

*[1958. Foreword to Charnock's "Existence and Attributes of God" as published by Jay Green's Sovereign Grace Book Club]*

## FOREWORD

The life of Stephen Charnock (1628-1680), in contrast to the turbulence of England in the mid-seventeenth century, was almost uneventful. The occurrence of one event, however, secures his reputation for adherence to gospel principles, for, although he was not imprisoned as John Bunyan was, he was one of the ministers ejected under the iniquitous Restoration of Charles II.

For the rest, he had an early charge in Southwark; became a Fellow and then a Senior Proctor at Oxford (1649-1656); went to Dublin as chaplain to the Governor; then in 1675, when restrictions on the reformed ministers were somewhat relaxed, he accepted a call to Crosby Square, where he remained until his death.

How he spent his time, in addition to preaching carefully prepared sermons, became evident upon the posthumous publication of his manuscripts, of which the Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God is the most famous. This edition includes every word of Charnock's remarks on the attributes of God, and the existence of God. However, in most editions in the past, his discourses on Providence, Practical Atheism, and God as a Spirit have been included. These are omitted here with regret. However, 1100 pages would be too much for this one volume.

The Puritan writers are noted for long-windedness. Some, perhaps much, of our impatience with them, however, is more to our discredit than to theirs. In our bustling era the practice of meditation is not popular; and our educational standards have encouraged the substitution of short comic books for solid volumes. Even Mr. Valiant-for-Truth, who in the twentieth century is busy battling for the Atonement and the Resurrection against modernism and neo-orthodoxy in the churches (and who can condemn him for such sorely needed activity?), has scarcely any time to ponder the divine glory and to reflect on the nature of God.

But when, unexpectedly, the essence and attributes of God are called into question, to whom else can we better go than to Stephen Charnock?

Is our knowledge of God mainly negative, or do we have positive information? Is there a positive sense in the words eternal, immutable, and spirit? Or are they merely denials of their temporal and sensory opposites? Can man's mind possess an adequate or suitable conception of God? Is the impossibility of having a mental image of God the equivalent of the impossibility of having a mental concept of God? And is it true that all human knowledge originates in sensation, as Charnock seems to say in one place; or, as he says elsewhere, has God impressed innate knowledge on man's heart from birth and by creation?

Some devoted and energetic Christians consider such questions useless and a waste of time. Evangelistic campaigns, personal work, missionary rallies, youth fellowships, and spectacular sunrise services should, they claim, exhaust all our energy. Theology is a valley of dry bones on which the Spirit will never breathe : let the dead Christian doze with his deadening volumes. Ours shall be life abundant.

With respect to this complaint let it be said that Stephen Charnock, though he was neither a John Wesley nor a Billy Graham, faithfully discharged those pastoral duties that everyone would admit are practical and necessary. It was in fact this cure of souls that motivated his study. If a minister of the gospel is to introduce people to his Lord, the triune God, he ought himself to know the Lord. The deeper, richer, more extensive this knowledge is, the better. And what impatient Christians are inclined to castigate as the dry bones of theology is this knowledge of God and His attributes. Must one labor to emphasize the obvious importance of knowing what sort of Being the Divine Being is? He is not the Deus sive Natura of Spinoza's philosophy; He is not the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle; nor is He their modern counterparts. Then what is the nature, the essence, the attributes of God? Charnock wants his readers to become acquainted with God.

There are other sincere, though we believe mistaken, men who consider this study worse than

useless : they consider it an impious curiosity into things that are too high for us. Although Protestant writers have sometimes warned against such a danger, it is hard in this day to believe that it is a frequent sin. The large majority of people want to know too little instead of too much. Undoubtedly, “the secret things belong unto the Lord our God;” but for this very reason it is more futile than sinful to try to know them.

In any case, the present subject does not fall under this category. The remainder of the verse reads, “but those things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever.” Now, the material that Charnock discusses is firmly founded in the Word of God. To a small extent we learn about God from nature; but chiefly He has revealed Himself in Scripture. This revelation is more extensive than meets the eye; it is not exhausted by merely making a list of pertinent passages. When these passages are compared and used as premises of syllogisms, conclusions hitherto unperceived will appear. And as the great Westminster Confession says, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” Drawing inferences from Scriptural premises is not impious curiosity, but divinely commanded meditation.

The verse just alluded to, after it says that all revelation belongs to us and to our children forever, ends with the words “That we may do all the words of this law.” These sentiments are reinforced later by the well-known verse, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and (all of it) is profitable for doctrine ... for instruction in righteousness ... that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament therefore emphasize these two things : we should study the whole revelation, not just some easy or favorite parts of it; and, this study is not dry as dust theology, but is 'practical', i.e., it leads to righteousness.

GORDON H. CLARK

Butler University.