For Rimmer and †Ruth De Vries
in gratitude for your kingdom-minded generosity
Contents

Editor’s Preface ix
Abbreviations xvii
Introduction to Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Ethics by Dirk van Keulen and John Bolt xxi

Introduction 1
§1 Historical Overview of Christian Ethics 2
§2 Terminology 17
§3 Division and Organization of Ethics 23
§4 Foundation and Method of Ethics 25

Book I Humanity before Conversion

1. Essential Human Nature 33
   §5 Human Beings, Created in God’s Image 35
   §6 The Content of Human Nature 44
   §7 Human Relationships 49

2. Humanity under the Power of Sin 77
   §8 The Devastation of the Image of God in Humanity 78
   §9 The Organizing Principle and Classification of Sins 100

3. The Self against the Neighbor and God 117
   §10 Sins of Egoism in the Narrow Sense 118
   §11 Sins against the Neighbor 129
   §12 Sins against God 139
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>The Fallen Image of God</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Image of God in Fallen Human Beings</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Human Conscience</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Conscience</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>The Sinner and the Law</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Law</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Natural Morality</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book II Converted Humanity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Life in the Spirit</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>The Nature of the Spiritual Life</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Origin of the Spiritual Life</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The First and Basic Activity of the Spiritual Life</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Life in the Spirit in the Church’s History</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mysticism, Pietism, and Methodism</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The Shape and Maturation of the Christian Life</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>The Shape of the Christian Life: The Imitation of Christ</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The Growth of the Spiritual Life</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Persevering in the Christian Life</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Security and Sealing</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Pathologies of the Christian Life</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Diseases of the Spiritual Life and Their Roots</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Restoration and Consummation of the Christian Life</td>
<td>461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Means of Restoration</td>
<td>462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Consummation of the Spiritual Life; Meditation on Death</td>
<td>493</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bibliography 495
Selected Scripture Index 528
Name Index 541
Subject Index 554
Book I

HUMANITY BEFORE CONVERSION
Essential Human Nature

How we must live is determined by our answers to the fundamental questions of our origin, purpose, and destiny. Scripture teaches us that the image of God belongs to the very essence of our humanity, created good, fallen, and redeemable in Christ. For Christians the moral good is not a purpose or ideal to be achieved through striving and exertion; it is a gift, a condition of being, a state. We must be good in order to do good. Adam was created good, and, after his fall, the Second Adam provides the gift of new righteousness and holiness.

This confession directly contradicts the contemporary dogma that we become good through the conflict between our ego, which strives for autonomy, and the external world of nature and matter, which restricts us; the end goal is to overcome nature by reason and spirit. This is part of a pantheistic worldview in which God himself becomes a person only after a process of overcoming. This movement from below to above, from the material to the spiritual, from the earthly to the heavenly, from humanity to God, from the visible to the invisible, from the temporal to the eternal, directly contradicts Christian belief in revelation. It is a system from the abyss.

We believe that the image of God belongs to the essence of our humanity; humanity apart from God, therefore, is unimaginable; all human beings always and everywhere stand in some relation to God. To be fully and truly human we must image God. As

1. Ed. note: Bavinck’s title for this chapter was “Human Nature Considered on Its Own” (De menschelijke natuur op zichzelf beschouwd). He inserted as an interlinear new title “The Essence of Humanity” (Het wezen van de mensch). Our title, “Essential Human Nature,” is intended to capture both ideas.
image-bearers of God, we consist of body and soul, which exist together in a reciprocal interaction of spirit and matter that is complex and mysterious. This must not be understood dualistically, although while the body cannot live without the soul, the soul can exist apart from the body. Persons are unities of body and soul; we are persons because we can say “I.” Our consciousness of this “I” develops gradually and is a wonder, inexplicable and simply to be accepted. Its two movements are theoretical (thinking and knowing) and practical (willing and doing), and both are mediated by feeling. These three abilities are distinct, have their own laws, and are free acts of the one person.

Human beings find themselves in three relations to what is external to them: to God (religion), to other persons (morality), and to nature. People cannot be viewed atomistically as mere individuals; we are members of a human race in a relationship to God that is an office or post of obedience and service to him. This is true religion and rests upon and arises from knowledge of God; its essence is piety. The word “religion” is derived from a Latin root that means “regathered” and reminds us that repetition of God’s commands and ordinances is necessary for their observance. This is objective religion—walking in the ways of the Lord—which must be matched by subjective religion—that is, faith or believing. The objective is not the product of the subjective but a gift of the Holy Spirit. Religion should not be defined as “communion with God” because it makes subjective religion all-important and devalues objective religion. Instead, it is the distinctive relationship or position of human beings to God, expressing itself in all of life and based on the distinctive relation of God to human beings.

Our relation to other persons begins before birth and starts in the family, which is the type of all other relations in society and the state. Our life in all these relationships constitutes our moral life and must be guided by a standard that is external to us. For Christians that standard is the Word of God. Our moral lives have always been connected to our religious lives, but they are properly distinct, with the latter governing the former. Though the two tables of the law come from one Lawgiver and constitute a single law, it is important to distinguish religion (our love toward God) from morality (our love toward our neighbor). The Bible itself keeps them close and connected but still distinct. The two sinful misconstruals of the relation between religion and morality—absolute separation and identification—both lead to false religion and poor morality. Either morality is divorced from God and true virtue becomes impossible, or God is identified with the world and religion is completely absorbed by ethics and eventually disappears. The Sabbath can and should penetrate the other days of the week, but the fullness of this Sabbath penetration will not be realized in this dispensation and awaits the next.
§5. Human Beings, Created in God’s Image

Questions about what human beings are, where they are headed, and the end and purpose of their existence depend on the answer to a prior question: Where did human beings come from? Origin determines direction and purpose. There is a big difference between saying that human beings are the image and offspring of the chimpanzee and orangutan and saying they are the image and offspring of God, between saying human beings are from below and saying they are from above. That governs the entire discipline of ethics. Without the Bible, it is impossible to answer the question of where human beings are from, and thus no answer can be given to the questions of what they are or where they are headed: one can only surmise, suspect, presuppose, and philosophize. The Greeks regarded human beings as autochthonous, as having originated from the earth, by chance, of their own accord. And contemporary thought, under the influence of materialistic pantheism, which erases all boundaries, levels all things and makes all things uniform, sees human beings as originating from a primate ancestry through a series of missing links and extinct mediating forms (species) influenced by natural selection and the struggle for survival over the course of many millennia. No one has furnished proof of this; it is not a conclusion reached by science or even a hypothesis that is occasionally borne out. No, it is simply a philosophical idea which people assume because they will not recognize a Creator God. This was openly stated by Professor du Bois-Reymond in Berlin.1

By proceeding from a wholly different presupposition we reach a different ethic. Ethics in the true sense of the word does not exist within a Darwinian framework.4 Every view of human beings starts from an axiom, a point of departure, a proposition of faith or hypothesis. This is the case with Darwin as well: his proposition of faith is that a human being is an evolved animal. For us, on the other hand, by faith, we understand that human beings are created in the image of God and are God’s offspring (Acts 17:28). This has to be a


4. Ed. note: Bavinck’s note here reads “See last year’s lecture” (“Zie dictaat vorig jaar”), an indication that he used these notes over and over again.
fixed and controlling principle when we examine humankind, a presupposition that governs all further reflection. To call human beings God’s image is to say that the human person is God’s likeness, his portrait in miniature, his imprint, effigy, or etcype. The image of God is the human similarity to God whereby we display, in our own creaturely way, the highest perfection of God. We are God’s image with respect to all of our existence, in the soul with all its capabilities (thinking, feeling, willing) and also in the body.

The image of God, therefore, exists

1. in the essence of our humanity: with soul and body as substrate;
2. in the capacities and abilities of that essence: knowing, feeling, willing, and acting;
3. in the properties and gifts of that essence and their capabilities: holiness, knowledge, righteousness.

But the question now arises: What is the relation between the human essence and those properties of the image of God? In other words, is the image of God the essence, the nature of a human being, or something added to its nature? The Flacians say the image of God (thus also its properties, including original righteousness) belongs to the essence, the nature of human beings. This cannot be correct, because then humanity, on losing its original righteousness, would have lost and changed its essence. The Roman Catholics say that human beings were created with an unblemished nature—hence neither righteous nor unrighteous by nature—and that original righteousness was added as a “superadded gift” to curb the naturally existing disharmony between flesh and spirit. But

6. Van Mastricht, Theoretico-Practica Theologia, I.iii.9, §30 [2:99]. Ed. note: For an explanation of the format we are using to cite this work, see the extended note in the introduction, §1, in the section “Reformed Churches” (pp. 8–9n48). The volume and page numbers come from the 1749–53 Dutch edition used by Bavinck.
7. Van Mastricht, Theoretico-Practica Theologia, I.iii.9, §31 [2:99].
8. Van Mastricht, Theoretico-Practica Theologia, I.iii.9, §30–33 [2:99].
9. LO: justitia originalis.
10. Ed. note: Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75) was a Lutheran reformer from present-day Croatia who held the view that the human fall into sin substantially transformed human nature into something evil.
11. LO: in puris naturalibus.
12. LO: donum superadditum. Ed. note: Bavinck’s critique of Roman Catholic thought on this point can be found in RD, 2:539–48. However, Bavinck’s treatment of Roman Catholic thought needs to be nuanced and corrected in places, particularly through a closer examination of Thomas Aquinas; see Bolt, Theological Analysis, 172n24, 180n29, 189n30. Cf. Vos, Aquinas, Calvin, and Contemporary Protestant Thought. An affinity between Bavinck and Thomas has
this also cannot be correct because then the struggle between flesh and spirit
would be natural and good, coming directly from God, who would then be the
cause of sin. The Reformed say that the image of God is neither the sum and
total of human essence nor a “superadded gift.” Rather, Reformed theology
understands the image of God in a broad sense to include the essence and ca-
pabilities of a human being, while a narrower sense of the image involves true
knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. As original righteousness it belongs
naturally to a human being, so that human essence or nature can no longer
be complete and right without it. The image of God, therefore, belongs to the
essence of human beings, although not in the Flacian sense.

This statement is of paramount importance for ethics. First, because it implies
that humans were good by nature, that the image of God by nature properly
belonged to them, that they did not need to become good, holy, and righteous
but were so already. Human beings by nature possessed goodness. This directly
contradicts contemporary teachings. J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) taught with im-
pressive intellectual power that morality only comes into existence out of conflict.
The intelligent ego strives after freedom, self-sufficiency, and independence and
wants to be absolutely autonomous but finds itself restricted by the non-ego.
The non-ego has to be conquered and pushed back; the ego has to dominate the
non-ego; reason has to rule over nature, and spirit over matter. Morality, thus,
is the result of conflict, struggle, and wrestling; it lies at the end of the road, it
is not a point of departure but an end goal. The ego is born as restricted by the
non-ego (which is sinful, because for Fichte sin is restriction).

Similarly, for Hegel, humanity is at first only natural and evil by nature; it
needs to free itself from the power of nature and, as spirit, needs to break free
from nature and oppose it. For Schleiermacher, too, the goal of ethos is that
nature becomes reason and spirit. The position of Rothe in his Theologische
Ethik is similar; for him the personhood of God is itself the result of a process
because the Spirit cannot be made but must bring himself forth, be his own
effect and cause. This is also the case with human beings. God can create
spirits only mediately; that is, he creates material creatures, which then raise
themselves up out of materiality toward spirituality. The ego is its own act
and action only; the human being thus destines itself to be ego, a person. And

been clearly demonstrated recently by two younger scholars: Sytsma, “Bavinck’s Thomistic
Epistemology”; and Van Raalte, “Unleavened Morality.”
13. Ed. note: These three terms that summarize the original image of God in Reformed
orthodoxy are conflated from Eph. 4:24 and Col. 3:10.
15. LO: sui ipsius effectus, causa sui; Rothe, Theologische Ethik, §§31, 34.
17. Rothe, Theologische Ethik, §73.
morality exists in the fact that personhood becomes spirit.\textsuperscript{18} The personal creature has to treat itself as an end in itself\textsuperscript{19} and has to create itself. Rothe writes, “Morality is what is caused, what becomes by means of creaturely self-determination, more specifically through the personal creature’s own self-determination in the human’s earthly created sphere.”\textsuperscript{20} Rothe sketches the moral process\textsuperscript{21} as one in which human beings determine themselves absolutely to become persons, and this task is twofold: (a) it is moral with respect to our material nature, which has to be appropriated and be made our instrument;\textsuperscript{22} and (b) it is religious, religion being the process by which we become spirits, through our own causality.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, we become immortal, and so forth, through our own action.\textsuperscript{24}

Overall, therefore, morality is a goal, the result of a process, an ideal which human beings finally reach through their own efforts and self-determination. This ethics, constructed on pantheism, a philosophy of process, and the theory of evolution, shares with pantheism an extraordinary number of core ideas. Everywhere in the physical, ethical, religious, civil, social, and political domains, the higher development is seen as having evolved from the lower. From below to above, from the material to the spiritual, from the earthly to the heavenly, from humanity to God, from the visible to the invisible, from the temporal to the eternal. This is directly the opposite of what we confess as Christians because it is directly contrary to God’s revelation. It is a system from the abyss. It has influenced a good deal of the ethics of our day, and yet many believers do not perceive its terrifying nature but unconsciously accept its thoughts and perspectives, which only fit in that anti-biblical system. Thus Harless speaks of a purpose which is given to the Christian in Christ, and Martensen considers morality as an idea, an end goal, a final task for the will.\textsuperscript{25} Vilmar, however, understood this better.\textsuperscript{26}

Directly opposing these pantheistic theories\textsuperscript{27} is the view of human beings as created in God’s image. The moral and the good is not an ideal hovering

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Rothe, \textit{Theologische Ethik}, §83.
\item \textsuperscript{19} GO: \textit{Selbstzweck}.
\item \textsuperscript{20} GO: \textit{Selbstbestimmung}; Rothe, \textit{Theologische Ethik}, §87. Ed. note: Bavinck adds two German words after the quotation: \textit{kausirte} = “caused”; \textit{gewordene} = “become.”
\item \textsuperscript{21} Rothe, \textit{Theologische Ethik}, §§93–126.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Rothe, \textit{Theologische Ethik}, §§97–113.
\item \textsuperscript{23} LO: \textit{causa sui}.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Rothe, \textit{Theologische Ethik}, §§109–10.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Harless, \textit{System of Christian Ethics}, 5 (§2); Martensen, \textit{Christian Ethics}, 1:4, 10–13 (§§1, 4).
\item \textsuperscript{26} Vilmar, \textit{Theologische Moral}, 1:23–37.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ed. note: What Bavinck calls “pantheism” here is better described as “panentheism.” On panentheism see Cooper, \textit{Panentheism}; on Schleiermacher, see pp. 80–89, and on Schelling and Hegel, see pp. 90–119.
\end{itemize}
far off in the distance from humanity and which we need to reach. The good
is not the end goal of life, a destination for humans, but the foundation on
which we stand and the environment within which we stand. The good is not
before us but above us, we stand in it with both feet and are
upheld by it. Adam did not have to become good, he was good and had to
ensure that he remained good. This is not striving and chasing after something,
but remaining and resting in that which he was and had. He came from the
hand of God holy, righteous, and wise. It is utterly false to say that holiness
could not be inborn and cocreated but must be the result of a process of free
self-determination, of one’s own action. Holiness is a gift; otherwise we shall
never have it. But we receive it now, at once, through justifying faith in Christ.
For this reason, moral virtue (holiness, the image of God) is one, a seamless
garment, which cannot be reached and obtained in piecemeal fashion. Whoever
has moral virtue has it wholly; whoever lacks it in part lacks it completely. The
Stoics already recognized this. From evil to good is not a walkway or bridge;
we reach it only by a leap (a leap of life rather than the proverbial fatal leap,
to change the expression). It is precisely the fundamental error of pantheism
that it wipes out all boundaries, relativizes all oppositions, and reduces the
distinction between sin and holiness, God and devil, to a difference of degree
only.28 For Christians, therefore, Adam was holy and had to remain such.
The fall into sin was not a step forward, but undoubtedly a fall, a downfall.
The moral good, therefore, is not a purpose or ideal to be obtained through
striving and exertion; it is a gift, a condition of being, a state. It remains true
forever that a tree has to be good if it is to bear good fruit.29 Pantheism also
obliterates the distinction between human beings and animals and views us
as developing from an animalistic (unthinking, etc.) state into our humanity.

Now it is true that Reformed Christians, in distinction from Lutherans,
can also speak of a goal in the case of Adam: we acknowledge that Adam had
not yet reached the end; he did not yet have eternal life; he did not yet have
the ability not to sin.30 In that sense we can also speak of a goal in the case of
Adam. But there is also a significant difference. We do not consider this “end”
so much a goal as a result. Adam did not have to strenuously exert himself
to obtain it but had merely to do what his own nature recommended—that

30. LO: non posse peccare. Ed. note: This phrase comes from Augustine and describes the
fourth and final state in outline of redemptive history. In order, the four states of humanity are
(1) innocence: able to sin or not to sin (posse peccare aut non peccare); (2) fall: not able not to
sin (non posse non peccare); (3) grace: able to sin or not to sin (posse peccare aut non peccare);
and (4) glory: not able to sin (non posse peccare). See Augustine, Enchiridion 118 (NPNF 3:275).
is, to remain what he was. The command not to eat was a prohibition.\textsuperscript{31} By remaining what he was, he would obtain what he was not.

That we cannot understand or imagine humanity without God and that all human beings always and everywhere stand in some relation to God is the second implication of the claim that the image of God belongs to the essence of our humanity. God is the archetype, the exemplar, the original. We are only truly human to the extent that we display God, also in our daily lives. The human person, therefore, has to be viewed theologically, and also in ethics. Morality, too, finds its principle and standard in the relation in which a human being stands to God. This principle is also strongly contested in our time. It is Fichte who dominates our present age: he sees the essence of morality involving the ego governing the non-ego and reason governing nature; the world is the material content of our moral obligation. This is also the case with Hegel: spirit has to realize its rational content, to mentally permeate nature. According to Schleiermacher the subject matter of ethics is reason acting on nature, and Rothe’s position is similar.\textsuperscript{32} Humanity stands in relation to nature and to God. The first relation is moral, the second religious. The moral task of human beings is to condition nature as an organ, an instrument, to make nature our property, a natural organism. Here morality is not only a result but the result of a process, the unity of two (relative) opposites, the product of conflict and struggle. But it is also wrong to think that the good and the moral only become possible by and after struggle, for then good, in order to exist now and to come in the future, needs evil; light needs darkness, and God needs the devil. Evil is then inevitable and actually no longer evil but a necessary intermediate stop, a barrier, a limitation, a transition phase, the condition and sine qua non for the good. And this means that the good is no longer good, since it is not free, independent, and eternal.

As Christians we believe and teach the contrary. The first human was God’s image at once, good and holy; the struggle we now experience only came because of our falling away; it is a struggle with sin, in sin, and after sin. The good, as we see it, is victory, rest, salvation, peace, love; not “storm and stress”\textsuperscript{33} but calmness. It is eternal, independent, free, in need of nothing, existing in and through itself and by itself, because God himself is the good

\textsuperscript{31} DO: verbod.
\textsuperscript{32} Rothe, Theologische Ethik, §96–113.
\textsuperscript{33} GO: Sturm und Drang. Ed. note: The term is connected with the early Romantic movement in German music and literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It stressed individual subjectivity, action, and intense emotional freedom producing turbulence and turmoil in reaction to the constraints of Enlightenment rationalism. The term was popularized by the title of a work by German dramatist and poet Friedrich von Klinger (from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturm_und_Drang).
and no goodness exists apart from him. Martensen also acknowledges the fact that morality cannot presuppose a struggle, etc., but thinks that, among other things, morality is the unity of opposites.\(^\text{34}\) This is completely wrong.

Men like Fichte have to search for such binary structures because they view morality as a unity of opposites, as the result of struggle. Various names are used to describe these opposites. Autonomous philosophical ethics looks for them in the empirical and the ideal (reasonable) will; in the individual and in humanity, egoism and altruism (like Darwin and those following his thought); or in personality and in nature.\(^\text{35}\) The first opposition, between the empirical and ideal will, does not work. It is an abstraction: human beings have but one will, and the (empirical) will is evil, sinful, inclined to hate God and the neighbor.\(^\text{36}\) What some call the ideal or reasonable will is not a will—that is to say, power—but (since human beings are powerless) only an idea, an ideal, given to us by our conscience. In the battle between the empirical will and the idea of the good, the empirical will always triumphs. The second opposition, between the individual and humanity, does not work either. It is completely socialist and sacrifices the individual for the sake of the majority, allowing a majority of one-half plus one to determine what is good and evil.

The third binary opposition, morality as the product of the conflict between personality and nature or reason and nature (Fichte, Schleiermacher, Rothe), is also not a viable option. This was essentially the view of the Greeks, a view that is once again being proposed by some of our anthropological philosophers in a somewhat more profound manner. Spirit and matter, personality and nature, are not inherently opposed (at least not originally; now, thanks to sin, they are); personality is by no means dissolved in its relations with nature.\(^\text{37}\) But there is some truth in these oppositions: human beings stand in relation to themselves (with duties toward themselves), to their neighbors, and to nature, but all of this is only part of a whole, and to reduce our entire duty to any one of these would be wrong. Regarding nature, Genesis 1:28 teaches us to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and so forth. There exists, therefore, also a relation between humans and animals. But that is by no means the only

\(^{34}\) Martensen, *Christian Ethics*, 1:10–13 (§4).

\(^{35}\) Ed. note: In the margin Bavinck added, “We cannot do away with God if we want to define the good; neither in the case of Kant nor by the socialists.”

\(^{36}\) Ed. note: Bavinck alludes here to Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 5: “Can you live up to all this [God’s Law] perfectly?” Answer: “No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbor.”

calling of humanity; it is only one of the entailments and consequences of being created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). And one must read carefully: to have dominion over the earth was not an end goal for human striving through considerable conflict. It was not a distant ideal, a destination at the end of a path of exertion. No! It was a part but not the sole content and consequence of being made in God’s image. Adam did not have to become lord and master of the earth, conquer it, and exercise dominion over it. Instead, he was the lord and master and sovereign and had to demonstrate this fact and continue to exercise lordship.

Martensen also argues against this contrast but replaces it with another: morality is produced by conflict, but not between personality and nature but between two personalities, me and you, will and will, specifically human will and God’s will. Thus he says that morality consists of the free unity of the human and the divine wills. These are notes that sound orthodox, embroidered with pantheistic philosophical patterns. But Martensen does not start with correct principles. He should have rejected the root idea that morality (being moral and good) is the result of struggle and a unity of opposites. That is a false notion. For us, the moral good is not something in process of becoming but something that is. It is not a product but a producer; it is not a result but a point of departure. Furthermore, the foundational idea of the moral good is not derived from our relation to ourselves, to our neighbor, or to nature, but from the central, all-governing relation of human beings to God. Martensen gets this right. But one has to understand this properly. It does not mean that somebody who stands in the right relation to God (for example, one who is converted) is by virtue of this already moral and can be described as moral. This would blur the difference between religion and morality; more will be said about relation between them later. But it does mean that the relation to God is the central relation controlling everything. Humans are to be viewed as image-bearers of God in our relations to ourselves, our neighbors, and nature. This reality must be seen in and through everything we do or leave undone and in everything effected with us, in us, or through us.

In other words, that which is considered to be normally human cannot truly serve as the standard of ethics. It is not enough to be a person exercising dominion over nature. We can only be truly good at home, in the public square, and everywhere else, when we are the image of God. After all, we

39. Ed. note: Bavinck originally wrote “shining” (sijnende) but changed it to “sounding” (klinkende).
cannot know proper dominion over nature apart from God and his revelation. In an etymological sense, ethics has its roots in religion. The notion of ethics therefore cannot fully satisfy us; it is too narrow. Etymologically, the word points to humanity as the standard, but our standard is humanity as God’s image and thus, in the final analysis, God himself.

Third, the notion of humanity as God’s image entails the essence of human beings having been corrupted through sin. After all, the image of God is part of the essence of humanness, not a donum superadditum, not an added trimming. According to Rome, humankind is not corrupt and corrupted but is still what it was supposed to be; but it lost this accessory, this bridle, and because it is no longer controlled and restrained, concupiscence (which humans had before the fall as well) now reigns.

We would say that by the loss of the image of God people’s very essence became corrupted, deteriorated and twisted, deformed, misshaped, and wrong. More about this, however, in chapter 2. Sin did not remove something and leave all the rest the same, as Rome would say. Neither did sin become the substance or essence of human beings. The human being remained a human being, not a machine, not a wooden thing or block, not a devil, but a human being. But the human became abnormal; though still human, its humanity is cankered and rotten.

The ethical meaning of the covenant of works is relevant here. The covenant of works assumes that humanity is the image of God. Humankind is good, but still has a task: good works. The covenant therefore involves not carefree idleness or quiet rest, as Rome and Luther described, but work, task, goal, thus exertion, zeal, and development of all powers and gifts. It involves becoming the image of God more and more through procreation, worship, and culture. From humanity’s creation in the image of God it follows that humans are moral beings and have to develop as such. In this regard the moral law must also be mentioned. The moral law is one of many sorts of law, and its basic principle is love for God and one’s neighbor. At this point law must be mentioned because the very notion of sin presupposes law (see question 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism).