

ADDENDUM

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PROTESTANT
REFORMATION ON THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS
CONDITION OF COMMUNITIES AND NATIONS

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COOKE'S CHURCH: Thursday afternoon, September 22nd, 1892, 3 o'clock, P.M. The Council resumed its session, the Rev. Prof. T. Darling, D.D., in the Chair. After devotional exercises, the Council proceeded to the Order of the Day, and heard the following Paper by the Rev. Professor H. Bavinck, D.D., Kampen, on "The Influence of the Protestant Reformation on the Moral and Religious Condition of Communities and Nations."

(Dr. Bavinck's very able and valuable paper is of such a length as forbids our printing it as a whole. We therefore give an abstract of its earlier passages, presenting the remainder in full.)

[In his opening paragraphs Dr. Bavinck remarks that the consideration of the topic assigned him is *timely*, because modern Romanists extol the happy moral and social condition of men previous to the Reformation, and deplore the tremendous overturning of all such that that movement occasioned. The subject is also *important* and *difficult*, for the nations affected by the Reformation are numerous and widely distributed. For three long centuries these have lived under an influence whose extent cannot be apprehended by the senses nor measured either by civil or ecclesiastical statistics. The title of the subject assumes that the Reformation was a religio-ethical movement and could exercise such an influence. It did not stand by itself, but, while part of the Renaissance, it preferred the friendship of God to that of man. What the Reformers sought was peace of the soul with God, liberty to serve Him according to His word, satisfaction for deep spiritual yearnings, such as the Romish Church could

never meet. Opposing the so-called abuses of the Romish system, the Reformers discovered that these "abuses" were but the natural fruit of the tree of Pelagianism, on which they grew; over against this they, therefore, placed an entirely new conception of religion and of morality. Thus, the Reformation "was born from the downcast heart, from the deep sense of guilt, and from the confusion of the spirit. It proceeded on the supposition that man is a sinner separated from God, and so in its starting point it was diametrically opposed to Humanism. It moved in the old, that is the Christian, antithesis of sin and grace, of guilt and reconciliation." As against Home it sought an answer to the question, "How is sin pardoned and peace with God obtained?" It thus changed and purified the religio-ethical consciousness, lifting man up to an infinitely higher plane than that on which Home had placed him, and setting aside for ever that sacramental system and outward morality in which the chief strength of Rome had consisted. Under the Reformation, "the entire ethical life originates in religion, in faith, and is itself nothing but a serving the Lord. The antithesis of consecrated and unconsecrated collapses, and makes way for that of holy and unholy. The natural is recognised in its value, and is "sanctified by faith in Christ." The Reformation has also changed the religious condition of nations. It made religion a personal matter, and encouraged liberty of conscience; though from this again have come our Protestant divisions. But in this matter Rome has no advantage over us. Our division into Lutheran and Reformed has its counterpart in the existence of the Greek and the Roman Churches. The latter is split up internally into countless parties, held together by the authority of the central power at Rome, while Protestants, however divided, remain one body through their free-adherence to the one universal Christian faith. The Romish system fostered and still fosters superstitious observances, but the Reformation set men free from all these. The former cherished the external, the latter seeks to influence the soul.]

But morally also, the influence of the Reformation on the nations has not been lowering in its character. It must be admitted, however, that in this respect the Lutheran Reformation comes behind the Calvinistic. For this there are several reasons. The German Reformation, though at first just as Augustinian and just as radical as the Swiss, was early dulled into conservatism. Luther, frightened by the peasant insurrection and the radicalism of the Anabaptists, restricted the working of his reformatory principle to the realm of the religious life, and for the rest left everything, as much as possible, as it was. Especially after the Diet of Spires, he left the settlement of the entire earthly life to the princes of the realm, who neither from principle nor from noble motives were all favourably disposed to the Reformation. It is true he liberated the ethical life from the impress of the profane, but he had neither the power nor the inclination to reform it entirely, from the standpoint of the Christian principle, so that the Lutheran

Reformation was only a reformation of the *religion*, a *change of the inner man*. Luther makes the worldly free from the ecclesiastical, but further he allows it, in a dualistic way, to stand side by side with the spiritual. And sometimes he speaks as if the external is an indifferent matter and incapable of moral renewal. The great and rich thought is not grasped, that Christ is not only king of the soul, but of the body as well; not only of the Church, but of the entire plane of all human life. This explains why even the Lutherans of to-day separate themselves very little from the world. In their common daily life there rules something cosmic, a "being conformed unto the world," which seriously endangers the Christian life, and not rarely gives occasion for serious complaints. The field of the *adiaphora* is very wide, and takes in nearly the whole external life. . Dancing, the theatre, concerts, etc., are frequented by believers and unbelievers alike. The keeping of the Sabbath, in Lutheran countries, differs but little from that in Romish lands.

In a direct way, the influence of the Lutheran Reformation is only appreciable in religious life and in pure doctrine. From this stationary and conservative tendency of Lutheranism, pietism has also originated: *i.e.*, the tendency which attaches value only to piety, and leaves all the rest—art, science, the State, society, etc.,—to the world.

The religio-ethical influence of the Reformation is most powerfully and purely observable, not among the Lutheran, but among the Calvinistic nations. The Swiss Reformation was radical and total. In principle it went deeper down, and therefore its practical compass was greater. Lutheranism took its point of vantage in history, in the concrete reality, and there it rested. It did not ascend higher; it did not penetrate deeper; it was completely satisfied with justification by faith,—*i.e.*, with the religion of the heart and the pure doctrine. But Calvinism has no peace until it had found the eternal in and behind the temporal. Its motto was, as it were,—"*caducum eterna tuetur*," the temporal is bearer of the eternal. The Calvinist found no rest for his thinking, no more than for his heart, unless he rested in God, the eternal and unchangeable. He penetrated into the holiest of holies of the temple, to the final ground of things, and did not cease his search after the "*aiwti,a*," the "*dio,tī*" of things, till he had found the answer in the eternal and sovereign pleasure, in the "*eu/dokia tou/ qeou/*." Calvinism is the only consistent theological view of the world and of humanity. And therefore, apparently, it is particular, but in reality it is most universal and catholic. From the high, spiritual, theological stand-point which the Calvinist occupies, he looks over the whole world. He see everything *sub specie æternitatis*,—broad and wide and far. In his system all depends, not on any creature but only, on God Almighty. There is no limit to His grace and mercy but that which He Himself, in His unsearchable and adorable good pleasure, may have established. The love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, have no limitation or condition, out-

side of themselves, in any quality of the creature. Neither country nor people, neither error nor sin, neither sex nor age bind them. "From Him and through Him and to Him are all things."

Of course this Calvinism gave a peculiar character to the religious life. The religious life among the Calvinists is not only different from that among the Catholics, but also from that among the Lutherans. The difference is that in the religious life, as it reveals itself in Reformed circles, as well as in doctrine, *the Sovereignty of God stands foremost*. Not the love of the Father, as in many modern circles; not the person of Christ, as among the Moravians; not the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, as among the Anabaptists and Friends; but the Sovereignty of God, in the entire work of salvation, and over the whole expanse of the religious life, *is here the starting-point and the ruling idea*. That Sovereignty is the Divine in the divinity, and the unity in the several operations of the three Persons of the adorable Trinity.

And now that it may be true that Calvinism, by its strict preaching of God's justice and law, awakens a deep feeling of guilt and unworthiness in man, and that it prostrates him deeply in the dust before God's sovereign majesty; but equally true it is, that afterwards, it elevates him to a singular height of blessedness, and that it causes him to rest in the free, eternal, and unchangeable good pleasure of the Father. This system is certainly not adapted to the making of "soft and dear" people, and it is averse to all sickly sentimentality. But it creates men of marble, with a character of steel, with a will of iron, with an insuperable power, with an extraordinary energy. The word of Bismarck—"Wir, Deutsche, fürchten Gott und sonst nichts in der Welt," is spoken from the heart of the Calvinist. Elected by God, he recognises in himself and in all creatures nothing but instruments in the Divine hand. He distinguishes sharply between the Creator and the creature, and, in his religion, he will know nothing but God and His Word. His piety links itself therefore most closely to the Scriptures, and not a whit less to the Old than to the New Testament. For, in the leadings of Israel and in the dispensation of the Old Covenant, this Sovereignty speaks louder yet than in the New Testament.

The study of the Holy Scriptures occupies therefore, a large place in Reformed circles. And because Calvinism is more masculine than feminine, more mental than emotional, it endeavours to develop the religious life in others chiefly by instruction. It possesses sharply defined dogmatics, and owes a great share of its influence and extension to the clearness of its conceptions, and the sobriety and healthfulness of its entire view of life and of the world.

But, yet more than in matters of religion, the difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism, is apparent in the influence on the *moral* condition of the nations. It must be acknowledged that the Calvinistic Reformation, in many countries, has also too early become stationary and conservative. In the Netherlands, for example, the activi-

ty of the Reformed ceased very nearly altogether after the Synod of Dort. Other powers then obtained a hearing. The magistrates bound the Church and broke its influence. Philosophy passed theology in the race. Literature and art were directed in unreformed paths. Riches and luxury stifled the simple Calvinistic spirit, so that we retain certain religious and moral conditions, which are little in harmony with the demands of the Reformation. But notwithstanding all this, Calvinism has exerted a mighty influence on the moral condition of the nations. In the mighty mind of the French reformer, regeneration was no system, which filled out creation, as among Romanists; no religious reformation, which left creation intact, as among Lutherans; much less an entirely new creation, as among the Anabaptists;—*but a reformation and a renewal of all creatures*. Calvin traced the working of sin wider than Luther, deeper than Zwingli. But, on this very account, grace is narrower with Luther and poorer with Zwingli than with Calvin. The Calvinist, therefore, is not satisfied when he is personally reconciled with God and assured of His salvation. His work begins then in dead earnest, and he becomes a co-worker with God. For the Word of God is not only the fountain of the truth of salvation, but also the norm of the whole life; not only glad tidings of salvation for the soul, but also for the body and for the entire world. The reformed believer continues therefore, “*ad extra*,” that reformation which began with himself and in his own heart. The conversion of his soul is not the aim and end, but the beginning and starting-point of his new life. He is therefore active and aggressive, and hates all false conservatism. The family and the school, the Church and Church government, the State and society, art and science, all are fields which he has to work and to develop for the glory of God. The Swiss Reformation bore thus not only a religious, but also an ethical social and political character.

The moral life, which has been fostered by the Calvinistic Reformation, distinguishes itself both from the Anabaptist “*avoidance*,” and from the Lutheran “*cosmism*.”¹ The Anabaptists and the Friends *avoid* the world; they break all contact with unbelievers, and withdraw within the narrow circle of their own spiritual kindred. Their dress is as simple as possible, their lives are sober, they do not cultivate art or science, they do not join in the enjoyments of life. There is a perfect separation and a dualism, carried on at times to the verge of the ridiculous. The Lutherans, on the contrary, maintain an unrestrained association with unbelievers; they take part in worldly pleasures, and there is here a manifest mixing of world and Church; in the common every-day life, the distinction between believers and

1. Editor's note: By “cosmism” Bavinck seems to have in mind that idea that the order of nature (the so-called non-religious aspects of life, which is then conceived as *most* of life) floats free from the gospel and exists in and for itself, basically a kind of secularism.—JMB

unbelievers is almost totally lost sight of. Now, Calvinism has taken position *between the two*, and has desired distinction, but no full separation, between Church and world. It foresaw that a complete separation would lead back to Romish asceticism and to monasticism; that it would compel the believers, contrary to the word of Paul (1 Cor. v. 10) to go out of the world; that it would only promote the unnatural; and that it would finally, terribly avenge itself in all manner of sins. But, on the other hand, it has not left the moral life to itself and to individual tendency and social caprice. Its conception of sin was too deep for this. The Calvinist has little faith in man, who is inclined to all manner of evil. It feared the play of emotions and the arousal of sensations which might very easily degenerate into sinful lusts and passions. It knew how easily the flesh was awakened and then spurred on by the enticements of the world. And therefore, the Calvinist has put the entire moral life under the discipline of the law and under the rule of the Divine commandment.

The moral life therefore reveals, in all Reformed circles, a strict legal character; it has always more or less of the Puritanical stamp. It characterises itself by the strictness of Sabbath-observation, by the antagonism to all worldly pleasures, by a serious conception of the entire life. Concerts and theatres, song and dancing parties, feasts and drinking-bouts are forbidden enjoyments of the world.

And although contact with the world need not be avoided, in an ascetic or Anabaptist way, Calvinism has yet never promoted a real communion of life with unbelievers, on festive occasions, in marriage, in enjoyments, etc.; nay, it has rather kept back from such communion and disapproved of it. The Geneva of Calvin's day, the legislation of the Presbyterian Churches in Scotland, in America, and in the Netherlands, prove it sufficiently.

Puritanism has thus sometimes nourished a hardness of sentiment, a coldness of heart, and a severity of judgment, which cannot impress favourably. The free, the genial, the spontaneous, in the moral life, have often been oppressed and killed by it. Far more classic than romantic in its nature, it has for the whole of life a norm and type, to which it must answer and be conformed.

And yet, we must not forget that Calvinism, even in its strictest form, differs on principle from the Romish asceticism and from the Anabaptist "avoidance." These originate in despal of the world; in the thought that the natural life, as being of a lower order, cannot be sanctified. But the Calvinistic rigorism was born from the desire to consecrate the whole life to God. Rome tries to bridle the natural man, Calvinism tries to sanctify him. And if it has thus been guilty of exaggeration, and if it has often disowned and killed the natural, every one who recognises the power and extensive dominion of sin will feel the difficulty here to walk in the right way, and equally to avoid conformity to and flight from the world, the worship and the despal of the same.

The strict morality of Calvinism has, moreover, nourished a series of beautiful virtues: domesticity, order, neatness, temperance, chastity, obedience, earnestness, industry, sense of duty, etc. These may not belong to the brilliant and heroic virtues; they are specially civic virtues, and are of inestimable value to a people. Thereby the Calvinistic nations have laid by, in store, a capital of moral possessions, on which the present generations are still living. Nay, by this strict morality, Calvinism has not only promoted the simple domestic taste and has called into existence a solid *bourgeoisie*, but has also regenerated nations and founded States. For, in distinction from Pelagianism, which is always more or less *aristocratic* and *hierarchical*, because it transfers from nature to the realm of grace the self-distinctions of men, Calvinism is *democratic* in character, and seeks its strength among the common people. It tolerates neither hierarchy in the Church, nor tyranny in the State. It is a principle of liberty, and has a republican mien. It had the greatest success among the nations that were strongly active and mostly set on liberty. It has defended, extended, and maintained the rights and liberty of the people in Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, and America. The character of the people and the nature of the religion here agreed and joined hands. This is the reason why Calvinism extended itself much farther than Lutheranism. It has prosecuted its march through and around the world. It is a missionary power; in it lives an impetus to conquer all the world. *Methodism* as well as the *Salvation Army* here betray their Calvinistic origin. All the nations, among whom Calvinism became a power, distinguish themselves by extraordinary activity, clearness of thought, religious spirit, love of liberty, and by a treasure of civic virtues, which are not found, to that extent, among Catholic nations. A comparison between Scotland and Ireland, between Prussia and Austria, between Holland and Spain, between North and South America, will always result in favour of the Protestant countries. In the centuries which have elapsed since the Reformation, the more serious Protestant and Germanic North of Europe and America has unquestionably, in almost every domain, passed in the arena the fickle Romish and Romanic South of both continents. The Reformation 'continues, therefore, to occupy an important place among the means by which God has promoted the religio-ethical education of the nations and of humanity.