

HERMAN
BAVINCK

Guidebook for Instruction
in the Christian Religion



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
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Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion

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THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

1. [1] The highest good of man is God and God alone.¹ In the beginning, [man] was created according to God's image and likeness, and man can never wholly eradicate or destroy his divine origin and divine relationship. Even though [through sin] he has lost the attributes of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, which were contained in this image, there are still some "small traces" present in him, which are not only sufficient to deny him all innocence, but which also bear witness to his former greatness and continually remind him of his divine calling and heavenly destination.²

In the entirety of the life and striving of man, he comes to this: that he does not have enough in the whole world. Along with the animals, he shares a sense perception and a sensual consciousness; but above this, he was equipped with intellect and reason, which gives him an awareness of things that are invisible and eternal. Likewise, along with the animals, man has sensual desires, the need for food and drink, light and air, work and ordinary [daily] rest. Moreover, man has received a will that, guided by reason and the conscience, extends to the unseen, spiritual, and eternal goods. The presentation of Holy Scripture roots both the intellect and the will in the heart of man, and in them God has laid eternity (Eccl. 3:11). Out of that are the springs of life; therefore, they must be preserved [2] for and above everything (Prov. 4:23). It does not benefit man, therefore, whether he gains houses and fields—yea, the whole world if he suffers the destruction of his soul (Matt. 16:26). No creature, however powerful, is capable of redeeming his soul (Ps. 49:7–8).³

1. *Magnalia Dei*, 7 [hereafter *MD* plus page number]. Bavinck admits in the preface that there will be a clear correlation between *Magnalia Dei* and *Handleiding*. In fact, they begin with the same sentence [Dutch: "Des menschen hoogste goed is God, en God alleen."]. Similarly, the second chapter of *MD* begins, "God is the highest good for man [Dutch: God het hoogste goed voor den mensch.]" (9).

2. *The Belgic Confession of Faith*, Article 14: The Creation and Fall of Humanity; cf. *MD*, 9.

3. For an expansion of this paragraph, see *MD*, 11–12.

This inability to satisfy the human heart applies not only to material treasures and sensual pleasures, but equally to those ideal goods that come under the name of science and art, of humanity, civilization, or culture.⁴ For these [material, sensual, and ideal] goods are by no means despised in Holy Scripture. On the contrary, they are prized (Exod. 31:3; 35:31; 1 Sam. 2:3; Prov. 2:6, 8:11; James 1:17); but they only obtain their true value if the fear of God is their foundation (Prov. 1:7), they are connected with love (1 Cor. 13:2), and they are used to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31).

As was said by Augustine, the heart of man is created for God and finds no rest until it finds it in God.⁵

2. In order for our hearts to find rest in God, naturally we must possess some knowledge of him, for the unknown is unloved. At present, there are many who completely deny the knowability of God; but Holy Scripture, with the rest of humanity, assumes that God, at least to some extent, can be known by man because [God] has revealed himself (for more: see chapter 2). According to Scripture, [God] has not only revealed himself in the works of nature (Rom. 1:19–20) but above all by the word of prophets and apostles in the person of Christ, who was the Father's only and much beloved Son (Matt. 3:17; John 1:14; Rom. 8:32; Heb. 1:3), the preeminent messenger (Matt. 11:27; John 3:16; 17:3), who [3] thus is able to perfectly convey the name of the Father and help us to know the true one (John 1:18; 17:6; 1 John 5:20). In the revelation of him, this Christ, the one sent, bears witness to the knowledge

4. In *MD*, he expands on this idea, writing of the heart of man as the physical point of origin and the main organ of bodily life, so it is also the spiritual and ethical source of the higher life of man; it is the seat of our self-consciousness, of our relationship to God, our bondage to the law in our whole moral and spiritual nature (11).

5. St. Augustine, *The Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 1. In *MD*, Bavinck writes similarly, "Zoo blijft het woord van Augustinus, dat het hart des menschen tot God is geschapen end at het geen rust vindt, voordat het ruste vindt aan zijn vaderhart. Alle menschen zoeken Dan. ook eigenlijk naar God, getuigde dezelfde kerkvader, maar zij zoeken Hem niet op de rechte wijze, niet in den rechten weg, niet op de rechte plaats. Zij zoeken Hem beneden, en Hij is boven. . . Zij voelen zich tot God aangetrokken en tegelijk door Hem afgestoon" (14). [English translation: So, it remains with the word of Augustine, that the heart of man was created for God and that it cannot find rest until it rests in his Father's heart. Then all men are really seeking for God, but they do not all seek him the right way, not in the right way, nor in the right place. They seek him down below, and He is up above. . . They feel themselves attracted to God and at the same time repelled by him.]

of the one true God, who is eternal life (John 17:3).⁶ From this it is apparent that the knowledge of God in Christ bears a wholly special character and differs from all other knowledge in origin and object and in essence and fruit.

In *origin* because knowledge of God is indebted to Christ. To a certain extent, we acquire all other knowledge through our own effort and research. But the knowledge of the only true God must be given to us, as children, through Christ. Apart from him, it is nowhere to be found; not in schools of science or in renowned philosophers. But Christ knows the Father and has revealed him to us. “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27).⁷

In *object* because although the knowledge of nature and history and of the whole world, especially in the last century, is so vast and multiplying, it is still not complete; it is about the creature and therefore is restricted to the finite and does not find the infinite.⁸ There is, however, a revelation of God’s eternal power and divinity in the works of creation, but the knowledge of God obtained from it is limited and insufficient for man, who is a sinner needing redemption (Rom. 1:20–23; 3:19–20). In Christ, however, we behold the Father himself in all of the fullness of his grace and truth (John 1:17; 14:9), so we may boast in humility that we know him because we are known by him; we love him because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

In *essence* because Jesus speaks the Scripture above (Matt. 11:27) not out of an [impersonal] knowledge (*weten*), but as one who knows (*kennen*) God.⁹ [4] There is a vast difference between them. One may know (*weten*) much about creatures, countries, or cultures from reading books, but this is much different from knowing (*kennen*) something from contemplation. It is this knowledge concerning God (*weten*) that consists only in

6. In *MD*, he writes of Christ as the midpoint and highpoint of revelation [Dutch: haar middel—en haar hoogtepunt”] (15).

7. For an extension of Christ as the origin of revelation, see *MD*, 17–18. In this section, Bavinck writes of the Son’s intimate relation with the Father and roots his trustworthiness as a reliable revelation in his mission, as the one who is sent to deliver his people.

8. For a lengthening of Christ as the object of revelation, see *MD*, 18–19.

9. For an enlargement of Christ as the essence of revelation, see *MD*, 19–21. It will be helpful for the reader to know when Bavinck is utilizing two different ways of expressing “to know” with *kennen* and *weten*. They both express different kinds of knowledge; *kennen* indicates an intimate personal knowledge, while *weten* indicates impersonal knowledge.

the intellectual acceptance of another's witness, never reaching the heart, and therefore granting no salvation or peace, but rather makes judgment worse (Matt. 7:21; Luke 12:47–48; 1 Cor. 13:1–13; James 1:23; 2:19). Christ, however, intends a knowledge (*kennis*) of God, which rests on a personal relationship with (*kennismaking*) and experience of his being and virtues, of his righteousness and grace, and therefore can be possessed only by his children (Matt. 5:8; 18:3; John 3:15; 7:17).¹⁰

Finally, in *effect* and *fruit* because this knowledge (*kennis*) of God indeed gives at the same moment eternal life.¹¹ It is not a power like the English proverb ascribes to knowledge, nor does it give to us authority only of the mind over material objects, like contemporary culture and technology; rather it is life, pure life, eternal life. And this life, according to Holy Scripture, includes peace, joy, and salvation; it is a life that in principle already triumphs here on earth and hereafter perfectly upon all sin and death. “He who believes in me,” Jesus said, “though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” [John 11:25–26]. He who believes in the Son *has* eternal life (John 3:36).

3. In accordance with this teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the nature of this science (*wetenschap*) was developed in the Christian Church, and it soon received the name of “Theology,” the study of God, and it retained this name until the present day. Theology was viewed as the science (*wetenschap*) that deduced, imagined, and recounted the knowledge of God from revelation under the guidance of his Holy Spirit. And a theologian is one who in a real sense is a scholar taught by God, who speaks of God, about God, and for the sake of the glory of God's name.

Like all other sciences (*wetenschappen*), in due course, theology wonderfully expanded so that a division was necessary. Typically, the theologian differentiates the science into four groups of study. The first group studies the origin, the collection, the text, and the interpretation of the books of the Bible; the second group concentrates on the church and seeks to understand its history and its present; the third group has the knowledge of God as its center (*middelpunt*), which is contained in revelation and thus includes all of those subjects that have to do with the truthful content of revelation; while, finally, the fourth group covers the offices in Christ's church and sets forth their work. But all these subjects are nevertheless masterfully con-

10. He introduces this sort of “knowing” (*kennen*) as the knowledge of faith in *MD*, 20.

11. For an expansion of the effect and fruit of revelation, see *MD*, 21–22.

nected to an organic unity and elevated to the position of an independent science by the idea of the knowledge of God, which supports them all. For this reason, theology is entitled to its own place in the sphere of the sciences, which are practiced at our colleges and compromise five so-called faculties: besides the faculty of theology, there exists that of law, medicine, mathematics and the field of the natural sciences, and literature and philosophy.

The third group of study in theological science has therefore a direct object for knowledge, which God has revealed of himself in nature and Scripture; and it endeavors to explain this to the human consciousness in such a manner that its truth and value clearly come to light. Naturally, however, this can occur, and it is fitting for it to [6] occur in a diversity of ways, depending on the persons in whose consciousness the truth of revelation is displayed. Holy Scripture itself speaks of milk for children and of solid food for adults (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12–14; 1 Pet. 2:2); it distinguishes between children, youths, and fathers in Christ (1 John 2:12–14), and believers and unbelievers in the gathering of the congregation (1 Cor. 14:23–24). In his preaching to the Jews, Paul was a Jew, to the Greeks a Greek, and to all people all things that he might rescue some (1 Cor. 9:20–22). The word of God is indeed suitable for all kinds of purposes, for teaching and comforting, but also for reproof, admonishment, and punishment (2 Tim. 3:16; 4:2). Additionally, the true faith can be declared in a written or unwritten confession by the congregation over against the world. [The confession] may be explained by the servant of the word in the pulpit to adults, through catechism to children, and through the theologian via dogmatics, whether assertively (positively, thetical) or repudiatingly (elenctic, apologetic), according to scholarly demands. [The confession] may also be explained by a teacher in a simple guidebook or textbook, laid down for students of a secondary or preparatory school.¹²

Although the manner of presentation can be quite different in each of these cases, it is always the same truth. In this respect, there is no distinction between children and adults, between the simple and scholars; they all have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, who is above all, though grace is given to each of them according to the measure of Christ's gift (Eph. 4:5–7). In this spirit, Calvin began his catechism of Geneva with this question: "What is the chief end of human life?" The [7]

12. A description of the various faculties and theology's place among them is absent from *MD* as well as the content of this paragraph, which discusses the place of theology in the life of the believer.

answer rang clear and powerful: “That man might know God by whom they were created.”¹³ In the same way, the Westminster Catechism begins its education with the question: “What is the chief and foremost end of man?” It gave this short and profound answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him perfectly forever.”¹⁴ And the inscription above our Dutch Confession of Faith is: “True Christian confession, containing the principal teachings of God and the eternal salvation of souls.”¹⁵

In the next four sections, we first highlight the sources from which our knowledge of God should be derived, after which we begin with a description of this knowledge of God itself. In this, we first concern ourselves with God himself as he has revealed himself, thus with his essence, his attributes, and his existence. Then we proceed to the treatment of his works, not in and of themselves (like in the other sciences of nature, history, etc.), but only as the works of *God* in their relation to him, as revelation of knowledge. These works fall into two large groups, the works of creation and providence, and that of re-creation and redemption. These works of re-creation and redemption have their objective foundation in the person of Christ and are brought about subjectively through the Holy Spirit in the congregation, until it is filled to all the fullness of God. Thus we, having proceeded from God through all his works, return to God; he is the Alpha and the Omega of all things; from through and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36; Rev.1:8).

13. John Calvin, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, trans. Elijah Waterman (Hartford, CT: Sheldon & Goodwin, 1815), 9.

14. *The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly with Analysis and Scriptural Proofs*, ed. Edwin Hall (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1919), 5.

15. Cf. *MD*, 22.