

Herman Bavinck, the Two Kingdoms, and Reformed Social Ethics

By Ron Gleason

One might wonder, rightly so I might add, why an article on Bavinck's view of the Two Kingdoms (*Zwei Reiche Lehre*) is germane to our time. That is a good and legitimate question that I hope to answer in the course of this article. It might seem to some who follow theological developments closely that the theological doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms" has faded somewhat to the background, but is that really the case? Simply because no one is dialoguing about the issue as frequently and as vociferously as was the case a couple of years ago, is no indication that the essence of the matter has passed out of existence. For instance, some argue today that post-modernism is no longer the "hot-button-topic" it was when Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard were getting traction in the 1960s, but that is incorrect. Quite possibly it can be reasonably argued that it is not explicitly discussed and debated as much as it was not that long ago, but that does not mean that it has disappeared. Something very similar is true of the theological doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

IS THE TWO KINGDOMS DOCTRINE STILL RELEVANT?

One might argue that the issue of the Two Kingdoms is simply reappearing in different guises and has rather easily found a new home in what has been termed "Our Increasingly Unrecognizable Civilization." That is, given the way in which Roman Catholic theology, Lutheran theology, and what John Frame called "The Escondido Theology," referring, of course, to Westminster Theological Seminary located in Escondido, California think, teach, and speak about the "Two Kingdoms," it might still be on the theological radar, although flying in somewhat of a "stealth" mode.¹

In his Introduction to Frame's book, George Grant opines that the possession of the biblical worldview is

non-negotiable for modern Christians and that Frame has been "invariably helpful to modern Christians in working out the practical implications of a fully orbed Christian worldview."² Grant proceeds to declare that a genuinely integrated Christian worldview "must be engaged in the world. It must be unengaged in worldliness. It must somehow correlate spiritual concerns with temporal concerns. It must coalesce heavenly hope and landed life. It must coordinate heart-felt faith and down-to-earth practice."³ That is, a Christian worldview must be exercised in the world without becoming itself worldly. This involves a great deal of biblical discernment and maturity. It also inextricably ties or links a Christian worldview and Christian ethics together.

Grant touches on an essential element for contemporary theology as well as an indispensable aspect of Bavinck's theology, namely the possession and continuous development of a biblical worldview by the serious Christian. The concept of biblical worldview was of such importance for Bavinck that he wrote his doctoral

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1. John Frame, *The Escondido Theology. A Reformed Response to Two Kingdoms Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2001).

2. George Grant, "Introduction," in Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, p. vii. Grant appends these words from Richard Weaver, "Worldview is the most important thing that we can know about a man. Ideas have consequences. And those consequences affect everything in the practical realm as well as in the theoretical realm. Discernment of worldview is therefore the most necessary of all the tasks of wisdom." In his book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, written in 1948, Weaver instructs his readers that his work "is another book about the dissolution of the West" and "There is ground for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot" (p. 1).

3. George Grant, "Introduction," in Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, p. x.

thesis at Leiden University in the Netherlands on it.⁴ In that dissertation, Bavinck devotes a lengthy chapter on how a Christian and his or her worldview ought to function in the society in which the Christian lives.⁵

In my biography,⁶ I chronicle how Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, and others in Holland strove to incorporate a biblical worldview among the citizens of the tiny country of the Netherlands. Bavinck went so far as to pen a booklet on the subject that went through three Dutch editions. Crossway published an English edition in 2019.⁷ The centrality, importance, and indispensable nature of possessing a biblical life and worldview has been emphasized and re-emphasized by seminal thinkers. An immediate example is the late-Francis Schaeffer, who, in his *Christian Manifesto*, reiterated the vital nature of worldview in the opening words of that book. He wrote, “The basic problem of the Christians in this country in the last eighty years or so, in regard to society and in regard to government, is that they have seen things in bits and pieces instead of totals.”⁸ What is important for our purposes is the statement by Schaeffer, which would certainly be endorsed by Bavinck that the Christian and secular worldviews are on a “collision course” and are diametrically opposed to one another. In his words, “These two world views stand as totals in complete antithesis to each other in content and also in their natural results—including sociological and governmental results, and specifically including law.”⁹ That truth still holds today.

The Foreword of Frame’s book was penned by Gary DeMar, who emphasizes many of the same things that Grant does, without being repetitious. DeMar rightly argues that when it comes to the notion of the Two Kingdoms “it’s important to understand that there is a legacy of Reformed thinking on this subject.”¹⁰ That is most certainly the case as I hope to delineate in this

4. Herman Bavinck, *De Ethiek of Ulrich Zwingli* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman, 1880).

5. Bavinck, *De Ethiek of Ulrich Zwingli*, “Het Christelijk leven in de maatschappij,” pp. 134–171.

6. Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck, Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010).

7. Herman Bavinck, *Christelijke wereldbeschouwing* (Kampen: Bos, 1904; Kok, 1913; & Kok, 1929). See Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, trans. and ed. Cory Brock, James Eglinton, and Nathaniel Sutanto (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019).

8. Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Vol. 5, “A Christian View of the West” (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 423.

9. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, 5.424.

10. Gary DeMar, “Foreword,” in Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, p. xvii.

article. For DeMar’s part, he offers a very helpful excursion through some of those very helpful Presbyterian and Reformed individuals and their writings.

HOW DOES THE DOCTRINE OF THE TWO KINGDOMS APPLY TO SOCIAL ETHICS?

In the “Author’s Preface,” to his work on the Escondido theology, Frame offers, if I have counted accurately, no less than thirty-two bullet points that comprise what he terms “controversial” teaching by some, but not all, of the faculty members at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, CA. This is not an article about Drs. Frame, Grant, and DeMar, but they are helpful in setting the table for what Herman Bavinck taught on the subject of the Two Kingdoms.

How one distinguishes those kingdoms and describes how the committed Christian is to function in them is very important at any time in history, but especially in our time, and I am not merely referring to our recent “lockdowns” caused by the Covid virus. For instance, do Christians look to have sentient discourse about the myriad social issues facing us today with those who have a very different worldview, *or* do they check their Christian values and virtues at the door of the public arena? Do they offer a full-throated defense of those social issues, or do they, while wearing their “secular” mindset, find nothing wrong with sexual perversion, abortion, euthanasia, and the blatant teaching of Critical Race Theory in government schools?

Do convinced Christians not merely function as the “conscience of morality” for the social issues facing the United States, but also offer some well-grounded push-back? I am convinced—and so was Bavinck—that it is the latter, as, I hope, will become increasingly evident in the course of this article. Allow me a few examples of what I mean. One sometimes hears a secularist unequivocally state, “Well, you don’t want to end up on the wrong side of history, do you?” That’s an amusing statement taken at face value. I wonder if anyone ever asked that question of Josef Stalin, Mao Zedong, or Che Guevara? How does anyone absolutely know in advance how history will play out? Stalinist Russia certainly didn’t, nor did Communist China.

Are we equally concerned about being on the wrong side of biology? What do I mean by that? If a male human being were to say to me, “I identify as a woman,” what ought my response be? I have given that some thought and my reply would be this: “Do you mean that as a clearly adult male you are *pretending* to be a woman because that is the reality of what we’re discussing?”

Then I would hasten to add, “You don’t want to be on the wrong side of millennia of biology, do you?” I would point out from my Christian life and worldview that God states that there are not genders, which is a radical feminist construct, but rather there are two sexes. Moreover, discoveries of mass graves dating back millennium have discovered the remains of only two sexes: male and female.

In the face of myriad ethical and worldview issues—such as Critical Race Theory, identity politics, intersectionality, BLM, Antifa, LGBTQIA+, The 1619 Project, climate change/global warming, a faltering economy that threatens massive inflation, an elitist, billionaire group that wants to rule everything Americans do and think, and one of the most startling anti-biological manifestations of wokeness: transgender fanaticism, where people of all stripes are being force-fed the abolition of biological sex—how ought a Christian to respond to such things? Does a Christian have *anything* at all to say to a world that is certifiably insane, or should the Christian community that at one point in time functioned as the moral consciousness of society, simply remain silent or even state that those issues do not belong to the realm into which they should speak or have an opinion?

It is well known that Bavinck was promoted at Leiden University in 1880. What is possibly less well known is that his dissertation was on the Swiss Reformer, Huldrych Zwingli, and specifically on Zwingli’s ethics.¹¹ The last two chapters of that doctoral dissertation (chapters 9 and 10), treat the Christian and civic life and the Christian life in society, respectively.¹² Moreover, in addition to his duties teaching Systematic (or Dogmatic) Theology, Bavinck also taught Ethics in Kampen. He abandoned that particular discipline until 1902 when he accepted the vacancy left by Abraham Kuyper in Dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam.¹³ In 1902, the Free University already had an ethics professor: Gerhard Geesink, so Bavinck left off teaching that discipline.

In order to address the controversial matter that faces us today regarding the place of the Christian in society and to what extent the Christian voice needs to be heard in the “Two Kingdoms,” I have chosen to discuss two of Bavinck’s speeches that he gave in Kampen at the Theological Seminary while he served a year’s term as “Rector” of that institution. I will take them in chronological order, which will have the added advantage of illustrating how Bavinck’s theological thoughts developed, and if, in fact, there were significant changes in his thinking, since both of these addresses deal, in

part, with how the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Reformed construe the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

I will submit one disclaimer for this article: I learned from the Brit, Herbert Butterfield, that a historian ought to function more as a *recording angel* than as a *hanging judge*. Therefore, my attempts in writing this article about Bavinck’s particular view on a particular theological issue are neither to praise him unduly nor to excoriate him. Rather, my aims are less ambitious. I want to represent his thoughts to you with the best of intentions and using the best of my (fallible) abilities. I also want to make what I consider to be exceedingly important points about writing history, articles, or biographies and more.

It is noteworthy, I think, how various historians, reading the identical documents, diaries, letters, tracts, and books, can arrive at very divergent, if not contradictory, conclusions. Academicians generally love to excoriate any and all who do not write for a narrow, tenured, and academic audience. I want to clarify from the outset that I am *not* writing this article for the academy, but rather for a popular audience. It is my desire that modern Christians come to comprehend what one Reformer, Herman Bavinck, thought and taught about the issue of the Two Kingdoms.

As I mentioned earlier, I will take Bavinck’s two addresses in chronological order. The first article was delivered as a speech in 1888.¹⁴ The second address was delivered in 1894 and dealt with the notion of common grace, which, in fact, is its concise title.¹⁵ Both talks/writings address how the Christian ought to relate to the society in which he or she lives as well as the concept of social ethics in light of the disparate worldviews represented by the Christian and a secular humanist.

11. Herman Bavinck, *De Ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman, 1880).

12. Bavinck, *De Ethiek van Ulrich Zwingli*, pp. 122–133 & 134–171.

13. See Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), p. 316ff.

14. Herman Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van Christendom en kerk, rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theol. School te Kampen op 18 december 1888* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888). The reader can access an English pdf of this speech online by searching for “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church.”

15. Herman Bavinck, *De algemeene genade, rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theologische School te Kampen op 6 december 1894* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1894). This article can also be accessed online by searching for a pdf of Bavinck’s “Common Grace.” As an interesting—or not so interesting—aside, 1894 was the same year Bavinck’s good friend, Geerhardus Vos, gave his acceptance address as professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton.

THE CATHOLICITY OF CHRISTIANITY
AND THE CHURCH

By the time Bavinck gave this speech he had been a professor in Kampen for five years. Of course, there was a history or “back story” to what he chose as his address as Rector of the school for his one-year term. This is not the place to go into that history, but you can read about it in my biography.¹⁶ Suffice it to say that there were some in his ecclesiastical affiliation that held to very narrow views regarding the Church of Jesus Christ.

Following a brief introduction to the subject of his address, Bavinck continued and divided this treatise into the following separate sections: “The Scriptural Teaching on Catholicity,” “The Idea of Catholicity in the History of the Church” (which is a much longer section than the first), and he ends with “The Obligation Catholicity Place Upon Us Today.” The second section of Bavinck’s speech will occupy the lion’s share of our time, but I will choose relevant quotations from the other two sections to augment and explicate what Bavinck intends in the second section.

It should be mentioned, as I alluded to, that there were some ecclesiastical issues that needed to be briefly addressed in Bavinck’s speech, not least of which was the suspicious nature of some of the members of the church affiliation that had established the Theological Seminary in Kampen. The *Afgescheidenen* (Separatists) as they were called tended to be hesitant fully to embrace other Reformed camps that were not in full agreement with them, including Abraham Kuyper’s *Doleantie* group. Bavinck was acutely aware of those suspicions and had experienced them first-hand when he attended Leiden

University for his theological studies. Simultaneously, Bavinck also was well aware that the movement that Abraham Kuyper led within the state church (*Hervormde Kerk*) aligned theologically with the *Afgescheidenen* and that the two groups should unify.

How does Bavinck define the term “catholicity”? He provides us with three simple meanings for the word “catholicity” in the Church’s use of that term in history. First, it was employed “to refer to the church as a unified whole in contrast to the dispersed local congregations that make up the whole and are included in it. The local church can, however, legitimately call itself catholic because it attaches itself to the universal church.”¹⁷

In the second place, Bavinck asserts that “the term expresses the unity of the church as inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places” (“Catholicity,” 221).

Finally, “the church is sometimes referred to as catholic because it embraces the *whole* of human experience. It possesses perfectly all doctrine concerning either invisible and visible things that human beings need to know; it provides a cure for all kinds of sin, either of body or soul; it produces all virtues and good works, and partakes of all spiritual gifts.”¹⁸

All of these taken together make it clear that the confession of the catholicity “is based on the conviction that Christianity is a world religion that should govern all people and sanctify all creatures irrespective of geography, nationality, place, and time.” In 1888, Bavinck was convinced Christianity was the only world religion that was fully universal and capable of permeating and sanctifying all others. In spite of the fact that the Christian faith was precisely what was required in his time that he describes as “rife with errors and schisms” (“Catholicity,” 221). In order to solidify his assertion, Bavinck moves to his first point regarding what the Word of God teaches about the notion of catholicity.

THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON CATHOLICITY

Bavinck begins this section of his address with a succinct, general description of creation followed closely by a brief summary of redemptive-history where Bavinck asserts that in Israel, revelation dominates everything.” He continues, “A separation between the cult (*godsdienst*) and the rest of life is altogether impossible.” Note the strong language he employs to drive home his point: “dominates,” “everything,” and “impossible.” Moreover, in this arrangement, “The law of YHWH regulates everything even to the smallest minutiae” (“Catholicity,” 222). In the same section, Bavinck suggests what

16. See Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian*, pp. 45–68.

17. Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 221. Hereafter, “Catholicity.”

18. Bavinck, “Catholicity,” 221. There is a significant translator’s note appended to this third and final descriptor of the term “catholicity.” The note reads: “This last dimension of catholicity is freely borrowed by Bavinck from Cyril of Jerusalem’s ‘Catechetical Lectures’ (XVIII, 23). The paragraph reads as follows: ‘The Church, then is called Catholic because it is spread through the whole world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it never stops teaching in all its fullness every doctrine that men ought to be brought to know; and that regarding things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. It is called Catholic also because it brings into religious obedience every sort of men, rulers and ruled, learned and simple, and because it is a universal treatment and cure for every kind of sin whether perpetrated by soul or body, and possesses within it every form of virtue that is named, whether it expresses itself in deeds or works or in spiritual graces of every description.’” (Emphasis added.)

the Swiss Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) explicitly states, namely that Christ and the apostles did not say or teach anything the Old Testament prophets did not say and teach, and the Old Testament prophets did not say or teach anything that Moses had not said or taught.

He cites the prophets in particular as the ones pulling back the curtain somewhat and hinting at the eventual inclusion of the Gentiles. In that entire process, there would be opposition from the world. Why? Because “This ‘world’ lies in wickedness [KJV] (1 John 5:19), has ‘the devil as its prince’ (John 14:30; 16:11), who is ‘the god of this age’ (II Cor. 4:4).” He raises that point in order to emphasize and raise the consciousness of his audience to the reality that the world neither knows God nor his children. In addition, the world “hates the followers of Jesus as it hated him (John 15:18, 19; 17:14)” (“Catholicity,” 223). All of this might seem to indicate that Bavinck will eventually remind his hearers that Christians should therefore avoid any contact with the world and the people of the world, or take a Lutheran approach and declare that Christians can be involved in society, but they must check their Christian principles at the door if they get involved with the culture. Neither is the case.

The cross is central according to God’s revelation and “Christianity is the religion of the cross” (“Catholicity,” 223). Nevertheless, and simultaneously, Bavinck proffers that “the Cross casts its shadow over all creation but so does the light of the Resurrection. On the one hand, the kingdom of heaven is a treasure in a field and a pearl of great price for which a man sells everything he has in order to buy it; at the same time it is also a mustard seed that grows into a tree in which the birds of the air build nests and a yeast that a woman takes hides in three measures of flour until it is all leavened” (“Catholicity,” 223–4). While it is true that the world is corrupted in sin, it is precisely “this sinful world that is the object of God’s love.” More than that, “The kingdoms of this world shall eventually become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15)” (“Catholicity,” 224).

What Bavinck is leading up to is one of his famous, regular dicta, namely that grace does not *destroy* nature but rather *restores* it. That is, the shadow that the cross of the Lord Jesus casts is over God’s entire creation, not in the sense of universal salvation, but rather in the sense that in Christ God intends the restoration of all things. After some germane comments pertaining to Christians avoiding being both narrow-minded and narrow-hearted, but remaining pure and orthodox in their church membership, orthodox, and church

discipline (p. 227), Bavinck moves to his second point: “The Idea of Catholicity in the History of the Church.”

THE IDEA OF CATHOLICITY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Bavinck contends that Scripture defines “two lines” concerning the world, which were not adhered to or equally developed in the post-apostolic period. There were reasons for that, one of which was that “The small Christian church, powerless and despised in the midst of a hostile world, had first of all to experience deeply the antithesis with the world.” Thus, in the course of time and over centuries, the church became more and more “worldly” particularly by and after Constantine. Voices were raised and protests against the secularization (*verwereldlijking*) of the Church occurred, but on balance they were either not heard or they were rejected. (“Catholicity,” 228). The upshot of this history was that “The original antithesis between holy and unholy became a contrast between good and better, between moral precepts and evangelical counsels” (Ibid., 229).

While it would be improper and incorrect to place all the blame on Thomas Aquinas and his attempt to consolidate Christian theology with Aristotelian philosophy, it would be equally incorrect to absolve him completely.¹⁹ Bavinck asserts that Roman Catholicism is fallacious because “According to Rome the ‘world’ increasingly loses the ethical significance it has in Scripture. The natural is not that which is sinful but that which by its very nature is incapable of reaching the supernatural level. The supernatural is a *donum superadditum*. Consistent Roman Catholic theologians deny that original sin is something positive; it is only negative consisting of a loss of the *donum superadditum*” (“Catholicity,” 229).

Not only does Bavinck employ this criticism of Roman Catholic theology in this early address in Kampen, but it is woven into the fabric of his *Reformed Dogmatics*. The significance of this accusation is to be located in the faulty view of the Roman Catholic Church that “The future of the world before or apart from Christianity is thus actually the same.... Nature, the world, is good, not corrupt; it is only missing that which in its

19. See Alfred Adam, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Bd. 2 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1981), pp. 101–115; Carl Andresen (hrsg.), *Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte*, Bd. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), pp. 650–682; Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte* (Kurt Aland [hrsg.]) (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1968), pp. 417–483; Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, Bd. 3 (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1930), pp. 325–337.

own strength it could never reach. The Christian faith, grace, enters the world in order to make possible the attainment of the supernatural, the *visio Dei*.²⁰ That is, Christianity does not “reform and renew that which exists, it only completes and perfects Creation. Christianity is that which transcends and approaches the natural, but it does not penetrate it and sanctify it” (“Catholicity,” 221). Theologically, this construct leaves Creation (*schepping*) and Re-Creation (*herschepping*) two entities or realities where never the twain shall meet.

All that one is left with is a “compromise” between the natural and the supernatural, “between God and humanity, faith and knowledge, church and world, soul and body, religion and morality, quietism and activity.” Serious consideration of Bavinck’s critique of this Roman construct lands one squarely in Pelagianism. To use Bavinck’s words, “The Roman principle, at bottom Pelagian, is an ‘add-on’ or supplementary system (*aanvullingssysteem*)” (“Catholicity,” 229). I realize that we are reaching back in history and that fewer and fewer in our time appreciate the value of history, but cloaked within Bavinck’s assessment of Rome being a “supplementary system” is a world of truth that demands serious reflection and answers in our current discussion not only surrounding the doctrine of the “Two Kingdoms” but also the discussions and debates that are concentrated around many of the “woke” issues of our time.

For instance, in Rome’s scheme of things, the “natural order” after the Fall is still “good” but it is of a *lower* order. How does that apply to our current situation? In our time, we frequently hear Christian friends and pastors (not that pastors are not friends, of course) that we are to follow “the science,” as if such a thing as “the science” actually exists. Again, I will put this in Bavinck’s words: “Reason and science are good and uncorrupted and are able on their own to achieve much. During the Middle Ages, Aristotle had an authority in his sphere equivalent to that of Scripture in its sphere. Only Scripture’s authority was of a higher order” (“Catholicity,” 230).

Concretely, how many Christian congregations have serious disagreements and arguments with each other over matters surrounding masks or no masks, Covid vaccinations or no Covid vaccinations, no singing in church or singing in church, and a host of other quite divisive issues? *Fallen* reason is alive and well among scientists of all stripes. There is no neutrality among scientists. A white lab coat does not confer infallibility.

20. “Catholicity,” 230. Emphasis added. Hold on to those italicized words because they are going to play a dominant role in Bavinck’s criticisms of both Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism.

As we will observe in the next section of Bavinck’s address, as is often the case, Lutheranism can frequently be a stepchild of Roman Catholicism. What do I mean by that? One example will suffice. The difference between Transubstantiation and consubstantiation is almost negligible. Both teach a form of “infused grace.” While Rome does not abolish the natural order of things, it does leave “marriage, family, possessions, earthly vocation, the state, science, and art intact and even permits them, *in their own place*, a greater space and freedom than Protestantism tends to do.”²⁰ The view that the Roman Catholic Church settled into was that it sought “to bring the entire world under the submission of the church.” Moreover, Rome “denies catholicity in the sense that the Christian faith itself must be a leavening agent in everything” (“Catholicity,” 231). The notion of the Christian faith functioning as “a leavening agent” will be a concept to which Bavinck would return in his address. It will be a kind of lynchpin for what he will say in favor of the Reformed position as well as how he will formulate his criticism against Martin Luther and the Lutherans in general.

Moving ahead, Bavinck reminded his audience that Rome and the Reformation were on a collision course not merely tangentially, but “on almost every point.” He also desired that his audience be cognizant of the fact that the Reformation be seen as more than *exclusively* a reformation of the Church. How cognizant did he want his audience to be? While conceding the point that the Reformation most certainly *was* a much-needed and long-overdue reformation of ecclesiastical matters, “it was *much more* than that; it was a *radically* new way of conceiving Christianity itself” (“Catholicity,” 221; emphasis added).

The differences between Rome and the Reformation were huge vis-à-vis life and worldview. He summarizes those differences this way: “Rome’s world-and-life view was dualistic; her disjunction between the natural and supernatural was a *quantitative* one. By returning to the New Testament, the Reformers replaced this with a truly theistic worldview that made the distinction a *qualitative* one.” Bavinck also cedes the point that on the matter of the distinction just mentioned, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were all on the same page. “All attempted to free the entire terrain of the natural from the hegemony of the church” (Ibid., 235). What deserves another look is the actuality that in spite of their *formal* agreement there were ineluctable differences among Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, not to mention other Reformers.

Bavinck then moves back to a comparison between Rome and Protestantism. He states,

The Protestant ... believes that sin corrupts and profanes everything, confessing that the entire world 'lies in wickedness' and is full of temptation. At the same time, the Protestant acknowledges that the natural order is not unholy in itself and is thus capable of being purified but must not be despised or repudiated. Precisely because Protestants combat sin more seriously than Rome does, they are also able to appreciate the proper worth of the natural order. In Protestantism, the mechanical relation of nature and grace gives way to an ethical relation. 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," 236; italics added).

DIFFERENCES AMONG LUTHER, ZWINGLI, AND CALVIN

Once Bavinck has compared Rome to the Protestants, he then turns his attention to the Protestants themselves because while general unity existed, there was neither uniformity nor identity among them. We can and should appreciate many similarities between the Reformers and the Lutherans, but we should also be on our guard for the differences—sometimes glaring—that exist between the two groups. Bavinck begins his explanation with Martin Luther, who once remarked, "Christ did not come to change things outwardly but to change persons inwardly in their hearts. The Gospel has *nothing* to do with worldly matters" ("Catholicity," 237).

It is imperative that we understand such statements against the backdrop of Luther's debates and confrontations with the Anabaptists. While the latter demanded that Christians not participate in the secular realm, Luther was of a different spirit, with a caveat. He believed that Christians could, for example, serve in the military, as a constable, as a civil magistrate, or even as a monarch. Citing Luther, Bavinck continues, "A Prince can be a Christian but he must not rule as a Christian and as a ruler he is not called a Christian but a Prince. The person is a Christian but the office and princely dignity has *nothing* to do with Christianity. In sum, Christ wants everyone to stay in their station. All he asks is that whoever had formerly been serving the Devil should henceforth serve him" ("Catholicity," 237; emphasis added).

The previous citation provides an excellent summary of Luther's and Lutheranism's concept of the relationship between the "Two Kingdoms." Granted, there is some "overlap." Luther does not deviate from Zwingli

and Calvin when it comes to freeing the "earthly realm" from the ecclesiastical. There is, however, a caveat: Luther leaves the earthly realm "standing without connection next to the spiritual realm and sometimes speaks as though the external is a matter of *complete indifference* and not capable of ethical renewal" ("Catholicity," 237; emphasis added). To Bavinck's mind and following the Reformed tradition, "Luther's mistake here is that he restricts the Gospel and limits the grace of God. The Gospel only changes the inward man, the conscience, the heart; the remainder stays the same until the final judgment. As a result, dualism is not completely overcome; a true and full catholicity is not achieved. Recreation (*herscheping*) continues to stand alongside creation (*schepping*)" ("Catholicity," 237).

Similarly, Zwingli, whom Bavinck had studied assiduously and even written his doctoral dissertation on, did not completely and fully extricate himself from the looming dualism. It is apparent, he told his audience, that Zwingli's life and worldview was quite different from Luther's in many significant regards. Nevertheless, Bavinck asserts that even Zwingli (and his works have been sorely neglected and often misunderstood. Fully to appreciate the significance of Zwingli's labors as a Reformer, one needs to read the original sources of his works and listen to Heinrich Bullinger, his successor in Zürich, and his praise for Zwingli) was not fully able to extricate himself from the tentacles of dualism.

There were two specific areas of reform for which Bavinck praises Zwingli's efforts. First, the ideal toward which he strove was with unshakable confidence in the truth "was to renew human beings first but then by means of the Gospel also the whole of life, state, society, and the world" ("Catholicity," 237). That is, his efforts extended beyond the walls of the Church. Surely, his primary focus was on the saving and nurture of souls, but Zwingli desired to move beyond that.

Second, and closely related to the first, Zwingli "also demonstrated in his practice of reform that he wanted to realize the Gospel's reforming and renewing power in *all* areas of life." What differentiates the first and second endeavors? It certainly was not because he did not try to actualize those two reforms, but rather "when he attempted theoretically to give an account of this, he failed. For him, too, flesh and spirit, human and divine justice continue to stand, in dualistic fashion, next to each other" ("Catholicity," 237; emphasis added).

To Bavinck's mind, the Reformer who truly overcame the dualism was John Calvin. Bavinck's appreciation for Calvin is well documented. In 1895, when the first volume of his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* was published, he

wrote this in his Preface (*Voorbericht*), without mentioning Calvin by name, “This Dogmatics is connected most closely to the Christian religion and theology from the sixteenth century by the Reformation, and especially that which was received from Switzerland.”²¹ He hastened to add that “To love the old simply because it is old is neither Reformed nor Christian. A Dogmatics does not describe what was applied/valued (in the past), but what *must* be applied/valued. It has its roots in the past, but it labors for the future.”²²

From this, it is clear that Bavinck possessed a long-standing appreciation for Calvin’s theology and the notion of the catholicity of the Church was no exception. As I will mention in my concluding remarks, being a historian and/or theologian means that when you read, write, or speak about one of your favorites Reformers, your aim ought to be a recording angel and not a hanging judge. That does not mean that you do not point out the very human fallacies, warts, foibles, and discrepancies of your subject. You may and you should. Bavinck is of a similar viewpoint when he says, “Nor do I want to give unqualified praise to Calvin’s work of reformation in Geneva, and the means by which he accomplished it. *Nonetheless*, it is Calvin whose labors completed the Reformation and saved Protestantism” (“Catholicity,” 237; emphasis added). The difference maker is the “None-theless” in Bavinck’s statement.

Of course, this naturally begs the question: *How* did Calvin overcome the dualism about which Bavinck is speaking? The short answer is that “He traced the operation of sin to a greater *extent* than did Luther, and to a greater *depth* than did Zwingli” (“Catholicity,” 237; emphasis added). What stands out in how Calvin bridged the gap between Luther and Zwingli is the graciousness of God’s grace. There is a particular emphasis on God’s redeeming and sustaining grace in salvation, but there is also a gracious disposition of God toward his creation in general—call it “common grace” if you wish. He writes that in the mind of the French Reformer, “re-creation is not a system that supplements Creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves Creation intact, as in Luther, much less a radically new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures” (“Catholicity,” 238).

In Bavinck’s estimation, it is Calvin’s articulation of the relationship between nature and grace that permits the gospel to be the gospel and to come into its own—fully. Simultaneously, Bavinck explains to his audience

that “There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized. Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity” (“Catholicity,” 238). That is, while it is patently true that Christians cannot and must not coerce the state, it can and should operate as the “voice of conscience” (my term) of the state. Quite possibly politicians, elitists, Marxists, progressives, and others will scoff and ridicule the Church for such statements, but that is the least of the Church’s problems. The “restraining” function of the Word of God does not occur in a dark corner of the world or in a vacuum, but rather in the public arena.

Here is how Bavinck summarizes the difference between the Lutherans and the Reformed: “The German reformation, therefore, was a reformation of worship and preaching while the Swiss reformation included a renewal of state and society. The former was exclusively ecclesiastical (*godsdienstig*) in character, the latter also displayed a social and political character.” Furthermore, “All this results from the fact that the Bible is, for Luther, only a source of salvation truth, whereas for Calvin it is the norm for *all* of life” (“Catholicity,” 238; emphasis added). It must be kept in mind that Bavinck was not only the professor of Systematic Theology in Kampen for twenty years, but he also taught Reformed Ethics at the Theological Seminary in that town as well. Therefore, he strove to inculcate a solid *individual* ethic in the lives of believers, but he was also convinced that the Reformed world also needed to expend its energy dealing with the *social* issues that confronted the Dutch in the nineteenth century and how the Word of God can and must have a voice in the political and social realms of life. A representatively large number of people in the United States struggle with the social aspect of the gospel and, quite often, for good reasons.

Many are aware of the disastrous results of the so-called “Social Gospel” movement from yesteryear and the “Social Justice Warrior” movement in our time. Both have *serious* errors in theology and the application of theology. Both deal in vagaries and generalities, never clearly and precisely defining what is meant by “social” and “justice.” Bavinck would have insisted that full and complete definitions of those words be derived from Scripture after serious exegesis. There is most definitely a drastic and crying need for Reformed professors and pastors to begin serious labors in setting forth in clear, plain, and easily understood language what constitutes “social justice.”

21. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Deel 1 (Kampen: J.H. Bos, 1895), p. iv.

22. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, p. iv.

THE OBLIGATION CATHOLICITY PLACES
UPON US TODAY

The final section of Bavinck's address is a historical odyssey and comparison of what occurred in Catholicism and Protestantism in the aftermath of the Reformation. He opines that "The history of Catholicism and Protestantism after the Reformation did not live up to expectations. In the sixteenth century, Rome did experience very significant and irrecoverable losses, but she not only continued to exist alongside the Reformed churches, she also got back on her feet and strengthened herself internally at the Council of Trent." Both movements seemed to settle into a disposition of co-belligerence dashing all hopes of rapprochement. Roman Catholicism, however, received added assistance from the Jesuit order, so much so that "One could say that Catholicism and Jesuitism were increasingly synonymous" ("Catholicity," 242). In fact, it would not be saying too much to assert that the Jesuit order made itself *indispensable* to Rome.

Conversely, "The Reformation in its turn soon lost her youthful courage and freshness. After barely one century, this powerful movement had already come to a standstill and a decline soon followed" ("Catholicity," 243). While it is possible that Bavinck slightly overstated the case, it is true that the influence of the Reformation did wane rather quickly and significantly. Similarly, Ahlstrom asserts that regarding the Protestant influence in America, "It is safe to assume that the influence of puritanism, in the broad Calvinistic sense, was a major force in the late colonial period, and that it contributed uniquely and profoundly to the making of the American mind when the American mind was in the making."²³

Former-Harvard professor, Samuel Huntington, declares something quite similar concerning what was on the individual and collective mind of the American colonists when he writes, "Key elements of that culture include: the English language; Christianity; religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, the responsibility of rulers, and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a 'city on a hill.'"²⁴ This being the case, what was Bavinck conveying to his Dutch audience, and, by extension, what are the "take-aways" for twenty-first-century Americans?

Bavinck contends that Christianity has often been little more than "a thin veneer covering the natural life of the people." In addition, "the Reformation, no

matter how universal in its conception, was even less successful in Christianizing life. Art, science, philosophy, political and social life never fully incorporated the principles of the Reformation. Although dualism was *theoretically* overcome, it remained a *practical* reality in many areas of life" ("Catholicity," 243). In a significant sense, this still holds true today when and where Christians want to keep the gospel limited to ecclesiastical matters and balk when some suggest that it has a broader application.

He fully realizes that history has played a role and one of the "actors" in that historical development has been the advent of "Pietism."²⁵ The tendency has been to withdraw from society and to develop "the other worldly pietism of Protestant" ("Catholicity," 244). The upshot, even in Bavinck's day, was that "A new worldview has arisen that does, to be sure, grant freedom of religion to all that is itself unconnected with Christianity and the church and seeks to eliminate the latter from public life in order to relegate them to private life and thus reduce them to sectarian phenomena. *For the most part, our contemporary culture takes place without reference to Christianity and church*" ("Catholicity," 244; italics added). If this does not sound familiar to us, it should. Remember that Bavinck addressed his audience with these words in 1888!

As a slight aside, I have often wondered why it is, since the Presbyterian and Reformed communities have such a biblical, covenantal worldview, that they allow the Roman Catholics to outstrip us in almost every aspect and facet of social ethics. Many today in America that adhere to "Big Eva" cannot tell you where to find the Ten Words of the Covenant (Ex. 34:28), a.k.a. the Ten Commandments, let alone recite those words. Presbyterians and Reformed Christians tend to be able to locate the Ten Commandments and tell you what they are, but that same group of people seems hopelessly divided on where, how, or even if the Ten Commandments have any social relevance. Bavinck extols the worldview that was handed down to us by the Reformation. "Public life is

23. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 349.

24. Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. xvi.

25. On p. 243, Bavinck explains that "When this duality after a period of time became an antagonism, the Reformation, in the circles where it still had the strongest influence, became disillusioned and disheartened, and retreated into itself. Thus, that peculiar conception of the Christian life came into being that I will, for brevity's sake, designate as 'Pietism.'" He includes under this designation Baptist groups, Quakers, Moravians, Pietists, Methodists, revivalist movements, and Darbyism.

ignored and rejected—often as intrinsically ‘worldly’—while no effort is made to reform it according to the demands of God’s Word. Satisfied with the ability to worship God in their own houses of worship, or to engage in evangelism, many left nation, state and society, art and science to their own devices” (“Catholicity,” 246).

Bavinck’s solution is not to go the route of renouncing the world, not bringing Christian values and virtues into the world, and not isolating oneself, as a Christian, from the world. What is it then? It is merely to follow the lead of a lion’s share of the Reformers who lived and taught that our involvement in the world is not something extraordinary, but rather it “is the faith of the person who while keeping the kingdom of heaven as a *treasure*, at the same time brings it out into the world as a *leaven*, certain that He who is for us is greater than he who is against us and that He is able to preserve us from evil even in the midst of the world” (“Catholicity,” 248).

True catholicity, Bavinck explains, is accompanied by responsible, covenantal conduct. “The Gospel is not content to be one opinion among others of the lie but claims to be *the truth*, the truth that by its very nature is exclusive in every area” (“Catholicity,” 246; emphasis added). He also realized that “The world would gladly banish Christianity and the church from its turf and force it to a private inner chamber. We could give the world no greater satisfaction than to withdraw into solitude and leave the world peacefully to its own devices.” In large measure, that has been the result of Pietism in general, consistent Lutheranism and of a large segment of contemporary evangelism—and also some in Presbyterian and Reformed circles. Bavinck concedes the point that the Kingdom of Heaven is not of this world, but adds this: “The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in the world be subservient to it. It is exclusivist and refuses to accept an independent or neutral kingdom alongside it. Undoubtedly it would be much easier to leave this entire age to its own devices and to seek our strength in quietness” (“Catholicity,” 248).

But the battle lines have been drawn and the enemies are sin and Satan and his host. That being the case, a true Christian with true faith is “not restricted to any time, place, nation, or people.” That faith “can enter into all situations, can connect with all forms of natural life, is

suitable to every time, and beneficial for all things, and is relevant in all circumstances. It is free and independent because it is in conflict only with sin and in the blood of the Cross that there is purification for every sin” (“Catholicity,” 249). Following some general comments about Christ’s Church and the confessions of the Church, Bavinck concluded his address. Let’s now turn our attention to Bavinck’s 1894 address that deals with, among other things, the concept of common grace.

BAVINCK ON COMMON GRACE

In 1894, Bavinck found himself once again serving as the rector of the Theological Seminary in Kampen. This time he chose to tackle the notion of common grace. From 1902–1904, Bavinck’s senior friend, Abraham Kuyper, produced a rather massive three-volume work titled *De Gemeene Gratie*. Those who desire to delve more deeply into the subject of common grace can consult Susan Schreiner’s *The Theater of His Glory. Nature & the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin*, and Jochem Douma’s work *Algemene Genade*.²⁶

My intention is to walk us through the most salient aspects of this address. For our purposes, we should take a few truths into account. First, I have to provide you with some insights into how I think theologians should generally write about historical figures. I am currently engaged in writing a two-volume work on the person and theology of Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), who was Zwingli’s successor in Zürich. He was the pastor for almost forty-five years. He was an accomplished scholar and his work on the covenant as well as his *Decades* are a must-read. I believe that when we write about those who have had illustrious callings in the Church and in theology, we should act as “recording angels” and not as “hanging judges.” I took that tack when I wrote the Bavinck biography and I am taking it in this article.

That does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that we ought to be blind to their foibles? No. Does it mean that we ought to attempt to deify them? No. Does it mean that we should strive to give them the benefit of the doubt, as we would hope others would give us the benefit of the doubt? Yes.

Second, we will encounter a more “mature” Bavinck in this address. Bavinck has had more than five years to read, study, teach, interact, and converse with colleagues, students, and God’s people in the congregation in Kampen, which plays a significant role in his development as a theologian.

Third, we will also note, with thanks I might add, that there have not been exponential changes in his

26. Jochem Douma, *Algemene Genade. Uiteenzetting, vergelijking en beoordeling van de opvattingen van A. Kuyper, K. Schilder, en Joh. Calvijn over “algemene genade”* (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre B.V., 1976); Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory. Nature & the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991).

theological mind in that more than half-a-decade. We ought to laud that and appreciate it. With these thoughts in mind, let's proceed to what Bavinck had to say regarding the notion of common grace.

As I mentioned in the description of Bavinck's 1888 address in Kampen, he was very appreciative of the work of Calvin and cited him approvingly on a frequent basis. He was not, however, averse to being realistic when dealing with this Reformation Father. In fact, at the outset of his address, he describes Calvin's character with these words: "The reproach is common that Calvin had no taste or stomach for things outside his particular calling. For him social pleasures were nonexistent. He never mentions domestic joys or woes in his letters. The beauties of nature left him cold. Art, poetry, and music seemed not to rouse his interest. Even innocent pleasures were somewhat suspect in his eyes, in a word, he was 'a melancholy soul, a somber spirit' (*Un esprit chagrin, un genie triste*).²⁷ Calvin sounds like he had been baptized with vinegar.

But it was not only the Reformer from Geneva that came under such reproach, but Bavinck attests to the fact that similar charges were leveled against other followers of the Reformed faith, such as the Huguenots in France, the Calvinists in Holland, the Puritans in England, and the Presbyterians in Scotland, just to mention a few ("Common Grace," 38). While the Reformed are still considered unyielding, inflexible, intractable, strict, and dour—and that is on good days—it is striking in someone of the stature of Calvin, who "in his system accorded a place and worth to the natural life that find no counterparts in other conceptions of the Christian religion" ("Common Grace," 38).

In wording similar to his 1888 address, Bavinck praises Calvin's theology because "the relation of nature and grace is conceived of far more correctly and profoundly than in the theologies of Luther or Zwingli." Moreover, "In his teaching on common grace, Calvin has expressed a principle which is *uncommonly* fruitful, yet was subsequently misconceived and denigrated all too often." ("Common Grace," 39; emphasis added). Thus, his intent was to more fully elaborate on that uncommon feature in Calvin in four points: "Permit me then, to present to you the Reformed doctrine of *common grace*. I would like to show (1) how it is based upon the Scriptures, (2) that the Roman Catholic system has no place for it, (3) that this principle was discovered in the Reformation, notably by Calvin, and finally (4) that it remains of the greatest significance for us today" ("Common Grace," 39).

HOW COMMON GRACE IS BASED UPON THE SCRIPTURES

In his first point, Bavinck hearkens back to Creation and the distinction between the *foedus operum* (covenant of works) and the *foedus gratiae* (covenant of grace). It is imperative, according to Bavinck, that we grasp the concept that the difference between those two "lies not in the concept of revelation but in that of grace" ("Common Grace," 39). His main point here is that "Revelation existed *before* the fall," and "Creation itself is the first, rich revelation of God, the *foundation* and *beginning* of every subsequent revelation" ("Common Grace," 39; emphasis added).

Even though the Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), is not explicitly cited in this address, Bullinger emphasizes the unity of the scriptures with the thesis that Christ and the apostles did not teach or say anything that the Old Testament prophets did not teach or say *and* the prophets did not teach or say anything that Moses did not record in the Pentateuch. Keeping that thought in mind, Bavinck asserts that "those attributes of God that appear in creation—his omnipotence and omniscience, his eternity and omnipresence are more prominent in the Old than in the New Testament" ("Common Grace," 42). In fact, God's works in nature are more prevalent in the Old Testament. Hold on to that thought because Bavinck is going to return to it.

In the early stages of his first point, it is Bavinck's intention to demonstrate that "the *foedus operum* rests upon revelation. This covenant is simply the form of religion possessed by man who, while created in the image of God, has not yet received the highest form of religion" ("Common Grace," 39–40). The Fall of Adam and Eve into sin (Bavinck believed in a historical, biblical Adam and Eve) brought a significant change in everything. As significant as the change was, "this change does not consist in God's beginning or ceasing to reveal himself. Revelation continues and God does not withdraw himself. He again seeks man out" ("Common Grace," 40).

What does that "difference" look like? There are two "new" components: First, while God's revelation continues, "it changes its character and receives a different content." Second, this continued and continuing

27. Herman Bavinck, *De algemeene genade, rede bij de overdracht van het rectoraat aan de Theologische School te Kampen op 6 december 1894* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1894), 1. Moving forward, all citations from this address will be taken from R.C. van Leeuwen's translation and the pagination will follow that article. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,' (A Translation)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, No. 1 (1989): 35–65. Hereafter, "Common Grace."

revelation “comes to guilty man, who merits death, as a revelation of *grace*.” When God seeks out and calls to sinful man, in spite of man’s transgression, a totally new aspect appears in his revelation, namely God’s compassion and mercy. That is, “Life, work, food, clothing come to him no longer on the basis of any agreement or right granted in the covenant of works but *through grace alone*. Grace has become the source and fountainhead of all life and every blessing for *mankind*” (“Common Grace,” 40. Emphasis added.). Note Bavinck’s emphasis on how God’s grace is meant for mankind, although not always savingly so.

With Cain, even though he is driven from God’s presence because he murdered his brother, yet “he continues to live; grace is thus given to him in place of strict justice. Cain indeed becomes the father of a tribe which sets its mind to the task of subduing the earth and begins the development of human culture (Gen. 4:15–24)” (“Common Grace,” 40). In the course of redemptive history, we read of how the people of God and the people of the earth intermingle and how the earth is filled with evil and violence. This is Noah’s story. The world is ripe for God’s judgment and it comes in the form of the Flood. The upshot of the narrative concerning Noah is that “From Noah a *new* mankind is born, milder in nature, less in might, and of shorter life. The new mankind also exists and lives *only* by the grace of God, which now takes the form of a covenant.... God now, as it were, firmly grounds the being and life of the creation in a covenant with all of nature and with *every* living being” (“Common Grace,” 40; emphasis added).

Then Bavinck makes a rather cryptic statement: “Common and special grace each flow on in their own channels” (“Common Grace,” 40–41). What does he mean by those enigmatic words? To understand his thinking properly, we will need to revert to his notion of Creation. Bavinck was actually a very accomplished Old Testament scholar. He read through the Old Testament in the original language several times. Knowing that Old Testament names were significant, he differentiated between *Elohim*, whom he viewed as “the God of creation and nature” and *Yahweh*, who is the God of the covenant (“Common Grace,” 41). What is essential to comprehend at this juncture is that for Bavinck “This revelation... attaches to previous history and to the revelation of God already in existence” (“Common Grace,” 41–42).

Bavinck possessed a great disdain for dualism, which means that we should neither subscribe nor attribute dualistic thinking to him. What he *does* mean is that we ought to view all of God’s works as a unity and that

even though common and special grace flow in their own channels, they are not exclusive of one another. For example, he points to “The economy of the divine forbearance and long-suffering” that is described in Romans 3:25. In addition, “The times of ignorance commence (Acts 17:30). God allows the nations to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16), yet does not leave himself without witness (Acts 14:17).” While the nations are walking in their own ways, his Church continues to be his witness for God’s truth. Every human being moves and has his or her being in him and he is not far from each one of them (cf. Acts 17:27–28). Generously and graciously, God reveals himself to mankind in the works of nature (cf. Rom. 1:19). Not only does God continue to reveal himself to mankind, but according to Bavinck “There is thus a *rich* revelation of God even among the heathen—not only in nature but also in their heart and conscience, in their life and history, among their statesmen and artists, their philosophers and reformers” (“Common Grace,” 41). More specifically,

The traditions of paradise, the life of Cain and his descendants, and the covenant with Noah have a special, supernatural origin. The working of supernatural forces in the world of the heathen is neither impossible nor improbably. Furthermore, the revelation of God in nature and history is never a mere passive pouring forth of God’s virtues but is always a positive act on the part of God. The Father of Jesus works always (John 5:17). His providence is a divine, eternal, omnipresent *power* (“Common Grace,” 41; emphasis in original).

It is indisputably true that God’s special grace is virtually unknown to the heathen. Religions in general are the products of the human will and are developed “from below.” Nevertheless, “These religions are *all* by-products of and degenerations from the broken *foedus operum*. As such, man is left to his own devices to save himself. Israel’s faith is of another order, but is closely related both to *Elohim* as well as to *Yahweh*. Concretely, Bavinck insists that “God who is Creator of heaven and earth is also the God of Israel, of a particular people, freely chosen by him out of his goodwill for an inheritance” (“Common Grace,” 42). That comprises the marvelous and unique center of Israel’s faith. Therefore, believers must understand the true and living God as both Creator and covenantal God. “In the course of history, the essence of Israel’s faith becomes more manifest as it finds its goal and fulfillment in Christ. He is the ultimate content of the *foedus gratiae*” (“Common Grace,” 43).

The Person and Work of Christ are central to

scriptural teaching. They portray the suffering and death of Christ as “perfectly natural events, showing no deviation from the laws of nature.” Indeed, God’s special grace is incomprehensible and only fully appreciated “when it is viewed in connection with its prevenient preparation from the time of the earliest man onward.” More than that, “It is God himself, the Creator of heaven and earth, who in Christ fully reveals and gives himself to his people. But this grace, having fully appeared in Christ, is now intended for all men. Israel was chosen for the sake of all mankind” (“Common Grace,” 44). There are reminders in Bavinck’s words of the promise God gave to then-Abram in Genesis 12:1–3: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’”

In terms of God’s redemptive-historical dealings with mankind not only was Israel chosen for the sake of mankind, but also “Israel’s election existed only to bring Christ into the world. . . . This was the mystery of which Paul so often spoke with wonder and adoration, that the heathen are also fellow-heirs and members of the household of God (Eph. 3:6).” Precisely in Paul’s explanation we observe how “The two, special and common grace, separated for ages, once again combine. And thus united, they henceforth make their way together among the Christian peoples of the world. The wild olive tree is engrafted into the good olive tree. And in Abraham’s seed all the families of the earth are blessed (Gen. 12:3)” (“Common Grace,” 44).

We move now to Bavinck’s criticism of Roman Catholicism’s rejection of the notion of common grace and why they reject it.

THAT THE ROMAN CATHOLIC SYSTEM HAS NO PLACE FOR COMMON GRACE

In the second point of his speech/address, Bavinck begins with a brief historical overview of early Christianity. His rationale for such an approach was to indicate that when the gospel message began to be preached there were some misconceptions, and many in the world perceived the good news as merely one new philosophy among many competing views (“Common Grace,” 44). But Bavinck had more in mind than a mere description of the events. Part of the reason Christianity met with such resistance was not only the spiritual nature

of the “new philosophy” but also once people began to become more familiar with its message there quickly arose a desire “to conquer Christianity with its strange and novel content, and to take it up in the service of the philosophically cultured consciousness” (“Common Grace,” 45).

As a case in point, Bavinck introduces Gnosticism into the equation. Coming to prominence in the second century, it was “an audacious attempt to introduce Christianity into the great world-process and to melt it down into a great system embracing all religions and philosophies. What followed that attempt by Gnosticism was that “In the midst of proud speculation, the gospel of grace was lost” (“Common Grace,” 45). Interestingly, Bavinck does not insist that the gospel was completely vitiated, but it was denuded of its power because of the absence of salvation by grace alone.

The history of the Church continued to unfold and during that time “men still continued to strain their powers of thought in an effort to lift faith up to the plane of *gnosis* and to prove or clarify the dogmas of Trinity, incarnation, and atonement with the light of reason.” This approach continued into the Middle Ages. Philosophers began to make a distinction between what they termed *articula mixti* (matters known by faith and reason) and *articula puri* (matters known by faith alone). That distinction also gave rise to a further distinction “between *theologia naturalis* (natural theology) and *revelata* (revealed theology).” In the course of time, especially during Roman Catholic scholasticism, but also before and after the Reformation “this distinction developed and acquired an entirely different meaning. Rome replaced the antithetical relation of sin and grace with the contrast between natural and supernatural religion” (“Common Grace,” 45).

This notion was present in Bavinck’s 1888 address, albeit in seminal form and with less explanation and clarification. We are going to observe the same phenomenon in just a moment, but the upshot of this development (or regress) is that “According to the viewpoint of Rome, there exist [*sic*] in the divine mind two conceptions of man and thus also a double moral law, two sorts of love, and a twofold destination or goal.” Here we observe a more descriptive notion of the development of dualism in Roman Catholic theology. Once again, we will find traces of Bavinck’s 1888 address in the following statements, but with more complete elaboration. Recall that in 1888 Bavinck spoke about the nature of the *donum superadditum* in Roman Catholic theology. Here, he takes up the cudgels again to remind his audience that according to Rome “God first created man

as an earthly, sensuous, rational, and moral being *in puris naturalibus* (in a purely natural state). To be sure, to this he added the divine image, the *donum superadditum* (superadded gift); but this was soon lost through sin” (“Common Grace,” 45).

This is precisely where we get a very skewed view of original sin in Rome and among the Reformers. For Rome, all that was lost in the Fall of Adam and Eve was the superadded gift. Specifically, that means that with the loss of the “gift,” man simply reverted to his purely natural state prior to the Fall. Thus, “Apart from the harmful influence of his social environment, man is still born in a condition like that of Adam before the fall, and lacking the *donum superadditum*. For even concupiscence is not in itself sin but only becomes such when desire escapes the hegemony of reason.” (“Common Grace,” 45–46). That is, the essence of this theology is that what Scripture calls “the natural man” is basically good. He can follow logic leading to the acceptance of religion via natural religion, he can have an acceptable set of ethical principles and practices, and he can practice genuine virtue, all apart from God and God’s revelation.

Here is the way Bavinck describes what I just wrote: “He is capable of an earthly life that is in all respects sinless and can dedicate himself to art and science, to business and industry, as well as accomplish his domestic, social, and political duties faithfully.” If you are thinking that this sounds like Pelagianism, go to the head of the class. Simultaneously, Rome asserts that this natural man “has no claim to a heavenly blessedness in the immediate presence of God.” For that, he needs the Roman Catholic Church. What this approach manifests is a “tiered” or “dualistic” system of Rome. In Rome’s view, 1 Corinthians 2:6–16 presents the Christian reader with “another order of things that are supernatural in the strict, absolute sense of the term” (“Common Grace,” 46).

If you are tracking closely with what Bavinck is saying, it should be apparent that there is a sense in which Rome conceives of “natural man” as sinless. Bavinck says as much.²⁸ In Rome’s anthropology, man’s natural gifts were not sufficient to reach the highest goal God intended for him. Therefore, in addition to his natural gifts, man needed the indwelling of the Spirit, supernatural grace and prior to the Fall, this had been given to him in the *donum superadditum* (“Common Grace,” 47).

28. “Common Grace,” 46: “These things not only transcend the ken of fallen humanity but also that of the *sinless* natural man.” Emphasis added.

The reception of this much-needed and requisite supernatural grace on earth was “entrusted to the church” of Rome. It should be increasingly clear from where Rome derives its notions of sacerdotalism and the notion of infused grace working *ex opera operato*. Through the ministry of the Church, through priest and sacrament the church causes supernatural grace to be infused into a person, now allowing them to do good works. Ultimately, then, “These good works make him worthy of the blessedness of heaven on the principle of *meritum ex condigno* (condign merit)” (“Common Grace,” 47).

Bavinck summarizes this exposition and description of Rome’s theology with these words: “Rome has always reared two types of children and has tailored Christianity more or less to suit all men without exception. If we for a moment think away from the supernatural order that Rome has built up over the natural, we find not much left besides pure rationalism, genuine Pelagianism, and unmitigated deism. *The root of the Catholic system lies in Pelagianism.*” (“Common Grace,” 47; italics added). What this amounts to in terms of practical Christian living is this: “[T]here is an indulgence of the weaknesses of human nature that constitutes a slap in the face of Christian morality” (“Common Grace,” 49). I would hasten to add that something very similar, if not identical, can be said of the Lutheran view of the two kingdoms as well. What Bavinck is alluding to is a life and worldview where Christian morality is explicit, whether within the confines of the walls of Christianity or in the world at large. We will return to this concept in due time.

COMMON GRACE IN THE REFORMATION AND IN CALVIN

The Reformation experienced Rome’s theology, generally, as un- or anti-scriptural or both. While the “reverse genius” (my term) of Roman Catholicism was presenting a “tangible” religion, the Reformers, emerging primarily from Roman Catholicism themselves, viewed Rome’s theological system as a hindrance to salvation. While the Reformation was not a political, social, or scientific movement in the first place, its theology brought it into direct contact with those spheres of life. The truth of God’s grace stood at the forefront of their various teachings. Forgiveness, adoption, justification by faith, sanctification, and God’s blessings come to fallen man “only if God grants them in his grace” (“Common Grace,” 49). Indeed those saving events are assured by the gift of God’s grace to sinners in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What was also “new” during the Reformation—and

is often overlooked—is the truth that “the Reformation based her position not on the *religio supernaturalis* but on the covenant of grace.” That theological construction brought with it the question of how one relates nature and grace. Among the problems raised was that there could be “no talk of good works without faith.” (“Common Grace,” 50). That was clearly an endeavor to eliminate the previously-held dualism of both Rome and the Anabaptists. Eventually, it would present a problem between the Reformed and the Lutherans as well. Of course, this also impacted the *imago Dei* too. It was conceded that the image of God in man did, in fact, belong to man’s being, “but it had been lost through sin.” That, in turn, led to a different understanding of original sin among the Reformers. The Reformers were virtually unanimous in insisting on the noetic effects of sin upon man, which entailed teaching that “all his thoughts, words, and deeds were polluted by sin” (“Common Grace,” 50; emphasis added).

It is well known that Martin Luther railed and raged against “reason,” applying all kinds of suggestive and colorful names to it. Among the “family-friendly” words he employed were “it resisted God’s laws” and it was a “dark lantern.” He affectionately referred to Aristotle as “that dead heathen.” The Formula of Concord “agreed when it judged man’s understanding, heart, and will as ‘utterly corrupt and dead’ (*prorsus corruptus atque mortuus*) in *spiritual* matters, capable of no more ‘than a stone, a tree trunk, or slime’ (*quam lapis, truncus, aut limus*).” The italicized word is intentional. While the Reformation generally found it difficult to deny any and all “good” from the unregenerate, “The Lutherans could find no other way of dealing with this difficulty than by making a strict separation of the heavenly and the earthly, of the *spiritual* and the sensible, of ‘two hemispheres (*duo hemisphaeria*), of which one is lower, the other higher” (“Common Grace,” 50; emphasis added).

It is easy to discern here the development of the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms and how Bavinck’s criticism of dualism is well-taken. For Luther and the Lutherans, “In the affairs of the natural life, man’s reason and will remain free and capable of some good, but in *spiritual* matters, they are utterly blind and powerless. The Roman Catholic dualism is here not really overcome, even though the opposition of natural and supernatural has been modified in an ethical direction” (“Common Grace,” 50).

As Bavinck outlined in his 1888 address, it was John Calvin who (with help, no doubt) put the existing dualism to rest. He rejected Zwingli’s far-fetched notion who “extended the sway of the *gratia specialis* far beyond the

borders of historic Christianity and allowed that it was working even in the world of the heathen” (“Common Grace,” 50–51). Conversely, Calvin “considered man’s sin to be so serious and profound as to render human nature incapable of good, *in whatever sphere*”. Appealing to Scripture, Calvin came to distinguish between general and special grace or, “between the working of the Spirit in all creation and the work of sanctification that belongs only to those who believe” (“Common Grace,” 50; emphasis added). This is an essential distinction that harkens back to Bavinck’s concept of *Elohim* as the Creator and *Yahweh* as the God of the covenant of grace.

God continued to have a purpose for mankind subsequent to the Fall and did not leave man alone to cope as best he could with the baneful effects of sin and depravity. That is, God continued to have a purpose for his creation. Therefore, “he interposed common grace between sin and the creation—a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless *restrains and compels*” (“Common Grace,” 51; emphasis added). Many today seem to have lost sight of these aspects of common grace. The Christian voice needs to be heard in our respective communities and in the political arena as a restraint, a witness, and a compelling voice in and to the non-Christian world. That does not mean, of course, that the world will be grateful for that voice or that it will embrace and adopt what the Christian worldview puts forth because the world tends toward totalitarianism in one form or another and autonomy. Nevertheless, the world *needs* to hear the Christian voice and to receive Christian input—desperately.

Even though Calvin described the image of God in man as “vitiating,” there are still traces of that image that can be observed in him. Here is how Bavinck more fully describes what he means:

Understanding and reason remain, and he possesses all sorts of natural gifts. In him dwells a feeling, a notion of the Godhead, a seed of religion. Reason is a precious gift of God and philosophy [is] a *praeclarum Dei donum* (splendid gifts of God). Music too is God’s gift. The arts and sciences are good, useful, and of great value. The state is an institution of God. The goods of life do not just serve to provide for man’s needs in the strict sense; they also serve to make life pleasant. They are not purely *ad necessitate* (for necessity); they are also *ad oblectamentum* (for delight). Men still have a sense of the truth and of right and wrong; we see the natural love that binds parents and children together. In the things which appertain to this earthly life, man can still accomplish much good (“Common Grace,” 51).

This is a clear explanation of how the Reformed have historically assessed the things of the world. There is a powerful element of appreciation for the gifts that the Lord God has bestowed and continues to lavish on the world in the realm of “common grace.” Bavinck continues and explains that the previous quotation has typically been “the sound position of all true Reformed people as well” (“Common Grace,” 51). In addition, by taking such a tack, the Reformed community was kept both from Pelagianism and Pietism (“Common Grace,” 52). At least, that is how it looked on paper. In practice, however, there was a spiritual battle to be fought and that battle rages still today. In Calvin’s time, the primary adversaries were Anabaptism and Socinianism. Bavinck reserved the right to ponder whether both of these movements (his word) are entitled to claim the name of Protestant or Reformed. In both cases, they seem especially akin to Roman Catholicism.²⁹

It seems clear to anyone who bothers to ponder whether Anabaptism and its historical step-children are truly Protestant in the strict sense of the term. For instance, if one removes the theological language of *donum superadditum* and discusses soteriology; if one strips away all the incense, miters, crosiers, vestments, and other accoutrements and probes deeply into how man is saved, there is barely a hair’s breadth difference between Roman Catholicism and a large segment of contemporary professing Christians. Socinianism, like Pelagianism, is heresy. Socinianism does not believe that original sin exists, mankind possesses the *imago Dei* which consists of lordship, man did not lose the image in the Fall, when Christ came, he did not add anything essentially new, and those who keep God’s commandments earn immortality as their reward (“Common Grace,” 53).

In a similar vein, Anabaptists scorn the creation, the natural order is unimportant and unclean, the coming of Christ infused a new, spiritual, and divine substance into man at his rebirth, which means that he is now to have no contact with unbelievers, oaths are to be rejected, as is war, the magistracy, the death penalty, and infant baptism. In short, “the supernatural order thrusts aside the entire natural order” (“Common Grace,” 53). The dualism still exists, each in its own way. For the Socinians, it manifests itself in conformity to the world and antinomianism, while to the Anabaptists it is demonstrated in their rather absolute flight from the world and the things pertaining to the world. The

Reformers were caught in the middle. The Socinians got their knickers in a knot because the Reformers did not criticize Roman Catholic *doctrine* severely enough to their liking, and the Anabaptists, who did not wear knickers, still got upset because the Reformers did not criticize Roman Catholic *practice* enough. Amazingly, but not totally surprisingly “These two streams not only won a place for themselves beside the churches of the Reformation but also exercised a tremendous influence within the Reformed churches themselves” (“Common Grace,” 53). I would add that even though the names Anabaptism and Socinianism do not roll easily off the lips of some contemporary Christians today and given some of our recent discussions/debates surrounding how we view the two kingdoms, it is evident that some of the Reformed most definitely do not follow either Calvin or Bavinck in this regard.

As Bavinck winds down his remarks in this third section of his address, he is concerned that his audience understands that in all the various movements the concept of common grace has either been misconstrued or rejected altogether. More than that, “Even in the Reformed churches themselves the original, Reformed principle was frequently weakened on the one or the other side, or simply adulterated.” I am convinced that this remains the case in our time as well. How did this manifest itself in 1894? Bavinck explains, “The scorning of the letter of Scripture and the elevation of the inner light of the Holy Spirit; the preference for impromptu edifying discourses along with a denigration of the office of minister of the Word; the belittling of the objective ordinances of God for church and covenant, for the sacraments and offices; the preference for closed societies; the rejection of art, scholarship, science, culture, and all the goods of earthly life, and the spurning of the vocation that rests upon us in family, business, and state—all these are fruits not of healthy Reformation but of the unsound Anabaptist tradition” (“Common Grace,” 54). That is from the perspective of the Church.

What about the world itself? It ought to be self-evident, Bavinck contends, that “trends” and “fads” are neither unique nor limited to Christian circles. Those who have broken with Christianity do not escape unscathed. In fact, in their separation from and disdain for Christianity, “among those who broke radically with Christianity we see essentially the same patterns and tendencies.” In a sentence that ought to be taped to our refrigerators and bathroom mirrors, Bavinck states, “Mankind *never* escapes unpunished when it rejects its destination in this life or the next” (“Common Grace,” 54; emphasis added).

29. “Common Grace,” 51, writes, “Their dualism places them much closer to Rome than to the Reformers.”

Secularization has its own peculiar and particular pitfalls. Its intent was to disconnect man from the notion of eternity, while it aimed at establishing paradise on earth. God and religion were to be viewed as the enemies of the human race. “Nature was God. Art, scholarship, science, and industry were deities to be worshiped and served. Culture made cultus superfluous. Humanity replaced Christianity, and hygiene abolished morality” (“Common Grace,” 54; emphasis added). No longer was the doctrine of the Incarnation of weight; it was supplanted by the deification of man (“Common Grace,” 55).

While when Bavinck gave this address the nineteenth century had not quite come to a close, there were observable cracks in the edifice of that utopia secularization was attempting to build. Did it materialize? No, it did not. It could not because life without God can never make good on what it promises. Bavinck declares, “The Century has not yet come to an end. Everywhere one already finds contrasts. On the one hand we see distress and misery, and on the other satiety and surfeit³⁰ of culture. The great expectation that men held for this culture has collapsed. Hope has turned to despair and doubt. Optimism has capitulated to pessimism.... Nature, formerly praised for her beauty and revered as a temple, is now a somber stage filled with confusion and conflict; her raging elements and threatening powers place man’s very life in danger. The world could not be worse...” (“Common Grace,” 55).

Of course, this sounds very much like our relativistic, narcissistic, nihilistic, woke, and stage-three or stage-four postmodern twenty-first-century culture, especially when Bavinck reiterates that at the end of the nineteenth century “Feeling is all, intellect is nothing.... Day by day pagan superstitions increase their sway among nonbelievers.... All balance has gone awry, the harmony of life is broken” (“Common Grace,” 55). On these pessimistic and discordant words, Bavinck completes his third point. The words form a transition for what he intends to say in his final point, namely, that there a definite, positive significance for his time (and ours) needs explication.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMON GRACE FOR BAVINCK’S TIME AND OURS

The final section of Bavinck’s address moved to the significance of the doctrine of common grace for his time. For our purposes, we want to extend what he says and perhaps add some proposed applications for our time. It was Bavinck’s conviction that at the bottom of every

serious question, a similar, if not identical, problem is roiling beneath the surface. One way to state his case is to say that it is all a question of one’s worldview, which, of course, is true. Bavinck does not employ the term “worldview,” although that is always in the back of his mind, but rather he couches the dilemma this way: “The relation of faith and knowledge, of theology and philosophy, of authority and reason, of head and heart, of Christianity and humanity, of religion and culture, of heavenly and earthly vocation, of religion and morality, of the contemplative and the active life, of sabbath and workday, of church and state—all these and many other questions are determined by the problem of the relation between creation and re-creation, between the work of the Father and the work of the Son” (“Common Grace,” 56).

When it comes to a discussion of common grace the dichotomy is typically between worldliness and world-flight. Or, “Head and heart painfully wrestle for supremacy” (“Common Grace,” 56). To that end, it is understandable that there is something attractive—powerfully attractive—about antinomianism even or especially for a redeemed sinner. People of all stripes frequently chafe at the forbidding of particular sins. We can even complain that our lifestyle is cramped or hobbled by the law. Nevertheless, the various commands concerning how believers ought to live were given to Adam and were known to him prior to the Fall.

By couching the argument in these terms, Bavinck is pointing the Church to the necessity of a sound metaphysics, as Bavinck would explain further in the 1904 edition of his work on the Christian worldview. Reformed theologians demonstrated that supernatural truths “were in essence known to Adam before the fall, that they were part of the content of the image of God, and consequently were ‘natural’ in that they belong to the being of man” (“Common Grace,” 56). It ought to be clear that what this statement leads to theologically is the rejection of any and all *theologia naturalis*, or natural theology.

Citing Romans 1:18ff., Bavinck asserts that even sinful man, man without God knows God. Thus, when Paul writes about man suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, he asserts that man is without excuse when it comes to the knowledge of God because God has, as it were, taken man by the hand and revealed himself so that man is without excuse. As he had reiterated in his 1888 address, “He who was Elohim reveals himself and

30. An excessive amount of something or an illness caused by excessive eating and drinking. Both definitions are apt and applicable.

lets himself be known as Yahweh” (“Common Grace,” 58). Moreover, “The Christian religion is temporal; as an *Erlösungsreligion* (religion of salvation) it will someday have completed its task. When the kingdom has fully come, Christ will hand it over the God the Father. The original order will be restored” (“Common Grace,” 59).

Yet, there is an “interim” period. Bavinck lived in it and we are living in it now. What is to be done during this time is not to sit back and await the Second Coming, although we certainly anticipate our Savior’s return. Rather, we are to be actively involved in spreading the “restraining” and “compelling” power of the gospel to a nihilistic, self-absorbed culture that is perverted/confused. The upshot of this activity is the realization that “grace does not remain outside or above or beside nature but rather permeates and wholly renews it” (“Common Grace,” 59). Those actions do not occur automatically but are brought into society by Christians equipped by their local congregations for the ministry of the gospel in its narrower focus of salvation and its broader concentration of speaking as the voice of conscience to the society in which we live. Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, but “more than that, he came to restore the works of the Father and so to renew man according to the image of him who first created man” (“Common Grace,” 60).

The purpose of Christianity, then, is not to institute a totally new, heavenly kingdom as Rome intends. Rather, “It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new.” It does this by its involvement in the world and through various means manifesting what God intends for humanity. Christians do not become worldly or withdraw from the world; they engage the world from a Christian perspective making use of their biblical worldview. To use Bavinck’s words, “Christ did not come just to restore the religio-ethical life of man and to leave all the rest of life undisturbed, as if the rest of life had not been corrupted by sin and had no need of restoration.... Everything that is sinful, guilty, unclean, and full of woe is, as such and for that very reason, the object of the evangel of grace that is to be preached to every creature” (“Common Grace,” 60–61).

He reiterates, “If the kingdom is not of, it is certainly *in* this world, and is intended for it.” Bavinck’s clarion call is for Christians to practice Christian virtues, which means biblical virtues. If they are willing to do that, their actions will look quite different from their secular counterparts and from their antinomian Christian counterparts. Those virtues are requisite for a sinful society because they are its cement (“Common Grace,” 61). In short, in what Bavinck outlined one sees “how

Christianity is to relate itself to home and society and how the church is to relate to the state.... Subjugation of the church by the state or of the state by the church are thus both condemned” (“Common Grace,” 63). Is it improper for Christians to long for the government of the land to be directed by Christian principles? Bavinck’s answer is No. The reality is, however, that that was not where Dutch culture was in 1894 and it is most definitely not where American culture is in 2021.

As Bavinck comes to the conclusion of his address, he leaves his audience then and us today with these words:

The church may indeed desire that the government of the land be directed by Christian principles and profit from the revelation of God’s grace, for state and society have also been damaged by sin and need God’s word to guide and direct, but here too grace does not nullify nature. Home, society, and state may well be reborn by the Spirit of Christ, but they exist and live by virtue of God’s ordering of nature; they possess alongside the church their own independence. Christ came not to do away with the world and the various spheres of life but to restore and preserve them (“Common Grace,” 63–64).

The gospel is meant to be a word of health and blessing in, to, and for the powerful aspects of culture, but the gospel does not come to any society in a vacuum. It is brought into the culture by committed Christians who comprehend the relationship of nature and grace and take God’s message into the fallen world where God has sovereignly placed them. ■