

Review of *The Christian Family*

By Herman Bavinck

REVIEWED BY COLIN J. SMOTHERS

The Christian Family by Herman Bavinck, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman. Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 2012. 188pp., \$10.00.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) found himself confronted by a society increasingly hostile to human flourishing according to the divine design of the family.¹ Sufficiently alarmed, he busied himself with a counteroffensive, which has been passed down to the anglophone world under the title, *The Christian Family*. The family was in trouble, and one of the most influential theologians of the Christian era unsheathed his pen in defense—he knew it was a matter of civilizational life or death.

Bavinck wrote *The Christian Family* in a day animated with revolutionary spirits. Socialism, Marxism, and the collectivists were threatening to upset the political order from one end of the political spectrum, and aftershocks from the French Revolution were galvanizing hyper-individualists from the other.

¹ This review is adapted from an entry in the Spring 2020 issue of *Eikon*, the journal of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

More fundamentally, what Bavinck termed “the women’s issue” was threatening the natural order, mobilizing various nascent feminist groups and their strange bedfellows: proponents of legalized prostitution, supporters of communal-living, and advocates for universal, state-run childcare from birth. These and other destabilizing factors made the situation so dire in Bavinck’s estimation that he could write, “There has never been a time when the family faced so severe a crisis as the time in which we are now living” (61).

Oh, that Bavinck was alive to see the state of the family today! Those of us used to tracing trends that threaten the American family today back to the sexual revolution may be surprised by Bavinck’s assessment from the first decade of the twentieth century — a full half-century and an ocean away from the American 1960s.

Bavinck’s *The Christian Family* is one of the best—it could be argued the best—book-length apologies for the family in print today. It is not my intention here to summarize or even extensively review the careful and convincing argument Bavinck makes in *The Christian Family*. The book is short enough that you would be much better served to get a copy for yourself and read it in a sitting or two. Instead, my purpose is to highlight key themes I see missing in today’s discourse on marriage and the family, and to provide constructive provocation on the authority of one of most well-respected Reformed theologians in print today.

Our era is increasingly marked by Great Tradition theological retrieval aimed at correcting twentieth century missteps. Calls for still more retrieval abound, which I heartily echo—not least because I am surely not the only one who blushes at a side-by-side comparison of classical and contemporary curricula. But I do find it rather interesting what the retrievalists have heretofore neglected: anthropology—arguably the doctrine under the most internal and external pressure from contemporary forces.² I have my suspicions for why, and they have everything to do with the great chasm that exists between the world of our theological forebears and our world today. This distance

² Michael Haykin, “This Anthropological Moment,” *Eikon* 1.2 (Fall 2019), 6.

strains our modern egalitarian sensibilities, and their reasoning makes us uncomfortable—especially when they speak about man vis-à-vis woman.

MALE-FEMALE DISTINCTION

Bavinck's aim in *The Christian Family* is familial reformation according to the Word of God. Where then does he begin? In the same place divine revelation begins: "Scripture proceeds from the distinction between man and woman" (64). As a man of biblical conviction, Bavinck pursues familial reformation in the same way as Scripture. In this way, it is extraordinary and noteworthy how prominent male-female distinction is in *The Christian Family*—it is perhaps the most pervasive theme in the book. Throughout, Bavinck extols male-female complementarity and actively reasons from sexual difference; he even goes so far as to feature it as one of humanity's—and in this way the family's—crowning aspects.

While he is quick to warn against both underestimating and overestimating male-female distinction, it is important to note Bavinck's careful labor to at least estimate the male-female difference, and how this difference informs his view of marriage, family, and beyond—indeed “all of life.”

Bavinck is unencumbered by twenty-first century egalitarian sensibilities, and we would do well to wrestle with his exploration of how male-female difference influences all of life—not just within the four walls of the home and the church. For Bavinck, this includes how we make decisions regarding child-rearing and care; how we raise and discipline boys and girls; how we consider male and female schooling and careers—again, “all of life.”

If we are to follow Bavinck in his reform, the implication is clear: recover the male-female distinction from which Scripture proceeds, and we are on the road toward familial reformation. Downplay the differences, cordon them off from some realms of life, or worse, completely ignore them—as so many writing on gender today so wantonly do—and we are no longer proceeding biblically and will not see the family reformed.

IDEOLOGICAL VS. INDIVIDUAL REFORM

Bavinck uses martial imagery throughout *The Christian Family* to underscore his perception of just how serious he perceived threats to the family to be. “An entire army of evils besieges the life of the family” (22). In the face of such organized evil, Bavinck saw resistance not only as a duty, but a calling.

When Bavinck writes about the threats and dangers facing the family, he considers both its ideological and individual enemies. He considered the most serious dangers to be new theories on marriage and the family that were gaining traction in his day, including open marriage, intentional childlessness and abortion, giving up children for the state to raise, and even the concept of radical “equality” that meant women needed to be “relieved” as much as possible from motherhood and duties at home. At the end of the day, Bavinck recognized these ideas flowed from and reinforced a statist error, namely that the state is the “one true family” (139).

Progressive ideologies swallow the family whole; when everything is the family, nothing is. When Bavinck names other evils besieging the family, he trots out familiar ghouls. The naming rhymes not only with the early chapters of Genesis, but with our own news headlines today:

The infidelity of the husband, the stubbornness of the wife, the disobedience of the child; both the worship and denigration of the woman, tyranny as well as slavery, the seduction and the hatred of men, both idolizing and killing children; sexual immorality, human trafficking, concubinage, bigamy, polygamy, polyandry, adultery, divorce, incest; unnatural sins whereby men commit scandalous acts with men, women with women, men with boys, women with girls, men and women and children with each other, people with animals; the stimulation of lust by impure thoughts, words, images, plays, literature, art, and clothing; glorifying nudity and evaluating even the passions of the flesh into the service of deity (22).

In this list, Bavinck makes good the words of Qohelet: there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9)—particularly, it seems, when it comes to institutions

as old as the sun.

Man is a product of both his own inner-life and the society in which he finds himself. Bavinck's plan for combating such societal ills is instructive. For Bavinck, it would be a mistake to put the attempt to change one's outward environment ahead of the war for internal, personal reform. Sin and unrighteousness are always the enemy. Not unaware of the malignant effects a society and its ideas can have on individuals and families—indeed, he names them for what they are—Bavinck nevertheless framed his efforts toward reforming and strengthening the family by addressing the individual, sinful heart:

In the modern era, as the notion of sin is slipping away, the culpability for every misery is being sought outside the person and located in the institutions, in social circumstances, in the organization of the state. All deliverance is naturally expected then from social and political reform. But conscience speaks a different language within every person who seriously examines himself and ventures to confront this moral reality. Such conscience lays the blame not on the institution of society and state, but on the person himself; you are the man! (75).

What shape does Bavinck's counteroffensive take? If the family is in trouble, the best one can do is to reform and fortify the family through its constituents. Reform the individual, reform the family, and societal reform will follow. Combat the ideas, yes; but we must engage persons and work on society through individuals.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY ARE ESSENTIAL

For Bavinck, marriage and family are not just one option among many in a choose-your-own-adventure. They are instead “the foundation of all of civilized society.” Without marriage, there is no family. Without family, there is no society. But more than foundational, the family is constitutive of the wellbeing of society: “The authority of the father, the love of the mother, and the obedience of the child form in their unity the threefold cord that binds together and sustains all relationships within human society” (8). Pity, then, any civilization that is bent on undermining and destroying such an estimable

institution.

Bavinck believed marriage and family were not only essential for civilized society, but a norm to be encouraged for the vast majority of people. When he speaks of singleness, he recognizes it is permissible and even perhaps obligatory in some instances, but he is sympathetic to say that marriage is still the “usual route” men and women everywhere should follow. He goes on to name several movements arrayed against this ideal in his day that should be vigorously opposed, including asceticism and celibacy, Roman Catholic errors regarding marriage, and societal trends that normalize sex outside monogamous marriage.

Bavinck locates the origin of marital and familial disintegration not in the state, nor society, which precedes the state, but in the entrance of sin into humanity in the Fall in Genesis 3. Thus, at base, it is always primarily sin and the curse that must be overcome in the fight for the family, including strained relations between man and woman. Susan Foh’s interpretation³ of Genesis 3:16—that woman’s desire for her husband in God’s curse is subversive—has been dismissed as a recent idiosyncrasy, but those who do should reckon with Bavinck’s take on God’s curse on the woman: “Driven to the man through her own desire, the woman seeks with her wiles to enchant him, or she bows like a slave under his feet” (13). God’s work in rolling back sin and the curse is illustrated in Ephesians 5, where husbands are commanded to love their wives, and wives are commanded to submit to their husbands.

Writing from the Netherlands in 1908, Bavinck noted that “in our country about 95 percent of women older than twenty get married, and most marriages by far are blessed with children” (153). If Bavinck could sound the alarm on the health of the family in his day, how much more in ours? In the United States today, the marriage rate for adults is fifty percent, including those who are divorced and no longer married.⁴ Perhaps even more alarming, almost forty percent of babies born in the US today are born to unmarried parents.⁵

³ Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974/75), 376–83.

⁴ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, November 6, 2019, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>.

⁵ Joyce A. Martin, et al., “Births: Final Data for 2018,” *National Vital Statistics Reports* vol. 68 no. 13, November 27,

What would Bavinck think of those today who argue that the church has made too much of marriage and the family? Consider this disparity—ninety-five vs. fifty percent of adult women married—the next time you notice someone being rebuked for overemphasizing marriage or making an idol out of the family.

FAMILIAL NURTURE

Essential to Bavinck's estimation of the family's importance is his concept of nurture, and he devotes an entire chapter to it. For Bavinck, the Christian view of familial nurture is set against what is desirable or even possible outside the family, with the state. This view directly implicates any who would neglect prioritizing familial nurture in pursuit of some other good. There were those in Bavinck's day, like ours today, who were complaining about the family's stultifying effect on individuals, especially women, because of its often-unchosen aspects. But for Bavinck, the unchosen-ness of the family is part of its unique and divine design, a design that schools the human person from his earliest years in the virtues. There exists an "is" to the familial design long before there is an "ought," but the "ought" needs to follow in any Christian estimation. The microcosm that is the family is a school of virtue and nurture *par excellence*:

Masculine and feminine qualities, physical and spiritual strengths, intellectual, volitional, and emotional gifts, age and youth, strength and weakness, authority and obedience, affection and love, unity and diversity of interests, all of these come together in one family, unified and distinguished and blended together. The diversity both attracts and repels, unifies and isolates; sometimes the family is a small kingdom divided against itself, but such division can be intense because the unity is maintained by the father, and especially by the mother, a communal language, religion, and morality, communal traditions, relationships, and interests, communal experiences of love and suffering, of joy and sorrow, of sickness and recovery, of death and grief, all preserve the unity and keep it in balance with the

diversity (92).

In light of such beautiful diversity, surely lament is appropriate in response to the perversity that would dare to celebrate any arrangement that intentionally forgoes sexual diversity, procreation, or intentional child-rearing. There is a reason so-called same-sex marriage is nothing more than a pretense, and there is a reason why children are everywhere in the Bible considered marks of divine blessing.

Bavinck's concept of familial nurture does not have in view only the benefits to children—though procreation and raising the next generation is clearly a primary good—but the benefits familial life has for parents too. Parenting changes a person for the good: “The family transforms ambition into service, miserliness into munificence, the weak into strong, cowards into heroes, coarse fathers into mild lambs, tenderhearted mothers into ferocious lionesses” (97). Do we want a society marked by the latter, not the former? Give children back to their parents and parents back to their children. According to Bavinck, this is how Christianity transforms a society, making strong, loving, nurturing mothers of women and devoted, tender, benevolent fathers of men.

The family is the first school of life: “A person's becoming human occurs within the home” (108). If Bavinck is correct, rebukes are in order toward the raft of literature that downplays or, worse, besmirches work in the home—even and especially what is being written from a purportedly Christian consideration.

CONCLUSION

While I have by no means exhausted Bavinck's argument in *The Christian Family*, it is my hope that the strands of pearly wisdom from his book presented above will result in greater interaction, retrieval, and appropriation with respect to this classic work. If this happens, I hope it will raise questions like the following: In what ways is Bavinck's thought incongruent with the modern evangelical church? Where do I observe anything approximating Bavinck's expression of orthodoxy today? Is the Bible's position on marriage and the family closer to the evangelical consensus, or Bavinck's? Do we consider

marriage to be “the apex of human life” (74) and uphold it as such? If not, have we been influenced more by the culture than the Bible? Reading many of the salvos being published today against the work of complementarians, I can’t help but wonder what these authors would write against *The Christian Family* if it were published in 2020. But even more, I can’t help but wonder what Herman Bavinck would write if he were reading these complementarian critics today. Sign me up for that recovery.

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