

Response Paper to Reformed Dogmatics by Herman Bavinck

by

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The existence of God is almost universally accepted. No matter where you go in the world you will run into someone who believes in god. All people know that there is a god, but not all people know the living God. How do people have this knowledge, while not knowing the living God? What is knowledge of God? Is knowledge of God innate? Must knowledge of God be mediated? These are some of the questions that Bavinck answers in “Reformed Dogmatics.”

Bavinck believes that the knowledge of God is mediated because God is transcendent and infinitely above us. He is infinite, we are finite, he is eternal, we exist in time. We cannot comprehend God because He transcends all of our concepts and language of Him. Even the smallest idea that we can think of about God implies that He is exalted above everything. Since, God is transcendent we cannot know God in Himself, or in His essence. What we know of God is only what God has desired to make known to us and as much as we can understand.

However, despite this great difference between God and us, we are still able to know God because God accommodates to us to reveal Himself. He does this by Scripture. Scripture mediates the acquired and innate knowledge of God. We cannot interpret or understand this knowledge of God that we have apart from God’s special revelation to us. He also does this by miracles, prophecy, history, and nature. God transcends all our concepts, pictures, and language of Him. “The purpose of God’s revelation, according to Scripture, is precisely that human beings may know God and so receive eternal life (John 17:3; 20:31) (p. 30)” Knowledge of God therefore can be true, but we must realize that our knowledge is relative and excludes comprehension of God.

The knowledge of God is important to Bavinck because it means that all people must consent to God’s existence. The existence of God is what Scripture assumes. It never assumes that people are so far gone as to not know that God exists. Atheism, he notes, is considered foolishness in the Bible and is to be regarded as the exception rather than the rule. Because the knowledge of God is innate or implanted in us we can readily assent to the existence of God. Hence, Bavinck says, “Just as people, upon opening their eyes, automatically see the sun and by its light discerns

objects, so by their very nature--the moment that they hear there is a God and a difference between good and evil--they must assent to these statements. They cannot do otherwise. They accept these truths without any compulsion or proof, because they are self-evident (p.72).”

Bavinck then means by the knowledge of God this implanted knowledge of God or what is often termed the *sensus divinitatis*. In discussing the sense of the divine, Bavinck explains Calvin’s view of it and affirms it. Bavinck however is careful to avoid talking of the knowledge of God as an innate idea. He rejects the idea that knowledge of God could be an innate idea because he thinks that it make people independent of the world, be self-sufficient, and do away with the revelation that God has given to us in his word. In contrast to be an innate idea Bavinck stipulates that the knowledge of God is *ectypal* (derived from Scripture) and that only God’s knowledge is *archetypal* (adequate and underived).

Bavinck holds together the nature of the knowledge of God and the mechanisms by which it is mediated by this insistence that knowledge of God is *ectypal*. He does this by drawing out five implications. First, it implies that all of our knowledge is epistemically grounded in God. All knowledge is to God and through God. Second, it implies that God has to accommodate people to their level of understanding in order to reveal himself to them. Third, it is impossible to deny that God accommodates people because that is what he did in creation. Fourth, our knowledge of God is analogical and not symbolic. It is shaped in analogy by God as he relates to people, reveals himself, in nature, and in his dispositions to creatures. Finally, our knowledge of God is true and trustworthy because it has God as the fountain from which the knowledge comes from.

What we see throughout this view that Bavinck advocates is a personal God. God relates to his creatures by accommodating understanding of himself to their level. God reveals himself in personal ways such as: how he relates to his people, his acts, and his words. Bavinck avoids philosophical abstractions about God such as his rejection of innate ideas. He holds together the nature of knowledge of God and the mechanisms of this knowledge by his teaching of our

knowledge being ectypal and in doing so upholds the person-hood of God in implying that our knowledge of God is analogical and as such is shaped by how God relates to people.

I can benefit from Bavinck's view on the knowledge of God by remembering that God desires to have a relationship with me. This can be seen in the relational nature of his message. God cares for us so much that he would accommodate himself to us and reveal himself to us by his relations with us. Since, God has made it possible to have a relationship with him by knowing him, I need to live in relationship to him and do what is pleasing to him.

Bavinck's discussion of the knowledge of God is something that I can take great comfort in when I teach and preach. It says that all people have knowledge of God and that when this knowledge is mediated to people they must affirm that there is a God and good and evil. So, since all people have this knowledge of God and it is mediated by God's word, I do not have to feel or think that I have not taken as an effective route to reach people as the apologist that tries to convince people of God's existence and morality by logical argument. Therefore, when I preach and teach the word of God we can have confidence in the words that I proclaim.

The view of the knowledge of God which Bavinck advocates should move me to communicate God's word to people. Since, God shows his desire for all people to know him by giving them knowledge of himself, then I should be moved to share the gospel because people who have never had a chance to accept the gospel do not sufficient knowledge of God. Since, knowledge of God must be mediated, I must be willing to do whatever we can to get the word of God to the unreached people groups in the world so that they may know God.

The discussion of God's transcendence given by Bavinck should also affect how I live and think. Realizing that God is transcendent and incomprehensible is humbling to me because it makes me realize that there is no understanding of God that I can arrive at on my own. By seeing that God is incomprehensible and so far beyond my understanding, I am amazed at how vast the knowledge of our God is. When I think of how God has not left anyone in a state of ignorance

but accommodated himself to all people, I rejoice in the grace and love of God displayed in that act.

What we can learn from Bavinck about the knowledge of God, touches every area of our lives. It can affect how we relate to God by giving us a picture of God that is personal. God gives the knowledge of himself so that people will know him, and he reveals himself in acts and personal relations. It affects our understanding of how we know God. It also affects the way we live, think, teach, and preach. Let us strive to live according to the knowledge of God we have!