



Bavinck on the doctrine of God's knowability

With this article, I will begin to treat the second volume of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, which addresses the Scriptural revelation of God as the Creator of all things, especially of human beings as his image bearers. Obviously, I will not be able to offer more than a sketch of some of the principal themes of this volume. In this article, I will consider Bavinck's understanding of the knowability of God.

The knowability of God

Bavinck opens his reflection on the knowability of God with a striking comment: "*Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics*" (RD 2:29). All theological knowledge is ultimately a knowledge of God, which is the "*exclusive content*" of the entire field of dogmatics. However, such knowledge cannot be grasped in the same way that the particular sciences grasp their subject matter. The knowledge of God always produces in us a response of adoration and worship. The Psalmist's exclamation — "*great is the Lord and greatly to be praised*" — is as true an expression for the theologian as it is for an ordinary believer. The knowledge of God that is communicated through creation and Scripture "*far surpasses human imagination and understanding.*" One of the great dangers that confronts the theologian who seeks to know God is the danger of pride or arrogance, which fails to marvel at the unfathomable greatness and grandeur of God.

In his reflection upon our knowledge of God, Bavinck endeavors to balance the reality and truth of our knowledge of God through revelation with the limits of any form of human apprehension of God. On the one hand, an inordinate stress upon the incomprehensibility of God leads to agnosticism, the view that any true knowledge of God is finally impossible. On the other hand, an exaggerated emphasis upon the knowability of God leads to a loss of an appreciation for the infinite richness and fullness of God. The challenge facing the Christian theologian is to hold on to the knowability of God without compromising his absolute greatness. To deny the truth of our knowledge of God is to treat God's revelation of himself with ingratitude and contempt. But to deny the limits of our knowledge of God, even when it is based upon God's self-revelation, is to forget that the incomprehensibility of God belongs itself to a true knowledge of God. The acknowledgment of the limits of our capacity to know God in his fullness is an inescapable and significant feature of our positive knowledge of who God is.

Early in his treatment of the knowability of God, Bavinck challenges the claim of many "critical" biblical scholars that the doctrine of God undergoes a kind of evolutionary development in the Old Testament writings. According to critical biblical scholarship, the original conception of God in Israel was "polydaemonistic." Critical scholars maintain that the God of Israel was originally regarded as "a mountain god, a fire god, or a thunder god," and only after the conquest of Canaan did Israel come to view him as the "*God of Israel's land and people*" (RD 2:31). Only after a long period of time, especially in the ministry of the later prophets, did Israel begin to move from this early "polytheistic" and then "henotheistic" view of God to a more fully-developed "monotheism." Contrary to this misrepresentation of the biblical revelation of God, Bavinck identifies a number of consistent features of Old Testament revelation that are incompatible with any form of polytheism. Throughout the Old Testament God is revealed as a personal being, who is the self-existent Creator of heaven and earth. Though God reveals himself at particular times and places, he remains the absolute Lord of all times and places, who surpasses the limitations of all creatures. Furthermore, the absolute yet personal God of the Old Testament Scriptures is never regarded as exhaustively coinciding with his self-revelation. Even in his revelation, God remains partially hidden

and inscrutable, One who is "infinitely" exalted "above the whole realm of nature and every creature" (RD 2:33).

In addition to the challenge posed by critical biblical theologians, Bavinck also evaluates the challenges to the knowability of God that have been raised in ancient as well as more recent philosophy since the Enlightenment. Among some ancient Greek philosophers, any positive descriptions of God were viewed as inappropriately limiting who God is. The neo-Platonist philosopher, Plotinus, for example, regarded any attempt to name God or describe him in terms of positive attributes as a denial of his infinite being. In the modern era, philosophers like Kant and Fichte also rejected the possibility of any definite knowledge of God. According to these philosophers, human knowledge is limited by experience and the knowledge of God as he truly is lies outside of the range of such experience. Theology or the knowledge of God within the framework of modern philosophy is limited to "religious experience" of God and ends in a kind of radical agnosticism. God is simply unknown and unknowable. The influence of modern philosophy upon theology has profoundly affected the confidence of Christian theologians regarding the possibility of any true knowledge of God. *"Theology has so far fallen victim to the dread of this agnosticism that it hardly any longer dares to speak of a knowledge of God. It tries as much as possible to exclude all metaphysics (although of late we can see some reaction to this trend) and to restrict itself to the realm of the religious. It has become ashamed of its own name and has allowed itself to be re-baptized into a science of religion."* (RD 2:44) The consequences of this modern denial of the knowability of God are dire and undermine the most basic convictions of Christian theology. On the one hand, some are driven to conceive of God as no more than a finite, *"personal, limited, humanlike being."* On the other hand, others *"strip our idea of God of all likeness to a finite creature, and end up with an empty abstract idea devoid of value for religion."* (RD 2:47)

In Bavinck's view of the knowability of God, the only way forward for Christian theology is to affirm God's incomprehensibility and knowability at the same time. Rather than to deny the possibility of a true knowledge of God, we need to affirm the possibility of a knowledge of God that is derived from his revelation of himself. But at the same time, we must admit that all such knowledge of God is thoroughly "analogical." Because God is inexhaustibly rich in being and surpassingly greater than any finite creature, Christian theology must affirm the truth of God's incomprehensibility. *"There is no name that fully expresses his being, no definition that captures him. He infinitely transcends our picture of him, our ideas of him, our language concerning him"* (RD 2:47). This is the moment of truth in all denials of the simple knowability of God. However, Christian theology is not content to simply affirm the incomprehensibility of God. Since God has created all things and is pleased to reveal himself through the works of his hands, a true knowledge of God is possible on the basis of divine revelation.

The critical question that modern denials of the knowability of God raise is whether God *"has willed and found a way to reveal himself in the domain of creatures"* (RD 2:50). Such denials really amount to a hostility toward the fundamental dogma of the Christian faith, namely, that God is able to disclose a true knowledge of himself through the works of his hands, and that human beings who bear his image are capable of apprehending that disclosure.

The knowledge we have of God is altogether unique. This knowledge may be called positive insofar as by it we recognize a being infinite and distinct from all finite creatures. On the other hand, it is negative because we cannot ascribe a single predicate to God as we conceive that predicate in relation to creatures. It is therefore an *analogical* knowledge: a knowledge of a being who is unknowable in himself, yet able to make something of himself known in the being he created.

When Bavinck employs the term "analogical" for our knowledge of God, he means to affirm that we know God through his creatures. The creature bears some resemblance to the Creator. There is a likeness or similarity between the Creator and creature. Yet at the same time, God transcends and surpasses all creatures. Thus, our knowledge of God is by analogy: there is similarity and dissimilarity between God and his creatures.

The knowledge of God: Implanted and acquired

After his opening treatment of the limits and basis for a true knowledge of God, Bavinck turns to the subject of how human beings actually come to know God. The knowledge of God is obtained in two ways. First, there is an inexpugnable knowledge of God that is *implanted* in all human beings as image-bearers of God. And second, there is an *acquired* knowledge that builds upon the in-created capacity of human beings for a true knowledge of God. All knowledge of God is derived from God's revelation of himself to his image-bearers. However, there is a significant difference between the knowledge of God that is basic and foundational to what it means to be a creature created in God's image, and the knowledge of God that is acquired and derived from human reflection upon and apprehension of divine revelation.

The first form of human knowledge of God is not so much acquired as implanted or "innate." According to Bavinck, since the entire creation and all of God's works constitute a kind of "*theater of God's glory*" (Calvin), which bears unmistakable marks of God's handiwork, it is ultimately impossible to view the world atheistically. Even though there are "atheists" who endeavor to deny God's existence and knowability, their number is few and their cause is futile. Even the vigor with which the atheist protests God's existence represents, ironically, the fact that the world is pervaded by a clear and undeniable testimony to the greatness and wisdom of its Creator. An inescapable "awareness of God" (Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*) belongs inherently and inescapably to the very fabric of human existence. All human beings are unable to eradicate this basic knowledge of God, which is the "seed of religion" (Calvin's *semen religionis*) and the only explanation for the fact that human beings are "incurably religious." However energetic or vigorous human beings may be in attempting to deny God and the things of God, this attempt is finally an exercise that is doomed to failure. God has so created the world and fashioned human beings after his image that all have an innate and inborn instinct or capacity for knowing and serving him.

Bavinck notes that the presence of such a universal and pervasive awareness of God among human beings who bear God's image has prompted some to assert a doctrine of "innate ideas." Just as in various sciences there seem to be some ideas that are necessary, basic, and natural (for example, every "effect" has a "cause," $2 + 2 = 4$, the distinction between "good" and "evil"), so it has been suggested in the history of theology that God has implanted a number of innate ideas regarding himself in the human mind. In order to account for those beliefs or convictions that seem to be universal, necessary, and basic to different sciences, including theology, philosophers and theologians have developed a doctrine that God implants such ideas in the human mind. Such innate ideas provide a kind of fund of knowledge that all human beings possess before they study some or another aspect of the created order. In the history of theology, the doctrine of innate ideas often played a significant role, and served as the basis for the development of a kind of natural theology or knowledge about God that is not based upon divine revelation.

In Bavinck's assessment of this doctrine of innate ideas, especially in the discipline of theology, he argues that it can easily encourage "rationalism" or "mysticism." Rationalism is the teaching that human beings, solely upon the basis of rational reflection, can know much about God's existence, nature, and relation to the creation. Without depending solely upon divine revelation as the exclusive source and norm for our knowledge of God, this rationalism makes human reason the measure and source for our most basic knowledge of God. It encourages a kind of natural theology that is untethered from the Word of God, and grants to the creature the authority to derive a knowledge of God from within the resources of his own mind. Furthermore, just as the doctrine of innate ideas encourages rationalism, it also encourages mysticism, the notion that spiritual experience is the avenue by which God is first made known to human beings. Rather than seeking to know God through the medium of his revelation or Word, mysticism wants to experience God in some direct and unmediated manner. God is so closely linked with the human spirit or soul that any reliance upon an external source for the knowledge of God is viewed with suspicion or disparaged as a less direct form of access to God. Both rationalism and mysticism employ the notion of "innate ideas," therefore, to establish human knowledge of God, not upon divine revelation through creation as a manifestation of God's glory and wisdom, but upon human reason or experience.

However, this does not mean that Bavinck rejects entirely the idea of innate knowledge of God. For Bavinck, there is moment of truth in the doctrine of innatism, namely that God has created human beings in his image with an innate disposition and capacity for a true knowledge of God. In the same way that human sight requires the light of the sun and eyes with which to see that light, human knowledge of God requires the light of divine revelation and the created capacity to apprehend and know what it discloses regarding God. According to Bavinck, 101 knowledge rests in faith" in the sense that the human knower must be convinced of certain "self-evident" and "basic" principles that underlie all study of God's creation. For example, the science of ethics depends upon the fundamental assumption that there is a distinction between "right" and "wrong." Even sciences like mathematics and physics require the assumption of certain abstract and necessary principles, such as the theory of numbers or the orderliness of the physical world. The science of theology or the knowledge of God likewise assumes the existence and knowability of God. Just as the scientist cannot reason his way to the conviction of the existence or order of what he studies, but assume it, so the theologian proceeds from the basic and undeniable truth of God and his revelation of himself.

"Implanted knowledge of God" does not mean that all people are immediately endowed by God himself with sufficient knowledge so as to be able to dispense with revelation. The term does not say that we are able, all by ourselves, to deduce conscious, clear, and valid knowledge of God from the contents of our own minds. What it does say is that we possess both the *capacity* (aptitude, faculty) and the *inclination* (*habitus*, disposition) to arrive at some firm, certain, and unending knowledge of God. (*RD* 2:71) Because God has created in human beings for fellowship with himself, and because human self-knowledge is never separable from the knowledge of God, we must insist that human beings will, in the natural course of their development and without "laborious reasoning," arrive at convictions regarding God's existence and nature that are self-evident and undeniable. When atheism claims to deny God's existence, therefore, it takes an unnatural, and ultimately impossible, position in relation to God whose existence is self-evident to all right thinking people.

Within the framework of this understanding of the innate capacity and disposition of all human beings for a true knowledge of God, Bavinck proceeds to observe that all actual knowledge of God derives from a proper apprehension of divine revelation. Contrary to the views of rationalism and mysticism, human knowledge of God depends completely upon an "objective" revelation of God that comes from "outside of" the creature and makes its impression upon us. The implanted knowledge of God, which consists in our capacity to know God, must be accompanied by an acquired knowledge of God, which finds its source in God's works and Word. All true knowledge of God is governed by the truth that God's Word is "light," and we only see the light through a careful study and reflection upon that Word.

In his discussion of such acquired knowledge of God, Bavinck makes an especially important observation about the legitimacy of "natural theology" in relation to our apprehension of divine revelation. Though some theologians (and traditions, for example, the Roman Catholic Church) have maintained that human beings can know much about God through human reason and reflection upon the created order apart from any use of special revelation, Bavinck notes that this represents a faulty view of revelation and human ability to know God through his revelation.

Even so-called "natural theology," which aims to know something about God through the creation itself and apart from special revelation, can only proceed upon the basis of the Christian conviction that the world belongs to God.

Furthermore, there are two errors that underlie the claim that a natural theology is possible upon the basis of human reason alone and without the light of Scriptural revelation. The first error is the assumption that our natural disposition to know God as creatures created in his image has not been seriously impaired through sinful disobedience and hostility toward God. Our natural inclination to know God has been terribly corrupted, and for this reason the Scriptures often speak of unbelief as a kind of culpable "blindness" to the truth. The second error is the assumption that it is possible for a Christian to dispense with what he knows from Scriptural revelation, even about

God as the Creator of all things, in the pursuit of a true knowledge of God, whether it be a knowledge of the created order or the way of redemption. *"The natural knowledge of God is incorporated and set forth at length in Scripture itself. Accordingly, Christians follow a completely mistaken method when, in treating natural theology, they, as it were, divest themselves of God's special revelation in Scripture and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, discuss it apart from any Christian presuppositions, and then move on to special revelation."* (RD 2:74) In seeking to know God through the works of his hands, Christians make grateful use of the fullness of divine revelation in creation and the Word of God. It would be an impoverishment, even an impossibility for the believer, to seek to know God through his works without the full enlightenment provided in the entirety of his revelation of himself.

The so-called "proofs" for God's existence

The final topic Bavinck considers in his extended treatment of the knowability of God is that of the so-called "proofs" for God's existence. This topic naturally arises in the context of Bavinck's treatment of the implanted and acquired knowledge of God, because it has historically been an important feature of "natural theology." In the history of theology, the proofs for God's existence have often been viewed as "preambles to faith." Before deriving the knowledge of God from inscripturated revelation, proponents of these proofs have frequently maintained that the theologian needs to demonstrate God's existence and knowability by offering rational proofs or arguments that will establish a foundation for the distinctive knowledge of God that belongs to the Christian faith.

In Bavinck's estimation, these so-called "proofs" for the existence of God play an important and legitimate role in theology, provided they are not formulated in a way that denies the prior and basic knowledge of God that belongs to all human beings who bear God's image. Since all knowledge of God derives from a proper apprehension of what God reveals everywhere and to all about himself, and since this knowledge is basic and undeniable, the proofs may not be viewed so much as proofs but as "testimonies" to what all human beings already know and believe. The whole creation eloquently testifies to God's existence as the almighty and wise Creator of all things. The Scriptures furthermore proceed throughout on the basis of the self-evidence of God's existence. Never do the Scriptural writers pause to prove by such arguments that God exists, and then move to present a further disclosure of God's will and purpose. All human beings already know and believe what these proofs endeavor to express in a more "elaborate" and "dialectical" form. The knowledge of God, whether derived from creation or Scripture, does not wait for such proofs. Rather, these so-called proofs are a kind of further unfolding of what all human beings already (or ought to) know in germinal and basic form.

Though Bavinck acknowledges that there has been a long tradition of treating these proofs as "rational" demonstrations of God's existence, which provide a kind of foundation upon which faith may build further, he seeks to view and formulate them within a "religious" context. When we proceed from a settled conviction regarding God's existence and knowability, these proofs serve to testify to the intellectual integrity and knowledge of faith. They provide a kind of intelligent exposition of the knowledge of God that is the possession of every believer. Each of them formulates what we know about God as the Author and Creator of all things.

In his positive exposition of these proofs, Bavinck notes that they can easily be distinguished into three groups: first, two of the proofs (the cosmological and the teleological argument) deduce the existence of God from the world's "origin and purpose"; second, two of the proofs deduce the existence of God from the rational and moral nature of human beings (the ontological and the moral argument); and third, the last two proofs deduce God's existence from the universal consent and history of humankind.

Rather than attempt to offer anything like a summary of these proofs, I will only illustrate how they serve to testify to the knowledge of God that all believers possess — whether they can understand, follow, or begin to articulate what they already know in the form of a sophisticated statement of the

argument. Perhaps the easiest way to appreciate these arguments is to regard them as answers to certain inescapable questions. For example, consider such questions as the following:

1. what accounts for the existence of anything at all?;
2. has the world always existed or was it created out of nothing?;
3. what explains the amazing diversity and interrelationship of all things?;
4. why do all people have an irrepressible conviction of the difference between "good" and "evil"?
5. what accounts for the fact that human beings seem to have an irresistible inclination to worship or "idolize" someone or something?;
6. how can we account for the existence of the human eye, with its amazing complexity and facility?;
7. could "blind chance" or unintelligent process produce the kind of world we know?;
8. what accounts for the apparent wisdom and design of the world?;
9. and how can we even be sure of the uniform order and consistency of what we study in the various sciences, if the existence of the Creator is denied?

Though questions like these could easily be multiplied, they illustrate what the so-called proofs for God's existence endeavor to explain further. These proofs, when formulated from the standpoint of the Christian faith and informed by the fullness of divine revelation, serve to testify to the reality of the God whom all human beings already know. Though they may not convince the atheist or the agnostic, they do not fail to do so because of any weakness in their testimony to the truth. Rather, they illustrate how in the case of the unbelieving, the adage remains true — "there is none so blind as he who will not see, none so deaf as he who will not hear."

Conclusion

For Bavinck, there are two errors that often accompany our reflection on the knowledge of God. One error is the tendency to exaggerate our knowledge of God and to diminish God's incomprehensible greatness. The other error is the denial of the possibility of a true knowledge of God based upon divine revelation. God is knowable by human beings because the whole of creation and all of the works of God's hands constitute an undeniable and inescapable testimony to his power and wisdom. All human beings are created with a sense and capacity for a knowledge of God, and all are given through divine revelation a compelling testimony to who he is. Atheism and agnosticism represent, therefore, culpable forms of human perversity in suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.

With this broad introduction to the knowability of God, we turn in our next article to Bavinck's understanding of the names and attributes of the Triune God.

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Endnotes:

1. For a confirmation of Bavinck's observations about atheism, see a recent book by Michael Novak, *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers* (New York: Doubleday, 2008). Novak treats several recent books by well-known atheists, included Richard Dawkins, and observes the passion with which they oppose any belief in God. Reading these atheistic authors prompts the retort, "methinks they protest too much."