

Calvin University

## Calvin Digital Commons

---

Seminary Faculty Publications

Seminary Faculty Scholarship

---

1-1-2010

### Herman Bavinck's Contribution to Christian Social Consciousness.

John Bolt

*Calvin Theological Seminary*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary\\_facultypubs](https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary_facultypubs)



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bolt, John, "Herman Bavinck's Contribution to Christian Social Consciousness." (2010). *Seminary Faculty Publications*. 4.

[https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary\\_facultypubs/4](https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/seminary_facultypubs/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Seminary Faculty Scholarship at Calvin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Seminary Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Calvin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dbm9@calvin.edu](mailto:dbm9@calvin.edu).

# Status Quaestionis<sup>†</sup>

† Conceived as a complement to our *Scholia*, which are original translations of early modern texts and treatises on ethics, economics, and theology, the *Status Quaestionis* features are intended to help us grasp in a more thorough and comprehensive way the state of the scholarly landscape with regard to the modern intersection between religion and economics. Whereas the *Scholia* are longer, generally treatise-length works located in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the *Status Quaestionis* will typically be shorter, essay-length pieces from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

General Biblical  
Principles and  
the Relevance of  
Concrete Mosaic  
Law for the  
Social Question  
Today (1891)

*Herman Bavinck*  
*Translation by John Bolt*  
*Introduction by John Bolt*

## Herman Bavinck's Contribution to Christian Social Consciousness

*John Bolt*  
*Professor of Systematic Theology*  
*Calvin Theological Seminary*  
*Grand Rapids, Michigan*

The year 1891 represents a high-water mark in the development of Christian social consciousness in the modern world, represented most famously by Pope Leo XIII's fertile encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the Holy See's answer to the nineteenth-century preoccupation with "the social question."<sup>1</sup> The essay by Herman Bavinck under consideration here was part of the deliberations of the First Christian Social Congress held in Amsterdam on November 9–12, 1891. Bavinck's essay is not nearly as well known as the opening address to the congress given by Abraham Kuyper, "The Social Question and the Christian Religion," but it deserves attention as a thoughtful reflection on the hermeneutic question of how to use the legal framework of the Pentateuch/Torah for Christian social engagement in the modern world.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction that follows I will briefly

---

<sup>1</sup> This is evidenced by the twelve papal encyclicals issued in the century between *Rerum Novarum* and John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, all of which build on Leo XIII's masterwork. For a handy one-volume collection of papal social teaching, see Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, eds., *Proclaiming Justice and Peace: Papal Documents from Rerum Novarum to Centesimus Annus*, rev. and exp. ed. (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *De Sociale Vraagstuk en de Christelijke Religie* (Amsterdam: Wormser, 1891); the English translation of this address has a checkered history; it was translated by Calvin College history professor Dr. Dirk Jellema as *Christianity and the Class Struggle* (Grand Rapids: Piet Hein, 1950)—the publisher's name undoubtedly reflects the liberationist sentiments of the translator; Piet Hein is the

set the stage for the congress' work in the broader context of nineteenth-century social discussions, summarize the key elements in Bavinnck's report, and conclude with some observations about its reception and ongoing value.

## The Context: European Social Congresses

The social question—what to do about the growing number of urbanized, working-class poor who struggled to meet basic necessities of life—arose in the nineteenth century thanks to the Industrial Revolution and the resultant dislocation of working people from rural areas into the urban centers of Europe as cottage industries gave way to factory production. Whatever date is chosen for the beginning of this major shift,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that the forces of industrialization, driven by technological innovation in iron and steel production as well as textile manufacture, spread like wild-fire across Europe after its initial phase primarily in England at the conclusion of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The resultant social upheaval cried for response and a variety of “fixes” were proposed in the nineteenth century. One response, socialism, and its chief intellectual voice, Karl Marx, has been well studied and is generally well known. Much the same can be said about the “Christian socialism” of Anglicans Charles Kingsley (1819–1875) and F. D. Maurice (1805–1887), along with American Baptists Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) and Francis

---

legendary Dutch naval officer who captured a significant part of the Spanish “silver fleet” coming from the Philippines and the Americas in 1628. A more aptly chosen title and improved translation appeared forty years later: *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Washington, D.C.: Center for Public Justice; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawn links the Industrial with the French as the “twin revolutions” that served as midwives to modern European history. See his trilogy, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York: New American Library, 1962); *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975); and *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987). Others, such as Cambridge University economic historian Sir John H. Clapham (1873–1946), see a more gradual, developmental change instead of a revolution. See his *The Economic Development of France and Germany, 1815–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921); and *An Economic History of Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926).

<sup>4</sup> Thus lending credence to Patrick Geddes's notion of a “second industrial revolution.” See his *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1915).

Julius Bellamy (1855–1931).<sup>5</sup> Not as well known in North America is the tradition of continental European Christian Social Congresses, many of them, such as the Dutch First Social Congress, were based in and focused on specific national concerns. The term *congress* can be misleading if we think in terms of single, conference-like events, again such as the 1891 event in Amsterdam. It is more appropriate to think of them—even when used in the singular—as organized movements for social reform, often including a variety of groups and interests,

---

<sup>5</sup> The following is a (partial) list of important works in the American social gospel movement: J. Llewelyn Davies, *Social Questions From the Point of View of Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1886); Henry Sylvester Nash, *Genesis of the Social Conscience: The Relation Between the Establishment of Christianity in Europe and the Social Question* (New York: Macmillan, 1897); Shailer Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897); idem., *The Individual and the Social Gospel* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1914); Francis Greenwood Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Social Question: An Examination of the Teaching of Jesus in Its Relation to some of the Problems of Modern Social Life* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1911); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1908); idem., *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912); idem., *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1912); idem., *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, ed. and introduced by Max L. Stackhouse (New York: Abingdon Press, 1945). The Canadian social gospel movement deserves its own mention, especially since it birthed not only a political movement that included urban labor and prairie populism, but also because it gave rise to two distinct Canadian political parties, the Social Credit Party (Alberta, 1935) and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (Alberta, 1932; later the New Democratic Party). On Social Credit see John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); and Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). On socialism and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, see Ivan Avakumovic, *Socialism in Canada: A Study of the CCF-NDP in Federal and Provincial Politics* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978). On the social gospel in Canada, see Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914–28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); Harry Antonides, *Stones for Bread: The Social Gospel and Its Contemporary Legacy* (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia, 1985); Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).

and acting in varying degrees of concert over an extended period of time.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the simply named Evangelical Social Congress was a diverse social-reform movement of German pastors founded in 1890.<sup>7</sup> The men who played a prominent part in the leadership of the congress reflect this diversity: social thinker Max Weber (1864–1920); the Christian socialist Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919);<sup>8</sup> Adolf Stoecker (1835–1909), chaplain to the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II and founder of the Lutheran, anti-Semitic, Christian Social (Workers) Party (1878);<sup>9</sup> as well as liberal, social gospel mainstays Wilhelm Herrmann (1848–1922) and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930).<sup>10</sup>

## The Dutch Christian Social Congress: Context

The First Christian Social Congress of the Netherlands was held in Amsterdam on November 9–12, 1891, but the events that shaped it went back to the 1860s and included the formation of cooperatives and workers' groups, including typographers (1861, 1866) and construction workers (1866), along with a ship-

---

<sup>6</sup> Even though each congress was nation specific, the public identifiers do not include national orientation but simply list the year and place [e.g., the 1903 Evangelical Social Congress held in Darmstadt (Germany); see n. 11 below].

<sup>7</sup> See Max Maurenbrecher, "The Evangelical Social Congress in Germany," *American Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1903): 24–36; Harry Liebersohn, *Religion and Industrial Society: The Protestant Social Congress in Wilhelmine Germany* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> See Wolfhart Pentz, "The Meaning of Religion in the Politics of Friedrich Naumann," *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 9, no. 1 (2002): 70–97.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Jeremy Telman, "Adolf Stoecker: Anti-Semite with a Christian Mission," *Jewish History* 9, no. 2 (1995): 93–112; and Harold M. Green, "Adolf Stoecker: Portrait of a Demagogue," *Politics & Policy* 31, no. 1 (2003): 106–29.

<sup>10</sup> The collection of essays edited by Harnack, *Essays on the Social Gospel*, ed. Maurice Arthuer Canney, trans. G. M. Craik (London: Williams & Norgate; New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1907), is revelatory. 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*, v. 76/3 (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.

builders' strike in 1869.<sup>11</sup> In the intervening years, leading up to the congress of 1891, the world's workers formed the International Working Men's Association (IWMA, later the "First Internationale") in London on September 28, 1864, but the Paris Commune momentarily seized power on March 28, 1871, establishing a brief communist rule until its bloody defeat two months later. An unintended consequence of this revolutionary failure was an increased anxiety in European nations about "socialism"; in the Netherlands it prompted anti-revolutionaries such as Groen Van Prinsterer (1801–1876) and Abraham Kuyper to push harder for alternative responses to the pressing social question. When Kuyper began publication of his daily newspaper *De Standaard* (*The Standard*) in 1872, he led off with a series of editorials on the social question, including such issues as wage increases, shorter work weeks, and "respectable" (i.e., not revolutionary) labor unions.<sup>12</sup> The beginning of a Christian social movement in the Netherlands can be dated to December 6, 1872, with the creation of an alliance against Sunday labor. The Internationale also set roots in the Netherlands; after a secret society, "Vox Populi," was formed by Internationale members, a Social-Democratic Alliance was formed in Amsterdam in 1874. A Protestant Workers Alliance, "Patrimonium"—not a labor union but a worker's alliance with broader social and cultural interests and goals<sup>13</sup>—appointed its first governing board on October 1,

---

<sup>11</sup> The chronology that follows is taken from J. M. Peet, L. J. Altena, and C. H. Wiedijk, *Honderd Jaar Sociaal, 1891–1991: Teksten uit Honderd Jaar Sociale Bewegingen en Sociaal Denken in Nederland* (Amsterdam: SDU Uitgevers, 1998), 701–13.

<sup>12</sup> See James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 316–22.

<sup>13</sup> Patrimonium came into being because orthodox Reformed workers felt they could no longer be members of the religiously neutral but politically liberal *Algemeen Nederlansch Werklieden Verbond* (General Dutch Worker's Association) which in 1875 supported the government's initiative for mandatory state-run, nonreligious, public education. This would have jeopardized parental rights to bring up their children in the faith and was the issue that propelled Abraham Kuyper into Dutch politics. See Lex Heerema van Voss, Patrick Pasture, and Jan De Meyer, eds., *Between Cross and Class: Comparative History of Christian Labour in Europe 1840–2000* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 57–58. Patrimonium was not an association of laborers only; it fiercely opposed class warfare and its motto was "Rich and poor meet each other, the Lord created them both." See P. E. Werkman, "'Rijken en Armen Ontmoeten Elkander'? De Protestantse Organisaties van Werkgevers en Werknemers," in *Een Land Nog Niet in Kaart Gebracht: Aspecten van het Protestants-Christelijk Leven in Nederland in de Jaren 1880–1940*, ed. J. De Bruijn (Amsterdam: Passage, 1987), 114.



1876, and held its first congress on August 22, 1879, the same year that Abraham Kuyper established the first Dutch political party—the Anti-Revolutionary Party.<sup>14</sup> The initiative for the congress came from Patrimonium; the Anti-Revolutionary Party was invited along and convened the congress in Amsterdam.<sup>15</sup> During this same time, Roman Catholic workers groups also began organizing, though at a slower rate than the Protestants, setting the stage for Leo XIII’s influential encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on May 15, 1891.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, let me add a few words about the larger political context in the Netherlands.<sup>17</sup> After the period of French governance from 1795–1813—including the Batavian Republic (1795–1806), the Napoleonic Kingdom of the Netherlands (1806–1810), and French Imperial annexation (1810–1813)—a new United Kingdom of the Netherlands was established under King William I in 1814–1815.<sup>18</sup> Belgium won its independence in the Revolution of 1830–1831—an independence

---

<sup>14</sup> The best introduction to Kuyper the politician is to read his political rhetoric first hand. See Bratt, *Centennial Reader*, 205–322. On Kuyper’s political rhetoric as the key to his thought, see John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper’s American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> The prehistory of the Congress, the request of Patrimonium to the Central Committee of the ARP and the subsequent back and forth over four meetings, is provided in the *Proces-Verbaal*, 11–34. For a compact review of the sometimes difficult relationship between Patrimonium and the Anti-Revolutionary Party leading up to the 1891 Congress, see P. E. Werkman, “‘Rijken en Armen Ontmoeten Elkander,’”? 115. See also note 37 below.

<sup>16</sup> Dutch Roman Catholic worker’s groups had their start around 1888 in the border region of Enschede, a textile manufacturing area, when Chaplain Alphonse Ariëns responded to the formation of trade union *Vooruit* (Forward) by the Social Democrats. By 1895, Patrimonium was the largest workers group in the Netherlands with some ten thousand members. See van Voss, Pasture, and De Meyer, eds., *Between Cross and Class*, chaps. 3 and 4, esp. p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> The basic outlines of Dutch national and constitutional history are readily available via good encyclopedia articles. For good scholarly treatment, the following are recommended: A. J. Barnouw, *The Making of Modern Holland* (London: Bradford & Dickens, 1948); Peter Geyl, *History of the Low Countries: Episodes and Problems* (London: Macmillan, 1964); Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); G. J. Renier, *The Dutch Nation: An Historical Study* (London: Hazell, Watson & Viney, 1944); and Bernard H. M. Vlekke, *Evolution of the Dutch Nation* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1945).

<sup>18</sup> See Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780–1813* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

finally recognized by the Netherlands in 1839. Following the broader European revolutions of 1848,<sup>19</sup> a new, liberal, Dutch Constitution, drafted by Johan Rudolph Thorbecke (1798–1872), establishing a parliamentary democracy, was proclaimed on November 3, 1848.<sup>20</sup> In it, the power of the monarch was curtailed and made accountable to parliament and ministers of the crown, direct elections to parliament were introduced, and liberty of religion enshrined. Thorbecke’s vision for the Netherlands was to move beyond the “conservative” monarchist tradition of devotion to the House of Orange as the unifying principle of order in Dutch Society to a more classically “liberal” one emphasizing individual rights and liberties, extension of suffrage, limited government and free markets, and, for the most part, a belief in progress.<sup>21</sup> It is as a response to the perceived inadequacies of this liberal order of things—exemplified by the growing awareness of the human cost resulting from industrialization—that we must interpret the social movements of the late nineteenth century. Paralleling the Roman Catholic movement initiated by figures such as the German bishop of Mainz, Wilhelm von Ketteler (1811–1877),<sup>22</sup> the Dutch Calvinist revival headed by Abraham Kuyper also looked for a Christian alternative to both liberal individualism and socialism’s dependence on revolutionary class conflict. The overwhelming misery of the new industrial, urbanized world of the late nineteenth century cried out against the failures of the former; Christian sensibilities about the reality of universal sin, the legitimate order of appropriate divinely instituted social institutions, and the inevitable tyranny of rebellious human beings arrogating power unto

---

<sup>19</sup> See, inter alia, Charles Breunig, *The Age of Revolution and Reaction, 1789–1850*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1977); R. J. W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, eds., *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848–1849: From Reform to Reaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution [Europe] 1789–1848* (London: Wedenfeld and Nicolson, 1962); Peter Jones, *The 1848 Revolutions*, 2d ed. (London & New York: Longman, 1991); Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Recollections: The French Revolution of 1848* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> On Thorbecke, see C. H. E. De Wit, *Thorbecke en de Wording van de Nederlandse Natie* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> See Joris van Eijnatten, *God, Nederland en Oranje: Dutch Calvinism and the Search for the Social Centre* (Kampen: Kok, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> On von Ketteler and the early architects of Roman Catholic social thought in the nineteenth century, see Michael Novak, *Freedom with Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), chap. 4.

themselves apart from God, made Calvinist thinkers, along with their Roman Catholic compatriots, wary of all forms of socialism.

## Does the Bible Favor Socialism?

The preceding sketch of the large context in Dutch (and European) social history is important because, like *Rerum Novarum* and the Roman Catholic workers' movement, the Protestant (Calvinist) tradition of social reflection that began in the second half of the nineteenth century was a deliberate and self-conscious effort to provide an alternative to secular, liberal labor associations and political parties, and especially to all forms of socialism, including the various Christian socialist visions. Christian socialism was especially in view here because of the direct appeal to biblical themes used to promote its vision of the good social order: The kingdom of Jesus is a brotherhood of cooperation and love; the gospel is about helping the poor; in the current conflict of the classes between the rich and powerful on the one side and the poor and marginalized on the other, the church has historically usually taken the wrong side and must change its course; this means, concretely, that the church and Christians must side with and fully support the social democratic movements of our day (i.e., become socialists).<sup>23</sup>

The dean of American social gospel theologians, Walter Rauschenbusch, exemplifies this vision to perfection. What was Jesus' mission? "The fundamental purpose of Jesus was the establishment of the kingdom of God, which involved a thorough regeneration and reconstruction of social life."<sup>24</sup> There is little doubt about the form of the new, reconstituted society that Rauschenbusch envisions; it is characterized by "socializing property." What does this mean? "By 'socializing property' we mean, then, that it is made to serve the public good, either by the services its uses render to the public welfare, or by the income it brings to the public treasury."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Jesus intended socialism. That this is not an over-reading of Rauschenbusch is clear from his posthumously published

---

<sup>23</sup> These are the ubiquitous themes found in all the literature cited in note 6 above.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 143. Rauschenbusch at times seems to want to eat his cake and have it too. Earlier in the same volume he insists: "Jesus was not a social reformer of the modern type" but one who "had learned the greatest and deepest and rarest secret of all—how to live a religious life."

<sup>25</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 420.

work, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*.<sup>26</sup> This is likely an earlier work and Rauschenbusch may have softened his rhetoric in later writings,<sup>27</sup> but here he speaks of Christianity as “revolutionary” and claims that while “Plato dreamed of an ideal republic, Christ instituted it.” In addition: “The splendid principle of the French Revolution: ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity,’ contains the social principles of the church.”<sup>28</sup> In terms of concretizing its ideals, the Canadian social gospel tradition is more revealing than the American one because it served as the necessary fuel for the birth of the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation as a moderately successful party in Canadian provincial politics.<sup>29</sup>

## A Non-Socialist Vision

The documents translated below are strikingly different, particularly when contrasted with Christian socialist visions that appeal to the New Testament and the teaching and example of Jesus. Considering the essay prepared for the Congress (“Which Principles ...?”), perhaps the most striking difference is Bavinck’s serious address to the hermeneutic question. He does not move in a direct way from Jesus’ teaching about the “reign of God” to contemporary social analysis and policy recommendations. He resists such moves by restricting the New Testament message to a primarily religious or spiritual one and by directing us away from the New Testament to the Old as the source for key principles. He also engages in a sophisticated set of distinctions between “then” and “now,” between “principles” and “application” in which the doctrine of creation (and natural law) plays a significant role. Let us consider the key points in turn.

## The Soteriological Focus of the New Testament

Bavinck’s emphasis on the primacy of soteriological questions—defined as “the salvation of human souls”—is a direct challenge to social gospel concerns, then and now, and we must face it honestly for it will not sit well with many

---

<sup>26</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, ed. Max Stackhouse (Nashville & New York: Abingdon, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> See Max Stackhouse’s Introduction to *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, 172–73.

<sup>29</sup> By contrast, American political culture has, until recently, been quite inhospitable to socialist policies. See Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York and London: Norton, 1996), esp. chap. 3.

contemporary readers. It is, they might say, another example of lamentable “spiritualizing.” Here is how Bavinck summarizes his viewpoint:

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. 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.<sup>30</sup> (Matt. 6:33; 16:26)

Although a restored relationship to God through Jesus Christ is the supreme value (the “pearl of great price”), Bavinck does insist that this new life also transforms all our other relationships: “From the principle of reconciliation with God, all other human relationships are given a new ordering and led back to their original state.” Here we are given the clue that unlocks Bavinck’s vision; “original state” points back to the creation being rightly ordered; this is its *law-full* content. In the New Testament dispensation, “the law is not simply abrogated and set aside, but is fulfilled in Christ and in this way reaches its own end.” Concretely, this means that “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.” We do get from the New Testament a *modus operandi* for how God’s law, renewed and restored in Christ, changes the world: “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.” In other words, renewed people change the world. In this regard, it also needs to be noted that Bavinck insists that, important as this world and its basic bodily needs are, they pale in significance to the profound question of our eternal destiny. Our “heavenly” calling supersedes our earthly one; we have a double calling. The heavenly and earthly vocations are not at odds with each other: True fulfillment of our earthly vocation is exactly what prepares us for eternal salvation, and putting our minds on those things that are above equips us for genuine satisfaction of our earthly desires. This is, indeed, strikingly different from the social gospel vision; it is not a reckless audacity of hope but *realistic* in the full and best sense of the word because it asks us to

---

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck makes the same point in an essay, “Christian Principles and Social Relationships,” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 119–44.

consider the limits of our social dreaming imposed by the “hard wiring” of our human nature and the “laws” of created reality.

## **Inequality Is *Not* the Social Problem**

If critics will accuse Bavinck of spiritualization in the previous point, they will launch the charge of conservatism in this second one. Bavinck insists that differences and inequalities among people are not inherently sinful but a given of creation and its grounding in the will of the Creator. Bavinck appeals to the duality of male and female as the foundation of all our other social dualities—parents and children, masters and slaves, rulers and subjects—and insists that this created structural reality is good. He then adds:

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.

The relevance of this point is obvious in an age where simple disparity of wealth is judged to be morally offensive, even by some Christians. Often forgotten here is that *envy* is one of the cardinal sins; the church, as Lord Peter Bauer once deftly pointed out, in spite of its good intentions to help poor people, has often “legitimized envy.”<sup>31</sup> Also, not to be overlooked is Bavinck’s reminder of the ‘leveling’ effect of both spiritual equality and Israel’s code of law concerning the jubilee as well as the laws about gleaning.

## **The Problem Is Sin**

Sin—“that is, transgression of God’s law”—not only ruptured human fellowship with God but also disturbed and devastated all human relationships. We and our world are under divine judgment that upsets the proper balance of the various dimensions of our life—“head and heart, understanding and will, soul and body, spirit and flesh”—and puts them into irreconcilable conflict and perpetual war with each other. It also results in our internecine human warfare. The result is not pretty; we become wolves:

---

<sup>31</sup> P. T. Bauer, “Ecclesiastical Economics: Envy Legitimized,” in *Is Capitalism Christian?* ed. Franky Schaeffer (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1985), 327–44.

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.

This is the note that is usually missing in Christian socialist visions. Rather, it is more correct to say that sin is reduced to social and economic sin as this is understood by the promoters of class envy; rich people and “capitalists” are sinners—they are oppressors; the poor are not sinners but those who are sinned against. Note, too, that sin here is not so much against God as it is against people serving as proxy for God (the “god” that is present in everyone). Bavinck’s point: Yes, the world is messed up; it is under divine judgment; our sin is the root cause, *and*, “We *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Bracketing out some from the universal condition of sin and isolating a few to serve as the scapegoats for our human ills is a lie and a very destructive one. The Christian doctrine of the atonement—“It is better that one man die for the sin of the nation than that the whole nation perish”—forbids all human scapegoating;<sup>32</sup> Jesus Christ has done it for us and on our behalf. Bavinck does not make this point, but it follows very naturally from this line of thought: Marxist-inspired analyses of our socioeconomic condition that divide the world up into oppressors and oppressed, victimizers and victims, really offer up alternative sacrificial lambs as atonement for the world’s sins; this idolatry is particularly offensive when it comes in pseudo-Christian versions.

### **God’s Common Grace Restrains Sin**

A world in sin and under divine wrath is still not a hellish existence. God’s common grace providentially links sin to its consequences as punishment, allows humanity to retain “a few weak remnants of his image and likeness to remain [after the Fall] in reason and conscience, a seed of religion, and a moral sense of good and evil, and establishes continuing “structures of family, society and

---

<sup>32</sup> The unmasking of scapegoating is one of the key themes in the writing of the brilliantly provocative thinker and social philosopher, René Girard (1923–). A commentator describes his great discovery thus: “the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, especially the New Testament Gospels, are singular. They represent a revelatory moment away from scapegoating.” See “A Note to the Reader,” in *The Girard Reader*, by René Girard, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996), viii.

state among human beings.” This conviction directs us to gratitude rather than envy; even if we don’t have as much as someone else, what is that to us; none of us are deserving; we didn’t make ourselves or “earn” what we have; it is all grace, a gift.

## **Common Grace Is Not Enough**

The pagan nations may “wander along their own path” but Israel is given, by special revelation, God’s law that regulated every aspect of Israel’s existence and life. Here, property is protected and each family’s inheritance preserved; both pauperization and excessive accumulation of property, land, and wealth are structurally opposed by the law of jubilee and the right of redemption. Nonetheless, differences between rich and poor were not eradicated; bondage or serfdom was a lawful institution. The ministry of mercy to the poor—the laws of gleaning and access to the food from sacrifices and tithes—was important as an integral part of Israel’s call to be holy before the Lord. Granting that differences are not themselves evil, we do regard pauperization and other forms of human misery as evils to which we must respond. Thus, recognizing that we are dependent, for our daily bread, but above all for the guidance to live our lives well, we work in obedience and are grateful for our blessings. As grateful people, those who have been shown mercy, we make mercy and compassion an integral part of our own discipleship.

## **Summary**

Bavinck’s essay breathes an altogether different spirit and content than the various versions of Christian socialism of his day. Bavinck does not build his “Christian sociology” from the New Testament teaching and example of Jesus but from the concrete law of Old Testament Israel that he views as a clarification of natural law or creation ordinances. Furthermore, he is convinced that inequality is a reality of our created condition and not in itself a grievous sin against heaven. Redemption in Christ does not set aside the creaturely and natural; it renews and restores it. From our restored fellowship with God in Christ and the spiritual equality it generates comes a grace and power that mitigates differences and distinctions, restores balance, and gives us caring and compassionate hearts that changes the world. “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.... Having received mercy from Christ, his followers are expected in turn to show mercy to others.”



## The Reception of Bavinck’s Essay

The narrative text of Bavinck’s report to the congress was followed by seven propositions or theses (*Stellingen*). The report was discussed at the second plenary session of the congress with a slightly emended set of propositions—eight in number.<sup>33</sup> My translation of Bavinck’s theses is provided in parallel with the propositions that were actually adopted by congress delegates. In the official report of the session the revised propositions are listed followed by Bavinck’s own commentary, which was introduced as follows: “The reporter, Dr. H. Bavinck, is given the floor to clarify these propositions and in substance says the following....”<sup>34</sup> I shall first highlight the differences between Bavinck’s original theses and those adopted by the congress, illuminating them with Bavinck’s own commentary as reported in the *Proces-Verbaal*.

### First Difference: A New Framework

The Congress’s number #1 is brand new, a preliminary statement that serves as a prologue and sets the frame for the whole set.<sup>35</sup>

**Congress #1:** 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.

At the beginning of his remarks, Bavinck comments briefly on specific words in the title of the report, “According to Holy Scripture, what are the general principles [provided for] a solution to the social question and what pointers towards this solution lie in the concrete application given to this principles for Israel by Mosaic Law?” We speak, he says of “general principles,” namely those “that can serve as the origin and root of other ideas and as a guiding principle for our actions.” We always need such principles, but especially “when we look for solutions to the numerous and very complex problems in the social question.” In addition, we must search for these principles in Holy Scripture because it alone sheds light on the crucial questions about the origin and destiny of human beings.” What we learn from Scripture is that “we are not our own creators and

---

<sup>33</sup> See *Proces-Verbaal*, 80–84.

<sup>34</sup> *Proces-Verbaal*, 81.

<sup>35</sup> The bold-face numbers that follow in this section refer to the numbered propositions finally adopted by the congress; see John Bolt’s translation of Herman Bavinck that follows.

society is not a human construct; both come from God and are therefore bound to his will and law.”

In our own context, where many do think of all social order as self-creation and arbitrary (we invent “genders” and dismiss “two sexes”; think of marriage as an “arrangement” that is alterable, and so forth), this reminder remains timely. In the best of the Christian (Roman Catholic and Calvinist) tradition, proposition #1 is a clear blend of scriptural revelation and natural law.

## **Second Difference: Avoiding Fatalism?**

Bavinck’s first thesis was not significantly altered by the congress; the concessive introductory addition—“Even the existence of inequalities”—may, however, signal an awareness among the delegates that this claim might meet with resistance: It ran the risk of sounding fatalistic. In his comments, Bavinck accents the threefold perspective required to view humanity aright: in the state of original righteousness, in sin, and in grace. This is essential because many forget that differences in sex, age, character, temperament, gifts, and so forth are not a consequence of sin but a given of creation.

## **Third Difference: Emphasizing Sin**

The changes made to Bavinck’s #2 are significant because they highlight and accent the importance of sin and its consequences. The congress enlarged the narrative frame for our thinking about sin’s importance. From Bavinck’s straightforward statement, “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,” the congress directed attention to social ills and pointed to the principle that they are rooted in sin, specifically the setting aside of God’s ordinances.

**Congress #3:** 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.

The ongoing relevance of this—revised—proposition is to remind us that sin is universal—there are no exceptions and no scapegoating is warranted—and that there is a law-dimension involved that transcends our human creation and construction. We cannot blame social ills on one kind of social construct, economic order, or civil polity—such as capitalism—nor delude ourselves into

believing that if we “change the system” all social ills will vanish. The problem is not certain people or specific structures; it is sin and sin messes up all of us.

### **Distinctly Christian Reflection and Action: No Common Cause**

The statement on redemption (Bavinck #3; Congress #4) was left unaltered. Although the same is true of Bavinck’s #4 (Congress #5), this one deserves a brief comment. It is noteworthy that there is no proposition on common grace, the grace whereby God restrains evil and its consequences from full flower. In other words, there was apparently no felt need to make common cause on the basis of natural law with others—socialists, for example—who observed the same misery and showed similar concern and compassion for the growing numbers of the working poor. This is quite different from much contemporary ecclesiastical social reflection that simply begins with perceived social ills and looks for others who also see the problem and then joins cause with them in a joint program of liberation. Bavinck and the congress insisted on thinking 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. What is also significant here is that the scriptural appeal is primarily to the Old Testament and not the New. It is, in other words, from the concrete life of Israel as a people, and not from the soteriological core of the New Testament, that we must derive general principles to guide us in our response to the social question. Bavinck directly answers the objection that the Old Testament is no longer relevant because it comes from an ancient and completely different world. He grants that the “form of the Old Covenant has been superseded and is antiquated, but the general ideas to which it gives embodiment continue to have relevance for us.” It is in this context that we must understand the proposition on justice (Bavinck #4; Congress #5).

**Congress #5:** According to Scripture the important general principle for a solution to the social question is that there be justice (*gerechtigheid*). 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.

In his commentary, Bavinck observes 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 defi-

inition of justice that is provided is striking: "... 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.

#### Fourth Difference: Revealing Tensions?

**Congress #7:** Civil authority, as God's servant called to maintain justice 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.

There are two noteworthy matters in this proposition. First, the congress changed Bavinck's *principles* (*beginselen*) to *ordinances* (*ordinantiën*). We can only surmise the reasons for this. At a common sense level, *principles* are the more general term; *ordinances* are more specific. This explanation fits with the change of verbs from *test* to *deduce from* (see later discussion). There is also another interesting possibility. The term *beginselen* was a Kuyperian code word and Bavinck's use of it indicates his close ties to Kuyper.<sup>36</sup> However, while the idea for the Social Congress came from the sizeable workers alliance, Patrimonium, who eventually invited the Central Committee of the Anti-Revolutionary Party to join them in a partnership, and Kuyper was given the honor of the opening address, Patrimonium did have its issues with Kuyper and the ARP. At its annual gathering on November 11, 1890, a full year before the congress, its chairman Klaas Kater opened the gathering with a fiery speech that implicated the ARP:

---

<sup>36</sup> The term *beginselen* became the occasion for a conflict at the Free University of Amsterdam in the 1890s between Kuyper and his theological colleague F. L. Rutgers on the one side, and the jurist Alexander de Savornin Lohman (1837–1924) on the other. Kuyper tried (and finally succeeded) in diminishing Lohman's role in the Anti-Revolutionary Party and thus silencing his opposition to Kuyper on political matters (the aristocratic Lohman opposed Kuyper's proposals on franchise extension, for example) by charging Lohman with a failure to conduct his law lectures in full accord with Reformed principles (*gereformeerde beginselen*). Lohman argued that his commitment to biblical principles was substantially the same as Kuyper's but a commission, headed by Bavinck, ended up siding with Kuyper. Lohman resigned from his post as Professor of Jurisprudence at the Free University in 1895. See further R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966), 91–107; and J. De Bruijn, *Abraham Kuyper: Leven en Werk in Beeld* (Amsterdam: Passage, 1987), 201–6.

Parliamentary reform is coming along far too slowly: The ARP is not really speaking for us but regards us as mere hewers of wood and carriers of water. The “greatest Lords” (*grootste heeren*) talk a good anti-revolutionary talk but act as conservatively as possible. They have no real practical knowledge about the social realities and while genuine anti-revolutionaries do not believe that plutocrats and those who hold the titles of nobility really know the needs of our slums and poor areas, and indicate a willingness to overcome this ignorance, the “regular folk” (*kleine luyden*; lit. little folk) never appear on the list of ARP candidates [for election to parliament]. The first and foremost place is always given to men of the higher classes.

Kater concluded with a plea for action: “There has been enough talking.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the *boeren arbeiders* (farm laborers) were having their own say in this subtle repudiation of Kuyper’s favorite term.

### **Fifth Difference: Scripture and Natural Law**

The second matter of significance 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.” Here a more active role is proposed for civil authority’s itself exploring and investigating Scripture. Although either one raises problems about the state’s task in relation to Scripture, I wonder here if Bavinck’s more circumspect formulation is not preferable. Bavinck insists, we must recall, that “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.” However, the “eternal principles” under consideration are givens of *creation*. Furthermore, in his report, Bavinck insists that we must consider humanity from a threefold perspective: as created, as fallen, and as redeemed. 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 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.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> A. J. van Dijk, “Het Eerste Christelijk Sociaal Congres: Beter laat dan nooit,” *Stichting Christelijke Sociaal Congress* 2, no. 3 (1991).

<sup>38</sup> *Proces-Verbaal*, 83–84.

When we combine these two things with Bavinck's insistence that the grace of redemption does not annihilate or set aside nature but renews and restores it to its *law-full* integrity, we must conclude that Scripture as a testing rod must be seen in tandem with natural law and the traditions of human experience. Scripture has the priority here; when in doubt, the Bible is to be trusted above what we might think reason or experience shows us. However, in this, seen now from the position of civil authority, we must remember, the language of "testing" with the aid of Scripture, though still problematic, seems more appropriate than "deducing from" Scripture. Without hypostasizing the state and thinking of civil authority as an entity of its own, let us think of Christian magistrates (Christian statesmen) that is, of *persons* in offices of civil authority. Concretely put, then, a Christian statesman ought to consider the scriptural understanding of human nature and human destiny when weighing a particular policy decision. Should Christians favor an increase in funding for state-mandated and controlled public education, *or* encourage local initiatives such as parish-based schools or home schooling? For an American politician, let us say, *testing* this with a biblical anthropology (along with serious attention to the Tenth Amendment) is appropriate. Trying to *deduce* a principle from Scripture to cover it, I am convinced, is not.<sup>39</sup>

## The Debated Heart of the Matter

With Bavinck's fifth thesis (Congress #6), we come to the defining and most debated proposition.

**Congress #6:** 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;

---

<sup>39</sup> While Bavinck's formulation would not protect him from secularists who see theocrats under every bed, the alternative formulation encourages the charge. Bavinck's treatment of the issue is also a needed corrective to the capitulation of so many Christians in the public square when they utter the facile mantra: "I am personally opposed, but..." Remarkably, secularists never utter such foolishness; they *do* wish to impose their religious commitments and values on others. Christians need to insist that our public policy recommendations are *in accord with but not restrictive based on biblical principles*. Our laws against murder are in accord with the sixth commandment; this does imply an imminent theocratic *coup d'état*.

- 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.

With all the built-up concern and passion about the social question that was overwhelmingly present in the second half of the nineteenth century, a passion that had given rise to the congress, this proposition in its several parts is remarkable for its nuance and balance. Social concerns are crucial; being a follower of Jesus Christ is incompatible with indifference to the misery and pain of poverty, destitution, disease, and hunger. Lazarus is at our door and the fires of hell await those who dismiss him while they party.

And yet, and yet.... We image bearers of God, forgiven and renewed by the blood of the lamb, have a *dual calling*; it is our eternal destiny that propels us to earthly love and obedience, to restructuring our life's relationships in accord with the cross, to self-denying, self-sacrificing love for our neighbor in need. Bavinck refuses to leave this as an abstract principle; three controversial imperatives follow from our cruciform life: preventing pauperization and accumulation of capital and landed property on the one side, and on the positive side, ensuring as much as possible a living wage for every person.

## A "Living Wage"?

It is hardly surprising that this article generated perhaps the most lively discussion at the congress. One delegate requested further elaboration on what constituted a living wage, especially because this was a favorite slogan of socialists.<sup>40</sup> In particular, the expression *menschwaardig bestaan* (existence worthy of one's humanity) is ambiguous; for one thing it is not the same as a *basic human need* (e.g., food, drink, clothing, shelter); for another, *worthy* suggests a deserving that none of us enjoys as sinners. In his response, Bavinck acknowledges that the origin of the notion is indeed from the socialist camp. "In spite of this, the expression is still *good*" (original emphasis). He is not satisfied with merely the basics of survival. "The Fall did not turn the human person into an *animal*;

---

<sup>40</sup> *Proces-Verbaal*, 364; the quotations that follow are from pp. 359–71. The question, it is worth noting, came from W. Geesink (1854–1929), professor of ethics at the Free University of Amsterdam from 1890–1926.

he retains a measure of humanity and this gives him a right to an existence that is commensurate and worthy of his humanity.” Bavinck refuses, however, to enter into a debate about the details. Does it consist of a basic piece of rye bread (*roggebrood*)? Or, does it include steak and a glass of wine? Bavinck notes that different classes of people have different needs. “A king on his throne who has only rye bread available to him, can be said to have a ‘less than worthy existence’ no less than a poor laborer who gorges himself with steak and wine.” (In the charming fashion of proceedings during this era, an editorial insertion indicates that this comment was received with laughter and applause.) It is, he adds, terribly difficult to draw a precise line; there is no useful formula, but we are capable intuitively of sensing what is humanly unworthy. As an example, he mentions factory workers who never receive a day of rest but are treated as extensions of the machines they operate. He concludes: “All we can say is that every person, including the laborer, has a right to an existence before God, receiving sufficient food and drink to remain a full human being.”

### **Limiting State Power: Mandated Wages?**

The desire to stick with broad principles and not to indulge in too much specific policy prescription is also reflected in Bavinck’s response to two specific proposals that came from members of Patrimonium. The first had to do with state-mandated just wages for all vocations and jobs according to their quality so that a workman’s wages would be sufficient to meet the needs of a family with four to five children. Apparently, the proposal had been called a precursor to state communism and its proponent asked Bavinck what he thought about the proposal and the accusation. Bavinck responded that such a specific question was not really the business of the hour but he would be willing to indicate his twofold objection: (1) establishing a just wage on the basis of quality criteria is simply impossible. Take the realm of science, for example. Here is one person who with the least effort produces the purest and clearest thought; on the other side a dullard who labors and labors for a whole week and produces barely a single thought—how does the state establish a proper scale for a just wage? (laughter) (2) Should such a scale be created—which is impossible—the proposal adds a condition that is impossible to meet: This wage must be pegged at a standard sufficient to meet the needs of a family with four to five children. Now we face a double impossibility because we have two irreconcilable criteria. A scale based on the quality of the work is more or less objective; the needs of a family are subjective—these two cancel each other out.



## Progressive Income Tax?

The other specific proposal arose in discussion about the reference in Congress #6 c. to the cross, implying that believers are called “to oppose the accumulation of capital and landed property.” Granted that the idea comes from socialists, one questioner wanted to know, does progressive income taxation not fit the bill of opposing the accumulation of capital and landed property? Bavinck once again rules the question out of order but gives his answer: No! The movement to establish a progressive income tax as a way of preventing the accumulation of capital and letting the state—which can never be satisfied—gobble up all private wealth and property, can never meet with our approval and must be opposed.

## Nationalizing Property and Land?

Bavinck makes the same point in response to a specific question about the nationalization of property, particularly land. His answer is short: I am opposed to nationalizing land because it precisely represents that greatest accumulation of property and capital by the state and conflicts directly with the right of ownership and private property.

## “The Poor Ye Always Have with You”

The last proposition (Bavinck #7; Congress #8) is a timely reminder that perfect justice will always elude us and that there will always be a critical need for the ministry of mercy.

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].

Two brief comments are in order. First, the congress’s formulation—adding *thanks to the working of sin and error*—seems to me preferable to Bavinck’s. It is important to avoid leaving the impression that there is some metaphysical inevitability to the reality of poverty and misery. Sin can be overcome; never perfectly or completely but in definite and measurable ways. The formulation does not locate the sin and error; by leaving it general (and universal) it implicitly repudiates efforts to pin blame on a specific group or class (e.g., the rich, capitalists) or to exonerate others (victims). Sin is here and will remain here until the Consummation—we are all sinners, we all need mercy, and we all must show mercy.

Second, we ought not to look to justice (or social justice) as the first response answer to the pain and misery we see around us. Our first response should be compassion and mercy. The current habit of disparaging mercy as mere charity diminishes our humanity and risks setting up standards of perfection that will destroy the incredible good that Christians do in the world. Rescuing thirty-three Chilean miners, even at the estimated cost of more than one million dollars per man, is far more precious than all the posturing about the evils of globalization at ecumenical gatherings. In the brief moments that constitute our life span on this earth we need to call a halt to time-wasting posturing in the name of some abstract notion of social justice. The lives of real people need to be saved.

## Concluding Wrap-up

I want to add a few additional observations about the report and propositions that follow—observations that come from the discussions and questions at the congress.<sup>41</sup> Socialism was in the air and served as a motivator for constructive engagement as well as occasion for fear. Several speakers prefaced their remarks by following Bavinck's lead and noted that "though this idea was first mentioned by socialists ... it is still worth thinking about." We have already taken note of some of these in the previous section, but there are a few more that deserve attention. The very first questioner wondered if the references to "differences," which then morph into "inequalities," does not open us up to further criticism from socialists who are committed to "liberty, equality, and fraternity" (though he grants that a French wit translated this quite fairly into "infantry, artillery, and cavalry"). Are the propositions that insist differences are a creation reality and not sinful in themselves not contradicted by the one that calls us to oppose accumulation of capital and property? Not at all. In fact, Bavinck claims that even apart from the Fall, there would have been people who are richer and those who are poorer. Not poor, in the sense that we think about it today, but *relatively poorer*. In Bavinck's words, "I most emphatically oppose this egalitarian impulse of the socialists; our only obligation is to see that these differences do not degenerate into clashes and conflicts." Demagogues turn differences into warfare and this is as much an issue today as it was then. As Thomas Sowell has pointed out, in a recent reflection on the hostilities among second and third generation children of French immigrants: "Here again, the media and the intelligentsia in France, as in the United States, tend to turn differences in achievement—'gaps,'

---

<sup>41</sup> *Proces-Verbaal*, 359–71.

‘disparities’—into social injustices rather than reflections of differences in the things that create achievement.”<sup>42</sup>

If we are able to get beyond our initial surprise at what we consider to be Bavinck’s antiquated and conservative propositions, we might discover that the anti-revolutionary spirit that fuels them is still a valuable resource for our own reflection on our social question.

My final point has great currency for contemporary discussion about social matters. I do not doubt that the most difficult passages in Bavinck’s report and in the propositions have to do with the language of God’s will with respect to poverty. Is it God’s will that there are inequalities? When this is combined with a definition of justice that “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,” the natural objection arises that we are being called to social quietism and conservatism. The objection is understandable and as old as discussions about social matters. In addition to the nervousness already noted about simply using *differences* synonymously with *inequalities*, further objections were raised about the language of God’s will in Bavinck’s first proposition. Another wanted to attribute inequalities to the fallen condition of humanity but not to its original state or to the consummated age. One sharp reader even pointed to what he thought was a contradiction between that proposition and the later call to oppose the accumulation of capital and property. In addition, if it is God’s will that there be poor among us, are we not going against God’s will when we try to alleviate poverty? In response, Bavinck, with some hint of impatience, pointed out that to say that God wills inequality refers to his *providential* governance but in no sense can be considered a divine *command* to us. This would be absurd because it implies that if there were no poor among us we would have to go out of our way to create some.

I trust that the preceding is sufficient orientation to the translation that follows. Bavinck’s report is clearly dated; it is a child of its own time, and we would not do it or him justice by trying to repriminate it with straightforward contemporary application. Yet, I am also convinced that wrestling with it brings its own rewards. The insistence upon our dual citizenship and calling, the anti-revolutionary and anti-utopian direction, and the call to show mercy, all remain as valuable today as they were in the last decade of the nineteenth century. At a time when evangelicals and Roman Catholics continue to flirt with various forms of socialism—now often inaptly, even ineptly, called social justice—Bavinck’s report and the work of the congress provides a thoughtful cautionary note.

---

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Sowell, *Dismantling America* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 121.