

6-7. Images of God and Names of God John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.x-xii (1:99-120)

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ch 3 (pp. 95-147)

Introduction

We're moving on in the next few weeks of the Emmanuel Guided Reading Course to the next major topic: the doctrine of God. Over a period of a few weeks we'll be thinking about God's essence and attributes, and also about the doctrine of the Trinity.

We'll also be working through some of the practical implications of the biblical doctrine of God. Indeed, this is where we start in week 6 – with a portion of John Calvin's *Institutes* on the subject of images of God (Calvin, *Institutes*, I.x-xii). This was obviously a big issue when Calvin wrote in the sixteenth century, for like the other Reformers Calvin was confronted with medieval Catholic churches that were stuffed full of icons, statues and so on. It remains an issue for us today, for we find images of God all over the place – and not just in churches.

After looking at these chapters of Calvin's *Institutes*, we'll be turning in week 7 to volume 2 of Herman Bavinck's superb *Reformed Dogmatics*. We'll be beginning with chapter 3 (pp. 95-147), which may take a little longer than four hours to read. However, the section from Calvin's *Institutes* is rather shorter, and the study questions for Bavinck are included below in order to give you more time to complete this reading. I suggest that you try to use some of the time from this week's reading to get started with Bavinck.

Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* is a demanding read. So don't be surprised (and don't worry!) if you occasionally find some of the details a bit baffling, especially in the philosophical and historical discussions. I've included plenty of notes to let you know which bits to spend your time on (mainly on pp. 97-106 and pp. 118-121). And, as ever, let the questions below guide your reading so that you know where to focus your attention. And if you're pressed for time, omit the questions marked with a *.

Outline

Over the next two weeks we'll be looking at both of the above works – focussing on Calvin in week 6 and Bavinck in week 7.

Questions for reflection

Before you begin looking at Calvin, think about these questions:

- i. Is it permissible to paint pictures of Jesus? Why or why not? Does context matter (e.g. icons in worship, children's Bibles, art galleries, graffiti, etc.)?
- ii. Is it permissible to paint pictures of God the Father, or the Holy Spirit?
- iii. What is the second commandment? What does it prohibit that isn't already covered by the first commandment?
- iv. Leaving aside pictures of God, what do you think about churches that contain pictures of anything else?

Study questions on Calvin, *Institutes*, I.x-xii

In previous chapters, Calvin has been talking about the way in which God reveals himself in and through the created world. In I.x, Calvin explains briefly that God's revelation in Scripture agrees with his revelation in creation. This opens the way for the subject of images in I.xi-xii, which will occupy most of our attention in the tutorial.

In I.xi Calvin sets out what he thinks about statues and images of God. He doesn't mince his words.

1. What does Calvin think about statues or images of God (I.xi.1)? What reasons does he give in I.xi.1-2?

For reflection: How does Calvin's teaching here compare with your answer to the "Questions for reflection" above?

For reflection: Can you think of any connection between what Calvin says here and the doctrine of creation?

In the following sections Calvin addresses a number of counter-arguments against the view he has set out in I.xi.1-2. The first counter-argument is addressed in I.xi.3.

2. What arguments in favour of images of God does Calvin consider in I.xi.3? How does he respond?

For reflection: Are you persuaded by Calvin's response in this section?

3. What further argument against images of God does Calvin set out in I.xi.4?

For reflection: What do you think of the tone of Calvin's discussion on this topic so far? Do you think such an approach is justifiable? Why or why not?

In sections I.xi.5-7 Calvin considers another argument sometimes advanced in favour of images of God: that they are "the books of the uneducated" (I.xi.5).

4. Does Calvin think images of God are acceptable as "the books of the uneducated" (I.xi.5)? What different reasons do he give to support his view (I.xi.5-7)?

For reflection: Do you agree with Calvin's response at this point? Why or why not?

5. What will tend to be the result, in Calvin's view, if people begin using images for educational purposes (I.xi.9)? Why, according to Calvin, will this result follow (I.xi.9)? Do you agree?

Some people who supported the use of images in worship attempted to defend their position by saying that they weren't really *worshipping* the idol. Calvin takes them on in I.xi.11.

*6. What is the "wily distinction" that Calvin mentions in I.xi.11? How does he respond? (You might find it helpful also to look at I.xii.2-3.)

Calvin's views obvious have implications for what artists may depict. He sets out his view on this subject in I.xi.12.

7. What, in Calvin's view, are artists permitted to reproduce (I.xi.12)?

For reflection: What implications does Calvin's argument have? Do you think Calvin is being consistent here? Do you agree with his view?

Having outlined his view on what artists may legitimately depict, Calvin has some things to say in I.xi.12 about *where* such art may and may not be placed.

8. In Calvin's view, is it permissible to have any images at all (whether of God or anything else) in churches (I.xi.13)? Why or why not?

*9. What do you think of the allegedly Scriptural arguments in favour of images in I.xi.15?

I.xii is a brief chapter, which you may already have looked at briefly while considering question 6 above.

Study questions on Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ch. 3

These study questions relate to Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ch. 3. We'll come to this in tutorial 7, but (as mentioned above) they're included here to enable you to make a start on them earlier.

1. "We do not name God; he names himself" (p. 98). What does Bavinck mean by this (see pp. 97-99)? Why is it important?

2. Why does God speak about himself in the ways described on pp. 100-101?

For reflection: Do any of these descriptions surprise you? If you took these descriptions seriously, how would they change the way you think about God?

On p. 102, Bavinck quotes from several people, including Augustine, Thomas and Bonaventure.

3. How do the quotations on p. 102 from Augustine, Thomas and Bonaventure illuminate what Bavinck has said so far?

4. How should "a reverent mind" understand Calvin's astonishing statement that "nature is God" (p. 103; quoting Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.5)?

For reflection: Does Calvin's statement, "Nature is God," make sense to you? Would you be happy to say it?

In the next section, beginning on p. 104, Bavinck confronts a tricky problem – "a peculiar intellectual difficulty" – raised by what he has said so far.

5. What is the "peculiar intellectual difficulty" (p. 104)? How, according to Bavinck, should it be resolved?

6. What consequences would follow if we were to insist that it is impossible to speak of God using human language?

From the bottom of p. 105 through to the middle of p. 110, Bavinck explores the issue of what kind of knowledge of God is available to us. The discussion is complex and rather philosophical, so don't worry about it too much. Nonetheless, the basic point is quite simple. Bavinck rejects two errors: first, the idea that our knowledge of God is complete and exhaustive; and second, the idea that our knowledge of God is untrue and incorrect. He argues that whereas God has "archetypal" knowledge of himself (he knows himself completely and exhaustively), we have "ectypal" knowledge of him (we know him truly, yet not exhaustively).

The five-point summary on p. 110 is particularly helpful.

*7. Can you highlight some places on pp. 105-110 where Bavinck's point about our true yet finite knowledge of God is particularly clear?

On pp. 110-118, Bavinck reflects on the attempts of theologians to describe the “essence” of God. Central to Bavinck’s approach is his claim that “Scripture ... never proceeds from an abstract concept of God, nor does it ever highlight one attribute of God at the expense of others” (p. 110). All God’s attributes describe his essence. Despite this, various theologians have attempted to identify a “predominant attribute” which identifies God and “differentiates him from all creatures” (p. 112). These different attempts are outlined on pp. 112-117.

*8. Given the previous discussion of God’s names, can you think why Bavinck would be so insistent that no single attribute of God should be emphasised above the others?

9. What is the doctrine of “divine simplicity” (p. 118)? How does this doctrine enable us “to honor equally all the attributes of God” (p. 118)?

10. What is meant by the Christian conception of God as “being” (pp. 120-121)? How does the Christian idea differ from the pagan philosophical notion of “being”?

*11. What kinds of distinction can be made between God’s attributes (pp. 124-128, especially pp. 126-127)? How do the illustrations of fire and grain (bottom of p. 127) help at this point?

On pp. 131-132 Bavinck discusses various classifications of God’s attributes, and on pp. 137-147 turns to some of the proper names applied to God in Scripture. These sections are well worth reading, but we won’t consider them in detail during the tutorial.