

[1960. In *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Everett F. Harrison, ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.]

KNOWLEDGE. The problems of knowledge that are raised by the biblical revelation are chiefly two: first, what is the nature of God's knowledge, and, second, what is man's knowledge, particularly man's knowledge of God?

Perhaps the fullest summary of the biblical material on God's knowledge is found in Stephen Charnock's *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1958, chapters VIII and IX, a study of some 200 pages.

The main point in considering God's knowledge is his omniscience: "His understanding is infinite" (Ps. 147:5). The items of God's knowledge are made in the Scripture in great profusion: even past, "God remembered Rachel" (Gen. 30:22), and "a book of remembrance was written before him" (Mal. 3:16); events present, "Doth he not see all my ways and count all my steps" (Job 30:4); events future, "In that day there shall be a fountain opened" (Zech. 13:1), and "He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever" (Luke 1:33); and, as well, hypothetical events contrary to fact, "The Lord said, they will deliver thee up" to Saul if thou stayest in Keilah (I Sam. 23:12).

Not so explicit but more important, God knows himself. When the Apostle says, "The Spirit searches the deep things of God" (I Cor. 2:11), the word *search*, as is also the case in Rev. 2:23, "I am he which searcheth the reins and heart" (cf. I Chron. 28:9; Rom. 8:27), does not imply that God had been ignorant previous to this search. In these cases, *search* means to know exactly and completely. Furthermore, that God knows himself may be deduced from his omnipotence, his blessedness, and perfection, all of which are expressed in sundry passages and divers manners.

The idea of omnipotence, perfection, and blessedness requires God to know all things always. His knowledge is eternal. Such an immediate and uninterrupted knowledge has frequently been designated as *intuitive*. God sees all things at a glance, as it were. He does not learn. He was never ignorant, and he can never come to know more.

This intuitive knowledge is distinguished from both the reasoning and the empirical learning of man. A boy in High School learns the axioms of geometry and painfully deduces the hitherto unknown theorem that triangles contain 180 degrees. God does not reason in this fashion. This is not to say that God is ignorant of the logical

relation between axioms and theorems. God's mind, i.e., God himself, is perfectly logical. But he does not reason in the sense of taking time to pass from one idea to another. That is to say, there is no succession of ideas in God's mind. He does not first know one item and then come to know another of which he was previously ignorant. All ideas are always in his mind.

But though there is no succession of ideas in God's mind, it does not follow that there is no idea of succession. The logical succession of conclusion upon premise is a part of omniscience. Similarly the idea of succession in time is known to God. God knows that one event follows another in time. Christ came after David, and David after Moses. But God's ideas do not follow one another in time, for Christ was slain before the foundation of the world. Therefore God did not learn that Christ was crucified or that David came after Moses by waiting for history to show it to him. God does not depend upon experience. His knowledge is entirely a priori. Otherwise prophecy would be impossible.

Charnock says (Vol. I. pp. 456-57, ed. 1873) "As nothing that he wills is the cause of his will, so nothing that he knows is the cause of his knowledge; he did not make things to know them, but he knows them to make them... If his knowledge did depend upon the things, then the existence of things did precede God's knowledge is to say that God was not the cause of their being."

Because of God's intuitive omniscience, as well as by reason of his omnipotence, and omnipresence, God is incomprehensible. This idea, however, turns the subject from God's knowledge of himself to man's knowledge of God. Of course God comprehends himself. In this respect God is not merely comprehensible but is actually known, understood, and comprehended. But God is incomprehensible to man.

Unfortunately, the term incomprehensible carries undesirable connotations. The word sometimes means irrational, unintelligible, or unknowable. Now, obviously if man could know or understand nothing about God, Christianity would be impossible. It is absolutely essential to maintain that the human mind is capable of grasping truth. Incomprehensible therefore must be taken to mean that man cannot know everything about God. It is necessary to assert that man can know some truths about God without knowing everything that God knows.

In reaction against the optimistic modernism of the nineteenth century, contemporary neo-orthodoxy (*q.v.*) has insisted on the transcendence of God. But it has distorted the biblical concept of transcendence to the degree of making God completely

unknowable. Some of their phraseology may be repeated as examples. God has been called the Wholly-Other. Brunner writes, “God can, when he wants to, speak his word even through false doctrine.” Another author denies that a proposition can have the same meaning for man as it does for God. Several theologians collaborated to say that “we dare not maintain that his (God’s) knowledge and our knowledge coincide at any single point.”

Now, it seems obvious that if a man knows any truth at all, he must know a truth that God knows, for God knows all truths. A sentence must mean to a man who knows its meaning precisely what it means to God; for if the man does not know God’s meaning, he does not know the meaning of the sentence. Hence, if man is to know anything, it cannot be denied that there are points of coincidence between human and divine knowledge. Similarly God cannot be Wholly-Other, for this would deny that man was created in the image of God.

The neo-orthodox try to substitute a personal encounter with God for conceptual knowledge of him. Thought, they say, cannot grasp God, or indeed any persons. Persons are *met*, not thought. But in human relations wordless encounters do not produce friendship. There must be knowledge of character, and this comes mainly through intelligible conversation. Similarly, if God does not give us information about himself, information that is rationally understood, a personal encounter would leave our minds a religious blank.

The intricacies of theology and philosophy are very difficult. Epistemology (*q.v.*) is terrifyingly technical. Whether we learn by logic alone as Descartes and Spinoza taught; or whether we learn by experience alone as Berkeley and Hume taught; or whether we need Kant’s *a priori* categories; or whether we can receive truth only by revelation – are subjects of interesting scholarly discussion. But however it may be, the Bible does not countenance skepticism. It is not anti-intellectual; it does not treat doctrine as unimportant, false, or “incomprehensible.” Rather it places considerable emphasis on truth and understanding.

“Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ... And ye shall know the truth... I tell you the truth... Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth” (John 1:17; 8:32; 16:7; 17:17; cf. John 5:53; 8:45; 16:13). In the face of these utterances it is difficult to understand how anyone can seriously say that we can be sanctified through false doctrine.

Or, again, “We *know* that the Son of God is come and hath given us an *understanding*, that we might *know* him that is *true*” (I John 5:20. Cf. also: I Kings 17:24; Pss. 25:5; 43:3; 86:11; 119:43, 142, 147; Rom. 1:18; 3:7; II Cor. 6:7; 7:14; 11:10; Gal. 2:5, 14; Eph. 1:13 etc.)

These verses indicate that we can grasp God’s meaning, that the truth can be known, and that God can be known. Christianity is the religion of a Book; it is a message of good news; it is a revelation or communication of truth from God to man. Only if the propositions of the Bible are rationally comprehensible, only if man’s intellect can understand what God says, only if God’s mind and man’s mind have some content in common, only so can Christianity be true and only so can Christ mean something to us.

See also Epistemology.

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