REFORMED SOCIAL ETHICS

PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIETY, CULTURE, STATE, CHURCH, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

EDITED BY JOHN BOLT

HERMAN BAVINCK

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Contents

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Society

Although Bavinck added an outline indicating five more chapters after §58 in the full manuscript of his *Reformed Ethics*, this first chapter on society[1] is the only one in which Bavinck provided an additional outline of twelve topics to be included:[2]

Ownership, Possessions
Vocation
Interest, Usury
Money
Trade
Industry
The Social Question
Hospitality[3]
Friendship
Sociability[4]

1. DO: *maatschappij*.

2. DO: *eigendom, bezit*; *beroep*; *rente, woeker*; *geld*; *handel*; *sociale kwestie*; *nijverheid*; *gastvrijheid*; *vriendschap*; *gezelligheid*; *spel*; *ergernis*. Note: This list, like all the longer sections of material original to Bavinck, is presented in a different font. Smaller quotations from Bavinck in the editor's framing text are set off with quotation marks.

3. Bav. note: Rudolph von Jhering, *Der Zweck im Recht*, 2:329–51. Ed. note: This is a section on "social manners" (*Umgangsformen*).

4. The Dutch term *gezellig* is notoriously difficult to capture in a single English term, but here are a few favorites: enjoyable, pleasant, cozy, entertaining, sociable, companionable,

Games
Offense[5]

In this chapter, in consultation with the colleagues who partnered with me to edit the *Reformed Ethics*, I have adjusted Bavinck's order somewhat and combined some of his topics into single sections. When Bavinck writes about our human vocation before God, he always places our twofold calling in the context of humans created in God's image. I am, therefore, bringing Bavinck's second topic up front under the subheading "Creation, and Humanity's Twofold Vocation" as the introduction to Bavinck's understanding of society. The topic of creation was not in Bavinck's original list, but, paired with the theme of vocation, it is a necessary orientation to Bavinck's reflections on society because, among other reasons, it provides the hermeneutical key to Bavinck's reading of the New Testament passages relevant to social questions.[6]

The topics of ownership and possessions, interest and usury, money, trade, and industry will be considered together under "Economic Life" and will be limited to considerations directly related to ownership and possessions, including private property. We lack adequate material to do justice to the remaining topics. I am retaining "The Social Question" as a distinct unit but reversing Bavinck's order, placing it before "Economic Life." This order helps us to understand the historical context of Bavinck's concerns and treatment of topics.

Similarly, the topics hospitality, friendship, and sociability will be considered together for reasons given above.[7] Bavinck's final two topics, games and offense, will also be treated in this section.[8] I am also adding two appendixes

convivial. Bav. note: [Regarding] sociability [*gezelligheid*] for society [*maatschappij*], see Adolf Wuttke, *Handbuch der christlichen Sittenlehre*, 3rd ed., 2:437–57 (§§287–91); for family, see H. Martensen, *Christian Ethics, Special Part*, 2/2:71–82 (§§36–38). Ed. note: The reference to Wuttke is to the second section, "The Christian Society" (*Die christliche Gesellschaft*), of a larger part, "The Christian Community" (*Die christliche Gemeinschaft*, pp. 397–538 [§§276–314]). Wuttke divides "The Christian Community" into four parts: "The Family" (§§276–86), "The Christian Society" (§§287–91), "The Christian State" (§§292–300), and "The Church" (§§301–14). Wuttke's final section is "The Kingdom of God and the History of the World" (§315). The parallel structure with Bavinck's own division of chapters in book IV of his *Reformed Ethics* is striking. Bavinck's reference to Martensen is to a section, "Hospitality—Friendship—Sociability" (*Gastfreiheit. Freundschaft. Geselligkeit*), itself part of Martensen's discussion of the family. Bavinck's listing of these three topics, in the exact order Martensen discusses them, indicates his likely use of them in his lectures.

5. Jhering, *Der Zweck im Recht*, 2:392–93; Kuyper, "Indien het mijn broeder ergert."

6. In particular, whether or not—and if so, how—the redemption in Christ changes or eliminates important creational social institutions and structures.

7. See n. 4, above.

8. I am including these two topics under the category of sociability because that is where Martensen also treats them.

to this chapter: The first is a translation of a popular newspaper column published in 1902, "Masters and Servants."[9] This piece deserves to stand alone because it is a direct response to the hermeneutical challenge of interpreting the "master and servant/slave" passages in the New Testament epistles. The second is a brief statement by Bavinck on abortion, "The Right to Life of the Unborn." Bavinck delivered these remarks to a society of Christian natural scientists and medical practitioners on May 12, 1903, and they were published in the society's journal.[10] His words remain instructive and timely.

This leads to the following chapter outline:

Introduction: Creation, and Humanity's Twofold Vocation
1. The Social Question
2. Economic Life: Ownership, Property, Possessions
3. Hospitality, Friendship, Sociability
Appendix A: "Masters and Servants"
Appendix B: "The Right to Life of the Unborn"

I have thus reduced Bavinck's twelve topics to three major sections plus an enhanced introduction. Each section will be preceded by a brief editorial introduction, indicating, among other things, the reasons for my selection of material used. Details about the specific sources used for each of the sections will be provided in the footnotes.

FOR FURTHER READING[a]

All titles are by Herman Bavinck; original publication date in square brackets follows each item.

Articles/Essays

"Calvin and Common Grace." In *Calvin and the Reformation: Four Studies*, 99–130 [1909].

"Christian Principles and Social Relationships." In *ERSS*, 119–44 [1908].

"General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891)." *Journal of Markets and Morality* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 437–45 [1891].

9. Bavinck, "Heeren en knechten."
10. Bavinck, "Het levensrecht der ongeboren vrucht."

"The Imitation of Christ and Life in the Modern World" [1918; referred to in this volume as "Imitation II"; in *Imitatio Christi*, 402–40].
"On Inequality." In *ERSS*, 145–63 [1913].

Books

The Christian Family [1908].

a. Chapters 1–4 are headed by a section of suggestions for further reading. These include references to full essays or articles excerpted in the chapter as well as additional material. Some bibliographic items are slightly abbreviated; see volume bibliography for full information.

Introduction: Creation, and Humanity's Twofold Vocation

The biblical doctrine of creation is the starting point for Bavinck's understanding of society. Human beings, created in God's image and likeness, have a dual vocation: first, "a calling rightly to know their Creator, love him with all their heart and live with him in eternity";[11] and, second, an earthly vocation. The following paragraph clearly indicates how crucial the doctrine of creation was for Bavinck's view of society:

> Because humans were image bearers of God, created with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and inclined in heart and equipped to bring God's plan to fruition, they were given every necessary gift and power to fulfill this double calling. By creating humanity as male and female God equipped them to fill the earth and subdue it. This duality of sex, this institution of marriage, contains in nuce all subsequent social relationships: husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, servants and freemen, civil rulers and subjects. It is here also that we see, in principle, all the inequalities that would eventually come to pass among people: differences in body and soul, in character and temperament, in gifts of understanding and will, in heart and hand, and so forth. Inequality is a given of creation, grounded in the very will of God himself, and not first of all a consequence of sin. (*GBP*, 438; see proposition B1/C2, below)[12]

11. Bavinck, "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891)," 437. For economy's sake, future references to this work will be indicated parenthetically within the text as *GBP*, followed by the page number. Bavinck prepared this address specifically for the First Christian Social Congress, held in Amsterdam on November 9–11, 1891.

12. Later in this chapter (in "1. The Social Question"), I will provide the resolutions of the First Christian Social Congress; see pp. 11–32.

What is true for creation is also true for re-creation (salvation). Jesus did not come—in the first place—to fix the social order (part of the second human task) but to save sinners from God's judgment and to make it possible for them to fulfill their first calling: "rightly to know their Creator, love him with all their heart and live with him in eternity."

The New Testament's primary concern is

> restoring our proper relationship with God. The cross of Christ, therefore, is the heart and mid-point of the Christian religion. Jesus did not come, first of all, to renew families and reform society but to save sinners and to redeem the world from the coming wrath of God. This salvation of our souls must be our ultimate concern for which we are willing to sacrifice everything: father and mother, house and field, even our own lives, in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 6:33; 16:26; etc.). (*GBP*, 443)

Bavinck expresses this primacy using one of his favorite similes from our Lord's parables, the treasure of inestimable worth:

> What he came to bring to earth is therefore something of inexpressible worth—the kingdom of God, not as a moral community that men would create, but as a heavenly, imperishable treasure (Matt. 6:20; Luke 12:33). The content of this kingdom is righteousness (Matt. 6:33), salvation from destruction (Matt. 7:13; Mark 8:35; 9:48), and eternal life (Matt. 5:3–9; 7:14; 13:43). The kingdom is thus of absolute world-transcending worth (Matt. 6:33; 13:44; Mark 8:36; Luke 10:42), and citizenship in it is only possible by way of regeneration (John 3:3), faith, and conversion (Mark 1:15).[13]

It would be a mistake to conclude from this that Bavinck considers Jesus so "spiritual" that he is indifferent to the natural, ordinary daily life of people. Was Jesus an ascetic? Bavinck categorically denies this; Jesus recalibrates the significance and meaning of daily life from the perspective of the treasure or pearl of great price that is the kingdom of God:

> From this standpoint Jesus evaluates all natural things. He does not despise them, he is not an ascetic, he does not impose fasting (Matt. 9:14); he is hated as a glutton and a drunkard (Matt. 11:18); he celebrates a wedding (John 2), participates as a guest at many a meal (Luke 7:36), and considers food and

13. Bavinck, "Christian Principles and Social Relationships," in *ERSS*, 129. For economy's sake, future references to this work will be indicated parenthetically within the text as *ERSS*, followed by the page number.

> drink, garment and clothing as good gifts of the heavenly Father (Matt. 6:25–33; Luke 11:3). He also honors marriage (Matt. 5:28; Mark 10:2–12), loves children (Matt. 18:2; 19:14), prizes a person's own home (Luke 9:58), and especially in his parables speaks openly about all of nature and the natural life, about all circumstances and relationships. The ascetic outlook on life is, in principle, foreign to Jesus. (*ERSS*, 129)

Jesus was not a social reformer, says Bavinck. Consequently, his summary of Jesus's relation to social conditions sounds—initially, at least—rather conservative:

> Jesus is not a man of science or art, nor is he a politician or economist; he is no social reformer or demagogue, nor a party man or a class struggler. He accepts social conditions as he finds them and never tries to bring about a change or improvement in them. . . . He leaves all political and social circumstances and relationships for what they are; he never intervenes in any of this, either by word or actions. (*ERSS*, 130)

Bavinck continues his exposition of Jesus's relation to human society by noting that while Jesus was certainly aware of the wretched religious, moral, social, and political condition of the world into which he sent his disciples, he neither promised them a rosy earthly future nor commanded them to direct their efforts to social amelioration. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said his followers should be prepared to suffer and called them to a higher righteousness. In fact, he calls "blessed"

> not the people who by external observation of the commandments seek to establish their own righteousness, but those who are mentioned in the Psalms and the Prophets as the wretched, the needy, the poor, and so forth. These Jesus now calls the poor in spirit, the people hungering and thirsting for righteousness, the pure in heart, and so forth. When Jesus therefore pronounces these people blessed, he does not violate but endorses the Old Testament completely. He is not a new lawgiver who supplements or improves the Law and the Prophets, and thus actually dissolves them, but he fulfills them totally and therefore demands another and better righteousness than that of the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 5:17–20). (*ERSS*, 132)

The gospel of the kingdom is not a program for a new sociopolitical order but a spiritual power that reorders the human heart. Continuing his explanation of the Sermon on the Mount, notably the series of "you have heard . . .

but I say" comparisons in Matthew 5:21–48, Bavinck insists that all literalism with respect to the Sermon (monks, Anabaptists, Quakers, Tolstoy, Charles Sheldon) violates the spirit of its message. Here is a summary of Bavinck's understanding of the *imitatio Christi* ideal:

> The true following of Christ therefore does not consist in copying him, in replicating him, in imitating his life and teaching but is found in the inner conversion of the heart, which gives us a true desire and choice to walk according to all, not just some, of God's commandments in spirit and truth. (*ERSS*, 133)[14]

Bavinck then draws the following conclusion:

> Therefore the words of Christ do not contain a political or social agenda; they cannot be imposed by means of the authority or force of a government and cannot be exacted with violence or under threat of punishment. At the moment someone does this, the words of Jesus are robbed of their spiritual essence and their core. They are religious-moral commandments that can be honored only in the way of liberty, spontaneously, from an inner compulsion of the regenerated heart. Only a good tree can produce good fruits. (*ERSS*, 133–34)

Bavinck goes on to discuss the abuse of Christian spiritual liberty as "an occasion for the flesh" in which Christians challenged the natural and social order—refusing all contact with pagans, refusing to obey civil authority, breaking up marriages with unbelievers, slaves refusing to submit to their masters. Bavinck describes the result as follows:

> The moral order that prevailed in the kingdom of heaven soon clashed with the rule of law in state and society. (*ERSS*, 134)

According to Bavinck, concerns about the misuse of Christian liberty help explain the "conservative" character of New Testament moral instruction:[15]

14. DO: *De waarachtige navolging van Christus bestaat daarom niet in het nadoen, in het nabootsen, in het naapen van zijn leven en leer, maar zij is gelegen in die innerlijke bekeering des harten, die ons een oprechten lust en keuze schenkt, om niet alleen naar sommige, maar naar alle Gods geboden in geest en waarheid te wandelen*. Ed. note: Though Bavinck does not provide a reference, the expression "according to all, not just some, of God's commandments" is a direct quote from Q&A 114 (Lord's Day 44) of the Heidelberg Catechism.

15. For more extensive discussion of Bavinck's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount in the context of the New Testament ethic as a whole, see *Imitatio Christi*, 294–307.

> In reaction, all the apostles at that time began unanimously to oppose this abuse of Christian liberty by supporting the natural order, institutions, and relationships. Like Christ, they admonish fellow Christians to be long-suffering and patient, to be gentle and forbearing, to be humble and loving, to endure persecution and abuse quietly and obediently, so that evil may be conquered by the good. This becomes evident already in the first church in Jerusalem. (*ERSS*, 134)

The church did not challenge or seek to reform the institutions of society. This includes retaining the institution of private property.[16]

> Just as with private property, so all natural ordinances and institutions are maintained by the church. The wealthy are nowhere called to divest themselves of their property, although they are urgently and often admonished not to put their trust in worldly goods, to guard themselves against miserliness, and to be compassionate and share (Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10; 1 Tim. 6:9, 17–19; James 1:10–11; 5:1–6). The poor are never encouraged to demand their share of earthly goods but rather to be satisfied and to work faithfully in their occupation (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:7–12; 1 Tim. 6:6, 8; Heb. 13:5). Associating with unbelievers is permitted; believing spouses should stay with unbelieving spouses; governing authorities are to be obeyed; . . . each person should remain in the situation to which God has called him or her (1 Cor. 7:24). (*ERSS*, 135)

After a lengthy examination of the New Testament's treatment of slavery, including the implication of Paul's instruction to Philemon about the slave Onesimus, Bavinck contends that Paul's main message is that

> external circumstances are not important to being a Christian; the important thing is to keep God's commandments, and that can be done in any situation. . . . External circumstances do not diminish being a Christian; one can be a Christian in any social position. Therefore, everyone is not to look at his position in life, whether slave or free, but at his calling, what he is in Christ. (*ERSS*, 137–38)

But does this then mean that the gospel has no renewing and transforming power in human relationships and social structures? On the contrary! The gospel plays a powerful transforming role in human society, but not as itself an actor in the political process. What is new about the gospel is not at all political, but it does turn the world of politics upside down.

16. See below, "2. Economic Life."

> Although the gospel left everything unchanged in the natural relationships, it nevertheless preached a principle so deep and rich and extraordinarily powerful that it was bound to exert a reforming influence on all earthly circumstances. The gospel has to be understood clearly. It must be accepted the way it presents itself without turning it into a political or social system, and then it will reveal its permeating power. For what does this gospel proclaim? What was this new element that was unknown to all of antiquity and that made the ancient world shake to its foundations? It was this, that heavenly, spiritual matters, that the kingdom of God and his righteousness in Christ are a tangible, completely trustworthy reality and that their value infinitely exceeds all visible and temporal things. There is absolutely nothing that is considered great and glorious among men that can be compared with it. In order to be a Christian, a citizen of the kingdom of God and heir of eternal life, it matters not at all whether one is a Jew or a Greek, barbarian or Scythian, male or female, free or slave, rich or poor, socially important or unimportant. (*ERSS*, 140)

What Christ did is truly to level the social and political playing field.

> The only way to enter the kingdom of heaven, which is available to all, is by way of regeneration, an inner change, faith, conversion. No nationality, no gender, no social standing, no class, no wealth or poverty, no freedom or slavery has any preference here. The old has passed; behold, all has been made new. The walls of division have fallen away, the palisades taken down; the gospel is intended for all and must be proclaimed to all. The despised and those without rights in antiquity—the barbarians, the uncivilized, the ignoble, women, slaves, publicans, sinners, whoremongers, idol worshipers—are all people of God's family, destined for his kingdom. Yes, if there is any preference then the poor, the ignoble, the unlearned, the oppressed are the ones who are considered first for the gospel. God chooses the poor, the despised, and the ignoble, so that no one should boast before him. (*ERSS*, 140)

Bavinck now turns passionately enthusiastic about the changes brought about by the gospel.

> What a revolution this gospel brought about in the ancient world; it gave a reforming power to humanity! All people are equal before God. He rates no one inferior because of social standing or rank, because of simplicity or unimportance. God loves everyone who fears him from all peoples and generations and social classes. This is a raising in status, this is the birthday of a new humanity, the beginning of a new society. Christians, however different they

> were among themselves in origin and social status, were an elect family, a holy nation, a people made his own, a royal priesthood, one body with many members. (*ERSS*, 141)

The sentences that immediately follow are pivotal for grasping Bavinck's understanding of the gospel's importance, also for social transformation.

> Even if Christianity had resulted in nothing more than this spiritual and holy community, even if it had not brought about any modification in earthly relationships, even if it, for instance, had done nothing for the abolition of slavery, it would still be and remain something of everlasting worth. The significance of the gospel does not depend on its influence on culture, its usefulness for life today; it is a treasure in itself, a pearl of great price, even if it might not be a leaven. (*ERSS*, 141)

But, of course, Bavinck continues,

> it nevertheless is undeniable that Christianity indeed exerts such an influence. The kingdom of heaven is not only a pearl, it is a leaven as well. . . . In keeping God's commandments, there is great reward. In its long and rich history, Christianity has borne much valuable fruit for all of society in all its relationships, in spite of the unfaithfulness of its confessors. (*ERSS*, 141)

Before we move on to consider Bavinck's specific topics for this chapter, here is a brief summary of his main points about society:[17]

a. Scripture's point of departure is creation, because essentially all relationships are connected with it, and thus can only be known from it.
b. The intent of grace, which entered immediately after the fall, always and everywhere has been to maintain and restore these original relationships.
c. The gospel of Christ . . . presupposes creation, honors the work of the Father, and concurs with all natural relationships in human life that exist by virtue of God's will. In itself the gospel, the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven and his [God's] righteousness, is the good news of reconciliation and redemption from sin through the blood of the cross. This is the gospel that must remain, first in church and missions, but also beyond them, everywhere. It may not be robbed of its content or dissolved into a political or social program. Only in this way can the gospel be maintained in its everlasting, all-surpassing value.

17. What follows is directly from Bavinck's own summary, *ERSS*, 141–43.

d. Because the gospel is exclusively directed to the redemption from sin, it leaves all natural relationships alone. The gospel shuns every revolution that arises from unbelief, since by its overthrow of everything a revolution makes no distinction between nature and sin and eradicates the good with the bad. The gospel, on the other hand, always works reformationally. . . . by setting people free from guilt, renewing the heart. . . .[18]

e. From this center [of a new humanity] it influences all earthly relationships in a reforming and renewing way.

f. [The way of social reformation and renewal is opposed to any form of] conservativism that closes its eyes to changes in society and to radicalism or radical revolution.[19]

1. The Social Question

This section is based on two primary Bavinck sources: (1) "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891)" and (2) "On Inequality." Since the first was a paper prepared specifically for the First Christian Social Congress held in Amsterdam on November 9–11, 1891,[20] a few observations about the historical context of the "social question" are in order.[21]

The term "social question" belongs to the nineteenth century and was a response to the dislocations of European life brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Working people left rural areas and flocked into the urban centers of Europe as cottage industries gave way to factory production. The social upheaval resulted in growing numbers of urbanized working-class poor who often struggled to meet basic necessities of life. English poet William Blake

18. Bavinck is explicit about the sociopolitical implications of this new reality: "[The gospel] is in principle opposed to all socialism, communism, anarchism, which after all never only oppose sin, but by their denial of the fall, identify sin with nature, unrighteousness with the very institution of the family and the state, and therefore creation with the fall" (*ERSS*, 142).

19. "While conservatism closes its eyes to changes in society, and radicalism fails to have a solid standpoint in the stream of events, a reformation that proceeds from a Christian principle combines both: being and becoming, the absolute and the relative, the unity of the divine will and the wonderful leading of his providence" (*ERSS*, 143).

20. Abraham Kuyper's opening address to this congress, "The Social Question and the Christian Religion" (translated into English by Dirk Jellema as *Christianity and the Class Struggle* [1950], and by James W. Skillen as *The Problem of Poverty* [1991]), is much better known than Bavinck's; both reflect the burning issue of the day as did Pope Leo XIII's famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, also from 1891.

21. For a longer introduction see Bolt, "Herman Bavinck's Contribution to Christian Social Consciousness"; most of what follows is taken from this introduction.

put an indelible stamp on our imagination's sense of this period of history with his famous reference to "these dark Satanic mills."[22]

The social upheaval was obvious, and social thinkers responded with a variety of "fixes," notably the secular socialist vision of Karl Marx and the Christian socialist visions of British Anglicans such as Charles Kingsley (1819–75) and Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72), along with American Baptists Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) and Francis Julius Bellamy (1855–1931). In continental Europe, a number of organized movements for social reform, called "Social Congresses," were organized, usually at national levels. The Evangelical Social Congress, for example, was a diverse social-reform movement founded by German pastors in 1890.[23]

The 1891 First Christian Social Congress was made possible by some thirty years of social group formation of workers in Europe more broadly and the Netherlands more particularly.[24] After the world's workers formed the International Working Men's Association (IWMA, later called the First International) in London on September 28, 1864, and the aborted revolutionary attempt by the Paris Commune to seize power in 1871, an increased anxiety about revolution and "socialism" grew in Europe. In the Netherlands, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–76) and, later, Abraham Kuyper initiated an anti-revolutionary movement, eventually forming the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1879.[25] In the decades leading up to the First Christian Social Congress, religiously neutral as well as expressly Christian—Protestant and Roman

22. In the poem "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time," from the preface to his epic *Milton: A Poem in Two Books*.

23. See Maurenbrecher, "Evangelical Social Congress in Germany"; Liebersohn, *Religion and Industrial Society: The Protestant Social Congress in Wilhelmine Germany* (1986). The Evangelical Social Congress included in its leadership the social thinker Max Weber (1864–1920); the Christian socialist Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919); Adolf Stoeker (1835–1909), chaplain to the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II and founder of the Lutheran, anti-Semitic, Christian Social (Workers) Party (1878); and liberal, social gospel mainstays Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922) and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). See Pentz, "Meaning of Religion in the Politics of Friedrich Naumann"; Telman, "Adolf Stoecker"; Green, "Adolf Stoecker." The collection of essays edited by Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, *Essays on the Social Gospel* (1907), reveals a great deal about the social gospel's understanding of the church's mission. It contains two addresses by Harnack, "The Evangelical Social Mission in the Light of the History of the Church," read on May 17, 1894, at the Evangelical Social Congress held at Frankfurt am Main, and published in *Prussian Annals* 76, no. 3 (1894), and "The Moral and Social Significance of Modern Education," read on May 22, 1902, at the Evangelical Social Congress held at Dortmund, as well as one by Wilhelm Herrmann, "The Moral Teachings of Jesus," read at the Evangelical Social Congress held at Darmstadt in 1903.

24. For details and chronology, see Peet, Altena, and Wiedijk, *Honderd Jaar Sociaal, 1891–1991*, 701–13.

25. Abraham Kuyper penned the party's first platform under the title *Ons Program* (*Our Program*).

Catholic—worker groups and employer associations came into being. As the congress met in November 1891, the condition of workers and the "threat" of socialism were very much on participants' minds. And it is this issue that is crucial for understanding Bavinck's paper.

Bavinck acknowledges the reality of this social ferment and even highlights the economic disparities that gave rise to it. Elsewhere he speaks of

> the many highly deplorable disparities that exist in real life. What is the reason and why is it necessary that a few may live in luxury and that many may live a fairly carefree life but that the mass of humanity has to earn a living through hard labor? Who or what accounts for the differences between those whose homes are furnished lavishly or comfortably and the many who have to endure living in stuffy rooms, narrow alleys, and dreary slums that lack light and fresh air? (*ERSS*, 147)

Nonetheless, Bavinck does not make the reality of inequality his starting point, and he differs from the revolutionary and socialist understanding of the problem by refusing to accept inequality as prima facie proof of injustice. Instead, he considers inequality to be "only one instance of a worldwide problem of multiformity" (*ERSS*, 147). We will see how he develops this, first in the context of the social and economic questions that framed the First Christian Social Congress, and then from a more philosophical perspective in his essay "On Inequality."

a. Bavinck's "General Biblical Principles" (1891)[26]

As I noted in the previous section, Bavinck sees a twofold calling for humanity and insists that our first obligation is to set right our relationship with God:

> Thus, the first order of the day is restoring our proper relationship with God. The cross of Christ, therefore, is the heart and mid-point of the Christian religion.

26. Original title: "Welke algemeene beginselen beheerschen, volgens de H. Schrift, de oplossing der sociale quaestie, en welke vingerwijzing voor die oplossing ligt in de concrete toepassing, welke deze beginselen voor Israël in Mosaïsch recht gevonden hebben?" This work was published in *Proces-Verbaal van het Sociaal Congres gehouden te Amsterdam, den 9, 10, 11, 12 November 1891*, 149–57. The title of the published English translation was shortened; the full and more literal title would read: "According to Holy Scripture, what general principles govern the solution of the social question, and what signals [lit., "finger-pointing"] for this solution can be found in Israel's concrete application of these principles found in Mosaic law." The congress's discussion of the resolutions, in interaction with Bavinck, can be found in the published account of the congress, in *Proces-Verbaal*, 80–87. See https://www.google.com/books/edition/Proces_verbaal_van_het_sociaal_congres_g/vo9VAAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1.

> Jesus did not come, first of all, to renew families and reform society but to save sinners and to redeem the world from the coming wrath of God. This salvation of our souls must be our ultimate concern for which we are willing to sacrifice everything: father and mother, house and field, even our own lives, in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 6:33; 16:26). (*GBP*, 443)

We also saw that with respect to our earthly vocation Bavinck considers "inequalities" as a given of creation and not a consequence of the fall:

> It is here [in creation] also that we see, in principle, all the inequalities that would eventually come to pass among people: differences in body and soul, in character and temperament, in gifts of understanding and will, in heart and hand, and so forth. Inequality is a given of creation, grounded in the very will of God himself, and not first of all a consequence of sin. (*GBP*, 438)

However, our world is one in which sin and its consequences are devastatingly real:

> In the first place, the relation of fellowship with God was broken; sin brought unbelief, disobedience, and enmity against God. Sin leads us to forget the things that are above, to lose sight of our eternal, heavenly destination. Instead, sin throws us down to the earth and directs us to look for our salvation and happiness in its visible things.
>
> Consequently, the right relation of humans to themselves was also disturbed. Proper balance was destroyed; soul and body, spirit and flesh are now at odds with each other. Head and heart, understanding and will, and desire and duty are in irreconcilable conflict as the various human gifts and powers engage in perpetual war with each other, are devalued or misused. Egoism replaces love in the human heart and as a result produces envy, deceit, hatred, murder, and so forth. Sin has thus become the basic given of human life, the motivating power of human conduct. (*ERSS*, 438)

"Irreconcilable conflict" and "perpetual war" not only describe the internal reality of our personal lives; that characterization also fits our relationships with fellow image bearers. We have become like ravenous beasts:

> In this way the entire social existence of human beings becomes a war of all against all. Husbands and wives, parents and children, rich and poor, and so forth, come to be enemies of each other; differences become oppositions; inequalities are changed into clashing contrasts. Driven by egoism, everyone

no longer thinks about that which they have but focuses on what belongs to someone else. Society becomes a stage-play about the struggle for existence, a world where one man acts as a wolf toward the others. (*GBP*, 439)

There are two additional consequences of our fallen, sinful condition:

(1) Our changed relationship to the natural world:

> God remains the same and his command does not change: We are still given the responsibility to fill the earth and subdue it. However, the character of our labor now is changed: Women bear children in pain and sorrow, and men eat bread by the sweat of their brow because nature is no longer cooperative but antagonistic. Human dominion over creation has given way to a situation where nature is indifferent, even hostile, where "thorns and thistles," the animals of the field, and the forces of nature are our enemies. Our labor has become a struggle merely to survive. Paradise is closed behind us and we are sent out into the raw, wasted world without any weapons. (*GBP*, 439–40)

(2) Life under the judgment of God:

> Furthermore, to top it off, in all this, humans feel the judgments of God that multiply above our heads. Rebellion against God's law never goes unpunished; sin is itself misery and is followed by an ocean of disasters. Shattered souls and broken bodies are the wrecks of justice; inner disturbance, a sense of guilt, an agonized conscience, and fear of punishment gnaw at the hidden life of every human being. Illness and troubles, tragedies and evils, mourning and death, all take away the joys of our earthly life. Dust celebrates its triumph in the grave; destruction sings its victory song. (*GBP*, 440)

The "nasty, brutish, and short" lives of humans are not the whole story, according to Bavinck. A world in sin and under divine wrath is still not a hellish existence:

> This devastating path of sin's work over time is nonetheless restrained by God's grace. His thoughts after all are not directed to destruction but to the preservation and redemption of humanity. Already in his role as Creator and Sustainer God redirects sin, opposes it and reins it in so that sin does not annihilate creation and frustrate his decree.
>
> God does this, in the first place, by the punishments and judgments that he links to sin. Restless souls, the trials of life, the struggle for existence, the toils of our daily labor, all of these are, at the same time, revelations of divine wrath

and instruments of his common grace, by which he throws obstacles in the path of sin's progress and opposes the most horrific outbursts of sin.

In addition, with respect to human beings, God does this by allowing a few weak remnants of his image and likeness to remain [after the fall]. He grants them reason and conscience; preserves in them some knowledge of his existence and character, a seed of religion; a moral sense of good and evil; and a consciousness of our eternal destiny. In this way, God keeps before people a tie to another and higher world than the visible one limited by our senses. Even with all the corruption present among all people and every individual, there remains a natural knowledge of God [for everyone].

Finally, God does that by establishing the structures of family, society, and state among human beings. He awakens in the human heart a natural love between men and women, parents and children. He nurtures a variety of social virtues among people: a pull toward social relationships and a longing for affection and friendship. He also scatters humanity into different people groups and languages to protect them from total decline. Among those nations, he creates the national virtues of affection for and love of fatherland. He permits these different people groups to organize themselves into states to whom is given the calling to regulate the relationships among the many diverse spheres of society and maintain justice. (*GBP*, 440–41)

Bavinck cautions against placing too much confidence in this restraint and amelioration:

Nonetheless, this endowment of common grace and divine long-suffering is not enough; it restrains human beings but does not renew them. (*GBP*, 441)

With this observation Bavinck comes to the heart of his paper's message:

While the Lord permits the pagan nations to wander along their own path, he sets Israel apart and makes known to them his ways and his laws. God is Israel's King, Lawgiver, and Judge (Isa. 33:22). These laws regulated the totality of Israel's existence and life, not only externally but also internally, its religious and moral life and its statecraft and social relationships. (*GBP*, 441)

Bavinck then describes the institutions and structures that defined Israel's social life:

a. Israel is the people of God, set apart from all the nations to be his holy people and called to walk in his ways (Exod. 19:5, 6, etc.). In the law-giving

at Mount Sinai, it is this religious destiny for Israel that stands in the foreground. However, it is not only the people but also the land that God owns as his possession. In the freedom of his decree, he took the land of Canaan from its previous inhabitants and gave it as an inheritance to Abraham and his seed. The land belongs to God and the Israelites are strangers and tenants (Lev. 25:23). Israel possesses the land in fiefdom to use as a renter. God manages it and determines how the land is to be divided among the tribes and clans (Josh. 13–19).

b. God maintains these tribes and clans and protects their inheritance. He promises fertility for Israel's families (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; Deut. 28:4) and kept alive among them the conviction that children are a blessing and inheritance from the Lord (Ps. 113:9; 127:3–5; 128:3). Inherited portions of land were passed on through sons; in families that had no sons, it was given to daughters but with the obligation that they marry men from their own tribal clan (Num. 27:8; 36:1–13). A childless widow was to be taken as wife by a brother or close relative of the deceased man in order that his name not be blotted out from the land and his inheritance given to another (Deut. 25:5–10).

c. In turn, the inherited portions of land were protected and preserved for the tribe and clan, especially by the principle of jubilee. In the Year of Jubilee, all Israelites whose poverty had led them into slavery were to be released (Lev. 25:39, 40 [also Deut. 15:12]); the right of redemption was to be available to them in perpetuity (Lev. 25:47)—their property could not be sold for good; it could only be used until the Year of Jubilee when it was to be returned freely, without payment of a purchase price, to the original owner. Even prior to this year, the owner or his redeemer retained the right to buy back the property (Lev. 25). However, this institution of redemption and return did not apply to houses in walled cities (Lev. 25:29–30) nor to land that was dedicated to the Lord (Lev. 27:16–21).

d. It was thanks to these stipulations that Israel avoided both pauperization and accumulation of land and capital. At the same time, this did not eliminate differences between rich and poor, freeman and serf. God willed that there should be poor (Deut. 15:11; Prov. 22:2), and bondage or serfdom was a lawful institution (Exod. 21:20ff.). Nonetheless, the basic necessities for a life of human dignity[27] were made possible for most Israelites. Contrasts [between rich and poor] were mitigated, in most beautiful manner on the Sabbath and the feast days. Poor and rich did not exist then; all lived, apart from their labor, freely from the hand of the

27. DO: *menschwaardig bestaan*.

Lord; all were free, throwing off their work clothes and donning festal garments. This was a time to rest from all labor and to rejoice in the presence of God.

e. In addition to this, we must not forget the ministry of mercy in Israel. Loans were to be given to the poor freely and willingly (Deut. 15:7); surety was not to be taken by force and even, in some cases, to be returned before sunset (Deut. 24:6, 10–12; Exod. 22:26). No interest was to be charged a brother Israelite (Deut. 25:19; Lev. 25:36), and debts were to be forgiven in the seventh year (Deut. 15); day-wages were to be paid in a timely fashion (Deut. 24:15). In addition, widows and orphans, the poor and the stranger were to be treated justly in the courts (Deut. 14:7; Exod. 22:21, 22); they had rights of gleaning after annual harvests (Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–21) and to the entire harvest in the Sabbath year (Lev. 25:5); they also had rights to share in the meals from sacrifices and tithes (Deut. 14:28–29; 16:10–15; 26:12–13). Those with disabilities were not to be mocked (Lev. 19:14; Deut. 27:18), and the elderly were to be honored (Lev. 19:32). God's law even provided for the life and well-being of animals, including their rest (Exod. 20:10; Deut. 25:4; 22:6, 28). This entire ministry of mercy is repeatedly predicated on Israel's oppression and sojourning in Egypt (Exod. 22:20; 23:9; etc.). Israel's moral law is written from the vantage point of the oppressed. (*GBP*, 441–42)

According to Bavinck, it is to these Old Testament principles, and not to the moral teachings of the New Testament, that we must turn for guidance on a biblical understanding of society. He says that in the New Testament, "the law is not simply abrogated and set aside, but it is fulfilled in Christ and in this way reaches its own end." Therefore,

> the New Testament does not give us laws that could as a matter of course be adopted by the state and enforced with its authority. Rather we must go to the Old Testament where the eternal principles are set forth by which alone the well-being of families, societies, and states can be guaranteed. These principles are not written on tablets of stone but penetrate the bodily tablets of human hearts and, through the church of Christ, the world. (*GBP*, 443)

We have seen that, according to Bavinck, the New Testament's primary concern is restoring our relationship with God.[28] Two consequences follow from this priority:

28. See above, pp. 13–14.

(a) All our social relationships are relativized:

> This new, reconciled relationship to God that is effected through faith in Christ is of such great significance and value that all our relationships and distinctions vanish because of it. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free (Col. 3:11). (*GBP*, 443)

(b) Soteriological equality does not eliminate other inequalities:

> However, this does not set aside all the differences and inequalities that exist among people in this earthly life. Property ownership does not disappear; the example of the Jerusalem church in Acts is all too often taken by itself and is too exceptional to provide a counter claim. The differences between rich and poor, slave and free, parents and children, civil authorities and subjects are assumed and honored fully by Jesus and his apostles in their words and deeds. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 make it clear that every person, even after their conversion, ought to remain in the calling to which they have been called. The differences that are present in creation by the will of God are not set aside by the Son in redemption. (*GBP*, 443)

Nonetheless, salvation in Christ does not leave the natural order unaffected:

> Redemption does change matters, however. From the principle of reconciliation with God, all other human relationships are given a new ordering and led back to their original state. God is the owner of every human being and their possessions; we are simply tenants, renters, and must give an account of our stewardship (Luke 16:2; Matt. 25:14–30). Husbands and wives (Eph. 5:22; Titus 2:5; Col. 3:18), parents and children (Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20–21), masters and slaves (1 Cor. 7:21–22; Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22), civil authorities and subjects (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–2; 1 Pet. 2:13–16; etc.), are all brought into proper relationship with each other. Distinctions in our social life remain, but they lose their sharp edge. The New Testament is overflowing with warnings against riches (Matt. 6:19; 19:23; 1 Tim. 6:17–19; etc.), but poverty is no virtue and the natural is not unclean in itself (Mark 7:15–23; Acts 14:17; Rom. 14:14; 1 Tim. 4:4). Work is commended and tied to food and wages (Matt. 10:10; 1 Tim. 5:18; Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:10). In Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus himself removes for his followers all anxious concern about this earthly life. Because the redemption in Christ renews but does not eliminate the various earthly relationships in which we find ourselves, there remains a large place for the ministry of mercy. Just like the poor (Matt. 26:11; John 12:8; Rev. 13:16), so, too, the many needy will always be with us. In the same way that Jesus the compassionate High Priest is always deeply

> moved by those in need, so, too, he directs his followers especially to clothe themselves with the Christlike virtue of compassion (Matt. 5:43–47; Luke 6:36). Having received mercy from Christ, his followers are expected in turn to show mercy to others (1 Pet. 2:10; Matt. 18:33). It is for this reason that the church has a distinct office for the ministry of mercy. (*GBP*, 443–44)

I conclude my overview of Bavinck's presentation to the 1891 Christian Social Congress with the seven resolutions he prepared for discussion and debate. The congress turned these seven resolutions into eight, adding a new one and also altering Bavinck's originals in some cases.[29]

Bavinck's Original Resolutions to 1891 Social Congress	**Resolutions Adopted by 1891 Social Congress**
	C1 (new): Holy Scripture teaches that human society must not be ordered according to our own preferences but is bound to those laws that God himself has firmly established in Creation and His Word.
B1: The inequalities that exist in every respect among people are grounded in the Creation, that is to say, in God's will itself, and serves precisely to make possible humanity's earthly task.	C2: **Even the existence of** inequalities among people is rooted in creation, that is to say, in God's will, and serves precisely to make possible humanity's earthly task.[30]

29. For ease of reference, I will number Bavinck's resolutions as "B1, B2, etc." and the revised resolutions of the congress as "C1, C2, etc." They can be found in *GBP*, 445–46. The changes from Bavinck's original will be highlighted in boldface. The discussion at the congress about Bavinck's paper was also recorded, and I will include some of that discussion in my footnotes; these notes are adapted from Bolt, "Herman Bavinck's Contribution to Christian Social Consciousness," 425–36. The congress also added a new resolution (C1), which is an important addition because it serves as a prologue and frame for the whole set. It also points to the natural law of creation alongside Scripture as a source of human knowledge about God's law.

30. C2: The concessive introductory phrase added by the congress likely signals concerns among delegates that the resolution risked being charged with determinism. In his comments in response to questions about this, Bavinck accented the threefold perspective required to view humanity aright: in the state of original righteousness, in sin, and in grace. Note that this is the same threefold perspective from which Bavinck views the entire moral life in his *Reformed Ethics*; book I, "Humanity before Conversion," deals with humanity as created (*RE*, 1, chap. 1) and fallen (*RE*, 1, chaps. 2–6); book II (*RE*, 1, chaps. 7–12) considers "humanity after conversion"—that is, in the state of grace; and books III (*RE* 2) and IV (*RE* 3), respectively, cover the "duties of the Christian life" (the Decalogue) and "social ethics."

B2: Sin eliminated the unity of this diversity, turned differences into oppositions, and placed creatures in a relationship of enmity against God and to each other.	C3: **In general, the origin of all social ills and abuses comes from setting aside these ordinances and laws. Thanks to this, the differences that are present among creatures by virtue of creation** lost their unity, were changed into oppositions, and placed creatures in a relationship of enmity against God and to each other.[31]
B3: Redemption does not set aside the differences that exist thanks to God's will but renews all relationships to their original form by bringing all of them into a reconciled relationship with God.	C4: Redemption does not set aside the differences that exist thanks to God's will but renews all relationships to their original form by bringing all of them into a reconciled relationship with God.[32]
B4: According to Scripture the important general principle for a solution to the social question is that there be justice.[33] This means that each person be assigned to the place where, in accord with their nature, they are able to live according to God's ordinances with respect to God and other creatures.	C5: According to Scripture the important general principle for a solution to the social question is that there be justice. This means that each person be assigned to the place where, in accord with their nature, they are able to live according to God's ordinances with respect to God and other creatures.[34]

31. C3: Here the congress strengthened Bavinck's formulation by directing attention first to social ills instead of sin and highlighting human culpability for "social ills and abuses" as a consequence of "setting aside" God's ordinances and laws. While inequalities may be rooted in creation's diversity according to God's will, the fact that they are now a problem is a consequence of human action. This resolution also underscores the universality of sin and paves the way for a repudiation of all schemes such as socialism that place the blame for social ills on unjust structures and institutions. Sin is universal and points to a law-dimension that transcends our human constructions and structures; all utopian dreaming is rendered foolish, and all scapegoating rejected. The problem does not lie in certain people or specific structures; the cure does not depend on changing the structures and institutions. *Sin* is the problem and we are all guilty and culpable for it.

32. C4: This resolution was not altered. C4 is identical, word for word, with B3. Though the congress left this resolution unaltered, it does deserve a brief comment. Neither Bavinck nor the congress included a resolution about "common grace," the notion of God's providential favor whereby he bestows nonsaving gifts upon all people and restrains evil from developing full flower. Apparently, the delegates felt no need to make common cause with non-Christians—such as socialists, for example, who observed the same misery and showed similar concern and compassion for the growing numbers of working poor. Bavinck and the congress were trying to think through the social question *as Christians* who looked to scriptural revelation as their resource for uncovering the truth about human life, its meaning, and its destiny. Also noteworthy is that the appeal to Scripture is primarily to the Old Testament and the concrete life of Israel as a people, and not to the soteriological core of the New Testament. See note on B4/C5, below.

33. DO: *gerechtigheid*.

34. C5: This resolution was not altered. C5 is identical, word for word, with B4. In his comments during the discussion, Bavinck observed that "Jesus did not come to destroy the work of his Father [i.e., creation] but the works of the Devil. Grace does not set aside justice [*recht*] but restores it, first by justly restoring our relationship to God, and thereby making possible a just relationship to other people." The definition of justice that is provided is striking: "that

B5: Therefore, it is entirely in keeping with Holy Scripture to: a. not only prepare people for their eternal destiny, but also to make it possible for them to fulfill their earthly calling; b. in the political arena, uphold the institution of the Sabbath alongside the workweek so as to maintain the unity and distinction of our double calling; c. guide all our life's relationships in a new way and restore them to their original shape by the same cross of Christ that proclaims our reconciliation with God. This has special relevance for the social arena, where [we should seek to] • prevent poverty and misery, especially pauperization; • oppose the accumulation of capital and landed property; • ensure, as much as possible, a "living wage" for every person.	C6: Therefore, it is entirely in keeping with Holy Scripture to: a. not only prepare people for their eternal destiny, but also to make it possible for them to fulfill their earthly calling; b. in the political arena, uphold the institution of the Sabbath alongside the workweek so as to maintain the unity and distinction of our double calling; c. guide all our life's relationships in a new way and restore them to their original shape by the same cross of Christ that proclaims our reconciliation with God. This has special relevance for the social arena, where [we should seek to] • prevent poverty and misery, especially pauperization; • oppose the accumulation of capital and landed property; • ensure, as much as possible, a "living wage" for every person.[35]
B6: Civil authority, as God's servant called to maintain justice in society, has an obligation to test this justice and to base it on the eternal principles[36] laid down in Scripture for the various spheres of society.	C7: Civil authority, as God's servant called to maintain justice ***also*** in society, has an obligation to **base** this justice on **and deduce it from** the eternal **ordinances** [*ordinantiën*] laid down in Scripture for the various spheres of society.[37]

each person be assigned to the place where, in accord with their nature, they are able to live according to God's ordinances with respect to God and other creatures." It is the responsibility of civil authority to make this possible (*Proces-Verbaal*, 83). It should not be overlooked that this resolution underscores the forensic nature of our Lord's atoning death on the cross; our relationship to God is *justly* restored.

35. C6: This resolution was not altered. C6 is identical, word for word, with B5. I will reserve commentary on this resolution for the next section of this chapter, on economic life.

36. DO: *beginselen*.

37. C7: The change from Bavinck's term "principles" to the congress's "ordinances" may or may not be significant. The term *beginselen* (principles) was a Kuyperian code word, and the congress may have been signaling a subtle distancing from Kuyper (see Bolt, "Herman Bavinck's Contribution to Christian Social Consciousness," 429–30). However, the term *ordinantiën* was also a Kuyperian and neo-Calvinist favorite; see, e.g., W. Geesink's three-volume work on ethics, *Van 's Heeren Ordinantiën*. What is significant is the verb change from "civil authority . . . has an obligation *to test* [*toetsen*] this justice and *to base* it on the eternal principles laid down in Scripture" to "has an obligation *to base* this justice on and *deduce it from* [*af te leiden*] the eternal ordinances [*ordinantiën*] laid down in Scripture." Both formulations raise questions about whether the state has a task in exploring and investigating Scripture, but Bavinck's formulation seems more circumspect. It must be remembered that the "eternal principles" (or "ordinances") considered here are givens of *creation*. In his introductory remarks at the plenary session where this report was discussed, Bavinck clarifies his own position with this comment: "As God's servant, it is the state in particular that has been given the calling by God, first to

The final resolution is a reminder that "ye have the poor always with you" (Matt. 26:11 KJV).

B7: There remains, in addition to this, a very large role for the ministry of mercy since all kinds of miseries will always be with us and can never be removed by justice [alone].	C8: There remains, in addition to this, a very large role for the ministry of mercy since, **thanks to the working of sin and error**, all kinds of miseries will always be with us, and **in this earthly dwelling** can never be removed by justice [alone].[38]

b. Bavinck's "On Inequality" (1913)[39]

Two decades after his presentation to the Social Congress, Bavinck once again addressed the question of inequality, but now in a more philosophical manner. The triggering impulse for this essay is not so much the "social question," with its concern about the poverty and misery of the working class (though this is not absent), as it is the spiritual, moral, and social chaos of the modern world leading up to World War I. Here is how Bavinck describes it:

> If in these busy, stressful times we look beyond ourselves at world events, we are constantly deluged by an overwhelming mass of incidents that are impossible to categorize or understand. And when we look inside ourselves, we see a restless sea of impressions, emotions, and moods, and we feel like a ship that is tossed to and fro. Sometimes in the vast restlessness of existing reality, we see things that weary us because of a certain monotony, but we also encounter things that move us and even bewilder us by their impenetrable mystery.

determine [deduce; *af te leiden*], from God's ordinances in nature and in Scripture, what justice [*recht*] is, and then to make it sovereign in every area that is its proper domain and to maintain it" (*Proces-Verbaal*, 83–84). It is fair to conclude, therefore, that Bavinck had in mind using Scripture as a testing rod in tandem with natural law and the traditions of human experience. If we think of Christian persons in offices of civil authority rather than of a hypostasized state as a single entity, it is not inappropriate to ask such persons to consider the scriptural understanding of human nature and human destiny when weighing a particular policy decision. That seems to follow from B5 and C6.

38. C8: Here the congress's insertions are helpful as a reminder that there is no metaphysical inevitability to the reality of poverty and misery. Sin, and especially the consequences of sin, *can* be ameliorated and overcome, never perfectly or completely but still in definite and measurable ways. The formulation carefully avoids locating the sin and error; by leaving it general (and universal) it implicitly repudiates efforts to pin blame on a specific group or class or to exonerate others. Sin is here and will remain here until the consummation—we are all sinners, we all need mercy, and we all must show mercy.

39. "On Inequality" (*ERSS*, 145–63) was originally published as "Over de Ongelijkheid" in *Stemmen des Tijds* 2 (1913): 17–43, and reprinted in Herman Bavinck, *Verzamelde Opstellen*, 151–71.

> In both instances, questions arise: What accounts for such infinite variety and endless diversity in this one, vast universe? Might it be possible that this endless variety can be reduced to, or is derived from, one single source that might quiet our souls? (*ERSS*, 145)

This endless variety does evoke aesthetic delight since there is beauty in diversity. But seeing only beauty in diversity is superficial:

> But this variety also hides a great many contradictions, for diversity is a pseudonym for a mysterious struggle between clashing powers. Just as nature has its days and nights, its summers and winters, so humanity faces good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and disgrace. (*ERSS*, 145)

Bavinck then proceeds to the biblical account of the fall and the divinely appointed enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. The evidence for the fallenness of the world is obvious to all:

> We recognize this all around. There is no peace or harmony anywhere; instead, dissonance and struggle are everywhere. People, social classes, nations, political parties, and interests have clashed throughout the centuries, while inside each person the head and the heart, flesh and spirit, duty and desire, conscience and lust are constantly at war with each other. Is it perhaps possible that all these harrowing contrasts can be reconciled and brought together in a nobler synthesis that might satisfy us in our day and eventually conquer and destroy them? (*ERSS*, 146)

Speaking of this as "an all-encompassing problem," Bavinck reduces all the efforts to bring about reconciliation to two basic types that "especially have become prominent": *monism* and *pluralism*.

> [There are,] on the one hand, the pantheistic or monistic systems that have tried to reduce variety to an appearance of reality with the slogan "variety is basically one reality." Thus they treat variety either as modification of a single reality, or they see it merely as man's imagination, which does not correspond to any objective reality. These are the views of the Greek Eleatic[40] and Stoic schools of thought that, overlooking gnosticism and Neoplatonism, have become part of the more recent philosophy of Spinoza, Hegel, and Spencer. They

40. Ed. note: The Greek pre-Socratic philosophical Eleatic school (at Elea, a Greek colony in Lucania, Italy) began with Parmenides (sixth to fifth century BC), the great philosopher of "being" who taught that everything is fundamentally "one."

> may even have found a more consistent voice in the philosophy of Buddhism, which views the entire world as maya, the representation of the one, unknowable and unutterable It. (*ERSS*, 146)

By way of contrast, the pluralistic visions of ancient pagan polytheism and polydaemonism have also remarkably resurfaced in the modern era:

> On the other hand, there are also the pluralistic systems that despair of ever finding one single reality and that do not go beyond accepting an original multitude of gods or spirits, of powers or matter. [This vision also] holds true for the dualism of the Persians and Manichaeans, for the theosophical distinction of the dark and bright aspects of God. And it is remarkable that they have reappeared more recently in this form as a reaction to monism. Not only is the pluralism of William James proof of this, but also the dualistic representation of a morally good God next to the mysterious power of nature and the even more prominent superstition and magic that increasingly spreads to our centers of culture. (*ERSS*, 146)

If these two answers are the basic options by which "religious and philosophic systems have approached the gripping problem of unity and multiformity," then, so Bavinck observes, "it is quite remarkable that in our day, more so than ever before, this idea of diversity has become a *practical* problem. The great diversity in our world is seen by many people today, especially in the social realm, as inequality" (*ERSS*, 146).

As in his 1891 paper for the First Christian Social Congress, Bavinck treats the social question of inequality as a subset of the larger metaphysical question of unity and diversity, "the one and the many." Taking his cue from the June 28, 1912, two-hundredth-anniversary birthday celebration of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he gives the Genevan thinker the credit (or blame) for linking social misery to conditions of inequality. Bavinck traces the development of Rousseau's thought and his eventual adoption of the ideals of natural simplicity along with a profound critique of culture. Bavinck notes that although it may be too much to call this change in Rousseau "a religious conversion,"[41] nonetheless,

41. Ed. note: The following note is an enhanced and corrected version of Bavinck's original note (see *ERSS*, 148n7). Bav. note: Cf. John Viénot, cited by Gaston Riou, "Un sermon sur Jean-Jacques [Rousseau]," *Foi et Vie* 15, no. 13 (July 1, 1912): 399. But Paul Doumergue, who for the rest praises Rousseau's spirituality, observes correctly that the gospel was a law for him and that Rousseau, who considered sin only a human weakness, did not see the need for Christ as Savior and that therefore Rousseau's Christianity lacked precisely . . . a conversion (Doumergue, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Ce qu'était sa religion; ce que fut son christianisme," *Foi et Vie* 15,

> it certainly was a remarkable and extremely important change. One could almost say that it inaugurated a new era. And it ran much deeper and was much more radical than one might have expected of a man like Rousseau. It started in his head, but then penetrated his heart and brought about a transformation of his entire life. From then on he abandoned the world, its praise, its pomp, and its honors and became even more than before a lover of solitude, a loner. He broke with society, with friends, and also with the philosophers of the day, those ardent missionaries of atheism. He cleansed his heart of greed and created for himself a different, moral world. Until then he had been a good person; now he became a virtuous person or at the least intoxicated by virtue. (*ERSS*, 148–49)
>
> The great change that Rousseau experienced at that time, though in a way somewhat related to his former life, consisted in his sudden renunciation of the corrupt culture of his day and his return to the simplicity and truth of nature. (*ERSS*, 149)

Rousseau's return to nature was accompanied by his turn inward:

> Until then he had lived at odds with himself and his surroundings. But now he rediscovered himself and nature at the same time, and he found the two to be in deep harmony. The language of his soul and of nature were one. Until that moment both had been buried in his thinking under the results of a rationalized reason and a corrupt culture. But now Rousseau had discovered both in their originality and truth and in their simplicity and beauty. And thus they became for him something different and much more meaningful: nature without and his soul within now set free from the unnatural trappings imposed on them by reason and culture, suddenly turned into revelations of one and the same God: a God who is pure goodness and from whose hands nothing evil can come. (*ERSS*, 150–51)

From this came the proposition that has guided revolutionary thought ever since:

> The multitude of wrongs and all the misery in our world can only find their origin in society and the culture it has created. . . . The prime reason for evil is inequality and . . . it gradually produced wealth, luxury, idleness, and also the arts and sciences. (*ERSS*, 151)

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no. 14 [July 16, 1912]: 419). Ed. note: To clarify, the article by Gaston Riou is the presentation of a sermon on Rousseau by John Viénot (1859–1933), a French Lutheran pastor and professor of church history at the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Paris. Doumergue's assessment is part of the longest section of his article, pp. 414–19.

Though Rousseau himself was not a revolutionary nor a communist or socialist, "his teachings were thoroughly revolutionary." Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and the 1789 French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* were cut from the same cloth, although there were differences:

> Nevertheless, the basic thought in both is that man should abandon society as it has developed historically, with its differences and inequalities, and return to nature and its original rights. (*ERSS*, 151)

The influence of Rousseau's spirit has been lasting:

> Especially his idea of the injustice of social inequality has become deeply rooted in the hearts of men and has found wide acceptance. (*ERSS*, 154)

Bavinck then returns to the questions with which he began this essay: "What accounts for such infinite variety and endless diversity in this one, vast universe? Might it be possible that this endless variety can be reduced to, or is derived from, one single source that might quiet our souls?" (*ERSS*, 145). This time, however, he points to a different duality than the philosophical notions of monism and pluralism he used earlier. Now he employs spatial imagery: "from above" and "from below." This is a further refinement of the earlier distinction because Bavinck judges that the opposition to social inequality from above (he has in mind the world of ideas, theories and philosophies) can be either pantheist (monist) or materialist (pluralist):

> This inequality is hard pressed in our day by opposition from two sides. On the one hand, it is attacked as though from above by the evolutionist mindset, which may be either pantheistically or materialistically colored. This mindset governs scientific thinking, either consciously or unconsciously, and tries hard to destroy all basic differences. The destruction concerns, first, the difference between God and the world but also the differences between man and animal, soul and body, truth and lie, good and evil, Christianity and paganism, and so forth.

Bavinck uses the spatial imagery "from below," in contrast to the world of ideas and philosophies, to describe revolutionary social and political movements:[42]

42. Ed. note: Of course, as Bavinck himself notes, this distinction is not a separation; it does not deny the importance of thinkers like Rousseau and Marx in inspiring and shaping revolutionary movements.

> On the other hand, differences are attacked as though from below, by all those modern movements that seek to obliterate the difference between husband and wife, parents and children, the government and the governed, rich and poor, and so forth. Both movements are undoubtedly related, and it would not make much sense to fight against pantheism and materialism in the realm of thought while supporting socialistic or communistic emancipation in the realm of trade. (*ERSS*, 155)

Bavinck's critique of Rousseau's revolutionary ideas is indirect rather than straight-on. He appeals to that other "citizen of Geneva"—John Calvin—and his decidedly different vision. In so doing, Bavinck takes his cue from Rousseau himself:

> Nevertheless, Rousseau, in spite of himself, acknowledges the greatness and superiority of Calvin. In the dedication of his *Discourse on Inequality*, which he offered to the "magnificent, much-honored rulers of Geneva," he states that he is happy he was born in Geneva, where equality and inequality are so well aligned. (*ERSS*, 159)[43]

If Rousseau is to be believed, notes Bavinck, then "the example of Geneva proves that Calvin's religious philosophy of life, when applied, also contains a promise for today's society" (*ERSS*, 161). Moreover, if one takes "Calvin's religious philosophy" seriously as an effective motivation of social reformation, then Rousseau's vision, which is the contradiction of Calvin's, will not effectively transform the social order for the better. Both were concerned with the problem of inequality, but what is the key difference between Calvin and Rousseau?

> [For Calvin] it was not political and social inequality that struck him first of all, but religious inequality. When human nature in all men is equally polluted, how does one explain the profound and ever-continuing difference between those who accept the gospel and those who are lost? For Calvin and all the Reformers, this was the central and all-important difference that superseded all other differences because it was everlasting. And in answering this question, Calvin

43. Rousseau's most complimentary statement about Calvin is found in his *Social Contract* (book II, chapter 7, note), and it is a tribute to Calvin's social and political influence on Geneva: "Those who know Calvin only as a theologian much underestimate the extent of his genius. The codification of our wise edicts, in which he played a large part, does him no less honor than his *Institute*. Whatever revolution time may bring in our religion, so long as the spirit of patriotism and liberty still lives among us, the memory of this great man will be forever blessed" (Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, 39n1).

> saw behind all culture and nature the good pleasure of God, his sovereign and omnipotent free will as the ultimate and deepest cause. He did this in the company of Luther and Zwingli, while following the footsteps of Augustine and guided by Paul, disregarding culture and nature. . . . God's preordaining was the final, most profound cause of all differences among creatures, such as kind, gender, gifts, and in all that is [*zijn*] and is just so [*zóó-zijn*]. It is neither the free will of man, nor merit and worth, nor culture, nor even nature that is the source of all multiplicity in creation, but God's almighty and all-powerful will, which at the same time is wise and holy, though inscrutable and inexplicable. Culture, nurture, or free will is not the cause, for the fundamental differences precede these and are already present in nature. Nature is not the cause either, for it did not come into being and does not exist on its own but is carried by the word of God's power from its beginning and always. By his will all things are and have been created. (*ERSS*, 156)

Bavinck is acutely aware that such a conviction is demanding and not easy; it is, he says, a "confession which only a strong generation can accept." Through it, "Calvin taught his followers first of all acceptance, submission, and contentment in times of struggle and oppression." He wryly adds:

> However, few people today will thank him for it. Sowing discontent and systematically goading people to be hostile toward all prevailing conditions and arrangements are held in much higher esteem by many. Rousseau is their great example, for he is the one who, blaming everything on society and culture, made people proud and rebellious, but he also caused them an endless series of disappointments, for revolution that runs counter to nature is a sword that always turns against the one brandishing it. "You can drive nature out with a pitchfork, but it always comes back."[44] (*ERSS*, 156)

Bavinck wants his readers to understand that this doctrine—"acceptance, submission, and contentment in times of struggle and oppression"—is not coldly fatalistic but a warm comfort:

> Still, acquiescence is not nearly the only and most important thing that Calvin impressed on his faithful followers. The will of God, according to Calvin's

44. LO: *Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret*. Ed. note: Bavinck cites no source for this saying, but it is from Horace, *Epistles* I.x.24 (LCL 194:316–17); the full quote is, *Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret, et mala perrumpet furtim fastidia victrix* (You may drive out Nature with a pitchfork, yet she will ever hurry back, and ere you know it, will burst through your foolish contempt in triumph).

> confession, may be absolutely sovereign, totally all-powerful, and inscrutable and therefore to be acknowledged with holy awe and deep reverence; yet it is for everyone who believes the will of a merciful and gracious Father, who loves all his children with an eternal love; his will may be hidden, but he always has wise and holy reasons for all the dark ways in which he often leads them. Such a will is not fate, in which a person acquiesces willy-nilly, but an object of childlike trust, an inexhaustible fountain of comfort, and the strong anchor of a firm and solid hope. (*ERSS*, 157)

Bavinck frames this in terms of God's fatherly love in Christ:

> Remember that in spite of—no, in keeping with—the teaching of predestination, the abundant grace of God in Christ constitutes the heart and soul of Calvin's *Institutes*. For him this was the essence of Christianity, through which God tells us how much he loves us. He saw the will of God revealed in all things. Even in the iniquities of mankind. But basically and in essence this will is the saving grace that leads the world and mankind through the darkness to the light and through death to eternal life. . . . This comfort was unknown to Rousseau, but Calvin made it known to the Christians of his day for their comfort and assurance. Through the preaching of God's holy and gracious will, Calvin furnished faith, heroism, and inspiration to the least and simplest, to those persecuted for the sake of the gospel, to prisoners in their jails, to martyrs on scaffold and pyre, making them scorn all suffering and glory in oppression. (*ERSS*, 157)

This message remains relevant in the modern world's social and political upheavals:

> And this comfort we need just as much in our day. For nothing is easier than to join Rousseau in sowing discontent in the hearts of men and to make them rebel against their own fate and society at large. (*ERSS*, 157)

Sowing revolutionary discontent is not an innocent pastime; Bavinck quotes Conrad Busken Huet about the dangers: "The danger is even great for us . . . that out of fear for the little man, we become flatterers of the people and courtiers of that which is common."[45] This results in terrible social and ecological damage:

> But fundamentally such flattery is cruel, like offering a stone and a serpent to someone who prays for a loaf of bread or a fish. For when a person loses his

45. *ERSS*, 157; Bav. note: Conrad Busken Huet, *Het land van Rembrandt: Studiën over de Noordnederlandsche beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw*, 2:2, 139.