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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD

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HOW IS GOD KNOWN? This important question stands behind the whole of our Christian faith, and the answer to it provides the fundamental distinction between the Biblical and secular philosophical approaches.

The answer in a nutshell is simply this: the Scriptures claim that God has revealed Himself in a way more direct than in nature and man—God has not only *done* something, but He has *said* something. On the other hand, the philosophical approach posits an abstract principle arrived at by speculation, for which a philosopher must find a name. The Biblical view witnesses to the fact that "God has spoken" and to a strong "Thus saith the Lord"; whereas the concept of a God in philosophical systems is introduced to "save significance for" or to "give coherence to" a system. Christianity does not introduce a God—He enters in unannounced and the force of His entry by His own declaration is recognized for what it is—the Word of God. For example:

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son . . .¹

Thus we must forever keep separate in our minds the important contrast between the God of speculation and the God of revelation, yet it is precisely this confusion which is so characteristic even of conservative thinking on the doctrine. A fine example of the contrast between these two concepts may be seen in the following quotations. The first is from a well-known and significant book written by A. N. Whitehead, one of our generation's most important philosophers; the second is from the book of *Exodus*.

¹ *Hebrews* 1: 1-2.

Aristotle found it necessary to complete his metaphysics by the introduction of a Prime Mover—God. . . . For nothing, within any limited type of experience, can give intelligence to shape our ideas of any entity at the base of all actual things, unless the general character of things requires that there be such an entity. . . . In the place of Aristotle's God as Prime Mover, we require God as the Principle of Concretion.²

I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty; but by my name Jehovah was I not known to them.³

The first quotation epitomizes the philosophical approach—God is The First Cause, The Principle of Concretion, The Absolute, The One, The Prime Mover. He is an abstraction necessary in the construction of a conceptual framework for the completion of the system, and not the Intruding One who comes to us, and speaks for Himself as the text from Scripture clearly indicates.

The tragedy is that the philosophical method stands behind a great deal of our theological literature and this is worsened by the fact that often we are so ignorant of the basic Biblical principles of the method of the Divine self-disclosure that we don't know that our conclusions and thought-patterns are often not Biblical but philosophical. This fact may be illustrated in two approaches frequently taken to this doctrine.

First, in respect to proofs for the existence of God. Most theological texts begin a study of the doctrine with an enumeration and explanation of the classical proofs for the existence of God, namely, the Ontological, Cosmological, Teleological, and Moral Arguments. Almost without exception it is stated that these are not "proofs" in the real sense, but are only corroborative arguments. Of course they are not proofs, for the term "proof" is ambiguous for one thing, and even if the meaning of the term were clearly defined, we could not prove the existence of God rationally, for then we would enclose Him within the limits of a syllogism, and when we think the matter over carefully we find that any ultimate fact is not amenable to "proof"; it just is and is seen to be such immediately.

The Bible does not set out to prove God's existence; it declares it on the basis of His self-disclosure. He does not reveal Himself as the One, the Absolute, the Prime Mover, but as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Further, it is important to note that the mode of the divine

² A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (cheap edition), pp. 173-174.

³ *Exodus* 6: 3.

self-disclosure is in terms of the NAME of God. In philosophy the name of God represents a term of abstraction summarizing the views of the philosopher on deity, whereas in the Christian view, the "name of God" is not something given by man to his view of God, but the means by which God reveals Himself to man. The reason for this is the stress given to the meaning and use of NAME in the Bible. For example, note the following texts:

1. Exodus 3: 13-14, "And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the Children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." (In this passage note that I AM THAT I AM does not mean the abstraction 'I am he who is', but 'I am the mysterious one'. Cf. Judges 13: 18, 'Wherefore askest thou after my name, seeing it is wonderful?')

2. Exodus 15: 3, "The Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his his name".

3. Isaiah 42: 8, "I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images".

4. Isaiah 51: 15, "But I am the Lord thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The Lord of hosts is his name."

5. Jeremiah 33: 2, "Thus saith the Lord the maker thereof, the Lord that formed it, to establish it; the Lord is His name; Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not".

Throughout the Old Testament the NAME of God meant to the Hebrew far more than just a term of distinction by which he distinguished Jehovah from the heathen gods of nature such as the Baalim. The NAME of God confronted Israel with the real mystery of the self-disclosure of God and holds the central point of the revelation of God to His people. The NAME of a thing for the Hebrew was a revelation of the nature of the person or thing named, and in some instances was taken to be equivalent for the thing itself. Hence names were jealously guarded because they were the reflection of the character.

Herman Bavinck, in his monumental work *The Doctrine of God*, is right when he says: "All that which can be known of God by virtue of his revelation is called by Scripture God's name".⁴ Exodus 33: 19 reads: "I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy to whom I will show mercy".

The New Testament carries in it the same emphasis. Our Lord

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, 1951), p. 83.

taught his disciples to pray by saying, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name". In John 17 our Lord prays and in that prayer He sums up all that He came to accomplish in the words of verse 6, "I have manifested Thy Name unto the men which Thou gavest me out of the world . . .", which surely involves their and our redemption. And in continuing His prayer our Lord entreats the Father for the preservation of His disciples in a similar vein, "Keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are".

The rationale of this is clear. Because God is revealed in His name, He is not discovered but is given. No man can know God truly apart from revelation. NAME implies that God is not an abstract principle, but a Person who discloses Himself to us, and the very use of the concept involves the idea of communication. The personification of the name of God to us is the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and this relationship is clearly shown in the verses quoted from John 17. In the name of God stands the covenant of God with us, and Christ's accomplishment of the work of redemption.

I urge strongly upon you the study of the names of God—both the single and compound names. Such names as El, Adonai, El Shaddai and Jehovah convey to us the progressive divine self-disclosure. Again, to quote Bavinck:

The name Elohim designates God as Creator and Preserver of all things; El Shaddai represents Him as the Mighty One who makes nature subservient to grace; Jehovah describes Him as the one whose grace and faithfulness endure forever; Jehovah Sabaoth characterizes Him as the King in the fulness of His glory, surrounded by organized hosts of angels, governing the entire universe as the Omnipotent One, and in His temple receiving the honour and adoration of all His creatures.⁵

Surely such a grand declaration must raise within us words of praise to this One who revealed Himself in the past, who to us in the Lord Jesus Christ has revealed Himself as Father through the atonement wrought by Christ, to whom all honour is due, and a larger part in the preaching and teaching in which we engage.

The *second* aspect of the problem is the way in which the attributes of God are to be conceived.

The philosophical approach to the doctrine of God with the various definitions of being involves an attempt to abstract the essence or being of God from the attributes. It is the attempt to view the essence of God without all qualities, but never as the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father through faith in the name of Christ.

Historically, while the problem was not serious in the early fathers, it has assumed an importance out of proportion to its value, due to the infusion of Neo-platonism into Christianity through Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who in medieval theology is more quoted than Augustine. It is clear that Greek philosophical speculation on the essence/attributes problem as applied to the being of God finds its way into Christianity through the Alexandrian School, notably from Plotinus and Dionysius, and in later medieval thought, through Scotus Erigena, becomes firmly established as an integral element of Christian theology.

The problem involved is, how are the attributes of God conceived to be related to the being of God, and this at once involves the presupposition that attributes may be abstracted from essences, which is a legacy of the Greek system. The Platonic system involved the abstraction of the attributes of a thing, so that one might arrive at what is its inmost essence, being, or *ousia*. The same method was applied to the being of God.

Three methods of arriving at a description of the essence of God have come down to us from Neo-platonism in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius. These are well-known, and are mentioned here :

1. The *Via Negationis*, or the way of negation. This is the 'negative Theology', so often spoken about, something like the self-emptying of the mystic. The thinker is to abstract away from the object all that is attribute, or change, until he comes to the irreducible essence, which is the core, the being, or the *ousia*. This is unchanging, and as far as God's being is concerned, ineffable, to be expressed only in negative terms.

2. The *Via Eminentiae*, or way of analogy. It is a system of analogy drawn from experience, that degrees of wisdom, power, being, imply an absolute wisdom, power, being. It is this concept which stands behind the Ontological Argument for the existence of God as devised by Anselm of Canterbury and is the basis for a Natural Theology. For example, the argument: Man knows ; Angels know more ; God is all-knowing.

3. The *Via Causalitatis*, or the way of cause/effect relationship. Through the idea of cause/effect relationship we work back to the first Cause, its essential nature, and its attributes.

It is significant to note that the speculative approach by which the so-called essence is abstracted from the attributes dominates

the consideration of the attributes of God in most of our theological textbooks. Usually it is exhibited in attempts to classify the attributes of God into two groups, that is, those that apply to a description of His so-called essence, or *ousia*, and those involving the transitive relation of His person to creation and moral creatures. For example, A. H. Strong, among others, takes this position by dividing the attributes into Absolute or Immanent, and Relative or Transitive. The Absolute are those applying to the being of God, whereas the relative are those applying to God's relations to other things, and persons. In the first he groups Spirituality, Infinity, and Perfection; while in the second, Relation to Time and Space, to Creation, and to Moral Beings.⁶ Strong adopts the essence/attribute distinction as suggested in the following, "The attributes have an objective existence" and, "The attributes inhere in the divine essence", while at the same time declaring, "We cannot conceive of attributes except as belonging to an underlying essence which furnishes their ground of unity".⁷ These sentences indicate the presuppositions on which Strong is working and also the problem he faces in this position.

Now when we speak of the 'essence' of God, if we are to speak Biblically and not after the fashion of Greek philosophy, we must not speak of a central core or *ousia* or being, in which the other attributes inhere and from which they may be 'abstracted' to leave an 'absolute'. Rather, the Christian theologian must have in mind the sum of that which God has revealed about Himself and the mode of that revelation, which is not abstraction, but self-disclosure in terms of His NAME. The philosopher arrives at his conception of God by a process of abstraction, whereas the Christian theologian arrives at his conception by a process of addition—adding together what God has revealed about himself in terms of His name, to construct a sum of knowledge. Thus we may not follow the method of abstraction, else we shall be bogged down in the unbiblical problem of what is meant by 'essence', but we must conceive of the attributes of God as identical with His being. God's attributes do not differ from each other or from one another. God is what He *has*.⁸

The contrast of these two points of view may be seen in the two following quotations, the first taken from L. S. Chafer, and

⁶ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, 11th ed., 1947), pp. 247-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-6.

⁸ Bavinck, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

the second, from Emil Brunner. Now I have not pitted Brunner against Chafer in order either to discredit Chafer or to vindicate Brunner. In my own thinking there is much that I can learn from both without subscribing to certain of the underlying premises of each of them. My purpose is to make us aware that we must be willing to acknowledge truth where we find it, particularly in days when we need as much light as possible thrown upon our study of Biblical Theology. Also, we must be aware of our pre-suppositions, and dependence on authorities, and hearsay evidence. Just because Dr. So-and-So said it may make it noteworthy, but not necessarily true. And on this subject of the Doctrine of God, particularly on the questions of the evidence for the existence of God and the character of God disclosed in His self-revelation, a doctrine which stands at the core of our Christian Faith, we need to be particularly careful that our thought patterns are Biblical. But first, to Chafer's position:

An attribute is a property which is intrinsic to its subject. It is that by which it is distinguished or identified. The term has two widely different applications, which fact is evidenced by the twofold classifications already named. It seems certain that some qualities which are not specifically attributes of God have been included by some writers under this designation. A body has its distinctive properties, the mind has its properties, and in like manner, there are specific attributes which may be predicated of God. The body is more than the sum-total of all its properties, which is equally true of the mind; and God is more than the sum of all His attributes. However, in each case these peculiar definitives retain an intrinsic value in the sense that the body, the mind, or God Himself cannot be conceived apart from the qualities attributed to them and apart from them He would not appear to be what He is. On the other hand, while any true conception of God must include His attributes, it is required that the attributes themselves must be treated as abstract ideas.⁹

This extended quotation epitomizes the brief section on the attributes in Chafer's *Systematic Theology* and I note the following questions and problems that arise in my mind respecting his position:

(a) Note that the essence/attributes dualism is apparently maintained, yet Chafer can say at the end of his discussion, without qualification, "The whole of the divine essence is in each attribute and the attribute belongs to the whole essence."¹⁰

(b) Chafer retains a mind/body dualism which appears partly Platonic and partly Cartesian. What can be said to be the useful-

⁹ L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 190.

¹⁰ L. S. Chafer, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

ness and the implications of the infusion of such systems of thought into Christian Theology, particularly in the light of changing opinions both in Theology on the Biblical teaching as to the constitution of man, and also in modern psychology?

(c) What is the meaning of the statement, "God is more than the sum of all His attributes"? May this in some respects be designated as an infusion of Hegelianism into Christian Theology?

(d) May an analogy be drawn, legitimately, between bodies and their properties and God and His supposed properties? For example, he says, "A body has its distinctive properties . . . mind has . . . and in like manner, there are specific attributes which may be predicated of God."

(e) What meaning may be assigned to the following paradox, ". . . God Himself cannot be conceived apart from the qualities attributed to them. By abstract thinking, God may be conceived apart from His attributes; but it remains true that He is known by His attributes and apart from them he would not appear to be what He is"?

(f) What does it mean to say that "attributes themselves must be treated as abstract ideas"?

To the writer there are serious difficulties logically, in the metaphysics employed, and also in the Biblical data which bear on the problem, militating against Chafer's position. The contrasting position is that of Brunner, which follows:

Anyone who knows the history of the development of the doctrine of God in "Christian" theology, and especially the doctrine of the Attributes of God, will never cease to marvel at the unthinking way in which theologians adopted the postulates of philosophical speculation on the Absolute, and at the amount of harm this has caused in the sphere of the "Christian" doctrine of God. They were entirely unaware of the fact that this procedure was an attempt to mingle two sets of ideas which were as incompatible as oil and water: for each view was based on an entirely different conception of God.

They did not perceive the sharp distinction between the speculative idea of the Absolute and the witness of revelation, between the "God of the philosophers" and the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". . . . But this contradiction does not first emerge when confronted with the Biblical language about the attributes of God, it occurs as soon as fundamental definitions of Being are formulated. The God who is without all qualities, who is above all Being, is never the God who makes His Name known, never the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose Nature is Holiness and Love. . . . It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the theological doctrine of the Divine Attributes, handed on from the theology of the early Church, has been shaped by the Platonic and Neo-platonic Idea of God, and not by the Biblical Idea. . . . The theologians of the Early Church were all

more or less educated in Greek philosophy—and no intelligent person will blame them for this, or even suggest that there was anything wrong in it! But in their eagerness to present the Christian Idea of God in “pure”, “exalted” and “spiritual” terms, they failed to notice the contradiction between the speculative method of the Greek thinkers and the way of reflection prescribed for the Christian theologian by that which has been “given” in revelation. Thus, without realizing what they were doing, they allowed the speculative idea of the Absolute to become incorporated in the *corpus* of Christian theology.¹¹

While I find it impossible to go along with other facets of Brunner’s theology, I cannot help but agree on this question which he discusses here.

To conclude: It is important, therefore, that we re-read the doctrine of God in the light of the Biblical thought patterns, and not those handed down to us through Greek philosophy. Just as it is the case that God is known through His self-disclosure in His NAME, so His NAME includes the idea of what we have traditionally called attributes, and which really are pictures of what God conveys to us of Himself, without involving ourselves in the metaphysics of essence/attributes problems. Just as God’s Name is El, Jehovah, El Shaddai, so also is His name the Holy One (and not abstract holiness), the Almighty One, Love, the Eternal One, the Faithful One. He is Lord of all and Lord over all, and may ever our study and preaching seek to exalt Him who is our God, revealed in Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, one God, blessed forever, worthy of our adoration, devotion, and service, world without end. AMEN.

Oxford.

¹¹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London, 1955), pp. 242-243.