

IMITATING CHRIST:
BAVINCK'S APPLICATION OF AN ETHICAL NORM
IN THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

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ABSTRACT: This essay seeks to examine the distinctive way that Herman Bavinck employs the imitation of Christ within *Reformed Ethics*. The distinctive way in which Bavinck understands and applies the imitation of Christ in his exposition of the commandments is helpfully clarified in conversation with his contemporary, Wilhelm Geesink. Both Bavinck and Geesink penned a *Reformed Ethic* – one remained unpublished and the other posthumously published – in which they share methodological commitments to scripture, the law, and the Reformed tradition's understanding of the normativity of the law for the Christian life. An analysis of the two thinkers on the first commandment shows, however, that amidst these striking similarities, Bavinck and Geesink differ in their appeal to the imitation of Christ as a guide for the Christian life. Through an examination of Bavinck's ethical method and both Bavinck and Geesink's exposition of the first commandment, this essay will highlight the centrality of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck's ethics as an ethical norm, differentiating his application of the duties of the commandment for the Christian life from his contemporaries.

KEYWORDS: Herman Bavinck, Ethics, Imitation of Christ, Ten Commandments, Wilhelm Geesink, Neo-Calvinism

Introduction

The 2008 discovery of Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* manuscript, along with its subsequent publication in both Dutch and English, has given fodder to a renewed interest in Bavinck as not only a dogmatician, but an *ethicist*. No doubt, prior to Dirk van Keulen's discovery, Bavinck's work in both dogmatics and ethics was acknowledged; in 1965, for example, Henry Zylstra, while describing Bavinck as 'primarily the theologian, the dogmatician,' also references the fact that he 'wrote an impressive number

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of substantial works in the areas of religion and theology, philosophy and applied ethics, and, especially too, psychology and the theory of education' (Zylstra 1965: 6-8). Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* manuscript offered an opportunity to examine not only Bavinck's works on applied ethics, but his ethical *methodology*. As John Bolt, James Eglinton, Dirk van Keulen and others have argued, the imitation of Christ is central to Bavinck's ethical methodology; Bavinck 'frames the entire ethical undertaking as the imitation of Christ' (Eglinton 2014: 174; van Keulen 2011: 79-91; Bolt 1993: 45-73; Bolt 2013).

Given the methodological import of the imitation of Christ, this essay seeks to explore the distinctive way that Bavinck employs the theme within his *Reformed Ethics*. The way this central motif shapes his exposition of the commandments is helpfully clarified in conversation with his contemporary, Wilhelm Geesink, who has been described as the 'premier ethicist of the Dutch Neo-Calvinist revival' (Bolt 2013: 20). As first-generation neo-Calvinist theologians, Bavinck and Geesink share multiple commitments in their work on Reformed ethics but, as we will see, differ in their articulation and application of the imitation of Christ. Through an examination of Bavinck's ethical methodology and both thinkers' exposition of the first commandment in their respective *Reformed Ethics*, this essay will argue that Bavinck's treatment of the first commandment demonstrates the distinctive way he employs the imitation of Christ in his understanding and application of the Ten Commandments. For Bavinck, the duties obligated by the first commandment are concretely illustrated in the life of Christ. As such, Christians are to imitate Christ as he follows the first commandment, in true faith, hope, and love for God.

Bavinck's Method: Law-Patterned Imitation of Christ's Virtues

For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is the shape of the Christian life, and thus the heart of the Christian ethic. But such a statement does not fall prey to a dichotomy between law and Christ. 'The gospel,' he argues, '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' (Bavinck 2013/1918: 429). Thus, 'in Christ, the law is our norm . . . Christ is the moral ideal, the living law' (Bavinck 2019: 341). Neither, however, does his affirmation of *both* law and gospel confuse the two, a potential charge which he dispels in his discussion of the first commandment:

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 (Bavinck 2021: 146).

On account of the unity and supremacy of God, the law-giver, who is ‘one eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient being, having one mind, one will, and one power . . . whatever distinctions may exist in the divine being, they may not and cannot diminish the unity of the divine nature,’ there can be no division in God’s decrees at Sinai and in the person of Christ (Bavinck 2004: 300). God’s unity-in-diversity, a central concept in Bavinck that has been explored in recent scholarship connected to his organic motif, has important implications for Bavinck’s ethics as well (Eglinton 2013; Sutanto 2021: 223-240). God’s law, he argues is a ‘singular, whole, an organism,’ which has ‘unity and harmony’ (Bavinck 2021: 75-76).

Bavinck neither blurs the law and gospel nor divorces the teachings of Jesus from God’s commands at Sinai. Instead, he argues that one imitates the virtues of Christ as Christ follows the law. The imitation of Christ, rightly understood, consists first in one’s union with Christ, which logically precedes any imitative *action* that follows (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 397). 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. This spiritual union then finds ‘concrete expression’ (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 398) in the life of the Christian, with a particular pattern for following Jesus: ‘it is,’ argues Bavinck,

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 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 2013/1885-1886: 400).

On account of what Christ has done, and Christ’s union with the believer, imitation of Christ takes shape in their life as they live their life in conformity with Christ, in law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ.

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, argues Bavinck, ‘takes issues, not with the words of the law itself, but with its incorrect interpretation and application.’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 415). Thus, ‘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’ (Bavinck 2012: 41). For Bavinck,

it follows that “in Christ, the law is and remains the norm for believers’ (Bavinck 2019: 337-338). Christ is not a new lawgiver, he is the ‘living law’ (Bavinck 2019: 341). As such, 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.

However, Christ does not just point *back* to the law, he *embodies* the law. 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 – following Calvin – adds important clarification to imitation: Christ does not demand literal mimicry, rather the virtues Christ embodies in the whole of his life must be imitated according to the specific circumstances of one’s life (see for example, Calvin 1847: 62). As Bavinck says, ‘while the virtues to which the imitation of Christ calls us are the same, circumstances may modify the application’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 438).

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, etc. From this we can conclude that Bavinck’s ethics can be characterized as a theological ethics of virtues (Van Keulen 2011: 90).

The virtues exemplified in Christ’s life – and held out as an example for the believer to imitate – are to be viewed in light of the moral law (Bavinck 2013/1918: 426). Thus there is no dichotomy between law and gospel *or* law and virtue; law and virtue come together in the imitation of Christ (Van Keulen 2011: 90; Cooke 2014: 97-100; Bavinck 2011: 133-134).

For Bavinck, Christian ethics is – and must be – Trinitarian. Christian ethics are grounded in God’s creational structure, i.e. the law, which is embodied in Christ, who is both our redeemer and example (Bavinck 2019: 216-218). In Bavinck’s insistence on the primacy of union with Christ for imitation, he also upholds the importance of the Holy Spirit in ethics. The imitation of Christ is only possible through the work of the Spirit, uniting the believer to Christ. Mystical union with Christ is thus the foundation for the imitation of Christ; ‘our lives can be directed *to* Christ only when they proceed *from* him and abide *in* him’ (Bavinck 2019: 339). The Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ and works in the believer that Christ may be reflected in them. Through the work of the Spirit, the Christian is united with Christ, so that they might

pattern their life according to Christ's example, grounded in not only redemption, but creation.

The imitation of Christ is the 'shape of the Christian life,' and as such occupies a central place in Bavinck's ethical methodology, closely connected to other dominant themes in his work, including grace restoring nature, the gospel as a leavening power in the world, and organicism (Bavinck 2019: 317; Van Keulen 2011: 86). As such, it is a central aspect and important theological distinctive in Bavinck's theological ethics, setting him apart from his neo-Calvinist contemporaries. While others, including Wilhelm Geesink, professor of ethics at the Free University from 1890-1923, highlight the primacy of the law in theological ethics, Bavinck, affirming the central place of the law in the Christian life, weaves together law and imitation into law-patterned imitation as the shape of the Christian life.

The Imitation of Christ and the First Commandment

In his *Reformed Ethics*, Bavinck details at length the proper theological approach to the imitation of Christ: law-patterned imitation of Christ's virtues. He also applies the theme in his exposition of the Ten Commandments, concretely articulating the way that Christ is an example to Christians as they continue to follow the law. Bavinck's appeal to Christ's example with this exposition highlights the consistency with which he appeals to imitation in the Christian life, and the centrality of that theme in his Christian ethics; it also shows Bavinck's distinctive approach to Reformed ethics. As John Bolt argues, Bavinck shows great *fidelity* to Calvin's ethical approach, which brings together law and imitation (Bolt 2013: 27). This fidelity to Calvin's appeal to both law and imitation is in *distinction* to Bavinck's contemporary, Wilhelm Geesink, who appeals to the law as *the* ethical norm (Eglinton 2014: 174).

Bavinck begins his exposition on Christian duties by explicitly framing the ethical conversation in light of the law:

Duty presupposes law. the question therefore is, What is the relation of believers to the *law*? . . . [The] will of God is revealed in the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 22:40); that is Jesus' point of departure (Mark 10:19): 'you know the commandments' (cf. Luke 10:26). And Jesus acknowledges and upholds the entire Mosaic law (Bavinck 2021: 7).

Our Christian life is thus framed by the law, a law which is *fulfilled* in Christ, and thus is embodied and exemplified by Christ. Bavinck continues his framing of Christian duties by appealing to Jesus' example:

Paul now views himself 'under the law of Christ' (1 Cor. 9:21), as serving the Lord (Rom. 12:11; 16:18; 2 Cor. 5:9), often points to the example of Jesus and himself (Gal.

4:12; 1 Cor. 4:16,17, 11:1; Phil. 3:17, 4:9; Eph. 5:2), appeals to Christian custom (1 Cor. 11:16, 14:33), and he himself provides ordinances (1 Cor. 7:17, 11:34, 16:1, 11:2; Phil. 2:12), nevertheless, the Old Testament and the law remain authoritative for him (Bavinck 2021:11).

As such, it is unsurprising that Bavinck continues the tradition of organizing Christian ethics around the Ten Commandments – as do his contemporaries, including Geesink (Bavinck 2021: 101-104; Geesink 1931: 188, 235). But as Bavinck discusses each commandment, he appeals to Christ's application of that commandment in his own life as example for our application of the commandment in our own life and time.

This ethical methodology sets Bavinck apart from other neo-Calvinist ethicists, including his colleague Geesink. In their respective *Reformed Ethics*, Bavinck and Geesink share a number of methodical commitments and structural similarities: both were committed to addressing a lack of Reformed ethics in their day, both structured their discussion of Christian duties around the law, and as they did, both begin with scripture, then survey of historical development throughout church history, and conclude with a normative appraisal of church teaching and application of what is commanded in Scripture for his own time (Bavinck 2019: 29; see for example Geesink 1931: 179-180).

Given their many similarities, Bavinck and Geesink's respective *Reformed Ethics* allow for a side-by-side examination of the two ethicists' respective treatments of the first commandment, with special attention to their use of the imitation of Christ. Such an examination is possible, given that both theologians engaged the imitation of Christ early and consistently in their academic career: Bavinck wrote his dissertation on the ethics of Ulrich Zwingli, which included a chapter on the law and example of Christ and Geesink's thesis was on Gerard Zerbolt, a member of the Brethren of the Common Life and an important influence on Thomas à Kempis, whose work popularized the theme of imitating Christ (Bavinck 1880: 75-88; Hepp 1931: 27-28; Bolt 2013: 20-21). Both Geesink and Bavinck also explicitly appeal to the imitation of Christ in their exposition of the first commandment. It is in their use of the imitation of Christ, however, that the two works on Reformed Ethics – amidst their significant shared theological and methodological commitments – begin to differ. Bavinck's ethical method is strikingly different from Geesink's in his *normative* use of the theme.

Given Bavinck's normative use of the imitation of Christ as an ethical norm, he consistently employs the theme in his exposition of the commandments; the imitation of Christ is at the heart of his application of the commandments. Geesink, however, engages the imitation of Christ only in the first commandment (in his treatment of the fourth commandment, he also references imitation [*navolving*], but

here it is an imitation of *God* [Geesink 1931: 346, 348, 366, 370, 371]). One could continue an examination of the theme in Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics* in each of the commandments (see, for example, Bavinck's discussion of Jesus' use of irony in relation to the fifth commandment [Bavinck 2021: 436]), but here we will limit our focus to the first commandment: the singular commandment in which both Bavinck and Geesink treat the theme. This analysis of Bavinck and Geesink's treatment of the first commandment in their respective *Reformed Ethics* will highlight the distinctive way Bavinck employs the theme of imitating Christ as ethical norm, alongside their shared emphasis on the law as the norm for Christian life. Bavinck's appeal to the imitation of Christ as a concrete ethical norm helpfully clarifies the distinctive nature of Bavinck's ethics: law-patterned imitation of Christ.

Bavinck on The First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me"
(Ex. 20:3)

Bavinck's brief scriptural examination of this verse leads him to the conclusion that this 'commandment reads, thus, that no other gods are to be kept as gods, either *instead of or next to* YHWH, and honored as such, for YHWH will not give his honor and name to anyone else' (Bavinck 2021: 123). As such, he argues, it prohibits 'idolatry' (which includes heresy), 'superstition,' and the 'invocation of saints and angels' (Bavinck 2021: 123-145).

Bavinck details these prohibitions extensively. Idolatry, defined by the Catechism as 'having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside the only true God, who has revealed himself in the Word,' (Bavinck 2021: 125; cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 95) prohibits polytheism, in its modern and ancient forms, any manner of 'not serving God, of denying and dishonoring him,' (Bavinck 2021: 126) and pantheism. But alongside these more obvious forms of idolatry, Bavinck includes refined idolatry, in its 'theoretical' and 'practical' form. The former 'create[s] its own God' rather than submitting to the one true God and his Word (Bavinck 2021: 127). The latter occurs when one 'put[s] their trust in something other than God and deprive[s] God of his honor' (Bavinck 2021: 127-128). All forms of idolatry are prohibited by the commandment to 'have no other gods before me.' Superstition, 'attributing power to words, things, or customs to deflect evil or obtain something good which they possess neither by nature nor according to God's word,' is also prohibited, in every arena where it may be practiced, including religion, arts, and sciences (Bavinck 2021: 130). Such acts are always related to 'unbelief' in the true God, but ought to be differentiated into two categories: 'objective' and 'subjective' superstition (Bavinck 2021: 131). Bavinck describes the former as 'incorrect, false ideas about God and the supernatural world,' including 'fantastic beings that exist only in the imagination,

with a hidden, secret, blind fate that stands above God' (Bavinck 2021: 132). The latter grounds superstition not in fantastical beings, but in the person, with the 'idea that human beings are in possession of and have at their disposal means by which they are able to control or employ (engage for their own purposes) the God-head, fate, or those imaginary spirits' which includes sorcery, magic, incantations, relics, so-called 'lucky' days, and astrology (Bavinck 2021: 132-136). While Bavinck mentions heretical movements and improper practices within church history in the first two categories prohibited by the commandment, the final category – invocation of saints and angels – is focused on excesses, abuses, and improper worship in the church. He examines Roman Catholic practices and teaching — Bavinck references, for example, the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, and papal bulls — related to the veneration of saints, Arians, and many modern theologians (Bavinck 2021: 141). In different forms, Bavinck argues, each negate or deny 'the position of Christ as mediator' and therefore transgress this commandment (Bavinck 2021: 143).

Following the *prohibitions* of the first commandment, Bavinck describes what this commandment *commands*, that is, the duties toward God required in this commandment. These commands are, at their heart, threefold: faith, hope, and love in the one, Triune God (Bavinck 2021: 145). The first commandment necessitates that we worship the 'true, living God,' thus it *must* be understood as a command to worship God in his Trinity. This worship must be an absolute worship; we are to worship God '*always entirely and everywhere*,' with 'all our soul, mind, and strength' (Bavinck 2021: 145 emphasis original).

In *Reformed Ethics*, Bavinck defines the first aspect of the commandment's duties, faith in God, in the same terms as in his *Reformed Dogmatics*: trust and knowledge (Bavinck 2021: 146-147; Bavinck 2008: 126). Both elements of faith have not only dogmatic, but ethical weight and character. Our knowledge of God 'must be nurtured . . . in humility (1 Cor. 8:1), from a pure desire to know God, to honor him . . . it must be exercised in total agreement with the moral law' (Bavinck 2021: 147). Our trust in God, a gift from the Holy Spirit, is also a 'moral relationship . . . an act of the greatest devotion.' It chastens away not only our 'mistrust, all reliance on creature, even on princes (Ps. 146:3), on the strength of flesh (Jer. 17:5), on temporal things and goods, and all worrying (Matt. 6: 25–34; Luke 12:26–34)' but our 'indifference' (Bavinck 2021: 148). The first commandment commands a 'radical' faith, encompassing one's knowledge of, and trust in, the Triune God (Bavinck 2021: 149).

Bavinck understands the second aspect of the first commandment's duty toward God, hope in God and his promises, to include an object, a posture, and an obligation. Hope – 'that virtue by which we unquestionably and surely anticipate God's

future blessings’ – must first be understood by means of its object: God’s ‘promises and their fulfillment,’ both for this life and the life that is to come (Bavinck 2021: 149-150). This sure hope then implies a posture for the Christian life: perseverance and patient endurance (Bavinck 2021: 150). In the midst of suffering and cross bearing, two chief requirements of the imitation of Christ, because of one’s sure hope in God, one neither passively submits or resigns oneself to the suffering, but ‘stand[s] firm,’ ‘remain[s] standing,’ and ‘anticipate[s] the fulfilment of salvation in spite the many inward and outward attacks’(Bavinck 2019: 322-323, 151). Finally, hope obligates the Christian to ‘*confess* God, Christ, and the truth,’ in word and deed, even – if necessary – to the point of death, as the martyrs did (Bavinck 2021: 151 emphasis original).

The third aspect of the first commandment, love for God, is “the great and first commandment” (Matt. 22:37-38; cf. Deut 6:5) . . . our highest duty’ (Bavinck 2021: 152). Bavinck’s description of this last aspect is comprised primarily of a description of what this love is *not*. Love for God is not the love of the mystics, a love that precludes any other longing or desire (Bavinck 2021: 152-153). Rather, Bavinck contends, love for God includes both fear and piety (Bavinck 2021: 153). Appealing to numerous biblical texts, Bavinck describes the fear in love in dogmatic and ethical terms as

not a slavish fear, but childlike, a respect for his Highness and Majesty, a fear against doing something that displeases him and arouses his anger. This fear is a holy acceptance of God’s word, God’s attributes, his promises and threats. This fear element in love maintains its purity and holiness, including the distance between Creator and creature (Bavinck 2021: 154).

Thus, love of God includes and commands proper devotion and humility (Bavinck 2021: 154).

Faith, hope, and love constitute our duties that the first commandment commands, in relationship to the one, true, Triune God. We are to give ourselves to God wholly and completely, in trust, devotion, confession, and service. To illustrate these obligations, Bavinck appeals to examples, both those whom we *ought* to follow and those who did not properly embody the duties of the first commandment. Some of these examples, both positive and negative, span church history: the martyr is an example of a faithful confession borne out of hope in God and his promises but some mystics (including Miguel de Molinos, Francis de Sales, Jane Francis de Chantal, Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte-Guyon, and François Fénelon) embodied a “disinterested” love that is not commanded by the first commandment (Bavinck 2021: 151-152). Alongside these, Bavinck gives scriptural, positive examples of the

duties that the first commandment requires. Scripture shows us what true, strong faith looks like:

Abraham is an example of this strong faith in God (Gen. 15). And Jesus shows us this when he sleeps in the midst of the storm (Matt. 8:24) (Bavinck 2021: 148).

In Scripture, we also find examples of what patient endurance and hope are:

This patience, which presupposes this oppression from unbelievers, the world, and Satan, was the virtue of Job (James. 5:11), and especially of Christ (2 Thess. 3:5) (Bavinck 2021: 151).

In both cases, Bavinck argues, Christ is the example *par excellence*, the one on whom we ought to pattern our own faith and hope.

In Bavinck's appeal to Jesus' embodiment of the duties of the first commandment, his commitment to both non-mimetic imitation and the full scope of Jesus' witness are clear. In his 1885/1886 essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck argues 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' (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 399 emphasis added). In Bavinck's exposition of the first commandment, we see how firmly he applies that commitment – even to Jesus' sleeping and waking!

Matthew 8:24 simply states 'Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.' One might assume there is not much to glean from Jesus' example in such a short passage, but Bavinck argues otherwise. Jesus' sleeping amid a 'furious' storm demonstrates not simply a tired rabbi finding any moment to rest, but one who is utterly reliant on God; Jesus demonstrates something ethical: how to trust in God, that is, how to have true faith in God. Each of Jesus' deeds, including his act of sleeping amidst a storm, is 'useful for our instruction,' but Bavinck clearly demonstrates that this passage is not necessarily an example for our own sleep patterns (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 399). Rather, Jesus is an example of true, radical trust in God – not in 'temporal things and goods,' including all those things – including inclement weather – that seem more powerful than us and threaten our lives (Bavinck 2021: 148). Law-patterned imitation of Jesus' virtues entails faith and trust, commanded in the first commandment, and exemplified in Jesus, including in the storm. Our task, argues Bavinck, is to take those same virtues and obligations and apply them in a new place and time.

Similarly, Bavinck's scriptural reference for imitating Christ's patient endurance is brief. 2 Thessalonians 3:5 simply states: 'May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.' Bavinck's appeal to Jesus' perseverance has clear resonances with his later, 1918 booklet on the imitation of Christ, where he details the

virtues that Jesus exemplifies: ‘truth, rigorousness, holiness (Eph. 4:24), purity, modesty, temperance (Eph 5:3-5); prayer, vigil and fasting (Acts 14:23; Rom. 12:12, 1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Peter 4:7,8); faith, love, *longsuffering* (1 Timothy 6:4); brotherly love, generosity, hospitality (Rom. 12:3); compassion, lowliness, meekness, patience (Col. 3:12)’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 420); ‘humility, lowliness, *longsuffering* . . . purity, and holiness . . . forgive[ness] and in love’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 426). Jesus is the supreme example of patient endurance, that is, of hope in God’s promises and their fulfillment. Bavinck does not provide a specific example of Jesus’ perseverance in this section, rather, he holds before us the totality of Jesus’ life as embodying this virtue, obligated by the first commandment. We then are to – following Jesus’ example and the law – similarly “stand firm” in our hope, amidst the attacks and pressures of our circumstances.

Bavinck’s appeal to Matthew 8:24 and 2 Thessalonians 3:5 show that the Christian duties obligated by the first commandment – faith, hope, and love – are concretely illustrated in the life of Christ. As such, Christ’s example constitutes an ethical norm that is inextricably tied to the law. What are Christians to do, as a result of the first commandment? This commandment sets out ‘the relationship in which we are to stand to God,’ and that is perfectly embodied and concretely illustrated by Jesus (Bavinck 2021: 145). Thus, Christians are to imitate Christ as he follows the first commandment, in true faith, hope, and love for God.

Geesink on The First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me”
(Ex. 20:3)

Bavinck’s explicit appeals to Christ’s example as illustrative of the obligations and duties of the first commandment set him apart from his contemporary, Wilhelm Geesink. As two thinkers within the neo-Calvinist tradition, Bavinck and Geesink shared a commitment to articulating Reformed, ethical ideals and applying those to their own day. With that commitment, they shared an affirmation of the centrality of the law for the Christian life. They also shared a commitment to similar methodology in Christian ethics: examining scripture, surveying historical development, and providing a normative claim (Eglinton 2014: 174). Given this, their treatment of the Ten Commandments reveals many similarities, but they diverge in one important way; where Bavinck appeals to Christ as an illustrative, concrete example to imitate, Geesink does not, even as he mentions the imitation of Christ.

In his treatment of the first commandment in *Gereformeerde Ethiek*, Geesink foregrounds his Reformed commitments with direct, repeated citations of Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism. Immediately preceding his treatment of the first commandment, Geesink details his method, following Calvin, for understanding the claims of the law: (1) synecdoche to understand the scope of the commandment, (2) an

affirmation the from prohibitions commanded in the commandment one must also discern what is positively commanded, and (3) examining the prohibitions of each commandment (Geesink 1931: 235). As such, there are strong similarities between Bavinck and Geesink; both understand, following Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism, that the scope of the commandment is vast, and includes both prohibitions and positive commands.

Geesink begins with the positive commands of the first commandment. The command to 'have no other gods before me' is a command to worship the 'only true God' (John 17:3) truly and with holy reverence and fear (Geesink 1931: 237; cf. Bavinck 2021: 147). The obligations of this command are true faith in God, holy love of God, proper and true worship of God, recognition of his sovereignty, and hope in God (Geesink 1931: 237-244). Here again, we find striking similarity to the obligations and duties that Bavinck details in the first commandment. The kind of relationship to God that this commandment entails is all encompassing; as Jesus says, we are to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37; see Geesink 1931: 238 cf. Bavinck 2021: 151-152).

The positive commands that are obligated to us in the first commandment flow from God himself, who grants faith. To truly know this God, Geesink argues, is to love him. Love is the 'greatest principle' [*grootste beginsel*], a central force of the first commandment (Geesink 1931: 238; cf. Bavinck 2021: 152). But this love must be properly ordered and expansive; it is not the love of the mystics which, Geesink argues, can have a proper place as a 'love of the heart and the soul [*liefde van het hart en der*],' but may simply or deliberately exclude knowledge. Rather, to truly love God is to love him with one's heart, soul, *and mind*. This love rests on a fulsome faith, that is the knowledge of and trust in God (Geesink 1931: 238). For Geesink, like Bavinck, faith, love, and knowledge are inextricably tied, and at the heart of the duties of this commandment.

The first commandment details the 'essence of true religion [*het wezen der ware religie*]', faith in God which engenders a love for God and proper fear of God (Geesink 1931: 239). Such a faith must necessarily be an active faith, Geesink's second point. The faith that engenders love and fear must not and cannot simply be an *internal* faith; it must be acted upon, embodied in word and deed (Geesink 1931: 240). It, therefore, obligates us to three things, all borne out of faith: worship, trust (which includes both present trust and expectant trust, i.e. hope), and submission (Geesink 1931: 241-245).

Geesink understands submission in relation to the sovereignty of God. God's sovereignty necessitates that those who place their trust in God submit themselves to

him, an act that includes self-denial (Geesink 1931: 245). Here, he clearly relates the content of the commandment to the person and work of Jesus, emphasizing that the self-denial included in the act of submitting to God is connected to Christ “*tak[ing] up his cross*” (Geesink 1931: 245, emphasis original). In his treatment of submission, self-denial, and cross-bearing, Geesink makes reference to the imitation of Christ: ‘taking up the cross is then in imitation of Jesus [*Het kruis opnemen is dan in navolging van Jezus*]’ (Geesink 1931: II:235, 246). This reference, one of the few to imitation (*navolging*) in the entirety of Geesink’s *Reformed Ethics*, is the only explicit reference to imitating *Jesus* in his treatment of the Ten Commandments.

In his handling of the first commandment, Geesink carefully differentiates between self-denial and obedience, placing his reference to the imitation of Christ under the former, self-denial. Both self-denial and obedience are grounded in the sovereignty of God, and both are referenced in the Westminster Larger Catechism as duties required in the first commandment (Westminster Larger Catechism Larger 104). In reference to the duty to obey, the Catechism cites Jeremiah 7:23. Geesink argues that this means that obedience must be to a *revealed*, or commanded will; God tells us what is required of us, and we are to obey. God explicitly commands obedience:

I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you (Jer. 7:23).

Obedience, then, is related *but importantly distinct* from submission; the duty to obey is in reference to God’s ‘revealed will’ [*wil des bevels*]’ while the duty to submit is in reference to God’s ‘will of decrees’ [*wil der besluiten*]’ (Geesink 1931: 246). As such, alongside obedience to God’s commandments, Geesink argues that one’s duty is to submit to God’s decrees, whether those are unknown or partially revealed.

John Bolt, in his *Theological Analysis*, pays special attention to Geesink’s differentiation between submission and obedience as a key to understanding how he employs this brief reference to imitation:

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 the *obedience* which has to do with the revealed will of God. Thus “imitation” (*navolging*) involving self-denial is not an ethical norm, it has to do with submission to the hidden will of God (Bolt 2013: 22).

While Geesink employs the imitation of Christ in his treatment of the first commandment, it is not done in relation to God’s revealed will, but rather God’s hidden will. As Geesink continues to differentiate submission and obedience, he again draws

on the words of Jesus, who prayed ‘not my will, but yours be done’ in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42; Geesink 1931: 247). These words, Geesink argues, are a prayer of *submission*. Jesus’ words do not detail a specific action, but a posture. When Jesus prays ‘your will be done’ in the Lord’s Prayer, however, these words are a prayer of *obedience* (Matt. 6:10; Geesink 1931: 247). Here, Jesus is desiring to do what God has commanded. Submission is about self-denial; obedience, Geesink argues, is about our actions. For the guide to obedience, Geesink explicitly references not Jesus’ example, but the Ten Commandments, where God’s will is revealed (Geesink 1931: 247). Thus, for Geesink, the imitation of Christ is not included in the commands or norms for ethical life. The central norm remains God’s commands, that is, the law.

After its duties, Geesink lays out the threefold prohibitions of the first commandment: atheism, false religion, and impure religion (Geesink 1931: 249). Each of these prohibitions are wide-ranging. Under the broad category of atheism, Geesink includes not only what is commonly understood as atheism, but also ‘practical atheism’ and ‘theoretical atheism,’ that is, acknowledging God with one’s mind but not one’s practice and materialistic philosophical trends, both ancient and modern (Geesink 1931: 250). He also includes practices and beliefs such as superstition, fate, sorcery, and magic under the category of atheism (Geesink 1931: 250-254). Under the broad category of false religion, Geesink includes an extended discussion of all forms of idolatry and of non-Christian religions (he names paganism, Islam, and Judaism). These non-Christian religions, he argues, can be differentiated into natural religions (which themselves can be differentiated into lower and higher forms), and ethical religions. All share, though in varying degrees, both a response to the *sensus divinitatis* in their practice of religion (and thus, a real, albeit clouded, sense of piety) and false worship, lacking fear of the one true God (Geesink 1931: 254-259). Finally, the first commandment prohibits impure religion. In this final prohibition, Geesink turns his attention to abuses and improper piety within Christian traditions, including invocation of saints and certain mystical practices (Geesink 1931: 259-262). Alongside these more obvious cases of impure worship, Geesink also argues that the first commandment prohibits any worship where God is not the highest good, where God does not have our deepest trust, and where we do not fully submit to God and obey him, thus denying or attacking his sovereignty (Geesink 1931: 262-266).

For Geesink, the commands of God that we are to obey come from the law, ‘God’s revealed will’ (Geesink 1998: 3; Geesink 1931: 262-266). Geesink’s exposition of the first commandment, which includes his only direct appeal to the imitation of *Christ* in his treatment of the commandments in *Reformed Ethics*, underscores his fulsome commitment to the law as the norm for Christian ethics. Imitating Christ, he argues,

must be understood in a limited way, as submission to God's hidden will, thus not as an ethical norm.

Bavinck's Distinctive Approach: Following Calvin on Law and Imitation

Bavinck and Geesink each give a systematic reading of the Ten Commandments as a central component of their respective *Reformed Ethics* and both, following Calvin – and with explicit appeal to the Heidelberg Catechism, among others in their shared Reformed tradition – understand the law as normative for the Christian life, revealing God's will. Both also affirm the *continuity* between Christ and the law; Jesus does not set aside the Ten Commandments, he fulfils them. But in these shared commitments, and even in their shared appeal to the imitation of Christ in their treatment of the first commandment, Bavinck and Geesink differ in their understanding of the role of the imitation of Christ. For Bavinck, the imitation of Christ *is* an ethical norm, one that does not negate the law, but rather brings together law and Christ in *law-patterned imitation*, the heart of the Christian life.

Bavinck's treatment of the first commandment is illustrative of his distinctive approach. In their respective treatments of the commandment, Bavinck and Geesink share an understanding of what this commandment requires, both its prohibitions and duties. While organized in slightly different ways, both argue that the commandment obligates us to proper faith, hope, and love for the one, true God and prohibits any false religion and false worship. Even the supportive scripture that the two use is similar (including Matthew 16:24, 1 John 4:18, and John 17:3), unsurprisingly, given their shared tradition and sources, including Voetius, the Heidelberg Catechism, and Calvin. But in his treatment of the first commandment, also Bavinck draws upon thinkers like Vilmar in interesting and creative ways to demonstrate the way that Jesus exemplifies this faith, hope, and love as our example (Bavinck 2021: 148). In emphasizing Jesus as example, Bavinck follows Calvin, who argues that Christ – the perfect embodiment of the law – “has been set before us as an example whose pattern we ought to express in our life” (Calvin 1960: III:vi.iii).

There is a long history of caution towards, or even suspicion towards, the imitation of Christ in Protestant, and particularly Reformed, ethics. Bavinck succinctly articulates this reticence, ‘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’ (Bavinck 2019: 335).

When it *was* discussed, Bavinck argues that the imitation of Christ was invoked ‘only in treatments of cross-bearing and self-denial (Calvin), as well as in discussions of our mystical union with Christ, in which we participate in his death and resurrec-

tion' (Bavinck 2019: 335). In his essay "Departing From – And Recovering – Tradition," Jimmy Agan argues that Protestant 'hostility toward the imitation of Christ,' which often comes from within the Reformed tradition is both enduring and misplaced, especially for Reformed thinkers that appeal to Calvin for this hostility (Agan 2013: 801). Calvin certainly does argue against *abuses* of the imitation of Christ. He cautions, for example, that we are to be 'imitators' not 'apes' (Calvin 1847: 62) and, as Agan highlights, 'warns that we undermine Christ's unique, divine authority when we imitate the "many things which he did not intend as examples for us"' (Agan 2013: 805; quoting Calvin 1960: IV:xix.xxix). These kinds of statements from Calvin, Agan argues, 'seem to justify' the tradition of using Calvin as justification for rejecting imitation (Agan 2013: 804). They do not, however, paint an accurate and full picture of Calvin's understanding and use of the theme.

Despite his cautions, Calvin's theology contains a strong understanding of the imitation of Christ. His views, as Agan asserts, are 'far more positive than what has become typical in the Reformed tradition' (Agan 2013: 806). For him, the imitation of Christ (properly defined) has a 'central emphasis in the Christian life' (Agan 2013: 810) 'to imitate Christ . . . is the rule of life' (Agan 2013: 806; quoting Calvin 1993: 246). Still, as Agan notes, the Reformed tradition has often deviated from Calvin's own use of imitation; in this sense, neo-Calvinists are not unique. Some neo-Calvinist thinkers are quite explicit in their rejection of the theme as an ethical norm. H. M. Kuitert, Professor of Ethics and Introduction to Dogmatics at the Free University in Amsterdam from 1967-1989, for example, argues that 'We should not try to make Jesus' story significant for us by applying His life to ours in a moral sense' (Kuitert 1968: 178-179). Instead, the Ten Commandments 'form a summary of what we can call the basic moral principles.' Kuitert argues that he is remaining 'faithful to tradition' in such a claim, that is, following Calvin (Kuitert 1993: 252, 267-269).

While Geesink is less explicit than Kuitert in an overt rejection of imitation as an ethical norm, he too does not appeal to the imitation of Christ as a norm, despite knowledge of, and appeal to, the theme within his ethics, as in his discussion of the first commandment. Geesink's treatment of the "history of Reformed ethics" an appendix to his *Reformed Ethics* suggests that he, too, finds himself faithful to Calvin in this regard. He argues:

Lobstein says very truly "Among all the reformers Calvin has most consistently based his ethics upon the Decalogue. The Ten Commandments are the rule of life prescribed and imposed by God Himself; they are the perfect norm of all righteousness; they include whatever belongs to piety and virtue; by observing them, our moral obligation is completely fulfilled." The setup derived from the Decalogue may be *truly said to be one of the characteristics of a genuinely Reformed Ethics*, and every one of its com-

mandments is to the Calvinist a norm possessing the force of a categorical imperative (Geesink 1941: 235).

Throughout his *Reformed Ethics*, Geesink consistently appeals to Calvin's treatment of the Decalogue as his guide for the same; here, he makes plain his understanding that Reformed ethics must find its norm in the law. Such a statement, however, would not necessarily be to the *exclusion* of the imitation of Christ. Bavinck, for example, similarly appeals to the centrality of the law and Calvin's treatment of the law (Bavinck 2019: 216-228). But Geesink couples this claim with his *lack* of appeal to the imitation of Christ as norm for the Christian life in his treatment of the Ten Commandments – as we have seen, he places his one explicit reference to imitating Christ under the concept of 'submission' not 'obedience' – *and* treats the use of the theme throughout church history with suspicion, rejecting its abuses.

While Geesink's references to the imitation of Christ throughout *Reformed Ethics* are few, outside of the appeal to the imitation of Christ in the first commandment and the imitation of God in the fourth, he treats *misuses* of the theme throughout church history. Within the latter, Geesink points to the use of the imitation of Christ as a 'higher morality' in Roman Catholic theology and practice and, briefly, Anabaptist use of the theme, creating a 'new set of commandments' (Geesink 1931: II:461). Geesink argues that there is an important difference between Catholic and Protestant ethics in the *consilia evangelica*; this difference pertains to the imitation of Christ. The monastic requirements of poverty, chastity, and obedience constitute an "imitation of Christ" that goes beyond what is 'necessary for salvation,' argues Geesink (Geesink 1931: II:461). Since these duties are only necessary for some, whereas the commandments are necessary for all, Geesink argues such a schema constitutes two levels of morality, one higher and one lower (Geesink 1931: II:205, 207). Geesink repeats this concern, with even more force in his discussion of the history of Reformed ethics:

Following Augustine, also Rome holds that the Decalogue is a summary and epitome of all laws; that it is a brief statement of all that the law of nature prescribes; hence also the "Catechismus Romanus" offers an exposition of the Decalogue. *Nevertheless*, Rome places alongside of the Decalogue – called the "lex vetus" – the new or evangelical law ("lex vetus sive evangelica") given by Christ. This new law includes besides the new commandments also the evangelical counsels, especially chastity, obedience, and poverty, voluntary vows which gave rise to the Roman Catholic conception of the "religious" life with its "higher morality" (Geesink 1941: 233).

As understood in Roman Catholicism, Geesink argues, the imitation of Christ *adds* to the law, creating an untenable, double morality.

Bavinck share these concerns, arguing that within monasticism the imitation of Christ ‘never became obligatory for all men . . . the goal was to achieve a higher level of perfection than was possible in ordinary life’ (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 381). On account of these differing levels of morality, the imitation of Christ articulated within monasticism often ‘promoted pride and trust in good works among those striving for perfection’ (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 382). This understanding of imitation, Bavinck argues, is also simply incorrect, as it consists in ‘simple repetition and copying of the personal life of Jesus’ which 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’ (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 391-392). Following Calvin, then, both Bavinck and Geesink reject the abuses of the imitation of Christ. But departing from Calvin, Geesink does not provide a normative appeal to imitation for Christian ethics. From his treatment of the theme in Roman Catholicism, we can intuit Geesink’s concern that a *commanded* imitation of Christ – particularly one that is literal and mimetic – constitutes an *addition* to the commandments; or, in the case of Anabaptism, a *replacement* of the commandments. As such, Geesink argues, the sum of the commands to be obeyed must be found *only* in the Decalogue, to which we have a duty of obedience (Geesink 1931: II:177, 181, 187). This, Geesink argues, is ‘genuinely Reformed Ethics’ (Geesink 1941: 235). The imitation of Christ is, instead, understood through submission, not as an ethical norm.

Bavinck, however, *does* provide a normative understanding of the imitation of Christ, as an ethical norm. Rather than rejecting a literalistic, mimetic imitation and thus *any* imitation ethic, Bavinck provides an alternative, hermeneutically rich interpretation of imitation. As Bavinck argues in other works on the imitation of Christ, imitating Christ ‘consists of a free, spiritual application of the principles by which he lived, completely fulfilling the moral law’ (Bavinck 2013/1885-1886: 396). The law and Jesus’ example are bound together as the guiding ethical norm for the Christian life. All of Jesus’ actions, in word and deed, are to be imitated, but Bavinck qualifies the way in which that imitation ought to occur. Not in literal mimicry, but law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Christ – including his waking and sleeping. Jesus’ actions provide a concrete illustration, which is ‘not to be taken literally,’ but ‘nonetheless to be understood practically and concretely’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 418). He embodies the ‘virtues which the law requires of us’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 426). In the case of Matthew 8:24, that virtue is trust, a duty commanded in the first commandment. As Bavinck discusses the duties, or commands, of the first commandment, Jesus’ example concretely applies the duties and virtues obligated to us. Bavinck’s consistent return to Christ’s example as an obligation, tied directly to a command,

sets him apart from Geesink, who views imitation within the category of submission, not obligation.

Conclusion

Bavinck explicitly states the centrality of the imitation of Christ for his theological ethics; it is the ‘form of the spiritual life.’ Christians are to not simply ‘copy . . . the person of Jesus,’ or ‘conform to his commandments apart from his person.’ True imitation, Bavinck argues ‘consists of shaping the life that exists only in and from communion with Christ in accord with his moral example’ (Bavinck 2019: 341) Recent scholarship has excellently demonstrated the centrality of the imitation of Christ in Bavinck’s ethical method, showing, for Bavinck, what is both a proper and improper understanding of this motif. The question then arises: how does this central motif shape his actual exposition of the commandments?

This article has sought to analyze Bavinck’s treatment of the first commandment, in conversation with Geesink on the same commandment, to show the distinctive way Bavinck employs the theme of imitating Christ as an ethical norm. Both Geesink and Bavinck were first generation neo-Calvinist theologians, who taught and wrote on Reformed ethics; as such, the two shared methodological commitments to scripture, the law, and even specific Reformed influences. But amidst striking similarities, Bavinck and Geesink differ in their appeal to the imitation of Christ as a guide for the Christian life. Here, we have narrowed our focus to the first commandment, which provides an illustrative comparison between Bavinck and Geesink on the imitation of Christ, given that this is the singular commandment in which both theologians treat the theme.

Bavinck’s application of imitation is strikingly different from Geesink’s in his normative *use* of the theme. The imitation of Christ, for Bavinck, is tied directly to a command as an obligation, albeit not a literalistic, mimetic one. In this, Bavinck’s uses Christ’s example as a concrete illustration of ‘what is *commanded* in this [first] commandment’ (Bavinck 2013/1918: 418, 426; Bavinck 2021: 145). An analysis of Bavinck and Geesink’s appeal to and use of the imitation of Christ in their expositions of the first commandment clarify the distinctive nature of Bavinck’s ethics: law-patterned imitation of Christ. Bavinck’s exposition of the first commandment demonstrates that law-patterned imitation of Jesus is central to his understanding and application of the Ten Commandments; it is a clear ethical norm.

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