

Lecture 14 – Essence & Attributes; Names, Roles & Historical Acts

“It is sufficient for us ‘to become acquainted with his character and to know what is conformable to his nature.’” Herman Bavinck

Key Terms

Neo-Calvinism, essence, Aquinas’ list of attributes, equivocal, univocal, analogical

Objectives

- *Analyze the question of whether there is a God in light of His interaction with His creation.
- *Distinguish between knowing God in a philosophical sense and in a relational, personal sense. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches.

Essence & Attributes

I. The Incomprehensibility of God

- A. Transcendence requires revelation.
- B. Human limitations relative to revelation
 1. Sin
 2. Immaturity
 3. Creatureliness, finitude
- C. Our knowledge of God is always a creaturely, covenantal knowing.

II. Can We Know the Essence of God?

- A. The tradition of H. Bavinck and C. Van Til: Neo-Calvinism
 1. Man cannot know the essence of God.

“Calvin deemed it vain speculation to attempt ‘an examination of God’s essence.’ It is sufficient for us ‘to become acquainted with his character and to know what is conformable to his nature.’”

Herman Bavinck

- 2. Essences are philosophical abstractions which are foreign to biblical revelation. Scripture knows God through His covenantal action.
 - a. The Bible is not concerned to speak of God as He is in-and-of-Himself (ad intra), but rather speaks of God as He comes to us in His Word (ad extra).
 - b. Thus we do not study God per se. We study His revelation, which is both a bridge and a boundary between the Creator and the creature.
- B. Positive elements of the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition
 1. It is appropriately anti-speculative.
 2. It seeks to emphasize the covenantal reality of all knowing.
 3. It seeks to safeguard God’s majesty from human presumption and preserve the Creator/creation distinction in that it rejects the medieval notion of an *analogia entis*.
 4. It seeks to respect the mediated character of human knowing.
 5. It inherently denies the integrity of natural theology while affirming creational revelation.
- C. The danger of the Dutch tradition
 1. The tradition can be interpreted as denying the knowability of God. Has been accused of agnosticism.
- D. God is knowable, but what is an essence?

Essence:

1. Can we define God?
 - a. We define things; we describe persons.
 - b. A definition, like a being or an essence, is a mental construction.
2. Our knowledge of God is real, and we can state that knowledge in propositional statements.
3. The denigration of cognitive (propositional) knowledge in modern theology
4. Persons act in conformity to their natures.

III. Divine Attributes

A. Divine attributes within classical theism

Aquinas' list of attributes. God is:

1. Pure actuality
2. Immutable
3. Impassible
4. Infinite and invisible
5. Eternal (in the sense of timeless)
6. Omniscient
7. Omnipresent
8. Simple
9. Necessary
10. Underived (aseity)
11. Omnipotent

B. Problems

1. Relevance
2. Essential and accidental properties
3. Fails to conform to the biblical pattern of God's self-disclosure

Names, Roles & Historical Acts

I. Who is God?

A. Which is the proper question:

1. Who is God? Calvin: "Who is the God with whom we have to do?"
2. Is God properly defined (what is it?) or described (who is He?). Which question is proper to persons?

B. God is a person.

1. Qualities which adhere to personhood
 - a. Alive
 - b. Self-conscious
 - c. Intelligence
2. A philosophical objection
 - a. Is attributing personhood to God an anthropomorphism?

C. The real anthropomorphisms of Scripture

D. The nature of language relevant to God

1. Equivocal
2. Univocal
3. Analogical