

Review Essay

Bavinck on the Family and Integral Human Development*

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Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) writes with breadth and depth on the Christian family in this one-hundred-year-old study on a Christian fundamental theology of marriage and family. Given the contemporary attempts of Christians from various ecclesial traditions to revise marriage and family such that marriage between people of the same sex is theologically defensible,¹ Bavinck's book has much to teach us based on his orthodox theological defense of marriage and family life. Of course in the early twentieth century, Bavinck did not have to meet the challenge of a revisionist vision of marriage as we do now. Yet, even then marriage and family life did face the challenges of divorce; open marriage; out-of-wedlock births; cohabitation; and, more generally, licentious sexual living (*TCF*, 64, 75, 89, 138–39). Bavinck addresses some of these challenges head-on by arguing that a right understanding of the family as the formative and nurturing institution par excellence is essential to integral human development. "A person's becoming [integrally] human occurs within the home; here the foundation is laid for the forming of the future man and woman, of the future father and mother, of the future member of society, of the future citizen, of the future subject in the kingdom of God" (*TCF*, 108). I will come back to this argument later. For now, I would like to outline the breadth and depth of Bavinck's treatment of the Christian family.

* Herman Bavinck, *Het Christelijke Huisgezin*, 2nd rev. ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1912; first edition 1908). Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman as *The Christian Family*, introduction by James Eglinton (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2012); idem, *De Vrouw in de Hedendaagsche Maatschappij* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1918). Available online at <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl>. Subsequent references to *The Christian Family* will be cited parenthetically in the text as *TCF*.

The Breadth of Bavinck's Vision

Bavinck writes with breadth because of his comprehensive vision of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation in light of which he reflects on marriage and family. Marriage and family are grounded in the order of creation, seriously disrupted by the fall into sin, integrally redeemed by salvation in Christ,² and attaining the fullness of redemption in Christ when creation reaches its final goal. Within this comprehensive scope, central to Bavinck's thought is the insight that grace restores nature³ rather than abolishes or leaves it untouched. But also, forasmuch as grace's restoration is not a mere re-creation of the deepest foundations of created reality, in some sense those foundations are raised to a "higher level" in the eschatological consummation of God's plan of salvation for the whole creation.⁴ In a passage worth quoting in full from volume 4 of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, he succinctly describes this consummation and its substantial continuity with the original creation.

All that is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable in the whole of creation, in heaven and on earth, is gathered up in the future city of God—renewed, re-created, boosted to its highest glory. The substance [of the city of God] is present in the creation. Just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, as carbon is converted into diamond, as the grain of wheat upon dying in the ground produces other grains of wheat, as all of nature revives in the spring and dresses up in celebrative clothing, as the believing community is formed out of Adam's fallen race, as the resurrection body is raised from the body that is dead and buried in the earth, so too, by the re-creating power of Christ, the new heaven and the new earth will one day emerge from the fire-purged elements of this world, radiant in enduring glory and forever set free from the "bondage to decay" ... [Rom. 8:21]. More glorious than this beautiful earth, more glorious than the earthly Jerusalem, more glorious even than paradise will be the glory of the new Jerusalem, whose architect and builder is God himself. The state of glory (*status gloriae*) will be no mere restoration (*restauratie*) of the state of nature (*status naturae*), but a re-formation that, thanks to the power of Christ, transforms all matter ... into form, all potency into actuality (*potential, actus*), and presents the entire creation before the face of God, brilliant in unfading splendor and blossoming in a springtime of eternal youth. *Substantially* nothing is lost.⁵

In the light of this vision, Bavinck holds that marriage is the basis of the family in the order of creation. What, then, is marriage? Bavinck affirms the *conjugal* view of marriage in which marriage is a comprehensive two-in-one-flesh-union—mind, will, and bodily union—of man and woman, ordered to family

life, to having and rearing children, and requiring a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other. Significantly, he regards sexual differentiation—and its corollary the “twoness” of male and female *bodily union*—as not only a created reality that is good but also a fundamental prerequisite for marriage (*TCF*, 70).⁶ On its goodness, he writes,

God is the Creator of the human being, and simultaneously also the Inaugurator of sex and of sexual difference. This difference did not result from sin; it existed from the very beginning, it has its basis in creation, it is a revelation of God’s will and sovereignty, and is therefore wise and holy and good. . . . Together in mutual fellowship [man and woman] bear the divine image. God himself is the Creator of duality-in-unity. Within that unity, they are and remain two. (*TCF*, 5)

As to sexual differentiation being a fundamental prerequisite for marriage, Bavinck elaborates on the concluding claim of the last quote. He says,

In order to make such unity, fellowship, and cooperation in soul and body both possible and real, God created the woman *from* the man and *for* the man (1 Cor. 11:8–9), but also simultaneously *unto* the man, even as he created the man *unto* the woman. God made two out of one, so that he could then make the two into one, one soul and one flesh. This kind of fellowship is possible only between two. From the very beginning, marriage was and is by virtue of its essential nature monogamous, an essential bond between one man and one woman, and therefore also a lifelong covenant. (*TCF*, 7)

Thus, man and woman were made for each other, these two sexually differentiated people being united comprehensively in the full and complete communion of husband and wife—again, mind, will, and bodily union—in one body, “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). This is the essence of marriage (*TCF*, 85). Yet, there is more, and here we come back to the claim that family life is based on marriage: the unique fellowship that is marriage makes it the kind of bond (*conjugium*) inherently fulfilled and expanded by the procreation and raising of children. Bavinck explains,

Upon this fellowship of love, then, God has bestowed his blessing in a special way. He is the Creator of man and of woman, the inaugurator of marriage, and the Sanctifier of matrimony. Each child born is the fruit of fellowship, and as such is also the fruit of divine blessing. The two-in-oneness of husband and wife expands with a child into a three-in-oneness. Father, mother, and child are one soul and one flesh, expanding and unfolding the one image of God, united within threefold diversity and diverse within harmonic unity. (*TCF*, 7–8; see also, 96)

The Christian family has, then, according to Bavinck, a triadic structure consisting essentially of father, mother, and child, and this and only this family structure is grounded in the order of creation.

Turning now from marriage in the order of creation to marriage under the regime of sin, Bavinck discusses the disruptive consequences of original sin as well as man's personal sin for marriage and family life. He sums up these consequences:

All the rich, glorious relationships that God originally created as part of the life of marriage, home, and family—between husband and wife, parents and children, brothers and sisters, those free and those who are servants—are attacked and disrupted by those sins. An entire army of evils besieges the life of the family: 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 elevating even the passions of the flesh into the service of deity—all of these and similar sins threaten the existence and undermine the well-being of the home.⁷ (*TCF*, 22)

When Christianity entered and took root in the culture of its time there were several practices in Roman society, originating from the influence of Greek and Oriental customs, that Christianity transformed. These signs of moral deterioration, of the fall into sin, included the existence of temporary marital arrangements, divorce, extramarital affairs, maintaining relations with harlots and concubinage—all of which resulted in the breakdown of the marital norms of permanence and exclusivity in that culture. Against this cultural background of sin's specific disruption of marital and family life, Bavinck describes the concrete effects of redemption: Grace enters into the realm of the natural world, transforming it from within so as to restore it to divinely ordained ends. Bavinck explains,

The confession of Christ made its appearance in this immoral society at that time.... Christianity did not overthrow the natural ordinances and institutions, but infused a new spirit in them, reforming them from within.... In the Christian faith, husband and wife were restored to one another, and various sins of harlotry and unchastity, adultery and divorce, had to give way to the love that bound them together anew. Christianity sanctified marriage, liber-

ated it from various evils, and once again established it on the foundation of the divine commandment.

What Bavinck is arguing here is that the transformative power of the redeeming work of Christ does not eradicate the distinction between male and female, husband and wife, their two-in-one-flesh union. Rather, the essence of marital life, conjugal marriage, persists in the regime of sin but heals and corrects from within that which has been vitiated and depraved.⁸ Bavinck adds,

Just as Christianity bound husband and wife together again, so, too, it gave parents back their children, and children [back] their parents. The wife became mother once again in the true sense of the word, the one who not only gives birth to her children but who also nurtures them. And children obtained rights as well, such as the right not to be destroyed before birth and not to be killed or abandoned as a castaway after birth. In the corrupt society there were actually no longer any fathers and mothers, any spouses and children. But now they were all once again bound together in one and in one family; and that family was not merely a part of the state, but it acquired an independent existence and became the foundation of the entire civil society. (*TCF*, 50)

The main point in the above passage has been argued by others, most recently by Dinesh D’Souza who said, “Christianity exalted heterosexual monogamous love, which would provide the basis for a lasting and exclusive relationship between husband and wife, oriented toward the rearing of children.”⁹ In other words, Christianity reaffirms the “father-mother-child” triad, introducing it into a corrupt society in which it was completely foreign, making marriage and family life the foundational cell of the entire civil society.

It remains to be understood that, according to Bavinck, marriage is not only grounded in the original order of creation but is also—indeed, most fully expressed as acquiring a richer and deeper significance through redemptive revelation—an image of the covenant of fidelity and love between God and his people. This is the case in the Old Testament covenant:

By virtue of that covenant Jehovah stands in a relation toward Israel as with no other nation on earth. Jehovah is the rock from which Israel was hewn (Deut. 32:4, 18; Isa. 51:1), the Father whom Israel denigrated (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16; 64:8), the Husbandman who planted the vine of Israel (Isa. 5; Jer. 2:21), and more than that, was the Bridegroom and the Husband who had chosen and betrothed Israel to himself out of pure grace (Isa. 61:10; 62:5; Jer. 2:32; Ezek. 16; Hosea 1–3), and is now jealous of his honor, and regards all the apostasy of his people as harlotry and adultery, as sexual immorality and

infidelity (Lev. 20:6; Num. 14:33; Ps. 73:27; Isa. 1:21; Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:32; and so forth). (*TCF*, 36)

The intimate covenant of the Old Testament is a prefiguration of the spousal love that exists between Christ and his bride, the church. In short, the fellowship between Christ and his church that is reflected in conjugal marriage is “the ultimate goal of history,” according to Bavinck, “The history of the human race began with a wedding; it also ends with a wedding, the wedding of Christ and his church, of the heavenly Lord with his earthly bride” (*TCF*, 161; see also, 1, 44, 109).

The Depth of Bavinck’s Vision

Thus far I have been explaining the breadth of Bavinck’s vision of marriage and family life; his vision also has depth. Consider his thesis that the family as a social institution is essential to the integral development of the human person as well as of society more broadly. Bavinck regards the family as the first natural society—the first, best, and irreplaceable school of nurture—occupying the central place of social life as the basic “cell” of society (*TCF*, 92–93, 101–2, 105–8).¹⁰ Bavinck especially opposes any theory of nurturing, of child-rearing, that transfers the uniquely indispensable responsibility of parents, of mother and father, to specialists and experts, rendering it a professional task outside the family, particularly by the state (*TCF*, 97–105). To use a handy phrase coined by the Bergers in their significant study on the family, Bavinck decidedly opposes the “professionalization of parenthood.”¹¹ In contrast, Bavinck explains that the family provides both the formation and the nurture of the human person,

The family does not consist of a number of empty forms that we need to fill, but it is full of life. The husband and wife, coming from differing families, each contributes their own genetic makeup, tradition, nature, character, disposition, and life. And each child born to them is a member of humanity, a person with capacities like those of everyone else, and yet distinguished from all those others, whose relation is close or distant, with a unique existence and character. . . . Therefore the nurture that takes place within the family possesses a very special character. Even as the family itself cannot be imitated, so too one cannot make a copy of family nurture. No school, no boarding school, no day-care center, no government institution can replace or improve upon the family. . . . The family is the school of life, because it is the fountain and hearth of life. Such nurture encompasses the whole person. . . . The child does indeed learn within the family and receive instruction; the child gradually becomes oriented within his surroundings and gets to know his small world expressing

a multitude of observations, emotions, imaginations, words, and thoughts. . . . The powers of observation, memory, and judgment are exercised, but also the powers of imagination, of the will, of conscience, of character, and of the heart, as are the muscles and the nerves, together with the head, hands, and feet. Vices are resisted—stubbornness, selfishness, and jealousy; virtues are cultivated—purity, order, obedience, cooperation, compassion—as in no other school. (*TCF*, 106–8)

As to the “extraordinary significance” (*TCF*, 114) of family life as a social good, Bavinck holds that society’s spiritual and moral well-being is dependent on the moral health of the family. “For there in the family from the moment we enter the world, we get to know all those relationships that we will enter later in society—relationships of freedom and connectedness, independence and dependence, authority and obedience, equality and difference.” Bavinck adds, “In the family we get to know the secret of life, the secret, namely, that not selfishness but self-denial and self-sacrifice, dedication and love, constitute the rich content of human living. And from the family we carry those moral relationships into society.” In sum, “the family is the nursery of love and inoculates society with such love.” Thus, “love is the foundation and the cement of the Christian society. Christianity is not the architect, but the soul of society.”¹² Attacks against the family are then, in consequence, undermining the moral foundations of the family and, in turn, “digging away the moral foundations on which society has been established as a moral institution” (*TCF*, 134).

We have been following Bavinck’s practice of speaking of *the* family. Bavinck views the family as a divinely instituted structure, but he is not oblivious to the facts of empirical diversity of the larger and complementary structures in which the nucleus of the family—father, mother, and child—has been embedded throughout human history.¹³ Bavinck is not denying that social practices, such as marriage and family life, can be changed in some respects by culture: “But it can do so only within specific limits and on the foundation of nature itself. People and nations were very different from each other in various times and circumstances, but the man has always been a man and the woman has always been a woman. There is nothing mutable about this fact; we have only to accept it” (*TCF*, 65). Consider, though, the functional differentiation of the family as a consequence of urbanization and industrialization; for example, the family lost its economic independence to provide all of its needs. It became dependent on its surrounding society, work was separated from the home, technological innovations transformed housework, and servants disappeared. Nonetheless, Bavinck holds, “One may not deduce from all of this [empirical diversity] that the family is disappearing and family life will be destroyed. *The forms may change, but*

the essence remains” (*TCF*, 144, italics added; see also, 160).¹⁴ Of course, the essence or the core objective meaning of family life is, according to Bavinck, the father-mother-child triad.

In his understanding of this triad, the husband-wife relationship is such that the husband is the head of the family without compromising the equal dignity of mother and children. As Bavinck writes, “In a word, the authority . . . the husband and father has in our society been significantly modified; it has received a far more rational, moral, and personal character, but it [male headship] nonetheless continues in this modified form; in its essence it is indestructible” (*TCF*, 95; see also 144). At the same time, and inseparably, adds Bavinck, “[marital] communion presupposes the mutual independence and freedom of personality. Only within marriage does the personality of husband and wife, and each according to their natures, come fully into its own” (*TCF*, 85).¹⁵ As one contemporary Catholic proponent of this view summarizes it, “The New Testament and Christian tradition present marriage as a union of persons, equal in personal dignity and fundamental rights, but with complementary roles and a certain primacy for the husband.”¹⁶ This is precisely Bavinck’s view (*TCF*, 65–70, 83–86). In this connection, Bavinck also underscores the primary vocation of the woman within marriage and family, to motherhood and care of the family. Of course Bavinck affirms that some women may pursue the course of “devoting themselves to some profession or occupation.” Consequently, “the women’s vocation may never be lost from view.” The “small minority” of women who pursue some profession or occupation outside the home “may not set the standard for training of the larger majority” (*TCF*, 154).

Leaving aside these last two points that are essentially contested by many in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the focus in what follows is on the essence, or the core objective meaning, of family that is, according to Bavinck, the father-mother-child triad. How can Bavinck justify this claim both biblically and philosophically?¹⁷

Biblical and Philosophical Justification

Regarding the Bible, the most obvious obstacle to Bavinck’s claim is that this triadic structure is often accompanied by polygamy, concubinage, and divorce, and, moreover, as Bavinck observes, the first two are closely connected with the patriarchal structure of marriage and family life (*TCF*, 26). In this patriarchal structure, “the authority and power of the home rested with the father.” Bavinck explains, “As such, the husband and father possessed extensive power. In addition to his lawful wife he could take one or more concubines; the law permitted

this patriarchal custom to exist and did not forbid polygamy (Lev. 18:18; Deut. 21:15).” In sum, “The home, the entire family constituted one organic unit, with the patriarch as head” (*TCF*, 31). Significantly, Bavinck contests the inference that this patriarchy placed the wife and children of the patriarch in a situation of slavery. The latter, as a matter of fact, were not devoid of all rights, says Bavinck, “the rights of the wife and the children, actually those of the husband as well, were established in large part not in the law but in the mores. Those mores ascribed to the wife and children a large measure of independence” (*TCF*, 32–33).

With respect to polygamy and concubinage, Bavinck addresses the difference between what the Bible reveals in the sense of accurately reporting or recording and what it reveals in the sense of normatively endorsing or actually teaching.¹⁸ The Old Testament gave a qualified toleration¹⁹ to polygamy and divorce, but it does so in light of the hardness of men’s heart, says Bavinck. This qualified toleration was in conflict with the essence of marriage built into creation—a two-in-one-flesh-union of man and woman, in principle and in essence exclusive and permanent, a covenant established by God—and hence these practices could never be the norm. What is more, the Old Testament contains a trajectory that criticizes these practices because they fall short of the divinely instituted order of creation.²⁰ Adds Bavinck, “Respect for the home was established by a number of stipulations that proscribed marital relationships between blood relatives and members of the immediate family. . . . Forbidden with equal vigor were prostitution (Gen. 38:24; Lev. 19:29; Deut. 23:17–18), fornication and adultery (Exod. 20:14; Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22; Ezek. 16:38–41; 23:43–49), and various other unchaste and impure acts [bestiality, ritual nakedness, homosexuality] (Exod. 22:19; 28:42; Lev. 15:18; 18:22–23; 20:13, 18; 18:19; Deut. 23:13–14; Ezek. 18:6; 22:10)” (*TCF*, 35).

Moreover, this trajectory of critique of polygamy, concubinage, and divorce receives its fullest expression in the New Testament with the teaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles (*TCF*, 41–47), which refers us back to the original institution of marriage. “Back-to-creation” is the *leitmotif* in Jesus’ teaching. God’s intentional creation of man as “male and female” and the conjugal view of marriage as a union between a man and a woman entails that the first prerequisite for an acceptable sexual bond before God is the “twoness” of the sexes ordained by him at creation. In short, complementary sexual differentiation is a necessary condition in order to effect the “one flesh” union of marriage: “So then they are no longer two but one flesh” (Mark 10:8).²¹

Bavinck adds in respect to the marital norms of exclusivity and permanence, “In terms of its nature and essence, marriage is the bond of one man and one woman becoming one flesh for their entire lives. In this way God has joined

them together, and what God has thus joined, man may not put asunder (Matt 19:4–6)” (*TCF*, 42). In sum, as to its continuing normativity, “For [marriage] dates from the creation, having received at that time its rule and law, and despite the frequency of its corruption, appears among all peoples. The New Testament as well returns repeatedly to the original institution of marriage to derive from that regulation in terms of which marriage should be arranged today” (*TCF*, 44). This return to the original institution of marriage also refers to family life, including not only the relationship of husband and wife but also of parents and children. “Although corrupted and destroyed by sin,” says Bavinck, “[they] are nevertheless restored and renewed by Christ” (*TCF*, 45).²²

Having summarized Bavinck’s biblical justification for the essence of marriage, there remains to be said something about his philosophical justification for the nature or essences of things created, such as marriage, and their relationship to God.²³ Bavinck’s justification represents a dominant strand in the Christian philosophical tradition, namely, Thomism with its roots in a biblically transformed version of the Platonic and Aristotelian doctrine of the “ideas” or “forms” of things in God.²⁴ Bavinck employs this doctrine as a way of avoiding the “dilemma between arbitrariness that appears to undercut necessity [within the context of creation] and necessity that appears to dominate the creator.”²⁵ On the one hand, although the world and everything in it exists contingently by divine choice, things within the world, that is, their natures or essences, are not drained of necessity. Bavinck does not hold to the position of theological voluntarism. On the other hand, affirming the necessities of things within the context of creation, as Bavinck does, need not imply that God is ruled by nature or essences existing over against himself. Yes, Bavinck holds that divine ideas or forms in God, which he refers to as *causae exemplares*, explain the natures or essences of things that have been created. Nevertheless, he does not embrace a *pure* theological essentialism, a view that he calls intellectualism. These divine ideas or forms do not explain the existence of things, “Over against intellectualism [essentialism], voluntarism is on solid ground in claiming that not an idea or exemplar in the divine mind, but only the will [divine choice] can be the principle that brings things into existence. Ideas can be exemplary causes but they cannot as such be efficient causes.”²⁶

In short, according to Bavinck, the way things are, such as marriage, family, morality and law, science and art, have necessity because the nature or essences of things resident in the divine consciousness determine the existence of things. As Sokolowski summarizes the philosophical position of Bavinck, “*esse* [existence] subsists only in God [*ipsum esse subsistens*], so the basis for the determination of things is not distinct from him: it is his own existence. The potentiality for

there to be the various kinds of things is to be placed, not in any material or foundation distinct from God, but in God himself."²⁷

In this light, we can understand Bavinck's conviction that marriage and family life have necessary features, an objective core—the triadic structure of father-mother-child, permanent commitment, and exclusivity (monogamy). That triadic structure is universal in all or nearly all human societies:

Despite all those grievous sins that besieged and disrupted the home for century after century, generation after generation, among all peoples and every land, despite this entire stream of evils, the home has been preserved and maintained everywhere and in every age in more or less pure form.... It is a miracle of God's grace and of the leading of his providence. For we encounter everywhere, to a weaker or stronger degree, home and family life. We encounter among all peoples laws, mores, customs, and usages either described or undescribed, that *regulate entrance into marriage, the relationships between husband and wife, and the relationship between parents and children.*" (TCF, 23–24; italics added)

Regulations governing entering into the moral institution of marriage—choosing a spouse, initial commitment, engagement, in short, courtship—vary in diverse human societies. Nevertheless, the triadic structure of father-mother-child, which is the core objective meaning of marriage and family life, according to Bavinck, is a cross-cultural truth everywhere embodied in practice. Why, then, is the relationship between husband and wife, and thus between parents and children, regulated?

Quite essentially it is because it is a male-female sexual relationship that alone produces new human beings. As we noted earlier, Bavinck holds that civilization depends on strong, stable marriages for integral human development. Bavinck, of course, is not alone in holding this view. Contemporary defenders of traditional marriage similarly argue,

For these new and highly dependent people, there is no path to physical, moral, and cultural maturity without a long and delicate process of ongoing care and supervision—one to which men and women typically bring different strengths, and for which they are better suited the more closely related they are to the children. Unless children are to mature, they will never become healthy, upright, productive members of society; and that state of economic and social development we call "civilization" depends on healthy, upright, productive citizens. But regularly producing citizens is nearly impossible unless men and women commit their lives to each other and any children they might have.²⁸

Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, marriage and family life were being threatened by what Bavinck called “new theories,” as he observed, “Today both are viewed by many as an antiquated form of living together.” A new ethic was taking hold in the culture according to which “no other law exists for the union of man and woman than open love, unrestrained blind passion.” Undoubtedly, Bavinck is referring here to cohabitation. He explains,

A man and a woman commit themselves arbitrarily, without needing to take into consideration church or state, God or his commandment. They come together and they leave each other strictly as the desire of their heart inclines them. No longer does that commitment at all entail having children and raising those children to be citizens of the kingdom of God or even to be good citizens of the state. For procreation is entirely within their power; they decide that matter in terms of their own well-being. If it suits them, they will have children; but if they judge differently, then they simply decline to have children, or they arbitrarily limit the number of children, and they choose to destroy life in the womb [abortion]. (*TCF*, 138–39)

Clearly, Bavinck is persuaded that children do better in conjugal marriage and family life, and he thinks that he has the evidence of history on his side.²⁹ Nevertheless, unless I am mistaken, Bavinck does not directly ask the question posed by Maggie Gallagher: “Why does this cross-cultural truth matter? Why does this basic shape of the marriage idea occur over and over again in diverse societies?”³⁰ Gallagher adds, “What is [marriage’s] core organizing principle? If the question is taken seriously, the answer is not hard to find. Marriage arises over and over again because it addresses three persistent truths about human beings everywhere.”³¹ What are these three persistent truths?

The first is that the overwhelming majority of us are powerfully attracted, and not by reason, to an act that makes new human life. Sex between men and women makes babies. The second persistent truth: society needs babies. Reproduction is optional for the individual. But only those cultures that successfully manage the procreative implications of male-female sexual attraction survive to become one of the human possibilities. Marriage is often only one way a culture manages this challenge. Infanticide and/or child neglect are among the attractive solutions human beings have come up with to the problem of babies. A culture that believes in the equal dignity of every human life has a much more difficult “problem” to solve than a culture which is content to designate some women and some children, as of lesser or no value. Our strong form of marriage has evolved in a culture that proposes the idea that every child is a child of God with an intrinsic dignity and worth. The third truth on which marriage is based is that children ought to have a father as well as a mother.³²

This third truth brings us back to the triadic structure of father-mother-child, which is the core objective meaning of marriage and family life, according to Bavinck. In a brief conclusion, I will describe the contemporary challenges that Bavinck's view of the Christian family faces.

Conclusion: Challenges to the Father-Mother-Child Triad

If anything, the threats against the stability and strength of marriage and family life have increased because of a culture of divorce; cohabitation; unwed child-birth; reproductive technologies that have legitimized the separation of having babies and sex (such that women consciously have children without a father); fatherlessness; abortion on demand;³³ a permissive sexual ethic that has separated sex completely from having babies; and, last but not least, homosexuality and the push for same-sex marriage. All of these things have contributed to making children more vulnerable and neglected, less well-off, and less valued. Bavinck would be saddened but not surprised that the threats occurring in his own time have become culturally dominant forces digging at the foundations of marriage and family life. Let me close this article review with Bavinck's own encouraging words:

Nevertheless, no matter how gloomy all of this may be and no matter the effort it may take to row against the current of the age, Christians may not permit their conduct to be determined by the spirit of the age, but must focus on the requirement of God's commandment. Even if they come to stand alone, as history has so often obligated them to do, they must show in word and deed what an inestimable blessing God has granted to humanity and to society, to church and state, with the gift of marriage and family. (*TCF*, 139)

Notes

1. For example, see the *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2008) issue that is entirely devoted to homosexuality, ethics, and the church. More recently, an entire issue (93, no. 1, [Winter 2011]) of the same journal was devoted to opposing viewpoints of the question, same-sex relationships, and the nature of marriage. See also, Charles Hefling, “It looks like a wedding,” which positively addresses the question of the new Episcopal same-sex rite, *Christian Century*, September 5, 2012, 10–11.
2. There is a faint echo of the redemptive-historical correlation of Eve and Mary in Bavinck’s claim, “Mary, the one blessed among women [Luke 1:42], will also repair Eve’s offense” (*TCF*, 14). The earliest fathers of the church, such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, John Chrysotom, and Jerome speak of Mary as the New Eve. For instance, Saint Irenaeus memorably writes: “Thus the knot formed by Eve’s disobedience was untied by the obedience of Mary. What the Virgin Eve tied through unbelief, the Virgin Mary untied through faith” (cited in John Henry Newman, *The New Eve* [Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952], 15).
3. It is necessary to engage critically Bavinck’s charge of *extrinsicism* against what he takes to be *the* Catholic understanding of the relation of nature and grace (*TCF*, 54–55). I have done so at length elsewhere in *Dialogue of Love: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic Ecumenist* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010). Suffice it to note here the dualistic and extrinsic construal of nature and grace, as Bavinck understands it, which I follow up by a few remarks. On this view, grace is merely alongside of or above nature—a mere superstructure erected on top of pure nature, a plus-factor in addition to nature—rather than directing and ordering nature from within, restoring and renewing it according to its divinely intended ends. I agree with Bavinck that extrinsicism is unquestionably found in both Catholic and Protestant thinkers. Catholic criticisms of this view have not been in short supply in the nineteenth (e.g., Matthias Joseph Scheeben, and John Henry Newman) and twentieth centuries (Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, and others). So what I contest is the claim that extrinsicism is the defining view of Rome, or of the Catholic tradition, over against the “ineluctable unity of nature, sin, and grace” (in the words of the American Calvinist Henry Stob). In short, Bavinck’s “objection is directed against a later (sixteenth- and seventeenth-century) corruption within Catholic thought, which entered it under the spell of the new humanist, Cartesian, and later Enlightenment views of an autonomous conception of reason and will” (Dewey Hoitenga, *John Calvin and the Will: A Critique and Corrective* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 241–58). Reformed Protestants who share Bavinck’s criticism of Catholicism are obliged to revise their thinking on the Church’s understanding of nature and grace.

4. The exact sense in which “the redemption by grace of created reality, the reformation of nature, is not merely repristination, *but raises the natural to a higher level than it originally occupied*” (Jan Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” *Pro Rege* [June 2006, 10–31, and at 22]) is a hotly disputed matter, especially in Reformed and Catholic thought. For instance, Henri de Lubac writes,

The supernatural does not merely *elevate* nature (this traditional term is correct, but it is inadequate by itself); it does not penetrate nature merely to help it prolong its momentum ... and bring it to a successful conclusion. It *transforms* it... “Behold, I make all things news!” (Rev. 21:4). Christianity is “a doctrine of transformation because the Spirit of Christ comes to permeate the first creation and make of it a ‘new creature.’”

See de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature & Grace* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 81. Berkouwer summarizes the issue clearly:

The meaning and extent of redemption are the heart of the issue. Is God’s Kingdom something more than just a restoration of what has been lost? Is not the deepest meaning of the eschatological mystery this, that it will supersede and transcend the original created nature of man?... It is as if according to God’s intention the glory of creatureliness sets up certain boundaries that cannot be transgressed, and any effort to attribute something more to man in the eschaton runs against these boundaries. Those who defy these boundaries need to be reminded that it “does not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2). This remark by John sets the limit to our penetration of the eschatological mystery. When we speak of that mystery, then, we cannot, in the very nature of the case make a simple identification of end-time and original time.

See Berkouwer, *Wederkomst van Christus*, 2 (Kampen: Kok, 1963), 267–68. Translated by James van Oosterom as *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 449–50.

5. *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4 (Kampen: Kok, 1901), 702. ET: John Bolt, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 720, see also Ed. note, 697.
6. Given these presuppositions, Bavinck would have agreed with the anthropological argument of the Catholic Church’s rejection of so-called same-sex marriage.

The light of such anthropology reveals “how incongruous is the demand to accord ‘marital’ status to unions between persons of the same sex. It is opposed, first of all, by the objective impossibility of making the partnership fruitful through the transmission of life according to the plan inscribed by God in the very structure of the human being. Another obstacle is the absence of the conditions for that interpersonal complementarity between male and female willed by the Creator at both the physical-biological and the eminently psychological levels. It is only in the union of two sexually different persons that the individual can achieve perfection in a synthesis of unity and mutual psychophysical completion.”

See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004), no. 228.

7. Similarly, Bavinck makes this point later in *De Vrouw in de Hedendaagsche Maatschappij*, 26.
8. See Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, bk. 14, chap. 11, “the natures in which evil exists, in so far as they are natures, are good. And evil is removed, not by removing any nature, or part of a nature . . . but by healing and correcting that which had been vitiated and depraved.” *NPNF¹ 2:272*. Available online at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.XIV.11.html.
9. Dinesh D’Souza, *What’s So Great about Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2007), 57–58.
10. This, too, is the teaching of the Catholic Church. See John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), nos. 42–44. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html. See also, Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II, no. 4. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html. For a more ample account of the family, see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 209–45.
11. Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger, *The War Over the Family* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), 14.
12. Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II, no. 13: “Dear families, the question of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is an integral part of the ‘civilization of love.’” The pope states that “*the family is fundamental to what Pope Paul VI called the ‘civilization of love.’*” Clearly, this, too, is Bavinck’s view.
13. So, too, William J. Bennett, *The Broken Hearth, Reversing the Moral Collapse of the American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 69.
14. Berger and Berger, *War Over the Family*, 85–104. This is also the claim of the French anthropologist and ethnologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009): The “conjugal family,” based on monogamous marriage, says Lévi-Strauss, “appears to be a practically universal phenomenon, present in every type of society” (*The View from Afar* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], 40–41).
15. Bavinck writes, “The wife has a different place and task in the family. If the husband is the head, then the wife is the heart of the family” (*TCF*, 95). So, too, Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, encyclical letter “On Christian Marriage” (1930): “For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love” (no. 27).

16. Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 614–19, and at 614–15. See also, Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, nos. 7–8: June 29, 1995.
17. For a social-scientific defense of the father-mother-child triad on the grounds that it “is intrinsically linked to certain values that we [the Bergers], along with most people in the Western world, espouse—notably the values of individual autonomy and democratic freedom.” See Berger and Berger, *War Over the Family*, 139–93. For a more recent defense of this triad, see David Blankenhorn, *The Future of Marriage* (New York and London: Encounter Books, 2007).
18. I am following here Paul Helm’s distinction between the two senses of “reveal” in his book, *Divine Revelation* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), 68–70. This distinction helpfully illuminates Bavinck’s well-formed biblical hermeneutics—which would take us too far afield to discuss here—as found in his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1 (Kampen: Kok, 1895), 428–29. ET: John Bolt, ed., *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 459–60.
19. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), uses the categories of “qualified toleration,” “rejection and prohibition,” and “critical affirmation” to describe Israel’s varied attitudes with respect to some customs and practices common in the ancient world (327–62).
20. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage, Human Reality and Saving Mystery*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965):

What cannot be justified from the texts [Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31] is that Genesis as a whole refers merely to the creation of woman and man, and not directly to marriage. The intention of the whole text was to restore the social fact of marriage to a divine institution. With a deliberately pointed reference to monogamous marriage, that is, to marriage between one man and one woman, the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint translated the Hebrew “and they become one flesh” interpretatively as “and *these two* become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). This ideal of marriage, based on a belief in God’s creation, was not stated by the sacred writer without a certain element of conscious polemic against the ancient oriental views concerning marriage [namely, polygamy] which had tainted the Israelites.... Although polygamy was officially tolerated by the Law, it was in no sense an expression of the deepest experience of the Israelite ethic. The purest expression of this ethic of married life is to be found in Genesis and in the commentary of the Book of Sirach upon it” (20–21).

Paul Copan also correctly remarks,

From Lamech’s wives to those of Abraham, Esau, Jacob, David, and Solomon, wherever we see God’s ideal of monogamy ignored, we witness strife, competition, and disharmony. The Old Testament presents polygamy as not only undesirable but also a violation of God’s standards. Old Testament narratives subtly critique this marital arrangement.

See *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 117.

21. Bavink would side with Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), no. 85:

It must never be forgotten that *the Word of God is at the very origin of marriage* (cf. Gen. 2:24) and that Jesus himself made marriage one of the institutions of his Kingdom (cf. Matt. 19:4–8). . . . Fidelity to God’s Word leads us to point out that nowadays this institution [marriage] is in many ways under attack from the current mentality. In the face of widespread confusion in the sphere of affectivity, and the rise of ways of thinking which trivialize the human body and sexual differentiation, the Word of God reaffirms the original goodness of the human body, created as man and woman and called to a love which is faithful, reciprocal, and fruitful.

See also, Benedict’s 2012 Address to the Roman Curia at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2012/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121221_auguri-curia_en.html:

According to the biblical creation account, being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature. This duality is an essential aspect of what being human is all about, as ordained by God. This very duality as something previously given is what is now disputed. The words of the creation account: “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27) no longer apply. . . . Man and woman in their created state as complementary versions of what it means to be human are disputed. But if there is no pre-ordained duality of man and woman in creation, then neither is the family any longer a reality established by creation. Likewise, the child has lost the place he had occupied hitherto and the dignity pertaining to him.

22. This also is the view of John Paul II, “*The Redemption restores*, in a sense, at its very root, *the good* that was essentially ‘diminished’ by [original] sin and its heritage in human history,” in apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), no. 11. The view that “grace restores nature” is also expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Marriage under the regime of sin is such that the original creational unity of man and woman has been seriously disturbed, indeed, savagely wounded by the fall. Still, the order of creation persists. However, as CCC teaches, “To heal the wounds of sin, man and woman need the help of grace that God in his infinite mercy never refuses them. Without his help man and woman cannot achieve the union of their lives for which God created them ‘in the beginning’” (no. 1608). Redemption is, then, about the restoration or renewal of the fallen creation. Grace restores or renews nature (= structures of reality). As CCC puts it, “Jesus came to restore creation to the purity of its origins” (2336). Elsewhere CCC states, “In his preaching Jesus unequivocally taught the original meaning of the union of man and woman as the Creator willed it from the beginning. . . . *By coming to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin*, [Jesus] himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God” (1614–15, italics added).

23. For Bavinck's philosophical views, I will draw here primarily on his minor treatise, *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*, 2nd rev. ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1913; originally published 1904). This work remains untranslated but the original Dutch text is available online at <http://www.neocalvinisme.nl>. See also, Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1, 186–207; ET: 207–33.
24. Bavinck, *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*, 54–68, and at 55.
25. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 44. I am indebted to Sokolowski for helping me to present Bavinck's philosophical views.
26. Bavinck, *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing*, 56; see also, 57.
27. Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 45.
28. Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York and London: Encounter Books, 2012), 38.
29. The Bergers, Bennett, Blankenhorn, Gallagher, George, et al. have corroborated Bavinck's position in their books to which I have referred in previous notes.
30. John Corvino and Maggie Gallagher, *Debating Same-Sex Marriage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); particularly Maggie Gallagher's contribution in this work: "The Case against Same-Sex Marriage," 91–178, and at 108.
31. Gallagher, "The Case against Same-Sex Marriage," 108.
32. Gallagher, "The Case against Same-Sex Marriage," 109.
33. In contemporary culture, forces exist that claim abortion on demand to be essential to women's equality. The right to have an abortion is even pivotal in Supreme Court opinions, such as *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* (1992), *Gonzalez v. Carhart* (2007), wherein Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth B. Ginsberg made such a claim. Ginsburg summarizes this claim in her confirmation hearing of 1993:

The decision whether or not to bear a child is central to a woman's life, her well-being, and her dignity.... When government controls this decision for her she is being treated as less than a fully adult human responsible for her choices ... as well [as] if the government imposes restraints that impedes a woman's right to choose it is disadvantaging her, because of her sex.