



Bavinck on the names and attributes of the Triune God

After an extended treatment of the knowability of God in volume two of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck turns to the subjects of the names and attributes of God, and the doctrine of the Trinity. Through his revelation of himself in his works and Word, the Triune God grants to us a true knowledge of who he is, not only in his relations with his creatures, but also in the fullness of his perfections and attributes. Though Bavinck acknowledges the limitations of our capacity to comprehend who God is, he insists that God's revelation is a reliable source for a true apprehension of God's nature and character.

The names of God

In the history of Christian theology, the subject of God's attributes has naturally emerged within the setting of a consideration of God's name. In Scriptural revelation, the name or names of God are not simply distinct ways of referring to the true and living God. They are descriptions of God's character. To use a linguistic distinction, these names are not merely denotative but connotative. Unlike human names that are often arbitrarily given (upon the basis of their current popularity) and say little or nothing about the sort of person who is named, God's names reveal who he is. Regarding the general significance of the idea of God's name in the Scriptures, Bavinck observes that

(A) name is something personal and very different from a number or a member of a species. It always feels more or less unpleasant when others misspell or garble our name: it stands for our honor, our worth, our person and individuality. But that linkage was much more vital in earlier times when names still had a transparent meaning, and actually revealed the identity of a person or thing.

(RD 2:97)

This general observation about the significance of a person's name has special application in the case of the Triune God of the Scriptures. So close is the link between God's name and his personal identity and character, any perversion or inappropriate use of God's name is a direct assault upon his Person, a defaming of his reputation, or a belittling of his identity.

Before he identifies and explains the various names for the true and living God of the Scriptures, Bavinck reiterates several themes that he set forth in his introductory comments on the knowability of God. The first of these themes is that God's names are not arbitrarily chosen or the product of human reflection or imagination. We do not name God; God names himself in his revelation. The names of God, accordingly, are given through divine revelation. When we address God or speak about him, our language must conform to the standard set for us in God's Word. The second of these themes is that divine revelation involves an act of God's gracious initiative and condescension. God comes to us in his Word and, in so doing, accommodates himself and his language to our limitations as creatures. All knowledge of God is *analogical*, that is, it assumes that God as Creator has left an imprint upon or revealed himself in the works of his hands. Our knowledge of God, and by extension of his names, "*is only a finite image, a faint likeness and creaturely impression of the perfect knowledge that God has of himself*" (RD 2:110). To illustrate what this means, Bavinck appeals to a traditional distinction in Reformed theology between the *archetypal* and *ectypal* knowledge of God. The *archetypal* knowledge of God is the knowledge God

has of himself. God's self-knowledge is perfect, comprehensive, immediate, and necessary to who he is as God. In a manner of speaking, God is the first and original theologian. The *ectypal* knowledge of God is our knowledge of God, which is wholly dependent upon God's gracious decision to "go outside of himself" and give himself to be known by us. To use an analogy of John Calvin, God's revelation of himself, which is the basis for all derived or *ectypal* knowledge, is akin to a mother "lispering" (we would use the language, "talking baby-talk") with her children. Through God's condescension in divine revelation, we are able truly to know God. However, our knowledge of God is necessarily imperfect, incomplete, and derivative knowledge. We know God as he shares his perfect knowledge of himself with us.

Since the names of God are revelatory of God's nature and character, the topic of God's attributes ordinarily is addressed in the context of a treatment of these names. However, before Bavinck considers God's attributes in particular, he notes that the Scriptures do employ a number of proper names for God that are of special importance in the history of revelation. When we speak of proper names, we are speaking of those names that God gives to himself and in terms of which he is to be addressed. Though all of God's attributes are able to be used in addressing God, some of the names of God in Scripture are used in a more restricted sense. These proper names are "*names by which we refer to or address God as an independent personal being*" (RD 2:137).

Among the proper names of God that are particularly important in Scriptural revelation, Bavinck identifies the following:

El, Elohim, El Shaddai: The simplest and most common name for God in the Old Testament is El, or one of its related forms, Elohim and El Shaddai (God Almighty). This name for God discloses that he is the great Creator of all things, whose power or might is evident in his rule over creation and his ability to accomplish his every purpose. In the history of theology, some debate has taken place regarding the significance of the plural form, Elohim, which could be translated "gods" (as is the case when it refers to the non-gods of human idolatry). Contrary to the argument of some biblical scholars, who claim that the plural form is a residue of an earlier polytheism, Bavinck suggests that it is better taken as a "plural of abstraction" or as an "intensive plural" which denotes the fullness of God's life and power as the transcendent Lord of all creation.

YHWH, YHWH Sabaoth: In the history of God's fulfillment of his covenant promises to his people, Israel, this name identifies God the Creator as the covenant Lord who unfailingly accomplishes his purposes and fulfills his promises. Known as the tetragrammaton (for the four consonants that comprise this name), God revealed his peculiar covenant name to Moses, the Mediator of the covenant, in the context of Moses' charge to lead the children of Israel out of captivity in Egypt (Exodus 3). Literally, this name means "I will be who I will be." The covenant Lord is always there in the course of redemptive history, accomplishing his redemptive purposes and faithfully executing his promise to be a God to Abraham and his seed. As the Lord of hosts, the covenant God of Israel employs the "armies of heaven" triumphantly to secure the redemption of his people and vanquish their enemies. In the Greek language of the New Testament, this name is often rendered as "Lord," and the covenant finds its fulfillment in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Word become flesh, "full of grace and truth" (John 1).

Father: In the New Testament revelation, we find the fullness of God's disclosure of himself in his trinitarian name, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

"This name is the supreme revelation of God. God is not only the Creator, the Almighty, the Faithful One, the King and Lord; he is also the Father of his people."

(RD 2:147)

Believers know God as their Father and King through Jesus Christ, the eternal and natural Son of the Father, and the One through whom the grace of adoption is bestowed upon the children of God. In the fullness of God's self-revelation, believers enjoy fellowship *with* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in or by* the Holy Spirit.

The attributes of God

If the *name* of God refers comprehensively to the fullness of what God has revealed about his nature and character in his revelation, and if the *names* of God refer to those restricted ways in which God is addressed by his people — the *attributes* of God represent the rich and diverse array of God's perfections. Because God is infinitely rich and unfathomably great in his being and nature, the revelation of God requires that we acknowledge a diversity of these attributes or perfections.

In the history of theology, several questions have historically been posed regarding God's attributes. The first question concerns the relation between these attributes and God's *being*, who he *is*. The second question focuses upon the permissibility of speaking of diverse attributes, when God is said to be a *simple* being who is not composed of different attributes but identical with each of his attributes. And the third question asks whether we may classify or distinguish God's attributes into different categories.

Bavinck answers the first of these questions by noting that God's attributes are not to be viewed as extrinsic to who is, but as descriptive of his intrinsic nature or essence. God does not *have* or *possess* distinct attributes; God *is* his attributes. When we speak of God's goodness, for example, we are not saying that there is something called goodness that God possesses or that there is a kind of standard by which we can measure God and conclude that he is good. The goodness of God is properly descriptive of God's own being and character. Or if we were to say that God is holy, we would be affirming not only that God is the measure of what it is to be holy but he is himself holy. The holiness of God describes God's nature. Furthermore, however many attributes or perfections we may ascribe to God, we should not think of any one attribute as though it were most especially descriptive of who he is. In the history of theology, one common source of error is to view one of God's attributes as a kind of privileged attribute that trumps or takes precedence over the others. An illustration of a common form of this error is the claim that, if God is perfectly loving and good, then it is impossible to believe that the atonement of Christ involved an act whereby God's justice and holiness were satisfied or appeased. Often, theologians who reject the idea of *propitiation* as an essential component of Christ's work of atonement are guilty of pitting one perfection of God against the other, or treating one perfection as though it were more important than the others. However, in the biblical view of God's works, including the work of atonement, we should recognize that God always acts in a way that *satisfies his own being and nature*; God acts in a way that reveals and corresponds to who he is.

One especially difficult question with respect to God's attributes has to do with their diversity. In the history of Christian theology, one of God's attributes is his "unity of simplicity," God is not a composite being of whom it could be said that he is partly holy or partly good. Rather, God is fully and indivisibly good or holy. Though from a human perspective it is necessary to speak of God's attributes in distinction from each other, we should acknowledge that each of God's attributes describes God himself. In the ultimate sense, each of God's attributes is identical with God himself, and each of these attributes is truly one with all the others. Perhaps an analogy will help to clarify this emphasis. A prism is something that enables us to refract the diverse colors of the spectrum of light. However, when these colors are seen in their fullness and unity, they are perfectly one; they are light, unrefracted and indistinguishable. Though this analogy is inexact for obvious reasons, it allows us to understand how our knowledge of God's perfections in their diversity is a knowledge that, cumulatively, gives to us a partial glimpse of the fullness of God's being in its indivisible glory.

In his consideration of the question of classifying God's attributes, Bavinck acknowledges that there have been several distinct classifications in the history of Christian theology. In Bavinck's judgment, the best method of classification is the one that has prevailed historically among Reformed theologians. God's attributes are of two kinds: incommunicable and communicable. The incommunicable attributes of God are those perfections that especially emphasize God's transcendent greatness and distinction from all things creaturely. In relation to these attributes, we may say that little or no resemblance of such attributes is evident in God's creatures. The communicable attributes of God are those perfections that especially emphasize God's immanence or nearness to the creation. These attributes are more obviously reflected in those creatures who

reflect some or another likeness to God, the Creator. While Bavinck finds this distinction the most useful and helpful, he also acknowledges that it should not be overstated or viewed as altogether satisfactory. Even God's incommunicable attributes are not without any analogy in the creation, and his communicable attributes are in many respects other than the way they find their resemblance or reflection in the created order.

In the interest of brevity, my summary of Bavinck's handling of the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God will consist of a series of short definitions.

Incommunicable attributes

Independence: (aseity) The independence or aseity of God refers to his self-existence and all-sufficiency. Unlike all created reality, God depends upon nothing outside of himself to be the God he is, and exercises universal lordship over all things. All creatures may or may not exist. God must exist, and enjoys the fullness of being and life within himself.

Immutability: God's immutability refers to his unchanging being, purpose and will. Though God sustains a direct and immediate relation to all that he has created, he does not undergo change in his nature or character. In and through all his relations with the creature, God remains who he is, steadfast and constant in all his ways and works.

Infinity: The infinity of God expresses the transcendent greatness of God in an especially powerful manner. Whereas all creatures are limited in some way, God is unlimited in his being. In relation to time, God's infinity is his *eternity*. God is not limited by the creaturely order of a succession of moments. He is without beginning or ending. God's eternity is not to be understood as mere everlastingness, as though God were subject to the passage of limitless number of moments. God transcends the limits of temporal succession, is the Creator of creaturely time, and is present to all moments, past, present, and future. In relation to space, God's infinity is his *omnipresence*. God is everywhere present in the fullness of his being, but not in the sense of extension or circumscription within a particular place. As One who is omnipresent, God is the Creator of space and is present to all creation. Time and space are created limits that apply to all that God has created. Eternity and omnipresence are divine perfections that properly belong to God alone.

Unity: The unity or oneness of God is evident in two respects. First, the "unity of singularity" means that God is absolutely and exclusively the one only true and living God, beside whom there is no other. All of the idols of the peoples are fashioned from some feature of the created world. Only the true God, the self-existent, immutable and infinite Creator of all things visible and invisible, is worthy of the creature's worship and service. Second, the "unity of simplicity" means that God, unlike all limited creatures, is not composed of parts or elements. The simplicity of God means that God is his attributes, and each of his attributes describes a facet of his indivisible fullness. Though the one God subsists eternally in three Persons, he remains incomposite in his being as God.

Communicable attributes

Spirituality: The spirituality of God includes the ideas of God's incorporeality (without a body) and invisibility, and corresponds to the truth of his eternity and omnipresence. When the Scriptures speak of the believer "seeing" God, they do so in the context of God's gracious condescension and accommodation of himself to his creatures.

Knowledge: The knowledge of God is the first of God's *intellectual* attributes. God, who is light, knows and understands all things. He knows himself necessarily, immediately, and comprehensively. He also knows all things actual and possible. Though God knows himself *necessarily*, he knows all things that pertain to the creation *freely*, since such knowledge *depends upon his will* to create and govern the world in a particular way. Even though God knows all things that pertain to the creation, past, present, and future, his knowledge of the future must be viewed as compatible with the free self-determination and responsibility of his creatures, such as angels and human beings who were created in his image. The idea that God could foreknow what free human beings will do without his determining in any sense what they will do, is impossible. Even

though we are not able to penetrate the relationship between God's all-determining counsel and the free actions of some of his creatures, we must affirm that both are true and that God is able to know all things in advance of their occurrence within his creation.

Wisdom: The wisdom of God is the perfect correspondence between what God knows and what God does. In the application of his knowledge, God always orders his means to their appropriate end, and acts in a manner that is true to his own character.

Truthfulness: God is wholly reliable in his being, works and words. He is absolutely trustworthy, possessing an intrinsic integrity that is incompatible with any variation or untruth. The truthfulness of God is evident in the reliability of his promises and the steadfastness of his purposes.

Goodness: The goodness of God is the first of his *moral* attributes. God's goodness is his bounty and generosity in self-giving love and devotion. As one who is intrinsically good, God displays his goodness in the grace he bestows upon his creatures in his providential care and sustenance. Particularly, in his purpose to redeem his people in Christ, God exhibits his grace or unmerited favor, his mercy or heartfelt pity, his steadfast or unfailing love, and his patience or slowness to anger.

Holiness: God's holiness distinguishes him from all creatures as transcendently great and morally perfect and indefectible. God displays his holiness in setting his people apart for himself, in providing for their cleansing from the guilt and corruption of sin, and in providing an atoning sacrifice in Christ for their sins.

Righteousness: God's righteousness is his steadfastness in justly ruling all things, and his adherence to the rule of justice and proper order. God's righteousness is evident in his rule over the creation, his rewarding of the righteous and punishing of the wicked. God's righteousness is vindicated in the gospel through the atoning work of Christ, which satisfies God's holiness and righteousness, and in the everlasting punishment of the unbelieving and disobedient.

Sovereignty: As the Creator and Lord of all things, God's sovereignty is his power to will and govern all things. With respect to himself, God necessarily wills to be the God he is. With respect to his creation, God freely wills to govern all things and to make them subservient to his own glory and purpose. God's sovereignty is not arbitrary or unlimited in an absolute sense, but the power to be who he is in all of his perfections. When it comes to God's sovereign will, we must distinguish between God's *revealed* (what he makes known to us) and *secret* (what he does not make known to us) will; between God's "will of decree" (what he has purposed with respect to all things, including the salvation of his people) and his "will of precept" (what he reveals in his Word concerning what pleases him). Such distinctions, however necessary or helpful, are only ways whereby the rich, single, and inscrutable will of God relates to the accomplishment of God's purposes for all creation and every creature.

Admittedly, this attempt to describe briefly the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God is less than satisfactory. Every one of these descriptions requires further elaboration and clarification. However, even these brief and inadequate descriptions of God's perfections are a reminder to us of the infinitely great and inexhaustibly glorious being of the living God. Anyone who would pretend to understand completely all of these dimensions of God's glorious perfections would be guilty either of self-delusion or idolatry. As we have previously observed, the consideration of God's perfections involves not only the grateful acknowledgment of the extent of the knowledge of God that is given to us through divine revelation, but also the humble awareness of the great mystery of God's being and nature.

Cornelis Venema

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