

who are on the receiving end of it. As Kuyper rightly argued, the practice of confession is never a private affair. It makes ripples far beyond the immediate, the individual, and the institutional church.

The posture, attitude, and embodied acts of confession are those we will one day fully inhabit. Our future is one in which it will become natural for us to say, "I'm sorry; I was wrong," and "This is what I believe; this is who I am." It can become natural for our neighbor to do the same. In confession we anticipate a new kingdom interaction with our God, our neighbor, and all creation. Here we anticipate communication that leads to communion, interaction that brings integration. We long for this day, and so does our neighbor.

Our ability to confess, reconcile, and communicate with our neighbor is not automatic. It is actually a spiritual exercise that all citizens must practice, as the philosopher Pierre Hadot (1922–2010) reminded us.²³ In order to dialogue well, a citizen must be spiritually formed. For us as Christians, this is further charged: to interact like Christ, we need to be formed by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). This involves being sensitive to the wounds of others. We must genuinely care about the conversation. As an act of hospitality, we need to make space, for us and for our neighbor, to be wrong. We need to get behind confession's goal of redemption and healing. We must examine our conscience and be willing to acknowledge our obstinacy when it gets in the way.

Though it seems minor, changing the way we interact is good news to the broken and ostracized. Changing how the city interacts is, in and of itself, an act of seeking the welfare of the city (Jer. 29:4–7). We bring the healing of Christ to neighbors when we practice confession. And we serve neighbors when we bring those movements and habits of confession into our conversation with them. Thus we witness to an alternative politic, a present and coming kingdom, one we are destined for and one for which we all long.

Peace Embrace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 100–101. The practice of confession knits together a society as much as it builds up a congregation.

23. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 89–93; especially see 93: "Dialogue is only possible if the interlocutor has a real desire to dialogue; that is, if [the other] truly wants to discover the truth, desires the Good from the depths of [the] soul, and agrees to submit to the rational demands of the Logos."

23

Piety and Public Life

The Public Imitation of Christ

JESSICA JOUSTRA

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.

—Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

I witnessed a profound testament to Annie Dillard's observation during a recent memorial service. John, a much beloved citizen in my community, had passed away.¹ On the day of his memorial service, hundreds of cars from all over town filled the parking lot of our local church.

Inside the sanctuary, Dillard's insight took on flesh as the community testified to the power of John's life by recalling mundane but beautiful anecdotes from his day-to-day work and service. A community-driven volunteer, John devoted much of his time to various organizations and community institutions as a committed supporter and board member. A front-runner in computer technology, John was a sought-after business leader and consultant. He was known for his unique blend of generosity, humility, and skill in the

1. John is not his actual name.

marketplace. A family man, John was devoted to his wife of fifty-plus years. He was an attentive and supportive father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. And, most importantly, John was a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

The stories that friends, family, and coworkers shared about John's life were beautiful. As I listened to them, however, I began to notice an uncomfortable pattern. "John did wonderful work in the community," friends recalled, "but when he got sick, none of that mattered anymore. All that mattered was his love for Jesus." "We were grateful for John's technical acumen and business savvy, but what was really significant were the Bible studies he started in the business community."

That little word "but" haunted many of the stories told about his day-to-day life. John was indeed a picture of Christian piety, and I am grateful the community could recognize, give thanks for, and find comfort in that aspect of his life. *But* what about his public life? What about his work, his volunteering, his board service? What about the jobs he created? The community problems he solved? The organizations and institutions he helped to build? Is it really true that John's "spiritual" life was the only thing that truly mattered?

Piety and Public Life: A Destructive Dichotomy

The stories told at John's funeral are hardly unique. Emphasizing the importance of personal spirituality above, or even in opposition to, public action is a common refrain in North American evangelicalism. Rather than attest to the ways in which piety and action are interwoven, evangelicalism has all too often pulled the two apart with a synthetic (and destructive) dichotomy. According to David Miller, a theologian and a businessman, the church in North America "all too frequently sends the signal that work in the church matters but work in the world does not."²

Within this synthetic dichotomy, so-called spiritual elements like prayer and piety, missions and evangelism are what truly matter. While material and mundane tasks, like jobs, errands, committee meetings, email, and so on—the things that, for most of us, make up much of "how we spend our days"—are at

best indifferent to the gospel. At worst, these material things are antagonistic to gospel work, distracting us from our *true* service in God's kingdom. These material things will waste away; the only thing that will truly last is the spiritual.

Piety and Public Action in Reformed Theology

John's life, shown by his day-to-day action, refused to accept this evangelical dichotomy between piety and public action. John's work and worship were one: whether he was solving a technological issue or studying the Scriptures, he was living his day-to-day life *coram Deo*, before the face of God. Though it is too late to ask him, I am confident that John's more integrated life of piety and public action was deeply informed by the Reformed community that raised him.

John's integrated life bears the fingerprints of the holistic theology of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921). Raised within the conservative Calvinistic pietism of the Netherlands, Herman Bavinck knew and cherished a rich spiritual tradition of worship and prayer.³ But, as Bavinck's theology developed, he came to argue that knowing and following Jesus did not mean disengaging with the world, but quite the opposite. For Bavinck, a spiritual and personal union in *Christ* should drive the Christian toward material and public action in the world.

As a young man, Bavinck took a decisive step toward world engagement in his choice of schooling. Opting against the confessional university of his denomination, Bavinck attended the "aggressively modernist theological faculty" at Leiden University.⁴ For some in Bavinck's community, his choice signaled a departure from the pietistic theology of his youth toward the more world-engaging (even worldly!) modern theology.⁵ But Bavinck did not see it that way. He refused to capitulate to this "duality of faith and culture."⁶ As he matured, Bavinck went on to develop and publicly model a form of Christian spirituality that was deeply committed to public life. To use Richard Mouw's terminology, Bavinck sought to develop a holy form of worldliness.⁷

3. James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 5.

4. Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 4.

5. James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 71–72, 87–89.

6. George Harinck, "Something That Must Remain, If the Truth Is to Be Sweet and Precious to Us": The Reformed Spirituality of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 252.

7. Richard J. Mouw, *Called to Holy Worldliness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

2. David W. Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10. Pastors, too, have reflected on the pervasive nature of this dichotomy. One pastor reported, "In sermon after sermon I had called [my congregation] to give more time, more money, more energy to the work of the church. Little did I understand or affirm their callings in the world. I had inadvertently created a secular/sacred divide in which the 'sacred' calling of the church was pitted against their 'secular' callings in the world." Skye Jethani, "Uncommon Callings," *Christianity Today*, January 14, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/winter/uncommon-callings.html>.

Two theological themes ground and direct Bavinck's approach to a spirituality of cultural engagement. First, he works with the dual metaphors of "pearl" and "leaven" in his description of the gospel. These metaphors, mixed as they may initially seem, undergird his creative fusion of piety and public action. The second is how Bavinck understood the imitation of Christ in the world. This public and pious vision for discipleship was, for Bavinck, the "heart of the spiritual life."⁸ In this brief chapter, I offer these two concepts as theological resources for Christians wrestling with the relationship between their spiritual and material lives in the world.

Pearl and Leaven

"The kingdom of heaven," Jesus declares, "is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened" (Matt. 13:33). To this, Jesus adds, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (13:45–46).⁹

For Bavinck, these two images describe not only *what* the gospel proclaims but also *how* that proclamation is manifested in the world. First and foremost, Bavinck asserts, the gospel is a pearl. It is a unique and irreplaceable treasure, an object of great cost and affection. In order to obtain it, we "sell everything" we have.¹⁰ And why would we forfeit everything for this pearl? Because it is the "power of salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).¹¹

However, as precious as it is, the pearl of the gospel cannot be hidden away, out of sight. Instead, like a *leaven*, the gospel goes out into the world and transforms, restores, and lifts it up.¹² The gospel is not simply precious; it

8. Dirk van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck's Reformed Ethics: Some Remarks about Unpublished Manuscripts in the Libraries of Amsterdam and Kampen," *The Bavinck Review* 1 (2010): 38.

9. All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from ESV unless otherwise indicated.

10. Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 224.

11. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 396.

12. As Bavinck writes,

Sin has corrupted much; in fact, everything. The guilt of human sin is immeasurable; the pollution that always accompanies it penetrates every structure of humanity and the world. Nonetheless 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. We need not, indeed we must not, despair of anyone or anything. The Gospel is a joyful tidings, 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. ("Catholicity of Christianity," 244)

also is powerful and public. In the words of Bavinck, it is an "invisible change agent" moving in and through the world.¹³ God's kingdom does not sit apart from or above this world; it permeates it.¹⁴ The church, therefore—in spite of its flaws and failures—has made and will continue to make a real and tangible difference in society. It succeeds in this not by its own power and perfection but by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Though Bavinck's thesis might look good on the page, holding both the precious and the pervasive nature of the gospel together in one life is difficult, to say the least. Some Christians today have a keen understanding of the gospel's precious, unique, and pearl-like qualities. They readily perceive how the Christian faith demands deep and costly piety, spiritual discipline, and an unbreakable and exclusive relationship with Jesus Christ. With their eyes fixed on heavenly reward, they hear Jesus's words clearly: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) and "Great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:12 NIV). But an exclusive or one-sided emphasis *only* on the pearl-like nature of the gospel will quickly privatize a gospel that is meant to be public.¹⁵

Other Christians have an acute sense of the leavening power of the gospel for public life and public action. They emphasize the way Jesus's words and actions are meant to change things *here* and *now*. Christianity brings with it a public and ethical program, not just for an individual's life, but also for the whole of society. Attentive to the public "reforming and renewing" power of the gospel for *this* world,¹⁶ they proclaim the words of the prophets and of Jesus Christ: "Let justice roll down like the waters"; "do justice, . . . love kindness"; "I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. . . . Whatever you did for . . . the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8; Matt. 25:35–36, 40 NIV). But with an exclusive emphasis on the leavening power of the gospel, Christians

13. Dirk van Keulen, "Herman Bavinck on the Imitation of Christ," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 86. The gospel, Bavinck writes, "preached a principle so deep and rich and extraordinarily powerful that it was bound to exert a reforming influence on all earthly circumstances." "Christian Principles and Social Relationships," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 140.

14. Bavinck, "Christian Principles," 141. With this claim, Bavinck rejects any conception of Christianity that posits a dualistic relationship between grace and nature. Rather, *grace restores* nature. Grace, then, is not opposed to *nature*; it is opposed only to sin.

15. "The Gospel only changes the inward man, the conscience, the heart; the remainder stays the same until the final judgment," Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity," 237.

16. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity," 237.

are in danger of conceding the distinctive driver and source of their power. Without a rootedness in the pearl-like nature of the gospel, the church could become like any other community organization seeking social and political change for its own ends.

In contemporary life, we hear these tensions echoed when evangelicals debate the relative importance of evangelism versus social justice, prayer versus policy, faith versus work. Bavinck refuses the dichotomy: the gospel is not *either* a pearl *or* a leaven. The gospel is *both* a pearl *and* a leaven.¹⁷ Bavinck both connects the pearl and leaven and distinguishes them in a very particular, precise, and purposeful way. Exactly how Bavinck accomplishes this feat is important: it has real consequences for the church and its mission in the world.

The Pearl Precedes the Leaven

According to Bavinck, the gospel as a pearl must always precede its leavening power. This order and distinction is critically important. The gospel is, first and foremost, a pearl. 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, . . . it would still be and remain something of everlasting worth."¹⁸

With or without successful social change, the gospel of Jesus Christ is and always will be a pearl of great price. The meaning and worth of the gospel are not dependent on the social or political change it makes in the world. In the gospel, we receive the "good news of reconciliation and redemption from sin through the blood of the cross."¹⁹ To miss the pearl-like qualities of the gospel, then, is to miss the crux of the story.

Although the pearl comes first, Bavinck is quick to declare that the gospel *does* affect change in the world. The pearl is, and must be, the impetus for leavening action in public life. Thus, while Bavinck's priority is undoubtedly on the gospel as pearl, he refuses to create a dichotomy between the pearl and the leaven. Instead, he establishes an order of causality—and this is critical. If the pearl does not come first, the gospel loses its distinctive claim. With no attention to its unique and precious power, the gospel becomes a rootless social movement, suddenly one more political ideology among many. The gospel is therefore *first* the "proclamation of the kingdom

of heaven and [God's] righteousness." This, Bavinck argues, "is the gospel that must remain, first in church and missions, but also beyond it, everywhere. It may not be robbed of its contents or dissolved into a political or social program."²⁰

However, if the pearl is not accompanied by the leaven, Bavinck warns, Christians lose the rest of the gospel story and fail to grasp its transformative power for their public lives, their bodies, their vocations, their communities, and their world. "From this center" in the pearl, Bavinck writes, the leaven goes out and "influences all earthly relationships in a reforming and renewing way."²¹ When the gospel, as a pearl, exerts extraordinary power in the world; it is a leaven. Rather than being in opposition to or indifferent toward public action, here piety drives and directs our action in the world.²²

Therefore, for Bavinck, the pearl-like and leaven-like qualities of the gospel cannot and ought not be separated. They must, however, be distinguished. In short, Bavinck's scheme enables Christians to make a helpful distinction between the pearl and leaven without making a separation between the two that would truly prove fatal. Bavinck's model clarifies where the gospel's leavening power originates. It upholds the distinctive, precious, and unique salvific claims of the gospel as well as its public power and consequences. Though the pearl and the leaven remain distinct, Bavinck refuses to tear these two aspects of the gospel apart.

Rather than placing the material and spiritual in eschatological opposition, Bavinck argues that the two will one day experience a deep eschatological unity. For him, it is not simply the pearl-like qualities of the gospel that have eschatological import; the earthy, leavening work of the gospel with this present age will somehow both matter and endure in the next. Scripture, he argues, "consistently maintains the intimate connectedness of the spiritual and the natural," which will be "harmoniously united" when Christ returns in the new heaven and the new earth.²³ These words contain an astounding claim: not only is our present action deeply—though mysteriously—connected to God's coming kingdom, our vision of life in the Holy City (Rev. 21:2) must

20. Bavinck, "Christian Principles," 142.

21. Bavinck, "Christian Principles," 142.

22. Thus, for Bavinck, the gospel does not simply remain set apart, transcending the world; it also exercises a leavening power that permeates the whole. As Bavinck writes in another essay, "The Christian faith is not a quantitative reality that spreads itself in a transcendent fashion over the natural but a religious and ethical power that enters the natural in an immanent fashion and eliminates only that which is unholy. The kingdom of heaven may be a treasure and a pearl of great price, but it is also a mustard seed and a leaven." "Catholicity of Christianity," 236.

23. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:720.

17. Bavinck, "Catholicity of Christianity," 236.

18. Bavinck, "Christian Principles," 141.

19. Bavinck, "Christian Principles," 142.

also be filled with action. The Holy City is not merely spiritual, for "what we have sown [on earth] is harvested in eternity."²⁴

The Imitation of Christ: Personal and Public

Distinguished, but never separated, the metaphors of pearl and heaven clarify the integral relationship between Christian piety and public action. But we are still left with an important question: How exactly does our piety undergird our public life? For Bavinck, part of the answer can be found in his nuanced understanding of the imitation of Christ. For him, knowing and following Jesus is *simultaneously* an act of personal piety and public action.

In the fifteenth century, the Roman Catholic monk Thomas à Kempis wrote a widely influential devotional titled *The Imitation of Christ*. In his opening chapter, reflecting on what it means to follow Jesus, Thomas à Kempis urges readers to "shift your affections from the things that you can see to the things you cannot see."²⁵ His understanding of imitation, saturated in a rich and Christocentric piety, emphasized self-denial, humility, cross-bearing, and detachment from the world. For Thomas à Kempis, and the thousands who read his devotionals, imitating Christ was profoundly *otherworldly*.

Reacting against this otherworldliness, a more recent exemplar of christological imitation pledged to literally emulate the actions of Jesus as directly as possible in day-to-day life.²⁶ Charles Sheldon, an early proponent of this literalistic approach, articulated imitation in this way: "Our aim will be to act just as [Jesus] would if He was in our places."²⁷ Sheldon's work, "a classic of turn-of-the-[twentieth]-century popular Protestantism,"²⁸ drew strongly on the person of Jesus, who would transform the lives of those who follow him. His understanding of imitation is less attentive to Christ as *savior*, instead

24. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:727.

25. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. William C. Creahey (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1989), 31.

26. In his writing on imitation, Bavinck elaborates four dominant traditions of interpreting the imitation of Christ: the martyr, the monk, the mystic, and the modernist. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 326–38.

27. Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (1896; repr., Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1975), 16. As many have noted, Sheldon's novel became quite popular during the social gospel movement. Later, Sheldon's work directly inspired the "What Would Jesus Do?" trend in North American evangelicalism in the 1990s. For part of the story about the popularity of the "WWJD" trend among young evangelicals, see "What Would Jesus Do? The Rise of a Slogan," *BBC World News*, December 8, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16068178>; and "What Would Jesus Do?," *World Magazine*, January 10, 1998, https://world.wng.org/1998/01/what_would_jesus_do?

28. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 4.

focusing on Christ as the "moral ideal *par excellence*."²⁹ Such an understanding of imitation focuses our attention on Jesus primarily as an *ethical* example who guides our actions in this world.³⁰ For many who read Sheldon's work, imitating Christ was an activity that was profoundly *this-worldly* focused.³¹

Rather than alleviate the problematic dichotomy between piety and action, these two conceptions of imitation actually exacerbate the divide. Either we must imitate Christ in a distinctly *otherworldly* manner, or we must look to Christ as an example while we focus on what is truly important: this-worldly action.

Bavinck's Reformed approach to imitation refuses to capitulate to such a dichotomy. He argues that, properly understood, the imitation of Christ has two distinct and yet necessarily connected aspects. The imitation of Christ is, first and foremost, an intimate and spiritual *union* with Christ. Second, as a consequence of that union, imitation "consists in shaping our lives in accord with Christ."³² Our primary, spiritual fellowship with Christ must lead us toward active and public imitation of his "words and deeds."³³ In both the content and ordering of Bavinck's vision for imitation, we can hear resonances with his conception of the gospel as a pearl and a heaven.

29. James Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 156. Gustafson elaborates on the tradition out of which Sheldon comes. In it, ethics "is basically the study of the *summum bonum*. The personal ethical question becomes, 'What is your ideal of life?'" Given this, as John Howard Yoder sharply contends, "the values" found in Sheldon's book that constitute imitating Christ "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." *Politics of Jesus*, 4–5.

30. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:336; Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ II (1918)," in *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 402–40, here 407–8. In his essays on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck consistently raises these critiques of "modern" understandings of the imitation of Christ, as do more recent scholars, including Alistair McGrath and James Gustafson. See James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 155–56; Alistair McGrath, "In What Way Can Jesus Be a Moral Example for Christians?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 3 (September 1991): 290. With these emphases, Christianity can simply be reduced to the moral teachings of Jesus. Clement Attlee, though not a theologian, highlighted the trajectory this emphasis can take in a conversation with his biographer, Kenneth Harris. When asked if he believed in Christianity, he replied, "Believe in the ethics of Christianity. Can't believe the mumbo-jumbo." Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 564.

31. As E. J. Tinsley argues, there is a "marked antimystical outlook of old Liberal theologians." "The Way of the Son of Man: The 'Imitation of Christ' in the Gospel Tradition," *Interpretation* 7 (1953): 418, emphasis added.

32. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:340.

33. Herman Bavinck, "The Imitation of Christ I [1885–86]," in Bolt, *Bavinck's Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, 372–401, here 400. Bavinck expands his definition of the *second* aspect of imitation with these words, in the same essay: we imitate the "virtues and obligations which conform to God's law that Christ in his words and deeds leaves as an example for us."

For Bavinck, Jesus Christ is both the redeemer of our souls and the moral director of our public lives. These two aspects should be distinguished but never separated. Christ is not *merely* an example of moral or public action. Moral action is not a first step leading to spiritual union with Christ. If this were the case, Christian discipleship would be an exercise in fear and futility, for who could, on their own, earn union with Christ or live up to his demands for public justice and righteousness?³⁴ If Christ is our moral model and nothing more, "then he comes to judge us and not to save us."³⁵ Facing such an unattainable goal on our own, we would quickly—and rightly—become discouraged. All imitation and public moral action must therefore begin with the spiritual union and redemption that is found in Jesus Christ. Once we know Christ as our savior, Bavinck argues, only then can we dare look to him as our moral example.³⁶

Although imitation begins with spiritual union in Christ, it must end with public action that emerges from said union.³⁷ The lives of those who have been saved by grace through the work of Christ on the cross are called to take on the very form and shape of Christ's life in their own lives. Followers can only do this because Christ has first been united to them, through the work of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

Molding one's public life to a christological pattern that is *external* feels awkward at best; at worst it feels either impossible or even coercive. Therefore, this first aspect of public discipleship must always be a deep *internal* union with Christ as forged by the Holy Spirit. Our moral pattern cannot remain outside of us, as an imposed, foreign, or unachievable moral ideal.

And therein lies the confounding, remarkable claim of the gospel: the one to whom we must be conformed, Jesus Christ, has already united himself to us through the power of his Spirit!³⁹ Thus the public pattern we are called to follow is no longer external to us: it is living and active within us through our union in Christ. Time and again, Bavinck stresses the importance of this

34. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:336.

35. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ I," 394.

36. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ I," 394.

37. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:337.

38. As Bavinck says, "Our lives can be directed to Christ only when they proceed from him and abide in him." *Reformed Ethics*, 1:339.

39. Christians, then, are called to follow Christ, our pattern, as he follows the law, in perfect obedience. For Bavinck, this has an important *creational* focus, for these laws are the laws that God has set down for his people in creation. Christ's life, while directing us eschatologically, also points us protologically back to God's created intent. For more on the relationship between the moral law and the imitation of Christ, see Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ I," 400; Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:377–78; John Bolt, "Christ and the Law in the Ethics of Herman Bavinck," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 73.

spiritual union for public discipleship. The imitation of Christ, he writes, is first and foremost a "*spiritual life-relationship with Jesus*."⁴⁰ The "heart of imitation" is a "*spiritual, believing communion with Christ*."⁴¹ Without that, any public or material attempt to imitate Jesus is futile.

Law-Patterned Public Spirituality

When we think about Christian spirituality, the law, judgments, and commandments of God are not typically the first things that come to mind. In fact, elements like these are often placed in opposition to Christian love, grace, and spirituality. The Old Testament gives us a law, it is said, while the New Testament gives us a person with whom we can have a spiritual relationship of grace and mercy.

Once again, Bavinck refuses to follow these dichotomies. For him, Christ is not in tension with the law: Christ's life reveals, fulfills, and embodies God's law. Bavinck argues that Jesus is the "living law"⁴² and thus a concrete pattern for life in the world.⁴³ In thought, word, and deed, and in life and death, Jesus has "completely fulfill[ed] the moral law."⁴⁴ His life demonstrates the "virtues and obligations which conform to God's law."⁴⁵ Christians, then, are called to imitate Jesus in his following of God's law. This is nothing less than a call to law-patterned imitation of the virtues of Jesus in our personal and communal life.

Bavinck's emphasis on the *law-patterned* nature of public discipleship flows from the Reformed tradition's emphasis on God's laws as a "positive guide" for both public life and spirituality.⁴⁶ As a pattern for life, the law teaches God's

40. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:321, emphasis original.

41. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:322, emphasis original.

42. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:341.

43. Importantly, argues Bavinck, Jesus is a *concrete* pattern, not a *literal* pattern. Jesus concretely shows us how one can perfectly apply the demands of the law; his life is a "concrete example" (Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ II," 413). We then must contextualize Christ's application of the law and the virtues that Christ embodies in our own time and place (Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ II," 418, 426, 438).

44. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ I," 396.

45. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ I," 400. Here Bavinck is careful to note that not everything in Jesus's life is to be imitated (we cannot, e.g., imitate Christ's salvific work), nor is everything in Jesus's life to be literally emulated. Rather, Christ is an example of the "most important virtues which the law requires of us." *Those virtues* in accordance with the law are what we ought to imitate in our own daily lives and contexts, not only in personal piety but also in every part of our lives (Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ II," 426).

46. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.7.12. The commandments, then, have three uses: they have a punitive use, acting as a mirror to "show God's righteousness" and, in turn, to show our unrighteousness. Thus the law "warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns"

people two very important things: the first table teaches proper worship and piety for God; and the second table teaches proper love in public action affecting the neighbor. Given this twofold understanding, it should come as no surprise that theologians like John Calvin turned to the law of God for questions that included *both* the ordering of worship *and* the ordering of public life.⁴⁷

Bavinck argues that this spirituality of law-patterned public obedience does not take our eyes off Jesus's saving work, nor does it focus our attention away from the things of this world. Instead, it focuses the disciple's attention on both, and does so in the proper order. Imitating Jesus is only possible on account of a primary "spiritual-life relationship with Christ."⁴⁸ To be a public example of a lawful life, Christ must first redeem us *for* lawful living. But from Christ's redemptive work "proceeds reforming, recreating, renewing power,"⁴⁹ enabling Christians to actively pattern their lives on his example and law.

Christ's Spirit sends us out to *follow him* in our "various walks of life,"⁵⁰ including the "state, society, art, science, agriculture, industry, [and] commerce."⁵¹ Rather than following Jesus out of the world, Christ's Spirit drives us into the world, toward a law-patterned and culturally engaged form of holy worldliness. Christians can and must, therefore, imitate Christ not only in prayer and piety but also in the public square.

Conclusion: Turning Our Eyes upon Jesus and the World

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full, in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.⁵²

humanity. Second, the law has a restraining function: it is a "deterrent to those not yet regenerated." The law also has a "third and principal use," its primary use: revealing God's intent; thus the law offers a positive guide for the lives of Christians (Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.6–12).

47. In Calvin's sermons on the Decalogue, among many other themes he preaches against superstition and idolatry (see his sermons on Deut. 5:4–7 and Deut. 5:8–10) and preaches on how we live alongside our neighbors, honoring them with our words and thoughts (see his sermon on Deut. 5:17), keeping in mind civil legislation. John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980).

48. Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:321.

49. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ I," 400.

50. Bavinck, "Christian Principles," 142.

51. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ II," 429. In his work on the imitation of Christ, Bavinck elaborates further on the contents of this imitation.

52. Helen Howarth Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," 1922; this refrain is now sung by popular evangelical singers and songwriters, including Lauren Daigle and Hillsong Worship.

I once heard a well-known Reformed theologian comment on this song, which wonderfully encapsulates the evangelical dichotomy between piety and public action. He remarked that only one word needed to be altered in that beloved old hymn to rightly capture the relationship between the two. Instead of "dim," he asked us to sing the hymn again with the word "clear." And so we did.

With that single alternation, our song leader fixed our eyes upon a vision of a savior who commissions us to go out into the world, embracing the leavening power of the gospel for all of life. In the arts, politics, business, and sciences, we are called to follow the one by whom "all things were created," the one in whom "all things hold together," and the one through whom God will "reconcile to himself all things" (Col. 1:16–20).

Those of us in contemporary evangelical circles often hear echoes of this hymn's mistaken dichotomy, just as I did that afternoon at John's memorial service. Faith is of the utmost importance, we are told, while the other aspects of our day-to-day lives in the public square are relegated to footnote status with that one little word, *but*.

And yet, as that Reformed theologian remarked, we should not simply get rid of the hymn and its important focus on commitment to, and steadfast assurance in, Jesus Christ. However, we would do well to tweak its lyrics, just a bit, to take away the "but" I heard so often at John's memorial service and to notice the way in which the things of this world grow strangely *clear* in the light of God's glory and grace.

Piety is primary to the Christian life but is not its end. Piety ought to drive us toward kingdom-oriented action in the public square—as we anticipate the new heaven and the new earth. This is good news for those of us who "spend our days"⁵³ in the material and mundane matters of the "state, society, art, science, agriculture, industry, commerce."⁵⁴ To that list we might add the work of neighborhood associations and school boards, cooking dinner and childcare, playing basketball and plucking weeds, and a host of other "this-worldly," seemingly ordinary, and unimportant tasks. These things, too, have eternal significance *in and through Christ*, whose gospel is for us, as both pearl *and* leaven.

53. Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 32.

54. Bavinck, "Imitation of Christ II," 429.