

the
Everlasting God

Broughton Knox



*Few minds have explored the depths of God's revelation
with such humble and innovative perception.*

~ Phillip D. Jensen

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Everlasting God
Broughton Knox

The Everlasting God

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A note on Bible versions

In the course of his lectures and writings, Dr Knox characteristically quoted from either the King James Version or the Revised Version, and sometimes in a combination of both. We have retained this feature.

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preface

The Everlasting God

When I first read *The Everlasting God* in the mid-1980s, it blew my mind. It made my previous conception of who God was seem like a crude children's jigsaw with half a dozen pieces. Here, by contrast, was a 1000-piece puzzle of a complexity and beauty that I hadn't thought possible. And yet the overall effect was not to confuse or confound, but to see the whole picture with a new clarity and sense of awe.

It was (and remains) the best-known literary work of Broughton Knox, who at that time was something of a living legend among Sydney evangelicals. He had shaped a generation of students at Moore College during his 26 years as Principal (1959-85), and wielded an extraordinary influence over the character and direction of Reformed evangelical Christianity in Sydney and beyond. Former Archbishop of Sydney Sir Marcus Loane wrote of him: "It is not too much to say that no other contemporary Australian churchman has had a more original mind or has shown a more penetrating insight into questions of pure theology, and that insight was derived from his understanding of the supreme revelation of truth in the Bible".

Broughton Knox died in 1994, and *The Everlasting God* fell out of print for a time. It was republished in 2000 in volume 1 of Matthias Media's edition of *D. Broughton Knox Selected Works*, and is now available in this new stand-alone edition.

It is not a difficult book to read, but not a quick book to

read either. The language is straightforward, but the ideas are probing, challenging, mind-stretching, profound. It is a book to savour and ponder, with a Bible open. It is also worth noting that Dr Knox did not consider the structure or organization of *The Everlasting God* to be definitive or comprehensive. On being criticized, for example, for not including more on the doctrine of the Spirit, he responded: “I must emphasize that this book is a reprint of five lectures given to a lay audience. The five subjects chosen are subjects of importance, but I could not choose every subject of importance on the doctrine of God. But they were subjects which I believed needed emphasis in the context of my hearers. The Spirit is God, and what is said of God is said of the Spirit.”

My hope and prayer is that this new edition of *The Everlasting God* will find a new generation of readers, eager to deepen their knowledge of God, and ready to have their minds blown.

Tony Payne

Matthias Media

May 2009

chapter 1

The living and true God

The doctrine of God is of the utmost importance, for it controls the whole of life. As a person thinks about God, that is to say, as he thinks about ultimate reality, so his standards of behaviour, values and relations with other people are determined.

Everyone has a doctrine of God, even if it is only the negative doctrine that God does not exist. On such a view, the objectives and values of life and relationships with other people will be very different from what they are when ultimate reality is conceived as a personal God who will judge the world by his standards of right conduct, which are written in the human conscience. On the other hand, if a person's doctrine of God has the Christian dimension of self-sacrificing love, then behaviour and attitudes will again be different from what they would be without a belief in the existence of God. Everyone has a doctrine of God, that is, of ultimate reality, which will influence every aspect of life—the emotions, the decisions of the will, the hopes of the future and day-to-day behaviour. If the thinker is consistent, so that his actions correspond with his thoughts, then his doctrine of God will control his behaviour completely. But most of us are inconsistent, and this does not add to our happiness or enhance our effectiveness.

Since this doctrine is so influential, and a true doctrine consistently held and practised is a source of great benefit, it is a matter of great importance to investigate what may be

known of the character and nature of God.

Deity is a concept congenial to the human mind. The existence of divine being is not an abstruse or difficult concept, like, for example, that of the infinitesimal calculus, which has to be struggled with before it can be apprehended; for even the simplest and youngest mind finds the notion of deity easy to accept and to understand. The idea of deity may be said to be innate, not in the sense that a child is born with the idea fully formed in his mind, but in the sense that the concept is readily understood and accepted by the child as soon as he is told about it. Strictly speaking, it is responsiveness to the concept of deity which is innate, though in actual fact there has been no child born into the world who has not early in his life learned from his elders of the concept of deity. For religion and belief in the divine are co-extensive with humanity. As far back into history as we can push our knowledge of the human race, religion is found, and among the nations and tribes that make up humanity at the present day, religion is a universal activity. So every child, early in his life, comes to hear of the concept of deity, and when he hears he understands it, and he has little problem in accepting it, if he learns it from one with whom he is in sympathy.

The ingredients that make up this universally held concept include personality and everlastingness, as well as knowledge, power and relatedness. The deities, as humanity conceives of them, are eternal, superhuman beings who influence our lives and who in turn may be influenced by a right approach to them. Belief in the existence of such a being or beings is found throughout humanity. There is no race known to history, or to archaeology, or to anthropology,

who did not or who does not believe in deity. The concept is filled out in different ways, and apart from Christianity, Judaism and Islam, deity is always conceived of as a plurality of divine beings. Only in the sophisticated society of the ancient world or of modern times has the reality of deity been denied.

Although it obviously would be to the advantage of self-centred humanity that deity should not exist, the notion of deity is so natural to the human mind that the acceptance of its non-existence can only be maintained by constant propaganda, and even this fails and the concept returns in one form or other. It would be strange indeed if this universal and tenacious concept of deity had no correspondence with reality. The alternative to the reality of deity is that people have made up the belief because their nature needs it. But this explanation contains within it a contradiction. For if people's nature is solely the creation of their environment, as the atheist affirms, how does it come about that the real environment has created in humans a need which can only be satisfied by something which does not exist—a need so real and basic that no human race has existed without its fulfilment in religious belief? The environment has not done this for any other form of life. How are we to believe then that it should do so simply for human life? It is self-contradictory to believe that ultimate reality, in this case for the atheist, material reality, has shaped humanity so that man is only truly man, only truly human, only truly related in a human way in societies, and only prospers, if he believes and devotes himself in worship to a nonentity, to something which is not there at all. If such were the case with regard to humanity, *homo sapiens* would be a sardonic misnomer.

Personal deity self-revelational

Although sophisticated thought is able to arrive at the concept of impersonal deity, and ultimately at the concept of the non-existence of deity, the universal view of deity, as received among the nations of the world from the time that history began, is that deity is personal. Now if this is true, it follows that men can have no knowledge of deity apart from deity's own volition. The gods have always been conceived of as persons, yet persons cannot be known unless they reveal themselves. To reveal themselves or not to do so remains within the will of persons.

Similarly, if the universally held view of humanity is true, if deity not only exists but is personal, the possibility follows that deity may reveal itself to humans. This possibility is inherent in personality. We ourselves, being persons, may take the initiative and reveal ourselves to whom we will; so, too, with personal deity, it may reveal itself to whom it will. But, of course, such events are unpredictable, just as our own decision to speak to this one, but not to that one, is unpredictable. The matter rests entirely within ourselves. But once deity has acted to reveal itself, then the event passes into history. From that moment on, it is an historical event which cannot be eliminated with the passage of time. It is written in the ongoing pages of history. Now in the history that is written in the Scriptures it is affirmed that deity has addressed itself to humans in this way. For example, while Abraham was living with his relatives, idol-worshippers in Mesopotamia beyond the river Euphrates, God Almighty spoke to him, and commanded him to leave his home in Ur and his kinsmen, and to go out into a land which God would show him, and Abraham believed God and obeyed.

In this way, through this word and response, Abraham, who up until then had been ignorant of God, began to know God. It is plain from the Old Testament narrative that God spoke with Abraham on many subsequent occasions. Abraham's personal relationship to God was so full that he was called the "friend of God".¹ Indeed this was God's own designation of Abraham: "Abraham my friend".² Friendship arises through personal conversation, personal association, one speaking to the other, the other responding, and vice versa. God took the initiative and spoke to Abraham, Abraham responded, and the friendship began which deepened over the years as Abraham came to know God more and more.

Another example from the history of the Old Testament of God's taking the initiative to make himself known was the incident of the burning bush in the desert of Sinai. Here God spoke to Moses, told Moses his name and something of his character, gave him directions how he should act and commissioned him to lead his people out of Egypt. Subsequent revelation of God to Moses was so complete and full that God himself said of Moses that he spoke to him face to face like a friend speaks to a friend.³ A third example is at Mount Sinai where God addressed the children of Israel directly, giving them the Ten Commandments.⁴

Persons are self-authenticating

We could multiply such illustrations, but it is sufficient to say that, when a person addresses another person, such

1 Jas 2:23

2 Isa 41:8

3 Exod 33:11; Num 12:8; Deut 34:10

4 Exodus 19-20

action carries with it its own authentication. We know this from our own experience. So, too, when God addresses anyone, the person knows that he is being addressed. All necessity for proof of the existence of God falls away when you meet God. What is true on a human level when we meet with one another is all the more true when God, the Creator on whom we depend, wills to meet and speak with us his creatures and to establish personal relationships with us. Those to whom God speaks will have a firm and clear conviction of God's existence and of the fact that he is addressing them. God's words are self-authenticating to the hearts and minds of those whom he addresses. It could not be otherwise. When God spoke to Abraham, there could not be a moment's doubt in his mind that God was speaking to him, any more than there could be in Paul's mind any doubt that the Lord Jesus was addressing him on the Damascus road. So, too, with Moses and with all those to whom God speaks.

God's word authenticates itself, and must do so, because it is a personal word addressed to a person and heard by that person, for that is the purpose of God's speaking, and his purposes do not fail. Personal words addressed to us by someone else, when received as personal words, carry within themselves their self-authenticating character; that is to say, when we hear someone addressing us, we know the reality of the existence of that other person, and if we listen to him we become, by the act of listening, personally related to him. So, too, when God addresses people, God's existence is known by those who hear, with a conviction which all theories can never attain. The universal view of humanity drawn from their contemplation of creation, namely that

deity exists, is proved to be true at the moment that God addresses us, as he addressed Abraham, as he addressed Moses and as he addresses all his children.

When the superhuman Person whom we know as God addresses any one of us, in that approach by God to us, in that word which he speaks to us, and which we receive because it is addressed to us by our Creator, we know God to be the true and living God. We know that he exists, we know that he has addressed us, we know that he is the living God, the true God, for only the living and true can speak. The gods of the philosophers never come to life. We cannot relate ourselves to them because they do not address us. They are dead. They do not exist. The same is true of the gods of the idolaters, only more conspicuously so. As the psalmist says, "They have mouths but they do not speak".⁵ They do not address us; they are non-gods. But the God who addresses us is known in that action not only to be, but to be the living God and the true God, and we know that we are in his presence.

God is known in his Word

Humanity's universal belief in deity, that is, in a superhuman person of everlasting character, of power and in a relationship with us, is confirmed as true in the only way that it can be confirmed—namely, by the deity approaching us and establishing a relationship with us through personal intercourse—that is to say, through his word, for words are the medium of personal relationship. God has spoken and in that address to us we know him—we know him to be

existent, we know him to be living and we know him to be the only true God, because his Word carries conviction and he affirms that he alone is God. We know this to be true because, knowing him, we know his character—that he is true.

God has not confined himself to speaking to Abraham and to Moses, but he has continued to speak to those whom he has chosen to address, and he has made known abundantly what his character is, through this ongoing relationship of person to person. In the same way as we learn the character of a friend as years go on and as our fellowship with our friend deepens, so, too, God has spoken to his people through the centuries in different ways. The most characteristic way by which God's Word came in Old Testament times was through prophets; that is to say, through the men and women in whom God's Spirit dwelt and whose words were controlled by the Spirit of God so that they were God's words though also remaining the words of the prophet. The prophet prefaced what he had to say with the introductory phrase "Thus saith the Lord" and then went on directly to speak in the first person singular in God's name. So the prophet was, as it were, God's mouthpiece, and those who heard the prophet heard God, and in hearing God's words learned of God's character. Now the Spirit of God was both giving the words through the prophet and confirming the words in the hearts of those to whom they were addressed.

The phenomenon of prophecy was not an occasional occurrence among the people of Israel but was characteristic of their relationship to God. God was present in the words of his prophets and the people were related to their divine Lord through his Word. As the Hebrew text so quaintly puts

it, God rose up early and sent his prophets.⁶ There was a succession of prophets right through Old Testament times who through their messages made clear the character of God and his will for men, and in this way gave to the hearers the opportunity of response through faith and obedience and so brought them into a personal relationship with the God who gave the Word.

The movement of the true and living God in revelation of himself to humanity was not confined to the prophets, but reached its apex in the incarnation of the Son of God himself. In Jesus of Nazareth God was present with us. Jesus was Emmanuel and his words were the words not of a prophet, but of the divine Creator himself. No longer does the divine message need the preface of “Thus saith the Lord”, but Jesus speaks directly with the divine ‘I’: “I say unto you”.⁷ Christ’s words were the words of God, and were received as such by those who believed him. In the words of Jesus and in the example of his life, God spoke to us, revealing his character and his will for us, and enlarged the possibilities of our relationship with him.

The revelation of God in Jesus was completed through the apostles and New Testament prophets. Jesus himself foretold that the Spirit of God, whom the Father would send at the Son’s request on his ascension, would lead the apostles into the fullness of truth about those things which he himself could not yet teach them because of their immaturity. And so it came about. The Spirit of prophecy was conspicuously present among New Testament Christians.

6 As reflected in the KJV rendering of Jeremiah 7:13.

7 Matt 5:21-22, 27-28

Who is God?

There can be no more profound or important question.

In this classic work of theology, Broughton Knox
examines the character of the God of the Bible:

that he is living and true,

that he is infinite in power, wisdom and goodness,

that he is three-in-one,

that he reveals himself to us in the Lord Jesus Christ,

and that he is rich in mercy and grace.

A mind-shifting, life-changing book for everyone
who wants to know God better.



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