

## Stephen Charnock's Christological Knowledge of God in *A Discourse of the Knowledge of God in Christ*

By Jae-Eun Park

### INTRODUCTION

The theology of Stephen Charnock (1628–1680)<sup>1</sup> and the theological tendency of his era have been misunderstood by several writers, not only through misunderstanding of the theological content and method specifically presented in *A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God* (1682),<sup>2</sup> but also because of misapprehension of post-Reformation Protestant thought in general. As an example of the former, Colin E. Gunton states that “Charnock fails to take up the biblical teaching according to which *Jesus* is the wisdom of God in action.”<sup>3</sup> Gunton attributes this failure not only to Charnock’s method that “continues to constrain the content,” but also to the consequent “grave structural deficiencies” that remain in the relationship

between the eternal attribute of God and that of the Son in *A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God* (Ibid). Those who misunderstand Charnock due to a more general misapprehension of post-Reformation thought include R. Tudur Jones and T. F. Torrance. For example, Jones holds that Charnock’s theological system (specifically a covenantal structure) moves “beyond the testimony of Scripture into the realm of scholasticism”<sup>4</sup> or a rigid rationalism. Along with the thought of the older scholarship (e.g., Ernst Bizer, Walter Kieckel, Brian Armstrong, etc.), Torrance asserts that “God” in the post-Reformation theology “appears to lack the kindness, humanity, familiarity of the ‘God’ of the Reformation, for tendencies toward impersonality, abstraction and even harshness are to be noted” in its doctrine of God.<sup>5</sup>

THE AUTHOR: The Rev. Jae-Eun Park received his M.Div. from Chongshin Theological Seminary, South Korea and Th.M. from Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is currently a doctoral candidate in Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. He was ordained in the General Assembly of Presbyterian Church in South Korea in 2013.

1. For a biography of Charnock, see William M. Symington, “Life and Character of Charnock,” in *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 vols. (Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 9–18; Erasmus Middleton, “Stephen Charnock, B. D.,” in *Biographia Evangelica: or, An Historical Account of the Lives and Deaths of the Most Eminent and Evangelical Authors or Preachers...*, vol. 3 of 4 in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (London: 1779–1786), 443–50; Richard L. Greaves, “Stephen Charnock,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: In Association with the British Academy: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, eds. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 203–205; idem, *God’s Other Children: Protestant Nonconformists and the Emergence of Denominational Churches in Ireland, 1660–1700* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 14, 23, 41; John D. Seymour, *The Puritans in Ireland 1647–1661* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921); James McCosh, “Introduction to Charnock’s Works,” in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* vol. I (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), vii–xxxv; Crawford Gribben, *The Irish Puritans: James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church*

(Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003), 110–115; Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 89; Hansang Lee, “Trinitarian Theology and Piety: The Attributes of God in the Thought of Stephen Charnock (1628–1680) and William Perkins (1558–1602)” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Edinburgh, 2009), 11–12.

2. Stephen Charnock, “A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God,” in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. I, with introduction by James McCosh (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 123–536. Charnock’s complete works were first printed in the seventeenth century with the title, *The Works of the Late Learned Divine Stephen Charnock*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for Ben Griffin, 1684). They were edited and published as part of Nichol’s series of the Standard Puritan Divines with the title, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864). In the nineteenth century, *A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God* was published in two different editions: *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (London: T. Tag, 1840; H. G. Bohn, 1845; J. Blackwood, 1875) and *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (New York: Robert Carter, 1853, 1856).

3. Gunton, *Act and Being*, 91 (emphasis in the original).

4. R. Tudur Jones, “Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990): 195.

5. T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: the Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959), lxxix.

Attempts to amend and redress these kinds of misconceptions of Charnock and of his era have followed an established academic tendency. This tendency has focused on examining *A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God*. In fact, not only the researchers who have studied Charnock's doctrine of God in the specific thematic sense (e.g., George Gatis,<sup>6</sup> Ken Deusterman,<sup>7</sup> F. K. Drayson, Stephen Yuille,<sup>8</sup> etc.) but also the scholars examining it in the broad theological and historical sense (e.g., Richard A. Muller,<sup>9</sup> Joel R. Beeke,<sup>10</sup> Carl R. Trueman,<sup>11</sup> Hansang Lee,<sup>12</sup> Larry D. Siekawitch,<sup>13</sup> etc.) tend to stress *A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God* more than other writings when expounding on

Charnock's doctrine of God.<sup>14</sup> Though worthwhile, this approach is insufficient to address Gunton, Torrance, and Jones' misunderstanding. To address these latter men more concretely and effectually, Charnock's other writing—e.g., *A Discourse of the Knowledge of God in Christ* (hereafter, *A Discourse*)<sup>15</sup>—serve as a suitable text. It will be examined here.

*A Discourse* demonstrates that the criticisms of these latter men are untenable. It makes evident that Gunton's criticism is based on a misunderstanding of the relationship between the eternal wisdom of God the Father and that of the Son. *A Discourse* also discovers Torrance and Jones' stereotypical arguments to be grounded on misunderstandings of the general theological tendency in Charnock's era. *A Discourse* makes it clear that Charnock and his contemporaries *actualized* the doctrine of God in Christology, *reinforced* the content of the doctrine of God in Christology based on biblical teaching, and *developed* the doctrine of God into the Puritan praxis in Christology.

This study will therefore progress by three steps. First, as a background study, it will examine Charnock's *Christological epistemology*—how God's knowledge is perceived in the threefold epistemological medium (natural, legal, and evangelical). Second, to redress several erroneous assumptions regarding Charnock's doctrine of God, the Christological knowledge of God will be scrutinized in the context of a soteriological *opera Dei ad extra*, based on God's attributes, and a *Christological* knowledge of God in its connection to *praxis*. Third, based on the preceding study, the conclusion will evaluate the significance of Charnock's Christological doctrine of God.

#### CHARNOCK'S CHRISTOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Charnock's main concern throughout *A Discourse* is to seek the most authentic and cogent *epistemological means*. In other words, he seeks to answer the questions how, and by what or who, one could most suitably and effectively acquire knowledge of God's existence, attributes, essence, and works (*A Discourse*, 110–114). Charnock maintains that knowing and discovering God is the "truth" (*A Discourse*, 117). To obtain this "truth," Charnock suggests a threefold epistemological approach—the natural, legal, and evangelical mediums. In assessing which medium is the most trustworthy to perceive knowledge of God, Charnock utilizes two pre-suppositions: (1) the necessity of revelation or illumination, and (2) the submission of our reason to them (*A Discourse*, 156–157).<sup>16</sup> Charnock adds:

6. Gatis tried to research the relationship between the law of God and the nature of God. See George J. Gatis, "Stephen Charnock's View of Substantive Biblical Law," *Contra Mundum*, no. 13 (Fall 1994): 1–14.

7. Ken Deusterman, "Stephen Charnock's Doctrine of God: An Anthology of the Existence and Attributes of God," *American Theological Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (January 2010): 127–149.

8. Drayson and Yuille handled the Divine sovereignty of Charnock and the critics on open theism by conceiving Charnock's doctrine of God, but neither are comprehensive scholarly works. See F. K. Drayson, "Divine Sovereignty in the Thought of Stephen Charnock," in *Puritan Papers*, vol. 1, ed. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and foreword by W. Robert Godfrey (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2000), 213–224; J. Stephen Yuille, "How Pastoral Is Open Theism?: A Critique from the Writings of George Swinnock and Stephen Charnock," *Themelios* 32, no. 2 (January 2007): 46–61.

9. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 132, 355–357, *et passim* (hereafter, *PRRD*); idem, *PRRD*, II: 507, 516–518.

10. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, "Stephen Charnock on the Attributes of God," in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 59–84.

11. Carl R. Trueman, "Reason and Rhetoric: Stephen Charnock on the Existence of God," in *Reason, Faith and History Philosophical Essays for Paul Helm* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 29–46.

12. Lee, "Trinitarian Theology and Piety," 10–222.

13. Larry Daniel Siekawitch, "Stephen Charnock's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Case Study of the Balance of Head and Heart in Restoration Puritanism" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wales, 2007).

14. Although Lee nicely dealt with *A Discourse of the Knowledge of God in Christ* in Chapter II of his dissertation, its nature is not fundamentally focused on the Christological understanding of Charnock's doctrine of God. Rather, it is for explicating Charnock's Trinitarian understanding of the doctrine of God in the main. Yet, a preliminary idea of the present study is substantially inspired by Lee's work. Specifically see Lee, "Trinitarian Theology and Piety," 55–65.

15. Charnock's *A Discourse of the Knowledge of God in Christ* is included in vol. IV of Nichol's edition (1864), *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vols. V. See Stephen Charnock, "A Discourse of the Knowledge of God in Christ," in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. IV, with introduction by James McCosh (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 110–163. In this study, when *A Discourse* is cited, original spelling, italics, and punctuation are retained in quoted passages.

16. These interpretive principles may not be Charnock's unique

A clear-eyed reason can only be in an uncorrupted soul. *Never speak of right reason in the things of God without a supernatural illumination, and the guidance of revelation, till you can shew a soul free from all manner of corruption, as white as snow, and as innocent as a standing angel* (*A Discourse*, 154–155, emphasis added).

These principles not only play a significant role in interpreting Charnock's "threefold epistemological medium"; they also become the primary criteria by which to determine which medium is the most authentic and genuine one presented throughout *A Discourse* (*A Discourse*, 158).

### A THREEFOLD EPISTEMOLOGICAL MEDIUM

#### 1. Natural Medium

For Charnock, there are catalysts for the knowledge of God: the implanted notion, the creatures, and the nature of our souls (*A Discourse*, 114–118). In a similar vein to Calvin's notion of *sensus divinitatis*, Charnock asserts that one can acquire the knowledge of God from the "written law in his heart" and improve it "by the understanding he is endowed with; and making deductions and conclusions with the help of reason, arrives to an apprehension of God" (*A Discourse*, 114). This "implanted notion," for Charnock, is based on the Scriptural evidence in that a notion of God is embedded in the minds of men (Rom 1:19) (Ibid). Not only that, but by the "creatures," one could also perceive God's attributes, for "the visible world, and every part of it, is a book, wherein we may read some syllables of God" (*A Discourse*, 115). Charnock further comments:

The perfections of the creatures are clearly seen: his *infinite power*, which discovers also his *eternity*; and his incomprehensible *goodness*, which is the most signal glory of the *divinity*. The beauty of the world acquaints us with the *excellency* of him that erected it, and the order of the world instructs us in the *wisdom* of him that composed it. This discovery hath been ever since the creation; 'from the creation of the world;' from the time the world and the things therein were first created (Ibid, emphasis added).

In this regard, the visible world is a drawing paper. God "imprinted some letters of himself upon this [creatural] frame of things" (Ibid). Every creature is "a glass which reflects some beams of God upon his mind; for no man in his wits can conclude that the world was made by chance, but by some being more wise than any being

in the world can be" (Ibid). What is more, one also can sense and taste God's existence and attributes by the "nature of our souls." The soul is a spirit, and the noblest of all beings upon the earth, "approaching nearest the nature of God, the contemplation of that renders God more intelligible to us than all material things, whose nature is more unlike to the nature of God" (*A Discourse*, 117). Since God made the soul "according to the image of God, and is the exactest image of God under heaven," there is more of God to be found in the "little central point of the soul than in the large circumstance of the world" (Ibid).

However, though all these natural means can help one reach a general knowledge of God, they are fundamentally "insufficient to represent God," inasmuch as they are "dimmed by the fumes of their corruption" (*A Discourse*, 118, 114–115, emphasis added). In other words, corrupted nature is "less able to know God by the creation, as he ought to be known, since the fall." Since no natural light "was strong enough to discover the wonders of God, corrupt reason can attain but a *faint knowledge*" (*A Discourse*, 121). Charnock further comments:

All nature is incapable of discovering God in a full manner. . . . Nature is of too low a stature to see God in the length and breadth, height and depth, of his perfection. The key of man's reason answers not to all the wards in the lock of those mysteries. *The world at best is but a shadow of God, and therefore cannot discover him in his magnificent and royal virtues*, no more than a shadow can discover the outward beauty, the excellent mien, and the inward endowments of the person whose shadow it is. . . . It discovers something of God, not so much of him as to give the soul a full complacency; the fruit of it is but a thirst without a satisfaction (*A Discourse*, 118).

In a post-lapsarian context, therefore, *natura* cannot be acquainted fully with the perfections of God. Yet Charnock does not infer therefrom that natural means are totally useless and ineffectual to acquire God's knowledge. Rather, they can still provide "weak and languishing notions of God." In this sense, therefore, the world as a natural medium could be "called by some *aenigma Dei*" in terms of providing a dim and darkish knowledge (*A Discourse*, 124).

feature. Rather, they are not only the established Reformed tradition (from Augustine to Calvin) but also the precious heritages of the Reformed orthodoxy throughout the era of post-Reformation Protestant. See Muller, *PRRD*, I: 360–405; idem, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3–62.

All things considered, Charnock believed natural means—the implanted notion, creatures, and the nature of soul—can be helpful to perceive knowledge of God to some extent. Yet they are ultimately *dim*, *faint*, *insufficient*, and *uncertain* due to the serious effect from sin over the entire *natura* (*A Discourse*, 154–156).

## 2. Legal Medium

As far as the legal medium is concerned, Charnock writes that before the giving of the law by Moses, God instructed men “by the apparitions of angels, visions to some prophets, by the holiness of some of his eminent darlings.” Under the *Law*, God instructed men “by figures and representations, which the wisest of them did but darkly understand, and that by the assistance of some special revelation, which was successively cleared by the prophets, enlightened in several ages” (*A Discourse*, 123). Thus, Moses’ Law, as a natural medium, also could act as a guide—as far as it goes—to discern the knowledge of God.

Moral law is “a discovery of God, chiefly in his sovereignty, holiness, and justice; he [God] enacts laws as a sovereign, righteous laws against sin as a holy one, annexeth threatenings and promises as a judge” (Ibid). In the law, God “manifested the marks of his greatness and his justice, armed with instruments of punishment for sin” (Ibid). In this sense, one could notice not only “the fuller discovery of the purity of God’s nature,” but also “the terror of his wrath” in the law (Ibid). Therefore the law compares favorably to the natural medium. In nature, God embodies each and every one of his attributes *somewhat broadly* (but neither a Neo-Platonic nor a Panentheistic sense). In the law, God *compactly* and *densely* engraves his nature on two stone tablets (Deut. 9:9–15) (*A Discourse*, 125–126). In this sense, the legal medium, for Charnock, is a better way to perceive God’s knowledge than the natural medium.

Yet like the natural medium, the legal medium, is also *dim* and *insufficient*. Charnock notes:

Though the temple, with all the ceremonies attending it [based on the law], was a clearer representation of the nature and will of God than the whole frame of the world, yet *obscurity* was of the nature of the legal state; and the glory of God was wrapped up in a cloud of animal sacrifices, so that Solomon calls the house wherein God then dwelt, ‘a thick darkness,’ 1 Kings viii. 12 (*A Discourse*, 124, emphasis added).

Through the temple based on the law, one could discover

the character of God more clearly than the works of nature. Nevertheless, in the law there is “more of *shadows* than substance, and the apostle in the Hebrews gives it no better a title than that of a *shadow*” (Ibid). In other words, legal knowledge based on Moses’ law is an atypical medium, not a prototypical medium, to perceive God’s nature and attributes. It is at best secondary and auxiliary, not primary. This ultimate deficiency of the legal medium necessarily calls for a more authentic and genuine medium to acquire a thorough knowledge of God. This thorough medium Charnock describes as the *evangelical* medium.

## 3. Evangelical Medium

The evangelical discovery of God *by Christ* is clearer than any kind of medium, for “the fullness of the Godhead dwelt personally in Christ, so the fullness of the divine perfections sparkled in the actions and sufferings of Christ” (*A Discourse*, 125). Put simply, Christ is “the *clearest medium*.” In this context, Christ’s mediation is epistemological rather than soteriological. Christ provides the authentic and genuine medium to perceive most clearly the *scientia Dei*. Charnock asserts that if we know Christ, we know the Father too, for “Christ hath revealed him by his doctrine and word, and the holiness, righteousness, tenderness of God is made visible in the transaction of Christ” (*A Discourse*, 111). Charnock further emphasizes:

In nature, we see God as it were like the sun in a picture; in the law, as the sun in a cloud; in Christ, we see him in his beams, he being ‘the brightness of his glory, and the exact image of his person,’ Heb. i. 3.... [I]n Christ, all vapours are dissolved, the clouds dispersed, and God appears in the sweetness and beauty of his nature, as a refreshing light. The creatures tell us that there is a God, and Christ tells who and what that God is.... Moses then did see his back parts, perhaps in the figure of a man, but in the gospel God shews himself ‘in the face of Christ,’ 2 Cor. xiv 7 (*A Discourse*, 125).

The natural and legal media were at best “man’s footsteps” to find the road to reach a cognizance of God’s nature. The evangelical medium, on the other hand, is not only the “strongest beam” but also the “transparent glass” to thoroughly discern God’s existence and attributes under grace (*A Discourse*, 124–126). Christ is *homooúsios*, “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), and therefore he “hath the same essence, the same attributes, the same operations” as God the Father (*A*

*Discourse*, 126). Christ is not merely a model or replica of God. He is the very nature of God: "such an image as represents the nature, features, attributes, and inward virtues of God" (*A Discourse*, 112). Accordingly, it is through Christ that God's divine attributes most vividly come to the fore: "it is certain, that whatsoever tends to the glory of God, his sovereignty, wisdom, righteousness, grace, is *fully revealed by Christ*" (*A Discourse*, 131, emphasis added).

With regard to the relationship among the threefold medium, Charnock asserts the following:

Though there be some relics of the law of nature, like Seth's pillars, standing in the heart, the mind of man paved with some broken pieces of the tables of the law, yet among all those fragments there is not one that hath the inscription of Christ the mediator upon it. Nature never preached the doctrine of a Saviour, and the necessity of faith; and therefore by all the endowments of nature the soul cannot be informed of the true nature of God.... *Natural and legal medium is clarified by the gospel*, which is comment to explain what was before but darkly understood, and a new revelation to elevate the soul to a greater understanding. *It fortifies the light of nature, and frames in us more pure and significant conceptions of God* (*A Discourse*, 127, 154, emphasis added).

The epistemological lights of the natural or legal media alone are weak and limited to perceive God fully. They can only be strengthened by working together with the evangelical medium. In this sense, the evangelical medium is the *mean of means* (*A Discourse*, 125). Whereas natural and legal knowledge "look upon God through a veil and lattice," and thereby "are not seen in his full lustre," Christ "draws the veil from them, and manifests him in his fullest glory" (*A Discourse*, 119–120). Thus, to acquire a full and thorough knowledge of God, the *Christological epistemological approach* is never set aside, inasmuch as Christ, being *homooúsios* to God, "brings God near to us; he is Immanuel, God with us, God in our nature" (*A Discourse*, 126). Charnock fittingly summarizes the characteristics of the threefold epistemological medium as follows: "the knowledge of God in nature was in darkness, in the law it was in shadows, in the gospel it is in light" (*A Discourse*, 158).

#### CHARNOCK'S CHRISTOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Charnock's *Christological epistemology* has a twofold significance. First, only by Christological epistemology can one obtain most fully the sense of God's nature and

attributes revealed in Christ's redemptive work (soteriological *opera Dei ad extra*) (*A Discourse*, 135–142). Second, one who tastes God's attributes in Christ's soteriological work will undoubtedly honor and worship God (Christological praxis) (*A Discourse*, 116, 129, 158). These two consequences of Christological epistemology shall provide serious correction for several misconceptions revealed in the criticisms of Gunton, Torrance, and Jones with regard to Charnock's doctrine of God.

#### 1. Soteriological Opera Dei Ad Extra

Charnock insists that God's nature and attributes are revealed most fully *in God's soteriological work in Christ*. "All attributes of God are glorified in Christ, ... but the riches and full sum of it was to be gathered in and laid out in the work of *redemption* by Christ" (*A Discourse*, 138, emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> This soteriological *opera Dei ad extra* is not randomly or inconstantly manifested in Christ. Rather, it is manifested teleologically toward an *exact harmony*. Charnock notes:

In Jesus Christ, God's attributes that seemed to look with an ill aspect on one another, are mixed together with unexpressible sweetness, and knit in an eternal amity. Patience rejoiceth at its indefatigable waiting, justice triumphantly flourisheth the bloody sword bathed in the heart of the Redeemer, and mercy as triumphantly kisseth it, justice glorying and mercy singing at the triumphs of justice, truth holding both threatenings and promises in conjunction in her bosom; all caressing one another, and applauding the designs and accomplishments of manifold tied a knot between time and eternity.... Christ gathered all the attributes of God into one sum, to conspire together for the welfare of believers [i.e., the ultimate redemption] (*A Discourse*, 139).

In this regard, Christ is not only a true "collection" of God's every attribute, but also the most trustworthy "certificate" to present God's soteriological plan, a plan containing an eschatological and teleological purpose over the entire world (*A Discourse*, 138).

Which aspects of God's nature and attributes could be unfolded only through Christ and in what manner?

*Forgiveness* "could not possibly have exerted itself without Christ," namely, "power, goodness, did shine in the creation, holiness in the law of nature, justice in the punishment of fallen angels ... but this forgiveness could not be evidenced without Christ" (*A Discourse*,

17. See also *A Discourse*, 139–154.

141). Forgiveness has not only a soteriological, but also an epistemological value:

As in Christ alone, and in his blood, we have purchased of 'redemption, even the forgiveness of sin,' Col. i. 14, so in and by him alone we had the first discovery of it in the promise, and a full declaration of it afterward. When he was set forth as a propitiation, it was not only to purchase our happiness, but to let into our knowledge the righteous and gracious nature of God thereby (*A Discourse*, 141–142, emphasis added).

In this sense, Christ's soteriological work based on forgiveness is the fastest channel to perceive God's other attributes as well (e.g., righteousness, graciousness, etc.). This kind of epistemological channel is "not made by nature and the creation," but, Charnock ceaselessly stresses, only by a Christo-centric way (*A Discourse*, 142).

Love is not only "most comfortable [God's nature] to the creature" but also a most crucial actualization of God's nature in Christ (*A Discourse*, 144–145). The love which is found in Christ and his work can never be compared to other loves found in other places. It is the zenith of soteriological *opera Dei ad extra* (*A Discourse*, 140). In Christ's redemptive work, love is always next to justice: "God discovered his patience in not pouring down upon every great sin destroying judgments, but for the demonstration of his justice and love together in the sacrifice of his Son" (*Ibid*).

The wisdom of God is "admirably manifested in Christ," for Christ himself "is called the wisdom of God: 1 Cor. i. 24" (*A Discourse*, 145). Charnock sees this as the simple truth: "the Son of God is the word of God, and the wisdom of God" (*A Discourse*, 128, emphasis added).

In light of this, Gunton's interpretation on Charnock's "wisdom of God in Christ" seems to be somewhat strange.<sup>18</sup> Gunton states that "although Charnock

recognizes that the Son of God is 'Wisdom in himself; he is *not* conceived as being essential to God's eternal wisdom, but, it would appear, only to the way that wisdom works itself out in time" (Gunton, 91, emphasis added). Gunton further adds that Charnock describes Christ's wisdom merely as "personal wisdom," "personal" here "being in some way *separate*—rather than merely distinct!—from essence" (*Ibid*). Gunton therefore labels Charnock's thought as a "foreshortening of vision," and evaluates it as follows: "the outcome of this foreshortening of vision is that Charnock fails to take up the biblical teaching according to which *Jesus* is the wisdom of God in action" (*Ibid*, emphasis in the original). Gunton seems to believe that Charnock's "foreshortening of vision" is close to the sense of *via negativa* that Christ separates himself from essence (Gunton, 91–92). Accordingly, Gunton sees in Charnock a *via negationis* which "continues to constrain the content, so that although in places, indeed in many places, the content breaks through, grave structural deficiencies remain" (Gunton, 91). The most prominent example of this alleged constraint and deficiency can be found in Charnock's treatment of "the wisdom of God in Christ." Gunton concludes that "Christology ... make[s] all of the difference, but scarcely shapes Charnock's treatment of this particular attribute" (Gunton, 92).<sup>19</sup>

In light of *A Discourse*, however, Gunton's criticism is no longer sustainable. There are two reasons for this.

First, in *A Discourse* Charnock does not rely on *via negationis* to present God's nature and attributes. Rather, his main concern is to find God's nature and attributes in Christ's soteriological work. This discovery is based on the Christological epistemology not by *via negationis*, but rather by the way of *reinforcement*. Christ's work intensifies and clarifies the biblical presentation of God's nature and attributes (*A Discourse*, 138–142). Thus, contrary to Gunton's criticism, Charnock's Christological way not only *reinforces* the content (the knowledge of God), but also *solidifies* the whole (Christo-centric epistemological) structure.

Second, throughout *A Discourse* Charnock never gives any sense of Christ's "personal wisdom" which is separated either from God's eternal wisdom or from the very essence of God. Rather, Charnock consistently emphasizes that Christ's wisdom *is* God's eternal wisdom, for God and Christ are essentially the same: "God pitches upon Christ in his secret counsel, and stored up in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.... [Therefore] he knows those counsels, eternal transactions, and condescensions of God" (*A Discourse*, 110–111. 131).<sup>20</sup> Although Charnock also recognizes that

18. Here, Charnock's text that Gunton deals with is not *A Discourse* (*A Discourse of Knowledge of God in Christ*), but only *A Discourse of the Existence and Attributes of God*. Yet, Gunton's citation from Charnock's writing is not much. Even some quotations Gunton makes are apocryphal. Cf. Gunton, *Act and Being*, 89–93.

19. Here, Gunton, in fact, does not give any detail or specific explanation with regard to the meaning of *what kind of biblical teaching* Charnock fails to take up and *what kind of structure* is deficient in Charnock.

20. Here, the expression—"God and Christ are essentially the same"—does not mean that Christ's human nature is relatively ignored and underestimated. For Charnock's primary concern is not a presentation of Christ's two natures and *communicatio idiomatum*, but the fundamental identification between God the Father and the Son in terms of attributes based on the sense of *homoousios*.

Christ's wisdom works itself out in time by way of the crucifixion (*A Discourse*, 145–146), this does not mean that Christ's wisdom is thus "personal wisdom" in time distinguished from God's eternal wisdom. Contrary to Gunton's assessment, Charnock sees no significant difference between Christ's wisdom and God's eternal wisdom, inasmuch as Christ is not only a "partaker of his [God's] essence" (*A Discourse*, 144) but also since "the depths and riches of it [God's eternal wisdom] are in Christ." In other words, "Christ crucified, the wisdom of God, i. e. the highest discovery of his wisdom is in the crucifixion of Christ, in the death of the Son of God upon the cross" (*A Discourse*, 145). For Charnock, Christ's wisdom, not only in time but also in action, and God's eternal wisdom, are essentially equalized in the soteriological *opera Dei ad extra*—i.e., in crucifixion. He repeats this phrase throughout *A Discourse*: "Christ is called the wisdom of God" (*A Discourse*, 128, 133, 145, 148, 153, 161). Charnock's expression does not contain any sense of "personal wisdom;" rather, it distinctly echoes the sense of *homooúsios* between God the Father and the Son in terms of nature, essence, and attributes. Gunton's conclusion seems to be a result of the fact that Gunton does not consider Charnock's Christological knowledge of God presented throughout *A Discourse*.

In sum, Charnock sees God's nature and attributes fully and comprehensively revealed in Christ through a soteriological *opera Dei ad extra*. This Christological knowledge of God, attained ultimately from an evangelical medium and not from nature or the legal medium, is based on the fundamental recognition that there is no qualitative or essential difference between God and Christ. This is the core of Charnock's Christological doctrine of God throughout *A Discourse*.

## 2. Christological Knowledge of God and Its Praxis

Older scholars (e.g., Torrance, Bizer, Kickel, Armstrong) maintain that post-Reformation Protestant thought regarding God's character is abstractive, impersonal, and even harsh. They claim that there is "quite clearly and definitely a combination with the Reformed doctrine of God of more abstract conceptions derived from scholasticism, with correspondingly strong stress upon God's eternal and immutable decree."<sup>21</sup> Is this criticism sustainable? Jones claims that Charnock's theology moves "beyond the testimony of Scripture into the realm of scholasticism ... as the intrusion of rationalism into Puritan thought."<sup>22</sup> Is this accurate?

These claims stem not only from a misconception of the term "scholasticism," but also from a general

indifference and ignorance of post-Reformation Protestant thought. If "scholasticism" is regarded as a particular theological or philosophical content, or as an excessively speculative form of Aristotelian philosophy, or as the recklessly assimilating "scholasticism" of seventeenth-century Protestants to the "scholasticism" of the Middle Ages, Torrance's and Jones' arguments might be the natural outcome. However, if this term is not regarded as a particular *content*, but as a *method*, the method of the classroom and of the more detailed systems of theology during the era of orthodoxy,<sup>23</sup> Torrance's and Jones' criticisms of Charnock and his era as "abstractive," "impersonal," and "arid" will be invalid.

Throughout *A Discourse*, Charnock provides many counter arguments to their contentions. Though admitting that some people could think that there are attributes of God which seem to be harsh and terrible (e.g., inexorable vindictive justice), Charnock maintains that the terrible attributes "become *sweet* in Christ to man" (*A Discourse*, 163, emphasis added), inasmuch as "the knowledge of God and Christ the Mediator is the necessary means to eternal life and happiness" (*A Discourse*, 110). Charnock further adds:

The knowledge of God in his justice, on Christ is comfortable to a believer; and the more, since that perfection of God which is most terrible is rendered a foundation of joy, for God is gracious in being righteous: Ps. cxvi. 5, 'Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful.' The severity of his justice on Christ glorifies the greatness of his grace to the believer.... By how much the punishment on Christ was the sharper, by so much his mercy to the believer is the fuller (*A Discourse*, 150–151).

Though Charnock's statement might seem to be harsh to unbelievers (because it is firmly grounded on the doctrine of double predestination), nevertheless it undercuts Torrance's criticism. For Charnock's exposition of God's vindictive justice is based not only on God's eternal and immutable decree,<sup>24</sup> but also on the "creature's

21. Torrance, *The School of Faith*, lxxviii–lxxix.

22. Jones, "Union with Christ," 195.

23. Here, I have not fully dealt with the definition and method of the term "scholasticism," even though it is worthwhile to present. Rather, I will pay more attention on finding Charnock's counter arguments to Torrance and Jones. For "scholasticism" and orthodoxy in the Reformed tradition in detail, see Muller, *After Calvin*, 25–46; idem, *PRRD*, I: 27–84; Willem J. van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 1–9.

24. For Torrance, the main reason that the doctrine of God in the

duty to know and love God” (*A Discourse*, 158). After considering God’s justice, Charnock comments:

True religion [Christianity] conduceth to the creature’s duty and happiness: our duty and happiness is to know and love God. This religion only gives us a knowledge of God honourable to him, and presents us with inducements to love him comfortable to ourselves; and whatsoever makes God known to man in his own glory, and for man’s comfort, is certainly in reason the most excellent religion (*Ibid*).

Contrary to Torrance, Charnock’s God could never be characterized as an impersonal and abstractive God who merely acts without any relations to or response from the creatures according to a speculative and abstract eternal decree. Rather, in revealing His nature and attributes to the creatures, God demonstrates himself to be most concerned with the creatures duty and comfort (*A Discourse*, 150–151).

Charnock’s kind and considerate God is manifest most fully in Christ. Although God could be discovered by contemplation in nature, Charnock maintains that God, *in Christ*, “is discovered to be embraced as well as admired,” for nature merely “discovers the existence of a God, but not the way of closing with God” (*A Discourse*, 159). Because the world is an *aenigma Dei* of insufficient information, one can often be confused and then finally carried into a false praxis that worships the creatures, not the Creator. Yet a true praxis is “restored by Christ to the knowledge of men, and to a worship due to God, and the adored idols sunk at the foot of the cross” (*Ibid*). Nothing but Christ makes God familiar to us: “nature sets out God as a being to be adored, Christ sets out God as a being to be enjoyed” (*A Discourse*, 129). Charnock’s doctrine of God throughout *A Discourse*, in which God is endowed with familiarity, intimacy, and openness to us *through Christ*, aims fundamentally at *Christological praxis*.

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post-Reformation thought becomes abstractive and impersonal is that it relies on an understanding of God’s eternal and immutable decree based on a harsh doctrine of double predestination. In Torrance’s own words: “A cognate issue in the doctrine of God is that of *abstraction*. This is particularly evident with regard to the doctrine of the divine decrees. Is election to be conceived as an act of God within His own eternity only in abstraction from the existence and life of Jesus Christ, or is it to be conceived only and fully in Jesus Christ?” See Torrance, *The School of Faith*, lxxvii (emphasis in the original).

25. See also *A Discourse*, 144.

26. Cf. Jones, “Union with Christ,” 195.

27. Cf. Jones, “Union with Christ,” 194–195.

28. See also *A Discourse*, 135, 161.

This Christological praxis represents God as offering unspeakable comfort to the creatures. In Charnock’s own words:

In Christ, God condescends to shew his fact to the creature, whereby he renders his nature amiable, and the believing creature comfortable. There is such a knowledge of God in it as can comfort a man upon a death-bed, appease his conscience, direct his eye to a delightful sight of another world, make him embrace death with joy; such advantages as the knowledge of God, in the whole book of nature, all political skill, and the choicest speculations, cannot afford a man (*A Discourse*, 159).<sup>25</sup>

Yet sensing and tasting God’s nature and attributes through Christ do not merely make one comfortable and agreeable. They also lead one inevitably to worship and honor God (*A Discourse*, 158–159). For Charnock, the more God’s nature and attributes are known, the more “*God ought to be worshipped*: as a mighty being, clothed with all those perfections as with a garment” (*A Discourse*, 116, emphasis added). The *terminus ad quem* of Charnock’s whole Christological doctrine of God is worship of and devotion to God.

Consequently, it can no longer plausibly be maintained that Charnock’s theological tendency moves into a rigid and static rationalism.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to Jones, the preceding examination demonstrates that Charnock’s theological tendency ultimately emphasizes Christological praxis.

However, one might still argue that Jones’s appraisal of Charnock’s theology as “the intrusion of rationalism into Puritan thought” retains its validity when directed toward Charnock’s federal theology rather than his doctrine of God.<sup>27</sup> Yet this is equally untenable. When Charnock mentions the term “covenant” and its context four times throughout *A Discourse* (*A Discourse*, 102, 135, 148, 161), none of the usages infer any nuance of stiff rationalism. Rather, at least three times the term “covenant” is used in the context of a *covenantal medidum*, namely, establishing communion between God and human beings by the “everlasting covenant founded in a mediator” (*A Discourse*, 148).<sup>28</sup> “In Christ, God is our God in covenant, to communicate himself to us in all things we are capable of” (*A Discourse*, 161). Though *A Discourse* speaks little of the theology of covenant, what mention there is militates against the charge of a rigorous rationalism. Rather, Charnock sees covenant as working *with* the Christological praxis. Covenant plays a significant role in man’s *communication* and *interaction* with God through Christ’s mediatorship (*A*

*Discourse*, 135). Consequently, the conclusions of several scholars (e.g., Muller, Beeke, Trueman, etc.)—i.e., that Charnock's theology makes a "pious 'use' of each doctrinal point,"<sup>29</sup> a "practical goal of all theology,"<sup>30</sup> and embraces the "larger pastoral purpose"<sup>31</sup>—seems correct. Even in the covenantal context, Charnock's intention in *A Discourse* is not to move into a rigid rationalism or scholasticism,<sup>32</sup> but rather to promote Puritan praxis based on the Christological knowledge of God.

#### CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates the untenability of several misunderstandings regarding the doctrine of God in Charnock, and the post-Reformation era more generally. These misunderstandings, evident in the criticisms of the older scholarship (e.g., Armstrong, Bizer, Kickel, etc.), Gunton, and Jones, are addressed and redressed in *A Discourse*. In this regard, *A Discourse* has a threefold significance.

First of these is the *Christological Epistemology*. After examining the threefold epistemological media (natural, legal, and evangelical) to perceive the knowledge of God, the *evangelical* medium is finally unfolded as a most cogent and authentic medium. Unlike the natural and legal media's dimness and insufficiency (due to the serious effect of sin), the evangelical medium is the most clear and transparent medium.

The second important contribution of *A Discourse* is the *Soteriological Opera Dei Ad Extra*. Through Christological epistemology, God's nature and attributes are fully revealed in Christ's redemptive work. This soteriological work is grounded on the notion of *homoousios* between God the Father and the Son in terms of nature, essence, and attributes. The soteriological *opera Dei ad extra* reinforces God's own nature and attributes. Thus there is no room for the notion of Christ's "personal wisdom" or the presence of an alleged structural deficiency due to *via negationis*. Contrary to Gunton, *A Discourse* maintains not only an essential identification between God and Christ in terms of divine attributes, but also an epistemological or structural reinforcement of God's knowledge through Christ.

Third, *A Discourse* emphasizes *Christological Praxis*. One who senses God's nature and attributes through Christ's work will honor and worship God as a natural outcome. Charnock's God is not a speculative and impersonal being, trapped under rigid (and wrongly defined) "scholasticism." Nor does Charnock's God act merely upon an eternal decree, as the older scholarship assumes. Rather, this God willingly connects to and

interacts with the creatures under the covenant through the soteriological *opera Dei ad extra*. Contrary to Jones, *A Discourse* demonstrates that Charnock's doctrine of God moves not into rigid rationalism, but into Christological Puritan praxis.

*A Discourse* has been scantily treated. Yet insofar as it describes Charnock's Christological epistemology, its study is positively necessary in order to properly perceive Charnock's doctrine of the knowledge of God. In *A Discourse*, Charnock highlights that God's nature and attributes can be comprehended most thoroughly *in Christ* and *through Christ*. Charnock's concluding remark of *A Discourse* is worthy enough to summarize his writing, as well as this study:

[L]et us behold his justice, to humble ourselves under it; his pardoning grace, to have recourse to it under pressures of guilt. Let us sweeten our affections by the sight of his compassions, and have confidence to call upon him as a Father in our necessities. Not any discovery of God in Christ, but is an encouragement to a forlorn creature, lost in his own sense. His perfections smile upon man; nothing of God looks terrible in Christ to a believer. The sun is risen, shadows are vanished, God walks upon the battlements of love, justice hath left its sting in a Saviour's side, the law is disarmed, weapons out of his hand, his bosom open, his bowels yearn, his heart pants, sweetness and love is in all his carriage. And this is life eternal, to know God believingly in the glories of his mercy and justice in Jesus Christ (*A Discourse*, 163).■

29. Muller, *PRRD*, III: 132. See also Muller, *PRRD*, II: 507, 516–518.

30. Beeke, "Stephen Charnock on the Attributes of God," 59.

31. Trueman, "Reason and Rhetoric," 46.

32. Cf. Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, 1–9.

*In Brief: Tyranny of Unbelief*

The truth is that the materialistic paternalism of the present day, if allowed to go on unchecked, will rapidly make of America one huge, "Main Street," where spiritual adventure will be discouraged and democracy will be regarded as consisting in the reduction of all mankind to the proportions of the narrowest and least gifted citizens. God grant that there may come a reaction, and that the great principles of Anglo-Saxon liberty may be rediscovered before it is too late! But whatever solution be found for the educational and social problems of our own country, a lamentable condition must be detected in the world at large. It cannot be denied that great men are few or non-existent, and that there has been a general contracting of the area of personal life. Material betterment has gone hand in hand with spiritual decline.

Such a condition of the world ought to cause the choice between modernism and traditionalism, liberalism and conservatism, to be approached without any of the prejudice which is too often displayed. In view of the lamentable defects of modern life, a type of religion certainly should not be commended simply because it is modern or condemned simply because it is old. On the contrary, the condition of mankind is such that one may well ask what it is that made the men of past generations so great and the men of the present generation so small. In the midst of all the material achievements of modern life, one may well ask the question whether in gaining the whole world we have not lost our own soul. Are we forever condemned to live the sordid life of utilitarianism? Or is there some lost secret which if rediscovered will restore to mankind something of the glories of the past?

Such a secret the writer of this little book would discover in the Christian religion. But the Christian religion which is meant is certainly not the religion of the modern liberal Church, but a message of divine grace, almost forgotten now, as it was in the middle ages, but destined to burst forth once more in God's good time, in a new Reformation, and bring light and freedom to mankind. What that message is can be made clear, as is the case with all definition, only by way of exclusion, by way of contrast. In setting forth the current liberalism, now almost dominant in the Church, over against Christianity, we are animated, therefore, by no merely negative or polemic purpose; on the contrary, by showing what Christianity is not we hope to be able to show what Christianity is, in order that men may be led to turn from the weak and beggarly elements and

have recourse again to the grace of God. J. G. Machen, *Christianity and liberalism*.

A public-school system, in itself, is indeed of enormous benefit to the race. But it is of benefit only if it is kept healthy at every moment by the absolutely free possibility of the competition of private schools. A public-school system, if it means the providing of free education for those who desire it, is a noteworthy and beneficent achievement of modern times; but when once it becomes monopolistic it is the most perfect instrument of tyranny which has yet been devised. Freedom of thought in the middle ages was combated by the Inquisition, but the modern method is far more effective. Place the lives of children in their formative years, despite the convictions of their parents, under the intimate control of experts appointed by the state, force them to attend schools where the higher aspirations of humanity are crushed out, and where the mind is filled with the materialism of the day, and it is difficult to see how even the remnants of liberty can subsist. Such a tyranny, supported as it is by a perverse technique used as the instrument in destroying human souls, is certainly far more dangerous than the crude tyrannies of the past, which despite their weapons of fire and sword permitted thought at least to be free.

J. Machen Gresham, *Christianity and Liberalism* (William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009) 11–13. ■



J. Gresham Machen, standing on the stoop of Westminster Theological Seminary at 1528 Pine Street, circa 1929–1936