

STEPHEN CHARNOCK'S DOCTRINE OF THE BEATIFIC VISION

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Abstract: *This study outlines the basic tenets of Stephen Charnock's doctrine of the Beatific Vision. Then, it analyzes the relationship of Charnock's view to those of other prominent theologians who have been studied in contemporary debates on the beatific vision. The other prominent theologians studied are Thomas Aquinas, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards. In particular, Charnock's view is compared to Aquinas, Owen, and Edwards' views on two key points: 1.) the role of Christ in the beatific vision, and 2.) whether or not the saints will see God's divine essence in the vision. By looking at the relationship of Charnock's view to those of these theologians, Charnock's doctrine of the beatific vision is further articulated and clarified.*

Key Words: Beatific Vision, Charnock, Aquinas, Owen, Edwards

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a revival in studies on the doctrine of the Beatific vision. Amid this revival, there has been renewed attention given to historic theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa,² Thomas Aquinas,³ John Owen,⁴ and Jonathan Edwards⁵ and their articulations of this doctrine. One prominent theologian whose views on the vision have not been extensively studied is Stephen Charnock. Steeped in classical theology along with the Puritan and Reformed traditions, Charnock provides an erudite exposition

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² Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018), 76–94.

³ A number of articles have been written about Aquinas' views on the beatific vision. For example, see Simon Gainé, "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the Beatific Vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald," *New Blackfriars*, no. 97/1070 (2016): 432–46; Simon Gainé, "The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ," *Theologica*, no. 2/2 (2018): 116–28; Hans Boersma, "Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit," *Theologica*, 2/2 (2018): 129–47; Simon Gainé, "Thomas Aquinas, the Beatific Vision and the Role of Christ: A Reply to Hans Boersma," *Theologica*, no. 2/2 (2018): 148–67. For a summary of the debates surrounding Aquinas' view as well as a general defense of the position, see Gavin Ortland, "Will We See God's Essence? A Defence of a Thomistic Account of the Beatific Vision.," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74 (2021): 323–332.

⁴ Suzanne McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the 'Reforming' of the Beatific Vision," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen*, ed. Kelly Kopic and Mark Jones (New York: Routledge, 2012), 141–58.

⁵ Kyle Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards's Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," in *Jonathan Edwards and Scotland*, ed. Ken Minkema, Adriaan Neele, and Kelly van Anel (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011), 171–88.

of the beatific vision that is biblically rich, historically informed, and pastorally sensitive. This paper will sketch Charnock's insufficiently studied doctrine of the beatific vision and explain the relationship of Charnock's view with the most prominent theologians written about in contemporary discussions of the doctrine. This explanation of relation will further articulate Charnock's view and help readers see how it compares to the most prominently debated theologians.

Outlining Stephen Charnock's Theology of the Beatific Vision

Puritan minister and theologian Stephen Charnock (1628–80) never wrote a formal systematic theology, but throughout his posthumously published collected works, he presents a great deal of theological reflection, primarily focusing on theology proper,⁶ Christology, and soteriology. The context of Charnock's published works is key as it shapes where the beatific vision is placed within Charnock's own body of divinity. Rather than focusing on the beatific vision primarily during discussions on eschatology, Charnock touches on the *visio Dei* most when he is talking about the knowledge of God.⁷ The most concentrated set of references to the beatific vision in Charnock's works come in his "Discourse on the Knowledge of God"⁸ and "Discourse on the Knowledge of God in Christ" in volume 4.⁹

Charnock holds that the Scripture expresses the knowledge of God most commonly through the senses, especially sight. For Charnock, knowledge and spiritual sight are inseparable. He says:

We find the knowledge of God set out by the acts of sense . . . often by seeing, which, being the quickest and most piercing sense, represents things to the understanding more clearly than bare report. And this kind of knowledge is necessary to happiness, for without it we can have no clear nor worthy notions of God . . .¹⁰

For Charnock, seeing and knowing God are intimately entwined because the

⁶ Joel Beeke has said that Charnock's volumes on the existence and attributes of God are "the work on the character and attributes of God. It should be read by every serious Christian." Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 145. Emphasis original.

⁷ Kyle Strobel has noted that within older systematic theologies, particularly those of Puritan and classical theologians, the beatific vision is typically referenced in 3 places: our knowledge of God, God's knowledge of God (often spoken of as vision), and eschatology. See Tony Reinke and Kyle Strobel, "Enjoying God's Beatific Beauty: An Interview With Kyle Strobel," *Authors on the Line*, accessed December 22, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/authors-on-the-line/id571410020?i=1000413103507>. For more on this, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 259–67.

⁸ Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864–1866), 3–109

⁹ Charnock, *Works* 4:110–163. Charnock also says a lesser, but fair amount about the beatific vision in his writings on the nature of regeneration in *Works* 3:5–165.

¹⁰ Charnock, *Works* 4:19.

central way we come to the fullest knowledge of God is through the beatific vision.

The happiness of heaven, which is the ultimate and complete happiness of the soul, consists in a knowledge of God. The sight of God is made by our Saviour the reward of purity of heart: Mat. 5:8, 'The pure in heart shall see God;' and to see him as he is, in the glory of the other world, 1 John 3:2, 3, when all the rational faculties shall be satisfied with light, and the desires replenished with love...[F]elicity, in the highest region, consists in a sight and knowledge of God . . .¹¹

Along with other luminaries of the Christian tradition and classical theology, Charnock believes that the beatific vision is the highest happiness of the soul and the end of the great Christian pilgrimage. For Charnock, the beatific vision is so significant that he explicitly stresses to his readers that the chief punishment for sin is a loss of the beatific vision, which also means a loss of communion with God.¹²

The God-centeredness of Charnock's Theology of the Beatific Vision

One striking feature of Charnock's theology of the beatific vision is how God-centered it is. Of course, it may seem evident that theology focusing on a vision of God would be God-centered. However, Charnock articulates the God-centeredness of the beatific vision not only by explaining the object of the vision but also by explaining from where the vision derives and the grace that makes it possible.

For Charnock, the God-centeredness of the beatific vision begins with the fact that the beatific vision of the saints begins with God's beatific vision of Himself. Charnock argues that God knows himself exhaustively through a perpetual vision of himself. God knows his nature fully because he sees his nature perfectly. This knowledge through vision relates not only to God's knowledge of his decrees but also to God's knowledge of his nature.¹³ God perfectly knows himself, and this knowledge of himself brings him perfect

¹¹ Charnock, *Works* 4:24–25.

¹² "Besides, no creature can inflict a due punishment for sin; that which is due to sin, is a loss of the vision and sight of God; but none can deprive any of that but God himself; nor can a creature reward another with eternal life, which consists in communion with God, which none but God can bestow." Charnock, *Works* 2:410.

¹³ Charnock says, "This we must conclude, that God being not a body, doth not see one thing with eyes and another thing with mind, as we do; but being a Spirit, he sees and knows only with mind, and his mind is himself, and is as unchangeable as himself; and therefore, as he is not now another thing than what he was, so he knows not anything now in another manner than as he knew it from eternity. He sees all things in the glass of his own essence; as therefore the glass doth not vary, so neither doth his vision...Again, as God knows all things by one simple vision of his understanding, so he wills all things by one act of volition; therefore the purpose of God in the Scripture is not expressed by counsels, in the plural number, but counsel, shewing that all the purposes of God are not various, but as one will, branching itself out into many acts towards the creature, but all knit in one root, all links of one chain." Charnock, *Works* 1:387–388.

joy. God has enjoyed this joy for all eternity in the fellowship of the Trinity. Just as the Father has a perfect view of his nature manifested in the eternally generated Son, the Son also has a perfect knowledge of the Father through a vision of the Father's essence.¹⁴ From this flow of vision and love between the Father and the Son comes the spiration of the Holy Spirit. Out of sheer grace, God creates humanity so that people may enjoy him for their good and his glory unto eternity. After all, the only thing that can perfectly satisfy mankind forever is the same thing that satisfied God before time began: God himself. The beatific vision is the catalyst.¹⁵ For Charnock, the beatific vision is a gracious gift of God, beginning in God's own vision of God, showcasing the goodness of God, made possible by faith in the Son of God, all for the glory of God.¹⁶

¹⁴ "But Christ knows the Father, he lay 'in the bosom of the Father,' was in the greatest intimacy with him, John 1:18, and, from this intimacy with him, he saw him and knew him; so he knows God as much as he is knowable, and therefore knows him perfectly, as the Father knows himself by a comprehensive vision. This is the knowledge of God wherein properly the infiniteness of his understanding appears. And our Saviour uses such expressions which manifest his knowledge to be above all created knowledge, and such a manner of knowledge of the Father as the Father hath of him." Charnock, *Works* 1:509.

¹⁵ "The happiness of God consists in the knowledge of himself, his own perfections, and delight in them. God is the object of his own happiness. The knowledge of God himself is the felicity of God. No being is really happy without reflection upon, and knowledge of, that happiness. If God should be happy by the knowledge of anything else but himself, that which he did contemplate and know would be greater and better than God, because his happiness would depend upon it. Felicity can never be in anything inferior. God hath nothing higher and better than himself to contemplate. This gave him a satisfaction before the world was, and this would still be his blessedness, if all things should be reduced to the depths of nothing. Since, therefore, he created the world, to communicate himself and his own happiness to the rational creature, felicity cannot be attained by anything less than the knowledge of the supreme good according to the creature's measures. The angels themselves are only blessed in the contemplation of him, and affection to him. In being encompassed with his bright rays, and having their affections inflamed by him, Mat. 18:10, 'they behold the face of God.' As God's knowledge and fruition of himself makes up his felicity, so the knowledge and fruition of God composeth our happiness." Charnock, *Works* 4:24.

¹⁶ "Now this eternal life was not due to his nature, but it was a pure beam and gift of divine goodness; for there was no proportion between man's service in his innocent estate, and a reward so great both for nature and duration. It was a higher reward than can be imagined either due to the nature of man, or upon any natural right claimable by his obedience. All that could be expected by him was but a natural happiness, not a supernatural. As there was no necessity upon the account of natural righteousness, so there was no necessity upon the account of the goodness of God to elevate the nature of man to a supernatural happiness, merely because he created him; for though it be necessary for God, when he would create, in regard of his wisdom, to create for some end, yet it was not necessary that end should be a supernatural end and happiness, since a natural blessedness had been sufficient for man. And though God, in creating angels and men intellectual and rational creatures, did make them necessary for himself and his own glory, yet it was not necessary for him to order either angels or men to such a felicity as consists in a clear vision, and so high a fruition of himself; for all other things are made by him for himself, and yet not for the vision of himself. God might have created man only for a natural happiness, according to the perfection of his natural faculties, and dealt bountifully with him, if he had never intended him a supernatural blessedness and an eternal recompense; but what a largeness of goodness is here, to design man in his creation for so rich a blessedness as an eternal life, with the fruition of himself! He hath not only given to man all things which are necessary, but designed for man that which the poor creature could

The Effects of the Beatific Vision

In Charnock's view, the beatific vision has two primary effects: 1.) it fills believers with immense and perfect joy, and 2.) it conforms believers to the image of God. First, the beatific vision fills the believer with immense and perfect joy. Charnock argues this at many different points throughout his works. In his "Discourse on the Knowledge of God" he says,

Knowledge of God and Christ is the life and happiness of the soul...In the clear sight of God as the supreme good, the understanding is satisfied, the will filled with love, and all the desires of the soul find the centre of their rest. The vision of God in heaven is the satisfaction of the soul . . .¹⁷

Second, Charnock contends that the beatific vision conforms believers to the image of God. He makes this point often from 1 John 3:2. Referencing that passage, Charnock says,

The change of the soul to a perfect glory in heaven depends upon the perfect knowledge of God and Christ; and therefore the change here depends upon this knowledge. This knowledge therefore cannot be a right knowledge without this, which is the proper effect of it. The vision of Christ in his glorious state shall then cause likeness to him: 1 John 3:2, 'We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' We shall see him in his glory; we shall, by that view, be transformed into the image of his glory, as by contemplating his virtues we are here changed into the image of his grace . . .¹⁸

While one may assume beatific conformity would undermine the Creator-creature distinction, Charnock is careful to protect this. He says, "As the vision of God will be perfect, so will your likeness to him, 1 John 3:2; as it will be a vision without any clouds, so it will be a likeness without any dissimilitude, according to the creature's capacity."¹⁹

Charnock also guards the Creator-creature distinction by clarifying that the believers' sight of God will be finite. This vision will be perfect, "but perfect according to the creature's capacity."²⁰ Charnock clearly states that finite creatures cannot fully comprehend the infinite God. He says, "In heaven, God shall not be comprehensively known. It is true there will be a fuller perception of God, and a clearer notion of him in heaven; the infinite treasures of wisdom and goodness, which lie hid in God to be admired, will be then more clearly seen; yet God can never descend from his own infiniteness to be grasped by a

not imagine. He garnished the earth for him, and garnished him for an eternal felicity, had he not, by slighting the goodness of God, stripped himself of the present, and forfeited his future blessedness." Charnock, *Works* 2:317.

¹⁷ Charnock, *Works* 4:14.

¹⁸ Charnock, *Works* 4:44. See also Charnock, *Works*, 3:54, 4:18.

¹⁹ Charnock, *Works* 3:139. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Charnock, *Works* 3:139.

created understanding.”²¹

Yet, with pastoral sensitivity, Charnock quickly points his parishioners to the reality that their lack of capacity to fully comprehend God should not lead them to doubt but rather to worship. He says, “[B]ecause we cannot comprehend [God], the more we ought, and the more we shall, admire him. Our admirations of the brightness of the sun are greater, by how much the less we can look upon the body of it without winking and shielding our eyes from the onset of his beams: so should they be of God.”²²

These two primary effects of the beatific vision, namely, joy and conformity to God’s image, lead to greater obedience to God and delight in his commands. Charnock uses the angels as an example. The angels are before God’s face, and this fills them with joy, beckoning them to obey God joyfully. On this point, Charnock says, “The more clearly [God] is understood, the more he is beloved; and the more he is beloved, the more readily he is obeyed. The angels that behold his face run most cheerfully to perform his errands, Ps. 103:20; and no doubt but the perfect illumination of the glorified souls is a partial cause of the steadiness of their wills.”²³

In Charnock’s view, the sight of God alone does not fill believers with happiness and conform them to God’s image unless it is tied to faith in and love for Christ. “The knowledge of Christ is as necessary to happiness as the knowledge of God. If a man had the knowledge of God in as clear a manner as the angels have, yet without a knowledge of Christ he were as remote from happiness as the devil.”²⁴ Without faith in Christ, the sight of a holy God would be dread rather than delight.

Similarly, Charnock contends that if a person does not exhibit love, holiness, and obedience to God in this life, he will not experience the joy of God in the beatific vision in the next. Referencing Hebrews 12:14, Charnock says, “None but those that are sanctified shall be glorified; that there must be grace here, if we expect glory hereafter; that we must not presume to expect an admittance to the vision of God’s face, unless our souls be clothed with a robe of holiness.”²⁵

A Foretaste of Glory

In like manner to other Reformed theologians of his time,²⁶ Charnock argues

²¹ Charnock, *Works*, 4:40.

²² Charnock, *Works* 4:41.

²³ Charnock, *Works* 4:30.

²⁴ Charnock, *Works* 4:14.

²⁵ Charnock, *Works* 2:66. Elsewhere Charnock says, “[God] will not have men brought only into a relative state of happiness by justification, without a real state of grace by sanctification. And so resolved he is in it, that there is no admittance into heaven of a starting, but a persevering, holiness.” Charnock, *Works* 2:214.

²⁶ Some examples of other Reformed theologians who argue along similar lines are John Owen, Francis Turretin, William Bates, and Herman Witsius. In his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, John Owen says, “For if our future blessedness shall consist in being where he is, and beholding of his glory, what better preparation can there be for it than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel, unto this very

that believers can have a foretaste of glory on this side of glory. He says, "By an unchangeable disposition to good we should begin the happiness of heaven upon earth."²⁷ Elsewhere, he argues, "the covenant will want its full accomplishment till the dim knowledge of God be drowned in a perfect and clear vision. And since the shadowy light we have is so delightful, how ravishing must that be which shall discover God in his full glory!"²⁸

This foretaste of glory aims to spur believers to fight sin, endure hardship, pursue God, grow in holiness, and know God more deeply. With the beatific vision as the telos of humanity, believers are encouraged to prepare for glory by gazing upon God's glory in this life. This is precisely how Charnock uses the beatific vision to inspire Christians in their walks with God.

Conclusions of the Outline

Charnock sees the beatific vision as the telos of humanity enjoyed fully in glory but with foretastes in this life. He holds that the beatific vision is a gracious gift of God that will give believers immense joy and conform them to God's image. The whole vision is God-centered from beginning to end.

Charnock's theology of the beatific vision follows the broader Christian tradition with several important theological emphases that lead to great pastoral payoff. There are two central elements of Charnock's view that must be explored in relation to other prominent theologians, as they are significant for contemporary theological debates and future theological formation.

Charnock's Views in Conversation With Aquinas, Owen, and Edwards

To articulate important nuances of Charnock's views, we will compare Charnock's views on Christology within the beatific vision and his beliefs

end, that by a view of it we may be gradually transformed into the same glory?" John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1850–5.), 275. Later in the same discourse, Owen says, "No man ought to look for anything in heaven, but what one way or other he hath some experience of in this life." Owen, *Works* 1:290. Turretin famously said, "For the life of grace does not differ except in degree from the life of glory, for grace is nothing else than glory begun, as glory is grace consummated." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 608. William Bates says, "The beginning and introduction of our felicity, is by a lively faith here, the consummation of it is by present sight in heaven." William Bates, *The Whole Works of the Rev. William Bates*, ed. W. Farmer, vol. 3 (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1990), 384. Witsius is perhaps the clearest of all on this point when he says, "[T]hrough the grace of God and of Christ, the beginnings of these felicities are imparted to true believers even in the present life, and are more richly conferred on the souls of the godly at death, that, released from the body of sin, they may rejoice in the embraces of God and the Redeemer, till, at last, being re-united to their bodies, which shall be raised up to glory, they experience God, without the intervention of any medium, to be to them 'all in all.'" Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations, on What Is Commonly Called the Apostles' Creed*, trans. Donald Fraser, vol. 2 (London: Knull, Blackie & Co., 1823), 474.

²⁷ Charnock, *Works* 1:418.

²⁸ Charnock, *Works* 4:84. Charnock also says, "Knowledge of God here is the dawn of heaven; knowledge hereafter, the meridian of it." Charnock, *Works* 4:25.

concerning whether or not we will see the essence of God in the beatific vision to the views of Thomas Aquinas, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards.

The Christological Focus of Charnock's Theology of the Beatific Vision, Especially in Christ's Glorified Human Nature

One of the consistent charges hailed against Thomas Aquinas²⁹ is that his view of the beatific vision is christologically deficient.³⁰ Simon Gainé and Gavin Ortlund have argued that this accusation is unfair to Aquinas.³¹ Regardless of which view one takes, it is clear that for Aquinas, the glorified human nature of Christ is of secondary significance in the beatific vision. Aquinas holds that believers will see the glorified humanity of Jesus, but this is not central to the beatific vision.³² For Aquinas, the primary object of the beatific vision is God's divine essence.

On this point, John Owen has famously been compared to Aquinas. For Owen, Christ's glorified human nature plays a far more central role in the beatific vision. In his book *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, Owen says, "It is the Lord Christ and his glory which are the immediate object both of this faith and sight for we here 'behold him darkly in a glass' (that is, by faith); 'but we shall see him face to face' (by immediate vision)."³³ Soon after, in the same discourse, Owen says, "Wherefore the blessed and

²⁹ For Aquinas's writings on the beatific vision see *Summa Theologiae* 1.12.1–11, 3.92.1–3, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3.49–63, *Commentary on the Sentences* I,1,2 and III,1,3, ad 6, and *Compendium of Theology* 1.216, 2.9. For a reliable edition of the *Compendium of Theology* see Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Richard J. Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁰ For example, see Hans Boersma, "Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision: A Christological Deficit," *Theologica*, 2/2 (2018): 129–47; See also Suzanne McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the 'Reforming' of the Beatific Vision," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen*, ed. Kelly Kapic and Mark Jones (New York: Routledge, 2012), 141–58.

³¹ For responses to these accusations, Simon Gainé, "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the Beatific Vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald," *New Blackfriars*, no. 97/1070 (2016): 432–46; Simon Gainé, "The Beatific Vision and the Heavenly Mediation of Christ," *Theologica*, no. 2/2 (2018): 116–28; Simon Gainé, "Thomas Aquinas, the Beatific Vision and the Role of Christ: A Reply to Hans Boersma," *Theologica*, no. 2/2 (2018): 148–67; and Gavin Ortlund, "Will We See God's Essence? A Defence of a Thomistic Account of the Beatific Vision," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74 (2021): 232–332.

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] 3.92.2, ed. The Aquinas Institute, trans. Laurence Shapcote, vol. 22 (Green Bay, WI; Steubenville, OH: Aquinas Institute; Emmaus Academic, 2018), 272. McDonald agrees with this point in McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ," 154. To be clear, Aquinas does have an important place for Christology in his view of the beatific vision, even if it is less straightforward, as Simon Gainé and Gavin Ortlund have shown. On this, see Ortlund, "Will we see God's essence?" 329–330 and Gainé, "Thomas Aquinas, the Beatific Vision, and the Role of Christ," 148–67. The key difference between Aquinas and other figures like Owen and Edwards, is the level of priority they place on the role that Christ's glorified human nature plays in the beatific vision. Gainé helpfully points this out when he says, "Where Owen does differ from Aquinas in terms of the content of vision is in its order: for Aquinas, divinity is thus the primary object and Christ's humanity secondary, such that the humanity is seen in the divinity, while for Owen the humanity is first in order, such that the divinity is seen in the humanity." Gainé, "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen," 436.

³³ Owen, *Works* 1:288.

blessing sight which we shall have of God will be always 'in the face of Jesus Christ.' Therein will that manifestation of the glory of God, in his infinite perfections, and all their blessed operations, so shine into our souls, as shall immediately fill us with peace, rest, and glory."³⁴ Suzanne McDonald summarizes Owen's meaning by saying, "For Owen, the content of the beatific vision is primarily Jesus Christ, fully God, fully man, acknowledged by faith now, apprehended in its fullness in eternity."³⁵

Like Owen, Jonathan Edwards has a similarly central role for the glorified human nature of Christ in the beatific vision. Edwards says the saints in heaven "shall see him as appearing in his glorified human nature with their bodily eyes, which will be a most glorious sight."³⁶

To be clear, Owen and Edwards do not give primacy of place to the physical sight of glorified believers over the spiritual sight of their souls. Edwards says, "The soul has in itself those powers whereby 'tis sufficiently capable of apprehending spiritual objects, without looking through the windows of the outward senses. The soul is capable of seeing God more immediately and more certainly, and more fully and gloriously, than the eye of the body is."³⁷ Instead, by seeing the glorified human nature of Christ with their physical eyes, a human nature subsisting with a divine nature, the saints receive a deeper and fuller sight of the invisible God with the eyes of their souls.³⁸ Edwards explains that "[S]eeing God or the glorified body of Christ is the most perfect way of seeing God with the bodily eyes that can be: for in seeing a real body that one of the persons of the Trinity has assumed to be his body, and that he dwells in forever as his own, in which the divine majesty and excellency appears as much as 'tis possible for it to appear in outward form or shape, the saints do actually see a divine person with bodily eyes, and in the same manner as we see one another."³⁹ Christ is ever the mediator for the saints in glory, in part because he makes the invisible God visible. For Owen and Edwards, by seeing Christ, we really *do* see God. This seeing is most profoundly done with the eyes of the soul but not to the neglect of the eyes of the body. For Owen and Edwards, without the glorified

³⁴ Owen, *Works* 1:292–93.

³⁵ McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ," 146–47.

³⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, ed. Kyle Strobel, Adriaan Neale, and Ken Minkema, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), 163. Edwards is also quick to point out that believers will see Christ not just the eyes of their bodies but that also "they shall see him with the eye of the soul." Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 164.

³⁷ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 170.

³⁸ Strobel ("Jonathan Edwards Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 186n39) further explains Edwards' view by saying, "We could say that the bodily sight of Christ's glorified body perfects the body while the spiritual sight of God and Christ perfects the soul, but Edwards does not make that specific distinction himself. One of Edwards' reasons for not allowing the highest sight of God to be an embodied sight is that the angels, who do not have bodily faculties, share in the vision as well. This is an interesting employment of angelology."

³⁹ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 169.

human nature of Christ, the beatific vision would not be complete.⁴⁰

Charnock laid out this same glorified christological focus. He says:

By knowing Christ, who is man, we know God because the human nature of Christ is personally assumed by the Son of God. As he that sees the body of a man, sees the man consisting of soul and body, because the soul and body are united together and make one composition, though the soul in itself be invisible; so he that sees the human nature of Christ is rightly said to see God, because the human and divine nature are personally united in Christ, though the divinity itself be invisible; and indeed, we cannot conceive any other sight and knowledge of God in heaven, but in Christ. The vision of Christ in his glorified human nature, is a seeing of God face to face; so that whosoever sees Christ with his bodily eyes, or with the eyes of his mind, sees God; he sees and knows God, not immediately and directly, but mediately and consequently.⁴¹

For Charnock, like Owen and Edwards, the glorified human nature of Christ is vital for the beatific vision.

Adding to the depth of his Christological focus for the *visio Dei*, Charnock argues that Christ is necessary for the beatific vision because Christ most fully reveals God's beauty and perfections to believers, not just in the vision but in all things. Charnock says:

All the attributes of God are glorified in Christ...Christ added no glory to God's nature by his death and resurrection, but opened the curtains, and manifested that which had lain hid from eternity in the infinite depths of his own essence. In this regard he is called by the name of the 'glory of God' rising upon the world, Isa. 60:1. For Christ is a certificate wherein the world may read how excellent, wise, bountiful, just, faithful, holy, God is.⁴²

⁴⁰ Interestingly, this emphasis on the glorified human nature of Christ for Owen and Edwards differs significantly from John Calvin's treatment of the beatific vision. Calvin argues that in glory, Christ's mediatorial role will be complete and unnecessary "because the veil being then removed, we shall openly behold God reigning in his majesty, and Christ's humanity will then no longer be interposed to keep us back from a closer view of God." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 32–33. Calvin seems to hold to a very direct view of the Godhead in the beatific vision. In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin says, the beatific vision will be a "direct vision of the Godhead". He goes on to say, "But when as partakers in heavenly glory we shall see God as he is, Christ, having then discharged the office of Mediator, will cease to be the ambassador of his Father, and will be satisfied with that glory which he enjoyed before the creation of the world." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 485. For a more detailed explanation of Calvin's view of Christ's mediatorial role and the beatific vision, see Richard A. Muller, "Christ in the Eschaton: Calvin and Moltmann on the Duration of the *Munus Regium*," *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 1 (1981): 31–59.

⁴¹ Charnock, *Works* 4:112.

⁴² Charnock, *Works* 4:138–39.

Additionally, for Charnock, Christ's mediation is necessary for the beatific vision not only because of the importance of Christ's glorified human nature or that he most fully reveals God's glory to mankind but also because it is only through the atonement of Christ that mankind is reconciled to God and able to enjoy the beatific vision in the first place. Charnock explains, "In uniting God and man in eternal fellowship...[God] brings stubble to dwell with flames, and weakness to behold and enjoy glory without being overwhelmed by the weight and splendour of it, to draw near to the supreme majesty through the veil of the flesh of Christ. He causeth pardon and punishment to meet, that God appeased, and man acquitted, may come together."⁴³ In the words of Simon Gaine, "One cannot see God without being 'in Christ.'"⁴⁴ At this point, Aquinas, Owen, Edwards, and Charnock speak in harmony.

In summary, while the glorified human nature of Christ is of secondary importance for Aquinas's view of the beatific vision, it is central in the beatific theology of Owen, Edwards, and Charnock. These latter three thinkers are far more explicitly Christological in their explanations of the beatific vision.⁴⁵ Charnock follows in Owen's footsteps in this regard. Thus, all four theologians recognize the significance of Christ as the foundation for the saints' participation in the beatific vision.

Will the Saints See the Essence of God in the Beatific Vision?

The final point of Charnock's theology of the beatific vision that we will explore in conversation with other theologians is whether or not the saints will see the essence of God in the vision. Aquinas posits that the saints will

⁴³ Charnock, *Works* 4:147.

⁴⁴ Gaine, "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen," 439. Gaine makes this point while arguing that Aquinas' view of the beatific vision is sufficiently christological because Christ is the only means by which we can have union and relationship with God and that believers are therefore always dependent on Christ for their experiencing the beatific vision. Ortlund furthers this point by saying, "Furthermore, Thomas believes that the vision of God in heaven is christologically mediated in the sense that it is the result of the light of glory imparted to the saints, which is imparted to the saints through Christ – indeed, it is received by an act of participation in Christ as their head. For Thomas, the ascended Christ possesses the beatific vision par excellence, and our beholding of it is a participation in his." Ortlund, "Will we see God's essence?" 330.

⁴⁵ Gaine and Ortlund have helpfully shown that Aquinas has a greater role for christology in his theology of the beatific vision than others have previously argued. That being said, it is a demonstrable fact that Owen, Edwards, and Charnock expend vastly more ink on elucidating Christ's explicit role in the beatific vision, particularly as it relates to his glorified human nature. Ortlund and Gaine argue that when the whole of Aquinas's theology is taken into account, the implication is that Christ must necessarily be vital to the beatific vision. While this may be true, it seems clear that Aquinas, in his many words about the beatific vision, makes far less explicit statements about Christ's role in the vision compared to Owen, Edwards, and Charnock. This cannot be easily explained away, and arguments resting simply on logical inference seem weak when the primary sources are engaged. Aquinas, Owen, Edwards, and Charnock may all view christology as important for the beatific vision in different ways, but Owen, Edwards, and Charnock seem to hold a more explicit and weightier place for christology in the vision and are all at pains to show it in their respective writings.

have a finite but unmediated view of God's essence.⁴⁶ This view comes from God impressing himself upon the intellects of the saints, creating a union and participation between the two.⁴⁷ This seeing is exclusively spiritual. Aquinas does have a place forth bodily eyes in the vision, but it is in a secondary sense, namely that by seeing other created things, we will see clear evidence of God's existence and work in the world.⁴⁸

Owen takes a different perspective by arguing that we cannot see God's essence without Christ's glorified human nature. He claims God's infinite essence would be invisible and incomprehensible without Christ's mediation, even in glory.⁴⁹ Whereas Aquinas believes that God will impress himself upon our intellect so that we can see his essence, making God the source and form of our vision, Owen has a different understanding of our source of sight and knowledge of God. McDonald explains Owen's view by saying:

All knowledge of and union and communion with God now, and everything about our salvation, come to us through the Son incarnate. So it will be eternally. God will not change the way in which he reveals himself at the consummation of all things, as if making himself

⁴⁶ "Therefore, God will be seen in his essence by the saints in heaven." Aquinas, *ST* 3.92.1. Aquinas also says, "[The] intellect [will] be able to see the divine essence by the divine essence itself." Aquinas, *ST* 3.92.1. Additionally, Aquinas says, "Now in the order of knowledge the object known follows the form by which we know, since by the form of a stone we see a stone, whereas the efficacy of knowledge follows the power of the knower: thus he who has stronger sight sees more clearly. Consequently, in that vision we shall see the same thing that God sees, namely, his essence, but not so effectively." Aquinas, *ST* 3.92.1 See also where Aquinas argues that, "I say then that God can in no way be seen with the eyes of the body, or perceived by any of the senses, as that which is seen directly, neither here, nor in heaven...Since, then, sight and sense will be specifically the same in the glorified body, as in a non-glorified body, it will be impossible for it to see the divine essence as an object of direct vision." Aquinas, *ST* 3.92.2. For further summary of Aquinas's view, see Ortlund, "Will we see God's essence?" 325–27. Francis Turretin also seems to hold that the saints will see the unmediated essence of God, although he is quite measured in his statements and only cautiously comes forward to say so. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 20.8.1–22, pp. 608–17.

⁴⁷ Edward Leigh, one of the Westminster divines, follows Aquinas exactly on this point. "God presents himself immediately to the understanding, 1 Cor. 13:9. 1 John 3:2....[T]hey shall enjoy God, possesse him, he shall be all in all. They shall not see him with bodily eyes (so the Deity cannot be seen) but with the soul so far as the understanding can be enlarged." Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity*. (London: Printed by A.M. for William Lee), 1654, 871.

⁴⁸ "Yet it will see it as an object of indirect vision, because on the one hand the bodily sight will see so great a glory of God in bodies, especially in the glorified bodies and most of all in the body of Christ, and, on the other hand, the intellect will see God so clearly that God will be perceived in things seen with the eye of the body, even as life is perceived in speech. For although our intellect will not then see God from seeing his creatures, yet it will see God in his creatures seen corporeally." Aquinas, *ST* 3.92.2. This argument is similar to Augustine's in *City of God* 22.29. Aquinas even explicitly cites Augustine at this point.

⁴⁹ Owen, *Works* 1:292–93. McDonald further explains Owen's view by saying, "Were it not for the incarnation, Owen maintains that God would remain essentially invisible, now and for all eternity...[F]or Owen, it is not even an unmediated apprehension of the essence of God as Trinity as such. Here Owen moves very deliberately beyond the Thomist tradition. He informs us that even in the beatific vision, God, in the unmediated fullness of his essence, will be incomprehensible to our created, even though glorified, minds." McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ," 146.

known in the person of the incarnate Son were merely a temporary emergency measure to be discarded This means that Owen is absolutely insistent that the vision of God in heaven will be mediated to us through Christ⁵⁰

For Owen, since God reveals himself most clearly through Christ to the saints in this life, he will not cease to do so in the next. According to Owen's understanding, our view of God in the beatific vision is primarily spiritual. However, this view is impossible without our physical eyes gazing upon the glory of the glorified human nature of Christ. Christ mediates our vision of God's essence.

Edwards holds a similar view to Owen, but with some key nuances. Edwards says that the saints will see "the glory of Christ in his divine nature."⁵¹ Strobel explains this by saying, "As Christological as Edwards' focus is, he is clear that the embodied Christ is not the object of the vision as such, that is, as *embodied*. The vision of God by the glorified saints is primarily spiritual. It is not beholding forms or representations, shapes or colours that make the soul 'happified'; rather, 'tis in seeing God, who is a spirit, spiritually with the eye of the soul."⁵² For Edwards, Christ is necessary for the beatific vision. While his glorified human nature is important to the whole event, the spiritual seeing of Christ's divine nature through Christ gives the saints ultimate joy.

On a related note, Edwards emphasizes the importance of mutual beholding in the beatific vision. The Father has beheld the Son for all eternity past, just as the Son has beheld the Father. For Edwards, the saints behold God through Christ's vision of God according to their creaturely capacities. Through the Son, bonded in union by the Spirit, the saints will partake in the life of the Trinity, which is grounded in mutual beholding and enjoyment.⁵³ Edwards says, "The saints shall enjoy God as partaking with Christ of his enjoyment of God, for they are united to him and are glorified and made happy in the enjoyment of God as his members."⁵⁴ Edwards adds a Trinitarian emphasis to the beatific vision and has a different emphasis overall from Aquinas (and arguably Owen). Strobel explains, "[T]he issue for Edwards is a participation in the *relational* life of the Trinity through sight, and not, as with Aquinas, a sight of the divine essence."⁵⁵

Like Edwards, Charnock stresses the importance of mutual beholding. Charnock posits that God has enjoyed beholding his glory for all eternity

⁵⁰ McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ," 149–50.

⁵¹ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 165.

⁵² Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 178.

⁵³ For more on Edwards' Trinitarian formulation, see Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 178–81.

⁵⁴ Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 173. Edwards also says, "By the Holy Ghost a spiritual sight of God is given in this world, so 'tis the same Holy Spirit by which a beatific vision is given of God in heaven." Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 173.

⁵⁵ Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 187n48. Emphasis his.

past and made the saints behold and enjoy that same glory.⁵⁶ Charnock's beatific theology is less explicitly Trinitarian than Edwards in that Charnock does not often relate the Spirit explicitly to the beatific vision. However, Charnock seems to point to the reality that our enjoyment in glory is of the Trinitarian Godhead, such that even glorifying and worshiping God in glory will involve praising the whole Godhead.⁵⁷ While Charnock's view is less fully relationally-focused than Edwards', Charnock does argue for a true participation in the divine nature founded upon and saturated in the love of God. Charnock says, "It is a real participation. It is not a picture, but a nature: it is divine. God doth not busy himself about apparitions. It is a likeness, not only in actions, but in nature. God communicates to the creature a singular participation of the divine vision and divine love; why may he not also give some excellent participation of his nature?"⁵⁸ Charnock believes that God causes us to participate in his nature by his grace, which is how we can "be holy as God is holy." We are adopted as children of God and are brought into union with God. If we are children, then we are heirs (according to Paul in Rom. 8:17), and if we are heirs of God, we experience all of the benefits of God earned by Christ that our creaturely capacities will allow. For Charnock, we really do participate in God's nature in the relational context of God's love for us and our love for him.

In discussing the essence of God, it is important to note that Aquinas, Owen, Edwards, and Charnock use the term *immediate* in diverse ways regarding the beatific vision. For Aquinas, the beatific vision is immediate (unmediated) because God directly gives the vision of himself by impressing himself directly on the intellect of the saints. Edwards also explicitly calls the vision immediate. However, Edwards means something different by the term. For Edwards, the beatific vision is an immediate view of God because it does not involve things like the Scriptures or sacraments, which help us "see" God in true but less clear ways than Christ Himself in the beatific vision.⁵⁹ Strobel explains that, for Edwards, "immediacy highlights the

⁵⁶ Charnock, *Works* 4:24, 1:509.

⁵⁷ Charnock's explanation of this Trinitarian worship can be seen in a discussion of his that almost sounds like a reverse form of inseparable operations related to our praising the Father through the Son. He says, "As the glory of both is linked in itself, it must be linked in our services; we must honour both, one as the object of worship, the other as the medium; the Father as the rector, Christ as the ambassador. As the Father is not glorified by Christ, but by first glorifying Christ, so neither is the Father glorified by us without our glorifying Christ first by believing. When we glorify Christ as the Son of God, we glorify God as the Father of Christ; we cannot glorify the paternity without acknowledging a filiation, nor acknowledge a filiation without honouring the paternity." Charnock, *Works* 4:7. Relating this to the beatific vision, we could posit that Charnock would say that in seeing God through the glorified Son, bonded to Christ by the Spirit, we praise Christ and therefore necessarily praise the Father through the Spirit.

⁵⁸ Charnock, *Works* 3:127.

⁵⁹ "This shall be an immediate sight. It will be no apprehension of God's excellency, by arguing of it from his works; neither will it be such a spiritual sight of God as the saints have in this world, seeing of him in his word, or making use of ordinances, which is called a seeing "through a glass, darkly: but then" they shall see him "face to face," 1 Corinthians 13:12. [They] shall not only

nature of *receiving* the sight, and does not delineate how direct the access is to God (namely, an immediacy to God's soul, which Edwards was concerned to protect against).⁶⁰ Charnock's view is closer to Edwards' than Aquinas's, but he uses the terms *immediate* and *mediate* differently. He says, "The vision of Christ in his glorified human nature, is a seeing of God face to face; so that whosoever sees Christ with his bodily eyes, or with the eyes of his mind, sees God; he sees and knows God, not immediately and directly, but mediately and consequently."⁶¹

In Charnock's view, similar to Owen and Edwards, the saints will not have an unmediated view of God's essence. There are multiple reasons for this. First, finite human beings cannot comprehend the infinite God.⁶² Second, Christ's mediation is necessary for the saints to see God. Charnock says, "[I]ndeed all the light of the knowledge of God that ever was did spring from Christ. None ever knew God by his own strength and natural abilities, but as they were kept up and animated by the mediator."⁶³ In seeing Christ, the saints really will see God and have a profound spiritual sight of God initiated by the physical sight of the glorified Christ. This sight will be different than the sight Aquinas envisions, which involves God impressing

see the glory of God as being reflected from other things, but they shall see him as we see the sun by his own light in a clear hemisphere; it will be an intuitive view of God that they will have." Edwards, *Jonathan Edwards: Spiritual Writings*, 170.

⁶⁰ Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 178–79. Emphasis his.

⁶¹ Charnock, *Works* 4:112. Interestingly, Strobel notes ("Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 186–87n41) a similarity between Edwards' view and Bavinck's when Bavinck says, "The redeemed see God, not—to be sure—with physical eyes, but still in a way that far outstrips all revelation in this dispensation via nature and Scripture. And thus they will all know him, each in the measure of his mental capacity, with a knowledge that has its image and likeness in God's knowledge—directly, immediately, unambiguously, and purely. Then they will receive and possess everything they expected here only in hope." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 722. Bavinck is commenting on how vision with the eyes is mediated while vision with the soul is considered immediate. In this sense, it seems that Charnock would agree. Charnock holds that the saints see the glorified human nature of Christ with their eyes and this gives them also a spiritual sight of God. The saints can only know God through Christ. Using Bavinck's framework, Charnock would agree with him insofar as Charnock would say that the saints have an immediate view of God by seeing him with the eyes of their souls through Christ, but they have a mediated view of God in seeing the human nature of Christ with their physical eyes. To be clear, Charnock would be quick to clarify that however one uses the terms immediate and mediate, the saints only have true knowledge of God through Christ, even in the beatific vision.

⁶² "And though it be said, 1 John 3:2, that 'we shall see him as he is,' it is most convenient to understand it of the sight of Christ in his visible human nature at the day of judgment, and not of the essence of God; for he speaks of the appearance of God, understanding Christ's appearance, which the Scripture frequently speaks of. There will, indeed, in heaven be a wider enlarging the faculty, and a fuller discovery of the object, greater sparklings of light and glory, enough to satisfy; yet still the perfections of God will be above our comprehensions; the understanding will be dilated and strengthened, a clear light put into it, which is not any species of God, but a spiritual principle created by God to perfect the understanding for the contemplation of him." Charnock, *Works* 4:40.

⁶³ Charnock, *Works* 4:114.

himself upon the human intellect.

Charnock's theology of the beatific vision also bears similarities to that of Edwards and Owen insofar as it is primarily focused "on the God who *gives*, rather than the vision *received*," according to Strobel.⁶⁴ Charnock's view can be indeed labeled as a "vision *pro nobis* (for us)."⁶⁵ Charnock consistently emphasizes that the beatific vision is a gracious gift of God for believers, made possible by the sacrificial death of Christ for believers, Christ's mediation for believers, through believers' faith in Christ dying for them, ultimately for the glory of God and the joy of believers. The whole of Charnock's theology of the beatific vision showcases God's love for his people through his Son by his Spirit.⁶⁶

In summary, Charnock believes that the saints will not have an unmediated view of God's essence, differing from Aquinas' position. Instead, the saints see the glorified human nature of Christ with their bodily eyes and, through Christ, have a perfect spiritual view of God. Charnock falls closer to Owen here but also has elements of Edwards' mutual beholding nuances in his view of the beatific vision. Charnock's view is less explicitly Trinitarian than Edwards', but there is evidence of Trinitarian worship in Charnock's view of the beatific vision. Charnock's emphasis on the beatific vision is less relational than Edwards', but Charnock's view still lands closer to Edwards overall than Aquinas. One could almost say that Charnock's theology of the beatific vision rests somewhere between Owen and Edwards.

CONCLUSION

Steeped in classical theology and the Puritan and Reformed tradition, Stephen Charnock's view of the beatific vision is robust, christologically-focused, and deeply pastoral. While agreeing with the God-centeredness of Aquinas's view⁶⁷ (as could be said of Owen and Edwards), Charnock's theology uniquely and more closely relates to that of John Owen and Jonathan Edwards. Rather than being too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good, Charnock's theology of the beatific vision can preach and is meant to encourage believers on this side of glory. By inspiring believers to strive for as much sight of and joy in God's glory as can be found during their earthly pilgrimages, Charnock inspires believers to seek out a foretaste of the joy of the beatific vision now. While their view of God may be imperfect in this life, one day, Charnock says, believers will see God perfectly through Christ in the beatific vision such that they will be filled with immense joy and will be conformed to the image of Christ, all while giving glory to the Godhead.

⁶⁴ Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 183.

⁶⁵ This language comes from Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards' Reformed Doctrine of the Beatific Vision," 183.

⁶⁶ For examples of this, see Charnock, *Works* 2:317, 3:125, 4:137–39, etc.

⁶⁷ Ortlund, "Will we see God's essence?," 326–27.