

The Imitation of God: A Comparison of Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to compare and contrast the differences and similarities between Herman Bavinck's views and those presented in Psalm 1, particularly focusing on the concept of imitating God as it relates to the image of God, the imitation of Christ/God, and its implications for life in this world. The method used is a literature study presented with a qualitative-comparative approach. It can be concluded that Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1 both affirm that the image and imitation of God are essential to ethical transformation and spiritual flourishing. However, they approach the subject from different theological foundations and modes of application. Bavinck, through a Christocentric and Reformed lens, emphasizes that the image of God, though damaged by sin, is restored in union with Christ, leading to a life of obedience, self-denial, and virtue. Psalm 1, on the other hand, presents imitation through Torah meditation, fostering a righteous and fruitful life marked by justice and covenantal faithfulness. While Bavinck focuses on Christ as the model for restoration, Psalm 1 highlights Scripture's formative power. Both agree, however, that true imitation of God brings inward renewal and outward transformation shaped by divine guidance.

Keywords: Herman Bavinck, Psalm 1, Imitation of God, Union with God



Introduction

The theological principle of *imitatio Dei*, or the imitation of God, represents a core imperative within the Christian faith, urging believers to align their lives with the character and actions of their Creator. This concept, explored across various theological traditions and scriptural texts, calls for a transformative journey that reflects the divine nature in human existence.¹ Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), a highly influential Dutch Reformed theologian, offered a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of *imitatio Dei* within his extensive body of work, particularly in his *Reformed Ethics* and the multi-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*.² Simultaneously, the Book of Psalms, a collection of inspired prayers, hymns, and wisdom literature in the Old Testament, frequently resonates with the theme of divine imitation, presenting it through a lens of devotion, poetry, and practical living.³ This paper aims to look at how Herman Bavinck's ideas about imitating God compare to the way this idea is shown in Psalm 1. By looking at Bavinck's main ideas and the moral and spiritual lessons from Psalm 1, this study seeks to show how this important idea is expressed in different but possibly compatible ways within the Reformed tradition.

From the overall discussion, it can be concluded that Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1 both present the image and imitation of God as central to ethical transformation and spiritual flourishing. However, they differ in theological foundations and modes of application. Bavinck, based on Reformed and Christ-centered beliefs, views the image of God as damaged by sin but made whole again through a connection with Christ, allowing believers to show God's qualities while still being human. For Bavinck, imitation flows from mystical communion with Christ. It is expressed through self-denial, obedience, and the cultivation of Christian virtues throughout one's life, affirming the principle that grace restores nature. In contrast, Psalm 1 portrays imitation through Torah-centered ethical living, where meditation on God's instruction leads to a righteous, fruitful life that mirrors Eden and brings communal renewal. The Psalmist's vision emphasizes liturgical and royal responsibility, with ethical worship fostering justice, compassion, and covenantal fidelity. While Bavinck emphasizes Christ as the definitive model for restoring the divine image, Psalm 1 highlights the formative power of Scripture in shaping lives aligned with God's justice and presence. Despite these theological and methodological differences, both affirm that imitating God entails inward renewal empowered by divine guidance, resulting in lives that reflect God's character and contribute to the transformation of the world.

Literature Review

Several books and articles discuss Herman Bavinck's views on the imitation of God, but no one has compared Bavinck's opinions with the concept of imitation of God from Psalm 1. Joustra discusses how Herman Bavinck distinctively applies the imitation of Christ as

1 Hak Joon Lee, *Christian Ethics: A New Covenant Model* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 183.

2 Jessica Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer: Law and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*," *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 312, <https://sites.gcu.edu/jbts/files/2024/05/JBTS-6.2-Article-5-e683e0160bfc73be.pdf>.

3 Eryl W. Davies, "The Bible in Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. Judith M. Lieu and J. W. Rogerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 740.

central to Christian ethical life in his exposition of the first commandment⁴ and also how Bavinck presents Jesus not as a new lawgiver but as a restorer of the original intent of the law, showing that Christ matters in the Christian life both as Savior and ethical example.⁵ Moon discusses Bavinck's concept that the ultimate good of humanity consists of ongoing personality formation and law fulfilment through the Imitation of Christ and its completion upon the coming of the Kingdom.⁶ Silva argues that Herman Bavinck offers a distinctive contribution to Reformed ethics by grounding the imitation of Christ in the believer's mystical union with Him, expanding beyond Calvin's focus on cross-bearing and self-denial.⁷ From the perspective of the Psalms, Wenham directly discusses the concept of imitating God as a principle underlying the Psalms.⁸ James discusses *imitatio Dei* as an ethical model in the Psalter,⁹ and Lim discusses how the individual lament psalms in Psalms 1–41 can be theologically interpreted as Torah for social ethics by bridging devotional-theological and sociological approaches.¹⁰ Therefore, this paper will compare the views between Bavinck and Psalm 1 to discuss the question: What are the differences and similarities between Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1 regarding the concept of imitation of God in the aspects of image of God, imitation of Christ/God, and its implications in life in this world?

Research Method

The method used is a literature study presented with a qualitative-comparative approach¹¹, which compares various journals, books, and commentaries related to the topic of this paper and describes the links and conclusions that can be drawn. This paper will first discuss Bavinck's view on the image of God. After that, this paper will discuss the view of Psalm 1 and make a comparison between the two. The discussion will be done with the following outline:

Discussions

Herman Bavinck

Background

Herman Bavinck's concept of *imitatio Dei* is closely tied to his understanding of the image of God in humans and the imitation of Christ. According to Bavinck, the whole human person is created in the image of the triune God, encompassing all aspects of human nature, including the soul, body, faculties, and virtues.¹² This comprehensive view of the

4 Jessica Joustra, "Imitating Christ: Bavinck's Application of an Ethical Norm in the First Commandment," *Perichoresis* 22, no. 1 (2024): 21, <https://doi.org/10.2478/perc-2024-0002>.

5 Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 329-330.

6 David Moon, "Reforming Virtue: Bavinck's Method of Engaging with Virtue Ethics from a Reformed Perspective" (master's thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), 59, <https://repository.sbts.edu/handle/10392/6967>.

7 Silva, "Union with Christ and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's Ethics," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 13, no. 1 (2021): 94.

8 Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 121. In Chapter 5, "The Ethics of the Psalms," Wenham states that righteous people should imitate God, who is often referred to as righteous.

9 Joshua T. James, "Research Trends in the Study of the Ethics of the Psalms," *Currents in Biblical Research* 18, no. 2 (2020): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993x18801286>.

10 Bo H. Lim, "Reading the Psalms as Torah for Social Ethics," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 15, no. 2 (2021): 203, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jtheointe.15.2.0203>.

11 Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in The Study of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 109.

12 Cory Willson, "Simul Humanitas et Peccator: The Talmud's Contribution to a Dutch Reformed Notion of the *Imago Dei*," in *The Kuyper Center*

imago Dei forms the foundation for Bavinck's understanding of *imitatio Dei*. In addition, for Bavinck, the imitation of Christ is central to his ethical framework. Bolt observes that the heart of Bavinck's understanding of the Christian life, as presented in volume 1, is found in chapter 9, with its emphasis on union with Christ and the imitation of Christ.¹³

Not only that, for Bavinck, *imitatio Dei* is not merely an abstract theological concept, but a dynamic and transformative principle that shapes the believer's daily conduct, fostering spiritual growth towards Christlikeness and directing their entire life towards the glory of God while actively engaging with the world (cultural engagement).¹⁴ Therefore, the discussion in this section will be divided into three parts: Bavinck's view of the image of God, the imitation of Christ, and its implications for the lives of Christians in the world.

Image of God According to Herman Bavinck

Bavinck argued that this inherent image-bearing capacity is the foundational basis for the ethical call to imitate God, distinguishing humanity as uniquely capable of reflecting the divine. While sin has significantly marred this original image, Bavinck emphasized that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is fundamentally aimed at its renewal and restoration, providing both the perfect model and the empowering means for believers to increasingly reflect their Creator.¹⁵ For Bavinck, a comprehensive imitation of God involves living in accordance with this renewed image across all facets of human life.¹⁶

Related to that, a crucial aspect of Bavinck's theology is the distinction between God's communicable and incommunicable attributes. Incommunicable attributes, such as God's independence, immutability, and infinity, are unique to His divine being and underscore His transcendence.¹⁷ Communicable attributes, including love, goodness, justice, and wisdom, are those that God shares analogously with humanity, forming the basis for the possibility and practice of *imitatio Dei*.¹⁸ This distinction is vital in Bavinck's thought, as it clarifies that human imitation of God occurs within the limitations of created nature and does not imply an aspiration to divine essence.¹⁹ The primary focus of *imitatio Dei* for Bavinck lies in the believer's striving to embody God's moral attributes while acknowledging the infinite qualitative difference between the Creator and His creatures in their possession of these perfections.

For Bavinck, humanity's capacity to bear God's image forms the basis for the ethical call to imitate Him, even though sin has marred this image. Through Christ's redemptive work, believers are renewed and empowered to reflect God's character in all areas of life increasingly. Bavinck points out the difference between God's qualities that people can share, like love and justice, and those that only God has, like being unchanging and

Review, Volume 2: Revelation and Common Grace, ed. John Bowlin (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011), 264.

13 Moon, *Reforming Virtue*, 39; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, Vol. 2: The Duties of the Christian Life*, ed. John Bolt (Baker Academic, 2021), ix.

14 Craig G. Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition: A Systematic Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 317.

15 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 531–33.

16 Joustra, "Imitating Christ," 25.

17 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 148–49.

18 Bavinck, 178–82.

19 Joustra, "Imitating Christ," 21.

limitless, stressing that humans should only try to imitate what is possible for them.

Imitation of Christ According to Herman Bavinck

Also central to Bavinck's concept of the image of God is the person and work of Jesus Christ, whom he considered the perfect and ultimate image of God, providing the concrete and definitive example for believers to follow.²⁰ Bavinck argued that the imitation of Christ, central to Christian spirituality, involves three key elements: acknowledging Christ as Redeemer and Mediator, entering into communion with Christ (particularly in suffering), and shaping one's life according to Christ. This imitation is not physical or substantial, but ethical, focusing on developing the same moral qualities as Christ, who is the perfect image of God.²¹ Van Keulen summarizes: recognition of Christ as mediator is necessary for imitation, and this imitation involves both inner transformation and external conformity to Christ.²²

Bavinck also argued that the imitation of Christ fundamentally shapes the Christian life, providing a clear and accessible pattern for living following God's will and character. As both fully God and fully human, Christ perfectly embodied the divine nature in His earthly existence. Consequently, Bavinck posited that looking to and imitating Christ is the most direct and effective means by which believers can imitate God. This imitation, however, does not necessitate a literal mimicry of every action of Jesus but rather an emulation of the virtues He exemplified through His perfect obedience to God's law, particularly the Ten Commandments.²³

How, then, should the imitation of Christ be lived out? Bavinck outlines several key elements that shape a Reformed understanding of imitating Christ: Imitation initially involved literally following Jesus as he traveled throughout Palestine; thus, imitation is fundamentally a spiritual relationship with Christ; because this imitation is rooted in spiritual fellowship, Jesus calls his followers to abandon all for his sake; at its core, imitation is about a spiritual, faith-filled union with Christ, expressed through trust and obedience; however, spiritual communion alone does not fully define imitation—it must also be specified more narrowly to include self-denial and bearing the cross; in this sense, following Jesus also carries a literal aspect, built on the foundation of mystical union with Him. Joustra further simplifies this framework into three points: Christ must first be recognized as Savior; Christ's life is not meant to be copied mechanically but appreciated in its full meaning; and the imitation of Christ is anchored in the moral law, which Christ Himself fulfills.²⁴ This imitation entails a fundamental reorientation of life, shifting from self-centeredness towards a God-centered existence, manifested in the cultivation of Christian virtues such as love, humility, patience, and justice, and consistent obedience to

²⁰ Joustra, 25.

²¹ Silva, "Union with Christ and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's Ethics," 105.

²² Moon, *Reforming Virtue*, 43–44.

²³ Joustra, "Imitating Christ," 22–25.

²⁴ Moon, *Reforming Virtue*, 40; Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 314.

God's law as perfectly demonstrated by Christ.²⁵

Bavinck emphasized that this imitation is not achievable through mere human effort but is rooted in the believer's mystical and spiritual union with Christ, a transformative gift enabled by the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Through this mystical union, believers appropriate Christ's merits and the benefits of grace, including wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification, which are all moral qualities that reflect the image of God.²⁷ This process of imitation and transformation is seen as a restoration of the image of God in the believer.²⁸ Believers are empowered to live lives that increasingly conform to the image of Christ, thereby reflecting God's own character.²⁹

Bavinck sees the imitation of Christ as central to restoring the image of God in believers, emphasizing that Christ, as the perfect image of God, provides the ultimate ethical model. This imitation involves recognizing Christ as Redeemer, entering spiritual communion with Him (especially in suffering), and shaping one's life according to His virtues, not through literal mimicry but through moral transformation. Rooted in mystical union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, this imitation demands self-denial, trust, and obedience, leading to a God-centered life marked by Christian virtues such as love, humility, justice, and conformity to God's law.

Implication in the World According to Herman Bavinck

Importantly, Bavinck does not isolate his concept of *imitatio Dei* from other aspects of Christian ethics. He pairs it with a traditional Reformed emphasis on God's law, viewing Christ not as a new lawgiver but as a restorer of the law. This approach aligns with Bavinck's broader theological theme of "grace restores nature," where the imitation of Christ leads to a renewed understanding and fulfillment of God's original design for humanity.³⁰

This uniqueness of Bavinck's concept of the imitation of Christ arises from his efforts to forge clear connections between reformed ethics and the incarnate life of Christ in the natural world: "Salvation does not take us out of creation or elevate us above it, but helps restore creation's brokenness. In theological terms, grace opposes sin, not nature; grace does not abolish nature but restores it."³¹ Bavinck argues that true imitation of Christ involves being conformed to His image, which encompasses not only deep, Christocentric spirituality but also cultural engagement.³² This balanced approach allows for a spirituality that is both deeply rooted in Christ and actively engaged with the world.

This closely entails imitating the ethical conduct of Jesus in His incarnation, since Christ serves as both our example and ideal. His life provides the form and pattern

25 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, Vol. 1: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Baker Academic, 2019), 335.

26 Joustra, "Imitating Christ," 23.

27 Silva, "Union with Christ and the Imitation of Christ in Herman Bavinck's Ethics," 105.

28 Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 312.

29 Joustra, "Imitating Christ," 23.

30 Joustra, "Jesus the Law Restorer," 312; Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, 317.

31 Moon, *Reforming Virtue*, 42.

32 Bartholomew, *Contours of the Kuyperian Tradition*, 317.

that our spiritual lives are meant to take on and toward which we are called to mature. Consequently, this leads to an ethic grounded in divine love—an ethic that shapes the identity and character of those who follow Jesus and which they are called to embody. Moon said that this concept can also be referred to as *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi*—the imitation of the incarnate Christ.³³

The concept of *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi* helps to demystify Christ, showing that the relationship between God and humanity is not only direct but also mediated through the means of grace. Unlike monks who focus solely on Christ's example of withdrawing from the world, the incarnate ministry of Christ reveals that His followers were deeply engaged with the social, political, and cultural centers of their time, whether in synagogues, marketplaces, the desolate wilderness, or lavish feasts hosted by the wealthy. Similarly, while some martyrs narrowly view suffering as the primary goal of imitating Christ, a careful study of Christ's incarnate life clarifies that suffering is simply a consequence of faithful obedience in a broken world, not an end in itself.³⁴

Bavinck's concept of *imitatio Dei* is rooted in the Reformed doctrine that "grace restores nature," meaning that imitation of Christ involves restoring God's original intent for humanity within creation rather than escaping it. Christ is seen not as a new lawgiver but as the restorer of God's law, whose incarnate life serves as both example and pattern for Christian living—combining deep spirituality with cultural engagement. Referred to as *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi*, this imitation calls believers to embody Christ's love and character in all aspects of life, clarifying that faithful obedience, not suffering itself, is the true goal of discipleship.

Psalm 1

Background

Psalm 1 presents a moral and dogmatic teaching that emphasizes the importance of virtuous living and imitating God (*imitatio Dei*). The psalm begins with a beatitude, blessing those who avoid the counsel of the ungodly, the way of sinners, and the seat of the corrupt. People see this emphasis on blessedness as a divine attribute that humans who practice virtue share. The psalm's structure progresses from walking to standing to sitting, reflecting the development of reasoning processes and the importance of avoiding profane thoughts and illicit actions.³⁵ The concept of imitating God is present in the Psalter, where the righteous are often expected to emulate God's attributes, such as being a righteous judge and intervening to help the oppressed.³⁶ The ethical teachings in the Psalms are considered particularly transformative due to the active engagement required in praying them, rather than passively reading other genres of Scripture. While the psalm doesn't explicitly mention the image of God, it portrays the ideal person as one who embodies

³³ Moon, *Reforming Virtue*, 42–43.

³⁴ Moon, 43.

³⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms 1–72* (The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation), trans. Robert Hill (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 46.

³⁶ Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*, 121.

divine attributes, suggesting that ethical behavior is intrinsically linked to reflecting God's nature (imitation of God).³⁷ Therefore, the discussion in this section will follow the same lines as Bavinck's, focusing on the image of God in Psalm 1 (which will directly address the imitation of God) and elaborating on the imitation of God from Calvin's perspective, as well as its implications for the lives of Christians in the world.

The Image of God as Described in Psalm 1

In the Psalm, James says that what is meant by imitating God is imitating one's ethical life according to God's character. James also quotes Wright as saying that the substance and quality of Israel's ethical behavior is nothing but a reflection of God's own character. Israel was called to change its character to imitate God's character. The Israelites were called to learn what it means to be holy, loving, merciful, and just, as God is holy, loving, merciful, and just, and they were called to embody these qualities in a variety of new situations and contexts.³⁸

In Psalm 1, the first step to modeling one's ethical life after God's character is to choose the right path. Psalm 1 describes the choice of two paths, the path of the righteous and the path of the wicked. The path of the righteous is the road less traveled but still a path of happiness.³⁹ The Psalms also constantly exalt the character and ways of God with the explicit aim of inculcating not only worship but also the quality of an ethical life that reflects the God who is worshipped. God's ways and paths became an example for the righteous Israelites to follow.⁴⁰ Therefore, the fundamental ethical teachings of the Psalms are unambiguous: avoid acting like the wicked and commit to the path of righteousness, as outlined in the ethical teachings rooted in the imitation of God.⁴¹ On the other hand, verses 4-6 also describe the fate of the wicked, sinners, and scoffers. Their ultimate destination is judgment and unhappiness.⁴²

Related to the first step, the second step toward modeling one's ethical life after God's character is to meditate on the Torah. Verses 2 and 3 depict trees planted near streams of water that bear fruit in season, subtly recalling the image of the trees that YHWH planted in the garden of Eden to the east, where four rivers flowed and good fruit grew (Gen. 2:8-10). The poetic effect suggests that meditating on the Torah mediates God's presence, so that those who walk with God in the word will experience the renewal of what life was like in the Garden of Eden. The lives and words of the righteous will become "trees of life" for others.⁴³

37 Isidore Singer, ed., "Ethics," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12: *A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901), 247.

38 James, "Research Trends in the Study of the Ethics of the Psalms," 129.

39 Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament), ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 60.

40 James, "Research Trends in the Study of the Ethics of the Psalms," 129.

41 Lim, "Reading the Psalms as Torah for Social Ethics," 208.

42 deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 58.

43 James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* Vol. 1 & 2 (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2021), 95.

Verses 3-4 transitions from the actions of the blessed person to the fruits of their lifestyle. The image of the tree or vine is used in the Old Testament for the nation of Israel as a whole (e.g., 2 Sam. 7:10; Isa. 6:13; Ps. 80:8) and for individuals within the nation (e.g., Ps. 128:3).⁴⁴ Therefore, this *imitatio dei* is not only practiced individually, but also communally, even like a nation, as a tree that has been transplanted beside a river. In the metaphorical world of the psalms, the river is God's teaching.⁴⁵

Imitating God, as described in the Psalms, means shaping one's ethical life to reflect God's character—being holy, loving, merciful, and just. Psalm 1 presents this imitation through two key steps: choosing the path of righteousness over wickedness and meditating on the Torah, which brings spiritual vitality like a tree planted by streams of water. This ethical imitation of God is both personal and communal, with the Torah serving as the source of divine life and guidance that leads to renewal and flourishing, echoing the life of Eden.

Imitation of God According to Psalm 1

Bavinck's approach in his theology was characterized by a return to Calvin's Reformed theology, combined with a biblical approach, historical consciousness, and engagement with contemporary views.⁴⁶ Therefore, it would also be beneficial to briefly discuss Calvin's view of *imitatio Dei*, which is also related to the Psalms (in his *Institutes*, the second most frequently quoted book of the Bible is the Psalms).⁴⁷ Calvin uses Augustine's favorite phrase, "cling to God" (*Deo adhaereant*), which Augustine also took from the Psalms to describe happiness or the highest good. Union with God is the *summum bonum*, which Calvin describes as the likeness of God, whereby, when the soul has grasped the knowledge of God, it is completely transformed into His likeness. This concept relates to God's purpose in creating man, which leads one to "contemplate divine worship and the life to come", which in turn leads to the knowledge of one's duty. Thus, Calvin based his concept of ethics on the Christian idea of the *summum bonum*.⁴⁸

This view of Calvin is also similar to verse 3, which describes that meditating on the Torah mediates the presence of God, so that those who walk with God in the word experience a renewal of what life was like in the Garden of Eden.⁴⁹ However, as with the physical sanctuary, the literal sanctuary presupposes an intimacy with God that only the righteous can experience.⁵⁰ This image communicates that one who meditates on Torah day and night will have a life that bears good fruit at the right time, the righteousness of Torah sustaining him when the other leaves wither.⁵¹ Verse 6 also describes them as the

44 Hamilton, 94.

45 deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 64.

46 Peter A. Lillback and Richard B. Gaffin Jr., eds., *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 569.

47 Herman J. Selderhuis, *Calvin's Theology of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 14.

48 David S. Sytsma, "John Calvin and Virtue Ethics: Augustinian and Aristotelian Themes," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 48, no. 3 (2020): 523–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12324>.

49 Hamilton, *Psalms*, 95.

50 Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 55.

51 Hamilton, *Psalms*, 1 & 2:95.

object of God's care, indicating that this is the true path to happiness and life.⁵²

Calvin, drawing from Augustine and the Psalms, views union with God—clinging to Him—as the highest ideal (*summum bonum*), where the soul is transformed into God's likeness through the knowledge of Him. This ethical vision aligns with Psalm 1, where meditating on the Torah brings God's presence, renews life like Eden, and leads to fruitfulness, righteousness, and divine care, marking the true path to happiness and spiritual flourishing.

Implications in the World According to Psalm 1 Kingship

In addition to the concepts discussed in the previous section, the concept of *imitatio dei* in the Psalms also relates to kingship in Israel. This aligns with the function of Psalms 1 and 2, which serve as an introduction to the Book of Psalms.⁵³ Psalm 1 describes a blessed person who rejoices in the Torah, while Psalm 2 reveals this figure as a descendant of King David (Christ) whom God raised in Zion. This synergy highlights both the role of the king and the true calling of the community to follow his example in obedience to God's law.⁵⁴ James quotes Wenham as saying that those who are in the best position to promote righteousness are kings, and they are called to exercise God-like qualities of justice. He said that a king should model or imitate the attributes of God, and if this is done properly, those who benefit most are those on the margins/people of the nation.⁵⁵

This view also corresponds to the image of the tree in Psalm 1, which is a symbol of divine blessing, a symbol of the temple where God dwells (cf. Ezek. 41:18), a symbol of paradise (cf. Genesis 2), a symbol of God's reign as God, a symbol of God's kingship and the kings of David's descendants who ruled as God's representatives (cf. Isa. 11:1; Zech. 6:12), and also a symbol of Israel's worship of God instead of idols (note that "Asherah" is the name of both the female idol and the sacred tree; cf. Deut. 16:21).⁵⁶ This means that this *imitatio Dei* King is also the King who brings the nation of Israel to flourish like a tree planted by the waters (the image of the tree or vine is used in the Old Testament both for the nation of Israel as a whole and for individuals within the nation).⁵⁷ This image of the King was ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Worship

About the tree, which is also a symbol of worship, in addition to the concept of the King, James also quotes Goldingay, who says that human life in the Old Testament is indeed about character expressed in worship and action and about a vision that is considered good. This vision, which characterizes ethical people (and not just their ethical actions),

⁵² deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 63.

⁵³ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, 65.

⁵⁴ Hamilton, *Psalms*, 89–90.

⁵⁵ James, "Research Trends in the Study of the Ethics of the Psalms," 130–31.

⁵⁶ deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, 64.

⁵⁷ Hamilton, *Psalms*, 94.

finds its true expression in the imitation of God's character. The Psalms celebrate these divine attributes in their entirety and implore their readers to reflect them in their lives.⁵⁸

This (Torah) contemplation in divine worship and the life to come will, in turn, lead to the recognition of one's obligations.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is also through worship that one who contemplates the Torah day and night (who imitates the character of God) will be molded to have an ethical life that bears good fruit at the right time.⁶⁰ This person will also experience the ramifications of a restored, healthy relationship with God, which will lead to a positive relationship with fellow human beings and with creation itself. In other words, this will be a return to a condition similar to Eden.⁶¹

In addition, Lim notes that in worship, divine attribution and human imitation also parallel God's actions and those of the righteous. He quotes Wenham who says that when Christians pray imprecatory psalms, or what he calls "petitions for divine intervention," three ethical commitments are made: 1) The congregation expresses deep sympathy for the feelings of those who suffer; 2) by bringing the needs of the poor and oppressed to God, the congregation's concern for their suffering is enhanced; 3) the congregation is taught to reflect on their complicity and responsibility in violence and oppression.⁶² All of these are ethical expressions of the righteous, manifested in daily life.

The concept of *imitatio Dei* in the Psalms extends to kingship and worship, where Israel's kings are called to reflect God's justice, especially for the marginalized, embodying divine attributes that lead the nation to flourish like a tree planted by water. This tree symbolizes divine blessing, the temple, paradise, and true worship, linking righteous leadership to God's reign. Similarly, worship forms character through Torah meditation, shaping ethical lives that mirror God's attributes and restore relationships with God, others, and creation—echoing the Edenic ideal. Ethical worship also involves justice, compassion, and self-examination, primarily through prayers for divine intervention. The true king who will bring about the fulfillment of these kingship and worship aspects is Christ Himself.

Comparative Analysis

Image of God According to Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1

For Bavinck, humanity's capacity to bear God's image forms the basis for the ethical call to imitate Him, even though sin has marred this image. Through Christ's redemptive work, believers are renewed and empowered to reflect God more and more in all areas of life. Bavinck points out the difference between God's qualities that people can share, like love and justice, and those that only God has, like being unchanging and infinite, stressing that humans should only imitate God within the limits of being human. On the other hand, imitating God, as described in the Psalms, means shaping one's ethical life to reflect God's character—being holy, loving, merciful, and just. Psalm 1 presents this imitation through

⁵⁸ James, "Research Trends in the Study of the Ethics of the Psalms," 131.

⁵⁹ Sytsma, "John Calvin and Virtue Ethics," 524.

⁶⁰ Hamilton, *Psalms*, 95.

⁶¹ Longman III, *Psalms*, 57.

⁶² Lim, "Reading the Psalms as Torah for Social Ethics," 209.

two key steps: choosing the path of righteousness over wickedness and meditating on the Torah, which brings spiritual vitality like a tree planted by streams of water. This ethical imitation of God is both personal and communal, with the Torah serving as the source of divine life and guidance that leads to renewal and flourishing, echoing the life of Eden.

Both Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1 present the image of God as an ethical foundation for human life, yet they approach it from distinct theological and practical frameworks. Bavinck points out that even though sin has damaged the image of God in people, it is being fixed through Christ's work, allowing believers to gradually show God's qualities like love and justice, while also recognizing the difference between God and humans by understanding God's unique qualities. His view is deeply Christological and rooted in Reformed theology, stressing that human imitation must occur within the context of grace and limitation. In contrast, Psalm 1 portrays the image of God as reflected through ethical living shaped by Torah meditation, where the righteous person flourishes like a tree planted by water—symbolizing vitality, divine blessing, and moral rootedness. This imitation is achieved not through Christological mediation but through immersive engagement with God's instruction, and it leads to both personal and communal renewal that mirrors Edenic wholeness. While Bavinck emphasizes the Christ-centered renewal of the image in all of life, Psalm 1 highlights Torah-centered ethical imitation, which results in a righteous life aligned with God's justice and presence. Both, however, affirm that reflecting God's image involves a transformative process grounded in divine guidance and aimed at spiritual and moral flourishing.

Imitation of God/Christ According to Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1

Bavinck sees the imitation of Christ as central to restoring the image of God in believers, emphasizing that Christ, as the perfect image of God, provides the ultimate ethical model. This imitation involves recognizing Christ as Redeemer, entering spiritual communion with Him (especially in suffering), and shaping one's life according to His virtues, not through literal mimicry but through moral transformation. Rooted in mystical union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, these imitation demands self-denial, trust, and obedience, leading to a God-centered life marked by Christian virtues such as love, humility, justice, and conformity to God's law. On the other hand, Calvin, drawing from Augustine and the Psalms, views union with God—clinging to Him—as the highest ideal (*summum bonum*), in which the soul is transformed into God's likeness through knowledge of Him. This ethical vision aligns with Psalm 1, where meditating on the Torah brings God's presence, renews life like Eden, and leads to fruitfulness, righteousness, and divine care—marking the true path to happiness and spiritual flourishing.

Both Bavinck's view of the imitation of God/Christ and Psalm 1 (based on Calvin and Augustine's views) emphasize that ethical transformation and communion with God are central to spiritual life. Yet, they approach this transformation from distinct Christological and scriptural frameworks. Bavinck centers imitation on Christ as the perfect image of

God, stressing that believers are morally transformed through mystical union with Christ by the Holy Spirit, primarily through suffering, obedience, and the cultivation of Christian virtues. In contrast, Psalm 1 focuses on union with God through meditative engagement with the Torah, which renews the soul and leads to a life of righteousness, fruitfulness, and delight in God's presence. Bavinck's view focuses on Christ and the Trinity, rooted in the history of redemption, while Psalm 1, as interpreted by Calvin, offers a way to grow ethically through a deep connection with Scripture. Both views, however, share the conviction that true imitation involves internal transformation, leads to ethical renewal, and results in a God-centered life shaped by love, righteousness, and sustained communion with the divine.

Implication in the World According to Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1

Bavinck's concept of *imitatio Dei* is rooted in the Reformed doctrine that "grace restores nature," meaning that imitation of Christ involves restoring God's original intent for humanity within creation rather than escaping it. Christ is seen not as a new lawgiver but as the restorer of God's law, whose incarnate life serves as both an example and a pattern for Christian living, combining deep spirituality with cultural engagement. Referred to as *Imitatio Incarnatus Christi*, this imitation calls believers to embody Christ's love and character in all aspects of life, clarifying that faithful obedience, not suffering itself, is the true goal of discipleship. On the other hand, the concept of *imitatio dei* in the Psalms extends to kingship and worship, where Israel's kings are called to reflect God's justice, especially for the marginalized, embodying divine attributes that lead the nation to flourish like a tree planted by water. This tree symbolizes divine blessing, the temple, paradise, and true worship, linking righteous leadership to God's reign. Similarly, worship forms character through Torah meditation, shaping ethical lives that mirror God's attributes and restore relationships with God, others, and creation—echoing Eden. Ethical worship also involves justice, compassion, and self-examination, especially through prayers for divine intervention. The true king who will bring about the fulfillment of these kingship and worship aspects is Christ Himself.

Both Herman Bavinck's and the Psalmist's views on *imitatio Dei* emphasize the restoration of creation through ethically shaped lives that reflect God's character; yet, they differ in theological emphasis, scope, and narrative framework. Bavinck places imitation within the Reformed belief that "grace restores nature," emphasizing that Christ's life on Earth—*Imitatio Incarnatus Christi*—is the ultimate example for how to engage faithfully with the world. For him, imitation entails a holistic discipleship where deep spirituality and cultural participation come together, with faithful obedience, not suffering, as the primary telos. In contrast, Psalm 1 articulates *imitatio dei* through the lens of Torah meditation and royal responsibility, where the king and the worshiper alike are to reflect God's justice, compassion, and covenantal faithfulness, especially toward the vulnerable. The tree planted by water becomes a rich symbol of temple-centered, Edenic flourishing, showing that ethical

worship leads to relational and communal renewal. Psalm 1 fulfills both aspects of kingship and worship, just as Bavinck did. Bavinck places emphasis on the Christological restoration of the individual within a broader cultural mandate, whereas Psalm 1 underscores the impact of liturgical-ethical formation on national identity and social justice. Despite these differences, both converge in affirming that imitating God transforms not only personal conduct but also the world by aligning human life with divine love, justice, and purpose.

Conclusion

Herman Bavinck and Psalm 1 both present the image and imitation of God as central to ethical transformation and spiritual flourishing, though they differ in theological foundations and modes of application. Bavinck, grounded in Reformed and Christocentric theology, sees the image of God as marred by sin yet restored through union with Christ, enabling believers to reflect God's communicable attributes within the boundaries of creaturely existence. For Bavinck, imitation flows from mystical communion with Christ. It is expressed through self-denial, obedience, and the cultivation of Christian virtues across all of life, affirming the principle that grace restores nature. In contrast, Psalm 1 portrays imitation through Torah-centered ethical living, where meditation on God's instruction leads to a righteous, fruitful life that mirrors Eden and brings communal renewal. The Psalmist's vision emphasizes liturgical and royal responsibility, with ethical worship fostering justice, compassion, and covenantal fidelity. While Bavinck emphasizes Christ as the definitive model for restoring the divine image, Psalm 1 highlights the formative power of Scripture in shaping lives aligned with God's justice and presence. Despite these theological and methodological differences, both affirm that imitating God entails inward renewal empowered by divine guidance, resulting in lives that reflect God's character and contribute to the transformation of the world.

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