

Triquetra

“Faith and Love” by Herman Bavinck

Translated and Edited by Gregory Parker Jr.¹

Over the past year and a half, this publication has presented voices from Cairn addressing our current culture. In this issue, we are pleased to present a translation—the only one in existence—of an essay from Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, completed

by Gregory Parker Jr. ‘13. While modern perspectives on our current culture are certainly helpful, we must always be mindful that historical perspectives addressing issues connected with our day are equally, if not more, helpful.

From the Translator:

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) was a Dutch reformed theologian, pastor, and ethicist. Until recently, he was typically placed in the theological shadow of his contemporary Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). Together, Kuyper and Bavinck are known as the progenitors of neo-Calvinism. This brief essay is from *Excelsior*, the monthly magazine of the Youth Association for the Promotion of Christian Life (*Jongelingsvereniging ter bevordering van Christelijk leven*).² This group formed in 1851 and joined the Dutch Youth Alliance (*Nederlandsch Jongelings Verbond*) in 1853. The Dutch Youth Alliance, after several name changes, eventually developed into the Dutch branch of the YMCA.

In this article, Bavinck encourages young Christians to recognize the distinctiveness of Christian love (that it includes a distinct relationship to the law), and he exhorts them to have their faith be active in such a love. This connection to the law brings Christian love into conversation with justice. He puts forth a Christianity in which faith “unfolds its power in love” and thus seeks to honor both God and neighbor as it seeks to be active in love. The connection between faith and love in this brief essay is facilitated by justice, and this justice finds its apex in the object of faith, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The two [faith and love] are often placed in opposition to one another.

There are religious people whose sincerity is not in question, who are characterized by a warm religious heart, and yet with whom there is very little evidence of true love for one’s neighbor. Amongst those who have noticed this phenomenon there are many

who have no other explanation for it other than to regard the activity of such believers as nothing but hypocrisy. But reality demonstrates the opposite. Faith and love, religion and morality, are indeed intimately connected and ought to live in harmony with each other. But they are not the same, and with some people, they are quite distinct. Zealots for religious pursuits are occasionally at odds with the demands of

Cairn University’s logo consists of two primary symbols. The shield represents both university education and truth. The triquetra represents the Trinity and enjoys a long history within Christianity. Together, the shield and triquetra form Cairn’s logo, which is intended to convey several important ideas concerning



the institution: It identifies the University as one that believes in the triune God of Christianity as revealed in the Bible, it signifies the institution’s belief that God is the source of all truth, and it reflects the institution’s commitment to ensuring that God and His truth are inextricably linked to all University programs and activities.

morality, the faithful are sometimes very broad-minded when it comes to morality. [The religious] who are supposed to be pillars of the faith often show a great deal of lovelessness toward the poor and the downtrodden, toward enemies and opponents. The apostle James already knew these individuals and admonished them to demonstrate their faith by their works.³

On the other hand, there are plenty of individuals who have a sincere sense of their duty, are honest and faithful in their work, have a heartfelt compassion for the wretched, and yet have renounced all religion and consider religion to be a detriment rather than a benefit to the moral life. For they believe that faith—which always rests on some authority—robs man of his autonomy and freedom and makes him love and practice the good, not because of the good itself but because of the legislator who commanded it or the reward attached to its practice. Although this in principle may be a good thing, it is not yet the true good, the true morality. From the highest perspective, one loves the good only for itself and thinks of no reward and no punishment. The rich young ruler had some affinity for this kind of morality, for he claimed to have kept all the commandments of the second table from his youth onward; but when Jesus put him to the test, he went away from Him in sorrow.⁴

Nonetheless, in all religions and among all peoples, religion and morality are, to a greater or lesser extent, intertwined. Religion always contains precepts that endeavor to regulate man's life, and the commandments of morality are reckoned as originating from the Godhead and, therefore, are upheld by God with the promise of reward or the penalty of punishment. In Christianity too, there is also an intimate link [between religion and morality], but it is much more profound [in Christianity] than anywhere else, because [in Christianity], religion and morality receive their truest and most pure character. [In Christianity], religion is faith and morality is love.

In the Christian religion, faith is not

understood as a so-called historical faith (that is, the acceptance of testimony concerning historical miracles and facts) such as we practice in the sphere of general or national history. But faith—true, genuine, Christian faith—is entrusting one's heart in the grace of God, which has been revealed in Christ Jesus. God revealed himself first in the law, and in it He made His commands known to us: "Do this and you will live."⁵ However, righteousness on account of works is no longer available for us because the law has become powerless as a consequence of the sinfulness of our flesh. That is why God, in accordance with the riches of His grace, has revealed another righteousness in the gospel, a righteousness apart from the law, a righteousness acquired by Christ and contained in His person, a righteousness that becomes ours through faith.

Therefore, true faith has as its object a person who is the righteousness, wisdom, holiness, and redemption given to us by God, namely Christ—in particular, Christ as He is portrayed to us in the Holy Scriptures. Apart from them, we know nothing of this Christ and may deceive ourselves with a false Christ. True faith, then, does not stop at the testimony of Scripture but penetrates through them to Christ himself, joins Him, and enters into fellowship with Him. All who believe in Christ in this way become, through Christ, a child of the Heavenly Father and an heir of eternal life.⁶ Faith in Christianity, then, is quite distinct from the faith of any other religion or sphere. It is a justifying, sanctifying, beatific faith.

Likewise, love in Christianity is completely different from love in non-Christian morality. This does not always seem to be true: It is often said that people differ greatly in their religion but are in agreement about their morals. There is some truth to this, because the moral law is written on the heart of every individual, but this judgment is, in the end, superficial. The deeper one penetrates, the more significant the moral differences become. The present moment provides significant evidence of this. All laws and concepts of morality have undergone a disturbing transformation. This is already particularly clear with regard to the first table of the law, for many no longer think that love of God is a requirement of the moral law. How can one speak of love

for God when His existence, revelation, and knowability are readily denied?

Therefore, when most people speak of love, they immediately think only of love for one's neighbor. Even this love is understood and applied in a very peculiar way. The reason for this strange understanding and application typically lies in the fact that people contrast justice and love and equate love [only] with gentleness, sympathy, and a feeling of compassion. This concept of love is not derived from Christianity but from Buddhism. [In Buddhism], being and existence are in themselves a misfortune and consequently worthy of pity.

But such a [strange] conception of love entails a peculiar application; for if love is [only] compassion and excludes all justice, then not only the poor and the sick but especially the delinquent may lay claim to it, for [delinquents] are those who suffer most during their existence. Therefore, punishment is not appropriate for them; they do not really belong in a prison but in a hospital or, at least, an institution for rehabilitation. And apart from criminals, love should also be extended to animals, for they are [according to Buddhists] no different than us; they belong to our family, and love of family is a form of love of neighbor. Examples of such love of neighbor are increasingly prevalent especially among the wealthy among us: men and women who feed and clothe animals far better than humans, treat them medically when they are sick, and give them a solemn and honorable burial when they die.

It would not be difficult to demonstrate extensively how each commandment of the moral law, not only of the first but also of the second table, is understood and applied differently than in Christian ethics. What would become of the honoring of father and mother and of all those whom God has appointed over us? What authority would remain in the prohibition of manslaughter, adultery, theft? What authority would be left to the prohibition of false testimony and of coveting one's neighbor? Not only in the praxis of life but also in

the world of ideas, a different morality is gradually forming on all of these points. In many respects, [Friedrich] Nietzsche only expressed what was unconsciously stirring in many people's hearts.

But the love of Christianity is quite different from the love preached by Buddhism. It is different in that it does not set law and justice aside but embraces and fulfills them. Christianity is a religion—the religion of salvation—but of salvation by the path of justice. Christ is a proof of God's love, above all in this, that he gave His very life as a ransom for many.

The gospel, which makes salvation known to us, is therefore something distinct and different from the law. What the law demands, the gospel gives; where the law condemns and kills—the gospel acquits and makes alive. But it gives that acquittal and that life first, so that they are rightly acquired by Christ and then secondly, for the purpose of fulfilling the law within those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.⁷ Grace does not destroy nature and the law but restores and fulfills them. It causes individuals, who come to faith in Christ, to confess with sincerity of heart: "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being" (Rom. 7:22)!

That is why faith and love are inseparable in Christianity. The new life begins and continues in faith. The life of faith lasts as long as we are here below; only above does it pass into a life of vision. This new life [of faith] unfolds its power in love. [Love] is the field in which it moves, the air that it breathes, and the path on which it walks.

But that love is not a weakness but a strength, not a flattery but an energy, not a feeling of sentimentality but a resolved will. It is not an evasion and destruction of justice but a fulfillment of the law. It sometimes manifests itself in seemingly unloving acts—like the surgeon who must suppress his feeling of empathy and use a knife to heal a wound through the power of love. It is a love that seeks to honor God, the salvation of one's neighbor, and therefore fulfills the law in all things. Such a love requires faith, and Christian faith is active in such a love.

H. Bavinck

APRIL

30

Highlander Mudder

Part trail race, part obstacle course, part mudder, the *Highlander Mudder* is sure to challenge you on a 2+ mile course throughout the Cairn University Campus. Register at cairn.edu/run.

MAY

9

Golf Classic

The Philadelphia Cricket Club, one of the finest private country clubs in the United States, will once again be our host course for the annual Golf Classic. All proceeds benefit The Cairn Fund. Register at cairn.edu/golf.

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1. Gregory Parker Jr. is a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh in Systematic Theology working on the theology of Herman Bavinck. He is also an adjunct professor of theology in the School of Divinity at Cairn University, and will be full-time at the University beginning July 1, 2022. He would like to thank Jacolien van Eekeren for her feedback on the translation.
2. Herman Bavinck, "Geloof en liefde," in *Excelsior: Maandblad van de Jongelingsvereniging ter bevordering van Christelijk leven* 245 (August 1909): 121–22.
3. Ed. — James 2:12–18.
4. Ed. — Mark 10:17–27; Matthew 19:16–22.
5. Ed. — Luke 10:28.
6. Ed. — Titus 3:4–7.
7. Ed. — Galatians 5:16.



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