recognized on account of the differences surrounding baptismal theology; (3) the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as one of promise and fulfillment, again a commonality that has been difficult to accept on account of the discontinuity that the Anabaptist tradition posits between the two covenants and the continuity that the Reformed affirm; and (4) a necessary connection between the individual and the corporate, “each group understands the church in very ‘communal’ terms. . . piety can never be considered as a purely individual affair,” a conviction

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1044 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 128. Mouw and Yoder name experiences of migration to North America as ethnic minorities, a continued celebration of ethnicity, and influence by various cultural currents in North America, among others.
1045 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 130; they continue in their description of this commonality: “Even though this may seem to be a pan-Protestant emphasis, neither the Anabaptists nor the Reformed were happy with the way other Protestant groups utilized the principle. Against the Lutheran and Erastian strains, both called for the believing community to have its own theologically-mandated social form. Against Lutheran and pietist emphases, both refused to allow the canon-within-the-canon of "justification by faith" to shut out other matters, many of them ethical, especially social-ethical. Against Roman and Anglo Catholicism both resisted a centering of Christian identity in sacramental life. And against pietist and inspirationalist patterns both rejected a dualism that either ignores or deprecates this-worldly obligations.”
1046 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 130; they also note the difference that accompanies this similarity: “Where the Anabaptists part company with the Calvinists is in their reluctance to modify their initial formulations. It is not difficult to make a case, then, for the contention that the Anabaptists are "out-Calvinisting" the Calvinists on this point” (Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 131.
1047 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 131; as they explain, this similarity has been difficult to discern: “In the Reformed-Anabaptist discussions, however, the angry rhetoric has masked the fact that a very similar view of the salvific event is presupposed in each case: both sides view the central redemptive event in strongly volitionalist terms. For both groups the human person is lost unless there is a radical turning away from the world toward God. For both, such a turning can only take place if the recalcitrant human will is conquered by the gracious divine will. For the Calvinist, the latter is safeguarded by professing the doctrines of human depravity and divine election. For the Anabaptists the former insight is safeguarded only if the human predicament is seen as the creature's own fault; otherwise God is made the author of evil and his grace an excuse for our continuing in our sin. But for both, volition is ultimate” (Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 132).
manifest in each tradition’s emphasis on discipline in the life of the corporate body.\textsuperscript{1049} The two traditions are not only in conflict with one another; they share important theological positions. Identifying these four commonalities between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions allows Mouw and Yoder to go beyond the harsh rhetoric between the two traditions. Their careful examination of the two traditions reexamines the relationship between the Anabaptist and the Reformed and finds it to be an “intra-family” dispute, not simply strong polarities and disagreements.\textsuperscript{1050} By reframing the relationship between the two traditions, Mouw and Yoder create an important framework for Anabaptist-Reformed ethical dialogue.\textsuperscript{1051}

\textbf{Willem Balke: The Relationship Between Calvin and the Early Anabaptists}

Mouw and Yoder describe the differences between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions as “intra-family” differences.\textsuperscript{1052} This approach, affirming the important commonalities between the two traditions, seems to match the polemics of the sixteenth century as described by Willem Balke in his study \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}.\textsuperscript{1053} In this work,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 133.
  \item Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 125-126.
  \item This framework has been employed by both Reformed and Anabaptist thinkers. As we will see, Branson Parler, a Reformed theologian, utilizes this framework in his work on Yoder and Kuyper. Jared Hiebert and Terry Hiebert, a Reformed theologian and an Anabaptist theologian in dialogue together, use Yoder and Mouw’s paradigm as a starting point for their analysis of the relationship between the “New Calvinists” and the “Neo-Anabaptists” (Hiebert and Hiebert, “Neo-Calvinists and Neo-Anabaptists”). Other prominent North American Anabaptists, including David Finch, also highlight Mouw and Yoder’s work as an important paradigm for Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue (David Finch, “Finding Things to Love about Reformed People: An Anabaptist Dialogue with a Reformed,” \textit{Missio Alliance}, Feb. 6, 2017. \url{https://www.missioalliance.org/finding-things-love-reformed-people-anabaptist-dialogues-reformed/}).
  \item Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 130. Mouw also notes in an unpublished essay that “the Anabaptists in effect ‘out-Calvinisted’ the Calvinists” in their understanding of the radical impact of the noetic effects of the fall and their administration of church discipline.
  \item Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 12. Balke’s work provides a look at the history of Calvin and the Anabaptists, from the perspective of a Reformed theologian. He provides important insights into the history of Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, but, given the specificity of the project, does not give a full history of the Anabaptists. For this, see George Huntston Williams book \textit{The Radical Reformation} (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962). Williams also addresses the relationship between Calvin and the Anabaptists (see: \textit{The Radical Reformation}, 580-614). He notes that, despite Calvin’s continued contact with Anabaptists (including his marriage to a woman who had once been Anabaptist herself), Calvin did not clearly differentiate between different traditions that he countered in various tracts (including the Anabaptists, Libertines, and Nicodemites; \textit{The Radical Reformation}, 580). Despite Williams identification of substantial differences between Calvin and the Radical Reformers, he also notes areas where Calvin shared Anabaptist convictions: “their conviction that only the
Balke highlights both the striking similarities and important differences between Calvin and the radical Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Without using the language of Mouw and Yoder, Balke points us toward the same conclusion: despite the polemics of the time, the differences between Reformed and Anabaptist perspectives are best seen as “intra-family” debates.

Echoing scholars such as A.A. van Ruler, Balke emphasizes the importance of studying the relationship between the Anabaptists and the Reformed.\textsuperscript{1054} He argues that the study of this relationship deepens and informs both our historic perspective on the relationship between the two traditions and our ability to speak to – and understand – our own time.\textsuperscript{1055} Through his detailed study of Calvin’s writings about, and actions toward, the Anabaptists,\textsuperscript{1056} Balke intends to understand Calvin’s polemic against the Anabaptists, and thus, those things that differ between Calvin and the Anabaptists and those things that unite them.\textsuperscript{1057} He carefully defines the core concern of the Anabaptist movement as “not the doctrine of the sacrament but the doctrine of the church,” a concern which “demanded their rejection of the established state church, or in other words, the established church of their time.”\textsuperscript{1058} This careful definition allows him to get to

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\textsuperscript{1054} Balke cites van Ruler who asks, “Is not the Anabaptist movement just as significant as our consideration of the teachings of Rome in our analysis of the Reformation?” (Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 9, citing A. A. van Ruler, “Rome-Reformatie-de Vraag van de Oecumene,” \textit{Woord en Dienst}, 16 (1957), 312).

\textsuperscript{1055} Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 9.

\textsuperscript{1056} Balke surveys Calvin’s \textit{Institutes}, commentaries, letters, and tracts in this study. He then journeys through Calvin’s life to uncover Calvin’s contact with the Anabaptists, what he knew about the Anabaptists, and his polemics against the Anabaptists in the second and third editions of the \textit{Institutes}, laying out compelling evidence that already early in his career, Calvin was aware of the Anabaptists and presented a strong polemic against the trend to identify the Reformers as Anabaptists. Calvin was well acquainted with Anabaptist theology and Anabaptist theologians (Balke points to many different occasions that Calvin had sustained interaction with Anabaptists (see Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 123-131). Indeed, even Calvin’s wife Idelette had been an Anabaptist in her early years (Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 134)!

\textsuperscript{1057} Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 1.

\textsuperscript{1058} Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 11.
the heart of the debate between the two traditions, without underemphasizing or exaggerating what was at stake.

Differing understandings of the doctrine of the church cascade out into a number of strongly-worded polemics, such as Calvin’s claim that Anabaptists do not make an adequate distinction between the kingdom of Christ and the civil government. Balke does not shy away from Calvin’s harsh claims against the Anabaptists. Calvin’s polemics against the Anabaptists, however, ought not be understood in isolation, but as secondary differences, flowing from the core difference between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions: the doctrine of the church. The differences that arise out of this core debate are numerous, including the sacraments, the relationship between church and state, and the relationship of Christians to broader society.

These differences between the Anabaptist and the Reformed traditions are not inconsequential. But, despite them, Balke takes care to note the fact that Calvin also names agreements between the Reformers and the Anabaptists, particularly on the question of church discipline. On this subject, Calvin writes “In this the Anabaptists do not differ from us. . . . On

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1059 Calvin writes that the Anabaptists “therefore think that nothing will be safe unless the whole world is reshaped into a new form, where there are neither courts nor laws, nor magistrates, nor anything similar which in their opinion restricts their freedom” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), tr. Battles, 285; quoted in Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 62).

1060 At one point, he writes that Calvin “clearly dissociates himself from [the Anabaptists], claiming that they are instruments of Satan” (Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 43). As Balke points out, these polemics, in part, served a pastoral purpose. Calvin desired to correct those who were in error (Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 30). They also served as a means to counter the trend that charged the Reformers as Anabaptists, as in the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin already raises the innocence of the Reformers against two charges of Anabaptism: “illuminism regarding religion and anarchism regarding the government” (cited in Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 41).

1061 Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 53-58. Calvin directly counters the Anabaptists on the question of the sacraments in his early *Institutes*, defending the unity between the Word and sacraments. Calvin names Anabaptist errors in their understanding of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper. See Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 60, 260 for his explanation of the difference between the Reformed and Anabaptist on the state. For differences between the two traditions on the church and society, see Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 267.
this we are in complete agreement.” Balke describes the agreement between Calvin and the Anabaptists on the question of church discipline as one that helped to foster explicit agreement between Calvin and the Anabaptist and a “critical affinity” between the two, allowing for debate and conversation.

Balke carefully defines the heart of the disagreement between the Anabaptists and the Reformed, but in doing so he also clearly describes the layers of affinity between the two traditions, amidst sharp polemics. This is an important challenge to the received wisdom on the relationship between the two traditions, which is often singularly focused on the polemics and aids in an accurate assessment of the relationship between the two.

Leonard Verduin – An Analysis of Historic Differences Between the Reformed and Anabaptist Traditions

In *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, Leonard Verduin also seeks to clarify the relationship between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions. Verduin argues that there has been a failure on the part of the Reformed tradition to understand the development of, and the theological traditions, of the Anabaptists. He sets out correct these misunderstandings. Verduin also argues that themes similar to Anabaptist teachings often occur within the Calvinist community, for the two traditions have similar convictions. As Mouw describes Verduin’s

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1062 John Calvin, *Against Anabaptists*, B6 (CO, VII, 65) quoted in Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 133; cf. Balke, 148. In principle, Calvin was in full agreement with the Anabaptists regarding the necessity of discipline. But Calvin still embodies a critical distance from the Anabaptists in their accompanying doctrines of the purity of the church and perfectionism. For Calvin, perfectionism was an eschatological gift; for the Anabaptists, one must aim for perfection prior to the eschaton. The Anabaptists maintained that perfectionism and righteousness must be achieved; individual members of the body could become completely holy and perfect; they believed it was possible to live a Christian life close to perfection – or perfect – for Christians should be able to fulfill whatever commands the gospel directed to them. If someone was regenerated, they were prepared to obey and spread the gospel (Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 248-250). Also like the Anabaptists, Calvin demanded integrity of life, which takes place by means of the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of church discipline.

1063 Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 153. This leads to further, explicit agreement between Calvin and the Anabaptists on affirmations regarding church officebearers, in the midst of sustained disagreements: emphasizing holy living for officebearers, exercising discipline, and the need for careful selection of those who would be admitted to office (Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 163).

1064 Verduin makes similar arguments elsewhere. See also: Verduin, *Honor Your Mother: Christian Reformed Roots*
argument: “[Anabaptist themes] are not alien thoughts that keep forcing their way in [to the
Reformed community] from the outside; they emerge from home-grown convictions.” Again,
we find the conviction that the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions are not as dissimilar as
conventional wisdom has held.

The explanations of the differences between the two traditions are often “erroneous.” As with Balke’s project, Verduin contends that clarifying the relationship between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions requires clear identification of the “cause of the dissention” between the two. The root of the dissention can be found in a key, historic difference between the two: the Anabaptist insistence that “they would have nothing to do with a State Church.” This historic difference has fueled other differences – some perceived, some actual, some misunderstood, some exaggerated – between the two traditions.

Verduin, a pastor in the Reformed tradition, does not shy away from strong criticisms of

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*in the 1834 Separation. In The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, Verduin clearly identifies the heart of the disagreement between the Reformed and the Anabaptist traditions, exposing the ways in which the Anabaptists have been unfairly characterized by the Reformed tradition. In Honor Your Mother, Verduin specifies distinctions within the Reformed tradition that further complicate the narrative of polarity between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions: within the distinctions among the Dutch Reformed, we find shared convictions between some Reformers and the Anabaptists.

1065 Mouw, He Shines in All That’s Fair, 23
1066 Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 47.
1067 Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 47.
1068 Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 38. Verduin describes the root of the discord as the “marriage” between the church and state that was sanctioned by the Reformers. When the Reformers submitted to the state, “radicals began to peel off.” Until this point, they had “walked with the Reformers,” but the Anabaptists “resisted stubbornly the coalescence of Church and State” (Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 38-39). Verduin traces this posture towards the church through the early Reformers – Calvin, Zwingli, Beza, etc. – through history, highlighting the same intent in neo-Calvinists, referencing the teaching of Abraham Kuyper (Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 61, cf. 79). In Honor Your Mother, Verduin highlights various strains of the Reformed tradition that questioned the idea of a “Christian nation,” such as the Afschiding (Verduin, Honor Your Mother, 32).
1069 This difference led the Reformed tradition to use a number of derogatory names for the Anabaptists. Verduin analyzes the history of these derogatory names, such as Wideräufer and Sacramentschwärmer, illustrating and clarifying the differences between the two traditions. This study is an important complement to works like Balke’s. Balke presents a systematic study of Calvin’s work and his regard for the Anabaptists; Verduin spends more time looking directly to the thinking within the Anabaptist tradition. Both are necessary for an accurate understanding of the relationship between the two traditions.
the tradition; his sympathy towards Anabaptism is clear. He also models a charitable recognition of the exegetical reasons behind the distinguishing practices of the Anabaptists, as seen in his commentary on the Anabaptist rejection of violence on account of the commands of the Sermon on the Mount:

we may smile at the naïveté of this philosophy; we may frown at the solution; but he who has been with the New Testament will have even greater trouble with the person who has no problem here. . . [the Christian] will find himself drawn to the sensitivity, if not the practical solutions, that marked the vision of the Rottengeister.

Responding to the “derogatory treatment to which these Stepchildren of the Reformation have been traditionally subjected,” Verduin seeks to treat the Anabaptists in a sympathetic way, carefully analyzing the charges against the Anabaptists in a way that is uncommon within the Reformed tradition. This allows him to identify the crux of the disagreement between the two traditions, and point out where the Anabaptists were treated unfairly.

Understanding the heart of the difference between the Reformers and the Anabaptists allows us to abandon inaccurate polemics against Anabaptism. Verduin expands on several inaccurate polemics perpetuated by the Reformed, including the charge of Anabaptist dualism, the charge of perfectionism, and the assertion that Anabaptists were “political nihilists,” seeking to “overthrow the magistracy.” These charges were based on

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1070 Verduin remarks that Beza’s teaching is “undiluted Constantinianism” (Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 83); Beza’s influence in the Low Countries, Verduin later argues, made it a “small wonder that Dutch Protestantism, when it encountered the Stepchildren, drew the sword with a vengeance” (Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 84).
1071 Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 275.
1072 Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 276.
1073 Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 99. He writes: the Anabaptists “were not addicted to any intolerable dualism – unless it be dualism to insist that the rule-right that comes to expression in the State (which is a creature of common grace) and the rule-right that comes to expression in the Church (which is a creature of redemptive grace) are discrete.”
1074 Verduin argues that the Anabaptists avoided both “conductual-averageism” and “Perfectionism” by “the formula of living in sin and falling into sin,” a nuance that was not understood by the Reformers (Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 103).
misunderstandings of, and inattention to the nuances of, Anabaptist thought.  

While Reformed polemics exaggerated some of the differences, there were enduring theological differences between the two traditions. But even in these differences, Verduin highlights commonalities, especially between the Anabaptist and later articulations of the Reformed tradition. In *Honor Your Mother*, Verduin points to strains of the Reformed church, such as the 1834 Secession from the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church), the *Afscheiding*, who, like the Anabaptists, distinguish between “living in sin” and “falling into sin.” Verduin argues that the *Afscheiding* were also very wary of a *Corpus Christianum* view of the church (a view held by other secessionist groups in the church, like the *Doleantie*).  

Within the Reformed tradition, Verduin explains, there was not a uniform understanding of the church – and some, like the *Afscheiding*, articulate concepts that sound surprisingly similar to Anabaptist contentions! These later similarities between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions stand alongside areas of commonality between the early Reformers and the Anabaptist that Verduin identifies, such as the focus on church discipline, and the practice of excommunication.  

Verduin’s nuanced, charitable reading of the early Anabaptists in *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* is an important impulse within the Reformed tradition. Verduin does not shy away from naming the times when the Reformers were uncharitable – and incorrect – in their

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1075 Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, 104. This misunderstanding, he argues, is based in an affirmation of a “sacralist society” because it depends on “the (mistaken) notion that society cannot hang together unless it is bound together in a common religion.”

1076 Verduin, *Honor Your Mother*, 33.

1077 Verduin, *Honor Your Mother*, 8; As Verduin explains, *Corpus Christianum* refers to the “totality of the christened;” all those who were within a given, Christian society were Christians. Contrary to this view, the *Afscheiding* affirmed the *Corpus Christi* view, a view that sees the church as those who believe. Adding nuance to these distinctions, Verduin references various attempts to bring together these views of the church, such as an affirmation of the visible and invisible church (Verduin, *Honor Your Mother*, 9).

proclamations regarding the Anabaptists. He seeks to situate the stances of the Anabaptists that were counter to the Reformers in light of their core theological orientation. In doing so, Verduin neither downplays nor over-exaggerates the differences between the two traditions. His careful study identifies the “difference of conviction as to the delineation of the Christian church” as the primary difference between the two traditions; he argues this difference lead to many clashes between the Reformed and Anabaptist, including as the sacraments, the relationship between church and society, and non-violence.

**Specifying the Question: Branson Parler on John Howard Yoder and Neo-Calvinism**

Richard Mouw argues, “Anabaptists deserve more respect than they have typically received from Calvinists.” Multiple Reformed theologians, including Verduin and Balke, have attempted to better understand and respect the Anabaptist tradition by articulating a more nuanced description of the early relationship between the Reformed and Anabaptists, and correcting the inflammatory ways in which Reformed thinkers have historically spoken of Anabaptists. These studies are an attempt to grant Anabaptists the respect they are due, and further dialogue and understanding between the traditions – and the effort is not one-sided. John Howard Yoder, in his dissertation *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*, also focuses on the relationship between the early Anabaptists and the Reformers, specifically the Swiss Reformers. But here we have focused on voices from within the Reformed tradition who have actively sought to understand the historic relationship between the Reformed and Anabaptist

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1081 There are, as we have noted, other ecclesial models of Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue (see reports on the dialogues between the WARC and the MWC in *Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012*) and various North America Anabaptist thinkers who, alongside Yoder (and building upon the work of Yoder) have taken up Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue (see Hiebert and Finch for two examples: Hiebert and Hiebert, “Neo-Calvinists and Neo-Anabaptists”; Finch, “Finding Things to Love about Reformed People”).
traditions, and correct persistent misrepresentations of Anabaptists, by Reformed theologians. This focus is, in part, a response to the North American context. As Yoder describes, “Reformed vocabulary and the Reformed thought patterns have largely set the tone for WASP theological culture in our time.” By virtue of their participation in the theological culture of the day, Anabaptist theologians have a keen awareness of Reformed thought; the same is not true of Reformed theologians. As Yoder explains, “the few Reformed thinkers who have some notion of what a conversation with Anabaptist thought would be about are those (like Mouw) who have taken it up with a special sense of the reason for doing so.” Given the context within which North American Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues are taking place, there is a special call for Reformed thinkers to revisit this relationship and partake in these dialogues. Verduin and Balke add their voices to Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue by exploring the historic debates – and mischaracterizations – of the traditions; Mouw, Yoder, and Parler look to the present day import and implications of continuing this dialogue.

Revisiting the relationship between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions has attended not only to historical analyses of the early conflicts between the two traditions, but to concrete application in our time. Mouw and Yoder situate the importance of Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue within current evangelical social ethics. Branson Parler then picks up on these themes in another more recent analysis of the relationship between the two traditions. He seeks to further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue by – following the spirit of Mouw and Yoder –

1082 Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 3.
1083 Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 3.
1084 The focus on Reformed thinkers also bears witness to the fact that this dissertation is an attempt, from the Reformed tradition, to enter into dialogue with the Anabaptist tradition. Thus, many cues are taken from Reformed theologians that have charted this path.
1085 Verduin discusses this briefly in his treatment of the more recent history between the Reformed and Anabaptist, such as the Anabaptist reception by neo-Calvinists, and the ways in which religion in America has endorsed the early, criticized positions of the Anabaptists (Verduin, The Reformers and their Stepchildren, 61-62, 276-281),
narrowing from the broad focus on the *traditions* to two particular individuals, John Howard Yoder and Abraham Kuyper, on a particular question: the doctrine of creation.

The differences between neo-Calvinism and Anabaptism on the doctrine of creation, initially, seem stark. Parler summarizes them this way: “the neo-Calvinist tradition focuses on humanity’s place in creation to the neglect of Christ, whereas Yoder focuses on the normativity of Jesus Christ without bothering to relate that normativity to Genesis 1-2 and the *imago Dei*.” Without negating the enduring differences between the two, in “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” Parler seeks to identify ways in which the two traditions are more similar than they initially appear in regard to the doctrine of creation.

In order to showcase the commonalities between the two traditions, Parler first must articulate how Yoder himself would understand the doctrine of creation, a concept he does not speak of often, but is implicit within his theology. Once articulated, the Yoderian doctrine of creation can be placed into dialogue with a neo-Calvinist alternative, seen in the thought of Abraham Kuyper. Doing so, Parler argues, “presents possibilities for convergence between [Yoder’s] thought and the neo-Calvinist tradition, while continuing to recognize that real differences remain.” In Parler’s exploration of the two traditions on the doctrine of creation, we again find the shared contention of Mouw and Yoder: the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions ought not be seen strictly through the lens of polarity; there are important points of connection between the two.

Parler’s focus on Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue on the specific topic of the doctrine of creation is not to the neglect of questions about the relationship between the church state, a

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1086 Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 65. Yoder presents significant critiques of the neo-Calvinist understanding of the creation narratives in Genesis 1-2, including views on the cultural mandate, creation order, and sphere sovereignty.

concern which many, such as Verduin and Balke, have identified as the core disagreement between the two. The doctrine of creation is substantively related to questions of ecclesiology. Parler explains this connection in this way: articulating a Yoderian doctrine of creation that understands Jesus as “not only a ‘new creation’ (discontinuity) but also a restoration or renewal of creation (continuity),” directly impacts “Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, specifically as the doctrine of creation relates to culture and the nature of the state.”

In order to understand Parler’s conclusion that there are important commonalities between Yoder and neo-Calvinism on the doctrine of creation, we must first outline Yoder’s doctrine of creation. To find this, Parler first looks to Yoder’s work where he has considerable engagement with the neo-Calvinist doctrine of creation, offering four substantial critiques. First, humanity’s access to God’s creational intent is not epistemologically reliable; those things that seem self-evident are unreliable. Second, Yoder criticizes an ethic based on creation order as one that is, in Parler’s words, “inherently conservative, undergirding and legitimating the status quo.” Third, Yoder criticizes creation order ethics as being less specific and particular than the ethics of Jesus. This allows for a conflation of the church and the world, underemphasizing the importance of faith in moral behavior. Finally, Yoder argues that creation order ethics are opposed to the revelation given through Jesus. Parler clarifies that this does not mean that Yoder is against creation; rather, he is against “construing creation as contradictory to what is revealed in Jesus.” At the heart of this concern is Yoder’s desire for consistency and clarity in the church’s teaching. The core confession of the church, the full humanity and divinity of Jesus,

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1089 Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 67. In other words, Yoder emphasizes the effects of the fall more than the Reformed tradition.
1092 Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 67-68. An obvious example of an abuse of creation-order ethics is apartheid.
must impact the ethics of the church. Despite these substantial critiques, however, Yoder does not reject creation as a source for theology and ethics. Instead, as Parler demonstrates, he rejects an improper use of creation as a source for ethics.\footnote{Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 68-69.}

Yoder’s answer to the neo-Calvinist creation order is not an outright rejection of creation. Parler argues that Yoder answers the neo-Calvinist emphasis on God’s creational intention and order in his theology of the Powers; within Yoder’s theology of the Powers is an affirmation that the politics of Jesus are a means of reestablishing the politics of the original creation.\footnote{Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 70.} Parler defends this assertion by outlining three aspects of Yoder’s understanding of the Powers. First, Yoder affirms that the Powers are a part of God’s original, good creation. They were then affected by the fall, as Yoder explains in the Politics of Jesus: “the structures which were supposed to be our servants have become our masters and our guardians.”\footnote{Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 69, quoting Yoder, Politics of Jesus, 141.} Nonetheless, the Powers were not originally created in this way; the distortion of the Powers is a distortion of God’s good, original creation.\footnote{Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 69-70.} The distortion of the Powers leads Parler to the second key aspect of Yoder’s theology: Jesus breaks the idolatry of the Powers. Jesus’ work is not a breaking of the Powers, or a release from the Powers, rather it is a re-orientation to the proper relationship to the Powers.\footnote{Parler explains: “because the Powers were originally meant to serve in the call to love, Jesus refused to let them gain mastery over him. . . . Jesus therefore embodies true human power and freedom. . . . as the second Adam, by living a life of wise rule over the fallen Powers (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 70).} Jesus did not do away with the Powers entirely, rather he broke the “oppressive rule of the Powers,” embodying and restoring a right relationship to them, one in line with God’s original, good, created intent.\footnote{Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 70-71.} This brings Parler to his third point, Yoder’s understanding of the relationship between restoration and the original creation, which he
describes in this way:

there is a sense in which Christ both restores creation and perfects creation. . . . the politics of Jesus do not simply restore a static structure or order that existed in the beginning; rather . . . all creation is restored – a restoration so radical that it can only be termed *new creation*.\(^\text{1099}\)

The work of Christ in restoring creation, therefore, is not entirely disconnected from the original creation. Christ’s work is both eschatological, pointing to the new creation, and ontological, revealing what the world is, and ought to be.\(^\text{1100}\) Thus, as Yoder describes, the way of the cross demonstrates “how things really are”; accordingly, believers, following the way of Jesus, work “with the grain of the universe.”\(^\text{1101}\) Understood this way, Yoder is seen to have a robust understanding of the doctrine of creation. As Parler describes, in Yoder’s thought, “what is revealed, renewed, and restored in the politics of Jesus is the authentic power of creation.”\(^\text{1102}\)

There is a strong connection between redemption and creation in Yoder’s work.

*Articulating a Yoderian doctrine of creation builds upon Yoder and Mouw’s claim regarding the nature of the Anabaptist-Reformed relationship.*\(^\text{1103}\) Parler argues that within Yoder’s doctrine of creation we can find “further convergence” between Yoder and neo-Calvinism:

both are joined by their continued mutual concern to live out the Lordship of Christ in everyday life. Insofar as this is done, walking in the way of wisdom, which may appear as foolishness to the world, both Anabaptist and Reformed will bear witness to the crucified Lamb, who claims every square inch of creation as his proper domain.\(^\text{1104}\)

There are still differences between the two traditions. In politics and in cultural engagement, on account of their respective doctrines of creation, the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions differ in

\(^{1099}\) Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 71, emphasis original.


\(^{1101}\) Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 72, quoting Yoder, “Are You the One Who Is to Come?” in For the Nations, 212.

\(^{1102}\) Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 72.

\(^{1103}\) Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 73.

\(^{1104}\) Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 77.
posture, but the fundamental questions of discernment remain the same. By articulating Yoder’s doctrine of creation, Parler further identifies the ways in which the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, specifically Yoder and the neo-Calvinists, can and should engage in fruitful dialogue. Received wisdom understands the Reformed emphasis on creation to be wholly other than the Anabaptist account of ethics. Contrary to this, Parler’s nuanced account shows the ways in which Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus* attends to the created order. Parler’s work is further evidence of the important similarities between the two traditions – and the fruitful nature of dialogue between Anabaptist and Reformed thought.

**Alongside the Academy: National and International Reformed-Anabaptist Ecumenical Dialogues**

The dialogues we have discussed here ought also to be seen in light of the larger, ecumenical dialogues during this time. Thus far, we have focused on dialogues between theologians that lead towards a very specific articulation of Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue, the dialogue between Yoder and neo-Calvinism. This is a dialogue Yoder himself entered into, and

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1105 Parler articulates important conclusions for what his account means Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue: Yoder’s doctrine of creation counters a prevalent misunderstanding that Anabaptist theology rejects any notion of the cultural mandate. It moves conversation from a paradigm focused on polarity to this question: “how Christians are to be cultural beings, not whether cultural activity as such is a valid realm for participation” (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 73, emphasis original). It also has implications for debates on the state. Both Yoder and Kuyper, while they differ on the role of the Christian in the state, agree that the state is a postlapsarian means of preserving the fallen world. Parler argues that this underlying joint affirmation is important: “their common view of the nature of the state should issue in many concrete similarities between the Yoderian and the Kuyprian” (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 75). We may not affirm that the Anabaptists reject cultural engagement and the neo-Calvinists wholeheartedly and unabashedly *affirm* cultural engagement. Rather, we must reframe the question to one of discerning proper interpretation. Similarly, we may not simply affirm that Anabaptists *withdraw* from participation in the state and neo-Calvinist opt for complete *engagement* in the state. Rather, because both traditions affirm that the state necessitated on account of human sin, each tradition engages in “both selective withdrawal and selective engagement” (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 76). Yoder himself discusses the relationship between the Anabaptist and Reformed on questions on cultural engagement when he writes, referencing the Reformed charge of the Anabaptists “denying” cultural engagement: “The Reformed do not say that the Anabaptist misinterpret the cultural mandate but that they deny it. This only makes sense if that mandate’s content is univocally that which the Anabaptist refuses to do” (Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 2). Interpreting this quote, Mouw argue that the Anabaptists oppose “not the cultural mandate as such, but only the Calvinist’s prescriptions about what it means to respond obediently to that mandate” (Mouw, “Creational Politics,” 114).
paved the way for, through his sustained dialogues with Richard Mouw. Following the pattern set by Mouw and Yoder, we have seen the ways that Branson Parler extends their dialogue, looking to the question of the doctrine of creation in Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue. But the dialogue between Mouw and Yoder did not arise in a vacuum. Insights from earlier scholars, such as Verduin and Balke, paved the way for Mouw and Yoder’s reframing the relationship between the two traditions as “intra-family.”

Most of the voices we have surveyed here have been Reformed. In one sense, the reason for this is rather straightforward: this dissertation enters Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue from a Reformed perspective, looking to Reformed guides along the way. A second reason for the bent towards Reformed voices is one of correction: it has been a persistent error within the Reformed tradition to mischaracterize the Anabaptist tradition. As Mouw explains, “differences between Anabaptist and Reformed Christians have been rather consistently misrepresented, especially on the part of Reformed thinkers.”1106 Correcting misconceptions and mischaracterizations of Anabaptist brothers and sisters in Christ is a necessary step towards repairing and rebuilding a relationship. But Yoder, in his dialogues with Mouw, helps us to identify a third reason why we might primarily look to Reformed voices in this survey: the social context surrounding any dialogues that might occur within North America is heavily weighted toward the Reformed voice. That is, while Anabaptist thinkers often learn about Reformed thought, or attend Reformed schools, the same is not true of Reformed thinkers.1107 While this in no way gives license to ignore or overlook Anabaptist voices within Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, it does place a particular burden on Reformed thinkers to take up these dialogues, and thus, undergirds a desire to seek out those Reformed thinkers who have taken up said dialogues. However, it is

1107 Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 3.
impertinent to merely look to Yoder as the representative of Anabaptism in Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue. While this study eventually looks to Yoder as a representative of Anabaptism worthy of studying in detail, given his long-standing relationship to neo-Calvinism and his impact on North American evangelicalism, we ought to see his dialogues with neo-Calvinism alongside, and in light of, broader Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues. For these, we can look to Mennonite-Reformed ecumenical dialogues.

*The Posture of Mennonites in Dialogue*

Mennonites around the globe have partaken in numerous ecumenical encounters in the last four decades. In their work *Mennonites in Dialogue*, Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling have helpfully compiled official reports from these encounters, from 1975 to 2012. These reports provide important context for Mennonite posture within ecumenical dialogues, document the outcomes of these dialogues, and mark the gained insights from national and international ecumenical conversations in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and among representatives from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). Each of the dialogues recorded in this work testify to the common roots of the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions and the troubled history between them. The relationship between the two traditions, these dialogues recount, has been marked by suspicion, persecution, and misunderstanding. But each dialogue also testifies to the importance of, strides towards, and hope of reconciliation. The participants were committed to revisiting misunderstandings and differences, in a spirit of ecumenicity and understanding. The dialogue participants revisited many themes, including church and baptism, where the two traditions had a history of difference.

While not overlooking the differences that remained, each of these Anabaptist-Reformed dialogues sought clarity in the theological differences, common ground where it can be found,
and refinement, challenge, and encouragement in their own tradition, through the insights gained in the dialogue. K. Blei, in his reflections on the ecumenical dialogues in the Netherlands, articulated an important insight found in each dialogue: there remain “certain fundamental differences which pertain to all theological themes. Yet it is interesting that these fundamental differences in many ways only appear as differences in emphasis.”

As with scholarly pursuits of Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue, these ecumenical dialogues highlight a growing awareness of, and attention towards, the shared roots of the two traditions. Even amidst continued difference, more commonality can be identified than received, historical wisdom may suggest.

The dialogues included in *Mennonites in Dialogue* not only provide material regarding the conclusions of the ecumenical dialogues throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century between Mennonite and Reformed denominations, they also provide insight into the manner in which Mennonites participate in ecumenical dialogues. In his introduction to the work, Fernando Enns helpfully articulates the context of, and purposes for, Mennonite dialogue with other Christian traditions. Methodologically, Enns articulates, Mennonites begin dialogues with a focus on the present context of their church. On account of the tendency towards congregationalism within Mennonite churches, there is “great diversity” among Mennonites, Enns notes. Thus dialogues are not primarily doctrinal; they begin with the “living testimonies of faith in a concrete context.” Further clarifying the relationship between practice and doctrine, especially historic Mennonite doctrines, Enns adds that “Mennonites are also rather skeptical about written confessions and always interpret common confessional texts

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within the limits of their local and temporal context.” Thus, “in dialogues these texts can only serve in a limited way as a final expression of ‘Mennonite doctrine.’” To understand the posture of Mennonites in ecumenical dialogue, one must understand their starting point.

Alongside the methodological insights that Enns provides regarding Mennonite practice and posture in ecclesial dialogue, he also reminds us of the ongoing influence and memory of history of other Christian traditions towards the Mennonite tradition within dialogue, and clarifies the purpose of dialogue within the Mennonite tradition. This chapter began by noting possibility for dialogue between Yoder and Bavinck to be seen as counterintuitive, given the history between their respective traditions. Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, in which Reformed subscribers note their rejection of Anabaptists, was cited as a historic example of this condemnation. Enns points to this tumultuous history as motivation for Mennonites in their dialogues. Current dialogue can pave the way for a new chapter in the relationships between Mennonites and other church traditions. For, as Enns articulates:

the history of Mennonites in relation to other faith traditions has usually been marked by harsh, mutual condemnations. Since these were expressed especially in the sixteenth century confessional texts that are still used in the churches, even in the form of “condemnations,” the memory remains present in the current encounters . . . present-day encounters have also been marked by the first-time recognition of the guilt toward Mennonites and by a search for ways to overcome these (sometimes mutual) condemnations, now moving toward a “healing of memories.”

The hope for revisited relationships among Christian traditions, no longer based in condemnation is one of the driving motivations for Mennonites in ecumenical dialogue.

Another goal is the desire for the sharpening of one’s own theological identity. Enns argues that listening to other traditions allows one’s own tradition to clarify theological positions in light of another position; “only through the clearest possible statement of differences can one

then carry out the crucial test of the enduring disagreements . . . dialogue aims first of all at understanding and explaining influential theological positions of a particular denomination.”

Dialogue is not a means of simply collapsing or erasing theological difference, but can provide important fodder for clarifying and refining one’s own, distinct theological identity. This process of clarification, both of one’s own view and the view of another tradition uncovers previously unknown or unexperienced commonness, while clarifying areas of theological distinction.

Consensus, Enns reminds us, is not the goal. Undergirding both of these aspects of dialogue, the healing of memories and clarification of theological distinctives, is the Mennonite’s firm conviction to catholicity and peace witness. Enns elaborates:

> For Mennonites the final abolition of all doctrinal differences is not a necessary condition for such visible unity, as they themselves can even demonstrate impressively with their congregationally based plurality. But this plurality must aim toward a reconciled diversity in the community of churches, because it is in such a way that the church’s peace witness becomes tested and gains credibility. Enns elaborates:

The history of the Mennonite tradition, its firm commitment to peace and nonviolence, and its emphasis on orthopraxy and faithfulness is critical to understanding their posture in ecumenical dialogues.

In the ecumenical dialogues between Reformed and Mennonite traditions from 1975-2012, many of the same topics that we found surveyed in Verduin, Balke, Mouw, and Yoder are present. These dialogues focus on questions of peace, baptism, ecclesiology, and the relationship between the church and state. Similarly, the conclusions of these ecumenical dialogues resonate with the scholarly Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue, identifying underlying historic and theological commonality and shared roots. But, as in the scholarly dialogues surveyed, a topic that does not arise in these ecumenical dialogues is the imitation of Christ. For the purposes of this study,

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which looks explicitly toward Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue on the imitation of Christ, it is interesting to note that while in practice, and throughout various ecumenical dialogues, the Anabaptist tradition upholds a strong emphasis on the imitation of Christ, the theme is not present in Reformed-Anabaptist dialogues. In Mennonite dialogue with Catholics, shared spiritual roots were uncovered. Both traditions, the dialogue participants concluded, were heavily influenced by medieval discipleship, including the early monastic traditions, the *Devotio Moderna*, and the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life:

at least a part of the spiritual roots of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is to be found in this medieval tradition of discipleship. Key concepts of the Anabaptist-Mennonite identity, such as yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*), discipleship (*Nachfolge*), repentance (*Bussfertigkeit*), and conversion were developed through the Middle Ages. . . . Medieval and post-medieval Catholic spirituality, on the one hand, and Anabaptist and Mennonite spirituality, on the other, are essentially in harmony, with respect to their common objective: holy living in word and deed.\(^\text{1115}\)

Both Mennonites and Catholics, this report emphasizes, cleave to the *imitatio Christi* as a core aspect of the Christian discipleship and spirituality. The commitment to be like Jesus, which animates each tradition’s view of the Christian life, is shared among Mennonites and Catholics. As their joint report states:

Catholics and Mennonites have a common zeal for the Christian life of holiness, motivated by devotion to Jesus Christ and the word of God, and actualized in a spirituality of discipleship and obedience. . . the life of discipleship and holiness is referred to and expressed variously in terms of ‘following Christ’ (*Nachfolge Christi*), ‘imitation of Christ’ (*imitatio Christi*), Christlikeness, and devotion to Christ.\(^\text{1116}\)

The imitation of Christ, these dialogues emphasize, is “basic to the Christian life.”\(^\text{1117}\) Dialogues with the Catholic church emphasize this christological mooring of the Christian life as


\(^{1116}\) "Called Together to be Peacemakers,” 69, cf. 88, 93, 97, 99.

\(^{1117}\) "Called Together to be Peacemakers,” 99.
foundational for both traditions, but this emphasis on the imitation of Christ is not seen in Mennonite dialogues with Reformed traditions.¹¹¹⁸ Through what is not found in these Mennonite-Reformed ecumenical dialogues, we again can assert the possibility for continuing Reformed-Anabaptist dialogues by engaging in dialogue on the imitation of Christ. The work of Herman Bavinck, articulated a reformed interpretation of the motif, provides a needed basis for this continued dialogue.

National and International Dialogues Between Reformed and Mennonite Traditions

Despite a lack of emphasis on the imitation of Christ in the ecumenical dialogues among Mennonite and Reformed tradition, these national and international dialogues again helpfully root the project of Reformed-Anabaptist dialogue, as seen in this dissertation through Bavinck and Yoder, in a tradition of dialogue. Thus, a brief examination of the conclusions from three ecumenical engagements – dialogue in the Netherlands between Reformed and Anabaptist churches, dialogue between the Federation of Swiss Protestant churches and the Conference of Mennonites in Switzerland, dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Christians and the Mennonite World Conference, and dialogue between Canadian Reformed and Mennonite churches –help to situate this study within the broader project of Mennonite-Reformed dialogue.

From 1975-1978, representatives from Reformed and Anabaptist churches in the Netherlands met together twenty times to dialogue on six topics: covenant, Word and Spirit,

¹¹¹⁸ Instead, the Reformed emphasis on law and the unity of the Old and New Testaments is noted (as we have noted throughout this study): “the course of the church as a covenant people is described in Old Testament terms as walking before the Lord according to his commandments. For this reason there has traditionally been a fixed place in many Reformed liturgies for the weekly reading of the commandments.” In dialogue, the Anabaptist traditions were seen to focus on the new aspect of the new covenant: “The Christian church, unlike Israel, lives in the era following the pouring out of the Spirit. The walk of the church is one according to the Spirit; the church as a community of faith is not a community formed by a continuity of generations, but is formed in discontinuity through personal conversion and rebirth through the Spirit” (J. Reiling and W. van’t Spijker, “The Covenant,” in Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012, ed. Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling, trans. Jonathan Seiling (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 315).
Jesus Christ, community, baptism, and the messianic way of life.\textsuperscript{1119} These meetings produced six joint summaries, one per discussion topic, which identified areas of commonality between the two and clarified the theological differences. In these meetings, the participants noted that the relationship between “Mennonites” and “Reformed” has been greatly shaped by history. Therefore, much attention was paid to the historical controversies in developing the summaries. In addition, however, there are also newer theological developments and biblical understandings that could contribute to the (still existing) controversies, such that they no longer appear as unbridgeable as they were previously.\textsuperscript{1120}

In their articulation of the relationship between the two traditions, participants noted that even in their differences, which were clarified, “these fundamental differences in many ways only appear as differences in emphasis.”\textsuperscript{1121} The contrasts and debates between the two traditions were not as stark as historic wisdom would lead one to believe. For example, in the relationship between Word and Spirit, the dialogue participants report that:

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The Mennonite/Baptist tradition never intended to separate Word and Spirit; the Reformed never intended totally including the Spirit in the Word . . . Here, however, the two traditions have a difference of emphasis. Cautiously speaking, we can say that according to Reformed tradition, the Spirit is, above all, the interpreter of the Word, whereas, according to Mennonite/Baptist tradition, the Spirit, above all, makes the Word become reality in the life of the believer and in that of the congregation. More than the Anabaptists, the Reformed have always emphasized the inter-relatedness of Word and Spirit, the criteria for every appeal to the Spirit being in the Scripture. . . . The [Anabaptists] emphasized obedience to the word as a condition for its understanding.\textsuperscript{1122}

quote

This difference between the two traditions ought to be understood as a difference in emphasis, not a fundamental theological difference that cannot be bridged. Even in areas where the theological differences seem staunch, such as baptism, the Dutch dialogues worked to find areas

\textsuperscript{1119} Blei, “Introduction,” 312-313.
\textsuperscript{1120} Blei, “Introduction,” 314.
\textsuperscript{1121} Blei, “Introduction,” 314.
of agreement between the two traditions. The six summary statements demonstrate deep theological conviction, both in their working toward Christian unity and clearly articulated doctrines – even in the midst of divergence. These statements found many areas of theological alignment, obtained clarity on areas of difference, revisited historic criticisms, growing in their understanding of one another and their commitment to work together.

Similarly, Reformed and Mennonite Christians in Switzerland, representatives from the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (SEK-FES) and the Conference of Mennonites in Switzerland (KMS-CMS) met together from 2006-2009 with the intent to revisit previous discussions between Reformed and Mennonite churches, create “an interpretive framework” for ongoing theological debates, and to address ongoing theological questions, primarily those surrounding baptism and ecclesiology. With a strong view towards the historical context within which these dialogues took place, the representatives noted both the conflict between the two traditions and celebrated the ongoing work of forgiveness and reconciliation. As in the Dutch dialogues, the Swiss representatives produced separate reports on the themes they set out to address: baptism and ecclesiology. Both reports contain careful articulations of the theological

1123 They note that the two traditions agree that “baptism marks the transition from the ‘old’ way of life to the ‘new’ life-in-Christ. By baptism one is brought into relationship with Christ, incorporated, as it were (Rom. 6). God in Christ works through the Spirit in the one who is baptized. Baptism is first and foremost an act that one undergoes: one is baptized” and that “baptism and faith indissolubly belong together. Together they are the expression of the new life breaking through in the midst of the old world. Since baptism and personal faith belong indissolubly together they cannot be interpreted individualistically. One who is baptized is incorporated into the body of Christ which is the church” (K. Blie and J. Reiling, “Baptism,” in Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012, ed. Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling, trans. Jonathan Seiling (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 322; emphasis original). But these dialogues also mark the continued differences: Reformed do not reject infant baptism; Anabaptists do.


1125 See “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 334-344 for a detailed history of the meetings between Reformed and Mennonites in Switzerland. For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to note Yoder’s enduring legacy in Swiss ecumenical dialogues. Already in 1975 he held a lecture at the University of Basel where Reformed faculty members “requested ‘forgiveness for the wrongs against Anabaptists’” (340).
positions of the respective traditions, highlight the challenges the traditions pose towards one another, and acknowledge areas of agreement. Regarding baptism, together they present the both the shared starting position and key difference between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions.

The two share the same starting point in their understanding of baptism:

God’s gracious condescension, which precedes all human faith and action. Receiving and appropriating salvation happens through a person’s own turning to God. Humans give a “response” to this “Word.” This “response” includes belief, confession, lifestyle, and inclusion in the community. 1126

But the traditions differ in the practice of this sacrament, clearly seen in the Reformed practice of infant baptism and the Anabaptist rejection of this practice. These dialogues carefully outline that this difference is in regard to

which of the two core elements, the “Word” or the “response,” is the reception or acceptance of grace, primarily supposed to be expressed through baptism. . . to what extent is the “response” – in particular by the baptized person – already supposed to play a significant role. 1127

While not agreeing on the practice of infant baptism, the difference is not as stark as received wisdom may have suggested. The two traditions share the same starting point, and, as articulated in further dialogues, they share a commitment to include children in the community of faith and acknowledge God’s work in their lives. 1128 While they two traditions are not able to mutually recognize one another’s baptisms, 1129 these dialogues move past a place of condemnation and

1126 “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 345.
1127 “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 345-346.
1128 “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 349. These commonalities are joined by concerns: the Mennonites articulated a continued concern that Reformed churches practice “indiscriminate” baptism (347). The Reformed churches articulated a concern regarding the practice of rebaptism in Mennonite churches (350). To these concerns, both sides offered commitments. The Mennonites committed to rethink how they have practiced re-baptism; “they take seriously the fact that their previous practice of baptism was from the Reformed perspective a painful sign if separation within the church of Jesus Christ” (352). The Reformed commit to counter “indiscriminate baptism” through the preparation of parents for baptism, robust catechesis, and opportunities for those who were baptized as infants to remember and commemorate their baptism (351).
1129 The Reformed recognize the baptism of the Mennonites, but “unrestricted mutual recognition of baptism is not possible, since the baptism of infants is not viable for the Mennonite side” (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 350).
division towards unity, clearly articulating areas of theological similarity.

In their dialogues on baptism, Swiss Reformed and Anabaptist representatives demonstrated a commitment to understanding one another, moving beyond the condemnations of the past, and working toward visible Christian unity – in understanding and practice. They articulated a shared theological starting point in a practice that has often been understood as wholly different in the two traditions. The common roots of Anabaptist and Reformed theology are on display even further within their dialogue on ecclesiology which “showed that most of the differences in ecclesiology are areas of emphasis, colorations, and accents, and not opposing positions.”\(^{1130}\) Differences between the two traditions are not as stark as history may have suggested. The Swiss dialogues cover many different topics related to ecclesiology to demonstrate this point, including the relationship between church and state.\(^{1131}\) Demonstrating that the differences stem from a common conviction, “the church of Christ can have the prophetic task to confront the state critically and to direct it toward God’s law,” the emphasis in Reformed and Mennonite churches on how this task is completed remains distinct.\(^{1132}\) Given the

\(^{1130}\) “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 353.

\(^{1131}\) These dialogues display incredible humility from the participants, marked by a willingness to honestly examine one’s own tradition to see where it may need to be strengthened. The Reformed participants examined the ways in which their ecclesiology can lead to absorption into society and uncritical ties to the state or other institutions. The Anabaptists show this humility in even more tangible ways, in lengthy requests toward their own tradition. They note that an emphasis on the voluntary nature of faith can sometimes lead to forgetfulness that “prior to our yes to God, it is always God who provides the yes to us”; emphasis on the fruits of repentance can sometimes lead to arrogance, elitism, or “merciless legalism. In an effort not to cheapen divine grace, we have sometimes allowed it to become a foreign word”; willingness to suffer has sometimes lead to persecution, other times has lead towards “wholesale bitterness towards governments and government representatives. On the other hand, however, it has sometimes led to a traumatized spirit of anxiety that pertains to the present, a weak-spiritedness and fear of others, which means sometimes hardly daring to publicly witness one’s own faith in a clear and relevant, glad and free way. . . continuity and preservation of the tradition often took precedence over changes and traditions – and listening to the Spirit of God was often treated as a lesser concern”; emphasis on local congregation “and the uncompromising adherence to what is biblical as that which is known to be true has sometimes narrowed the perspective of the greater whole of the church of Jesus Christ.” From this, they commit to “to allow for a rediscovery of the strengths and weaknesses of one’s own tradition and to renew and strengthen them in conversation with the partner church, hopefully toward a more shared synthesis” (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 364-366).

\(^{1132}\) “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 354. These dialogues also examine the relationship between the old and new covenant (“Mennonites and Reformed understand the Christian church as the beloved people of God, whom he chose and called to proclaim his grace. The Reformed emphasize the unity of the Bible’s Old and New Testaments.”)
relationship between the two traditions, and their many shared convictions, the dialogues conclude with the ways in which the two can speak to each other and challenge each to be faithful witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the present context. As they include in their conclusion of their dialogue, “together, we are summoned to be salt and light in society today without this compromising the gospel message through our divisions.”

In 1984, representatives from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonites emphasize that Jesus newly calls people from all nations into God’s people and that the writings of the Old Testament are to be interpreted in light of the new), organization of the church (reformed focus on “church” in its global form; Mennonites tend to think of “church” as a local congregation. Mennonites are more congregational, reformed gather in synods, etc.), community (“Body of Christ” is the guiding principle of community for both churches. . . Mennonites emphasize that they want to live as community in everyday life through the common reading of the Bible and the effort for a lifestyle that takes Jesus as example in everything. In the Reformed Church, the community becomes something concrete, where people listen to Jesus in worship. They trust that God’s Word shapes one’s lifestyle. The Reformed are less binding concerning fraternal coexistence”), priesthood (while both recognize the gifts given to all believers, “in Reformed churches, normally the responsibility of preaching, baptism and communion is for those trained, ordained and elected officials. In Mennonite congregations there are also those who were not specifically trained who are encouraged and empowered to use their gifts in the congregation”), and voluntarism (“Both churches are now convinced that faith and discipleship cannot and must not be compelled in any way. The Reformed have the stronger expectation that one is born into a tradition and church and that one can learn to appreciate its value with time. Mennonites emphasize more strongly that when people become adults, they voluntarily and knowingly choose to join the congregation;” 353-355).

Citing numerous examples of this mutual learning, the dialogues recount that: “The Anabaptist-Mennonite care for congregational life . . . is symbolically apparent.” This “enables the Evangelical-Reformed churches to inquire as to their own congregational life, also asking whether their congregations are simply absorbed into society” (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 358) and “the dedication of the Protestant churches beyond their own boarders for the surrounding community and world is an inquiry for the Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations, as to whether and how they contribute to society and creation beyond themselves” (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 358-359); “The independence of the Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations from state institutions calls for the Reformed churches to consider the extent to which they have become bound to public institutions and whether these correspond to their foundation and purpose” and “Conversely, the positive, cooperative relation of Evangelical-Reformed churches raises the question for Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations of which constructive contributions they can offer to the structuring of the state and society” (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 359); finally, “the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition of fearless commitment to unconditional peace against every form of violence challenges the Reformed churches to examine whether they need to take a stand against economic or political engagement that promotes war and benefits from it. Conversely, it applies to the Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations to clarify whether and in what form they endorse or support political and military initiatives aimed at securing peace” (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 359).

They emphasize the way in which the present-day context allows for this mutuality in a special way: “In Switzerland, as elsewhere, the time has come for Christians of different denominations to have fraternal relations that are characterized more by respect and mutual appreciation. Today’s favorable climate allows us first to emphasize what unites us. This is a grace and an opportunity for our generation. That which separates us also deserves our attention, and the reasons for it are not to be ignored. . . . Each church is invited to give their loyalty to Christ and his Word through their own vocation, by the totality of their distinctive gifts. At the same time the core of the Gospel message, in continuity with the supreme commandment of the Lord (Matt. 22: 34-40), is a call to build relationships borne out of love. This means that all churches are called to develop a substantial relationship to each other.”
Mennonite World Conference met together in Strasbourg for a day of consultation. Their time together ended with a public service of confession and communion. Like the dialogues in the Netherlands and Switzerland, they again affirmed the troubled history of the relationship between the two traditions and the reality of common roots and shared affirmations. They recognized a common call to live under the Lordship of Christ in a changing, divide and threatened world.”

The two traditions, these bodies asserted, have been called “twin sisters,” a fitting name for traditions that share so much, in history and proclamation. As these dialogues looked back on the disputes and differences throughout history between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, they identified “agreement on important issues of Christian faith and practice.” The traditions share an affirmation of the fundamental principles of the Reformation. *Sola Scriptura:* Scripture alone is the rule and norm of revelation. *Sola Gratia:* God’s grace, in Christ and by the Spirit, is the only source of salvation. *Sola fide:* justification is given by faith along in Christ, apart from any merit or works.

Alongside these fundamental claims, both traditions underline the importance of sanctification as well as its interrelatedness to justification. Faith in Christ means obedience to him – in public as well as the private dimension of the Christian’s life. Further, both traditions, each in its own way – have placed a special emphasis on the church as community: a community opposed to sacramentalism and ritualism; a community committed to build relations and structures for mutual support and discipline.

Identifying *first* the commonalities allows for a recognition that the differences that are sustained between the traditions are differences in application, not fundamental differences. Both traditions, for example, affirm *sola fide,* but the Anabaptists apply this principle to justification

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1136 “Beyond Brokenness into God’s New Creation,” 377.
1137 “Beyond Brokenness into God’s New Creation,” 377.
1138 “Beyond Brokenness into God’s New Creation,” 377.
and epistemology. Both traditions affirm *sola scriptura*, but the Reformed tradition emphasizes the continuity between the old and new covenants, while the Anabaptists emphasize the *fulfillment* that the new covenant brings.\textsuperscript{1139} While these have often been seen as irreconcilable differences, these dialogues assert that the differences are important, but not totalizing. They are differences in application of shared principles. The dialogues between the WARC and MWC call Reformed and Anabaptist churches to “look afresh at our relationship to each other and our common calling to follow Christ in church and world.”\textsuperscript{1140} Indeed, where strife and dissimilarity seemed to reign, there are many shared assertions among the two traditions.

One final dialogue is recorded in this work, a three-day meeting between Reformed and Mennonite Canadians in Calgary, in 1989. In these dialogues, too, there is an emphasis on historic divisions between the two traditions regarding baptism and peace and the state. The participants summarized their findings in this way: “while there is a Mennonite spectrum of views and a Reformed spectrum of views, there is also a considerable area of common ground. The old sense that the two parties are rigid and bitter enemies is gone.”\textsuperscript{1141} On baptism, the dialogue participants were able to assert a number of shared convictions: “neither the Mennonite nor the Reformed traditions can properly be understood apart from a doctrine of prevenient divine grace,” “both traditions insist upon the connection between baptism and church membership,” and church discipline is closely linked with baptism in both traditions.\textsuperscript{1142}

\textsuperscript{1139} “Beyond Brokenness into God’s New Creation,” 378.
\textsuperscript{1140} “Beyond Brokenness into God’s New Creation,” 380.
\textsuperscript{1142} “Baptism, Peace, and the State,” 382-383. The ongoing differences include: “whether and in what sense baptism in the NT may be understood as analogous to circumcision in the Old (Col. 2: 9-15); whether the NT teaches believers’ baptism as the normative order; whether the NT understandings and accounts of baptismal practice allow for infant baptism; — the sense in which baptism as “mystery” or “sacrament” may be grounded in the NT concept of “mystery” or the NT concept of “pledge” (I Pet. 3: 21); the degrees to which differing views of covenant and of
Similarly with commitments to peace, while the Reformed assert that there may be reason and need to take up the sword in a fallen world and the Mennonites are committed to pacifism, both traditions take their stand on the Christ event, including the life and example of Jesus, his atoning death on the Cross, his Resurrection and lordship over the powers. Within this understanding Mennonites, and some parts of the Reformed family, have emphasized the obligation of non-violent action in accordance with the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Other Reformed Christians would claim that free responsibility in Christ may involve violent action at times, undertaken in repentance, and confident in the forgiving mercy of God.\(^{1143}\)

In the midst of ongoing theological differences, there are “elements of convergence” that must be identified.\(^{1144}\) Doing so, these dialogues show, paves the way for learning and growing together,\(^{1145}\) and demonstrates a deep Christian commitment to unity.

Like Verduin, Balke, Parler, Mouw, and Yoder, these ecclesial dialogues point to a relationship between the two traditions that has historically over-emphasized difference, when points of commonality can – and should – be identified. The close relationship between the two traditions is not simply one of historic proximity, but one of shared impulses and ideas that come alongside, and animate, enduring differences. They are, in the words of Mouw and Yoder, “intra-family” differences, or, in the words of Verduin, a familial, stepchild relationship. Similarly, the ecumenical dialogues point to a relationship of “twin sisters.” In each description, deep, familial

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\(^{1143}\) “Baptism, Peace, and the State,” 385.

\(^{1144}\) “Baptism, Peace, and the State,” 385. Similarly, the identify areas of similarity and difference on the church: “While there is convergence on the role of the church, differences remain as to its nature, and on the terms most appropriately used to express it. Hence the need for further analysis of this matter both within the two traditions and between them. It would seem that the Reformed tend to have a more social understanding of the catholicity of the Church, while the Mennonites tend rather to emphasize the discipleship of believers in the context of commitment to community. In the effort to relate to culture, the Reformed have sometimes identified themselves too closely with it, while the Mennonites, in their effort to challenge culture, have sometimes distanced themselves too far from it” (386, emphasis original).

\(^{1145}\) They affirm that “Both traditions are changing, the Reformed realizing that they must pay more attention to the integrity of the Church as a witnessing and nurturing community than they have sometimes done, the Mennonites recognizing that they have to participate and act responsibly in society and culture. The traditions are converging on the conception of Christ as transforming culture, as opposed to his being over, against, or above, it” (“Baptism, Peace, and the State,” 385).
ties are highlighted. These ties do not negate the differences between the two traditions, rather, they situate them – and properly so – within shared history and shared theological emphases. As the churches in Switzerland testified in their dialogues,

the time has come for Christians of different denominations to have fraternal relations that are characterized more by respect and mutual appreciation. Today’s favorable climate allows us first to emphasize what unites us. This is a grace and an opportunity for our generation. That which separates us also deserves our attention, and the reasons for it are not to be ignored. . .

Anabaptist-Reformed ecumenical dialogues have made significant strides in this direction, particularly in regards to ecclesiology and baptism. The scholarly contributions of Mouw, Yoder, Verduin, Balke, and Parler are also significant, showing the way the two traditions can speak to one another, clarifying one’s own convictions, challenging the other tradition to be faithful to the call of Christ, and working together to display this call in the world. They each demonstrate the reality of core similarities among the two traditions, and the fruit that is borne when Reformed and Anabaptist dialogue together. These dialogues, scholarly and ecumenical, have established core, common theological affirmations as it relates to ecclesiology, baptism, social ethics, and the doctrine of creation. They have also identified the importance of the imitation of Christ in Anabaptist thought, and the need for Reformed Christians to speak more clearly about Christian ethics, especially the role of Christ in Christian ethics. It is upon these claims that we can add, placing Bavinck and Yoder in conversation on the imitation of Christ, drawing upon the insights of these dialogues.

**Continuing the Conversation: Yoder and Bavinck in Dialogue**

Historical analyses of the relationship between the Anabaptists and the Reformed traditions demonstrate that even in the early tension between the two traditions, there were
important similarities. To be sure, these similarities were coupled with significant differences, but the differences were not as numerous as one might expect, given the received wisdom of strict polarity between the two traditions. Balke, Verduin, and the dialogues between the WARC and the MWC point us toward the conclusion that Mouw and Yoder explicitly articulate: despite the polemics of the time, the differences between Reformed and Anabaptist perspectives are best seen as “intra-family” debates. Branson Parler takes Mouw and Yoder’s argument and uses it as a way to view contemporary disagreement on the question of the doctrine of creation. Again, he argues that despite significant disagreements, there are important resonances between the two traditions, specifically between Yoder and Abraham Kuyper.

Each ecclesial dialogue, and the work of Verduin and Balke, give us a historical framework for understanding the relationship between the two traditions broadly. Mouw, Yoder, and Parler have then specified the historical question in light of a particular relationship: Yoder and the neo-Calvinists. In these studies, Kuyper has often been used as the representative for neo-Calvinism, but given Bavinck’s influence in the tradition, it is similarly appropriate to understand Bavinck as a representative for Anabaptist-neo-Calvinist dialogue. The table has already been, metaphorically, set for such a dialogue, given the work of these previous studies. Like Parler, then, we will continue in the tradition of dialogue between Yoder and the neo-Calvinists by focusing on one particular theological theme: the imitation of Christ, a motif that –

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1147 Mouw articulates the received wisdom on the relationship between the two traditions in this way: “on the received reading of the differences between Calvinists and Anabaptists, Calvinists believe that we ought to be transforming culture while Anabaptists adopt an anti-cultural stance; and more specifically, Calvinists urge Christians to participate in civil government while Anabaptists oppose such participation.” But this reading of staunch polarities does not hold true when subjected to the way in which Yoder articulates Anabaptist principles. For example, Yoder argues that Anabaptists are opposed to “the Calvinist mode of cultural transformation,” not cultural transformation in and of itself (Mouw, “Abandoning the Typology,” 9, emphasis original).

1148 The Dutch ecclesial dialogues from 1975-1978 also include neo-Calvinist representatives, in dialogue with Anabaptists. They again demonstrate the shared convictions and roots among the two traditions (see: Blei, “Introduction,” 314).
as we have seen – has a central place in the theological ethics of both Yoder and Bavinck.

The imitation of Christ is another area that is ripe for fruitful dialogue between the traditions. It is a theme that is widespread among American evangelicalism, but begs further questions, most importantly: what are the ways in which one determines what constitutes a proper imitation of Christ? Here, the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions have significant differences. But, exploring both Yoder’s and Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ also demonstrates many commonalities between the two traditions, again pointing us back to Mouw and Yoder’s initial premise: the disputes between these two traditions ought to be seen as “intra-family” disputes, not simply strong polarities and disagreements. Exploring both the disagreement and the confluence between the two traditions on the imitation of Christ has the potential to both further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue and aid in refining and clarifying evangelical ethics.

As Mouw and Yoder explained in their debates, the real questions and issues in evangelical ethics were questions of “Reformed versus Anabaptist;” as evangicals develop and enact social ethics “they’re either going to move toward a more creational theology or they’re going to move for more robust Christology.” But, these two emphases ought not be pitted against one another; in an interview for Comment Magazine with James K.A. Smith, Mouw clearly articulates the way in which both of these emphases are important. Mouw argues that Reformed ethics needs further development, and ought to do so in conversation with the Anabaptist tradition, which has important insights for Reformed ethics. Neo-Calvinism has not yet developed theological ethics that can stand alongside Anabaptist ethics, represented by Yoder, Hauerwas, and others. Smith responds with this insight and question: “one of the things .

1150 Mouw and Smith, “An Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue.”
we need to learn from that [Anabaptist] tradition is: *Jesus matters.* In the Reformed tradition, we also speak more about creation than we do cross, and we speak more about law than we do Jesus. But do you think that there are resources indigenous to the Reformed tradition . . . that this dialogue could bring out?” Mouw’s response is worth quoting, at length:

I think [the resources are] there in Bavinck, for example. Bavinck is one of the few people in our Neo-Calvinistic tradition who actually talks about the imitation of Christ. What does it mean to be like Jesus? We've always said, "If you want to be like Jesus, fulfill the law." Jesus fulfilled the law and we can't fulfill it by keeping it, but the third use of the law, it's also said we need to conform to the law. To be like Jesus is to live in accordance with God's commands.

I agree with all of that, but there's something about the fact that we can look to Jesus. And it isn't just in some formal sense fulfilling the law, but it's seeing how he did it, how he reacted to people who picked corn on the Sabbath, those kinds of things.

[In the Reformed tradition, ethics] ended up being very law-oriented. I'm all in favour of that; I think the lawful ordering of creation is a very profound insight of Neo-Calvinism. But if all we have is a lawful ordering of creation, I don't think we'd always have very nice people.1151

These insights raise an important challenge: what does it look like for Reformed ethics to take seriously questions of character formation? And what is the role of Christ in a theological tradition that emphasizes creation-order? Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue on the question of the imitation of Christ is an important resource for pressing law-based Reformed ethics to think seriously about the ways that Jesus matters in Christian ethics. It can also challenge the Anabaptist ethic in its areas of weakness. In the same interview, Mouw also identifies the ways in which this dialogue can aid the Anabaptist tradition: “One of the weaknesses of an Anabaptist ethic is that there isn't really a lot of room for talking about

commonness, about public vocabulary for talking about justice and peace and loving relationships.” Here, neo-Calvinist ethics have important insights to share.\footnote{The ecumenical dialogues between Reformed and Mennonite representatives further identified areas where the Mennonite tradition can learn from encounters with their Reformed brothers and sisters, see: “From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 364-366.}

As seen in their ecumenical dialogues, the Mennonite tradition has been strong on the imitation of Christ; the tradition emphasizes a discipleship that is marked by following Jesus. The same cannot be said of the Reformed tradition, which has typically focused on a law-based ethic. Nonetheless, the Reformed tradition is not devoid of attention toward the imitation of Christ; Herman Bavinck’s ethics demonstrate a robust Reformed approach to the theme. His work also presents an opportunity to further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue on this key ethical motif. Dialogue on the theme of the imitation of Christ has the potential to further Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue by exploring areas of commonality on the imitation of Christ, alongside recognizing areas where each tradition challenges the other, addressing weaknesses in each tradition. This dialogue also clarifies the nature of the imitation of Christ, a motif that has been dominant within North American evangelical ethics, but the way in which the motif ought to be applied in the lives of Christians has been hazy, at best. The WWJD bracelets of the 1990s asked nothing more than “what would Jesus do?”, a question that – as Sheldon’s congregants recognized – needs additional hermeneutical cues for proper execution. One may not simply ask this question with no further clarity as to how to discern the answer to the question (doing so may result in, for example, a disappointing – and watery – batch of wine for the local winemaker!). Clearly articulating the way in which the dominant theological traditions influencing North
American evangelical ethics understand the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer clarifies an important motif within evangelical ethics.

For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is properly understood as the law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. For Yoder, the imitation of Christ is following Jesus in his cross. Initially, these two definitions of the imitation of Christ seem characterized by, as many other issues are in Reformed-Anabaptist debate, a strict polarity. They do not seem to have much in common. However, without downplaying the important differences that remain between the two, a closer look at the two understandings of the imitation of Christ necessitates an acknowledgement that there are significant areas of convergence between Yoder’s thought and Bavinck’s thought. Drawing upon the explorations of both Bavinck’s and Yoder’s understandings of the imitation of Christ in chapters three and four, we will identify both the areas of convergence and difference between the two definitions of the imitation of Christ. We will then articulate the critiques that a Bavinckian articulation of the imitation of Christ offers to a Yoderian view, and the reverse. Doing so will press us toward a positive articulation of the imitation of Christ for Reformed evangelicals in the twenty-first century.

**Yoder and Bavinck’s Shared Emphases on the Imitation of Christ**

In the dialogues which established the Anabaptist-Reformed relationship as an “intra-family” relationship, Mouw and Yoder establish important shared ethical affirmations among the two traditions, including a shared pessimism regarding the unregenerate moral consciousness, shared emphasis on volition, and a shared affirmation of the

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connection between individual piety and the Christian community. In this discussion, Mouw and Yoder also hint at the ways in which the imitation of Christ may rise to importance in both communities: “For both traditions ‘following Jesus’ has an inescapably corporate dimension to it.” There are important distinctives in the way in which both traditions understand what it means to follow Jesus. But alongside these distinctives and disagreements, there are significant areas of convergence between the two, grounded in the familial nature of the dialogue. Discussions on the imitation of Christ in each tradition, as seen in Bavinck and Yoder, will, accordingly, display these shared ethical convictions. We can expect, therefore, that there are concrete similarities arising out of the imitation of Christ in the thought of both Bavinck and Yoder. Here, we will identify some of those similarities, noting the ways in which they arise from the shared convictions Mouw and Yoder outline.

For both Bavinck and Yoder, the imitation of Christ is at the heart of Christian ethics. It is a necessary motif for the Christian life. Even in this simple statement, we find the first similarity between the two: the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians. Alongside this shared emphasis, both Bavinck and Yoder insist that the imitation of Christ must be an ethic that affirms the relationship between Christ and creation as one of restoration, is an all of life encompassing ethic, and calls for a qualified imitation of Christ. These latter affirmations result in another similarity: both Yoder and Bavinck reject the historic forms of the imitation of Christ (the martyr, the mystic, the monk, and the modernist).

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1155 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 133.
1156 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 133.
The Imitation of Christ as an Ethic for Christians

In his 1966 lecture, “Walking in the Resurrection,” Yoder’s understanding of the limited application of an ethic based upon the imitation of Christ is clear. The command to imitate Jesus is not universal; it is only for believers. The command to imitate Jesus in his cross is a command for Christians.\footnote{1157} Yoder writes, in this lecture and in many others, that “Christian morality is for Christians.”\footnote{1158} Perhaps, in an ethic so centrally defined by Jesus this seems to be an obvious statement, but Yoder does not understand it to be a self-evident claim; many Christians throughout history have had a tendency to argue for a universal morality.\footnote{1159} This cannot be the case, Yoder argues, because a morality for all people would force the Christian ethic to be understood in terms of its utility in the world and whether or not the standards for morality are attainable. But this rubric does not – and cannot – fit onto a Christian ethic, for it is only on account of the believer’s new life in Jesus that they are able to live out the commands of Jesus.\footnote{1160} Thus, as they imitate Jesus, Christians are visibly different from the world; they are “like a city on a hill,” modeling Jesus’ new way of living to a watching world.\footnote{1161}

Bavinck similarly understands the imitation of Christ to be a charge to Christians. His language, on this question, is as direct as Yoder’s. In his Reformed Ethics, under the heading of the true imitation of Christ, Bavinck writes:

Christ is the example not for everyone but for those who are regenerated. Imitating him is only the form of the spiritual life. Therefore, our lives can be directed to Christ only when they proceed from him and abide in him.\footnote{1162}

\footnote{1157} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 36-38.  
\footnote{1159} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 36.  
\footnote{1160} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” in Revolutionary Christianity, 40-41.  
\footnote{1162} Bavinck, GE, 288.
It is only Christians, on account of who Christ is and what he has done, that can imitate Christ. As Bavinck writes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, in Christ, believers are “made alive...and called to follow in his footsteps.” Union with Christ is the foundation for the imitation of Christ. Only when one is united with Christ can one’s life take the shape of Christ’s life; imitating Christ necessitates understanding Christ as both example and Redeemer.

Both Bavinck and Yoder emphasize the importance of faith in Christ prior to imitating him. One must be a Christian before Christ can be an example. Given the common emphasis on volition and surrender within each tradition articulated by Mouw and Yoder, this commonality ought not surprise us. Each tradition affirms the need for a radical turning toward God away from the world; the imitation of Christ is predicated upon this volitional turn.

“Restored to Our Destiny”: The Imitation of Christ, Creation, and Redemption

In a dialogue with Mouw, Yoder remarked that one of the primary differences between Anabaptist and Reformed traditions (specifically, the difference between him and Richard Mouw) on questions of culture was this: “Mouw wants to say, ‘Fallen, but created,’ and I want to say, ‘Created, but fallen.’” This pithy remark aptly illustrates the difference between the two traditions on this question. With such differing emphases, then, it seems rather difficult to find common ground on questions of the relationship between Christ, creation, and redemption. But, using the work of Branson Parler on the doctrine of creation found within Yoder’s own writings, we can demonstrate a core similarity between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ, even on the relationship between creation and

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1165 They write: “both make much of surrender as foundational to righteous living” (Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 132, emphasis original).
1166 This shared emphasis also highlights another aspect of Mouw and Yoder’s argument: the shared “pessimistic appraisal of the unregenerate moral consciousness” (Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 131).
1167 Mouw, “The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship,” 20
restoration. Each theologian emphasizes the *restoration* that Christ brings of God’s creational intent and norms. While Yoder and Bavinck differ on our postlapsarian ability to access and understand God’s creational intent through general revelation, both affirm that the example of Christ is directly, and necessarily, connected to the patterns established in God’s original, good creation.

Branson Parler argues – and convincingly so – that while Yoder is “particularly suspicious of certain Reformed views of the cultural mandate, sphere sovereignty, the concept of vocation, and the doctrine of ‘creation orders,’” he still has a doctrine of creation, rooted in his understanding of the Powers.  

Inherent in this account of the doctrine of creation is the claim that, in Parler’s words, the work of Jesus is “not only a ‘new creation’ (discontinuity) but also a restoration or renewal of creation (continuity).”

At the heart of Yoder’s understanding of the restoration of creation is Yoder’s theology of the Powers. The Powers were part of God’s original, good creation. But as a result of the fall, this good intent has been thwarted; “the structures which were supposed to be our servants have become our masters and our guardians.” Then in the cross, Jesus breaks the oppressive nature of the Powers. Parler explains,

redemption is not a release from a relation to the Powers or power. Instead, the redemption manifest in Jesus is a revelation of the true nature of God-like power, that is, what it means to be the true image of God. . . .His life, death, resurrection, and ascension broke the oppressive rule of the Powers and redeemed humanity to once again walk in true power and wisdom.

Jesus restores God’s good, created intent. But, that restoration involves – as it does in Bavinck –

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1171 Yoder, *PoJ*, 141.
a fulfilling and heightening, in some way. Parler explains: “The politics of Jesus do not simply restore a static structure or order that existed in the beginning; rather, the dynamic human freedom and power to be in right relation with God and all creation is restored—a restoration so radical that it can only be termed new creation.”

This new creation is deeply connected to the original creation. The relationship between the two is one of restoration, not beginning from scratch. God’s grace doesn’t add something new or foreign to creation. It restores the original intent of creation—seeing it to it’s intended fulfillment. Jesus restores the “nature of things” as they ought to be. Jesus points both to the way things will be, and shows the connection between God’s coming kingdom and the prelapsarian state of things.

Parler summarizes his argument by stating that “Yoder provides a broad outline of their radical connection in the politics of Jesus and the power of creation, in humanity's true being and calling.” Understanding Yoder’s theology of the Powers in this way, we find a direct connection between Yoder’s doctrine of creation and the imitation of Christ. Followers of Jesus are to imitate Christ in his cross, a concept within Yoder’s theology that is clearly tied to the Powers. The cross is Jesus’ victory over the oppression of the Powers. In the cross, he “broke their rules,” disarming them not through the sword, but in nonviolent

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1173 Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 71; emphasis original.
1176 Yoder, “Are You The One Who Is to Come?” 212.
1177 Thus Yoder’s direct, and sole, appeal to Jesus to understand the proper imitation of Christ does not negate some kind of appeal to creation. The doctrine of creation cannot contradict what is exemplified in Christ, but Christ as exemplar does not necessarily negate any appeal to creation. See: Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 68, where he writes, “whatever we say about humanity's true purpose and calling in creation, we cannot disconnect it from the biblical proclamation that Jesus is the true image of God and the Word by whom all things were created. As a result, whatever revelation, substantive doctrine, and ethical guidance we find in creation, these must not be articulated in conflict with the fullness of revelation that is given in Jesus Christ.”
obedience and voluntary subordination. Jesus’ death was the “firstfruits of an authentic restored humanity;” he was not “a slave of these Powers,” instead, in the cross, Jesus broke the dominion of the Powers, a result of the fall. In doing this, he opened up a new way for humanity to live, a way that is in proper relation to the Powers. Powers no longer must be “masters and guardians.” They can be – as they were created to be – servants. Parler explains, “Because the Powers were originally meant to serve in the call to love, Jesus refused to let them gain mastery over him and would not sacrifice his neighbor to any power.” This is true humanity, the way we were created to live; Jesus lived a “genuinely free and human existence.” Following Jesus, believers live as ones who “know another regime is normative;” they live in a way that anticipates the coming kingdom of God. But this way of living, eschatologically directed, is the way humanity was created to live. For Yoder, the imitation of Christ is predicated upon Christ’s work of restoring the creational order.

Bavinck explicitly raises the question of the relationship between Christ and creation when he asks, “how is grace related to nature . . . what is the connection between creation and re-creation”? Many scholarly works take up Bavinck’s answer to this question, including Jan Veenhof’s highly regarded study, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, which effectively investigates the importance and prominence of the relationship between nature and grace in Herman Bavinck. Veenhof argues that for Bavinck, the relationship was one of restoration: grace

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1182 Yoder, *PoJ*, 144; See also Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama*, 111
1183 Yoder, *PoJ*, 187. This leads to a posture of “voluntary subordination” as seen in Jesus on the cross. Mouw connects Christ’s way of confronting the Powers to the Christian’s attitude to the state: “The Christian’s submission to the state grows out of an attempt to imitate the work of Christ on the cross” (Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama*, 112).
restores nature. God’s coming eschatological kingdom is not wholly disconnected from our present, nor from God’s original, created design. As Al Wolters summarizes, “grace restores nature . . . salvation means the restoration of creation . . . creation is not abolished but integrally renewed by salvation in Christ.”

The relationship between grace and nature, characterized by Bavinck as one of restoration, is necessarily connected to his understanding of the imitation of Christ. Grace does not abolish nature; it restores it; it is not an “annihilation, but a restoration of God’s sin-disrupted work of creation. . . . in re-creation the creation, with all its forms and norms, is restored; in the gospel, the law; in grace, justice; in Christ, the cosmos is restored.” God’s grace in Christ does not take away, or elevate above, the natural world. It restores what God had originally created. But, as Veenhof shows, this is “restoration,” not “repristination”:

A further important point of view is that the redemption by grace of created reality, the reformation of nature, is not merely repristination, but raises the natural to a higher level than it originally occupied. In the future, Bavinck writes, the “original order” will be restored. Not, however, “as though nothing had happened, as though sin had not existed,

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1187 This theme is also connected to other important theological concepts. Brian Mattson, in *Restored to Our Destiny*, convincingly argues the necessary relationship between creation and redemption in Bavinck’s thought. This work, focused on the *Imago Dei* argues that humanity always had a unified, eschatological destination as a part of the *Imago Dei*. Mattson convincingly demonstrates, here and elsewhere, the relationship between nature and grace in Herman Bavinck and the application of this relationship to various theological themes in his corpus (Brian Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and The Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); 7, 113, 240). See also Brian Mattson, *Cultural Amnesia: Three Essays on Two Kingdoms* (Billings, MT: Swinging Bridge Press, 2018).
1188 Christelijke wereldbeschouwing (Kampen, 1913), p. 89; cf. IV, 358, cited in Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 18. Veenhof adds that Bavinck continues with these “striking” reflections: “It would have been much simpler if God had destroyed the whole fallen world and replaced it with an entirely new one. But it was His good pleasure to re-establish the fallen world, and to liberate from sin the same mankind which had sinned” (IV 675f). Veenhof also highlights these words of Bavinck: “. . . The Holy Spirit, who acts in continuity with God’s directives in natural life, ‘seeks by His grace to restore the whole of natural life, to liberate it from sin and to hallow it to God’” (Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 18, citing III 575 [ET 3.571]); “The kingdom of God is hostile to nothing but sin alone” (Our Reasonable Faith, p. 528; cited in Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 18.), among others.
1189 Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 19. Veenhof writes: “Grace militates against sin in the natural, but it does not militate against the natural itself; on the contrary, it restores the natural and brings it to its normal development, i.e. the development intended by God.”
and the revelation of God’s grace in Christ had never occurred. Christ gives more than sin took away; grace did much more abound.\textsuperscript{1190}

This, however, is not Bavinck’s subtle way of pitting nature and grace against each other, under the guise of restoration. Veenhof argues: “The fact must not be neglected, however, that this higher glory constitutes the goal to which the earth had been directed \textit{from the beginning}.\textsuperscript{1191} It is a restoration towards what God originally intended for creation. The work of God in the word, according to Bavinck, is one of restoration. It is not opposed to the natural; it restores and elevates God’s created intention; “Grace does not remain outside or above or beside nature but rather permeates and wholly renews it.”\textsuperscript{1192}

Bavinck directly appeals to this relationship between nature and grace in his second essay on the imitation:

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Grace does not suppress nature but restores it. The gospel is not a new law either with respect to the Law of Moses nor to the laws which God has established in nature for the natural dimension of life.\textsuperscript{1193}
\end{quote}

Appeals to this theme are also present in the first essay on the imitation of Christ: \textsuperscript{1194} “From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example, proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us”\textsuperscript{1195} A life following Christ, enlivened by his Spirit, is thus not a life opposed to nature – or those norms that can be found in nature, and are revealed in the law. Instead, as Bavinck clearly highlights in

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\textsuperscript{1190} Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 22, citing Bavinck, \textit{De algemeene genade}, p. 43 [ET 59]; emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{1191} Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 22, emphasis original. Bavinck affirms that grace “does not grant anything beyond what Adam, if he had remained standing, would have acquired in the way of obedience. The covenant of grace differs from the covenant of works in the road, not in its final destination. The same benefits are promised in the covenant of works and freely given in the covenant of grace. Grace restores nature and raises it to its highest fulfillment, but it does not add a new, heterogeneous component to it” (III 582 [3.577]; quoted in Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” 22).
\textsuperscript{1192} Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 60; cf. 62, 64.
\textsuperscript{1193} Bavinck, Imitation II, 429.
\textsuperscript{1194} Van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 86.
\textsuperscript{1195} Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
\end{flushright}
his insistence on the relationship between the law and Christ’s example, the two are necessarily connected. Christ restores God’s original, creational intent for the way humanity ought to live their life. The law of Christ, or the imitation of Christ, does not set aside or surpass the law. Those things in the life of Christ that are to be imitated, rather, are determined by the law.\footnote{Further emphasizing both restoration and the reality that the imitation of Christ is for Christians, Bavinck writes: “examples often have greater persuasive power than mere doctrines or laws. While the Christian may have an inner delight after the law (Rom. 7:22) it nevertheless judges and slays him. The same law spoke by Christ can bring forth obedience” (Bavinck, Imitation I, 415; emphasis added).}

The work of God in Christians is one of restoration and renewing, restoring the image of God in us: an image which conforms to the law of God and the example of Christ. By necessarily connecting the creational law of God, the redeeming work of Christ and his example, and the glorified, eschatologically complete image of God that is restored in us by the Spirit and ever more conforming to the example of Christ, Bavinck again highlights that grace restores nature. The norm for humanity given in the imitation of Christ is one that is the restoration of our creational destiny.

Both Bavinck and Yoder understand the relationship between Christ and creation as one of restoration, clearly seen in the imitation of Christ; Mouw and Yoder similarly point to a shared relationship between the Old and New Testaments, one of promise and fulfillment. The Old and New Testaments, creation and restoration, are not separated from one another; both traditions emphasize the relationship between the two.\footnote{Both Yoder and Bavinck also directly appeal to the relationship of promise and fulfillment between the Old and New Testaments in their discussion of the imitation of Christ. In The Original Revolution Yoder argues that the Zealot options, the posture of Jesus which believers are to imitate, runs through the Old and New Testament; it begins with Abraham and culminates in Jesus (Yoder, “The Original Revolution,” 27-28). The promise-fulfillment relationship is also seen in Yoder’s treatment of the Sermon on the Mount, which he classifies as an “ethic of fulfillment” (Yoder, “The Political Axioms of the Sermon on the Mount,” 42). In Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, the law is fulfilled; as Yoder explains, “the law is not set aside. It is rounded out, intensified” (Yoder, Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution, 314). Instead of dismantling the teaching of the Old Testament, Jesus completes it. Jesus brings the law “to full accomplishment of the intent of the earlier moral guides” (Yoder, “The Political Axioms of the Sermon on the Mount,” 44). Yoder stresses that Jesus did not come to set aside the law, but to reinforce and “purify Jewish understandings of the law, and to save the law from misunderstandings” (Yoder, Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution, 139). Likewise, Bavinck stresses...}

life of the believer is deeply tied to the way in which humanity was created to live; Christ
restores this pattern. But restoration is not simply going back to how things were; in Christ, there
is fulfillment. Both Bavinck and Yoder proclaim this reality. In Christ, redeemed humanity lives
as we were created to live, anticipating a kingdom where we are restored to our destiny.

Differing Interpretations of a Shared Framework: Bavinck and Yoder on Postlapsarian Noetic
Access to God’s Created Intent

Bavinck and Yoder commonly attest to a relationship between Christ and creation that is
characterized by restoration. But, we cannot overlook the significantly different ways that this
shared theme manifests in their respective works. Bavinck stresses the way in which the believer
still looks to the law for their understanding of the way one imitates Christ. Yoder does not share
this charge to look towards creation. Again, these differences are rooted in a similar theological
paradigm, and similar theological emphases regarding the moral consciousness of the unbeliever.
As Mouw and Yoder point out, both traditions have a shared pessimism toward the unregenerate
moral consciousness, but the traditions part ways in their application of this similar
contention. They argue that the Anabaptists are "out-Calvinisting" the Calvinists on this
point. We find this clearly in Yoder, who emphasizes his pessimistic assessment stronger
than Bavinck does. In Yoder’s own words,

Contrasted to the Calvinist vision, then, [my] view is more serious about the fallenness of
the structures of creation. For Calvinism, the fall is affirmed but it is held not to mar the
orders so seriously as to keep them from being reliably known and moderately made

this relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In his second essay on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck
writes that in the Sermon on the Mount, and his other teaching, Jesus takes issue “not with the words of the
law itself, but with its incorrect interpretation and application” (Bavinck, Imitation II, 415). In this essay,
Bavinck shifts his focus to the freedom of the Christian in applying the Old Testament law, but never wavers from
his commitment to the Old Testament law. Bavinck repeats this focus in The Christian Family: “Jesus did not come
to give a new law, including in relation to marriage, but he came to fulfill the law and the prophets and to bring them
to full realization and application” (Bavinck, The Christian Family, 41). The relationship between the Old and
New Testaments is clearly seen in the way Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ brings together

usable to provide a reasonable frame for humane existence. This fallenness is structural: they are warped. It is functional: they do not do their duty. It is noetic: we are not able to perceive by looking at things as they are what they really should be.\textsuperscript{1200}

Bavinck, pointing to God’s ongoing work in creation through common grace, emphasizes God’s own countering to the noetic effects of sin alongside his affirmation of the disastrous effects of the fall.\textsuperscript{1201} Common grace maintains the goodness of creation in spite of human’s depravity; in spite of our sin, believers – and unbelievers – can still know something of God’s creational intent on account of the way God upholds and preserves creation.\textsuperscript{1202} Applying their shared contentions of both the devastating nature of the fall and the restoration of creation to God’s intention, two theologians have a sustained disagreement on what can be known about the original order of creation, post-fall.\textsuperscript{1203}

In his discussion of the enduring differences between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions on cultural and political engagement, the “tensions between ‘the politics of creation’ and ‘the politics of Jesus’”, Mouw summarizes the differences regarding noetic access to the original creation and the ministry of Jesus, and underlying commonalities, between the two traditions well:

Calvinists believe, then, in a political Jesus; and Anabaptists have no reason to reject the idea of an original creation in which politics had a part. The main connection has to do with how these two political realities – the ministry of Jesus and the creation order – are to be ranked in order of knowing. The question is where primarily we are to look for normative guidance.\textsuperscript{1204}

\textsuperscript{1201} Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 38-65. Bavinck directly appeals to common grace in his essays on the imitation of Christ (Bavinck, Imitation II, 427, 432).
\textsuperscript{1202} Bavinck firmly rejects the Roman Catholic idea of grace as something "superadded" to the natural life. In accordance with the Reformed tradition, he insists that common grace sustains the creation order while special (salvific) grace redeems, restores, and transforms creation and culture. Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 36.
\textsuperscript{1203} For more, especially regarding why the Calvinist contends so strongly that we must affirm both the politics of Jesus and the politics of creation, see Mouw, “Creational Politics,” 115-123.
\textsuperscript{1204} Mouw, “Creational Politics,” 115.
This approach frames the differences between the two traditions in terms of postlapsarian noetic access to God’s original intent, not overall theological framework for the relationship between creation, Christ, and restoration. Thus, we can situate the difference between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ: Yoder only looks to Christ, while Bavinck looks to the law and Christ. But both do so within a shared framework, one that understands the imitation of Christ as part of the restoration to our destiny.

A Historical Addendum: The Ontological Differences Regarding Nature and Grace in John Calvin and Menno Simons

This section has argued that Bavinck and Yoder, despite important, continuing differences, have at the heart of their understandings of nature and grace a shared paradigm. For both, the teaching and example of Jesus confirms and restores that which was set out in creation; the example of Jesus that believers are to imitate is directly connected to the patterns established in God’s good creation. In Bavinck we see the paradigm of grace restoring nature clearly. He ends his first essay on the imitation of Christ with these words; “From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example, proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us;” in his later essay on the imitation of Christ, he writes that Christianity “never opposes nature and culture in themselves but only their degeneration.” In Yoder, the pattern is not as immediately obvious, and less developed,

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1205 Yoder also argues that an ethics grounded in Jesus is more particular than an ethics grounded in norms other than Jesus. As Parler articulates, “Yoder’s third concern is that creation is thought to ground ethics that are more general than the particular ethics one finds in Jesus. This move has two deleterious aspects. First, it conflates church and world by forgetting the difference that faith makes for moral behavior. Second, this search for a general or universal ethics often implies a Constantinian epistemology or hard foundationalism According to Yoder, a Constantinian epistemology is driven by the desire, not just to be true, but to be irresistible” (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 67). Bavinck, however, avoids at least part of this charge, given his strong affirmation of the imitation of Christ as necessitating union with Christ. Parler is clear, however, that Yoder is not opposed to creation order, but “construing creation as contradictory to what is revealed in Jesus” (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 67-68).
1206 Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
1207 Bavinck, Imitation II, 430; cf. Christelijke wereldbeschouwing (Kampen, 1913), p. 89; cf. IV, 358.
but upon a closer inspection of Yoder’s discussions of the work of Jesus who works “with the grain of the cosmos”⁴¹⁰ and his theology of the Powers where Yoder argues that the Powers are part of God’s good creation and Jesus restores a proper relationship to them in the cross,⁴¹⁰ we have argued that the same pattern is present. Jesus models an “authentic restored humanity;”⁴¹⁰ the pattern that gives to his disciples is in line with God’s created order.⁴¹¹

Asserting that there is a shared theological framework for the two theologians is not to say that the two do not have significant divergences in their interpretation and application of the grace restoring nature paradigm, particularly as it relates to the imitation of Christ. While both affirm disastrous effects of the fall that effect the whole of the cosmos, the noetic effects of the fall are interpreted differently by each theologian, and thus the means by which the believer can understand the creational norms that Christ restores are different. For Bavinck, a believer discerns how to imitate the example of Christ through the moral law. One can look to creation and Christ to see how one ought to live. Bavinck theologically understands the ongoing ability of the fallen human to look to creation and the moral law for norms through his account of God’s ongoing, providential upholding of creation through common grace.⁴¹² One does not only look to Christ’s example; one looks to Christ and creation, hence Bavinck’s insistence that “the Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.”⁴¹³ The believer looks to

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⁴¹¹ Yoder, PoJ, 145.
⁴¹² In his Stone Lectures, Kuyper critiques Anabaptist theology for positing a wholly new moral system with Jesus. He rejected the Anabaptist understanding of Jesus’ life and teaching providing a new model for the Christian to pattern their life upon. He wrote, “Can we imagine that at one time God willed to rule things in a certain moral order, but that now, in Christ, He wills to rule it otherwise?” (Abraham Kuyper, Lectures on Calvinism (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1994), 71.
⁴¹³ Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
Christ and creation. For Yoder, the same is not true. Although Christ is a model of “authentic restored humanity,” one can only look to Christ to see what authentic humanity looks like, hence his insistence that one can only look to the cross of Christ to know how one ought to live.1214 One cannot look to creation; the devastating effects of the fall have marred humanity’s ability to rightly see what God has set out in creation; special revelation in Christ is needed.1215 Yoder poignantly affirms this when he writes that, on account of the work of Christ, we are “enabled to go on proleptically in the redemption of creation.” In this work, “We still do not see that the world has been set straight. We still have no proof that right is right. . . . But we do see Jesus.”1216 Christians can only look to Jesus to see what is right, not creation. Bavinck and Yoder significantly differ in their application of the grace restoring nature paradigm; they do not share an understanding of the noetic effects of the fall.

Given the historic relationship between the traditions of Bavinck and Yoder, Reformed and Anabaptist, one may rightly raise the question of another difference, however, in the relationship between nature and grace in the two theologians. Alongside the noetic differences that we have identified,1217 one may raise an addition question regarding ontological differences in the way the two theologians understand the relationship. This question is appropriately raised

1214 Yoder, PoJ, 95.
1215 Again, we cannot draw too complete a boundary between Bavinck and Yoder; the two differ: Bavinck looks to Christ and creation, Yoder only looks to Christ. But Bavinck still affirms the need for special revelation to wholly discern what God is proclaiming in creation. In his essay on common grace, he writes: “gratia specialis, however, can be fully appreciated only when it is viewed in connection with its prevenient preparation from the time of earliest man onward. Christ is of Israel. The New Testament is the full-grown fruit of the old covenant. The portrait of Christ comes into sharp focus only against the tapestry of the Old Testament. And then we behold him clearly, full of grace and truth [cf. Exod. 34:6-7; John 1:14]. It is God himself, the Creator of heaven and earth, who in Christ fully reveals and gives himself to his people” (Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 44).
1217 We have noted that these are, broadly: Bavinck affirms our ability to know something of the created order from creation, in spite of the fall, while Yoder affirms that the fall has so corrupted our ability to know the truth from creation that we can only look to Christ (for more on Yoder’s understanding, see John Howard Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies: An Inadequate Typology,” TSF Bulletin (May-June 1985), 6).
on account of influential Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons. Balke reminds us that Calvin once said, “I have no more in common with [Menno Simons] than water has with fire.”¹²¹⁸ In this dissertation, we have already noted many of the significant differences between Calvin and Menno including the relationship between church and state, ecclesiology, baptismal theology, pacifism and the just war tradition, among others. But there is another important difference between the two thinkers, which has implications for the relationship between nature and grace: their understanding of the incarnation. The relationship between Jesus Christ – who both affirm was God and man, in some way – and creation is understood differently by the two theologians; in fact, Calvin adamantly refuted Menno’s articulation of how Christ became human, and remained sinless.¹²¹⁹

It is not uncommon for these differences to be revisited in Anabaptist-Reformed dialogue. In the report on Christology from dialogues in the Netherlands, J. Veenhof and S. Voolstra describe the difference in this way:

the Reformed put the accent on Christ, the Son of God, who became human in order to take the position of Mediator to reconcile those who belong to Him; the Anabaptists emphasized that Christ, the Son of God, became the New Being, who as predecessor of His followers, went the entire way of sanctification and obedience.¹²²⁰

They continue, elaborating on the Anabaptist treatment of John 1:14:

in the text “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14), it is not stated that the Word ‘adopted’ the flesh. Thus they reject the view that in His incarnation Christ adopted Mary’s flesh. They also rejected the concept of Christ having had a dual nature (human and divine) combined in one person. For them, the total newness was of highest importance. Moreover, they readily used the contrast presented by Paul (1 Cor. 15:47) when he spoke

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¹²¹⁸ Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 207.
¹²¹⁹ Menno engaged in multiple debates on the question of the incarnation. À Lasco, one of Menno’s opponents, discussed these debates with Calvin (Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 203); Micron, another of Menno’s opponents, also sent a report of his debate with Menno to Calvin, but Calvin’s response to Micron never reached him. Nevertheless, Calvin’s refutation of Menno’s thoughts, sent to Micron, is still accessible (Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 203-204).
of the “first man being of the dust of the earth, the second man being from heaven.” Accordingly, they emphasized the New Being’s pre-eminently divine origin. For Anabaptists, there was an unbridgeable gulf between the sinlessness of human nature and the New Being which was Christ. Becoming a Christian was considered a new act of creation from and by the Spirit.\footnote{\textsuperscript{1221} Veenhof and Voolstra, “Christiology,” 318.}

Contrary to this view, Veenhof and Voolstra posit,

the Reformed maintained that Christ adopted a true human, though sinless, nature from the flesh and blood of Mary. They held that in order to become Mediator, Christ had to participate in and become united with that which He was to liberate from the power of sin. In this way he represented the ‘old’ being who was sinful and alienated from God. In their opinion, grace is not the opposite of the nature and human as such, but carries with it the restoration of human nature. From early times they emphasized Christ as Mediator, truly God and truly Man.\footnote{\textsuperscript{1222} Veenhof and Voolstra, “Christiology,” 318-319.}

These differing exegetical impulses create substantive differences between the two traditions. To the Reformed tradition, which emphasizes continuity, Menno’s view seemed to downplay (if not dismiss) the full humanity of Jesus; if this is the case, the relationship between nature and grace could rightly be called into question as positing duality, not restoration.\footnote{\textsuperscript{1223} This charge of duality is indeed one that Bavinck raises. In “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” he writes that the Anabaptists “repudiated the entire world, state and society, art and science, theology and church, and conceived of Christianity as a radically new creation, descending from heaven just as Christ took his human nature from heaven” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 246). For Bavinck, an understanding of the Christian faith as one that “encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life” was a central tenant of the catholicity of the church and faith (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 222).} A strong distinction between Christ and human nature, and thus, Christ and nature, would imply an ontological difference between a tradition that emphasizes continuity with creation and a tradition that emphasizes newness. Christ would be seen as one who brings new creation, as he himself was a new creation, not one who restores what has already been created. Van Ruler describes the ontological difference between the two traditions in this way: The Anabaptists speak of the nova creatio: ‘The Old creation is totally spoiled. Nothing can be done to it. It can only be thrown away like a worn-out pair of shoes. A new, completely different creation takes its place. With a human nature newly created in heaven the Son goes through Mary and becomes man (not: he adopts the human nature.” There, in this new birth, in the regeneration, in this new creation, lies the only destination of man and consequently also
of history. This destination is of course to be achieved by a leap: from the old to the new creation.\footnote{A. A. van Ruler, \textit{Theologisch Werk}, VI (Nijkerk, 1973), 74f, quoted in Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 331-332.}

Looking to Menno’s conception of the incarnation, van Ruler raises important questions of the relationship between creation and redemption in Anabaptist thought.

The crux of the debate between Menno and Calvin regarding the person of Jesus rested on the nature of the incarnation. Menno’s thought on the incarnation is complex and controversial. There continues to be scholarly disagreement as to how best interpret Menno’s thoughts on this question, and some charge him with inconsistency on this point, given the variety of ways he responds to charges regarding Jesus’ two natures. In spite of this, his thought on the incarnation is often summed up by this phrase that Menno uses in his debates with Micron: Jesus was born “not of Mary, but in Mary.”\footnote{Menno Simons, “A Very Plain and Discreet Answer to Martin Microns,” in \textit{The Complete Works of Menno Simons}, (Elkhart IN: John F. Funk and Brother, 1871), 371b. Balke points to Menno’s repeated assertion that Christ was not “\textit{natus ex Maria virgine}” but “\textit{factus in Maria virgine}” (Balke, \textit{Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals}, 205).}

To understand what Menno means by this phrase, we must look a little closer at Menno’s thought. Irvin E. Buckhart, in his essay “Menno Simons on the Incarnation,” provides a helpful survey of both the controversy and Menno’s teaching on the doctrine. Buckhart first provides the insights of Menno’s students on the incarnation: John Lawrence Mosheim writes, quoting Herman Schyn, that

\begin{quote}
Menno denied that Christ received from the Virgin Mary that human body which he assumed. On the contrary, he supposed it was produced out of nothing in the womb of the immaculate virgin, but the power of the Holy Ghost\footnote{Irvin E. Buckhart, “Menno Simons on the Incarnation,” \textit{The Mennonite Quarterly Review} 4, no. 2 (April 1930), 117, quoting Instil. Hist. Eccl, Libri IV; Saec. XVI; Sec. III; Pars II; p. 703-4.};
\end{quote}

Simeon Frederick Rues argued that Menno understood the incarnation in this way:

\begin{quote}
The human nature of Christ which from the very beginning of the Incarnation God created out of nothing in the womb of the holy virgin, received its sustenance from the blood of the mother virgin. . . . Menno came to this viewpoint because he could not understand how the human nature of Christ could be without sin if one believed that it
originated with Mary; others, such as S. Cramer and Henry Elias Dosker argued that Menno was inconsistent on this doctrine. Alongside these interpretations of Menno’s thought, Buckhart presents his own. Menno used two illustrations to articulate what it meant that Christ was “seed of the woman,” a reference to the words of Genesis 3:15 used in Menno’s continued debates on the incarnation. 

Buckhart explains:

An opponent had urged that Jesus was the "fruit of Mary's womb as an apple is called the fruit of a tree because it grows upon the tree and partakes of its nature." But Menno turns this illustration back upon him to prove his own point and says that, an apple is called the fruit of the tree, but is actually produced by the soil on which the tree is grown. His point seems to be that even though the tree performs an integral function the apple is the result of another factor, the soil. So the fruit of the womb of Mary was the product of the Holy Spirit through the vital mediation of Mary.

Menno employed a similar analogy with the “fruit of the field;” again, he argued that the fruit was not merely produced by the field, the sower also needed to work the field.

For Menno, the issue at stake was Christ’s sinlessness. Following his reading of John 1:14, a key question for him was how Jesus could be born of Mary, who was sinful, and remain sinless. As Buckhart explains:

if Jesus was of divine form and nature, also at the same time of human form and nature, it follows that one of two things is true, namely, either Christ was sinner or else He was not God.

Buckhart argues that, for Menno, Christ was still “true son of God and a true Son of man,” words

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1230 Thus, Buckhart argues that for Menno, “Then when the fruit (Son of man) was produced, even though the field (Mary) produced it, it was not at all the same kind of substance as the field, neither did it have its origin in the field, and yet, it was a true fruit thereof. So the origin of the Son of man is divine, the growth to man is a normal human process, the result is a man like other man as to need, hunger, thirst, suffering, mortality, and spiritual immortality, but the flesh and blood substance was not identical with that of man because it was the result of a divine seed within human limits” (Buckhart, “Menno Simons on the Incarnation,” 122-123).
1231 Balke, Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals, 204.
Menno used frequently. But, as we’ve seen, exactly what Menno means by this phrase is in question. For Menno, the incarnation was, at its core, an incomprehensible mystery;\(^{1233}\) it was a miracle, rather than an act of creation.\(^{1234}\) By this, Menno means it was an act similar to Jesus’ turning water into wine, turning Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt, or turning water into blood in Egypt; it was “God working in a new way with old elements” in a way that “did not belong to the ordinary course of things.”\(^{1235}\) Menno writes: “The Scripture says that Lot's wife became a pillar of salt, and the water became wine. Thus says the Scripture and it also became so, but it does not say that the woman took on a pillar of salt, or that the water took on wine. In the same manner the Scripture testifies that the Word became flesh, but it does not say that He took on Himself our flesh.”\(^{1236}\) Alongside his affirmation of Jesus as fully human and fully divine, Menno taught that Jesus’ “flesh” did not come from Mary, –it was not descended from Adam – but it was from heaven.\(^{1237}\) In his words, “Christ Jesus remains the precious, blessed fruit of the womb of Mary, according to the words of Elizabeth, which was conceived not of her womb but in her womb wrought by the Holy Spirit through faith, of God, the omnipotent Father, from high heaven.”\(^{1238}\)

Calvin was aware of the debates with Menno on the incarnation, and responded to Menno’s views, insisting that Menno had erred in his understanding of the incarnation. Balke

\(^{1233}\) Buckhart, “Menno Simons on the Incarnation,” 131, quoting Opera, 389b-391a; Works, II, 186-188.

\(^{1234}\) Buckhart, “Menno Simons on the Incarnation,” 133.


\(^{1236}\) Buckhart, “Menno Simons on the Incarnation,” 134, quoting Opera, 368b; Works, II, 159-160; Werke, II, 229-230; the second, 370b; II, 162; II, 233.

\(^{1237}\) Menno wrote that Mary was “of the impure and sinful seed of Adam.” Grislis explains that “If Christ actually partook of Mary's corrupt humanity, then, in Menno's view, the dire conclusion was inevitable: 'They make a creature of the unclean sinful flesh and seed of Adam their throne of grace and atoning sacrifice, their High Priest, Mediator, Advocate, Intercessor, and Reconciler, and they falsely call Him the Son of God.’” (Egil Grislis, “The Doctrine of Incarnation According to Menno Simons,” \textit{Journal of Mennonite Studies} 8 (1990), 18, quoting M S., p. 851; M S., p. 882).

\(^{1238}\) Menno Simons, “Confession of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ,” in \textit{The Complete Works of Menno Simons}, (Elkhart IN: John F. Funk and Brother, 1871), 337a. Simons continues: “Christ, of his origin, is no earthly man, that is, a fruit of flesh and blood of Adam, but he is a heavenly fruit or man.”
explains that Calvin “emphasized the Bible texts that refer to Jesus’ human, Davidic descent.”

Again we see that within the Reformed tradition, as seen in Calvin, there is a strong emphasis on continuity; the Anabaptist tradition, as seen in Menno, emphasizes the newness and the distinctions of Jesus. Menno’s assertions on the incarnation seem to suggest that, in some way, Jesus does not fully share in our nature, which raises important questions about Jesus’ relation to creation. This brings us back to our original question: if we understand the relationship between Jesus and human nature differently, can we really speak of “nature” or “creation” in the same way when it comes to Jesus’ restoration of creation? Or, is it the case that we are speaking of two fundamentally different things?

The historical differences in ontology of creation are important – and well worth a study in their own right. If we were to leave this discussion in the historical context of the debates between Calvin and Menno on the incarnation, it would necessitate an in-depth discussion on the way in which the two thinkers understood creation, nature, and the incarnation. But this is not exactly the question we are asking in this study. Here, we are looking to Yoder and Bavinck as representatives of the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions, respectively. Certainly they draw from their respective traditions; indeed, we have clearly seen the way Bavinck draws upon the thought of Calvin. Bavinck’s understanding of Christ and creation testifies to his strong insistence on continuity, as Calvin insisted in his refutation of Menno. Bavinck’s words regarding Anabaptists, while they perhaps do not have quite as harsh a tone to them as Calvin’s, still emphasize the duality that Calvin alleges of the Anabaptists. Bavinck writes that Anabaptists “repudiated the entire world . . . and conceived of Christianity as a radically new creation, descending from heaven just as Christ took his human nature from heaven.”

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1239 Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 205.
a strong ontological difference between the two traditions interpretation of nature and grace.

If it were the case that Yoder wholeheartedly affirmed Menno’s understanding of the incarnation, we ought to examine the ontological differences between Bavinck and Yoder on the relationship between nature and grace, alongside the noetic differences. However, Yoder does not rely on Menno’s works in a way that suggests we must attend to these differences. We can see this explicitly and implicitly in Yoder’s work. Explicitly, Yoder raises the question of his fidelity to his tradition’s founder in his essay “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies.” He writes:

perhaps a Calvinist or Lutheran needs, for reasons which can be defined theologically, to be faithful to his founder. The descendants of churches once led by Menno do not. By the nature of the case the tradition of the sixteenth century is not normative in the free church style. The free church tradition is also a tradition, so that guidance is also received from the past. But the way that guidance is received is much less firmly structured, and much less concerned for fidelity to any particular father.

Here, Yoder testifies to the freedom he has, as a member in the free church tradition, to receive guidance, not necessarily norms, from the founders. If he strays from fidelity to Menno, he is unconcerned. While Yoder does not directly address Menno’s understanding on the incarnation in this essay, we already see Yoder’s willingness to stray from, or challenge, Menno’s teaching. It is also worth noting that other contemporary Anabaptist thinkers freely note that “most Mennonites do not share Menno’s Christology.”

Yoder not only explicitly announces his freedom to deviate from Menno’s thought, but,

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1241 Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 5.
1242 Fernando Enns expresses a similar freedom to interpret, and re-interpret, the church’s tradition in his introduction to ecumenical dialogues of Mennonite churches: “the theological convictions of [the Mennonite] tradition are expressed foremost as living testimonies of faith in a concrete context. . . . Mennonites are also rather skeptical about written confessions and always interpret common confessional texts within the limits of their local and temporal context.” (Fernando Enns, “Introduction,” in Mennonites in Dialogue: Official Reports from International and National Ecumenical Encounters, 1975-2012, ed. Fernando Enns and Jonathan Seiling (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 1.
in the same essay, he alerts his readers to the way in which he draws upon other traditions for his thought. In this, we can see an implicit affirmation of the way in which Yoder does not understand the same sense of theological obligation to remain faithful to Menno’s teaching.

Yoder points to his understanding of the Powers, a key theological insight to understand Yoder’s thought (and one of special importance to this study, as a key insight into his understanding of creation and restoration), that he does not gain from Anabaptist thinkers. His understanding of the Powers, Yoder reminds his readers, is influenced by various Reformed thinkers, including Barth and Berkhof. In this clarifying statement, Yoder alerts us to two key insights. First, in a defining area of his thought, one that grounds his appeal to Jesus’ restoration of the created order, Yoder is, by his own admission, not only drawing on Anabaptist thought. He is actively, and primarily, drawing upon Reformed thought. Second, we see that Yoder has no issue drawing upon Reformed thought on questions that relate to nature and creation. This, again, hints to something significant: Yoder’s affirmation of shared frameworks between the two traditions, in spite of historic differences and continued differences on questions like the noetic effects of sin.

In practice, Yoder demonstrates the way that the two traditions can speak to one another. On questions of creation, Yoder freely draws from the Reformed tradition in a way that informs his theological understanding, as an Anabaptist. Yoder does not seem to be burdened by a notion of two competing understandings of creation and grace, in relation to ontology. Well-versed in Reformed theology, Yoder actively alerts his readers to the sustained differences of opinion in noetic access to creation; he does not similarly take up the question of ontology. In his essay, Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 2. He writes: “I do not grant that anything dealt with in the following pages of my interpretation of Paul and the powers, or Paul and Haustafeln, or John of Patmos and historical hope, is specifically ‘Anabaptist.’”

From this, we may infer that Yoder does not simply see the ontology of creation as Menno did; at the very least, does not see the two frameworks as so different that they cannot speak to one another.
“Helpful and Deceptive Dualisms,” appealing again to the influence of Barth on his thought, Yoder clearly articulates what dualisms can be upheld, and which ought to be rejected. While he, again, does not discuss the ontological questions that Menno and Calvin raise, he does clearly reject an ontological difference between the church and the world. The difference between the two, he argues, is epistemological, not ontological. Yoder writes: “There is in fact a duality; church and world are different. But there is no dualism; no ontological validation or consecration of the ‘other side’.”\(^\text{1246}\) The fundamental distinction between the church and the world is epistemology, not ontology.\(^\text{1247}\)

There is much more that could be said on Yoder and the incarnation, and the larger question of the relationship between the Reformed tradition and the Anabaptist tradition on questions of nature and grace.\(^\text{1248}\) But, rather than beginning with the question: can we place a representative of the Reformed tradition and a representative of the Anabaptist tradition in dialogue on questions of nature and grace, in this study we begin with a theologian who has already, actively and willingly, placed himself in conversation with the Reformed tradition. While Yoder, in his dialogues with Mouw and elsewhere, strongly affirms the important differences between the two traditions (including the noetic effects of sin), he takes for granted

\(^{1246}\) Yoder, “Helpful and Deceptive Dualisms,” 76.

\(^{1247}\) Yoder, “Helpful and Deceptive Dualisms,” 80. While Yoder does not adopt Menno’s understanding of the incarnation (see PoJ, 102 and Preface to Theology, 210-222), he does display other “distinguishing marks of Anabaptist Christology” that are laid out in the ecumenical dialogues between Reformed and Anabaptist traditions in the Netherlands. In these dialogues, Veenhof and Voolstra note that Anabaptists tend to understand justification and sanctification as “closely interrelated” (Veenhof and Voolstra, “Christology,” 318); we have seen the way that Yoder understands the two to be inseparable. They also note that “One of the distinguishing marks of Anabaptist Christology is its emphasis on the passion of Christ that is a demonstration of God’s love calling for love in return, that again in its turn does not shun sacrifice and suffering which results from the world’s misjudgment and hatred. Thus, the willingness to undergo suffering has its roots in Christology” (Veenhof and Voolstra, “Christology,” 318); again, we see this emphasis on suffering and Christ’s passion clearly in Yoder’s work.

\(^{1248}\) We could also point to, for example, key statements of Yoder’s on the incarnation. In his reflections on Philippians 2 and Isaiah 53, Yoder affirms Jesus’ “genuine humanity, and not simply in a metaphysical sense. He had the attributes, the character, the definition of being a man” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 84); Preface to Theology includes many more insights from Yoder on the incarnation, see pages 210-223.
the reality that the two traditions can enter into conversation together. For Yoder, the historic
differences on questions like the ontology of creation and incarnation between the two traditions
are not a barrier to dialogue.\textsuperscript{1249} Yoder’s work testifies to the freedom he feels to draw upon the
Reformed tradition and dialogue with the tradition; his words also testify to the ongoing fear he
had that his work would be seen merely through the lens of historic debate. Of dialogue with
people in the Reformed tradition, he wrote that he often “perceive[d] that I am being read and
heard through a filter, whether I meet that in historical terms as the definition of Anabaptism
which is in the Reformed confessions, or whether I identify in the logical content of the axioms
stated above.”\textsuperscript{1250} While affirming the important, historic questions regarding the Anabaptist and
Reformed traditions on the incarnation, creation, and grace, this study seeks to take Yoder at his
word, which demonstrates his recognition of sustained differences between the two traditions,
but does not understand those differences to be ontological questions related to nature and grace.
The differences Yoder identifies are noetic. As we have seen, in Bavinck and Yoder’s
understanding of the imitation of Christ, both understand the imitation of Christ as part of the
restoration to our destiny; although the two differ in postlapsarian noetic access to God’s created
intent, both affirm that Christ restores this good, created order.

\textit{The Imitation of Christ as an All-of-life Encompassing Ethic}

The call to imitate Christ is one for all Christians, in every part of their lives. Both
Bavinck and Yoder emphasize the demand of the imitation of Christ on all Christians, in
every aspect of life. The imitation of Christ is not an ideal practiced only by some, nor does

\textsuperscript{1249} Indeed, it seems as though often Yoder takes them as the opposite. Anabaptist scholarship has been, historically,
strong in biblical scholarship and historical theology; they have been less strong in systematic theology. Yoder’s
study of systematic theology draws heavily from Reformed thinkers, including Barth and Berkhof, to provide him
avenues to construct and shape his own systematic theology.

\textsuperscript{1250} Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 7.
it take hold of only some aspects of one’s life. The imitation of Christ lays claim on the whole of the Christian’s life; no person or aspect of one’s life is exempt from its call: internal life, external life, personal life, and the corporate life of the body of Christ.

Yoder’s claims of the relevancy of the imitation of Christ for the whole of life are often found stated negatively, in his criticism of other schools of Christian ethics. Contemporary Christian ethics, “the mainstream ethical consensus,” Yoder argues, asserts that “Jesus is simply not relevant in any immediate sense to the question of social ethics.” Against this, Yoder argues that Jesus is wholly relevant for social ethics. Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection has direct significance for social ethics. Yoder’s rejection of any imitation ethic that does not take the imitation of Christ to be significant for the whole of life is further seen in his argument against models of imitation and piety that understand Jesus in a simple, agrarian manner. This understanding of imitation is unable to speak “substantively about the problems of complex organizations, of institutions and offices” Thus, it is not a proper imitation of Christ.

Yoder’s appeal to the role of the imitation of Christ in the practices of the church, such as in revolutionary subordination and nonviolence, further underscores the personal and corporate dimensions of the imitation of Christ. Each of these are calls toward the individual; revolutionary subordination, for example, calls the individual to a posture of chosen subordination. It is also the posture of the church in society; the corporate body of Christ imitates Christ in revolutionary subordination as in, for example, their posture toward the government. The church, both in

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1251 Yoder, PoJ, 8, 5.
1252 Yoder, PoJ, 11.
1253 Yoder, PoJ, 6.
1254 Hauerwas and Sider also testify to the importance of communal formation in Yoder. They write: “to ‘know’ the God to which the Bible is a witness requires a storied community. The bible is a narrative and can be recognized as such only through the work of the Spirit creating and sustaining a community that seeks no greater certainty than the narrative can give” (Hauerwas and Side, “Introduction,” 22).
personal disposition, character, and action and corporate witness testifies to the coming kingdom of Jesus as they imitate Christ. As individuals and as a corporate body, Christians are a witness to the world, a minority vision, that testifies to – and modifies – the whole of society.

Bavinck’s affirmation of the imitation of Christ as an ethic that encompasses all of life is helpfully distilled by Matthew Kaemingk, who briefly mentions the role of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s thought in Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age of Fear. Kaemingk writes, “the whole of the church must follow the whole Christ.” Within this short claim, he identifies two primary ways that Bavinck understood the imitation of Christ to be all encompassing. First, it is an ethic that is for all Christians. The imitation of Christ must not be an ideal only attainable by some within the body of Christ. Second, the imitation of Christ must follow all aspects of Christ’s life, a statement which lays claim on the whole life of the believer. From these, we can conclude a final way in which the imitation of Christ is all of life encompassing: the imitation of Christ is not simply normative in one’s personal life; it is also normative in social ethics.

Bavinck’s first essay on the imitation of Christ underscores the way in which the imitation of Christ is for all people. Bavinck’s grounding of the imitation of Christ in the moral law, which “applies and is valid for all men everywhere; it requires of all men the same virtues and obligation,” clearly demonstrates this point. As he asserts the universality of the law, he also affirms the freedom that the individual Christian has in

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1255 Yoder, “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics,” 73.
1256 This view is heightened further in the work of Hauerwas, who was profoundly influenced by Yoder. See, for example, A Community of Character, where Hauerwas argues that the church was to be a “contrast model” to the world, through its practices, virtues, and communal formations. The church is to faithfully embody the teachings of Jesus (Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 49).
1258 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
applying this ethical idea. In the same essay, Bavinck argues that the application of that moral law “is characterized by a rich diversity.” Thus, Christ is to be followed “in everything” and by all people, but it is not “a slavish and narrow copying” Jesus’ words and actions. Instead of a literal mimicking of the external actions of Christ, the imitation of Christ consists of “free, spiritual application of the principles by which he lived, completely fulfilling the moral law.” It is important to note that there are aspects of Christ’s life, in Bavinck’s thought, that are inimitable. The believer does not imitate Christ’s mediatorial work. But, for Bavinck, this does not negate imitating Christ in all things: “Christ was always Mediator, but always was the moral ideal as well. Therefore, we imitate him in everything, albeit in our own way, with our own individual personality, status, social class, and calling.”

The imitation of Christ, in Bavinck’s thought, lays claim to both the internal disposition and orientation of the Christian and their external actions. Again, this does not mean that the Christian must literally mimic the actions of Jesus and also have a Christ-like inner disposition. Contrary to this understanding of imitation, Bavinck clearly lays out the ways in which the believer is to imitate Christ, internally and externally, in his *Reformed Ethics* where he articulates the three aspects of the true imitation of Christ. The first component is mystical union with Christ. Second, the imitation of Christ consists of Christ taking shape within us. As van Keulen argues, the believer must conform to Christ in one’s “inner being.” But the imitation of Christ does not end with inner conformity to Christ.

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1259 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
1260 Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
1261 Bavinck, GE, 288.
1262 Christ is the example not for everyone but for those who are regenerated. Imitating him is only the form of the spiritual life. Therefore, our lives can be directed to Christ only when they proceed from him and abide in him” (Bavinck, GE, 288), emphasis original. Thus, as we’ve seen, for Bavinck, imitating Christ is only for Christians.
The third component of the imitation of Christ, for Bavinck, is imitating Christ externally, “shaping our lives in accordance with Christ.”\textsuperscript{1264} The imitation of Christ is aligning our life with the life of Christ, which is manifest in the virtues; it lays claim to the whole of one’s life.\textsuperscript{1265}

The whole of Christ’s life is an example for the believer; Christ’s disciples follow \textit{all} of Christ, as he follows the law, imitating the virtues that Christ exemplifies in obedience to the law of God. This imitation is not, however, simply a call toward the individual Christian. In “Christian Principles and Social Relationships,” Bavinck also appeals to the imitation motif as a way to think about the posture of the believer in society. In his latter essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck again argues that the Christian must “walk in all these areas [science, the arts, politics, etc.] as a child of God and a follower of Christ.”\textsuperscript{1266} Properly understood, the imitation of Christ is the way in which the believer applies Christian principles in everyday life.\textsuperscript{1267}

There is thus an inescapably individual element to the imitation of Christ alongside a necessarily communal element in Bavinck’s thought. The imitation of Christ not only speaks to the individual’s disposition, habits, motives, and character and external actions, it is the posture of the believer, and the body of believers, in society. Bavinck’s concern for both the individual and the corporate nature of the imitation of Christ is clearly on display in his later essay on the imitation of Christ, where he rejects a view that the Christian can look to “Jesus and his holy love for the salvation of our soul but he does not and cannot give us guidance for economic or

\textsuperscript{1264} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 289.

\textsuperscript{1265} Bavinck reaffirms this claim in \textit{The Philosophy of Revelation} and “Ethics and Politics.” He writes: “beneath consciousness there is a world of instincts and habits, notions and inclinations, abilities and capacities, which continually sets on fire the course of nature. Beneath the head lies the heart, out of which are the issues of life” (Herman Bavinck, \textit{The Philosophy of Revelation}, ed. Geerhardus Vos and B.B. Warfield (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979), 215); “morality involves both the will and character and acts and deeds . . . justice is not satisfied with only the mere external obedience to the law but is certainly also interested in motives” (Bavinck, “Ethics and Politics,” 273).

\textsuperscript{1266} Bavinck, Imitation II, 440.

\textsuperscript{1267} Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133-134; this theme also emerges in Bavinck’s second essay on the imitation of Christ where he rejects the view of Bismarck who was “a confessing Christian in his personal life, ignored Christian ethical principles in his \textit{Realpolitik}.” (Bavinck, Imitation II, 409).
political life.”1268 Against this, Bavinck asserts that the imitation of Christ, which lays claim in
the virtues, character, disposition, and actions of the individual, also speaks to the “state,
industry, business, marketplace, stock-exchange, office [and] factory;” indeed, demands attention
“in science and art in war, even at the front.”1269 In their imitation of Christ, the church is called,
as the words of Matthew 5:13-17 proclaim, “to the responsible and glorious task of being the salt
of the earth and the light of the world, letting their light so shine before men that they may see
their good works and glorify their Father who is in heaven.”1270 The imitation of Christ is not just
an individual posture; it is the posture of the church.

The imitation of Christ lays claim on the whole Christian and the entire believing
community. Bavinck and Yoder’s joint affirmation of individual and communal nature of
the imitation of Christ underscores Mouw and Yoder’s assertion that the Reformed and
Anabaptist traditions share an affirmation that:

for both traditions "following Jesus" has an inescapably corporate dimension to it. And
the corporateness here is not fully contained within the "internal" patterns of Christian
community. The church serves in turn as a paradigmatic society – an eschatological sign
of God's communal designs for the New Creation1271

Piety and practice are not wholly separated in either tradition. One’s belief necessarily
convictions one’s inner and outer life. Belief in Christ necessitates Christ as an example.
The believing community takes the imitation of Christ to heart in both their personal lives
and their corporate example to, and engagement in, the world. Both Bavinck and Yoder
firmly assert that the imitation of Christ is an ethic that encompasses all of life.1272

1268 Bavinck, Imitation II, 409.
1269 Bavinck, Imitation II, 409.
1271 Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 133.
1272 Both traditions are committed to the proclamation of Christ as Lord over the entire cosmos. Yoder’s claim that
“the affirmation [of the New Testament canon] is unchanging that Jesus Christ, ascended to the right hand of God, is
now exercising dominion over the world” (Yoder, The Christian Witness to the State, 8) bears remarkable
resemblance to Bavinck’s claim, “Christ is and always remains our eternal king who rules us by his Word and
The Imitation of Christ as a Qualified Ethic

There have been pious attempts, Yoder argues, to literally apply the life and teaching of Jesus to the lives of his believers. But these attempts do not conform with New Testament application of the theme. Rather, they attempt to find a “general” concept of imitation where there is none.\textsuperscript{1273} As we have seen, Yoder argues that the New Testament only sees Christ as example at one point: his cross.\textsuperscript{1274} The whole of Jesus’ life is socially and politically relevant, but the cross is the core content of his teaching. This is where believers ought to imitate him.

Thus, the ethic of Yoder is a qualified ethic. Yoder does not affirm any and all interpretations of what it means to imitate Christ, especially those that advocate mimicry. Yoder balances both an affirmation of Jesus as a concrete, normative example and a rejection of literal mimicry with these words: “We do not mimic Jesus; we live from his life.”\textsuperscript{1275} For Yoder, being guided by the content of Jesus’ life means voluntary suffering and a renunciation of violence, a cross-shaped life of obedience.

While Bavinck clearly lays out that the whole of Christ’s life is to be imitated, his understanding of what this entails is also qualified. Bavinck writes, “Nothing in Christ is excluded in the demand to follow him.”\textsuperscript{1276} This comprehensive claim is followed by his qualification: “every word and deed of Jesus is useful for our instruction and ought to be taken to heart . . . [but] not every word or deed is in itself to be imitated.”\textsuperscript{1277} Bavinck rejects imitation

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\textsuperscript{1273} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 130.
\textsuperscript{1274} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 95.
\textsuperscript{1275} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41.
\textsuperscript{1276} Bavinck, Imitation I, 399.
\textsuperscript{1277} Bavinck, Imitation I, 399, emphasis added.
that is simply external, literal repetition of the words and actions of Jesus, in his words, a
“slavish and narrow copying” of Christ’s actions. Mimicry is not the goal of imitation. As
Bavinck argues, the “simple repetition and copying of the personal life of Jesus” does not
necessarily transform the individual, or even mean that the person is wholly living in conformity
with Christ. Outwardly, one may be mimicking Christ’s actions, but may still remain “very
unChrist-like.”\textsuperscript{1279} Mimicking Christ’s actions may simply lead to a person “appear[ing] to be
one with him while actually very far from him.”\textsuperscript{1280} Instead, the imitation of Christ “consists of a
free, spiritual application of the principles by which he lived, completely fulfilling the moral
law.”\textsuperscript{1281} Bavinck affirms that all of Jesus’ actions, in word and deed, are to be imitated, but
qualifies the way in which that imitation ought to occur. Not in literal mimicry, but law-patterned
imitation of the virtues of Christ.

In his \textit{Reformed Ethics}, Bavinck does speak of a literal imitation of Christ, but uses that
term very specifically. He, again, does not appeal to a literal imitation as one that takes up the
specific, literal actions of Christ in one’s own life (such as, for example, remaining single as
Jesus was).\textsuperscript{1282} Bavinck’s reference to the literal imitation of Christ refers to the way disciples
literally followed after Christ, as in Matthew 4, where the disciples “left their nets and followed
him.”\textsuperscript{1283} Followers of Jesus must, as the disciples did, literally follow after Jesus; this is a call to
take up the demands of discipleship, such as “denial, cross-bearing, and opposition to the
world.”\textsuperscript{1284} This literal call to follow after Christ necessitates the imitation of Christ. But
following Jesus does not entail mimicking his external actions. Instead, it is seen in shaping

\textsuperscript{1278} Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
\textsuperscript{1279} Bavinck, Imitation I, 391-392.
\textsuperscript{1280} Bavinck, Imitation I, 392.
\textsuperscript{1281} Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
\textsuperscript{1282} Bavinck, \textit{The Christian Family}, 40, 72.
\textsuperscript{1283} Matthew 4:20
\textsuperscript{1284} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 269.
one’s life in accordance with Christ’s life. The specific content of this imitation is necessarily influenced by the particulars of one’s life; it is “characterized by a rich diversity,”¹²⁸⁵ but bound by the moral law. As such the believer is called to imitate Christ in the virtues he embodies and the principles by which he lived, not in literal mimicry.¹²⁸⁶

The starting point for Yoder’s qualified imitation of Christ is the cross. For Bavinck, the criterion for a qualified imitation ethic is found in the Ten Commandments. Both of these ethics reject a literal mimicry of Christ’s life, and – in line with their shared claim that the imitation of Christ must lay claim to all aspects of the Christian’s life – affirm the inner and outer call of the Christian in imitating Christ. As Mouw and Yoder point out, both the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions share an affirmation of Sola Scriptura, understood in light of a “pessimistic appraisal of the unregenerate moral consciousness.”¹²⁸⁷ Thus, not only is this ethic only an ethic for Christians, even Christians need a substantive guide for understanding the imitation of Christ, rooted in Scripture. Scriptural motifs – the cross, the law – are necessary for properly rooting the imitation of Christ.

Bavinck and Yoder’s understandings of the imitation of Christ have important differences, but share many central concerns that echo the argument of Mouw and Yoder: the differences between the two on the imitation of Christ are “intra-family” differences, on account of their important, shared convictions. These common convictions are rooted in both tradition’s affirmations of Sola Scriptura, emphasis on volition, understanding of the relationship between the two Testaments, and connection between the individual and the corporate. These shared

¹²⁸⁵ Bavinck, Imitation I, 396.
¹²⁸⁶ In his chapter on clothing in Reformed Ethics, Bavinck makes this point again when he writes: “We are to share with the poor from our abundance: ‘Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise’ (Luke 3:11). This must not be taken absolutely; Jesus had two coats and kept both.” Again, the example of Jesus is an important ground for ethics. The virtues and principles Jesus lived by must be imitated, but this does not necessitate a literal copying of the actions of Jesus (Bavinck, GE, 779).
affirmations lead to specific assertions regarding the imitation of Christ: it 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.

Not the Martyr, the Mystic, the Monk or the Modernist: A Shared Rejection of Historic Forms of the Imitation of Christ

While Bavinck and Yoder differ in their understandings of the proper imitation of Christ – Bavinck focuses on the law and virtue, Yoder focuses on the cross – we have seen that the two share many underlying affirmations regarding imitating Jesus. On account of these shared affirmations, Bavinck and Yoder also both reject the historic forms of the imitation of Christ, discussed in detail in chapter two; the proper imitation of Christ is not seen, for either Bavinck or Yoder, in the martyr, the mystic, the monk, or the modernist. Both Bavinck and Yoder reject these forms, and articulate a shared rationale for their rejection. While a cursory look to both Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation may not lead one to assume that the two would issue nearly identical critiques of the historic forms of the imitation of Christ, our closer analysis of the shared convictions between the two on the imitation of Christ helps us to understand how Bavinck and Yoder both independently arrive at similar rationale in their rejection of historic forms of imitation.

Neither Yoder nor Bavinck wholeheartedly dismiss the historic forms of imitating Christ. Both find aspects within each to praise: they praise the martyrs for their courage and dedication to the faith, the monks for their piety and embodiment of the “otherness” of the church, and the mystics for the way they took seriously the words of Christ. But for Yoder and Bavinck, true and proper practice of the imitation of Christ is not exemplified in any of these traditions. Alongside their words of praise, both Yoder and Bavinck present extended commentaries on the misunderstandings inherent within each of these traditions. Bavinck’s
commentary is displayed systematically, both in his essays on the imitation of Christ and in his *Reformed Ethics*. Yoder’s discussion of these historic forms of the imitation of Christ is presented less systematically; he references these traditions consistently, but his analysis of them is found throughout his many writings. Each theologian, however, presents a strikingly similar commentary. Both Bavinck and Yoder identify serious misunderstandings and abuses within the historic imitation motifs, precluding any of these forms from typifying the true and proper imitation of Christ.

**The Martyr**

The earliest historic form of imitating Christ was seen in the martyr. Irenaeus, Ignatius, Origen, and other fathers of the church teach that the suffering and passion of the martyr is the highest form of imitating Christ. Bavinck and Yoder praise the courage and conviction of the martyrs, but warn of the ways that this motif can be abused.

Martyrdom, Yoder argues, is one of the ways the church is visible in the world. It is a distinguishing practice, one grounded in the ethic of Jesus. This practice of martyrdom flows directly from the example of Christ: “Jesus was born under the cross, brought up under the cross, walked under the cross, and eventually died on the cross.” Jesus’ life was marked by the cross; it is a life of suffering servanthood, culminating in his death. The believer is then charged to follow after Christ, the faithful martyr, in the practice of pacifism and the way of the cross. But, Yoder’s appeal to the concept of martyrdom is not a whole-hearted affirmation of tradition. The tradition of martyrdom began to idealize

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1288 Yoder, “The Otherness of the Church,” 56.
1289 Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, 192.
1290 See Grismud’s commentary on Yoder’s use of the theme in: Grimsrud, “Prologue,” 14.
1291 Yoder also affirms the place of literal martyrdom as something that is a serious possibility for the believer. It is simply not one that ought to be sought after (John H. Yoder, “‘What Would You Do If . . .’ An Exercise in Situation Ethics,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 17 (December 1976), 12).
the act of martyrdom as not simply something that may happen when one follows the way of Jesus, but an ideal to be sought after. Here, Yoder takes issue with the tradition, warning that “suffering is not . . . a good in itself.”¹²⁹² To seek after suffering and martyrdom – rather than seeking after faithful following of Jesus, accepting the consequences that may come – is a distortion of the ideal.¹²⁹³ Suffering in and of itself, Yoder argues, is not “in itself redemptive;” martyrdom is not “a value to be sought after.”¹²⁹⁴ The motif of the martyr is easily distorted into one seeking after suffering, rather than mere fidelity to the cause of Christ.

Bavinck similarly warns of this distortion. Martyrdom, in its “pure” form, he argues, was a testament to the truth of Christianity. The martyrs “were killed but their dying was life, their defeat was triumph, their death days were regarded and remembered as birthdays”;¹²⁹⁵ martyrdom began as a testament to the “courage, firm conviction, and faithful witness” of the early Christians.¹²⁹⁶ Like Yoder, Bavinck points to the scriptural basis for martyrdom and following Jesus in his suffering.¹²⁹⁷ But following Jesus in his suffering, Bavinck argues, turned pathological for some: “an authentic longing for death turned into a fanatic desire for the glory of martyrdom. . . . the essence of the Christian life consisted in suffering and dying and death its consummation.”¹²⁹⁸ The ideal of martyrdom shifted from a

¹²⁹² Yoder, PoJ, 238.
¹²⁹³ As he says in his lecture, “Love and Responsibility,” there is a place and purpose for martyrdom: “The death of a Christian at the hands of the agents of evil (because of her behaving in a Christian way) can become, through no merit of her own, a special kind of witness and monuments to the power of God” (Yoder, “Love and Responsibility,” 78).
¹²⁹⁴ Yoder, PoJ, 236; see also: Yoder, Discipleship as Political Responsibility 22 and Yoder, “A People in the World,” 88.
¹²⁹⁵ Bavinck, Imitation I, 376.
¹²⁹⁶ Bavinck, Imitation I, 376; Bavinck goes on to criticize later forms of martyrdom for counting the act of martyrdom as meritorious, attributing redemptive power to the act.
¹²⁹⁷ Bavinck, Imitation II, 416.
¹²⁹⁸ Bavinck, GE, 275; in the case of Ignatius, for example, some scholars understand his “fiery zeal” for martyrdom to be a testament to Ignatius’ “psychopathic self-hatred” or his “abnormal mentality” (Bakker, Exemplar Domini,
focus on the wholehearted surrender of one’s life for Christ, suffering the consequences of this surrender, to a focus on the act of martyrdom itself. As Bavinck writes, “those martyrs who actually sought the glory of martyrdom as the purest way to imitate Christ forgot that not martyrdom itself but the cause for which a martyr died made him a true witness.” For some, the external act became the primary, if not singular, focus in the ideal of martyrdom.

Bavinck and Yoder both describe, and reject, the distortion of the ideal of martyrdom. They each describe this distortion as the shift from faithful, wholehearted following of Jesus, that may result in death, to a fixation on outer compliance with the deeds – specifically the death – of Jesus. Simply seeking to attain death does not mean that one was truly following the way of Jesus; it says nothing of the person’s inner conviction. For both Bavinck and Yoder, proper imitation of Christ does not end with external acts. The imitation of Christ must, necessarily, take hold of the whole person. The external act does not

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59) This is not the view of Bakker himself, who sees Ignatius as an “idealist,” but this remains a view within scholarship on Ignatius.

1299 Bavinck, Imitation I, 391.

1300 As we’ve seen, Bavinck affirms the “pure” impulse of the martyr – but warns against distortions. There remain, however, scholarly debates about the nature and extent of the distortions of martyrdom. One prime example of this debate is seen in the work of Henk Bakker on Ignatius, who is thought by some to exhibit “psychopathic self-hatred” in his desire for martyrdom (Bakker, Exemplar Domini, 59). Bakker argues for an alternative understanding of Ignatius’ desire to be martyred, one rooted in the imitation of Christ and a profound understanding of being united with Christ in his suffering. Bakker argues that, influenced by both Christian and Jewish sources, Ignatius’ “strong motivation to suffer martyrdom can be associated with the literary tradition of the suffering prophet” (Bakker, Exemplar Domini, 118); Ignatius then “adapted the traditions about the suffering prophet to himself and believed he had an important role to fulfil as redeemer of his church,” in the face of church division (this division was related to differences regarding Jesus and his mission, including Docetic and anti-Docetic views of Jesus). Bakker argues that, to Ignatius, “a divided church invokes punishment and suffering on itself, and requires martyrs to avert God’s judgment.” (Bakker, Exemplar Domini, 119, 124). This desire, imitating Jesus’ passion, knowing the suffering of Jesus, being mystically united with Christ, and taking the suffering and punishment of his divided church upon himself, drove Ignatius toward martyrdom. For Ignatius, Bakker argues, “discipleship implies martyrdom” (Bakker, Exemplar Domini, 122, cf. 152-154, 163-169); in his act of martyrdom, Ignatius was imitating the work of Christ, and was united to Christ in his suffering. Bakker concludes that “Ignatius’ choice of voluntary martyrdom was not inspired by a heavy conscience, or a desire for personal fulfillment. On the contrary, the bishop positioned himself in a Deuteronomistic tradition of spiritually replete prophets and martyrs who sacrificed themselves for the sins of their communities. Jesus’ passion is taken as the example and standard of such practices. Ignatius qualifies this form of martyrdom as ‘imitation’ and ‘discipleship’” (Bakker, Exemplar Domini, 203).
not dictate what it means to properly follow Christ; the way in which one’s life is oriented, the motivation behind the action, must be captivated and changed when one follows Christ. Both their shared emphasis on violation and on the all encompassing nature of the imitation of Christ are seen in Bavinck and Yoder’s shared rejection of the ideal of martyrdom as the proper imitation of Christ.

The Monk

Both Bavinck and Yoder laud the monastic ideal for its protest against the growing worldliness of the church in its context and the way in which this ideal tries to call the believer to actively follow Christ. Alongside this praise, both theologians critique the monastic ideal for its attempt to literally mimic the actions of Jesus.

Yoder praises the monastic tradition of imitating Christ for its “needed critique of comfortable religion,” emphasis on faithfulness rather than efficacy, revival of the vision of Jesus as suffering servant, and desire to “restore the normativeness of Jesus.” But Yoder also raises significant criticisms. He broadly characterizes the monastic tradition as “formal mimicking of [Jesus’] life-style,” one focused on the “outward form of Jesus’ life; his forsaking domicile and property, his celibacy, or his barefoot itinerancy.” Yoder argues that simply mimicking Christ’s actions and external circumstances is not how one ought to imitate Christ; there is no New Testament justification for this practice. Scripture does not teach a “general pastoral or moral guideline” by which we follow Jesus. Yoder

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1301 Yoder, PoJ, 5, fn. 7 and Bavinck, Imitation I, 387-388.
1302 Yoder, “Revolution and Gospel,” 156.
1304 Yoder, Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution, 134.
1305 Yoder, PoJ, 130.
1306 Yoder, PoJ, 95, emphasis original. Generally following Jesus, as in claiming the celibacy of Jesus as a universal standard or working as a carpenter to follow Jesus’ vocation literally, is not taught by the New Testament (see Yoder, PoJ, 130-131 and Yoder, “The Wisdom and the Power,” where Yoder refers to the example
classifies the monastic attempt to find a “general” concept of imitation as “naïve outward (‘franciscan’) replicating of the shape of Jesus’ life,” a trend he rejects.\textsuperscript{1307} The imitation of Christ must not, again, simply focus on the external actions of the believer.

Alongside Yoder’s critique of the external mimicry of the monastic ideal of imitation, he raises a secondary concern: the imitation of the monk is not one that can be taken up by all Christians. He writes, “the renunciation of comfort, pride, and power . . . cannot be taken by all Christians, because mendicants live in symbiotic dependency on wider society, on the economy, and generosity of others.” Thus, again, Yoder deems this form of imitation naïve.

Bavinck echoes Yoder’s praise for the monks’ protest against the “worldliness of the church;”\textsuperscript{1308} he raises a critique similar to Yoder’s: the monastic ideal of imitating Christ idealizes literal, external replication of Jesus’ actions through ascetic practices.\textsuperscript{1309} Bavinck argues that an imitation of Christ that is “simple repetition and copying of the personal life of Jesus” is both incorrect and can have disastrous consequences.\textsuperscript{1310} As Bavinck writes, “it is all too possible for someone outwardly to be Christ-like yet inwardly very unChrist-like.”\textsuperscript{1311} One’s external actions are not necessarily indicative of one’s internal motivation and character.

As Yoder does, Bavinck adds to this critique a second: the ideal of the monk, given the “slavish copying” of Christ’s actions, cannot be practiced by all Christians. He writes,

Monasticism became the true imitation of Christ who had also not been married, had

\textsuperscript{1307} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 132.
\textsuperscript{1308} Bavinck, \textit{Imitation I}, 378; He also emphasizes that the ideals of poverty, chastity, and obedience \textit{can be} found within the new Testament; Christ calls his followers forsake everything to take up their cross (Bavinck, \textit{Imitation I}, 391, citing Matthew 10:38, Matthew 19:21, and Luke 14:26).
\textsuperscript{1309} Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 277.
\textsuperscript{1310} Bavinck, \textit{Imitation I}, 391: For the monk, imitation is “copying the external life of Jesus and then only in some of the outward circumstances of his life which are exaggerated as well.”
\textsuperscript{1311} Bavinck, \textit{Imitation I}, 392.
wandered through the land and had even periodically isolated himself in the desert. Granted, this ideal never became obligatory for all men; that would have been impossible without the destruction of society itself. Nevertheless, in monasticism, the goal was to achieve a higher level of perfection than was possible in ordinary life. The result was a pernicious distinction of two kinds of morality, of higher and lower obligations, of counsels and commandments. This distinction had two ruinous consequences. It promoted pride and trust in good works among those striving for perfection and a complacent indifference to the ideals of holiness in the practical daily lives of ordinary people.\footnote{Bavinck, Imitation I, 381-382.}

In his explanation of both critiques, Bavinck notes that monasticism also entered a “new era” in later centuries, the era of the mendicant orders.\footnote{Yoder does not specifically demarcate these eras of monasticism, but addresses each within his writing.} Again, the mendicant orders distorted the true imitation of Christ, while providing an important critique of the church and an important example of what it means to take the prescriptions of Jesus seriously.\footnote{Bavinck, Imitation I, 387-388; this, he asserts, went against the “prevailing spiritual indifference” of the day.} Within the mendicant orders, the commands of Jesus again “were not longer to be ignored or spiritualized, but taken literally. The entire life of Jesus must be imitated and copied.” This meant that the “supreme ideal was to live and suffer as Jesus had.”\footnote{Bavinck, Imitation I, 388.} Within these later monastic orders, the focus remained on a literal repetition of the particular acts of Jesus, something only possible for a select group of believers, with the potential of simply focusing on external action.

Imitation is not merely mimicry; the believer must do more than follow the actions of Jesus literally and externally.\footnote{This view of monasticism, while raising important questions about the practices of imitation within the monastic ideal, does not give credence to the aspects of imitation and piety that are not merely externally mimetic. Benedict’s monastic rule, for example, charges monks to obedience, humility, and seeking after the lost, and other internal dispositions that lay claim on the inner life of the monk, and the external acts that flow from these practices (see The Holy Rule of St. Benedict, trans. Rev. Boniface Verheyen (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library)).} While the monastic ideal of imitating Christ provides an important corrective against those who do not take the life of Jesus seriously as a model for the Christian life, both Bavinck and Yoder argue against this model, rejecting its literal mimicry. Bavinck and Yoder understand this application of the imitation of Christ to be a naïve
understanding of the theme. Properly imitating Christ must draw upon a fuller sense of imitation, one that is manifest both internally and externally. The true imitation of Christ must lay claim on the whole of the believer’s life; following Jesus demands nothing less.

The Mystic

Meditating on the suffering of Jesus began within the mendicant orders, paving the way to mysticism. In this tradition, imitating Christ meant a deep reflection and meditation on the life of Christ, keenly focused on his suffering. Both Bavinck and Yoder emphasize the importance of union with Christ, a theme stressed by the mystics. But they both critique the mystics for having an incomplete understanding of the imitation of Christ; while union with Christ is necessary, the mystic overly emphasizes seeking out suffering, focuses exclusively on the inner life, and idealizes asceticism.

The imitation of Christ as exemplified in the mystics strongly emphasizes the cross. One may imagine, given Yoder’s similar focus on imitating Christ in his cross, that he would speak more positively of medieval mysticism. But this is not the case. Yoder is critical of the mystics for their interpretation and application of the cross in the Christian life. Within the mystic tradition, the cross is focused on the experience of the inner self; “the ‘cross’ is an inward experience in which the self struggles with doubt or with pride until it is brought to that brokenness and surrender that permits the mystical vision.”

Yoder has two significant exegetical qualms with this interpretation. First, similar to monasticism and martyrdom, the mystics’ exaltation of suffering can result in a problematic view of the role of suffering in the life of the believer. Suffering can become glorified as an

\[^{1317}\text{Yoder does not use this language outside of references to Romans 6 (Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 118), but the theme is present throughout The Politics of Jesus.}\]
\[^{1318}\text{Yoder, “A People in the World,” 87.}\]
end in and of itself. But according to Yoder, the New Testament teaches that one does not "seek [the cross], but when it comes neither does one consider it simply as a matter of having been providentially chosen for a hard time."\(^{1319}\) Second, the mystics’ stress on the cross as an experience of “death to self”\(^{1320}\) leads toward an “inward wrestling of the sensitive soul with self and sin.”\(^{1321}\) Again, this focus does not get to the heart of New Testament teaching. In the New Testament the cross is not simply an inward experience. It is “the social reality of representing an unwilling world to the Order to come;”\(^{1322}\) it is “the call to share with Jesus the path of incarnate love – God in mankind (incarnation) meeting mankind against God (rebellion) at God’s expense (atonement).”\(^{1323}\)

Alongside his sustained criticism of the mystic interpretation of the cross, Yoder raises another, often implicit, concern. When Yoder discusses the imitation of Christ he never argues that imitation is characterized by asceticism. The models of imitation that have asceticism and world-denunciation at their core are understood to be an attempt to live out a general concept of imitation, which is not found within the New Testament.\(^{1324}\)

Bavinck affirms that there is a “mystical significance to imitation . . . in faith, we enter into a fellowship with [Jesus’] suffering and glory.”\(^{1325}\) But the imitation of Christ is “not merely something spiritual.”\(^{1326}\) The imitation of Christ is not less than mystical union with Christ, but it is more than mystical union. Many mystics, however, understood Christ

\(^{1319}\) Yoder, “A People in the World,” 88; the Christian must be willing to bear the cross on account of one’s obedience to Christ, but not seek after suffering as a good in itself.

\(^{1320}\) Yoder, “The Wisdom and the Power,” 44.

\(^{1321}\) Yoder, PoJ, 96.

\(^{1322}\) Yoder, PoJ, 96.

\(^{1323}\) Yoder, “The Wisdom and the Power,” 44; see also Yoder, PoJ, 129-130.

\(^{1324}\) Yoder, PoJ, 95, 131.

\(^{1325}\) Bavinck, GE, 272.

\(^{1326}\) Bavinck, GE, 272.
as “an example only of the mystical union with God.” This understanding precludes an affirmation of Christ as Redeemer, a necessary aspect of the imitation of Christ, according to Bavinck. It also teaches an imitation that focuses only on the inward, spiritual, aspects of the Christian life. Bavinck argues that this is a “one-sided” imitation of Christ, omitting the “human qualities that ought to be renewed and sanctified by imitation.” The intimation of Christ must attend not only to the spiritual, but to the ethical.

Like Yoder, Bavinck also criticizes the focus on suffering as an end within the mystic tradition. Many mystics, so focused on inward reflection and meditation on Christ’s sufferings, sought after suffering akin to that of Jesus. Bavinck writes,

> the majority of mystics understood the imitation of Christ to consist of a series of events and deeds that simply had to be copied. . . . The intensive imitation occasioned by such deep meditation on the suffering of Jesus led to very realistic appropriation of that suffering. The appropriation of Christ’s suffering led to extreme phenomenon among the mystics, such as the stigmata, which Bavinck comments on extensively in his *Reformed Ethics*. The focus on these phenomenon led to an increased focus away from the world, drawing Christians further “away from the world toward . . . toward contemplation.”

Both Bavinck and Yoder find the mystic understanding of the imitation of Christ to be too narrowly focused on the spiritual, inward aspects of the Christian life. This inward

1327 Bavinck, *GE*, 287; emphasis added.
1328 Bavinck, *GE*, 288; this is a generalization. Some mystics, like Thomas à Kempis, Bavinck argues, taught a “purer” understanding of the imitation of Christ. While Kempis still stresses the basic themes of mysticism – mystical union, asceticism, the cross – Kempis does not merely see Christ as an example in his mystical union. Rather, “Thomas also turns attention to the ethical, to the necessity of imitating Christ’s humility and tenderness” (Bavinck, *GE*, 284). He has a “strong ethical and practical emphasis in addition to this inward, mystical note” (Imitation I, 388-389).
focus, particularly on the suffering that Christ endured, led the mystics to over-emphasized, sustained contemplation on the suffering of Christ. Contemplation on Christ’s sufferings led, in turn, to external mimicry of Jesus’ suffering. For Yoder, this is a misunderstanding of the nature of the cross. For Bavinck, this is, at best, a one-sided understanding of the imitation of Christ. As this leads to a focus on suffering, asceticism, and world renunciation, the mystic imitation of Christ is, for both Bavinck and Yoder, yet another attempt to find what Yoder deems a “general” concept of imitation in Jesus’ life, which is not possible. For both Bavinck and Yoder, the mystic imitation of Christ motif does not satisfy their affirmation of the imitation of Christ as an ethic that is all-of-life encompassing. It does not attend to the spiritual and ethical. The mystic motif also seeks a literal imitation of Christ, one that neither Bavinck nor Yoder affirm.

The Modernist

Finally, both Bavinck and Yoder reject the motif of imitating Christ found within the modern interpretation of the theme, typified by Charles Sheldon, among others. This approach reduces Jesus to a mere example. In this tradition, not only is the role of Jesus reduced to an example, the substance of Jesus’ example is also reduced. Jesus becomes an ideal for one to follow after; one must supplement the content of what is to be imitated from elsewhere. The question of what Jesus would do often becomes a stand-in for what the “summum bonum” is for an individual. One’s own ideals often determine the shape and content of the imitation of Christ.

On account of this, Yoder contends that the “mainstream,” modern view of the imitation of Christ does not constitute a “serious . . . vision of discipleship.” What Sheldon, and others,

1334 Yoder, *PoJ*, 4-5, fn. 7, emphasis original.
advocate is an imitation of Christ that is “not materially related to Jesus.” This is deeply problematic; it does not take the person and character of Jesus seriously. In the modern tradition, the content of ethics can be, and is, found elsewhere. Yoder describes Sheldon’s appeal to imitating Christ in this way: “‘Do what Jesus would do’ means for Sheldon simply ‘do the right thing at all costs’; but what is the right thing to do is knowable for Sheldon apart from Jesus.” Against this view, Yoder argues that the imitation of Christ must assert that Jesus is normative for Christian ethics; the modern understanding of the imitation of Christ fails to substantively claim Jesus’ normativity.

Bavinck similarly argues against the reduction of ethics to simply an amorphous “essence” of Jesus. In the modern understanding of the imitation of Christ, “not much is left of the example of Jesus and its imitation.” The content of Jesus’ life cannot be substantively imitated by the modern person, for “modern man’s ideal cannot be that of the past, a man who was in every respect a product of his own time, but must be sought in the uncertain future. It must be an ideal established and validated by the modern man himself.” In the modern tradition, the content of the imitation of Christ is determined by the individual, not by Jesus.

Bavinck adds to this critique, arguing that the modern conception of Jesus as one whose only purpose was to be an example has multiple, problematic interpretations. First, one could interpret this as the “actual person and life of Jesus as exemplary. Jesus is the normal and normative human being who, in his words and deeds, reveals the moral ideal and who seals it with his death.” But if Jesus is merely an example for us to emulate, Bavinck warns, we are given an unattainable standard for life and are necessarily discouraged when we try to take up a

1335 Yoder, PoJ, 5, fn. 7, emphasis original.
1336 Yoder, PoJ, 5, fn. 7, emphasis original.
1337 Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
1338 Bavinck, Imitation I, 394
life in his footsteps; we know we can never live exactly as he did, a sinless, perfect life. One 
first needs to know Jesus as savior. Only then can Jesus be an example. But one could also 
interpret Jesus as an example in a second way. Many modern theologians, Bavinck argues, 
understand Jesus to be “an ideal” but not “the ideal;” that is, on account of the specific, 
contextual details of Jesus life, people cannot truly follow his example: “as a man, an individual, 
he was inevitably limited and one-sided. . . . for this reason the true imitation of Christ consists in 
. . . being filled with and following after his ‘spirit’ in its essence and core.” It is for the 
individual to determine how the essence and core of Jesus’ life should be displayed in their life. 
The substance of the imitation of Christ is then no longer determined by Christ’s own life.

Christ must first be Redeemer in order to be an example. Bavinck’s key contention in his 
argument against the modern understanding of the imitation of Christ reveals, again, one of the 
key similarities between Yoder and Bavinck: the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians. 
Bavinck and Yoder also reject the modernist de-coupling of the content of Jesus’ life and the 
content for imitation. The imitation of Christ must be substantively related to the life of Jesus. 
While neither Bavinck or Yoder affirm a literal mimicry of the acts of Jesus’ life, both ethics 
intend to take the content of Jesus’ life seriously – and normatively – as they establish a proper 
imitation of Christ. The imitation of Christ must be, as Bavinck proclaims, “a life lived 
according to Christ’s example, in Christ’s power.” Neither of these criteria are 
substantively met in the modernist motif.

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1339 Bavinck, Imitation I, 394: Bavinck writes, “he who sees Jesus only as an example is overwhelmed and becomes discouraged . . . if he is only an example then he comes to judge us and not to save us.”
1340 Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
1341 Bavinck, GE, 285; Bavinck writes, “Christ as a person is indeed a foundation for ethics, but not his example. . . . truth is not a matter of being a copy of Jesus; it is to share in his family likeness.”
1342 Bavinck, GE, 285.
Bavinck and Yoder share the conviction that the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians; you cannot know Christ as example until you know him as savior. Both theologians teach the all encompassing nature of the imitation of Christ; it is an ethical motif that is demanded of every Christian and affects every aspect of one’s life. Bavinck and Yoder also affirm qualifications in the criteria of what must be imitated in Christ; while imitation must be substantively derived from the life of Christ, merely externally copying (or dwelling upon) Christ’s actions is not properly imitating Christ. The imitation of Christ is more than literal mimicry of Christ’s actions. On the basis of their shared affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ, both Bavinck and are Yoder reject the historic forms of the imitation of Christ as the complete, proper imitation of Christ. The martyr, the mystic, and the monk all focus too narrowly on a literal mimicry of a single aspect of Christ’s life and work, while the modernist does not substantively take into account the life of Christ. The martyr, mystic, and monk motifs also engender a hierarchy between those disciples who can imitate Christ (the martyr, the mystic, and the monk) and those who cannot (lay, ordinary Christians who do not become a martyr, mystic, or monk). While each of these motifs have aspects to be praised, none fully capture the proper imitation of Christ.

Conclusion

The polarities and differences between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions are not difficult to identify; this is so in the history of the traditions, and in specific theological and ethical questions – including the imitation of Christ. An ethical system centered on the imitation of Christ in his cross is clearly different than an ethical system centered on the imitation of Christ as he follows the law. But an analysis of the relationship between the two traditions cannot simply attest to the differences between the two traditions; we can, and
must, also identify the way in which the two traditions have similar impulses and themes in their understanding of the imitation of Christ.

Identifying the common themes in both Bavinck’s and Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ further concretizes the way in which the relationship between Anabaptist and Reformed traditions is rooted in familial ties. As Mouw and Yoder contend, the two are “discussion-partners who share some deeply-rooted spiritual traits and impulses.”

We have established that the imitation of Christ is at the heart of Christian ethics for both Bavinck and Yoder. Within each theologian’s understanding of the proper imitation of Christ, there are similar affirmations of the imitation of Christ as an all of life encompassing ethic, an ethic for Christians, an ethic grounded in a relationship of restoration between creation and redemption, and a qualified ethic. We have also noted the ways that the imitation of Christ is connected to the whole of each theologian’s thought, so we could certainly build upon these reflections even further. But these shared affirmations constitute an important base for framing discussions on the imitation of Christ between Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder. The two understandings of a proper imitation of Christ are not without their differences, as we will see in the next chapter, but these differences are grounded in shared affirmations. Understanding the differences between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ in this way helps us to build bridges among evangelicals today; many continue the appeal to the imitation of Christ from traditions of Bavinck and Yoder in ways that can seem to be merely in conflict with one another. We have demonstrated here the ways in which the two understandings of the imitation of Christ

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1344 Each of these shared convictions, for example, can be seen to be grounded in the “intra-family” affirmations that Mouw and Yoder identified.
are grounded in important, common theological affirmations and impulses.
CHAPTER SIX

Furthering the Conversation:
The Maintained Disagreements Between Bavinck and Yoder
on the Imitation of Christ

Introduction

The imitation of Christ is an important tradition throughout the history of Christian spirituality and ethics that begs the hermeneutical question, “how am I going to tell what Christ would do?” Many have answered this question, in competing ways. We have seen, in detail, the ways that two prominent theologians, Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder, have answered this question: the law and the cross. For Bavinck, the heart of the proper imitation of Christ can be found in these words: “it is precisely all those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law that Christ in his words and deeds leaves as an example for us.”\footnote{Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.} The Christian is to follow Christ in law-patterned imitation of his virtues. For Yoder, the heart of the proper imitation of Christ is seen in these words: “Only at one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross.”\footnote{Yoder, PoJ, 95.} The Christian is to imitate Christ only in his cross.

It is not difficult to determine how these two understandings of the imitation of Christ differ. Like the received wisdom on the history of the traditions of both Bavinck and Yoder, Reformed and Anabaptist, the two seem to only produce polarity and disagreement. However, we have demonstrated that these two articulations of a proper imitation of Christ ought not be viewed as simply debate and difference. Rather, the debate between the two is rooted in shared
affirmations: the imitation of Christ as an all of life encompassing ethic, an ethic for Christians, an ethic grounded in a relationship of restoration between creation and redemption, and a qualified ethic.

Thus far, we have looked toward the *commonalities* between Bavinck and Yoder. In this chapter, we will explore the continued disagreements and differences that Bavinck and Yoder maintain in their interpretations of the proper imitation of Christ. First, we will survey the basic differences between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ, arising from their writing on the imitation of Christ. We will then examine the explicit critiques of the other’s tradition that arise within both Bavinck and Yoder’s ethical texts, as a way to further investigate the differences the two maintain on the imitation of Christ. Finally, although the two never directly interacted with one another, we will raise implicit critiques that the two might have of one another. Examining these critiques will highlight the sustained differences between the two on the imitation of Christ, while also identifying the way in which these differences often arise out of shared theological convictions. Investigating the implicit critiques that the two may raise toward the other also 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.

**Differences Between Yoder and Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ**

As Mouw and Yoder attest, dialogue between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions still presumes substantive differences, rooted in similar impulses.\(^ {1347}\) Alongside the shared affirmations between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ, ongoing

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\(^ {1347}\) Mouw and Yoder, “Dialogue,” 129.
differences are also on display. The careful analysis of the differences of the two traditions are instructive found in these ecumenical dialogues surveyed and in Balke and Verduin’s work are instructive as we examine the sustained differences between the two accounts of a proper imitation of Christ. Understanding these key differences and unique insights from both traditions on the imitation of Christ will, finally, fuel a proposal for a Reformed, evangelical imitation ethic for the twenty-first century.

Balke, Verduin, and the ecclesial dialogues among Swiss, Canadian, Dutch and WARC and WMC representatives each identify one of the core difference between the two traditions as a difference rooted in ecclesiology. The Anabaptist rejection of the state church led to the prominent differences between the two churches, including their different approaches to government, the sacraments, violence, and the “Constantinian shift.”1348 These theological and ecclesial differences between the two traditions necessarily impact their respective understandings of the imitation of Christ. Within the work of Bavinck and Yoder, the differences between the two remain apparent. Here, we will discuss several key differences: different focal images for the imitation of Christ, different understandings of Christology and the role of suffering, different emphases on the relationship between the church and broader society.

Focal Images

Bavinck points to the law as the focal image in the imitation of Christ. Upholding both the law and the example of Christ is critical in Bavinck’s thought. Believers are to follow Christ’s example in a law-patterned imitation of his virtues. This emphasis on the

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relationship between Christ’s example and the law was already present in the beginning of Bavinck’s academic career; the sixth chapter of his dissertation was entitled “The Guiding Norm of the Christian Life: The Law and the Example of Christ.”\textsuperscript{1349} The emphasis on law and imitation continues in his first essays on the imitation of Christ, his chapter on the imitation of Christ in \textit{Reformed Ethics}, and his late-career essays on the imitation of Christ. Bavinck’s first essay on the imitation clearly sets out the pattern for the imitation of Christ, a pattern that binds together the law and Christ’s example: “the Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.”\textsuperscript{1350} Bavinck never wavers from the necessary link between the law and Christ’s example. His latter essay on the imitation of Christ displays more hermeneutical nuance, but continues to affirm the law as the focal image for the imitation of Christ, now prominently emphasizing the virtues of Christ. A proper imitation of Christ consists of:

\begin{quote}
those virtues which \textit{Jesus exhibited in his life of obedience to the Father’s will}. Believers who have a desire for the \textit{law of God} after the inward man and have to prove the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2) could thus learn from the example of Christ. They must imitate him in those virtues of humility, lowliness, longsuffering (II Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5; I Peter 2:21), in purity and holiness (I Peter 1:15; I John 3:3,4; 4:17; Eph. 1:10), in willingness to forgive and in love (Eph. 4:32; 5:2; II Cor. 10:1; Col. 3:13). In a word, they are to walk in the light as he is in the light (I John 1:7; 2:3; Eph. 5:8). . . . The \textit{example of Christ}, becomes for the apostles a noteworthy illustration of the most important virtues which the \textit{law requires of us}, especially love (Rom. 12:9; Gal. 5:14).\textsuperscript{1351}
\end{quote}

For Bavinck, a proper imitation of Christ is understood through the lens of the example of Christ in conformity to the law of God. Christ’s example is inseparably linked to the law.

Yoder, however, understands Christ’s example to be found in \textit{one} aspect of his life: the cross. In two sections of \textit{The Politics of Jesus}, Yoder is extremely clear on this point: “Only at

\begin{footnotes}
\item[1350] Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
\item[1351] Bavinck, Imitation I, 426.
\end{footnotes}
one point, only on one subject – but then consistently, universally – Jesus is our example: in his cross;”\textsuperscript{1352} and “[t]here is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds. . . at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross.”\textsuperscript{1353} The same insistence recurs throughout Yoder’s work: “Jesus is appealed to as an example not generally but only at the point of the meaning of the cross. On that subject he is always appealed to,”\textsuperscript{1354} “it is simple logic when Jesus says of his disciples that his cross is to be the pattern of their life.”\textsuperscript{1355} This focal image is a constant refrain in Yoder’s thought: Jesus is an example to Christians only in his cross. Jesus embodies the way of the cross, and calls his followers to take after him, in suffering, obedience rather than efficiency, servanthood, revolutionary subordination, nonviolence, enemy love, wisdom that the world deems foolish, forgiveness, and power through weakness. This is the cross. Followers of Christ are called to take up this call in their life – and death.

The focal images that Bavinck and Yoder employ, and the hermeneutical lens through which the believer understands a proper imitation of Christ, differ significantly. But, both focal images still lead the respective theologians to emphasize an ethic that testifies to the transformative power of the work of Christ in the life of the believer to a watching world. Both, as we will see, emphasize dying to oneself, taking up one’s cross, and following Christ, even in his suffering. And both emphasize a straining toward the eschatological destiny that God intends for his fallen humanity. Nevertheless, in the midst of these commonalities, there are important differences that inform, and stem from, Bavinck and Yoder’s differing focal images.

\textsuperscript{1352} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 95, emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{1353} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 131.
\textsuperscript{1355} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41.
Christology and the Role of Suffering

To imitate Christ is to partake in his suffering. Drawing clearly on Scripture, both Bavinck and Yoder affirm this aspect of the imitation of Christ. The two diverge, however, on both the extent to which Christ’s work on the cross is imitable and the sufficiency of suffering as the guide for imitation. While upholding a significant place for the role of suffering in the life of the believer, Bavinck’s Christology leads him to reject an understanding of imitation that imitates all aspects of Christ on the cross; he also rejects suffering as a complete understanding of what ought to be imitated in Christ. Yoder’s focus on the cross leads him to focus on suffering and the enemy love that often produces suffering as the means by which believers imitate Christ.

Referencing 1 Peter 2:21, Bavinck argues that Christ’s suffering is “an example to be followed by his disciples.” In his first essay on imitation, Bavinck again references this text:

Now it is true that suffering for the sake of Christ is a fully Scriptural understanding of the imitation of Christ. In Phil. 1:29 Paul considers it a gift of grace to suffer on behalf of Christ. Peter, in his first epistle (2:21ff; 3:17-18; 4:1) calls our attention to the fact that especially in innocent suffering Christ has left us an example.

In both excerpts, we find Bavinck’s strong emphasis on the relationship between suffering and imitation. Taking up one’s cross is a necessary aspect of the imitation of Christ, and one that often brings about suffering in the life of the disciple. The cross is the “symbol of the suffering that can be expected and must be endured in this life by all his followers.”

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1356 Bavinck, RD 3, 409.
1357 Bavinck, Imitation I, 392.
1358 Bavinck, Imitation I, 398. Bavinck writes, “It is this fellowship in suffering that Jesus had in mind when he noted that following him involved the double demand of denying oneself and taking up the cross. In order to partake in this fellowship with Christ it is necessary to renounce everything.”
1359 Bavinck, Imitation II, 412.
disciples, as Bavinck emphasizes, are to imitate the virtues that Christ exemplifies; when he lists these virtues, suffering is often included.\textsuperscript{1360}

Bavinck uses very strong language to affirm the place of suffering in the imitation of Christ. Again emphasizing the role of suffering, he writes, “throughout his life, but especially in his suffering and death and including the foot-washing episode (John 13:15), Jesus held himself up as an example that the disciples were to imitate.”\textsuperscript{1361} But not all of Christ’s suffering and death is to be – or can be – imitated. Bavinck is clear on the inimitable nature of the atoning work of Christ. The juridical act of Christ on the cross cannot be imitated by the believer; rather, it is only on account of this juridical act that the believer can imitate the ethical acts of Christ. On account of this claim, Bavinck both rejects various aspects of the historical imitation motifs and affirms the inimitable nature of Christ’s atoning work.

Historical imitation motifs often misunderstand the relationship of suffering to imitation. Bavinck argues that the martyrs do not understand the way in which only Christ atones; thus, he rejects the notion of the martyrs that understands suffering as a “completion of the mediatorial suffering of Jesus Christ,” whereby the martyrs themselves “became participants in the redeeming and atoning sacrifice of Christ and gained benefits for others.”\textsuperscript{1362} Bavinck argues that mystics misunderstand the application of Christ’s suffering to the life of the believer; thus, he rejects the overly literalistic appropriation of Jesus’ suffering seen in the mystics.\textsuperscript{1363} Bavinck continues his criticism of the modernists who fail to emphasize the inimitable aspects of Jesus’ suffering. Of this tradition, he writes,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1360} Bavinck, Imitation II, 420, 426; Bavinck cites multiple scriptural texts as evidence of this: 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5; 1 Peter 2:2; 1 Timothy 6:4
  \item \textsuperscript{1361} Bavinck, Imitation II, 412; emphasis added.
  \item \textsuperscript{1362} Bavinck, Imitation I, 377.
  \item \textsuperscript{1363} Bavinck, Imitation I, 389, 392; In this criticism, referencing Romans 8:17, Bavinck does recognize the scriptural charge to be united with Christ in his suffering.
\end{itemize}
Only when we know and experience [Christ] as Redeemer, as the one whose suffering covers our guilt and whose Spirit fulfills the law of God in us, only then do we dare to look at him and consider him our example.\textsuperscript{1364}

The suffering of Jesus is not only something to be imitated; it is first something which, by his redeeming work and power, \textit{enables} our imitation, on account of our justification. In his first essay on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck expands on this claim:

It must be noted that we are not referring to the suffering of Christ which atoned for sin since that suffering is complete and can only be borne by Christ himself, but to suffering in a general sense. The imitation of Christ is thus in the first place a sharing in his suffering. However, because of and by means of this suffering it is also a sharing in his glory.\textsuperscript{1365}

Here, we see the way Bavinck relates the imitation of Christ to his broader understanding of justification and sanctification. The imitation of Christ pertains to sanctification; the justification of the believer, through Christ’s atoning work, makes imitation possible. Christ’s atoning work, which paves the way for imitation and involves suffering, cannot be imitated by his disciples.\textsuperscript{1366} The atonement is applied to the believer, not imitated; thus, for Bavinck, it is on the basis of the inimitable work of Christ on the cross that the believer can imitate Christ’s virtues – including suffering.

The virtues of Christ, which conform to the law, that the believer is to imitate include, but are not limited to, suffering. Bavinck lists many virtues:

- truth, righteousness, holiness (Eph. 4:24); purity, modesty, temperance (Eph. 5:3-5);
- prayer, vigil and fasting (Acts 14:23; Rom. 12:12, I Cor. 7:5; I Peter 4:7,8); faith, love, longsuffering (I Timothy 6:4); brotherly love, generosity, hospitality (Rom. 12:3);
- compassion, lowliness, meekness, patience (Col. 3:12); all those virtues which Paul acclaims as fruits of the Spirit and contrasts with the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-22).
- humility, lowliness, longsuffering (II Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5; I Peter 2:21), in purity and holiness (I Peter 1:15; I John 3:3,4; 4:17; Eph. 1:10), in willingness to forgive and in love (Eph. 4:32; 5:2; II Cor. 10:1; Col. 3:13). In a word, they are to walk in the light as he is in the light (I John 1:7; 2:3; Eph. 5:8).

\textsuperscript{1364} Bavinck, Imitation I, 394.
\textsuperscript{1365} Bavinck, Imitation I, 398.
\textsuperscript{1366} Bavinck, \textit{RD} 3, 481.
noteworthy illustration of the most important virtues which the law requires of us, especially love.\textsuperscript{1367}

To these virtues, he adds another: joy.\textsuperscript{1368} Bavinck argues that many pious Christians, intent on imitating Christ, forego the joy of a life following Jesus. He writes,

They experience no joy in living, the beauty of the creation affords them no pleasure, and they are completely indifferent to discoveries of science, the creations of art, or the advances of technology. Constantly focusing on their sin and misery they never achieve the joy of faith.\textsuperscript{1369}

Jesus’ life was one not only marked by suffering, but marked by joy. His message is a “joyful and comforting” one;\textsuperscript{1370} it brings forth joy in the believer. Bavinck characterizes new converts to Christianity in this way: “with great joy they experienced the liberty for which Christ had set them free.”\textsuperscript{1371} Following Jesus, imitating him in his virtues, is not merely a life marked by suffering; it is a life overflowing in joy – both present and anticipated eschatological joy.

Like Bavinck, Yoder empathizes the role of suffering in the imitation of Christ: “The morality of the New Testament is the morality of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.”\textsuperscript{1372} The suffering of Christ is seen most fully in the cross; as we have seen, for Yoder, it is in the cross that the believer is to imitate Christ. Thus, the believer is to imitate Christ in his suffering. For this understanding of the cross, and of imitation, Yoder primarily appeals to the gospel of Luke.\textsuperscript{1373} The cross looms large in this gospel. Already in his exegesis of the early sections of the Lucan narrative, Yoder identifies the cross as the defining aspect of Jesus’ ministry; Yoder

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\textsuperscript{1367} Bavinck, Imitation II, 420, 426; cf. 438.
\textsuperscript{1368} Bavinck’s insistence on the role of joy in imitating Christ is found both in his his rejections of historic emphases and affirmations of the role of joy in the life of Christ and the believer.
\textsuperscript{1369} Bavinck, Imitation II, 406.
\textsuperscript{1370} Bavinck, Imitation II, 415.
\textsuperscript{1371} Bavinck, Imitation II, 431.
\textsuperscript{1372} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41.
\textsuperscript{1373} He also shows the way the theme of the cross permeates the gospels and the epistles.
reflects on the narrative in this way: Jesus’ “ministry was to be one of suffering and that his
disciples would need to be ready to bear the cross.”\textsuperscript{1374}

Using the words and emphases of scripture, Yoder carefully defines what “the cross”
means. The cross is where Jesus’ suffering is most clearly displayed; it is the way of voluntary
suffering and servanthood;\textsuperscript{1375} nonviolence;\textsuperscript{1376} obedience to the way of Christ’s kingdom, not
the way of the world;\textsuperscript{1377} self-sacrificial love;\textsuperscript{1378} and victory over the Powers of the day.\textsuperscript{1379} The
cross was a political act, a political death.\textsuperscript{1380} In living his life in the way of the cross, Jesus
rebelled against the dominant ways of society. His suffering and death was his punishment for
acting in line with the ways of God’s nonviolent kingdom, not the ruling Powers of the day.

Believers, then, are to follow the example of Christ in this cross: to act in accord with
Christ’s new, nonviolent kingdom, to take up the path of suffering, and to suffer the
consequences. Imitating Christ in his cross \textit{is} political. Pointing to the relationship between the
political nature of Christ’s life and death, Yoder describes the sacrifice necessary for Christians
to follow the way of Christ on the cross.\textsuperscript{1381} Jesus did not choose to act in step with the prevailing
ways of social change in his day. Neither ought his followers. Yoder writes,

\begin{quote}
Jesus was, from beginning to end, a political person . . . both highly political in his
kingdom message and also to outward appearances non-political in his rejection of the
most readily available political means of setting up his kingdom, he died (just as we die
today) because people were not willing to recognize (as we also do not want to recognize
that) ‘political’ does not always mean “governmental.”\textsuperscript{1382}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1374} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 35.
\textsuperscript{1375} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 38.
\textsuperscript{1377} Yoder, “The Way of Peace in a World of War,”19.
\textsuperscript{1378} Grimsrud, “Prologue,” 7.
\textsuperscript{1379} Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?,” 147.
\textsuperscript{1380} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 125.
\textsuperscript{1381} The Swiss dialogues highlight the prominence of an emphasis on suffering, as seen in Yoder, throughout
Mennonite thought (“From Coexistence to Cooperation,” 364-366).
\textsuperscript{1382} Yoder, \textit{Discipleship as Political Responsibility}, 57; see also Yoder, “The Cross as Social Fact,” 65 where he
argues that Jesus died, as we die today.
Here, we see Yoder clearly connect the suffering and death of Christ to the believer: we die, just as he died. Imitating Christ, the believer is to imitate his suffering, on the road to the cross and in the cross. The essence of Christ’s death on the cross, a political punishment for not acting in line with the Powers of the day, is one that the believer can, and must, also take up as they imitate Christ. In “A People in the World,” Yoder again makes this point clear: the cross is “a reflection of and participation in the character of the saving work of Christ. . . . Thus willingness to bear the cross means simply the readiness to let the form of the church’s obedience to Christ be dictated by Christ.”

Christians are to actively participate in the suffering of Jesus on the cross by living the same way he did – and undertaking the same punishment that he suffered.

The believer is to imitate Christ on his cross. For Yoder, then, the majority of Jesus’ work on the cross is imitable. Believers actively take up the cross, refusing the pattern of the Powers, as Jesus did, undergoing punishment for that nonviolence refusal, as Jesus did, and claiming victory over the Powers, as Jesus did. Anticipating Christ’s new kingdom, they act as those who “know another regime is normative.” In Jesus’ cross, there is a “culmination of that new regime” that his followers are called to act in accordance with. Thus, the actions of Christ on the cross are imitable, and must be taken up by his believers. As Jesus died a political death, on account of his revolutionary subordination and enemy love, so must believers.

There is one way, however, that Christ’s death is other than the death of believers following in his footsteps. In his essay, “Politics: Liberating Images of Christ,” Yoder reminds his readers that Jesus’ death is not entirely imitable. In his death, Jesus ends the sacrificial

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1383 Carter expands on the direct relationship between Christ’s suffering and the suffering of the believer, following the way of the cross: “Jesus was put to death as a threat to the established social order by authorities and this threat was read, according to Yoder. The rejection of Jesus was the rejection of the new social option he first embodied and them built out of those who accepted his message” (Carter, The Politics of the Cross, 99).
1385 Yoder, PoJ, 187.
1386 Yoder, PoJ, 52.
system. This act is Jesus’, and his alone. The believer is only to follow in the new way of the cross:

When Jesus, the nonviolent Zealot, accepted death willingly and innocently, that was far more than merely one more martyrdom to add to the many others before and since. It was the end of the sacrificial system. . . . No more can a society claim that its peace demands the blood of a scapegoat. Enemy love, the cross as a way of life and death, is not merely a moral ideal. . . it is participation in redemption.”

Jesus’ death marks a turning point. It is the “creation of a new inclusive peoplehood,” marked by Jesus’ renunciation of violence. Jesus opens the way for others to live in this manner. Believers can live in this way, imitating the cross of Christ because of Christ. They are called “to share with Jesus the path of incarnate love” and can do so because of what Jesus did: “God in mankind (incarnation) meeting mankind against God (rebellion) at God’s expense (atonement).” Jesus, the suffering servant, inaugurated the new way of the cross. Believers share in his “divine condescension,” suffer with him, and “give [their] life as he did.”

Yoder’s view of the imitable and inimitable nature of the imitation of Christ, heavily emphasizing the way in which Christ’s work on the cross is imitable, is grounded in his understanding of the atonement and the relationship between sanctification and justification. As Hauerwas and Sider describe, Yoder has “no use for a strong distinction between justification and sanctification.” Thus, “his account of participation is ethical, or perhaps better, it is about our perfection.” The subjective and objective aspects of Christ’s work, then, also need no distinction. Because Yoder does not posit a distinction between sanctification and justification, Hauerwas and Sider explain that atonement must be understood in a new way. It is “not about

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1390 Yoder, PoJ, 120-126.
accepting that Christ died because we sinned. Rather, it is a faith-union, or participation in Christ’s victory through his obedience.” 1392 This emphasis on obedience as the core aspect of both Christ and the imitation of Christ continues as Yoder himself elaborates on the atonement. 1393 Referencing Philippians 2, Yoder argues that the work of Christ is, “at its center, obedience.” 1394 Yoder elaborates on the nature of Jesus’ sacrifice as one of obedience:

the sinlessness of Christ is thus not (as for Anselm) a purely legal formality . . . Christ’s sinlessness is rather the whole point of his life and his obedience-offering. His sinlessness, his obedience, is what he offered to God, and that sinlessness, utter faithfulness to love, cost him his life in a world of sinners.” 1395

It follows, then, that God’s purpose for humanity is to “establish obedience in communion, not only to expiate juridical guilt.” 1396 Putting one’s faith in Christ and following him is a commitment to the faith-union of obedience made available to us through the perfect and triumphant obedience of Christ. In Pauline usage, faith is identification with Christ’s offering of himself in obedience to God; in Hebrews, faith means believing enough to obey when it looks hopeless. . . in both uses faith means discipleship. 1397

Yoder’s account of the atoning work of Christ on the cross is an ethical account. Emphasizing Christ’s obedience leads Yoder to similarly stress the obedience of Christ’s disciples as the core commitment of faith. The cross of Christ is not primarily about juridical guilt. It is about the obedience of Christ, and thus, the obedience of the followers of Christ. 1398 Faith, repentance, and

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1393 As we have seen, it is also consistently present in his discussion of the imitation of Christ.
1394 Yoder, Preface to Theology, 310.
1395 Yoder, Preface to Theology, 311.
1396 Yoder, Preface to Theology, 301.
1397 Yoder, Preface to Theology, 312.
1398 Yoder writes that “the work of Christ is, at its center, obedience” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 310). In this same work, Yoder devotes significant attention to “de-Anselmiz[ing]” faith and atonement. He writes that faith is “not the mere acceptance of the proclamation that Jesus died because of our guilt. It is rather commitment to the faith-union of obedience made available to us through the perfect and triumphant obedience of Christ.” He argues that this view of faith and atonement “fits, better than Anselm’s view, all the New Testament figures for atonement. It allows us to use the notions, for example, of illumination (the favorite Anabaptist concept), union with Christ, the new Adam, death of the old person and resurrection of the new, healing, and adoption to Sonship, as well as those of sacrifice-blood and ransom-redeemption with which we already dealt” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 312, emphasis original). Jesus, on the cross (and in his life) demonstrates a life of obedience, following God’s way of agape which “comes to mean nonresistance, bearing the other’s sinfulness, bearing, literally, his or her sins.” This was what
Christian living (imitation of Christ) are all ethical categories for Yoder. There is no separation between justification and sanctification; the “gap is between our intention . . . and our achievement.” Thus Christians are continually charged to follow in Christ’s obedience, seen most clearly in his suffering on the cross. As Christians do this, Hauerwas and Sider explain, they are “participants in Christ’s reconciliation of the world.” 1399

Suffering, then, is the pinnacle of the cross, the imitation of Christ; “suffering with Christ [is] the definition of apostolic existence.” 1400 The way of the cross is the way of servanthood, nonviolence, and enemy love; 1401 it is necessarily at odds with the ways of the world – and to follow this path leads to suffering, following the way of the suffering servant, Jesus. Forgiving, loving indiscriminately, dying and rising with Christ, serving others in humility, sharing in

brought Christ to the cross, “sinlessness, utter faithfulness to live” which “cost him his life in a world of sinners” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 311). Of Anselm’s understanding of atonement, Yoder writes: “Anselm’s judicial imagery envisions God’s holiness as akin to a Roman court’s judgment of guilt. Humanity’s sin offends this holiness, which then demands satisfaction. . . . Christ literally dies in our stead and God’s holiness is satisfied by that death” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 299). Yoder recognizes many important aspects of this understanding of the atonement, especially the way in which it takes sin seriously, recognizes God’s holiness and love, and incorporates Biblical pictures of Christ’s work as sacrifice. He also raises a number of challenges to this view: it places God as the object, not agent of our redemption, the New Testament witness does not support the idea of Christ as substitute (only as our representative), and, focusing on the guilt of humanity’s sin, misses critical aspects of the human condition as lost: separation from God and incapacity to do good. With his characteristic, close attention to the biblical text, Yoder writes “Every strand of New Testament literature makes clear that God’s purpose with humanity is to establish obedience in communion, not only expiate juridical guilt” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 301). Instead, he argues that the cross is primarily about obedience; Christ’s cross “demands and enables the cross of the Christian” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 307). Yoder’s answer to Anselm focuses on obedience, not juridical expiation of guilt. Here, a proponent of substitutionary atonement would raise the distinction between justification and sanctification: while obedience is certainly a critical aspect of the Christian life, it is a critical aspect of sanctification, not justification. The atonement, God’s justification of the sinner, provides a means by which one is obedient. Yoder does not affirm this distinction between justification and sanctification, and does so intentionally. He writes that “there is thus no gap between justification and sanctification, between forensic justification and real righteousness . . . the gap is between our intention (what we are ‘in faith’ when we are in faith) and our achievement (which includes the times we fall into unfaithful-alienation-disobedience)” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 312-313).

Yoder’s view of atonement incorporates three basic presuppositions: faith-union with Christ, nonresistance as an essential aspect of agape, and the difference between the church and the world (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 308). 1399 Hauerwas and Sider, “Introduction,” 22. Here we see Yoder’s strong emphasis on the alternative practices of the church – and the ability for the Christian to rightly practice those alternative practices here and now. This, as we’ve noted, was a significant part of his theology, and one that led to both a robust notion of discipleship, and caused him to err in significant ways, including his sexual abuse. 1400 Yoder, PoJ, 120. As described above, this is not just any suffering. It is the “price of social nonconformity” (Yoder, PoJ, 96; see chapter four).

Christ’s condescension, suffering, and death are all biblical themes that Yoder draws upon in his elaboration of imitating Christ in his cross. Unlike Bavinck however, Yoder does not draw upon joy as an important aspect of the imitation of Christ.

Yoder mentions “joy” twice in *The Politics of Jesus*, both within scriptural citations. These scriptural texts are used to both root the imitation of Christ within scripture and to elaborate on the constitution of the proper imitation of Christ. Yoder cites 1 Peter 4:13 twice, “you share in Christ’s sufferings, and that is a cause for joy.” For Yoder, joy is closely, and necessarily, related to the suffering of the disciple. Joy is found in sharing in Christ’s sufferings. The way in which Yoder appeals to joy undergirds the claim that for Yoder the imitation of Christ is fully understood in the imitation of the sufferings of Jesus. Again, we are brought back to Yoder’s central claim: Jesus’ followers are only to imitate him in his cross.

Christology plays a significant role in mitigating what can, and should, be imitated in the life of Christ. Bavinck’s stress on the work of Christ in justification and the benefits that this grants to the believer lead him to stress the inimitable aspects of Jesus’ work, while still affirming the way in which the believer imitates Christ in his suffering. Yoder’s stress on Christ’s death as a political punishment by the Powers of the day leads him to stress the believer’s imitation of Christ in his suffering and death. In these respective emphases regarding imitating and suffering, we are again drawn back to the focal image for both theologians. Understanding the law as the focal image, Bavinck stresses suffering alongside other virtues of Christ; understanding the cross as the focal image, Yoder singularly stresses the suffering of the way of the cross as the means by which the believer imitates Christ. Although he does not appeal

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1403 Unlike Bavinck, Yoder does not spend time exploring the relationship between the other joys of life, like the beauty of creation, and the imitation of Christ.
to the language of “virtue,” the virtues that Yoder affirms as a part of the imitation of Christ are more limited. They are what Bavinck classifies as passive virtues, an aspect of Bavinck’s understanding of imitating Christ as well, joined together with Christ’s active virtues.

*The Church and the World*

Both Bavinck and Yoder assert the transformative power of the gospel in society. The imitation of Christ is not merely a private, personal ethic. For both, it is a personal and social ethic that lays claim on all aspects of the life of the believer. Even so, the two differ on the question of the relationship between the church and the world, especially on the question: is the imitation of Christ a political act? Yoder asserts that it is. Christ is a model of political action; his kingdom is a political kingdom. Following Christ’s example, then, is a political act. Bavinck, while affirming the transformative nature of the imitation of Christ in society, does not understand Christ in this way. For him, the words and actions of Christ are primarily “religious-moral,” not explicitly political.\(^{1404}\)

The words of Christ, Bavinck argues, are *primarily* religious-moral in nature. But from this we should not assume that they lack any ethical and cultural import. Matthew Kaemingk helpfully describes the importance of cultural engagement in the theology of Bavinck:

Herman Bavinck’s trinitarian theology of cultural engagement is marked, not surprisingly, by three significant aspects: a traditional neo-Calvinist passion for the exploration, development, and enjoyment of God’s creation; a nuanced commitment to the imitation of Christ in daily life; and a generous understanding of the Holy Spirit’s pervasive work of common grace in culture.\(^{1405}\)

In this description, Kaemingk highlights that the imitation of Christ is connected to daily life, to cultural and ethical engagement in the world. The primacy of the religious-moral nature of Christ’s example does not negate other implications that flow from the imitation of Christ.

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\(^{1404}\) Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133-134.

In Bavinck’s hermeneutically sophisticated reflections on the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount in his later essays on the imitation of Christ, we find his deep sensitivity to cultural context. One’s context necessarily influences the way one imitates Christ. With these reflections, Bavinck is not advocating for a relativistic approach to imitating Christ. Rather, he is asserting that the application of the enduring norms of the imitation of Christ are contextually sensitive. The Christian has the freedom to apply the virtues and principles that Christ teaches in the Sermon on the Mount and concretely illustrates in his life. Bavinck makes contextual freedom of the Christian and norms guiding that freedom clear: “While the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same, circumstances may modify the application.”

Thus, the church’s relationship to culture may – and has – changed. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasizes “passive virtues:” truth, righteousness, holiness, purity, modesty, temperance, prayer, vigil, fasting, faith, love, longsuffering, generosity, hospitality, compassion, lowliness, meekness, and patience. These are the posture of the early church. Bavinck’s lengthy reflections on this period helpfully illustrate the context and posture of the church:

Believers are urged to make “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings, for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.” (I Tim. 2:2) Another and higher ideal is nowhere set before them; nowhere do we find a positive instruction to stand up for their freedom, to insist upon their rights, to improve their lot in life, to consider possible positions of influence for good in state and society. From this attitude to the world which the first century had to adopt, it is clear that the ethic of the New Testament was written from the vantage point of an oppressed and persecuted body of believers. The New Testament takes the side of the socially and politically dispossessed, the oppressed and persecuted, the helpless and the destitute. This position was all the more understandable when we recall that the early Christians lived with the expectation that Jesus was returning shortly, that the present generation would be the last (I Thess. 4:15; I Cor. 15:51). Thus the time was short, it was the last hour (I Cor. 7:29; I John 2:8; Rev.

1406 As we have noted in chapter three, the context while Bavinck wrote his later essays on the imitation of Christ had shifted significantly from his early essays. His audience was grappling with new questions, as a result of the 1892 church union, the Great War, and greater social influence and visibility.

1407 Bavinck, Imitation II, 438.

1408 Bavinck, Imitation II, 420.
1:3) and Christians were called to possess things as those who had no possessions (I Cor. 7:29-31), to train themselves in godliness (I Tim. 4:7), and to be prudent and watchful, persevering in prayer and fasting until the imminent return of the Lord (I Thess. 5:6; I Peter 4:7; Col. 4:2). Godliness must be supplemented with brotherly affection and brotherly affection with love to all (II Peter 1:17). By exercising these virtues the Christian church, in the first and second centuries, powerfully influenced the world, overcoming it by the cross, even as God, by the cross, had triumphed over the principalities and powers (Col. 2:15). 1409

This passive posture of the church in a minority position in society, however, exerted a tremendous effect on society. Through their faithful exercise of the passive virtues to which they were called, the church influenced the world in a remarkable way.

On account of the influence of the church on the world, the church’s posture had to change. The church had to adapt a new posture in the world, for “the exercise of negative and passive virtues was no longer sufficient to sustain [the church] in its new task of reforming and renewing the world in accord with Christian principles.” 1410 Alongside the passive virtues that were exemplified by the early church, active virtues must be undertaken. But, Bavinck is clear that this was not a negation of passive virtues that had typified the posture of the early church; instead, active or positive virtues were taken up alongside passive virtues. But even this new posture, emphasizing active virtues was not wholly separated from the early church’s posture. Bavinck argues that that these positive virtues, or active virtues, were not entirely absent from the early Christian focus. They were “latent in the central facts of the Christian gospel.” 1411 The incarnation, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ point to the world-changing power, the active virtues, of the Christ’s life and work.

The posture of the early church that Bavinck articulates sounds remarkably like an Anabaptist understanding of the posture of the church in society: a minority group, emphasizing

1409 Bavinck, Imitation II, 423-424.
1410 Bavinck, Imitation II, 424.
1411 Bavinck, Imitation II, 424.
passive virtues that can, and do, exert and influence in society. Bavinck then emphasizes a different posture in a different time and cultural context. Both postures, he asserts, are proper, contextually sensitive, faithful applications of the imitation of Christ. Both imitate the virtues of Christ, following the law. Thus, for Bavinck, the contextual question is not one of passive or active virtues, to the neglect of the other. The question is one of emphasis: in one’s context, ought the passive or active virtues be more emphasized?

Bavinck’s contextually sensitive understanding of the relationship between the church and society – one that changes, as contexts change – is rooted in his understanding of the church’s dominant posture as neither “world-renunciation” or “world-domination.” Rather, using one of the key themes in his theology, grace restores nature, he asserts that Christianity “never opposes nature and culture in themselves but only their degeneration.” Christians must, then, respect culture – even “gladly and thankfully accept” much of culture – combatting only the decays that are present in the world on account of sin. The church is called to be a “reforming and renewing presence in the world rather than a revolutionary one. It must conquer by means of spiritual and moral power.” Imitating Christ, living out the virtues of Christ in one’s specific context, requires both passive and active virtues, alongside a wise and perceptive understanding of culture. The church is always a transformative agent in the world, but this transformation flows from it’s primary, spiritual power. Christians are therefore charged to be actively engaged in the world, opposed to sin.

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1412 Bavinck, Imitation II, 428.
1413 Bavinck, Imitation II, 430.
1414 Bavinck, Imitation II, 432.
1415 Bavinck, Imitation II, 437.
1416 Bavinck’s robust understanding of the doctrine of common grace allowed him to affirm that God allows remnants of his likeness and image after the fall and continues to preserve and uphold all of his creation, dampening some of the effects of sin. God maintains the goodness of creation in spite of human depravity. For Bavinck, common grace is the source of all human accomplishment and virtuous deeds.
It can be, Bavinck recognizes, easier to simply disengage from the world at times, thinking only of the Christian community and not attending to the transformative work that the gospel can assert in the world. Bavinck understands this draw towards seclusion, noting that it is “much easier to reject all culture than it is to walk in all these areas as a Child of God and to imitate Christ,” but he does not affirm such actions. He writes: “Christ came not to do away

1417 In “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” Bavinck again repeats his critique of those drawn towards a disengaged stance with the world. He writes that pietism is “attractive to many Christians today.” While he affirms the good that has come from this tradition, their good work, “protest against the worldliness and corruption of the church,” “holy passion for the honor of God,” and the way that they “excelled in many Christian virtues,” he nevertheless argues that, on account of their withdrawal, there is something “lacking in their Christianity.” He argues that “one misses the genuine catholicity of the Christian faith in them” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 246). By this, he is referring to the understanding of catholicity as a faith that “embraces the whole of human experience” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 221). This posture can be seen in many different traditions: “Whether withdrawing from the world in Pietist fashion or attacking it and seeking to conquer it by force in Methodist fashion, what is missing here is reformation in the genuine, true, full sense of the word. Instead, individuals are rescued and snatched out of the world – the world that lies in wickedness – there is never a to methodic, organic reformation of the whole cosmos, of nation and country . . . the current of life itself is not redirected. The conflict is characterized by a struggle against individual sins while the root of all sins is often left untouched. The unbelieving results of science are rejected, but there is no inner reformation of the sciences on the basis of a different principle. Public life is ignored and rejected – often as intrinsically ‘worldly’ – while no effort is made to reform it according to the demands of God's Word. Satisfied with the ability to worship God in their own houses of worship, or to engage in evangelism, many left nation, state and society, art and science to their own devices. Many withdrew completely from life, literally separated themselves from everything, and, in some cases, what was even worse, shipped off to America, abandoning the Fatherland as lost to unbelief. It needs to be rioted that while this orientation has much about it that is Christian, it is missing the full truth of Christianity. It is a denial of the truth that God loves the world. It is dedicated to conflict with and even rejection of the world but not to ‘the victory that overcomes it’ in faith” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 246-247). For Bavinck, there are even worse offenders to the catholicity of the church, the Anabaptists who “repudiated the entire world, state and society, art and science, theology and church, and conceived of Christianity as a radically new creation, descending from heaven just as Christ took his human nature from heaven” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 246). In typical fashion for Bavinck, he again reaffirms the good that comes from each of these traditions: “Without a doubt, there is a glorious truth to be found in Pietism and all the religious movements akin to it. Jesus himself indeed calls us to the one thing that is necessary, namely, that we seek the kingdom of heaven above all and set aside concerns about everything else because our heavenly Father knows what we need. The life of communion with God has its own content and is not exhausted in our moral life or in the exercise of our earthly vocation” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 248), but he maintains strong criticisms for those who tend toward withdrawal for “The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in the world be subservient to it. It is exclusivistic and refuses to accept an independent or neutral kingdom alongside of it. Undoubtedly it would be much easier to leave this entire age to its own devices and to seek our strength in quietness. But such a restful peace is not permitted us here. Because every creature of God is good and not to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because everything can be sanctified by the Word of God and prayer, rejection of any one of His creatures would be ingratitude to God, a denial of His gifts. Our conflict is not with anything creaturely but against sin alone. No matter how complicated the relationships may be within which we as Christ-confessors find ourselves in our age, no matter how serious and difficult, perhaps even insoluble, the problems may seem in the areas of society, politics, and above all, in science, it would testify to unbelief and powerlessness for us to withdraw proudly from the fray and under the guise of Christianity to dismiss the whole of our age's culture as demonic” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 248-249).
with the world and the various spheres of life but to restore and preserve them.” Bavinck has theological justification to engage in broader society: God’s initial act of creation and Christ’s work of redemption both propels us into the world and restores and redeems our cultural activity. The concept of restoration is thus key to understanding this important component of Bavinck’s thought. He argues that

\[\ldots\text{ in itself the Kingdom of God is not hostile toward [earthly] goods. Rather, the Kingdom of God is independent from all of those externalities; it exists above them, enlists them as its instrument, and in so doing returns to them their original purpose. For this reason Jesus came with the demand: seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all the rest is then not vain, unprofitable, and sinful, but will be added to you; added, for one who possesses the righteousness of the Kingdom of God will certainly inherit the earth.}\]

The kingdom of God both transcends and transforms human culture and society. Thus, imitation, while primarily spiritual, necessarily asserts an influence on the world.

For Bavinck, the relationship between the kingdom of God and its transforming effects in society may be best summed up by another common theme in his work, the dual metaphors of “pearl” and “leaven,” from Matthew 13. The gospel is both pearl and leaven. To understand Bavinck on this point, we must note the priority that he places on the gospel as pearl, the heavenly, spiritual reality of the kingdom of God and the righteousness of Christ. He writes:

\[\text{Even if Christianity had resulted in nothing more than this spiritual and holy community, even if it had not brought about any modification in earthly relationships \ldots it would still be and remain something of everlasting worth. \ldots it is a treasure in itself, a pearl of great value, even if it might not be a leaven.}\]

1420 Bavinck, Philosophy of Revelation, 266-267. He writes: “Certainly Christianity is in the first place a religion, but not merely a religion. It is an entirely new life that can penetrate and enliven every life sphere and life form. Thus Christianity is not coextensive with the church. It is far too rich to allow itself to be pressed within its walls. Indeed, it would not be the true religion if it had no influence on the richly fulsome human life” (Bavinck, “The Kingdom of God, the Highest Good,” 157-158).
1422 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 141, emphasis added.
The people of God are given a promise of eternal life (pearl), but are also given promises for life in our world today (leaven). Godliness, that is, keeping the commandments of God, does not only have eternal rewards. It bears fruit in society, exerting the influence of the gospel as a leavening agent throughout the world. The gospel has a tangible and important impact in our world today, bearing great fruit in society. The gospel, as a leaven, has culture-making, culture-swaying, and culture-transforming power. The imitation of Christ is transformative in society.

In an important way, Bavinck’s biography is illustrative of how he viewed the role of the state and the Christian’s participation in the state. Bavinck himself was a politician and a statesman. While Bavinck is most well-known for his work as a scholar, in the later years of his life he was also heavily involved in politics. He was elected to the First Chamber of the Dutch Parliament in 1911, and won a second term to this office in 1917.\(^{1423}\) Undeniably, then, Bavinck affirmed the notion that a Christian could hold government office; active engagement in politics is one of the means by which a Christian can engage in the transformation of society. The Christian is called to law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ in every sphere. The theological emphases that we have highlighted in Bavinck’s thought – grace restoring nature, the gospel as pearl and leaven, the imitation of Christ as law-patterned imitation of Christ’s virtues - allowed him, without downplaying the noetic effects of the fall,\(^{1424}\) to affirm Christian engagement in the broader society, including the state. He viewed the state as fulfilling a “noble

\(^{1423}\) This part of Bavinck’s career has remained relatively unexplored in early biographies of Bavinck; however, George Harinck and John Bolt have recently given more sustained attention to various aspects of his political career. (George Harinck, "Universality and dualism: Herman Bavinck and the debate on whether to civilize the Dutch East Indies through missions or education," *Calvin Theological Journal* 48, no. 2 (November 2013): 217-218; John Bolt, *Bavinck on the Christian Life: Following Jesus in Faithful Service* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

\(^{1424}\) Bavinck’s robust understanding of the doctrine of common grace allowed him to affirm that God allows remnants of his likeness and image after the fall and continues to preserve and uphold all of his creation, dampening some of the effects of sin. God maintains the goodness of creation in spite of human depravity. For Bavinck, common grace is the source of all human accomplishment and virtuous deeds.
and elevated task,” one that Christians can – and should – engage in. Bavinck maintains that Christians can and should have a positive influence in society, through work in the government and as Christians more broadly embody the leavening aspects of the gospel in the world. Opposed only to sin, not aspects of culture in and of themselves, Christians are called to imitate Christ in every sphere of life.

The believer’s posture in society is then one of imitating Christ. Bavinck’s clear assertion of the primacy of the religious-moral nature of Christ’s example does not mean that the teachings of Christ and the lives of believers who are imitating Christ have no influence on social relationships. Although Christ’s teaching was religious-moral in nature, it does have an influence in the world. The gospel preaches “a principle so deep and rich and extraordinarily powerful that it was bound to exert a reforming influence on all earthly circumstances.” Accepting the gospel as a religious-moral teaching, without first making it a social system, allows the “permeating power” of the gospel to be unleashed in the world. The imitation of Christ is not primarily political; Christ’s example does not contain an explicit social agenda. But, from the religious-moral example of Christ flows a powerful, leavening power in the society.

While Bavinck stresses the religious-moral nature of Christ’s teaching, Yoder understands Jesus’ life and death to be political. This is pointedly seen in Jesus’ cross, which Christians are charged to imitate. Thus, the practices of the church are also political. In them, the church proclaims the concrete, socio-political implications of their faith in Christ; the church is

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1425 Bavinck, “Ethics and Politics,” 227, 277. The state is to uphold justice, which is not, for Bavinck, an arbitrary definition or something to be defined in abstraction, but based on the normative standard of the will of God.
1426 For an example from Bavinck’s career, see John Bolt’s explanation of Bavinck’s address to the 1891 Christian Social Congress in Amsterdam, entitled “General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today.” Bolt highlights the fact that Bavinck argued that society was “bound to the laws that God himself has firmly established in Creation and His Word.” Bolt, Bavinck on the Christian Life, 67-8.
1427 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 140.
1428 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 140.
guided by the image of Christ, the suffering servant. Yoder clearly articulates the practices of the church that flow from imitating Christ in his cross. We have already explored the connection between these practices – revolutionary subordination, binding and loosing, the Eucharist, and baptism – and the imitation of Christ. Each of these practices, in Yoder’s words, “spell out in different ways the fundamental decision of Jesus to accept the conditions of suffering servanthood as the shape of his messiahship.”1429 The practices of the church are to be lived in a way that testifies to, and is an embodied witness of, the way of Jesus where nonviolence replaces violence and enemy love replaces revenge.

By enacting these practices in a collective – communal and personal – imitation of Christ, the Christian community is visibly different from the world. They are a “city on a hill” as they follow Christ, modeling Jesus’ new way of living to a watching world.1430 Living out the practices of the church is the way the church proclaims to the world the way of Christ. By faithfully following the example of Christ, the church is a social and political entity.1431

The church is a political agent in its witness to broader society. Yoder writes that “[the church’s] witness, our service of love, our difference from the world and our sacrifice for the world would reveal in far greater measure whose disciples we are.”1432 Here, he demonstrates his core conviction, again pointing to the cross: as disciples of Christ, following the way of the cross, the church will look and act differently. But this is a socio-political witness to the new way of Christ, one that can and does influence the watching world. The church actively witnesses to the world. Yoder’s emphasis on the church as a minority movement witnessing to the watching world recurs throughout his work. In his lecture “Revolution and Gospel,” Yoder argues that

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1429 Yoder, *Body Politics*, 77.
1432 Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, 46.
the most urgent and ultimately the most effective task for the church in our day with its missionary responsibility in a world of rapid social change is to be the church, to discover – within the ranks of those who have let themselves be counted as the disciples of a suffering servant – that reality of a new creation, of the constraining love of Christ by virtue of which “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”

In another lecture, again referencing Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 5:17, Yoder writes:

There is no greater contribution that can be made by the tiny people of God in the revolution of our age than to be that people, both separate from the world and identified with its needs, both the soul of society (without which it cannot live) and its conscience (with which it cannot be at peace). We can look to the future to dream of a time when “The home of God is among mortals” only because in the congregation of believers it is already true.

The church, imitating Christ, is necessarily involved in – and desiring transformation in – the world, albeit in an unexpected way. As a witness, the church is a political entity. As Mouw explains, the “Christian must ‘speak to authorities.’” In their witness to the way of Jesus, the church does just this. Jesus gives the community he inaugurates a new way to live in the world, “a new way to deal with a corrupt society – by building a new order, not smashing the old.”

The church is, then, called to be a distinct society; a public, political witness to Christ in the world. Yoder argues that the Bible testifies to a church that is missional and subversive, a minority movement of Christians founded on the historical objectivity of the life, suffering, and death of Christ and the imitation of Christ. The subversive aspect of the New Testament church is important in his understanding of how the communal life of the church is ethics. The body of Christ, a new humanity in Christ, does not destroy the old communities of the world, rather it exists in a new way, a subversive way. Yoder writes: “The transcendence of the new consists not in escaping the realm where the old order rules, but in its subverting and

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1433 Yoder, “Revolution and Gospel,” 158, emphasis original.
1434 Yoder, “The Meaning of Our Revolutionary Age,” 167, emphasis original.
1435 Mouw, Politics and the Biblical Drama, 102-103.
1437 John Howard Yoder, To Hear the Word (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 87-88.
transforming that realm. It does that by virtue of its being an alternative story.\textsuperscript{1438} The church is to cultivate an alternative consciousness and live out an alternative narrative;\textsuperscript{1439} it is a visible, confessing community. Its celebration is visible. Its confession is public. Its lifestyle differs from that of its neighbors and its neighbors know it. This voluntary minority body is an organ of the work of God in history.\textsuperscript{1440}

In its imitation of Christ, the church marks itself off from the rest of society.\textsuperscript{1441}

Yoder’s insistence on the set apart nature of the church is predicated upon his understanding of the world: it is fallen and disobedient, as seen in the state, economics, and all of human culture. The church lives in tension with the world, for the church proclaims the lordship of Christ.\textsuperscript{1442} The posture of the church then is distinct and dissenting, but in its dissent the church can alert the world to alternative ways of living and acting, perhaps even ways that seem unrealistic in the present – but with future, even non-eschatological future, import.\textsuperscript{1443} A distinct, separate society, however, is not necessary a withdrawn society, or an impotent society, a

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  \item Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom, 94-95.
  \item Schriven, The Transformation of Culture, 152. One of the ways in which this is perhaps most misunderstood is in Yoder’s understanding participation in the state. Though they do not act as full participants in the state, Christians still witness to the state. For example, Yoder argues that “a minority may do for a society what the conscience does for an individual. Insightful minorities may tell people that their solutions are counterproductive, even when no one has ready the outlines of a better solution. The minority community has other grounds to sustain a wholesome discomfort and thereby keeps the door open for solutions not yet found” (Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom, 99). See also Yoder, “But Do We See Jesus,” 57-75.
  \item Yoder continues this line of argument: Christ is the head of the church and lord over the Powers; the rule of Christ extends beyond the corporate life of believers (Yoder, To Hear the Word, 135). Christ’s lordship over the entire cosmos necessitates that the Bible not only has normative claims over the life of the body of Christ, but has culture-critiquing powers (Yoder, To Hear the Word, 133). Following Christ is not simply a matter of imitating Christ’s actions; it involves being socially present in the world in the same manner that Jesus was – a necessarily political call, including the posture of nonviolence (Jesus, as the ethical norm for Christians, exemplifies nonviolence. However, Yoder argues that the state relies on violent force to protect justice and order. These two ways of being in the world can not fully come together, as they hold up opposing values as ideals; because the state relies on violence, the Christian cannot participate fully in the life of the state).
  \item Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom, 98. Yoder writes: A minority may do for a society what the conscience does for an individual. Insightful minorities may tell people that their solutions are counterproductive, even when no one has ready the outlines of a better solution. The minority community has other grounds to sustain a wholesome discomfort and thereby keeps the door open for solutions not yet found” (Yoder, The Priestly Kingdom, 99).
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common charge against Yoder. On the contrary, the posture of imitating Christ that Yoder advances is one that does actively seek the good of the place that Christians dwell, through the work of “creative minorities in a society they don’t control.” The church as an alternative society, witnessing to the larger community, can and does – as in the case of Joseph, Daniel, and Mordecai – work towards the good of their cities and communities. Following the words of Jeremiah, they “seek the welfare of the city.” The witness that Yoder preaches is one that is actively involved in “temporal” activities. God’s work of restoration is not simply restricted to the church; as such, Christians are not called to merely attend to the “spiritual” or work within the church. In Yoder’s charge to the church to be a distinct society that actively witnesses to the world, we again see Yoder’s rejection of a nature-grace dualism that restricts the work of the church and gospel merely to the church. Christ comes, indeed, to renew and restore the whole of the cosmos. In his advocating for the distinctive practices of the church, however, we also see Yoder’s continued emphasis on the newness of the work of Christ, and the noetic effects of sin, leading to his understanding that the Christian can only look to Christ – not creation – to see what it is that he has restored. This emphasis places an important focus on the person and work of Christ, but, as we have seen, also opened troubling theological options for Yoder in his understanding of the distinctive practices of the church and sexuality.

The posture of the church, Yoder argues, is one of creative, subversive witness. In

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1444 Mouw, “Abandoning the Typology,” 8. This is not a charge Anabaptists take lightly, and one that is continued to be grappled with. See “Called to be Peacemakers,” 365 for an Anabaptist admission that the relationship between the church and the world can, within various Mennonite traditions, lead towards a decreased public witness.
1446 Yoder, “Exodus and Exile,” 306, quoting Jeremiah 29. But, as Yoder has laid out, they do so in unexpected ways, ways which do not compromise the way in which God has called them to act. As Yoder writes, “liberation in the biblical witness is not prudentially justified violence but ‘mighty Acts’ which may come through the destruction at the Red Sea – but may also come when the King is moved to be gracious to Esther, or to Daniel, or to Nehemiah.”
1447 The predilection of Anabaptist theologians to emphasize the newness of the new covenant is also discussed in Reiling and van’t Spijker, “The Covenant,” 315.
1448 In a way that, often, the Reformed tradition has not emphasized in the same manner.
advocating for this posture, Yoder rejects an understanding of the relationship between the
church and broader society that, he claims, has been prevalent in Christianity since Constantine:
a vision that fuses Christ and culture and elevates the church’s worldly status.\footnote{Yoder writes: “the alternative to idolatrous patriotism is not unpatriotic. The alternative to the fusion of Christ and culture is not Christ rejecting culture, but a more radically Christ-oriented transformation of the genuine values hidden amidst the mishmash called “culture.” The alternative to the neo-Constantinian fusion of the church and national power is not withdrawal to the ghetto, the desert, or the \textit{bruderhof}, but the discovery of the next frontier where a more honest dialogue between the community of faith and her neighbors can build a more open pattern of civility. The alternative to buying into the power game as it is being played is not opting out, but inventing a new game” (Yoder, \textit{The Priestly Kingdom}, 180).} As we have
seen, Yoder’s rejection of this vision does not necessitate a complete rejection of society. Rather,
it calls for a reorientation, a new understanding of the church as a Christ-oriented minority. The
church is an outsider in society, it witnesses to the political process, most often from the
outside.\footnote{Yoder’s theology does not completely preclude government participation. While his ways certainly place limits on Christian involvement in established political structures, one could join the political process if doing so does not compromise the ideals of discipleship (Schriven, \textit{The Transformation of Culture}, 157).} This understanding of the role of the church, however, does not make the church
impotent. Yoder strongly asserts that a minority living out its vision can indeed modify the whole
Mordecai, Christians are “creative minorities in a society they don’t control,” working for its
good.\footnote{Yoder, “Exodus and Exile,” 308.} While there are limitations to political and cultural engagement, this is not a complete
withdrawal from society. Critics claim that this fails to be an effective way of changing society,
but Yoder maintains that the true call of the disciple is obedience, not effectiveness. On the basis
of Christ’s lordship over all creation, Christians affirm a truth that is universal. Christians are to
be witnesses to the truth as they live in obedience to the way of Christ.\footnote{Yoder, “But Do We See Jesus,” 57-75.} The imitation of
Christ, thus, is not only transformative for the believing community; it is a witness to the
watching world. Imitating Christ, a model of radical political action toward the Powers of his
Yoder and Bavinck differ on the relationship between the church and society as it relates to the imitation of Christ. Both theologians affirm the desire for transformation in society through the church, the differences in question are twofold: how and what is the priority placed upon that transformation (that is, is it the primary message and goal of the church)? As Mouw writes, of the first question, it is a debate on “the degree to which, and in what sense, the internal polity of the ecclesial community could be ‘exported’ into the larger society.” For Yoder, the practices flowing from the imitation of Christ set the church apart as a distinct, minority group within society. But, imitating Christ, this community is necessarily and directly political. Bavinck, on the other hand, does not see the primary role of the imitation of Christ as a political role. This does not negate the possibility of social and political transformation within society on account of the believer’s imitation of Christ, but it understands that to flow from the primacy of the spiritual, moral nature of Christ and his example. However, Bavinck also affirms social and cultural engagement that is more direct than Yoder. As grace restores nature, so the church, following Christ, can be tasked with active, transformative virtues within the larger society. In Bavinck’s time, he understood the task of the church to be one of not just imitating Christ in his passive virtues, but imitating Christ in the task of “reforming and renewing the world in accord with Christian principles.” Thus, as we’ve seen, in his contemporary context, Bavinck emphasizes a broader array of virtues for the Christian to imitate in the life of Christ – both active and passive. Yoder emphasizes passive virtues; the church is always a minority voice, influencing culture in it’s witness.

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1456 Bavinck, Imitation II, 424.
Yoder and Bavinck’s Explicit Critiques of the Other’s Tradition

While neither Yoder nor Bavinck specifically address the other’s theology, both react to the traditions of the other. Yoder addresses the creation-based ethics of the Calvinists on multiple occasions throughout his writing. Similarly, Bavinck responds to Anabaptist theology, both in his essays on the imitation and in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Both Bavinck and Yoder raise important criticisms of the other’s tradition, further informing the differences in their respective understandings of the imitation of Christ.

Dualism and the Literal Repetition of Jesus’ Deeds: Bavinck’s Critique of Anabaptism

In his later essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck is critical of those traditions that, in their piety, only focus on the negative aspects of the Christian life. Their piety is genuine, he argues, but it is devoid of the full sense of the Christian life in its unilateral focus on suffering, sin, and misery. Including the Anabaptists in this criticism, Bavinck argues that these traditions experience “no joy in living, the beauty of the creation affords them no pleasure, and they are completely indifferent to discoveries of science, the creations of art, or the advances of technology.”\(^{1457}\) Underneath this claim, we read Bavinck’s strong insistence on the continued *good* of the created order, upheld by God through his common grace. Grace, as Bavinck often insists, *restores* nature; the Christian, therefore, can explore the joy-filled aspects of the created order. Bavinck furthers his critique of the Anabaptist’s relationship to nature in his *Reformed Dogmatics* when he writes:

> Anabaptism sacrifices nature to grace. Adam was “of the earth earthly” (1 Cor. 15:47); creation and all of nature is of a lower order: material, physical, carnal, impure. Christ, however, brings with him from heaven another, higher human nature. In regeneration he infuses a new substance into human beings and thereby makes them into different people who are no longer allowed to maintain any fellowship with unbelievers, the world, the state, and so forth.\(^{1458}\)

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\(^{1457}\) Bavinck, Imitation II, 406.

\(^{1458}\) Bavinck, *RD* 1, 184.
Again we see Bavinck’s driving concern: the Anabaptist tradition does not properly understand the relationship between grace and nature, producing a dualism that devalues the created order on account of Christ’s redemption.1459 We can conclude then, for Bavinck, the Anabaptist tradition, including the understanding of imitating Christ found within this tradition, is too focused on suffering and, to its detriment, fails to look to God’s created intent in nature; it only looks to Christ, creating a duality between the two.

Bavinck also directly addresses the relationship between the church and the world in the Anabaptist tradition, again articulating his critiques. Unlike Bavinck’s understanding of the person and mission of Christ, one that is religious-moral in nature, Anabaptists seek social and political change. Bavinck argues that the transformation that Jesus brought, and later the church brought, in the world was “purely ethical and spiritual.”1460 Anabaptism, on the other hand, “was radical;” “it sought not only religious-ethical but also social and political reformation.”1461 This is an incorrect understanding of the person, mission, and teaching of Jesus, which has a “religious-moral nature,” not a political agenda.1462 Thus we can contend that for Bavinck, the Anabaptist tradition, including its understanding of imitation of Christ, mistakenly teaches and emphasizes the political nature of Jesus’ claims.

A final concern that Bavinck raises regarding the Anabaptist tradition is also seen repeatedly in his criticisms of historic forms of imitating Christ that attempt to literally, and externally, copy the actions of Christ, such as the monk and martyr. This is not the proper

1459 Bavinck repeats this point in “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church” where he again describes the Anabaptists as those who “repudiated the entire world, state and society, art and science, theology and church, and conceived of Christianity as a radically new creation, descending from heaven just as Christ took his human nature from heaven” (Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 246).
1460 Bavinck, Imitation II, 427.
1461 Bavinck, RD 3, 208.
1462 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 132.
imitation of Christ. Rather than focusing on external acts, Bavinck argues that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus “emphasizes the disposition of the heart, inner conformity with the law, and internal, spiritual righteousness when he explains each commandment.” Understood this way, the greatest violation of the proper imitation of Christ is to copy the life and teachings of Jesus in a literalistic manner that “quickly degenerates into caricature.” Of the traditions that Bavinck claims violate the imitation of Christ in this way, he names the Anabaptists. Through this, we can conclude that an imitation ethic based on imitating the sufferings of Christ is, in Bavinck’s thought, a continuation of a pattern of literal mimicry. Instead, “the true following of Christ therefore does not consist in copying him, in replicating him, in imitating his life and teaching but is found in the inner conversion of the heart, which gives a true desire and choice to walk according to all, not just some, of God’s commandments in spirit and truth.” Focusing wholly on Jesus’ suffering does not satisfy this definition.

An Ethic for all, or an Ethic for Christians: Yoder’s Critique of the Reformed Tradition

Yoder likewise addresses the Reformed tradition of ethics, specifically ethics that are based in creation and law, a number of times throughout his writing. Here, he references an ethic based only on the law, not Bavinck’s understanding of an ethic based on the law and the imitation of Christ, but his specific critiques of law based ethics are still instructive for understanding the way Yoder views the Reformed tradition.

Yoder is clear in his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount as a fulfillment of, not a radical break from, Old Testament law. The Sermon on the Mount does not set aside the Old Testament law, but rather “quite literally fill[s] full” the Ten Commandments.

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1463 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133; emphasis original.
1464 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133.
1465 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 133.
1466 Yoder, Original Revolution, 44.
The relationship between the two remains, and is significant, but one must not look to understand the Christian life in the Ten Commandments. An understanding of the Christian life, and Christian obedience, must be found in Jesus. It must be, Yoder argues:

rooted in the character of God as manifested in the life of Jesus. If we are to affirm that God became flesh in him alone and was known to us as he could not be known through the words of God’s prophets, then this must mean that the life of Jesus is a revelation of true humanity — as the Ten Commandments could not be — and a revelation of what it means to do God’s will.\textsuperscript{1467}

The Ten Commandments, then, should not be the starting point for Christian ethics. Christian ethics begins by looking at God made flesh, Jesus Christ. Any other starting point distorts the true picture of what it means to do God’s will.\textsuperscript{1468} Yoder’s rejection of the Ten Commandments as the starting point for Christian ethics is a continued affirmation of the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament commands. Again highlighting his emphasis on the newness of Christ and his teaching that fulfills Old Testament instruction, Yoder emphasizes that Christians must look to Christ, not creation as the way in which they discern God’s will.\textsuperscript{1469} The New Testament rejection of violence is “no surprise, no distortion, no dilution, no sell-out, but a fulfillment as Jesus called it and also an extrapolation of what Judaism had been doing.”\textsuperscript{1470} Ethics grounded in law, do not take seriously enough the ways in which Jesus fulfills the Old Testament law.

\textsuperscript{1467} Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 39.
\textsuperscript{1468} This does not mean that Yoder understood the Ten Commandments as strict legalism. Yoder affirmed the special way that the Ten Commandments were given to Israel, for their life together. The Ten Commandments, as John Nugent describes, were much more than legal parameters. They were a “way of life that God graciously entrusted to the Israelites for their own benefit.” (John C. Nugent, The Politics of Yahweh, 47). Yoder writes, “The Decalogue's message is the gracious provision of a life form of grateful response, motivated by neither positive nor negative reinforcement.” (Yoder, “Exodus 20:13 – ‘Thou shalt not kill,’” Interpretation (October 1, 1980), 395). As Branson Parler points out, he does have concerns about ethics that draw upon creation as being “inherently conservative, undergirding and legitimating the status quo,” as in the case of apartheid (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 67).
\textsuperscript{1469} This claim raises the important question that we have grappled with throughout this dissertation: if we only look to Christ, what is the means by which one can discern what in Christ one ought to imitate? Here, Bavinck provides a concrete response: we must look to the law.
\textsuperscript{1470} Yoder, “Exodus 20:13,” 398.
Yoder’s strong critique of law-based ethics parallels his critique of ethics based on the creation order, both of which are prominent within neo-Calvinist ethics. For the neo-Calvinist, the two are clearly tied together; the Ten Commandments “fit life’s design,” as Lewis Smedes argues.\(^{1471}\) For Yoder, however, the orders of creation are not a helpful starting point for Christian ethics. Ethics grounded in the life of Jesus cannot be guided by the “orders of creation.”\(^{1472}\) Yoder expands this claim in “Helpful and Deceptive Dualisms,” where he argues that the practices of Christians are only made possible by the Spirit, a stance which differs from other traditions starting point for ethics. Yoder explains:

This is important especially in the light of Lutheran, Reformed, and Enlightenment predilections for finding better guidance for ethics in the orders of creation. Those positions argue that social ethics should be drawn from creation more than from redemption, guided by reason more than by revelation, rooted in the work of the Father more than that of the Son. In all of the practices here described, the apostolic communities did it the other way 'round. All of these practices represent the realm of redemption. That does not make them less public. It makes them more realistic about sin and more hopeful about reconciliation than are those approaches which trust the reason/nature/creation complex to derive our knowledge of what should be from our observing what is.\(^{1473}\)

Again, we are drawn back to Mouw and Yoder’s debates. Both the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions take the noetic effects of the fall seriously, but here we observe Yoder’s insistence on the radical nature of these effects. While neo-Calvinists affirm the role of common grace in upholding the created order, allowing one to continue to discern God’s intended design in the created world, Yoder emphasizes the crushing effects of the fall. Realism about the nature and effects of sin necessitate looking to Jesus for the way of life in God, Yoder argues.\(^{1474}\) This does not negate the reality that Yoder does have a

\(^{1472}\) Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 40.
\(^{1474}\) Mouw, “The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship,” 20
theology of creation. Branson Parler has convincingly argued that Yoder does. There is a clear connection between Christ and creation – and the restoration of creation – in Yoder’s thought. But alongside this clear connection, Yoder argues a strong attention to the fallenness of the created order. Thus, Christian ethics can not be based on creation order.

Yoder extends his argument regarding creation order by asserting that Christian ethics go beyond what is required in creation order. Creation order ethics are “an inadequate moral guide because its standards are wrong.” Following Jesus asks more of Christians than what is ascertained through common sense and creation order; “if our life is a reflection of the working of God, it must be different from what is generally possible. Thus, it will also be different from what generally seems useful.” Creation order ethics are an ethical system that can be understood by, and demanded of, all people, not just Christians. It is, thus, not a “minority logic,” the type of logic that must characterize the Christian response. 

Christian ethics must follow the logic of Jesus, a logic which does not make sense to the world. Ethics grounded in creation order appeal to reason and common sense, a majority logic that does not take seriously enough the radical call of Jesus. The ethics of Jesus must bear witness to the profoundly new, radical nature of Jesus’ life and teaching, a witness which, for Yoder, goes beyond creation ethics.

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1477 Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41; see also Yoder, “The Otherness of the Church.”
1478 In “Creational Politics,” Mouw responds briefly to this Anabaptist challenge, recognizing the proclivity of the Reformed tradition to emphasize continuity and creation, and calling Reformed Christians to take this charge seriously: “it is certainly plausible to posit some significant continuities between God’s purposes in Eden and Sinai and God’s purposes in Jesus’ ministry. But the differences are, in the final analysis, very striking – just as the earliest hints of dawn are very different from the full brightness of noonday. . . . We Reformed Christians are much fonder of continuities and fulfillments than we are of disruptions and novelties. But for all that, I am also convinced that the newness of Jesus’ witness needs to be stressed more energetically in Calvinist ethics. While Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of the potentials and yearnings of the older patterns of righteousness, he also radically changes those previous understandings of God’s will for human beings. . . . [I]f there is a seeming tension between older political advice and the kind of political guidance we receive from Jesus . . . then the way of wisdom is to follow what we
Both Bavinck and Yoder issue strong critiques of the other’s tradition. Bavinck charges the Anabaptist tradition with an incomplete understanding of the relationship between nature and grace, severing the bond between the two. He also claims that the tradition misunderstands the primary nature of Jesus’ teaching, which was spiritual. Instead, the Anabaptists assign Jesus a primarily political agenda. Finally, Bavinck claims that the Anabaptist focus on the suffering of Jesus leads to an ethic based on mimicry, foregoing the true sense of the imitation of Christ: following Jesus as he embodies the law. Yoder has similarly strong criticisms. Creation-based ethics do not take seriously enough the way in which Jesus fulfills the Old Testament law, focusing too strongly on the continuity between the two. Creation order ethics also do not take seriously enough the distortion of creation in the fall. Finally, Yoder charges creation order ethics with not taking seriously enough the radical call of imitation of Christ. The ethics of Jesus cannot be something understood by those who do not follow Jesus; creation-order ethics rely too strongly on majority logic, which is not the logic of Jesus. But while the critiques of Yoder and Bavinck are grounded in their informed, and generally fair, understandings of the other’s tradition, we can also look back to the words of both Yoder and Bavinck to respond to the other’s critique; both Bavinck and Yoder’s works contain nuanced articulations of the relationship between nature and grace, the role of Jesus, and other theological concerns that were raised. The critiques that Bavinck and Yoder raise again betray the received wisdom among the two traditions, offering polarity and critique. But, looking to the words of Bavinck and Yoder, we can see ways that the legitimate, enduring differences between the two traditions are not as far apart as they initially appear.
Bavinck critiques the Anabaptist tradition for their misunderstanding of the relationship between grace and nature, arguing that “Anabaptism sacrifices nature to grace.” While Bavinck’s assessment of the differing nature of the understanding of nature and grace between Reformed and Anabaptist traditions is undeniably correct, looking to Yoder highlights the ways that Anabaptist theology need not be characterized as a wholly other view of nature and grace, a dualistic view between the two. Yoder presents an Anabaptist interpretation of the relationship between grace and nature, seen in his theology of the Powers, that, while differing in emphasis and postlapsarian access to the created order, still affirms a basic relationship between nature and grace of restoration. Yoder argues that Christ restores the created order; he writes that “human life . . . conformed to the image of God in Christ [is] a revelation of the way things really are. The cruciform life ‘works’ because it goes with the grain of the cosmos.” The relationship between nature and grace is one of restoration, not replacement.

We can affirm the core theological framework, the work of Christ restoring God’s original creational intent, that is shared between Bavinck and Yoder – and thus, see the ways that Yoder provides a response to Bavinck’s charge of Anabaptist theology “sacrifice[ing] nature to grace” – while still noting the ways that the accents that Yoder places in his discussion of this framework remain different than Bavinck’s. Yoder proclaims an ethic that is “doxological,” or “dictated by the knowledge that a once slaughtered Lamb is now living.” For Yoder, it is

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1479 Bavinck, *RD* 1, 184.
1480 As we have seen, Yoder argues that Christ restores the created order; he writes “human life . . . conformed to the image of God in Christ [is] a revelation of the way things really are. The cruciform life ‘works’ because it goes with the grain of the cosmos.” (Yoder, “Liberating Images of Christ,” 164). Yoder certainly proclaims an ethic that is “doxological,” or “dictated by the knowledge that a once slaughtered Lamb is now living” (John Howard Yoder, “To Serve Our God and to Rule the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 129), but that living lamb walks in step with creation. While for Yoder one cannot know the creational intent of God by simply looking to creation, one can know it by looking to Christ.
1482 Bavinck, *RD* 1, 184.
critical that Jesus’ person and message “interpenetrates with realms of politics and culture;”
again we see Yoder’s clear insistence that Jesus is not other than nature, he is bound up in the
natural. Jesus “participates in localized, datable history,” he “intervenes in the liberation from
violence and he identifies with the poor,” and he “contributes to the nuts-and-bolts reconstruction
of forgiving community.”1484 This, Yoder argues, is not always the case with “savior figures,” but
it is so with Jesus. Thus, Jesus followers are equipped not just for the eschaton, but for daily life
in the here and now. He writes that

To know that the Lamb who was slain was worthy to receive power not only enables his
disciples to face martyrdom when they must; it also encourages them to go about their
daily crafts and trades, to do their duties as parents and neighbors. . . Even before the
broken world can be made whole by the Second Coming, the witnesses to the first
coming – through the very fact that they proclaim Christ above the powers, the Son above
the angels – are enabled to go on proleptically in the redemption of creation. Only this
evangelical Christology can found a truly transformationalist approach to culture.1485

Jesus, and the imitation of Christ, is, for Yoder necessarily bound up with the natural; grace is
not other than nature, it restores nature. On this, Bavinck and Yoder agree. But, for Yoder, one
can only truly know God’s creational intent by looking to Christ. To see what has been restored,
one must look to Jesus. In his discussion of the practices and postures that believers embody in
the world, he writes, “we do not see that the world has been set straight. We still have no proof
that right is right. . . But we do see Jesus.”1486 Yoder’s vision of the Christian life is one rooted
in the eschatologically-oriented, distinctive practices of Christ. But, for Yoder, the living lamb
walks in step with creation. The question, for Yoder, is not if grace restores nature, as Bavinck
seems to draw the distinction, but when and how grace restores nature.1487

1484 Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 69-70.
1485 Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 73.
1486 Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 73, emphasis original.
1487 Bavinck, of course, is not responding to Yoder; he is responding to the Anabaptist tradition at large. As we have
seen, his critiques are not baseless. There are strains of Anabaptist thought that do contain a much stronger sense of
duality and dualism. But Yoder, as a representative of the Anabaptist tradition, has important responses to these
critiques.
Yoder articulates a unique understanding of the relationship between nature and grace. While he emphasizes doxological, eschatological nature of the Christian life in much of his writing, the theme of restoration is also present. Yoder’s tendency, as we have seen, is to stress the *newness* of Jesus’ life, ministry, and teaching – we have also seen the ways in which this tendency has been problematic in Yoder’s thought – attention to restoration is not absent.¹⁴⁸⁸ Yoder’s insistence that Christ models “authentic restored humanity” that is “with the grain of the cosmos” provides an important response to Bavinck’s charge of Anabaptist dualism between nature and grace.¹⁴⁸⁹

We can also look to Yoder’s work to address Bavinck’s critique that Anabaptist theology presents a literalistic ideal of the imitation of Christ. Again, there are stark differences between Yoder and Bavinck on the imitation of Christ, but the two, as we have seen, both reject literalistic imitation of Jesus’ actions.¹⁴⁹⁰ Yoder points to the cross of Jesus, an emphasis that Bavinck may still view as too close to literalism (indeed, he certainly would view it as a misunderstanding of the imitation of Christ), but the difference is not one of literalistic and non-literalistic views of imitating Jesus. Both Bavinck and Yoder affirm a qualified imitation ethic.¹⁴⁹¹ Differences remain, but they are not as stark as Bavinck presents them; in fact, these differences are rooted in shared affirmations.

Similarly, Yoder critiques the Reformed tradition’s law based ethic and the lack of attention to the life and words of Jesus, raising the question: what does the person and teaching

¹⁴⁸⁸ While attention to restoration is not absent in Yoder, it is not a systematically addressed topic. One must piece together many comments throughout Yoder’s corpus to arrive at an understanding of how Yoder attends to the theme of restoration. Given this, Yoder’s attention to restoration remains, at times, rather unclear.
¹⁴⁹⁰ See, for example, *PoJ* 95.
¹⁴⁹¹ A third concern of Bavinck’s was highlighted, that the Anabaptist tradition sought radical social and political change. This claim is not softened by looking to Yoder’s thought. Here, Bavinck’s articulation of Anabaptist theology captures a key difference between the two traditions.
of Jesus really matter in a law based ethic?

Again, a careful reading of Bavinck’s own words on the relationship between Christ and the law helpfully clarifies the heart of the sustained disagreement, while also situating the two traditions closer together than they appear in these critiques. In his extended discussion of the first commandment in *Reformed Ethics*, Bavinck clearly articulates the relationship between law and gospel, affirming both the continuity between the two and the weight and importance of the particular teachings of Jesus:

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

In this passage, Bavinck recognizes the difficulty that Yoder points to in a creation-based ethic; there is the potential for law and gospel to be blurred, or the teachings of Jesus to be underemphasized. He responds to these challenges by upholding the relationship between law and gospel, thus affirming Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel as, once proclaimed, a part of the

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1492 Again, Yoder is not responding directly to Bavinck. His charges, too, are not baseless. There are strains of Reformed thought that do contain focus on creation to the exclusion of a discussion of the role of Christ and his example in Christian ethics. But Bavinck, as a representative of the Reformed tradition, has important responses to these critiques.

1493 Bavinck, GE, 583. “Maar gebiedt de wet dan ook reeds de eigenaardige christelijke deugden van geloof, hoop en liefde tot God? Dit is een moeilijke vraag. Zegt men ja, dan schijnt wet en evangelie verward te worden, de wet weet toch van geen geloof enz. in eigenaardig christelijke zin, dan wordt de wet dus in het Evangelie gelegd en gezocht. Zegt men neen, dan komt men ertoe, om met de socinianen Christus te maken tot een novus legislator, die de wet niet maar heeft vervuld, maar aangevuld, vervolledigd, verdiept in nieuwe geboden eraan toegevoegd, en nieuwe deugden ingevoerd. Daarop dient geantwoord, dat de wet zeer zeker niets van Christus, niets van het zaligmakend geloof enz. weet, maar zodra het Evangelie komt met de prediking: geloof in Jezus etc., dan komt dat geloof als eis tot ons en is voor ons verplichtend, op grond der wet. Tot geloven en alwat God beveelen en eisen moge later, zijn we krachtens de wet verplicht. De wet subsumeert als het ware dat geloof onder zich, geeft er een ons allen bindend, verplichtend karakter aan. Het is toch een bevel van die God, die ook Auteur is der wet.”
law. Bavinck affirms both the enduring normativity of the law in Christian morality and the unique ways in which Jesus fulfills the law. Alongside his recognition of the particularity and newness of Christ, Bavinck continues to stress continuity between Christ and the law. While Yoder would still press Bavinck’s notion of the distinctive nature of Christ’s teaching and example, Bavinck’s words provide an important response to his characterization of the Reformed inattention to the ways in which Jesus fulfills the Old Testament and speaks to the “logic of Jesus.” Bavinck and Yoder share the affirmation that Jesus fulfills the law; there are, as Bavinck writes, “uniquely Christian virtues” that Jesus introduces. While differences between the two remain, they are not as stark as Yoder articulates; looking to Bavinck’s words, we find that the imitation of Christ, as it is for Yoder, is an ethic for Christians that affirms the importance and necessity of the person and work of Christ.

Yoder also challenges the primacy of the law in Reformed ethics. Not only does this primacy, he argues, downplay the particularity of Jesus’ teaching and person, starting with the Ten Commandments distorts the true revelation of God’s will. In this charge, we should hear again Yoder’s radical understanding of the devastation of the fall; in the fall, humanity has lost our ability to know something of God’s will. To know this, we must now look only to Jesus. To say otherwise, Yoder argues, is a “fusion of creation and Fall;” it is a grave theological error.

Because of the fall,

the human mind in its capacity to know the truth, however that truth be understood (special revelation, empirical nature, speculative nature), is distorted by the Fall. My capacity and desire to know the truth are distorted by my desire to use the truth for my own purposes and my desire to avoid those parts of the truth with which I disagree. Even if in some sense it could be held that the truth remains essentially unconfused despite the Fall, and my ability to perceive it were not radically destroyed, there still remains the flaw in my will which no longer desire to obey but prefers to use the area of history to act out my rebelliousness, my will to power, and my hostility to my brother.

1494 He says, for example, that Christ speaks in continuity with the law and the prophets (Bavinck, “CPSR,” 132).
Even if my will were unfallen and my knowledge were unfallen, my ability to control the course of events would no longer be whole. The chain of causation, the structures of the social order, communication and decision making are fallen as well.\textsuperscript{1496}

To these charges, again, Bavinck has a direct answer. His understanding of humanity’s ability to continue to look to creation to know something of God’s will is not a fusion of creation and fall; rather, it is a different understanding of God’s outpouring of grace post-fall. In his essay on common grace, Bavinck is clear that common grace is something that was given by God after the fall; it was necessitated on account of the fall. Here we have Bavinck’s clear articulation of the way in which the fall radically distorted humanity’s ability to know anything of God’s intent, and totality of the effect of sin on not just humanity, but the cosmos.\textsuperscript{1497} But for Bavinck, on account of God’s continued providential gift of common grace, humanity can know something of God’s created intent, and thus look to the Ten Commandments. Taking seriously the destructive nature of sin, Bavinck writes,

God did not leave sin alone to do its destructive work. He had and, after the fall, continued to have a purpose for his creation; he interposed common grace between sin and the creation – a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless restrains and compels. All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation.\textsuperscript{1498}

\textsuperscript{1496} Yoder, “Reformed Versus Anabaptist Social Strategies,” 6.
\textsuperscript{1497} Of his views on common grace, Bavinck writes; “we have not denied the serious character of sin. Sin is certainly not a substance but a quality, \textit{not materia} [matter] but \textit{forma} [form]. Sin is not the essence of things but rather cleaves to the essence; it is a \textit{privatio} [privation], albeit \textit{actuosa} [active], and to that extent accidental, having penetrated from the outside like death. Hence sin can be separated and removed from reality. The world is and remains susceptible of purification and redemption. Its essence can be rescued, and its original state can return. Even so, sin is a power, a principle, that has penetrated deeply into all forms of created life. The organism of the world itself has been affected. Left to itself, sin would have made desolate and destroyed all things. But God has interposed his grace and his covenant between sin and the world. By his common grace he restrains sin with its power to dissolve and destroy. Yet common grace is not enough. It compels but it does not change; it restrains but does not conquer. Unrighteousness breaks through its fences again and again. To save the world, nothing less was needed than the immeasurable greatness of the divine power, the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:19, 20). To save the world required nothing less than the fullness of his grace and the omnipotence of his love (Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 60-61).
\textsuperscript{1498} Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 51.
God’s providential and gracious preserving of the cosmos, restraining of sin, even working in the hearts and minds of all people through common grace is Bavinck’s answer to Yoder’s charge of a fusion between creation and fall and the radical destruction of the fall.

In his discourse on common grace, and humanity’s ability to still know something of God’s purpose for his creation, Bavinck is clear that this ability is not of our own noetic prowess, it is a gift of God’s grace. The relationship between God and humanity has always been, says Bavinck, one based on revelation; “a religion always requires revelation as its foundation and correlate.” This is true in both the prelapsarian and postlapsarian state. But after the fall, the means by which humanity knows something of God necessarily is different; “revelation continues, but it changes in character and receives a different content.” Bavinck argues that “after the fall, God’s revelation takes another form on account of man’s sinful state; it flows forth entirely from God’s grace.” In spite of human sin, God, in his grace and mercy, seeks out humanity. On the character of this grace, Bavinck writes:

> Life, work, food, clothing come to him no longer on the basis of an agreement or right granted in the covenant of works but through grace alone. Grace has become the source and fountainhead of all life and every blessing for mankind. It is the overflowing spring of all good (Gen. 3:8-24). Yet this grace does not remain single and undivided. It differentiates itself into common and special grace.

Bavinck expands on the nature of common grace in this way:

> God allows the nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16), yet does not leave himself without witness (Acts 14:17). In him they move and have their being; he is not far from each one of them (Acts 17:27,28). He reveals himself to them in the works of nature (Rom. 1:19). Every good and perfect gift, also among the nations, comes down from the Father of Lights (James 1:17). The Logos, who created and maintains all things, enlightens each man coming into the world (John 1:9). The Holy Spirit is the author of all life, of every power and every virtue (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Pss. 33:6; 104:30; 139:2; Job 32:8; Eccl. 3:19).  

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1500 Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 58.
1502 Bavinck also appeals to the God as the “Father of lights” in his essays on the imitation of Christ, showing the connection between the two concepts in his mind (Bavinck, Imitation II, 427; cf. 432).
There is thus a rich revelation of God even among the heathen – not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers. There exists no reason at all to denigrate or diminish this divine revelation. Nor is it to be limited to a so-called natural revelation. The traditions of paradise, the life of Cain and his descendants, and the covenant with Noah have a special, supernatural origin. The working of supernatural forces in the world of the heathen is neither impossible nor improbable. Furthermore, the revelation of God in nature and history is never a mere passive pouring forth of God's virtues but is always a positive act on the part of God.\footnote{Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 41.}

God’s gift of common grace, Bavinck affirms comes to all of humanity after the fall; this is Bavinck’s theological way of rejecting a fusion between creation and fall, while still affirming – on account of God’s grace – humanity’s ability to know something of the created order.\footnote{Bavinck also writes: “The entirety of the rich life of nature and society exists thanks to God's common grace. But why should he continue to preserve such a sinful world by a special action of his grace? Does he squander his gifts? Is he acting purposelessly? Is it not because natural life, in all its forms has value in his eyes in spite of sin's corruption? The love of family and kin, societal and political life, art and science are all in themselves objects of his divine good pleasure. He delights also in these works of his hands. They all together constitute, not in their mode of being but in their essence, the original order that God called into being at creation and that he still preserves and maintains, sin notwithstanding. Contempt for this divine order of creation is thus illegitimate; it flies in the face of experience and conflicts with Scripture. Here all separatism or asceticism is cut off at the roots. All world-flight is a repudiation of the first article of our Apostolic Creed. Christ indeed came to destroy the works of the devil. But more than that, he came to restore the works of the Father and so to renew man according to the image of him who first created man” (Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 60).}

Starting discourse on morality with the Ten Commandments, for Bavinck, is not a distortion of what it means to do God’s will; it is only on account of God’s gracious work in the world that humanity can begin here. The ability to know something of God’s will from creation is only possible because of God’s grace.\footnote{Common grace, Bavinck argues, is a counter to the “one-sided views . . . of Anabaptism and Socinianism” (Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 52). The Anabaptists, he argues, denigrate the natural order; they deny common grace; they “scorn the creation; Adam was of the earth, earthly; the natural order as such is unclean; but Christ, who brought his human nature down from heaven, infuses a new, spiritual, and divine substance into man at his rebirth. The born-again man, since he is wholly renewed and other, may have no intercourse with unbelievers. Consequently, the Anabaptists reject oaths, war, the magistracy, the death penalty, worldly dress and lifestyle, marriage with unbelievers, and infant baptism; the supernatural order thrusts aside the entire natural order” (Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 53).}

In the relationship between creation, fall, the primacy of the law and noetic access to God’s creational intent, there are again clear differences between Bavinck and Yoder. But, we
have seen that Bavinck has an answer to the charges that Yoder raises against the Reformed tradition: the work of God in creation through common grace as a means of preserving and upholding his creation. At the heart of Bavinck’s claim, we are brought back to one of Bavinck’s core contentions: grace restores nature. In Bavinck’s words, “grace does not cancel nature but establishes and restores it.”1506 We have seen that this theological framework, the restoration of God’s created intent through Christ, is a framework Bavinck and Yoder share. The two theologians differ in their application of this framework, and – as we have established – their understanding of postlapsarian noetic access to God’s created intent. These differences cause them to raise serious critiques of the other. But the differences, while significant, are not as stark as they initially appeal; underneath them, the two theologians share an affirmation that creation will be “restored to its destiny.”

The explicit critiques of Bavinck and Yoder toward the other’s tradition are important windows into the differences between the two. But even amidst these enduring differences, the way that the two traditions are not as different as they appear, or as the received wisdom on the two leads us to believe. Many of the critiques that Bavinck and Yoder raise identify important differences, but the differences are not as stark as they initially appear; many are rooted, again, in shared affirmations among the two traditions. Identifying the critiques that both Bavinck and Yoder explicitly charge toward the other’s tradition helps to further identify the ways in which both theologians challenge the other and the ways in which both theologians push the other to consider important questions regarding the imitation of Christ. Examining these two understandings of the imitation of Christ, in dialogue with one another, clarifies the unique, biblical strengths of both of these imitation motifs. Learning from both of these traditions, in

their similarities and critiques, helps us to articulate an imitation ethic for North American evangelicalism in the twenty-first century.

**Furthering the Conversation: The Implicit Critiques of Yoder and Bavinck**

Bavinck and Yoder, initially, appear to affirm opposite understandings of the imitation of Christ that are in direct conflict with one another: to understand what it means to imitate Jesus, Bavinck looks to Christ and the law, Yoder looks to the cross of Christ. Left unexplored, these two seemingly rival views of the imitation of Christ conform to the received wisdom regarding the two traditions that sees only disagreement and polarity among Reformed and Anabaptist thought. In this chapter, however, we have argued that while Bavinck and Yoder are not in complete agreement with one another on what constitutes a proper imitation of Christ, their disagreements often stem from shared assertions that ground the imitation of Christ. Looking to each theologian’s definition of the imitation of Christ, we identified clear differences between the two; we also looked to the critiques they give to the tradition of the other. From these, we can intuit further challenges they would offer to the other. Through these, we will get to the heart of the differences between the two, while continuing to root those differences in shared affirmations. Rather than strict polarities, we will again see the ways that differences between Bavinck and Yoder and their respective criticisms can be situated within common affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ.

**Yoder’s Implicit Critique of Bavinck’s Imitation Ethic**

Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is centered firmly upon the meaning of the cross of Christ, found in the Gospels. His singular focus on the cross leads Yoder to stress Jesus as the suffering servant. The way of the cross is the way of servanthood, nonviolence, and enemy love; it is one that is in direct conflict with the way of the world
and, as such, is marked by willful, voluntary suffering and rejection. Jesus’ ministry is a clash with, and victory over, the Powers. On account of this focus, we can assume that Yoder would raise several questions to Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ including questions about the power of the Powers, church and broader society, the political nature of imitating Christ, and the role of suffering.

**Do the Powers maintain their power?**

Given the relationship between the cross and the Powers, Yoder stresses the connection between the imitation of Christ and his theology of the Powers. In regard to this relationship, Yoder may challenge Bavinck. While Bavinck does reference the Powers in his later essay on the imitation of Christ, proclaiming Christ’s victory over them, he only has one specific reference to the victory of the cross over the Powers. Does this take seriously enough the power of the Powers in the world, and the new age that Christ has ushered in, through his victory over the Powers?

Bavinck writes this of the Powers and the cross: “by exercising these virtues the Christian church, in the first and second centuries, powerfully influenced the world, overcoming it by the cross, even as God, by the cross, had triumphed over the principalities and Powers (Col. 2:15).” But, Yoder may argue, this can be read in a way that suggests confidence in the Christian’s ability to overcome the Powers, rather than taking on the posture of Christ toward the Powers, one of submission that leads to triumph. One may read Bavinck’s discussion of the Powers in a way that resonates with Yoder’s view of subordination, but one may also read it in a way that suggests a posture intent on effective cultural transformation. To this latter interpretation, particularly in light of Bavinck’s stress on positive virtues in his own time, Yoder

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1507 Bavinck, Imitation II, 423-424.
may challenge the extent to which Bavinck views the devastation of the fall, the postlapsarian power of the Powers, and (although they are disarmed by the cross) their continued rule in the world.\textsuperscript{1508} While both affirm the cosmic devastation of the fall and the paradigm that grace restores nature, does Bavinck overemphasize the church’s ability to actively transform the world?\textsuperscript{1509} The question for both theologians is not if grace restores nature, but the extent to which grace restores nature as we await the return of Christ. Similarly, does Bavinck underemphasize the continued stronghold of the Powers and the effects of the fall in the world as we await Christ’s return? These questions press Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ to prioritize the role of passive virtues in every time, until Christ comes again.

**What of the Church and the Broader society?**

Yoder’s theology of the Powers informs his understanding of the relationship between church and society. He argues that because the Powers continue their rule in the world, the church must proclaim an other way of living in the world, one that is free from the grip of the Powers. Of this different posture, Yoder writes:

> the “otherness of the church” is an attitude rooted in strength and not in weakness. It consists of being a herald of liberation and not a community of slaves. . . . The church accepted as a gift being the “new humanity created by the cross and not the sword.”\textsuperscript{1510}

This new way of living fundamentally drives the posture of the church in the world:

> the very existence of the church is its primary task. It is in itself a proclamation of the lordship of Christ to the powers from whose domination the church has already begun to be liberated. . . . The church must be a sample of the kind of humanity within which, for example, economic and racial differences are surmounted. Only then will it have

\textsuperscript{1508} See *PoJ*, 144-149; see also Mouw, “Creational Politics,” 119-120. Mouw rightly attends to both the “more-than-human layer of perversity” in the cosmos that Yoder’s account of the Powers affirms and the “perversity that does reside in humankind itself.” Both are raised in Yoder’s account of the Powers – and both are necessary for the Reformed tradition to grapple with (as Mouw demonstrates in this section of “Creational Politics” where he argues that Yoder’s account of the Powers and radical effects of sin asserts that “Reformed Christianity, for all its talk about ‘total depravity,’ really does not take the depths of sinful politics seriously enough”).

\textsuperscript{1509} Cornelis van der Kooi raises a similar point when he describes the way in which Bavinck is “impressed by modernity” (van der Kooi, “Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth on Christian Faith and Culture,” 73).

\textsuperscript{1510} Yoder, *PoJ*, 148-149.
anything to say to the society that surrounds it about how those differences must be dealt with.\textsuperscript{1511} The church, in its practices and posture, is the fundamental way that Christians witness to the world. Its witness is as an other society. On this point, too, Yoder may raise some concerns about Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ in his own day.\textsuperscript{1512} Bavinck’s appeal to active virtues, and appreciation of much of culture would again, according to Yoder, underestimate the power of the Powers and, overemphasizing common grace, the effects of sin in the world. What are the limits of Christian engagement in the ways of the world?

The task that Bavinck describes of church, “reforming and renewing the world in accord with Christian principles,” is not a task that Yoder would advocate the church taking up directly.\textsuperscript{1513} For Yoder, transformation should take place through the witness of the church. Bavinck’s emphasis on active virtues and transformation, Yoder may argue, has the potential to diminish the “otherness” of the church, and thus, diminish its witness. Bavinck and Yoder both affirm that the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians. If this is so, should not the radical call of Christ, to the church, be one that is only understood and taken up by the church? An emphasis on cultural transformation and being the gospel as a leavening power in the world leads to a posture where Christians teach and preach a way of living that ought to be shared by those they are working alongside.\textsuperscript{1514} The normative standard of the will of God, taught in the law and concretely illustrated in the life of Christ, can be applied in society.\textsuperscript{1515} If the imitation of Christ

\textsuperscript{1511} Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 150-151.
\textsuperscript{1512} As earlier noted, the posture of imitation that Bavinck assigns to the early church, through passive virtues, would be one that would have resonated very clearly with Yoder’s understanding of the call to imitate Jesus.
\textsuperscript{1513} Bavinck, Imitation II, 424.
\textsuperscript{1514} Clay Cooke helpfully demonstrates the way Bavinck’s emphasis on virtue and transformation leads him to affirm an ethic that contributes to the common good, as opposed to an ethic that testifies to another way of being, but is wholly separated from society (Clay Cooke, “Distinctively Common,” in \textit{The Kuyper Center Review}, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2014), 97-100.
\textsuperscript{1515} See, for example: Bavinck, “Ethics and Politics,” 227, 277. Here he argues that the state is to uphold justice, which is not, for Bavinck, an arbitrary definition or something to be defined in abstraction, but based on the
is for Christians, how will non-Christians understand this call? Yoder may call Bavinck to consider the way that his lack of emphasis on the “otherness” of the church in the call to transformation may downplay the imitation of Christ as only for Christians. Following Jesus, the radical implications of the imitation of Christ are understandable in the church – and thus, not in the world. The transformative power of the church then occurs in its witness.

Is the Imitation of Christ Really a Political Calling?

The witness of the church, imitating Christ in his cross, is a political act. Yoder clearly identifies Jesus as a model of “radical political action.” Jesus demonstrates a new way of living in the world, one that is directly political. Following Jesus’ way of revolutionary subordination, that is, imitating Christ in his cross, is a political way of being in the world, Yoder argues. Thus the church gives an explicit, political critique to society and in its witness is a political agent. On the question of the political nature of the imitation of Christ, Yoder again raises a criticism toward Bavinck. Does Bavinck really attest to the political nature of this call?

The disagreement between Bavinck and Yoder on the political nature of imitating Jesus is clearly seen in each theologian’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. Yoder argues that the Sermon on the Mount is political; in it, Jesus teaches “political axioms.” Bavinck argues that the Sermon on the Mount makes the “religious-moral nature,” of Jesus’ teaching explicit. For Bavinck, the primary work of Jesus, and the totality of his teaching, was religious. His purpose was to save people from their sins. This is not to say that there is not a political effect of

normative standard of the will of God. Bolt also highlights Bavinck’s argument that society was “bound to the laws that God himself has firmly established in Creation and His Word” (Bolt, Bavinck on the Christian Life, 67-68)
1516 In another work, Yoder warns: “all Christian truth is distorted when the difference between the church and the world is not clearly kept in mind” (Yoder, Preface to Theology, 308).
1517 Yoder, PoJ, 2.
1518 John Howard Yoder, “If Christ is Truly Lord,” 55-57.
1520 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 132.
the teaching of the gospel, but for Bavinck, this is not the primary purpose. The relationship between social and political change and the preaching of the gospel is clearly seen in Bavinck’s appeal to the metaphors of pearl and leaven. Bavinck places a priority on the pearl (spiritual of the kingdom of God and the righteousness of Christ); from that flows the leaven (the reforming power of the gospel). He writes:

The truth and value of Christianity certainly does not depend on the fruits which it has borne for civilization and culture: it has its own independent value; it is the realization of the kingdom of God on earth; and it does not make its truth depend, after a utilitarian or pragmatical fashion, on what men here have accomplished with the talents entrusted to them…But, nevertheless, the kingdom of heaven, while a pearl of great price, is also a leaven which permeates the whole of the meal; godliness is profitable unto all things having the promise of the life which now is, and that which is to come.  

For Bavinck, the pearl has logical priority over the leaven, but this does not lead Bavinck away from stressing the importance of the gospel as both pearl and leaven. The gospel both creates a new community, restoring the relationship between God and his people and has a robust influence on the present society. Thus, the primary nature of the imitation of Christ is spiritual, or religious-moral, not political. It has political implications, but that is not its primary aim. To this, Yoder may ask: does this sufficiently appreciate the political nature of Christ’s kingdom? Or, if the political implications of the imitation of Christ are not primary, is there a chance they may be overlooked or undervalued? Both Bavinck and Yoder affirm that the imitation of Christ is an ethic that attends to all of life, personal and communal. Both attest to the transformative power of the gospel in the world. But they differ in the priority placed on the political nature of imitating Jesus.

Has the Church Truly Grasped the Extent of Christ’s Suffering?

The imitation of Christ is political, Yoder argues. Followers of Jesus take upon

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1521 Bavinck, The Philosophy of Revelation, 268-269.
themselves the life of Christ and the way of the cross; this is a life of obedience, nonviolence, countercultural witness to the world, and enemy love. Thus, the imitation of Christ is a life of voluntary suffering; “the morality of the New Testament is the morality of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.” In his emphasis on the cross and suffering, we find a final critique that Yoder may raise to Bavinck: does Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ take seriously enough the nature of suffering in the life of Jesus?

As Yoder exegetes the gospels, he notes the way that the cross “looms” throughout all of Jesus’ life. The cross looming, there is a consistent call for the disciple to share in Jesus’ suffering and death; suffering with Jesus is “the definition of apostolic existence.” Bavinck, in his writing on the imitation of Christ, also readily references the suffering of Christ in his understanding of the proper imitation of Christ. He clearly identifies the role of suffering in the life of the disciple: “Following Christ consisted in copying and imitating deeds and conditions from his life, specifically from his suffering;” indeed, Bavinck argues that Christianity is “the religion of the cross; the mystery of suffering is at its center.” But suffering is not the only virtue to be imitated in Bavinck’s thought. The imitation of Christ “involves a fellowship of suffering and self-denying, sacrificial love and culminates in a fellowship in Christ’s resurrection and ascension in glory;” it also “involves taking on those virtues and obligations which conform to God’s law as normative for our moral life.” To this, Yoder may ask: does Bavinck’s emphasis on other virtues (particularly active virtues) downplay the role of suffering in the life of Jesus?

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1523 Yoder, PoJ, 120, emphasis added.
1524 Bavinck, RD 3, 377.
1526 Bolt, Theological Analysis, 95; van Keulen understands Bavinck’s proper conception of the imitation of Christ to have three aspects: union with Christ, the reflection of Christ in our inner being, and the reflection of Christ in our outward lives (van Keulen, “Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ,” 85). He is intending to capture the relationship between the imitation of Christ and the passive and active aspects of sanctification, which Bolt understands as part of the first aspect of the imitation of Christ.
the believer? Both theologians emphasize the way in which the imitation of Christ is a qualified ethic. But each qualifies the imitation of Christ in different ways; Yoder looks to the cross, Bavinck looks to the law and virtue. Yoder may also raise another question, one that we have seen before: does Bavinck underestimate the grip of the Powers on the world and thus the extent to which the believer, and the believing community, suffers at their hand?

In each of these critiques of Bavinck’s understandings of the imitation of Christ, we see similar themes arise: Yoder’s affirmation of the otherness of the church in the world, his emphasis on the devastating and ongoing effects of the fall in the world, and his emphasis on a theology of the Powers. These affirmations – growing out of Yoder’s convictions that the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians, a qualified ethic, and one rooted in a relationship of restoration between grace and nature – cause Yoder to stress an imitation ethic that is focused on suffering and the alternative witness of the church in the world.

Bavinck’s Implicit Critique of Yoder’s Imitation Ethic

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of cross focuses on the law; Christians are to imitate the virtues of Christ as he follows the law. Thus, Bavinck does not just focus on one action, or motif, of Christ’s life and death as imitable. Taking account of the whole of Christ’s life, and the specificity of Christ’s context, Bavinck attempts to get to the heart of the imitation of Christ, normed by the law and the life of Christ, and contextually mobile and specific. Affirming the particularity of Christ’s life and example, along with the universality of the law, Bavinck argues that, for all Christians, “the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same,” but the particularity of one’s “circumstances may modify the application.”

Bavinck, Imitation II, 438.
Can the Cross Explain all of Morality?

Bavinck affirms the Ten Commandments as the grounds for determining what may, and may not, be imitated in Christ’s life. Later, he specifies that the law determines the way in which Christians apply the virtues and principles in the life of Christ. Thus, he affirms that a plurality of virtues constitutes the imitation of Christ: patience, joy, obedience, perseverance suffering, humility, faith, gentleness, love, and more. Many of these virtues are affirmed in Yoder’s robust understanding of the cross. The cross, for Yoder, involves suffering, enemy love, servanthood, and obedience. These are all aspects of the virtues that Bavinck identifies in his articulation of the passive and active virtues of Christ that the believer is to imitate. But Bavinck may still be left with the question: is the cross adequate to explaining all of morality?

Bavinck and Yoder both affirm that the imitation of Christ lays claim on the whole Christian, in every aspect of their life. On account of this affirmation, it is appropriate to raise the question: can every aspect of life be understood through the rubric of the cross? What of those situations – such as enjoying Buxtehude’s chorale settings in concert or exploring the complexities of outer space – that do not necessarily call for enemy love and servanthood? The cross is certainly a dominant, biblical motif in the life of Christ; it is undoubtable a centrally defining aspect of Jesus’ life, both Bavinck and Yoder attest to this biblical reality. But is it the whole of Christ’s life – and can it adequately explain all of morality? Bavinck argues that bearing one’s cross and self-denial, while necessary aspects of imitating Christ, are not the full imitation of Christ. They are “two components of the imitation of Christ” which “do not fully explain the imitation of Christ.”

Focused solely on the cross, Yoder emphasizes suffering; while a defining aspect of Christ’s life, the morality of the cross does not attend to every aspect

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1528 Bavinck, GE, 270.
of life: Christ’s, whose birth was accompanied by announcements of “good tidings of great joy” and who lived life in a way that he was accused of being a “glutton and a drunkard”, or his followers.\footnote{Williams, \textit{Reflect}, 58, citing Luke 2: 10 and Matthew 11:19. See also, B.B. Warfield who argues that “if our Lord was ‘the Man of Sorrows,’ he was more profoundly still ‘the Man of Joy’” (B. B. Warfield, “The Emotional Life of Our Lord,” \textit{Monergism}, accessed June 11, 2018, \url{https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/emotionallife.html}) and Q&A 52 and 90 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which reference the joy of the Christian life.}

Can a Focus on Suffering Adequately Anticipate the Eschaton?

Bavinck’s question to Yoder of adequacy of the cross as \textit{the} motif for the imitation of Christ raises a secondary question. Yoder’s emphasis on the cross is accompanied by a robust understanding of the role of suffering in the life of the disciple: “The morality of the New Testament is the morality of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.”\footnote{Yoder, “Walking in the Resurrection,” 41.} Yoder is specific in what constitutes suffering that is imitating Christ. But he is equally specific about the dominant role that suffering plays within the imitation of Christ. Again, we see Bavinck agree with Yoder on the reality of suffering in the life of the disciple imitating Christ. But the question Bavinck may raise to Yoder, similar to the question of the cross, is the adequacy of suffering as \textit{the} motif of the imitation of Christ. Both Bavinck and Yoder affirm that the imitation of Christ is lays claim on the whole of the life of the believer, a claim we’ve often defined in terms of both personal and social. But what of the eschatological nature of the imitation of Christ? A follower of Jesus does not cease to be a disciple and an imitator in the eschaton, nor did Jesus cease to be an example post-resurrection. Can appealing to suffering as \textit{the} mark of the imitation of Christ account for following Jesus when he comes again in glory?

Bavinck may press Yoder to articulate an imitation ethic that not only accounts for following Jesus while awaiting his return, but an ethic that endures in Christ’s coming kingdom.
Awaiting Christ’s coming kingdom, believers anticipate a time when “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”\footnote{Revelation 21:4} Yoder certainly anticipates Christ’s victory. In his understanding of the cross, he appeals to the cross as \textit{victory} over the Powers, a victory found in subordination and submission, subverting the way of the Powers. Because of the victory of Christ on the cross, over the Powers, the Powers know that their defeat is imminent;\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 148. Even in his understanding of the “victory,” Bavinck may question if Yoder’s definition is wholly adequate. Yoder writes that the “real victory of Christ in the language of Hebrews seems to be more at the point of his obedience. . . . Thus death is the victory. Death is not merely the way to victory; it is not the prerequisite to victory. . . . It is the victory. . . . in suffering, in facing temptation, in being human, he saves us. . . . The victory of Christ is therefore not only at the point of resurrection and ascension. It is already part of the quality with which he accepts humiliation, with which he obeys and suffers. . . . Christ’s exaltation is the response to his humiliation. It is God’s seal on his faithfulness. That connection between his victory and his faithfulness is all the way through Hebrews” (Yoder, \textit{Preface to Theology}, 119-120). But if victory \textit{is} suffering and suffering \textit{is} obedience, what does eschatological obedience look like, when suffering ceases?} Because Christ has disarmed the Powers on the cross, the church can live a new way; the existence of the church proclaims “the lordship of Christ to the Powers from whose dominion the church has begun to be liberated.”\footnote{Yoder, \textit{PoJ}, 150.}

This liberation is not yet complete. Thus, the posture of the church continues to be one of subordination and suffering as they go against the Powers of the day. The posture of the church is modeled on Christ’s posture against the Powers, and on Christ’s obedience – even to death. But what of the day when Christ’s returns, his kingdom is fully realized, and the dominion of the Powers is completely undone?\footnote{What, even, of the example of Christ post-resurrection?} When we take into account both the present and eschatological nature of the Christian life, an imitation ethic based solely on suffering does not seem adequate as an enduring ethic; an ethic based only on suffering cannot endure throughout both the period of anticipating the fullness of Christ’s kingdom and following Christ in Christ’s coming kingdom.\footnote{Similarly, Bavinck may raise the question of: does suffering encapsulate the fullness of Christ’s obedience? What of Christ’s resurrection and ascension? Is his obedience still characterized by suffering?} Bavinck might argue that an imitation based only on suffering does not fully attend
to the whole life of the Christian, present and eschatological. For this, we need to also draw upon other virtues, such as joy.\textsuperscript{1536}

**Does not an Ethical Atonement Presume Juridical Benefits of the Atonement?**

To these, Bavinck may add another concern, that of the place and role of the atoning work of Christ in the imitation of Christ. Yoder calls followers of Jesus to imitate Christ in his cross, while recognizing that in the cross, Jesus did do something unique and inimitable: he created a new community wherein there is a new pattern of living, one of innocent suffering and renunciation of violence. Peace no longer demands a scapegoat; in the death of Christ, enemy love replaces the system of scapegoat and sacrifice. Followers of Jesus can live – and die – this way because Jesus lived and died in this way. He writes: “We are to love the enemy because it is the enemy for whom God suffers the most. *This is the pattern of atonement*; this is also the pattern of wholesome social change.”\textsuperscript{1537} Alongside the charge to enemy love, Yoder is clear that the cross is victory over the Powers. But, Yoder does not make much of the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of humanity. He does not stress the juridical aspect of the cross; instead, he stresses the obedience of Christ on the cross, which the believer is to imitate.\textsuperscript{1538} In doing so, Yoder downplays the distinction between justification and sanctification, opting for an ethical account of the cross, rooted in participation with Christ.

Yoder emphasizes the ethical nature of participation, arguing that God’s purpose is to

\textsuperscript{1536} Bavinck’s focus on the creation order, and God’s upholding of his good creation despite human sin, leads him to articulate an ethic that attends to the life of the Christian now and in God’s coming kingdom. We are drawn back to Bavinck’s insistence that grace *restores* nature, thus an ethic that attends to creation order will necessarily attend to the restored creation in the eschaton. Christ’s affirmation of the creation order in his following of the law leads to an imitation ethic that extends toward the fulfillment of God’s creational purposes in the eschaton. This is yet another area where Bavinck could press Yoder: to continue to grapple with the implications of a relationship between nature and grace that is one of restoration.

\textsuperscript{1537} Yoder, “The Wisdom and the Power,” 44.

\textsuperscript{1538} Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 310-311.
“establish obedience in communion, not only to expiate juridical guilt.”\textsuperscript{1539} On this point, Bavinck agrees; the cross cannot simply be understood as a juridical act. On account of the cross, Bavinck argues, the believer receives many benefits: juridical, mystical, ethical, moral, economic, and physical.\textsuperscript{1540} While the cross is a juridical act, it is not only a juridical act. But, Bavinck argues that it is on account of the work of Christ on the cross that the believer obtains the moral benefits of reconciliation. Thus, the imitation of Christ is made possible by the justifying work of Christ on the cross; it is only possible if the burden of our sins is nailed to the cross and the Spirit works within us to make us more and more like Jesus. Yoder does not deny this in his discussion of the imitation of Christ, but does not stress Bavinck’s emphasis of the atonement of Christ, particularly the juridical aspects of the atonement. To this, Bavinck may raise a question: is Yoder’s understanding of the atoning work of Christ adequate to address the effects of sin in humanity; does Yoder sufficiently articulate the way in which our justification by Christ and union with Christ makes possible the imitation of Christ?

In their discussions of the cross and atonement, both Yoder and Bavinck affirm the devastating effects of the fall (both in humanity and in the entire cosmos) and affirm that the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians. In Yoder’s understanding of the cross and atonement, he profoundly addresses the cosmic effects of the fall – and Jesus’ victory over the Powers on the cross. The cataclysmic, cosmic devastation of the fall is on full display. This devastation is similarly on display in Yoder’s discussion of the church and the world, and his strong affirmation of the imitation of Christ as a radical ethic for Christians. But Bavinck may ask, is the same emphasis clear in his discussion of the cross, atonement, and faith?

In his atonement theology, Yoder emphasizes obedience. Faith is a “commitment to the

\textsuperscript{1539} Yoder, \textit{Preface to Theology}, 301; emphasis added. \\
\textsuperscript{1540} Bavinck, \textit{RD} 3, 451.
faith-union of obedience made available to us through the perfect and triumphant obedience of Christ;” repentance is “the turning-around of will that is the condition of obedience;”\footnote{1541} forgiveness is “removing the hindrance to communion; the obstacle is our sinfulness.”\footnote{1542} In this paradigm, salvation is then “restored communion and consequently, restored capacity to obedience.”\footnote{1543} But, if the fall is so devastating that the world cannot understand the radical ethic of Jesus and there is a cosmic need for Jesus’ victory of the Powers, how can any human overcome it and will toward obedience? Yoder stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian’s ethical participation in Christ’s reconciling work, but what of the role in Holy Spirit in the juridical act? To this, Bavinck might argue that Yoder’s understanding of the atoning work of Christ does not adequately address the effects of sin in humanity, that is, the way in which our justification by God, through Christ, makes possible the imitation of Christ.

In each of these critiques of Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, we see similar themes arise: Bavinck’s affirmation of the “passive” and “active” virtues displayed in the life of Christ, the aspects of Christ’s work on the cross that are inimitable, and God’s continued upholding of (and anticipated full, eschatological restoration of) creation in spite of the devastating effects of the fall. These emphases – growing out of Bavinck’s convictions that the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians, a qualified ethic, and one rooted in a relationship of restoration between grace and nature – draw attention to the way in which Bavinck ties together Christ and the law, creation and redemption, in the imitation of Christ. Bavinck’s emphasis on the many virtues concretely illustrated in the life of Christ, in line with the law, supports an

\footnote{1541} Here we also find the emphasis on volition that jointly characterized the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, as laid out by Mouw and Yoder.\footnote{1542} Yoder, \textit{Preface to Theology}, 312.\footnote{1543} Yoder, \textit{Preface to Theology}, 312.
enduring imitation ethic.\textsuperscript{1544} The example of Christ is one to be followed in his suffering – and in his victory and resurrection.

Both Bavinck and Yoder’s critiques to the other emphasize the important ways in which the two differ on what constitutes a proper imitation of Christ. But in these critiques, we are also drawn, again, to the significant ways in which the two share common understandings of the imitation of Christ. It is on account of these similarities that the two raise concerns of one another! A mutual affirmation of an imitation ethic that is for Christians, lays claim over the whole of the Christian life, and is grounded in a paradigm of grace restoring nature leads Bavinck and Yoder to raise critiques of the other. But rather than seeing these critiques as indicative of incompatible motifs of the imitation of Christ, we ought to see them as strategic and theological differences from within the same “family” of imitation ethics. Yoder and Bavinck’s understandings of the imitation of Christ initially seem polarized: one is rooted in law, the other in the cross. We have shown, however, that there is good reason to think the two function together; they can contribute to one another and work in dialogue, based on their shared theological understandings of the nature of the imitation of Christ.

Conclusion

In the abstract, the imitation of Christ is a non-contentious motif; followers of Jesus ought to be like Jesus. The difficulty becomes discerning what properly constitutes that imitation of Christ. Imitating Christ requires a hermeneutic for determining what in Christ ought to be imitated, as the earnest congregant in Sheldon’s novel reminded us of in her question, “How am I going to tell what [Jesus] would do?”\textsuperscript{1545} This question demands a response; as such, both Yoder

\textsuperscript{1544} Enduring refers to an imitation ethic that is rooted in God’s creation order, affirmed by Christ in his life, and extends towards the fulfillment of God’s creational purposes in the eschaton.

\textsuperscript{1545} Sheldon, \textit{In His Steps}, 18.
and Bavinck attempt to articulate a biblically faithful model for determining what in the life of Christ ought to be imitated. For Yoder, Christians must only imitate Christ in his cross; for Bavinck, Christians must follow Christ as he follows the law, imitating his virtues.

An initial assessment might judge Bavinck and Yoder’s respective descriptions of the imitation of Christ incompatible; an ethic based on the law and virtue seems to bear little resemblance to an ethic based on the cross. This judgment resonates well with the received wisdom on the relationship between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions at large: one of staunch polemic and discord. However, much work has been done – including that of Verduin, Balke, Parler, Mouw, Yoder, and others – to carefully assess the relationship between the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions; this work results in a slightly different picture. Careful analysis of the relationship between the Anabaptist and the Reformed certainly portrays important differences. Verduin, Balke, and others clarify the heart of the disagreement between the two traditions. But, as in the dialogues of Mouw and Yoder, it also revisits the nature of the differences between the two. Rather than understanding the relationship as one of mere polemic and polarity, on close look, shared affirmations begin to emerge between the two traditions. Mouw and Yoder then clarify the nature of the relationship of the debates between the two as “intra-family” debates.

Mouw and Yoder’s analysis identifies the shared affirmations of the two traditions at

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1546 For some within the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, these differences are not merely important, they are decisive. This line of thought is based in arguments that the two traditions see nature and grace in wholly other ways (following the arguments of Bavinck, among others), the two posit differing postures in civil and social life that are incompatible, along with many other differences, both historic and current. This is, to be sure, the received wisdom of the relationship between the two traditions and has been the modus operandi of relating the two. There are many theological, and historical reasons that one would understand these differences to be distinctive (in his essay “Abandoning the Typology,” Mouw also points to the pluralism within the Anabaptist and Reformed communities, such that “the tensions between the two traditions are not experienced in the same light or with the same intensity on every point on the spectrum within each community”). Here, however, we have pushed back against the received wisdom, following the example of Mouw, Yoder, and others to work towards establishing a recognition of the commonalities – without downplaying the continuing differences.
large. Here, we have explored the way in which way of understanding the relationship between
the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions also applies to a singular ethical motif in both traditions:
the imitation of Christ. Using the common affirmations identified by Mouw and Yoder and the
insights offered by Parler, Verduin, Balke, representatives from ecumenical dialogues, and
others, we have identified the ways in which the differences between Yoder and Bavinck on the
imitation of Christ, as representatives of the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions, are also “intra-
family” differences, on account of their important, shared convictions. Bavinck and Yoder, both
striving to draw a proper imitation of Christ from scripture, ground the imitation of Christ in
shared affirmations: the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians, an all of life encompassing
ethic, and a qualified ethic, grounded in a relationship of restoration between creation and
redemption.

The dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ is not simply a
litany of shared affirmations, however. As we have seen, there are sustained differences
between the two. In this chapter we have identified these differences, and the way that the
theological differences can be understood in light of the common affirmations both thinkers
profess. Bavinck and Yoder appeal to different focal images and different understandings of
Christology and the role of suffering in their conception of a proper, biblical imitation of
Christ. Their application of the imitation of Christ in the life of the believer and the
believing community also results in different emphases on the relationship between the
church and broader society.

Alongside the pronounced critiques that both Bavinck and Yoder name of the other’s
tradition, and the explicit differences between the two understandings of the imitation of
Christ, we have identified further questions that the differing motifs of the imitation of
Christ may pose to one another. Understood within the shared affirmations of the two traditions, these questions help point to the ways in which both theologian’s articulation of the proper imitation of Christ clarifies and challenges the other. Read together, in dialogue, they can ward us from the potential dangers inherent in either definition. Positively, the two imitation traditions in dialogue together can lead us toward more productive ethical discourse in North American evangelical ethics, an ethical system popularly captivated by the imitation of Christ, but lacking substantive guidance for the constitutive elements of a proper imitation of Christ.

Evangelical ethics draws substantively from both the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, but the two have not seemed compatible on the question of a dominant motif in evangelical ethics: the imitation of Christ. Whether the Reformed tradition is seen to be wholly lacking an imitation ethic (or even antagonistic towards imitation ethics), or seen in Bavinck to ground the imitation of Christ in the law, it is seen to be in opposition to an Anabaptist imitation ethic that is grounded in the cross of Christ. But here, we have shown that despite the initial assessment of staunch polarity between the two, the imitation ethics of Bavinck and Yoder share much in common. Both theologians affirm that the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians, grounded in a theological paradigm of grace restoring nature, lays claim over the whole life of the Christian, and is a qualified ethic that does not result in literal mimicry. To be sure, in spite of these common affirmations, Bavinck and Yoder still differ on their understanding and application of the imitation of Christ. As they make claims regarding the imitation of Christ, we also see enduring differences between the two traditions. The two do not, as we have seen, share an understanding of the extent of sin and the noetic effects of sin. These differences have important ramifications for one’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, both how we obtain
guidance regarding a proper imitation of Christ and the correct focus for imitating Christ in Christian ethics. But despite these differences, we have shown that the two share common, core affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ. Thus, the dialogue between the two is one is rooted in familial ties. It is therefore not a question of whether or not the imitation of Christ involves suffering, is a political stance, defines the church as “other,” or has a transformative effect on the world. Instead, the question is: to what extent does the imitation of Christ involve these things? Both traditions, as seen in Bavinck and Yoder, make selective, theological judgments on the postures and practices that flow from their understanding of the imitation of Christ. But we should not see these as other; rather, we should see the critiques of the traditions and the differing application of the imitation of Christ as often arising from common affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ. Understood in this way, the imitation ethics of Bavinck and Yoder can shed light on twenty-first century ethical debates and build bridges between traditions that are often understood as wholly other.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Following the Way of Jesus:
A Reformed, Evangelical Imitation Ethic
in the Twenty-First Century

Introduction

The twenty-first century in North America, particularly the United States of America in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, is an interesting – and contentious – time to be a part of the evangelical tradition. Entire books, like *Still Evangelical?*, edited by Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, are devoted to the state of evangelicalism in North America today. This book, and others, testify to fractures within the tradition. These fractures have manifested themselves dynamically, and prominently, in evangelical social and political engagement.

Surveying North American evangelicalism, Mark Young, president of Denver Seminary, labels the current moment as a “crisis;” he describes this crisis as grounded in an inadequate understanding of how those core beliefs ought to shape one’s sense of national identity, religious identity, and social responsibility, areas that are directly related to ecclesiology and mission.

Within Young’s reflections, we find a crisis that is twofold: on display in this description is a lack of attention to theological grounds for Christian ethics within North American evangelicalism and, underlying these reflections, polarized and tribal divisions within the evangelical tradition (in fact, these divisions are so prominent that one may be more accurate to

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1547 See Mark Galli’s essay, entitled “Looking for Unity in All the Wrong Places,” (in *Still Evangelical?*, ed. Mark Labberton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 138-152) for sustained reflections on the divisions within North American evangelicalism.

label them evangelical traditions).\textsuperscript{1549}

In the midst of these deep divides, one of the common appeals in social and political engagement from those who claim the evangelical tradition is to the person of Jesus. Given David Bebbington’s helpful four-part summary of evangelical distinctives (conversionist, biblicist, cross-centered, activist), the Bebbington Quadrilateral, the appeal to Jesus is not surprising.\textsuperscript{1550} As the National Evangelical Association remarks, “many evangelicals rarely use the term ‘evangelical’ to describe themselves, focusing simply on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism and discipleship.”\textsuperscript{1551} Jesus is central to evangelicals; amidst the fractures within the North American evangelical tradition(s), there is still agreement on this common claim. As Mark Labberton explains:

Common evangelical faith claims confidence and trust in the supracultural good news of Jesus Christ that makes a first-order claim on what is true and most important. As Savior and Lord, no one and nothing rivals Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{1552}

In theological ethics, this appeal to the centrality of Jesus has often taken the form of claiming his example as normative. In other words, evangelicals have appealed to the imitation of Christ.

We have seen that the appeal to the example of Jesus, however, needs definition. One cannot merely say “do what Jesus would do” and anticipate congruous actions. An appeal to the example of Christ necessitates a response informed by some form of hermeneutics. As the

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\textsuperscript{1549} In the same collection, Mark Labberton describes the divisions within the evangelical tradition(s) in North America: “the impression of many on the evangelical left is that the good news of Jesus Christ has been taken hostage by a highly charged, toxic subculture on the evangelical right that – in the name of God – expresses steely resolve to have its own way in the public square. From the evangelical right, the critique is that Christian America is at war with any and all liberalism – evangelical or otherwise – and is in serious danger of losing its conservative virtues and spiritual practice” (Mark Labberton, “Introduction: Still Evangelical?,” in Still Evangelical?, ed. Mark Labberton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 4).

\textsuperscript{1550} David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (Abington, UK: Routledge, 1988).


\textsuperscript{1552} Labberton, “Introduction: Still Evangelical?,” 13.
congregant in Sheldon’s novel remarks, “How am I going to tell what He would do?” Those that are charged to imitate Christ, a dominant motif in evangelical ethics, need a guiding, normative, biblical framework out of which to enact the imitation of Christ.

**An Ethic in Jeopardy? Deep Disagreements about the Nature of the Imitation of Christ**

The diversity of the appeal to the imitation of Christ within those who claim the evangelical tradition, and the discord and disagreement within those appeals, is evident in social action, political engagement, and even on social media. One striking example of the ways in which those who claim the evangelical tradition appeal to the imitation of Christ in discordant, polarized ways, can be seen in a short exchange on twitter between Shane Claiborne, an evangelical activist, and Jerry Falwell Jr., president of an evangelical university. Appealing to the example and words of Jesus, Falwell argued that

> Jesus said love our neighbors as ourselves but never told Caesar how to run Rome-he never said Roman soldiers should turn the other cheek in battle or that Caesar should allow all the barbarians to be Roman citizens or that Caesar should tax the rich to help poor. That's our job.

Quickly, another twitter user responded to Falwell’s tweet, challenging his assertion with the words of Jesus in Matthew 25: 40, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” To this Falwell responded,

> Exactly - what we did personally for the least of these will matter, not whether we voted for someone who claimed they would tax our neighbors to help the least of these. That’s the whole point.

Claiborne added to this discussion. Like the initial respondent to Falwell, he also pointed to the

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1555 Sarah. Smith, Twitter Post, January 25, 2018, 5:00 PM. https://twitter.com/SLSmith000/status/956693366212890629.
example and words of Jesus in Matthew 25. To Falwell, Claiborne replied:

   The idea that Caesar or a Roman soldier... or anyone... is exempt from God's command to
   love our enemy, care for the poor, or welcome the stranger is heresy. Jesus said we will
   ALL be asked how we cared for “the least of these.” (Mt. 25).

Both appealing to the example of Jesus in Matthew 25, Claiborne and Falwell display

dramatically different interpretations and resulting action. In the same words, one finds a
personal call to aid the least of these, devoid of political implications. Another finds a radical
societal and political charge. In this short exchange, the deep divide among those who claim the
evangelical tradition is well-illustrated.

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\textbf{A Way Forward: Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue}

Given that deep disagreements result from evangelical appeals to the imitation of Christ,
and the widespread appeal to Christ’s example within the evangelical tradition, are we simply
left at an impasse? Does a continued appeal to the imitation of Christ only, and necessarily,
enhance and propel the discord and tribalism within North American evangelicalism? It is the
contention of this dissertation that appeals to the imitation of Christ within evangelicalism ought
not necessarily contribute to the tribalism of the evangelical tradition. We have argued here that
the addition of a Reformed imitation ethic, found in the ethics of Herman Bavinck helpfully
illuminates and contributes to ethical discourse in North American evangelicalism; in particular,
we have looked to the way Bavinck’s imitation ethic relates to a dominant imitation ideal within
American evangelicalism, the ethics of John Howard Yoder. This does not mean, of course, that

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\footnote{1557 Shane Claiborne, Twitter Post, January 26, 2018. 5:51 PM. 
https://twitter.com/ShaneClaiborne/status/957068510169006080. These ideas are discussed in many of Claiborne’s 
works, including \textit{Jesus for President} and \textit{Irresistible Revolution}. In \textit{Jesus for President}, Claiborne draws upon the 
works of John Howard Yoder, including \textit{The Politics of Jesus} (Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, \textit{Jesus for President: 
Politics for Ordinary Radicals} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 68, 74, 95) and \textit{The Original Revolution} (171, 
347). For more of Claiborne’s initiatives that directly appeal to the example of Christ as normative for the life of the 
believer, see the red-letter Christian pledge. The text can be found in: Shane Claiborne, “Evangelicalism Must be 
Born Again,” in \textit{Still Evangelical?}, ed. Mark Labberton (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 171.}
every interpretation of the imitation of Christ within those who claim the evangelical tradition is a valid interpretation, or one that can relate to the others in a substantive and dialogic manner. Rather, we have argued that re-examining the relationship between Reformed and Anabaptist ethics through the lens of the dominant imitation motif in evangelical ethics, done by examining the ethics of Herman Bavinck, uncovers a relationship that upholds core, common affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ. Given these core, shared affirmations, we have reason to imagine these two perspectives both contributing to one another and working together, in dialogue. In this way, the ethics of Herman Bavinck, in dialogue with John Howard Yoder, helpfully illumine ethical discourse in North American evangelicalism.

North American evangelical social ethics are often very polarized between two dominant ideals, seen within the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions. Often characterized as “retreat” and “reform,” respectively, the two traditions are pitted against one another; the relationship between the two is only seen in staunch polarity. The difference between the two traditions is further heightened on the question of the imitation of Christ, given the Reformed tradition’s general lack of appeal to Christ’s example as a dominant ethical motif, looking instead to the law. In this dissertation, we have shown that the ethics of Herman Bavinck demonstrate a Reformed understanding of the imitation of Christ, which upholds both Christ’s example and the law. The imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life; it is a comprehensive ethic. We have also showed the way in which Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is related to the imitation of Christ found in the work of John Howard Yoder. We have argued that the two traditions, often thought of as polarized and competing tribes, are to be deeply related to one

1558 Throughout this dissertation, however, we have called for a different way to view Yoder’s work. He promoted a vision of Christian discipleship that updated the traditional Anabaptist postures, calling for new, active engagement in political life, often in the form of creative witness that speaks truth to power.
another in their common affirmations.

*Bavinck and Yoder: Familial Disputes on the Imitation of Christ*

In this dissertation, we have demonstrated the relationship between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ by situating the two within the long tradition of imitation theology. Interestingly, both Bavinck and Yoder, deeply attentive to the historic Christian tradition, respond to the dominant imitation motifs in the history of Christian spirituality and ethics in remarkably similar ways. This initial observation of the shared reaction between Yoder and Bavinck to the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the modernist suggests underlying commonalities between the two theologians on the imitation of Christ. Bavinck and Yoder reject these historical motifs, with shared rationale for their rejection.

Simply noting what the two theologians reject as an improper imitation of Christ, however, is not enough to posit strong commonalities between the two, or to claim—like Mouw and Yoder have in regard to the Anabaptist and Reformed traditions at large— that the dispute between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ is an “intra-family” dispute. To do this necessitates careful definitions of how both Bavinck and Yoder define the imitation of Christ and, from those definitions, finding the affirmations that the two theologians share.

Neo-Calvinists are not known for their imitation ethics, nor are they known for looking to Christ as the source of ethical instruction. Instead, they look to the law, which contains the guiding, creational norms for human living. Bavinck maintains this neo-Calvinist emphasis on the law, but adds to it an appeal to the imitation of Christ. For him, these two work hand in hand; Christ, who fulfills the law, is a concrete example of a life lived in accordance with the law. Christian ethics must not choose the law or the example of Christ; rather, in Christ we see the living law. Christ affirms and fulfills the law of God, established in creation. Thus, for Bavinck,
a proper imitation of Christ is found in law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ. The imitation of Christ constitutes the heart of the Christian life; on account of the believer’s spiritual union with Christ because of Christ’s work on the cross, the imitation of Christ takes shape in the life of the believer, as they live their life in conformity with the example of Christ.

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ is grounded in both creation and the concrete example of Christ. Yoder, on the contrary, appeals directly – and solely – to the example of Christ in his imitation ethic. Christians are to imitate Christ only in his cross. Underneath this claim is Yoder’s appeal to the normativity of the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the Christian life. While the hermeneutic by which the believer discerns the proper imitation of Christ is simple – the cross of Jesus – the implications of this imitation motif are radical. Christians are to follow Jesus, the suffering servant, in the way of the cross: a way of nonviolence, power through weakness, servanthood, suffering, enemy love, wisdom where the world seeks foolishness, and losing one’s life for the sake of saving it. Imitating Christ is an active partaking in the radically new way of Jesus, a costly, concrete social stance that lays its totalizing claim on the whole life of the believing community.

It is not difficult to discern that these two imitation motifs are different. The biblical images upon which they draw and the hermeneutics through which they discern imitation ethics are strikingly distinct. But we have looked beyond these initial differences to uncover profound similarities between the two. There are at least four central affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ that both Bavinck and Yoder share: the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians, it is predicated on the relationship between Christ and creation as one of restoration, it is an ethic that lays claim on the whole of life (one’s inner life and motivations, external actions, and the corporate life of believers), and is a qualified ethic that constitutes imitating Jesus as other than
the literal mimicry of his actions. On account of these shared affirmations, both Bavinck and Yoder reject the historic forms of the imitation of Christ. These four claims, made by both theologians, constitute significant commonality between the two in their understanding of the imitation of Christ.

This project is not unique in positing meaningful commonality between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions. Leonard Verduin, Willem Balke, Richard Mouw, and John Howard Yoder, among others, have worked to re-examine the historic relationship between the two traditions that Bavinck and Yoder represent, the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, as have many ecclesial dialogues throughout twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Each of these scholarly works and ecclesial dialogues posits a remarkable commonality between the two, arguing that the widely-recognized polarity between the traditions stemmed from a plurality of shared affirmations that led to a divergence on particular theologian questions. Balke and Verduin pinpoint the historic divergence between the two on ecclesiology, but recognize, to use Balke’s words, a “critical affinity” between the two traditions. Each ecclesial dialogue also recognizes the historic differences on questions of church, state, and baptism, but argue that while differences between the two traditions have been understood historically as “fundamental differences,” these points of disagreement “in many ways only appear as differences in emphasis.” Mouw and Yoder also identify “profound commonalities” among the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions. In their exploration of these commonalities, they posit a redefinition of the relationship between the two, providing us with the language of “intra-family disputes” instead of the prevalent “strict-polarity model” to explain the Reformed-Anabaptist

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The concept of applying these affirmations regarding the two traditions at large to a specific theological question is a similarly trodden road, paved by Branson Parler who takes these insights and applies them to the doctrine of creation. Again, his conclusions support the intra-family nature of the dispute between the two traditions.

Building on the fine work of these scholars, we have finally contended that debate regarding a proper imitation of Christ Bavinck and Yoder is a familial one; the profound commonalities between the two theologians lay the groundwork for many of the differences and distinctions that they maintain. There are certainly differences between the two: differences in focal images for the imitation of Christ, differences in the role and imitability of suffering in Christ’s life, the grip and role of the Powers in the world, and differences in the relationship between the church and the broader society. But we have shown that many of these differences are rooted in shared affirmations.1563

Differences between Bavinck and Yoder on the focal images for the imitation of Christ stem from their shared affirmation of the qualified nature of the imitation of Christ. Both Bavinck and Yoder affirm that Jesus’ example is normative for Christian life, but not as an example to be literally – and thus, perhaps merely externally – mimicked. The question, for both theologians, is then as follows: if we cannot literally mimic the actions of Christ, what aspects of Christ’s life are imitable?

Disagreements between Bavinck and Yoder on the relationship between the Powers and the imitation of Christ flow out of their interpretation of the paradigm that grace restores nature. For both, it is not a question of whether there will be a restored relationship to the Powers, one

1563 Alongside these shared affirmations, out of which a majority of the differences between Yoder and Bavinck arise, there is also a continued disagreement over the nature of the atonement.
that is in line with God’s creational intent; it is a question of the emphasis one places on the Powers and how much restoration we can expect in the here and now. Similarly, while both affirm the restoration of God’s original, created intent, they differ on the extent to which one can obtain knowledge of that created intention in a fallen world. For Bavinck and Yoder, the question is not whether or not God had an original created intent that will be restored, it is a question of the degree of noetic access one has to God’s intention. While Yoder references Christ’s work as work of restoration, this theme is not as developed in Yoder’s thought as it is Bavinck’s.\footnote{While it remains a less developed theme in Yoder’s thought, it is still importantly different than some of the historic understandings of Anabaptism, as we’ve noted in Menno Simons.} Yoder’s understanding of Christ’s work of restoration is paired with his emphasis on the devastating effect of the fall on humanity’s ability to know something of God’s created intent; he stresses the latter more frequently. Thus, for Yoder, Christians can only know something of God’s created intention through Christ. On account of common grace, and his developed understanding of grace restoring nature, Bavinck emphasizes that we can still know something of God’s intent by looking to creation; Christians look to Christ and creation.

The sustained differences between Bavinck and Yoder on the question of the church and broader society flow from their respective interpretations of the way in which the imitation of Christ is an ethic for Christians. For both, the question is not whether imitating Christ is a claim for Christians, but the extent to which that can be understood outside the church. From this follows another question, the ways in which Christians ought to transform the broader society according to this ethic (again, we find that it is not a question of whether or not Christians ought to engage in cultural activity and transformation, but the extent to which, and the way in which, this activity should occur). Neither desires a Christendom model or the type of secularity that
Charles Taylor classifies as “secularity in terms of public spaces.” Both Bavinck and Yoder seek an alternative understanding of the relationship between the church and society, rooted in the imitation of Christ.

Finally, the disagreements that Bavinck and Yoder posit on the role of suffering in Christ’s life stem, at least in part, from the shared claim that the imitation of Christ is an all-encompassing ethic. Both desire to affirm the normativity of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for the whole of the Christian life. Their differences arise from a question out of this shared assertion: what are the ways in which suffering can speak to the whole of the Christian life – and how does suffering relate to the other virtues that Christ exemplified?

A Diverse Family Identity: Unique and Shared Affirmations on the Imitation of Christ

Appeals to the imitation of Christ have conjured up many different, often competing, visions of the Christian life throughout Christian history. In Yoder and Bavinck, we again see differing perspectives on the imitation of Christ. Bavinck understands the imitation of Christ to be grounded in the Ten Commandments; Yoder understands the imitation of Christ to be grounded in Jesus’ cross. But these two imitation ethics are not wholly other. The disagreements between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ ought to be viewed within their familial context. Affirming commonalities between the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, – the way in which both testify to Sola Scriptura as the starting point for ethical discourse, the ultimacy of the will, a relationship between the Old and New Testament characterized by promise and fulfillment, and a connection between the individual and the corporate – Mouw and Yoder have

1565 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard University Press, 2007), 2. In this understanding, public spaces are “emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality.”
1566 The enduring difference between the two on the nature of the atonement also affects the way both theologians understand the role of suffering in the Christian life.
1567 We have also seen, from Mouw and Yoder, the ways in which these questions are bound together with the broad themes of Anabaptist and Reformed theology, which are, again, “intra-family” debates.
articulated the theological basis for the shared family identity. Articulating a Yoderian doctrine of creation, Parler demonstrates further convergences between the two traditions: both desire to live out the Lordship of Christ, the one who restores creation, in the practical, daily realities of life. Building on these recognitions of the shared family identity between the Reformed and Anabaptists, we have argued that Bavinck and Yoder, as representatives of the two traditions, share important convictions relating to the imitation of Christ, a central motif in both thinker’s understandings of the Christian life. Both attest to the imitation of Christ as an ethic for Christians, an ethic that affirms the relationship between Christ and creation as one of restoration, an all of life encompassing ethic, and an ethic that is qualified, rejecting literal mimicry of Jesus. Thus, again, we have argued that the ongoing disputes and disagreements between Bavinck and Yoder on the imitation of Christ ought to be understood within their shared family identity.

Framing the conversation on the imitation of Christ in this way does not, however, downplay the reality that there are ongoing disagreements between the two. As with any family, differences between family members are not erased when the familial connection is established. While Bavinck and Yoder share many convictions, there remain broad differences between the two. The disagreements between the two can be seen in their articulation of the extent of sin and the noetic effects of sin; the two also maintain strong differences regarding the nature of the atonement and the relationship between justification and sanctification. Given this, we should not be surprised that even within a shared family identity, and common affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ, distinct and ongoing differences emerge from the two theologians.

The two differ in the biblical texts they draw upon to articulate the proper imitation of Christ. Bavinck begins with the Ten Commandments, then examines the Sermon on the Mount
which provides a concrete example of the application of these commandments. Yoder points to the cruciform narrative of the gospels. As a result, Bavinck and Yoder also differ on the determinative aspects of the imitation of Christ. For Bavinck, the Ten Commandments are the determining factor for what one may, and ought to, imitate in the life of Jesus.\textsuperscript{1568} Yoder argues that one only imitates Christ in his cross.

Bavinck and Yoder also differ in their understandings of postlapsarian noetic access to God’s created will in creation. Both affirm the reality that Christ restores creation,\textsuperscript{1569} but Yoder argues that the Christian can only look to Christ to know what is right, while Bavinck argues that one ought to look to Christ and creation. Given his theological framework, Yoder often stresses the newness of the work of Christ, alongside his work of restoration, while Bavinck stresses the continuity between Christ and creation. Again, this causes Yoder to point to only Christ to know what is right, while Bavinck points to the moral law and Christ. Not only do they disagree on where one can obtain ethical norms, the two theologians maintain differences on the imitable aspects of Jesus’ life. While both place the cross and suffering at the center of the Christian faith, Yoder, focused on the cross, argues that one must imitate Christ in his cruciform suffering and enemy love. Bavinck appeals to suffering \textit{alongside} other virtues that Jesus manifests throughout his life, death, and resurrection. He recognizes the role of not only suffering and “passive” virtues in the Christian life, but affirms that Christians must also imitate Christ in positive, or active, virtues.

Finally, Bavinck and Yoder differ on the means by which one seeks to transform society.

\textsuperscript{1568} To this, as we’ve seen, Bavinck later adds that one looks to the virtues that Jesus lives out, in accordance with the Ten Commandments.  
\textsuperscript{1569} As we have seen, while both affirm Christ’s restorative work, the theme is more developed and emphasized in Bavinck’s thought.
Both affirm, in Yoder’s words, a “transformationalist” approach to culture,\textsuperscript{1570} but due to Yoder’s emphasis humanity’s postlapsarian inability to know something of what God intends by looking to creation, he does not emphasize this transformation as a project that has elements of commonness with non-Christians. For Yoder, the posture of the church in the world is one of subversive witness. Christians are to contribute to the good of the city, but as a minority voice. Bavinck, who is less pessimistic regarding noetic abilities on account of God’s common grace, argues that the posture of the church is contextually sensitive; it may be a minority witness, but in other contexts, the church may also seek to actively transform and renew society. Bavinck’s understanding of common grace gives him unique theological resources to develop an emphasis on co-laboring with those who are not Christians, as he did with his work in politics. God still preserves and upholds his creational intentions in the world; on account of this, the imitation of Christ still has rational and ethical points of contact with those who are not united with Christ. Again, we find that Bavinck and Yoder, alongside their common affirmations, have ongoing theological and practical differences on the imitation of Christ.

Bavinck and Yoder maintain significant differences in their theological frameworks, including their interpretation of the noetic effects of sin;\textsuperscript{1571} alongside the common affirmations the two share, their disagreements result in significantly different applications of the imitation of Christ in the life of the Christian. For Bavinck, the Christian is to imitate the virtues of Christ in law-patterned obedience. For Yoder, the Christian is to imitate Jesus, the suffering servant, on the cross. The ramifications of the differences between Bavinck and Yoder are significant, but, as we have see, this does not mean the two cannot speak to one another, challenge the other, and refine the other.

\textsuperscript{1570} Yoder, “But We Do See Jesus,” 73.
\textsuperscript{1571} They also have differing interpretations of atonement, justification and sanctification.
Given their differences, we have explored the various critiques that Bavinck and Yoder raise toward one another. In these critiques, they testify to the common understandings that lay the foundation for a proper imitation ethic. Rather than seeing the two understandings of the imitation of Christ as incompatible, we ought to see them as part of the same family of imitation ethics. Their common affirmations are manifest in varying degrees in the claims made regarding the imitation of Christ; the disagreements between Bavinck and Yoder often arise from these differing degrees. Neither, for example, claims that the imitation of Christ shields the church from engagement and transformation in the broader society. Rather, Bavinck and Yoder differ on the manner and application of this engagement and transformation. Does an ethic for Christians have broader receptivity and understanding within society? Or can the church simply testify to another way of living in its internal praxis and practice? In both Bavinck and Yoder, there is a strong commitment to the imitation of Christ as an ethic for Christians and an ethic that impacts the broader society. The disagreement between the two does not negate either of these commitments. Rather, it highlights the discord, sometimes pragmatic, between the two, stemming from shared theological affirmations. What seem to be opposing, even competing, understandings of the imitation of Christ are actually two understandings of the imitation of Christ from within the same family. Thus, we have good reason to think that these perspectives can not only speak to one another, but they can contribute to one another. The affirmation of the relationship between the two motifs for the imitation of Christ, rather than polarized competition.

Similarly, the two have important differences related to their stress on creation and Christ. Both affirm that Jesus restores God’s original, good created order. But they differ in their application of that shared theological affirmation. Bavinck affirms that grace restores nature presently, and cosmically – though this restoration will not be fully seen until Christ’s second coming. Yoder similarly attests to Christ’s work as one of restoration, but his focus for that restoration is primarily eschatological. For the Christian, following Christ, one anticipates Christ’s future rule and lives in a way that anticipates God’s coming kingdom, a restoration of God’s created intent. These differences have significant implications for Christian engagement in the world, but we ought not see them as merely opposing one another in theology and practice.
between the two, contributes an important insight to evangelical social ethics: dominant ethical perspectives that can seem to work against one another have much in common with one another.

**Bavinck and Yoder in Dialogue: A Bridge Across North American Evangelical Divisions**

While the dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder does not attend to the vast pluriformity of the appeals to the imitation of Christ within evangelicalism, it does attend to two major theological traditions which contribute significantly to evangelical social ethics. These two traditions, Anabaptist and Reformed, have been broadly characterized as withdrawal and transformation; and their patterns of imitation have followed suit. These broad caricatures, of course, do not represent the specifics of either tradition well, but have manifest popularly among evangelicals. Yoder does not advocate for withdraw, but contends that the church must imitate Christ as a minority witness to the broader society. Likewise, Bavinck does not advocate for triumphalistic cultural transformation, but contends that in some cultural contexts, alongside the “passive” virtues of Christ, Christians must imitate Jesus in his active virtues, seeking to reform and renew the world. We can find many popular examples of evangelicals who take these charges seriously. The question that emerges, within evangelical social action, is one of the relationship between these postures in social ethics.

If we understand Bavinck and Yoder to be articulating opposing views of the imitation of Christ, as they may initially seem, we will necessarily understand these popular evangelical stances to be similarly opposed. But, the contention that Bavinck and Yoder’s disputes over the imitation of Christ are familial disputes suggests the potential for more commonality among evangelical postures than initially appears; articulating the commonalities between Bavinck and Yoder enables us to build theological bridges among differing evangelical positions, amidst

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1573 Jerry Falwell’s appeal to the imitation of Christ (mentioned above), for example, would not fall into a broadly Bavinckian or Yoderian category.
continued disagreement. Examples of differing positions are many; here we will briefly look to four popular models of cultural engagement and imitation, espoused by Rod Dreher, Stanley Hauerwas, Tim Keller, and John Inazu.

Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option*, described by New York Times Columnist David Brooks as “already the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade” posits the need for Christian counterculture in a post-Christian world, a posture often characterized as withdrawal and retreat.\(^{1574}\) Dreher’s project is one of “strategic withdrawal,”\(^{1575}\) with a caution against isolationism; in his own words, Dreher describes the Benedict option in this way:

> We are only trying to build a Christian way of life that stands as an island of sanctity and stability amid the high tide of liquid modernity. We are not looking to create heaven on earth; we are simply looking for a way to be strong in faith through a time of great testing. The Rule, with its vision of an ordered life centered around Christ and the practices it prescribes to deepen our conversion, can help us achieve that goal.\(^{1576}\)

This posture has many practical commonalities with the Anabaptist position, although Jonathan Tran identifies clear theological differences between Dreher and Hauerwas, who was heavily influenced by Yoder. Describing the difference between the two, Tran writes:

> Even though Hauerwas’s vision emphasizes the life of the church, it does not espouse the church’s withdrawal, for it could not without relinquishing the critical proximity the church needs in order to serve and influence the world. Hauerwas’ work is best described as a theology of witness, where the political stakes have to do with the church as a distinct but not sequestered type of politics. Withdrawal gives all of that up. Because the drift of Dreher’s *Benedict Option* is less witness, less about serving and influencing the world, and more about protecting Christianity’s own moral integrity, it then makes withdrawal, insofar as it is a principled and strategic retreat, a live option for Christianity.\(^{1577}\)

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\(^{1576}\) Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 54.

Like Yoder, Hauerwas understands the role of the church as one of witness. The church is distinct, but does not withdraw from society. The distinctive practices of the church are the way in which it engages in the public square; the church is a witness to “the kind of social life possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ.” Dreher’s thought, while distinct, is congruous with much of the countercultural witness that Hauerwas describes.

Not all popular evangelical postures posit the primary mode of cultural engagement as distinctive witness. John Inazu and Tim Keller are two well-known evangelicals who, instead, advocate for a robust sense of pluralism where practical partnerships in the midst of deep differences are possible. Both are committed to active cultural engagement, with postures that bear both practical and theological commonalities to Bavinck’s position; indeed, aspects of their postures are drawn from the theological wells of neo-Calvinism, among other traditions. In a co-written article for Christianity Today, Inazu and Keller expound on “How Christians Can Bear Gospel Witness in an Anxious Age.” Unlike Hauerwas, though, this witness is constituted of the church working with neighbors and cities who deeply disagree with the gospel message and the distinct message and posture of the church. Drawing on Jeremiah’s message in Jeremiah 29:7, they argue that the people of God are to “build up the social fabric for their common well-

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1578 See, for example: Stanley Hauerwas, With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2001) and Hauerwas’ often quoted claim: “the first task of the church is not to make the world more just but to make the world the world” (Stanley Hauerwas, “How to Write a Theological Sentence,” Religion and Ethics, September 26, 2013. http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/09/26/3856546.htm).
1579 Hauerwas, A Community of Character, 1981), 11. Hauerwas is explicit that posture is not withdrawal. He writes: “My call for Christians to recover the integrity of the church as integral to our political witness does not entail that Christians must withdraw from the economic, cultural, legal, and political life of our society. it does mean, however, that the form of our participation will vary given the nature of the societies in which we find ourselves” (Stanley Hauerwas, “Why the “Sectarian Temptation” Is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson (1988),” in The Hauerwas Reader, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 104; emphasis original).
1580 For examples of their posture of active cultural engagement see: John Inazu, Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) and Timothy Keller, Center Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2012).
This entails active engagement in, and partnership with, the surrounding community; Keller and Inazu call this “confident pluralism.” Of this position, they write:

Our engagement in the world in an anxious age is made possible by our confidence in the gospel in a pluralistic society where people have profoundly different beliefs. We won’t always be able to persuade those around us that our beliefs are right and theirs are wrong. Indeed, some of our most important beliefs stem from contested premises that others do not share. But recognizing the existence of these disagreements should not prevent us from holding to what is ultimately true. Our beliefs can be true, and we can hold these warranted beliefs confidently even though others reject them. For this reason, recognizing the social fact of difference should not be mistaken as relativism. To the contrary, a greater awareness of our distinctiveness that comes from confidence in the gospel can encourage us to work to strengthen the social fabric for the good of others. . . . We can seek common ground even with those who may not share our view of the common good.1582

Theirs is a posture that actively seeks to engage those who surround the church. The example of Christ leads the believer directly into society, a position that is reminiscent of Bavinck.

Like Yoder and Bavinck, when we examine Hauerwas – and Dreher – alongside other prominent evangelical perspectives, such as Tim Keller and John Inazu, the differences are immediately apparent. The perspectives of Inazu, Keller, Dreher, and Hauerwas are not unknown to the other. In fact, John Inazu responded to Dreher’s “Benedict Option,” beginning with these words “I agree with much of Rod Dreher’s cultural diagnosis, though we differ in posture and tone.”1583 But is that all we can say? That despite deep differences in approach – and there are


1582 Inazu and Keller, “How Christians Can Bear Gospel Witness in an Anxious Age.” In this last sentence, the difference between Inazu, Keller and Hauerwas becomes clear. Contrary to Inazu and Keller’s appeal to common ground, Hauerwas writes: “The more theologians seek to find the means to translate theological convictions into terms acceptable to the non-believer, the more they substantiate the view that theology has little of importance to say in the area of ethics” (Stanley Hauerwas, “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological,” in The Hauerwas Reader, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 69). See also Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony (Nashville, Abington, 1989), 25. In this work, the point is made even more directly; Hauerwas and Willimon ask if the meanings of terms like “justice” can really be found in appeals to common ground. Are the Christian meanings of these terms understandable apart from the life of Jesus? 1583 John Inazu, “The Benedict Option Falls Short of Real Pluralism,” Christianity Today, March 2, 2017. https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/february-web-only/benedict-option-should-include-muslims-too.html.
indeed substantive differences – that the various theologians and practitioners we surveyed agree on their diagnosis? Surely this is so, but our examination of Yoder and Bavinck leads us to wonder if we cannot find even more common ground, while affirming the real differences that remain. Hauerwas, Keller, Inazu – and even Dreher to some extent – all draw upon the same theological affirmations that we find in Bavinck and Yoder. Here, we find steadfast agreement on the nature of following Christ as a call for Christians, where Christ is the one who will, in the end, restore all things to their destiny. Imitating Christ, Christians ought to seek engagement with and transformation of, toward that creational end, the public square. These shared theological foundations give us reason to think that these perspectives, as different as they may be, share common ground; they have between them a theological bridge. This theological bridge allows these perspectives, which can seem contradictory and competing, the ability to both contribute to the other and even work together. The difference between these positions is not insignificant, but viewed this way, we can see aspects of this as discord that stem from strategic differences, not wholly other presuppositions.1584 Uncovering the theological bridges between seemingly opposing postures for evangelical social engagement is an important contribution that a dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder can contribute to evangelical social ethics. As we identify the ways in which Bavinck and Yoder are similar, we can apply those insights to the popular models in evangelicalism today that draw upon these theologians and their traditions.

We can, finally, press the idea of Bavinck and Yoder’s understandings of the imitation of Christ working together in dialogue even further, albeit in broad, suggestive strokes. We have

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1584 This is not an assertion that all evangelical appeals to the imitation of Christ have this theological bridge between them, however; here, we have limited our scope to those that share common roots with Bavinckian and Yoderian approaches. There are also aspects of the disagreement that are not merely strategic. We have identified, for example, the differences between Bavinck and Yoder on justification and sanctification. Bavinck understands a necessary distinction between the two, while Yoder does not. This has important theological implications for understanding the way in which we ought to live out Christian faith.
affirmed that the imitation motifs are part of the same family; they are not as polarized as one may initially assume. Not only can they work in tandem, but– both in their shared affirmations and their critiques of the other – we can explore the ways that Bavinck and Yoder’s understandings of the imitation of Christ, together, can contribute to a Reformed understanding of the imitation of Christ in the twenty-first century.

“What is Missing?” Bavinck’s Challenges and Correctives to Yoder

This dissertation has argued that the dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder’s understandings of the imitation of Christ is a fruitful one. The two, despite initially seeming opposed to one another, posit articulations of the proper imitation of Christ that share important, common affirmations. On account of this, there is ample room for dialogue. The two understandings can meet one another in their shared affirmations, while critiquing and challenging the other on account of the areas of continued difference.

Dialogue between the two theologians is not a theoretical endeavor; it is one that, as we have seen, can bear tangible fruit within modern, North American evangelical discourse, which is rife with applications of, and arguments around, the imitation of Christ. Differing understandings of the imitation of Christ are concretized in real world applications of the theme. Bavinck and Yoder’s own life and work testify to this fact. The two, holding imitation of Christ as a central theme in the life of the believer, apply the theme in radically different ways. Bavinck applies this theme within the diverse spheres of life, including marriage, economics, and politics. The gospel, he argues, is not only a pearl of great price, but it is a leaven in the world. It bears “much valuable fruit for all of society.”

 Truly imitating Christ, he argues, “does not consist in copying him, in replicating him, in imitating his life and teaching but is found in the inner

\[1585\] Bavinck, “CPSR,” 141.
conversion of the heart, which gives us a true desire and choice to walk according to all, not just some, of God’s commandments in spirit and truth.” Christians do this in “family, society, the state, occupation, business, agriculture, industry, commerce, science, art, and so forth.” The Christian is actively involved in all of these spheres of life, for grace restores nature; as Bavinck often reminds his readers, the gospel “opposes only sin.” Law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ – including sustained attention to Christ’s positive virtues – drove Bavinck into all spheres of life, as an imitator of Jesus. The imprints of Bavinck’s’ theology are found in many areas, including political think tanks like the Center for Public Justice, which seeks to equip citizens to “serve God, advance justice, and transform public life.” For Yoder, the imitation of Christ drove him to a different posture in society. While he similarly affirmed the transformative effect of the gospel in the world, Yoder championed a posture of subversive, creative witness for the church. Rather than being actively involved in politics, for example, the Christian was most often going to witness to the state. Most often, Yoder argued, the Christian witnesses to the political process from the outside. The influence of Yoder’s affirmation of the distinct, transformative, nonviolent, public discipleship can be similarly seen in organizations like Evangelicals for Social Action, who seek to make Jesus’ “radical love . . . visible.”

But as we noted, there are also troubling aspects to the concrete influence of Yoder and his theology. Reflecting on Yoder’s patterns of abuse, which were both startlingly consistent and frustratingly inconsistent with his theological framework, Hauerwas asked an important question: what was missing that allowed Yoder to make such grave mistakes? We see in Yoder’s

1586 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 132.
1587 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 142.
1588 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 143.
1589 https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/about_us
1590 https://www.evangelicalsfor社alaction.org/about-esa/
legacy, again, the particular and tangible ways that one’s imitation ethic is concretized in practice. Hauerwas’ answers to his own question, what was missing, are perceptive and instructive. He argues that Yoder’s theology was missing attention to the virtues and the “question of ‘the natural.’”1591 From the beginning, we have argued that Yoder and Bavinck are constructive voices on the imitation of Christ in dialogue together. In the missing accents of Yoder’s theology, we again see why this is the case. Yoder’s imitation ethic has had astounding and important influence in North American evangelical thought and action. But Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ attends to the missing pieces, or less accentuated aspects, of Yoder’s thought in a corrective manner.

Bavinck’s commitment to the imitation of Christ as the heart of the Christian life is an integral aspect of his theological framework, which is trinitarian, Christ-centered, and culturally engaged. The Christian follows Christ in law-patterned imitation of his virtues. Each piece of Bavinck’s formula for a proper imitation of Christ aids us in establishing a foundation for Christian ethics that incorporates both nature, or creation, and virtue, critical aspects that Hauerwas has pointed us towards. The first piece of Bavinck’s understanding of the proper imitation of Christ, “the Christian”: imitation of Christ presupposes union with Christ;1592 “our lives can be directed to Christ only when they proceed from him and abide in him.”1593 Second, “law-patterned,”: the imitation of Christ is rooted in God’s creational norms and will; “The Ten Commandments form the constitution of a life of obedience to God and, in the final analysis, determine that which may and must not be imitated in the life of Jesus.”1594 The imitation of Christ is grounded in creation. Grace, as Bavinck often insists, restores nature; therefore, we can

1591 Hauerwas, “In Defense of ‘Our Respectable Culture.’”
1592 As we have shown, Yoder also affirms the imitation of Christ as a uniquely Christian charge.
1593 Bavinck, GE, 288; emphasis original.
1594 Bavinck, Imitation I, 400.
know something of, and explore the created order. Christ work restores God’s creational intent, he does not set it aside. And, third, the imitation of Christ is an “imitation of Christ’s virtues”: the imitation of Christ looks to Jesus’ virtues. In this affirmation, Bavinck provides a theological framework for imitating the whole of Jesus’ life, and understanding both context and inner desires, habits, capacities, and passions.

For Bavinck, the Ten Commandments dictate how one applies the ethical motif of imitating Christ. Thus, to know what it is to imitate Christ, Christians must be tutored by the law, which properly directs and orients the imitation of the virtues of Christ. Bavinck’s understanding of the relationship between imitation, law (creation), and virtue provides concrete norms for imitation that could function positively as a bolster for the imitation ethics of Yoder—providing the type of reflection on virtues and “the natural” that Hauerwas points towards—and negatively as a guard against the dangerous application of “newness,” “freedom of the Gospel,” and distinctive practices of the Christian community within Yoder’s theology that allowed for his abuses. Bavinck’s grounding of the imitation of Christ in creation and law provides an important framework to respond to “what is missing” in Yoder’s understanding of imitating Christ.

Bavinck articulates an imitation ethic that affirms both the creational, normative will of God and the pedagogical, exemplary function of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. God’s creational will is taught in the law, and concretely illustrated in the life of Christ. The Christian is

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1595 Bavinck’s affirmation of the generous gift of God’s common grace also undergirds this theological assertion.
1596 See the reflections of Cramer, Howell, Martens, and Tran on Yoder’s understanding of “newness” within his radical theology, Cramer, Howell, Tran, and Martens, “Scandalizing John Howard Yoder” and Goossen, “Defanging the Beast,” 7-80. Yoder, in his application of following Christ’s example that led to his abuses (using the example of Jesus to appeal to the “freedom of the Gospel” in his “ experimentation;” see Goossen, “Defanging the Beast,” 24) displays strikingly individualistic interpretations of what Jesus might do, and how one can thus follow the example of Christ in their own life. Bavinck’s emphasis on law grounds the imitation of Christ, giving the motif a strong tether to creational norms. This tether could have the potential to mitigate against such individualistic applications, as seen in Yoder.
called to follow Christ as he follows the law, imitating his virtues. The theological framework that Bavinck provides attends to the missing pieces that Hauerwas identifies in Yoder’s theology: creation and virtue. While providing a beautiful picture of the lawful ordering of creation, Reformed theologians have often struggled to articulate the role of Christ in Christian ethics. Bavinck offers an instructive, articulate vision of the proper imitation of Christ, one that upholds Christ and creation, virtue and law, protology and eschatology.

**Not Just Bavinck, But Yoder: The Correctives Yoder Offers to the Neo-Calvinist Tradition**

“What is missing?” is not only a significant question in the face of moral failings; it is an important question for any theological framework. Lest we hold Bavinck up as an unattainable, un-human ideal of theology without any deficits or need of refining, we can likewise look to the ways that Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ provides important correctives and challenges. Yoder’s stress on the distinctive practices of Christ and his church can further press a Bavinckian understanding of the imitation of Christ to articulate what exactly it means that Jesus “comes into the world with the newness of his person and work.”

While Bavinck thoroughly upholds the importance of the imitation of Christ, he still is prone to stress continuity and restoration over newness. As James K.A. Smith reminds us, one of the things Reformed Christians need to continue to learn from the Anabaptist tradition is that “Jesus matters.” Bavinck has significant resources here, but Yoder’s work can continue to challenge and refine his insights.

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1597 Bavinck, “CPSR,” 131; this is especially true given that Bavinck’s theology is grounded in a robust understanding of creational norms, which both may hinder an understanding of the newness of Jesus, but also dissuade troubling and wrong applications of the distinctiveness that we have seen in Yoder’s practice.

1598 Bavinck grapples with the relationship between continuity and newness in many places, including “General Biblical Principles,” where he writes: In the fullness of time, the old dispensation gave way to the new; its essence remained, but its form changed—when the body comes, the shadows disappear. Now the law is not simply abrogated and set aside, but it is fulfilled in Christ and in this way reaches its own end.” (Bavinck, “General Biblical Principles,” 443).

Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ also provides important correctives and challenges to the impulses of Bavinck’s theological heirs, the contemporary North American neo-Calvinist tradition as they apply the imitation of Christ in social ethics today. The dialogue between Bavinck and Yoder is a fruitful one, not only on account of the methodological and theological similarities that we have uncovered between the two, but also for the ways in which Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ challenges the contemporary application of Bavinck’s insights. Without negating the key theological insights that Bavinck brings to the imitation of Christ (his emphasis on common grace, grace restoring nature, union with Christ, relationship between law and virtue, and the importance of context), we can look to Yoder to add complementary and constructive insights. Here, we will highlight three of the ways in which Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ can instruct and correct contemporary neo-Calvinist application of the theme.

Relating Piety and Practice

*To Be Near Unto God,* a collection of Abraham Kuyper’s meditations, contains an apt warning for twenty-first century neo-Calvinists. In these meditations, he cautions that keen theological insights devoid of fellowship with the living God produce “beautifully shaped, finely cornered and dazzlingly transparent ice-crystals. But underneath that ice the stream of the living water so easily runs dry.” proper intellectual knowledge of God must be accompanied by personal piety. Similarly, in his sixth Stone Lecture, “Calvinism and the Future,” Kuyper warns that “a Christianity that neglects the mystic element grows frigid and congeals.” He not only cautions against the danger of intellectualism, but also cautions against cultural engagement that is devoid of piety. Both cultural engagement and intellectualism may be attractive and

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1601 Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism,* 188.
compelling, but neither can be sustained without a deep personal piety, communion with the one true God.

Kuyper repeatedly cautions against a faith system that is devoid of piety. In To Be Near Unto God, Kuyper contends that “the mystic has something to learn from the methodist, and the methodist from the mystic. Only from the impulse of both does blessed harmony arise.” One without the other cannot continue to be sustainable; cultural engagement, however sophisticated and impactful, cannot continue to exist without piety. In these excerpts, and many other meditations, we find Kuyper, a man of deep engagement in many spheres, consistently emphasizing the need for personal piety. This is seen in his writings, and his practice. Kuyper’s life was marked by fervent prayer and deep devotion. Profound theological insights, public life, and personal piety must exist together.

Kuyper warns his readers and listeners of the dangers of a world and life view devoid of piety, warnings that seem especially prescient when we look to his twenty-first century heirs, often eager to wholeheartedly engage in public life and transformative activities without a robust emphasis on piety. Al Wolters describes the emphasis on transformation, to the detriment of piety within modern neo-Calvinists in this way:

Generally speaking, neocalvinists are more noted for their intellectual ability and culture-transforming zeal than for their personal godliness or their living relationship with Jesus Christ. This is of course not to suggest that there is some kind of inherent tension between intellectuality and spirituality, but only that the neocalvinist polemic against a pietistic otherworldliness can have the unfortunate effect of throwing out the godly baby with the pietistic bathwater.

Engaged in their broad vision for the Christian life, intellectual prowess, and culture-engaging call, neo-Calvinists have lacked an emphasis on piety, to their deep detriment.

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1602 Kuyper, To Be Near Unto God, 95.
Kuyper’s followers have done exactly what Kuyper warned them against.

Following Christ in the call to cultural engagement necessitates nurturing a life of piety; there is a necessary link between communion with God and cultural engagement, one that Kuyper’s followers have often ignored. Put another way, imitating Christ in the task of reforming and renewing the world necessitates cultivating quiet moments of piety and devotion. Neo-Calvinists have often been quick to brush past the stillness, rushing toward the action of cultural engagement. The antidote to the neglect of modern neo-Calvinists can be found, of course, in Kuyper’s own words. His warnings and his example are rich with the remedy for our foibles.

The remedy is also present within Bavinck’s own words. Bavinck stresses the primacy of unio mystica, or union with Christ in the imitation of Christ. Only when one is united with Christ can one imitate Christ. For Bavinck, conformity with Christ, and thus conformity with the law, flows from union with Christ. Faithful discipleship, personal and corporate, is only possible on account of union with Christ. The primacy on spiritual union with Christ is also seen in the way Bavinck consistently draws upon Jesus’ parables in Matthew 13: for the gospel to be a leaven, we must prioritize the pearl. Cultural transformation must be accompanied by a deep-rooted, pious assurance in the gospel and communion with the living Christ. Imitating Christ in his passive and active virtues necessitates union with Christ. Again, Bavinck’s emphasis on the need for piety and union with Christ can be seen in his repeated cautions against a sole emphasis on cultural engagement is seen. He writes, in 1901: “Although Christians in older times neglected the world around them, we run the risk of losing ourselves in the world;” later, in 1918, he similarly stresses the need for piety: “Do we not run the risk that we, with all our increased
knowledge and cultural insight, will forget [what sin and grace are].” Union with Christ must be primary; cultural engagement flows from this union. Like Kuyper, Bavinck’s stress on the need for piety and cultural engagement—and warnings against severing the two—is consistent.

It can be, however, hard to take heed from the warnings and wisdom of those who brought us up. Neo-Calvinists have intently studied the words of both Bavinck and Kuyper, and still fallen into the snares of dichotomizing action and piety. This is not to suggest, by any means, that we ought not go back to Bavinck and Kuyper for instruction and correction. By no means! Attention to all of the emphases of Bavinck and Kuyper is necessary for those who find themselves engaged in their ongoing project and tradition. But sometimes it can be helpful to hear the reminder of another, someone from outside one’s own traditions that can add a corrective to internal oversights. John Howard Yoder, in his emphases on the imitation of Christ can be one of those correctives.

Yoder, in his radical understanding of the spiritual and political nature of the mission and ministry of Christ, negates any notion of tension between spirituality and action. Instead, living a life of devotion to Jesus necessarily involves culture engaging activity (albeit in a different form than Yoder and Bavinck would posit). Piety and ethics, for Yoder, go hand in hand. One must meditate on, and cultivate the practices of Jesus, in community, and enact them as a public witness. Neo-Calvinists would do well to attend to Yoder’s emphasis on meditating on the suffering of Christ which is necessarily tied to personal and social action. For Yoder, the two go

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1604 Herman Bavinck and Henk van den Belt, Geloofszekerheid (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2017), 96, 256. “Terwijl de christenen in vroeger dagen om zichzelf de wereld vergaten, lopen wij gevar in de wereld onszelf te verliezen;” “En lopen wij wel eens niet het gevaar, dat wij, bij al onze toegenomen kennis en cultureel inzicht, dat ene gaan vergaten.”

1605 It is important to note here, once again, that this is the goal of Yoder’s theology. The moral failings of Yoder highlight the ways in which these became unmoored from communal norms in his own life and practice. In light of these failures, we can once again affirm that Bavinck’s necessary theological connection between the imitation of Christ, virtues, and the law is instructive and corrective in the case of Yoder’s failures.
hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other.

**Contextual Analysis in the Twenty-First Century**

It is not simply in the modern-day neo-Calvinist’s lack of attention to the relationship between piety and practice, however, that Yoder offers an important insight into the imitation of Christ. One of the significant insights that Bavinck brings into his discussion of the imitation of Christ, especially in his later essays on the imitation of Christ, is the necessity of a clear-eyed, wise analysis of one’s own cultural context in order to faithfully apply the imitation of Christ. As a North American theologian in the late twentieth century, Yoder’s work contains insightful commentary on the context within which present day North American neo-Calvinists apply Bavinck’s insight that one’s context affects the way in which one imitates Christ.

With this insight, Bavinck affirms that the imitation of Christ is not simply a laundry list of activities and virtues that the believer must take up in their life. It is not a rote application of a static ideal. Rather, the believer is to see Christ’s life as a concrete application of the moral law, in a particular context. Therefore, imitating Christ means, first, grasping the way in which Christ applied in his own context and second, applying Christ’s own application to one’s unique context. While the normative status of the law does not waver, nor do the virtues that one can embody to live out the call of the law change, what virtues one exercises can and may change depending on one’s circumstances. Bavinck concretely illustrates his point by identifying the posture of the early church, focused primarily on passive virtues (humility, suffering, etc.). These were the virtues called for in their environment as they experienced persecution for their faith. The church in Bavinck’s time, however, experienced no such persecution. Therefore, alongside the passive virtues that the early church exemplified, the church in Bavinck’s time was to also take up active virtues. It is not only cultural context that demands careful analysis to determine
which virtues the believer is called to imitate; the life circumstances of the believer also
influence the application of the virtues of Christ. The virtues concretely illustrated in the life of
Christ, taught in the Sermon on the Mount, and rooted in the law, Bavinck argues
remain powerful through the ages and retain their validity in all circumstances. Naturally
the application will vary depending upon circumstances. Although all are subject to one
and the same moral law the duties under that law vary considerably. It is different for the
civil authorities than for subjects, for parents than for children, for the rich than for the
poor, and it will be different in times of prosperity than in times of poverty, in days of
health than in days of illness. Thus while the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls
us are the same, circumstances may modify the application.\footnote{1606}

To take Bavinck’s insights on the imitation of Christ seriously, we must undergo a careful
cultural analysis. For North American neo-Calvinists in the twenty-first century, again, Yoder is
an important voice.\footnote{1607}

In his books, essays, and lectures, Yoder identifies many of the enduring temptations in
our world: violence, conformity to the political ideologies of the day, retribution, the seduction
of power, and more. For Yoder, the imitation of Christ demands a distinctly other practice, one
of radical non-violence and revolutionary subordination.\footnote{1608} The Christian is to follow Christ in
his cross. Yoder’s keen insights into the temptations facing Christians aids us in our attempt, as
is instructed in Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, to carefully consider the
cultural context in which we find ourselves. In his reflections on the cultural context of
Bavinck’s colleague, Abraham Kuyper, Ad de Bruijne also stresses the importance of context for

\footnote{1606} Bavinck, Imitation II, 438. Bavinck raises the specific, and timely, example of war in his description of the way
in which the application of virtues differed based on context.
\footnote{1607} See also Ad de Bruijne, “‘A Banner That Flies Across This Land’: An Interpretation and Evaluation of Dutch
Evangelical Political Awareness Since the End of the Twentieth Century,” in Evangelical Theology in Transition,
argues that neo-Calvinist political theology needs continued refinement. In this project, “Anabaptist notions are
indispensable . . . the Anabaptist approach possesses a key position within the current and on-going politico-
theological debate.”
\footnote{1608} This posture flows from his Anabaptist tradition, and is a normative posture within that tradition, rather than
simply a response to the contemporary context. While the same would not be true in Bavinck’s thought, the
perceptive analysis from Yoder of the contemporary context is critical in light of Bavinck’s understanding of the
role of context in the application of the virtues of Christ.
understanding and applying Kuyper’s political thought, today:

Kuyper’s ideal of a Christian Netherlands was related to his immediate context and cannot be viewed, as later Neo-Calvinists or contemporary admirers do, as a generally applicable political strategy. Between the lines, Kuyper even indicates a period when this ideal should be abandoned. At the end of history, the public value of Christian truth shall seem to vanish. There will be a final battle in which all the fruit of progressive common grace will seem lost. The church then survives as a persecuted minority in a society that it can no longer influence with Christian values. To pass through the last storm of time, Christians will retreat back into the shelter of the institution.  

For Kuyper, de Bruijne argues, the role of the church in the public square changes based on the context within which the church finds itself. This sounds remarkably similar to Bavinck’s contention regarding the imitation of Christ. The ideals of neo-Calvinism are not static; the theological foundations of neo-Calvinism, rather, need to be applied according to one’s context. Both Bavinck and Kuyper, in different ways, attest to this fact. De Bruijne, in his analysis of how neo-Calvinists ought to apply Kuyperian principles in the public square today, also points to the importance of Anabaptist themes. He argues that “Kuyper himself would likely adopt typically ‘Anabaptist’ characteristics.” For Yoder, these characteristics bear a significant resemblance to the virtues Bavinck classifies as “passive” virtues in his discussion of the imitation of Christ. Yoder stresses these virtues, instead of the active virtues that Bavinck affirms in his own cultural context.  

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1609 de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 109.  
1610 Of the contemporary context, de Bruijne writes: “Meanwhile, new ‘culture wars’ were erupting in the United States. Moreover, the a-religious form of secularism passed its peak and we began to experience a new religiosity, as a matter of fact primarily in oriental dress. . . . It was no longer appropriate to engage in an interim struggle for the identity of culture. Christians must now primarily survive and, for this purpose, them must temporarily retreat and strengthen the institutional church” (de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 110-111).  
1611 de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 111.  
1612 Cornelis van der Kooi similarly points out the importance of context in reading and understanding of Bavinck. While not negating the significance of Bavinck’s thought in twenty-first century theological discourse, van der Kooi reminds us that “Bavinck’s theology is situated in the nineteenth century and that his work contains some of the features of that century.” One of the results of this, van der Kooi argues, is that Bavinck “was deeply impressed by the facts of the modernization of the society and concerned about the cultural effects that these changes in society have for Christian faith and theology” (van der Kooi, “Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth on Christian Faith and Culture,” 72).
political theology, have been too eager to simply transport the postures Bavinck and Kuyper in the early twentieth century into the twenty-first, without significant attention to the change in cultural context. While this ought not necessarily entail a loss of stress on the positive virtues, North American neo-Calvinists have often focused wholly on these virtues. Looking to Yoder’s analysis of the contemporary context neo-Calvinists may gain important insights, and a renewed appreciation for the passive virtues within the imitation of Christ.

Attending to the emphases of Yoder calls neo-Calvinist to a rekindled focus on the role of the so-called “passive virtues” alongside the active virtues of cultural engagement. In a recent essay in the *Public Justice Review*, a journal of the Kuyperian think tank, the Center for Public Justice, Kevin den Dulk, professor of Political Science at Calvin College, emphasizes the way in which cultivating humility, a virtue which has perhaps been overlooked by some in the neo-Calvinist camp whose posture leans more towards triumphalistic social engagement, is necessary in public policy. This essay underscores the way in which a Yoderian critique, focused on the passive virtues of Christ, is apt.

Den Dulk clearly identifies the pit-falls of a triumphalistic posture, with this diagnosis: “by presuming that God must be on their side, triumphalists almost always underestimate social complexity and overestimate the human capacity to address it.” Den Dulk’s diagnosis echoes the critique that Yoder raises towards the Reformed tradition imitation of Christ: it needs to take more seriously the cosmic, continued action of the Powers in the world and the detrimental effects of the fall in human capacity. While not abandoning the call to actively engage in cultural transformation, den Dulk’s solution is to point readers towards the passive virtue of humility.

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1613 See, again, Al Wolters incisive analysis of the “culture-transforming zeal” of present day neo-Calvinists in “What is to be Done . . . Toward a Neocalvinist Agenda?”

These virtues have received significantly less consideration among many neo-Calvinists. Sustained attention to, and dialogue with, Yoder’s understanding of the imitation of Christ point us toward a fuller appreciation for, and recognition of, the passive virtues of the imitation of Christ, even if the Reformed imitation of Christ does not, in the end, view cultural transformation as only stemming from the witness of the church.

**Common Grace and the “Otherness” of Christians**

Bavinck contends that the “negative and passive virtues” of the early church were no longer sufficient in a different cultural context. To these, the church was to add positive virtues, “reforming and renewing the world.” Bavinck is not the only neo-Calvinist to stress these virtues. In his inaugural address at the Vrije Universiteit, Kuyper famously declared: “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry: “Mine!” These words, affirming Christ’s kingship over all of life, have led neo-Calvinists to follow the call of Christ into every area of social, cultural, and political life. Confidently following the call of Christ into every square inch, neo-Calvinists have formed labor unions, school systems, farmer’s federations, radio stations, newspapers, and other organizations and associations; they have faithfully served as teachers, home-makers, journalists, psychologists, politicians, carpenters, electricians, medical professionals, administrators, and more. In each of these areas of life, neo-Calvinists have sought to discover what it means to imitate Christ, working towards God’s restorative purposes in all of creation.

Bavinck and Kuyper preach that the call to follow Christ propels Christians into all spheres of the world. In his 1918 essay on the imitation of Christ, the same essay where Bavinck

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1615 Bavinck, Imitation II, 424.
affirms the positive call of the church to renew and reform the world, he clearly connects the imitation of Christ to the good gifts of God in creation, through God’s continued upholding of the creation, or, common grace: “All good and perfect gifts come down from the Father of lights who satisfies the hearts of men with food and gladness (James 1:17; Acts 14:17).” Bavinck expands upon the same theme, in an essay on common grace:

Consequently, traces of the image of God continue in mankind. Understanding and reason remain, and he possesses all sorts of natural gifts. In him dwells a feeling, a notion of the Godhead, a seed of religion. Reason is a precious gift of God and philosophy a praeclarum Dei donum [splendid gift of God]. Music too is God's gift. The arts and sciences are good, useful, and of great value. The state is an institution of God. The goods of life do not just serve to provide for man's needs in the strict sense; they also serve to make life pleasant. They are not purely ad necessitatatem [for necessity]; they are also ad oblectamentum [for delight]. Men still have a sense of the truth and of right and wrong; we see the natural love that binds parents and children together. In the things which appertain to this earthly life, man can still accomplish much good. In spite of the extremely strict discipline that Calvin instituted in Geneva, he shows no hesitation in acknowledging these facts with gratitude. . . he eagerly grants it, second to none in expressing heartfelt gratitude. Had he not fully acknowledged these good and perfect gifts from the Father of Lights, he would have been in conflict with Scripture and guilty of gross ingratitude.

Following the example of Christ is not opposed to the world; it is only opposed to sin. Imitating Christ, who has claimed every square inch, Christians are to go out into the world. God still preserves and upholds his creational intentions in the world, thus, the imitation of Christ has rational and ethical points of contact, even to those who are not united with Christ. But some modern neo-Calvinists have overemphasized these points of contact, negating substantive

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1617 Bavinck, Imitation II, 427; cf. 432.
1619 In the full quote regarding the “Father of lights” in Bavinck’s later imitation essay, we also see another dominant motif: grace restores nature (Bavinck, Imitation II, 427).
1620 See Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 36, 51: “Common grace maintains the goodness of creation in spite of humanity's radical depravity resulting from the fall. This grace is the source of all human virtue and accomplishment, even that of unbelievers who have not been regenerated by the salvific grace of God;” and “God did not leave sin alone to do its destructive work. He had and, after the fall, continued to have a purpose for his creation; he interposed common grace between sin and the creation—a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless restrains and compels. All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. The spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation.”
attention to the continued discontinuity between the believer and unbeliever.

The call to imitate Christ is intimately bound up in the circumstances of our life; it ought to be exercised in each square inch of one’s life. Neo-Calvinists, following Kuyper’s call to go into every square inch of life and Bavinck’s consistent emphasis on God’s common grace, wholly affirm the ways God continues to uphold his good creation. The call to imitate Christ is a call bound up in our actions in this world; we imitate Christ where Christ has called us, and do so actively engaged in the world. But ought not be conflated with this world.\footnote{Kuyper and Bavinck profess God’s coming restoration of all things, which implies both continuity and discontinuity with our present world. These themes are profoundly applied in Richard Mouw’s book on Isaiah 60, \textit{When the Kings Come Marching In}. Of the coming Holy City, he writes: “The arrival of this City will constitute a radical break with the present patterns of sinful life. But the Holy City is not wholly discontinuous with present conditions.” (Richard Mouw, \textit{When the Kings Come Marching In} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 19-20.)} It is here that neo-Calvinists can sometimes stumble. The zeal to follow Christ into all spheres of God’s good creation can turn into a singular focus on this world, positing a staunch continuity between this world and God’s coming kingdom. Without abandoning the emphasis on the restoration of all things (for, as we’ve seen, Yoder also affirms the paradigm of restoration) and without departing from the call to engage in all spheres of life, the zeal of modern neo-Calvinists to imitate Christ in their engagement in every sphere, perhaps overemphasizing common grace and underemphasizing antithesis, can be tempered by Yoder’s consistent emphasis on the distinctive, radical nature of the imitation of Christ.

Ad de Bruijne similarly points to the way Yoder can temper the modern neo-Calvinist zeal, albeit with a focus on political theology. De Bruijne, as does Cornelis van der Kooi, points to the modernist impulses within neo-Calvinist theology that have been comported into twenty-first century neo-Calvinism.\footnote{Van der Kooi, “Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth,” 73-74. Van der Kooi writes: “Bavinck is impressed by cultural and social changes and considers the cultural milieu of modernity as a gift from God, yet he also recognizes the modern world’s need for the gospel. Christian faith is not only a pearl but also a leaven that exerts influence on and} De Bruijne contends that neo-Calvinism
often still bears the stamp of the nineteenth-century emphasis on creation and history, and has insufficiently adopted this eschatological twist. As a result, Neo-Calvinism operates too easily in assuming continuity between God’s kingdom and the earthly realm. It is precisely with regard to this point that the new duality between the two realms preserved in the Anabaptist tradition is so important.\textsuperscript{1623}

The duality between the present world and the eschaton in Yoder’s thought, as Parler has demonstrated, is not an ontological duality.\textsuperscript{1624} It is a duality rooted in the noetic access of humanity to God’s original creation. On account of the devastating effects of sin, humans cannot access God’s original intent in creation, thus we must look to Christ, who as inaugurated God’s coming kingdom. The kingdom of God has a distinctive character that the church must embody. Neo-Calvinists, on the other hand, de Bruijne argues, have a tendency to “ally God’s kingdom with the earthly realm.”\textsuperscript{1625} Here Anabaptism offers an important corrective.

The political impulses that de Bruijne identifies can be correlated to the imitation of Christ in neo-Calvinism: propelled by a zeal to imitate Christ in all areas of life and undergirded by a robust notion of common grace, neo-Calvinists can downplay the distinctive nature of the imitation of Christ. Yoder offers an important reminder that the imitation of Christ can look

\textsuperscript{1623} de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 124.

\textsuperscript{1624} Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 69-72. The work of Christ in restoring creation, therefore, is not entirely disconnected with the original creation. Christ’s work is both eschatological, pointing to the new creation, and ontological, revealing what the world is, and ought to be (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 72); Thus, believers, following the way of Jesus, work “with the grain of the universe” (Parler, “John Howard Yoder and the Politics of Creation,” 72, quoting Yoder, “Armaments and Eschatology,” Studies in Christian Ethics 1, no. 1 (1988): 58).

\textsuperscript{1625} de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 122.
foolish to the world. Though God is continuing to uphold and preserve the goodness of creation, full restoration has not come. While we ought to recognize the ways that God is working in the lives of all people and continually praise God for the way he sustains and upholds creation, we ought not underemphasize the hold of sin in the world. Yoder’s insistence on the radical otherness of Christians offers an important reminder to neo-Calvinists that God’s work is not yet completed.

Neo-Calvinists seeking to apply Bavinck’s insights on the imitation of Christ in the twenty-first century do well to heed the cautions that Yoder offers. Many, if not all, of these cautions and insights that Yoder offers can be found within Bavinck’s own thought, but are needed reminders for present day neo-Calvinists. Reading Yoder alongside Bavinck on the imitation of Christ can aid in countering some of the sustained impulses of North American neo-Calvinists.

A Reformed Articulation of the Imitation of Christ in the 21st Century

Reflecting on his travels to America, Bavinck concluded with these words: “May American Christianity develop according to its own law. God has entrusted America with its own high and great calling. [May America] strive for it, in its own way. Calvinism, after all, is not the only truth!”1626 From Bavinck’s 1892 reflections, American Christianity certainly has developed, in a multiplicity of ways, to its betterment and detriment. While Bavinck reminds us that Calvinism is not the only way, we have seen that Calvinism remains a dominant theological tradition within North American evangelical social ethics. But it is not alone in that category; alongside it, we find Anabaptism, and others. Taking Bavinck at his word, we can contend that both neo-Calvinism and Anabaptism, in dialogue together, can contribute to the development of

North American evangelical ethics. The imitation of Christ has been seen to be a dominant ethical motif for evangelicals, but one lacking in specificity and definition. “How am I going to tell what He would do?” remains an important question, one that is answered in many, seemingly opposing, ways. What then does it mean for a Reformed evangelical to ask and apply the question “what would Jesus do?” today, in the midst of deep divisions within evangelicalism and shifting social and cultural contexts in North America?

Called to follow Christ as he follows the law, we have already noted some of the ways in which neo-Calvinists need to be attentive to the critiques that Yoder offers, connecting piety and practice, remaining attentive to the otherness of the church, and attending to the passive virtues of Jesus as we imitate him. One of those passive virtues, prominently highlighted by Yoder in his description of the imitation of Christ is the suffering of Jesus. Christians are to imitate Christ in his sufferings. Bavinck, too, emphasizes the place of suffering in the imitation of Christ. 1627 Jesus is an example “in holiness, and patience in his suffering.” 1628

Focused on the positive virtues of Christ, however, neo-Calvinists are not always attentive to the way in which we ought to imitate Jesus in his suffering. Bavinck and Yoder both contend that the believer ought not seek out suffering for the sake of imitation; nevertheless, following the way of Christ may include suffering. While both theologians note the place of suffering in the imitation of Christ, Yoder highlights the role of Christ as suffering servant, pointing us back to the theological necessity of imitating Christ in suffering. Soong-Chan Rah, professor at North Park Theological Seminary, then gives us practical ways to enact imitation in suffering. One of the tangible ways in which North American Reformed evangelicals can emphasize suffering, Rah argues, is to practice lament. Rah highlights the important connection

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1627 See, for example, Bavinck, GE, 288.
1628 Bavinck, GE, 271.
between suffering and lament in his reflections on the future of evangelicalism in North America. Reflecting on the lack of sustained suffering within the North American church, he writes:

the Western world doesn’t experience suffering in the ways experienced by the non-Western world. . . . Outside the comfort of Western culture, Christians readily embrace the suffering Messiah, since his suffering reflects the suffering reality of their world. 1629

This lack of suffering leads to a lack of attention to, and capacity for, lament, for “lament is the language of suffering.” 1630 It is a “critical worship practice for God’s people,” modeled within Scripture. 1631 But lament is infrequent in evangelical liturgy and preaching, Rah argues. In personal and communal spaces for lament, Christians are reminded of, and have the opportunity to voice, their “dependence on God in the midst of their distress.” 1632 Jesus, the suffering servant, cried out to God, words of lament, in his suffering. 1633 Taking up the example of Jesus, a Reformed imitation ethic ought to, likewise, take up the practices of lament. Often focused on the kingship and victory of Christ, a Reformed imitation ethic must seek to better understand Christ as both the suffering servant and king. Jesus, the lamb who was slain, is the one who will make all things new. 1634

Each “passive virtue” that Christ exemplified – truth, righteousness, holiness, purity, modesty, temperance, prayer, vigil, fasting, faith, love, longsuffering, generosity, hospitality, compassion, lowliness, meekness, and patience 1635 – is worthy of detailed exploration. However, in these brief concluding comments, we will focus on just one: patience, an indispensable virtue

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1630 Rah, “Evangelical Futures,” 90.
1631 Rah, “Evangelical Futures,” 90.
1632 Rah, “Evangelical Futures,” 91.
1633 See, for example, the suffering and lament of Jesus on the cross. He cries out, using the words of the Psalms (Psalm 22, Psalm 31).
1634 Revelation 5:12.
for the Reformed imitation of Christ in North America today. In his analysis of both evangelical Christians, following the example of neo-Calvinists (both in the Netherlands and in the United States of America), Ad de Bruijne mentions that many evangelicals have been driven towards political participation due to the “rapid secularization” in society.¹⁶³⁶ Questions of abortion, sexuality, religious liberty, euthanasia (in the Netherlands and areas of North America, such as Canada), and others have driven evangelicals towards public engagement.¹⁶³⁷ For some evangelicals, the changing social context has caused significant anxiety and fear. Eric Metaxas, evangelical author and speaker, captures this anxiety well in a speech where he commented that “We are on the verge of losing.”¹⁶³⁸ Commenting on evangelicals in North American in the twenty-first century, Michael Gerson draws attention to the fear of evangelicals who were once an “influential and culturally confident religious movement.” Now they have “became a marginalized and anxious minority seeking political protection.”¹⁶³⁹ The posture that has defined evangelical public engagement in the face of secularization has become, Gerson argues, a posture of anxiety and fear.

But anxiety and fear ought not be the defining mark of the public engagement of Reformed evangelicals (neither should it be, as we’ve argued, a transformationalist zeal). Both Bavinck and Yoder remind Christians that following the way of Jesus is not always an easy road. Jesus’ way will not always make sense to those living alongside the Christian community. Whatever anxieties within the evangelical community that are based on principles and stances flowing from the way of Jesus, they should neither be surprised by adverse reaction nor relegated

¹⁶³⁶ de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 91, 100.
¹⁶³⁷ de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 101. These are not the only issues, of course. For other evangelicals, questions of racial reconciliation, war, and other social justice concerns drove engagement in the public square (see Swartz, Moral Minority; de Bruijne, “A Banner That Flies Across This Land,” 103).
¹⁶³⁹ Gerson, “The Last Temptation.”
to frenetic responses, trying to reclaim a “Christian society.” Instead, the imitation of Christ
demands taking up the posture of Jesus, who suffered adversity patiently.\textsuperscript{1640} Bavinck upholds
the virtue of patience as one that Christ embodied;\textsuperscript{1641} in Yoder, we find patience even more
prominently displayed. The way of Jesus is not one that immediately demands efficacy; the way
of the cross is the way of obedience – and obedience may not always be popular.\textsuperscript{1642} Yoder
stresses that the way of Jesus necessitates, at times, patience in and with society.\textsuperscript{1643} Yoder
reminds us not only of the importance of patience, but also corrects a misunderstanding of
patience: patience is not synonymous with passivity.\textsuperscript{1644}

Bavinck and Yoder stress the importance of patience, especially in suffering. But Christ
is not only the suffering servant, Bavinck reminds us. While a Reformed evangelical imitation
ethic needs to be more attentive to the suffering and lament of Christ, it must also be more
attentive to the joys of Christ. B.B. Warfield argues that “if our Lord was ‘the Man of Sorrows,’
he was more profoundly still ‘the Man of Joy.’”\textsuperscript{1645} While imitating Christ ought not devalue the
suffering and lament of Jesus and his example, it ought also look to his joy. Criticizing those
imitation motifs where followers of Jesus “experience no joy in living,” Bavinck brings our
attention back to the continued goodness and beauty of God’s creation, and the joy that, as Jesus
did, we ought to find in it.\textsuperscript{1646} The angels announcing Christ’s birth did so with these words: “I
bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”\textsuperscript{1647} We are imitating the one

\begin{footnotes}
\item[1640] Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 271.
\item[1641] Bavinck also points to patience as one of the ways we fulfill the commands of the first commandment: “the relationship we have with God is expressed by knowing, believing, trusting, relying, hoping, expecting, loving, fearing, honoring, \textit{being patient}, confessing, and so forth.” (Bavinck, \textit{GE}, 582; emphasis added).
\item[1643] See: Yoder, “‘Patience’ as Method in Moral Reasoning,” 113-132.
\item[1644] This helpfully addresses an often false choice between inactivity (mischaracterized as patience) and
transformationalist zeal.
\item[1645] Warfield, “The Emotional Life of Our Lord.”
\item[1646] Bavinck, Imitation II, 406.
\item[1647] Luke 2:10.
\end{footnotes}
who brings these tidings of joy; the one who is the giver of all good gifts; the one who not only took upon the sin and misery of the world, but gave to us life abundant; the one who suffered and died, but also is the one “through whom all things were made,”1648 the one who celebrated marriages,1649 the one who ate and drank with his friends,1650 and is the one who teaches us to delight in the law.1651 Following Jesus, imitating him in his virtues, is not merely a life marked by suffering; it is a life overflowing in joy. The imitation of Christ marks every aspect of our life; our sufferings, our joys – and the mundane moments of a life of discipleship (which are often accompanied by suffering and joy). We imitate Christ in our moments of hardship for the gospel, in enemy-love towards those who may feel underserving of our care, in self-sacrifice and obedience to the will of God: in all of these things, Jesus is our example. But we also imitate Christ in moments when we enjoy a fine meal, watch a sunset, hear beautiful music, place our hands to the pottery wheel, skip rope, or celebrate with friends and family: in all of these things, too, Jesus is our example. A robust sense of God’s provisions to us in his common grace, the joy in Christ’s life, and God’s anticipated restoration of all things,1652 ought to mark our imitation of Christ.1653

**Following Jesus: The Shape of the Christian Life**

Bavinck’s understanding of the imitation of Christ, together with Yoder, is instructive for Reformed evangelicals seeking to follow the example of Jesus in the twenty-first century. From them, we learn that the entirety of the Christian life is the imitation of Christ; the imitation of Christ lays claim on the whole of the believer’s life, but it is not characterized by the believer

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1648 John 1:1.
1649 John 2.
1650 John 20.
1651 Psalm 119:67.
1652 Revelation 21:5.
1653 This posture then not only influences our cultural engagement, as we saw above, it also influences the daily activities of the believer.
simply mimicking the external actions of Christ. Properly understanding the imitation of Christ necessitates a sophisticated hermeneutic to determine what in Christ’s life is to be imitated. Bavinck focuses on law patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ’s life, while Yoder focuses on the cross of Christ. While these may initially seem opposed to one another, we have discovered many ways that the two imitation motifs share similar affirmations regarding the imitation of Christ and can work together, offering correctives to the other. Together, they point to a biblical picture of the imitation of Christ, the shape of the Christian life.

The imitation of Christ demands sustained reflections on the biblical picture of the example of Christ and the cultural context within which one has been placed in order to determine the ways in which the believer ought to imitate the virtues of Christ. In Jesus’ life, as Edwards says, “is found the greatest spirit of obedience to the commands and laws of God that ever was in the universe.” In him, the delight of the law comes to life; Christ is a concrete illustration of a life lived in obedience to the law of God. He is, as Carl Henry describes, not simply a “great Teacher of ethics. He was its greatest Liver.”

We look to Christ and see the law embodied; he is the “living law.” When we look to Christ, we see not only life the way God intended, but life as it will be in God’s coming kingdom. Thus, to imitate Christ is to be human, in the fullest sense. It is to live as we were created to live.

The way to creation, as Al Wolters argues, is “via the cross.” Thus, the life of Jesus

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Henry, Christian Personal Ethics, 398.
Bavinck, GE, 290.

As Bavinck writes: “From Christ, who is both our Savior and our example, proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power, a power that makes us like him and completely restores the image of God in us. If this is already begun here on earth where we only see him in a mirror, what will it be like when we see him face to face? We shall be like him since we will see him as he is (I John 3:2).”

Wolters, “What is to be Done . . . Toward a Neocalvinist Agenda?” He writes: “One might say that the road to creation is only via the cross. The restoration of creation depends entirely on the atonement for sin which makes that restoration possible. When we say ‘cross,’ we say sin and grace, guilt and punishment, wrath and propitiation. These are not part of God's design for creation; they are the result of man's spoiling of creation and God's dealing with that
points to the cross – but in the cross, he points to a restored creation. Because this is the way of Jesus, this is our way. Awaiting the coming kingdom of God, the imitation of Christ is marked by suffering and the way of the cross. In our world, devastated by sin, the imitation of Christ calls us to a posture of self-denial, love of enemy, and patience in a world where all is not yet made right. But God’s continued affirmation of creation in the cross means that even now – as we await the day when all things will be made new – the imitation of Christ also calls us to delight in the joys of creation and participate in God’s ongoing work of restoration and renewal. The posture of the believer, united with Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit, is the imitation of Christ, for the imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life. With the joy of the Lord, may we be “people of the way,” following in the footsteps of Jesus.


sin, in forgiveness and judgment. To the extent that the Scriptures deal with these realities—and it is clear that they are filled with references to them—it is not accurate to say that the Bible is the republication of the creation word or law. If we had only the republished creation law, the Scriptures would not be the book of comfort and admonition, hope and encouragement that it now is. It is only because it points throughout to the cross, which is not part of the creational scheme of things, that it is possible for us to live by the creation law again. The Scriptures may be said to be the account of the struggle and sacrifice involved in reestablishing obedience in creation.”


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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.