

# Pearls and Leaven

## The Imitation of Christ Is Not the Same in Every Age

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Those who read Herman Bavinck for the first time are often struck by how current and timely his writing seems to be. Though he wrote them 100 years ago, his words speak to *our* issues in *our* day. Not only is the true for the *Reformed Dogmatics* when his comments on justification, for example, seem to anticipate some of the current debates among evangelicals, it is often—quite remarkably!—even more true for some of his social analysis. In his 1918 essay, “The Imitation of Christ and life in the Modern World,”<sup>1</sup> he insists that the circumstances of Jesus’s own context and that of the first-century church are crucial for a proper reading of the Sermon on the Mount and that different circumstances call for a different application. A hostile, pagan culture and a marginalized church help explain the emphasis on passive virtues such as self-denial, forfeit one’s privileges and rights, and so forth. But Bavinck insists that the position of Christians in his day is different:

It is difficult to prove the contention that our position vis-à-vis our culture must be identical to that of the early church. We grant that nothing may be subtracted from the truth of Paul’s statement that the cross is a scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. This remains true throughout the ages and is confirmed by our daily experience. Yet the culture of the present is simply not saturated with paganism in the same way and to the degree that it was in the apostolic era. Although it con-

1. A full translation is provided in Appendix B of my *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck’s Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi: Between Pietism and Modernism* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 402–40. All excerpts are taken from this translation. Page numbers in brackets refer to the pagination of the original.

tains many pantheistic and materialistic tendencies which attempt to gain the upper hand, [138] our culture does not find its origins in these tendencies. Rather it is in principle and in essence rooted in the free and unprejudiced view of nature and the world made possible by Christianity, especially by Protestantism.

At this point Bavinck becomes rhapsodic in his enthusiasm for the blessings of the modern world:

Consequently, the Christian struggle against our modern culture, while similar in some respects, is nevertheless significantly different from that of the early church against the Greco-Roman civilization. The present struggle lacks the unity and closed nature so characteristic of the earlier one. There is simply far too much in our present-day culture that we gladly and thankfully accept and which we daily use and enjoy. The discoveries of science, the new vistas opened up by the historical sciences, the wondrous things brought forth by technology, are of such a nature that they cannot but be regarded as good and perfect gifts coming down from the Father of lights.

At the same time, he shows that he is aware of the moral challenges of his day and does not indulge himself in the progressive dream of ongoing betterment of the human condition. He points out that “whatever moral objections one may have about our present society it cannot be simply designated as pagan,” and then adds that “we simply do not know” what will come. He is aware of certain dangerous developments:

There are developments that fill our hearts with sorrow and fear. If some of the principles being proposed for a future moral order are accepted by society and pass into legislation we shall experience difficult times ahead. But that day has not yet arrived. Governments, legislatures, judiciaries, [139] official life in its entirety are still influenced by the ethical norms derived from Christianity. Even the modern state and civil order, for the most part, are grounded in Christian principles. In general it must be said that our society, unlike that faced by the early church, does not make the imitation of Christ impossible. The Christian church today enjoys a freedom for which it must be truly grateful. It is not a prey for oppression and persecution.

Much of what Bavinck said about the Europe of his day remains true for those of us who are North Americans. At the same time we too face increased hostility to public expressions of the Christian faith, and Bavinck’s wisdom will continue to be a helpful guide as we wrestle with the public expression of our Christian discipleship.