

Thomas Halyburton

and How God May Be Known (1)

Rev H M Cartwright

Thomas Halyburton was born in 1674, the son of George Halyburton, who was minister of Aberdalgie and Dupplin in Perthshire from 1657 until he was evicted from his charge in 1662 for his adherence to the Covenanted religion of Scotland. In 1676 George Halyburton was denounced by the Privy Council for keeping conventicles and was effectively silenced, and in 1682 he died. Mrs Halyburton and her two surviving children – her married daughter Janet and her son Thomas – fled to Rotterdam for a time, to escape the persecution of the Covenanters. In the changed circumstances brought about by the Revolution, Thomas was ordained and inducted to the ministry of the gospel at Ceres in Fife on 1 May 1700. In April 1710 he was installed as Professor of Divinity in the new college, St Andrews, and on 23 September 1712 he died. A struggle with ill health characterised most of his ministry.

Although Halyburton lived 300 years ago and his public ministry covered only 12 years in total, mostly in comparative obscurity, he has been regarded as one of the most significant of Scottish theologians. Hugh Martin described Halyburton and Cunningham as "the two greatest theologians that Scotland has ever produced" and John Duncan regarded him as "a minor John Owen", in the same category as Hermann Witsius. One of the unresolved questions of history is what effect he might have had upon theological development in the eighteenth-century Church of Scotland had his life been prolonged beyond its 38 years and particularly how he might have influenced the controversy in the Church of Scotland which came to a head over the theology of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. But he served his own generation according to the will of God for ten years in a country parish and for two years in a theological hall, and what remains of his autobiographical, literary and pulpit work has been of much benefit to many who have had access to it throughout the centuries since.

How God may be known was the concern at the heart of Halyburton's own spiritual experience, as can be seen from the *Memoirs* (of which a nice edition was published by Reformation Heritage Books in 1996). This was also the concern with which he grappled as a theologian and an apologist for biblical Christianity, especially against the Deists. His main work on this subject is found in *Natural Religion Insufficient and Revealed Necessary to Man's Happiness in His Present State* and in *An Essay Concerning the Nature of Faith; or, The Ground upon which Faith Assents to the Scriptures*.² What Archibald Alexander says of Halyburton's account of his spiritual experience in general suggests that we may find benefit in considering what he has to say on this theme in particular: it was written "when his judgment was fully matured".

Two basic assumptions underlie what Thomas Halyburton has to say on how God, who has revealed Himself in Christ, may be known. The first is that *God may be known*. The second is that *the knowledge of God is the heart of true religion – it is life eternal*. "Nothing is more plain than this", writes Halyburton, "that religion is founded upon the knowledge of the Deity, and that our regard for Him will be answerable to the knowledge we have of Him. . . . Religion then in general may be justly said to import that veneration, respect or regard which is due from the rational creature in his whole course of life to the supreme supereminently excellent Being, his creator, preserver, lord or governor, and benefactor. . . . A blind devotion that is begotten and maintained either by profound ignorance of God, or confused notions of Him, answers neither man's nature, which is rational and requires that he proceed in all his actions, especially those of most moment, rationally – that is, with knowledge and willingness – nor will it obtain acceptance as that which answers his duty, whereby he is obliged to serve God with the best and in the highest way his faculties admit him. . . . To conceive of God in the general, that He is the best and greatest of beings, is not enough. . . . We may mistake in other things without sin; but to frame wrong and other conceptions of God and His excellencies than the truth of the thing requires is dangerous and sinful, for it frames an idol."

We begin by looking at the question of how God may be known, as Halyburton wrestled with it in his own spiritual experience and as he confronted it in the writings of those who advocated a natural theology and religion. Then we consider the answer to which he was led by his study of the Bible and his own experience of the power of the truth. In conclusion we briefly suggest some implications of the answer. In each case we let Halyburton speak for himself as much as possible.

1a. The question of how God may be known – as Halyburton wrestled with it in his own spiritual experience.

Halyburton was well acquainted with biblical truth from his youth. Although not converted until shortly before he was licensed to preach the gospel, he was intellectually hesitant to question the existence of God as the Bible reveals Him. Indeed, he put much effort into trying to maintain his belief in God's existence. He tells us that the Lord suffered him not to yield but made him "dread and recoil at the terrible conclusions aimed at by those arguings" against the being of God. He went through strong temptations on the subject however, and was honest enough to refuse to seek licence to preach as long as he was uncertain of the being of God. He was convinced that it would be misery for a man to preach to others what he did not believe himself.

His temptation regarding the existence of God began almost as soon as he became concerned about spiritual things. Initially his temptation was that he did not have sufficient evidence *for* a truth on which so much depended. Later he was bombarded with arguments *against* the truth. It was his view that in his study of metaphysics and natural theology he became so intrigued with some of the "subtle notions" he met with that "Satan, in conjunction with the natural atheism of [his] heart, took occasion" to shake his belief in the being of God. Arguments over deism which he had as a young man led him to the kind of reading and reasoning which left him unsure. He was pressed between, on the one hand, an inability flatly to deny the being of God – which he thought he owed to conscience, confirmed by his religious

education, his hearing of the Word and perhaps some common work of the Spirit – and, on the other hand, the atheism of his carnal mind which, he says, was "strengthened by Satan's fiery darts".

As his belief in the existence of God was shaken by *reasoning* he endeavoured by *his own reasonings* and by studying *the reasonings of others* to argue himself into belief. He bought and read books on the subject. The various "proofs" for the existence of God gave only temporary relief, for they left no satisfying impression of the God whose existence they demonstrated and were not able to overcome all the objections. Rational arguments for the being of God did not enlighten his mind with any satisfying notions and discoveries of the God whom he says they obliged him to own as existent – and so his mind was not quieted. The devil tempted him that *he* did not need to expect confirmation of God's existence when many more able men after all their researches had rejected it. He noted: "I hereby learned the danger and vanity of reasoning with Satan. When I began to answer him with my own reasonings, he had still great advantage". He sometimes wished for visions and voices to persuade him. When God did not answer his prayer "for a discovery of God Himself" the devil assured him that this was evidence that God did not exist, for "surely, if there was a God, He would help one that was standing up for Him in such straits".

The question of how God may be known was not merely theoretical to Halyburton, but a matter of life and death. He learned that the major difficulty in the way of a soul coming to know God is atheism, and that no reasoning can destroy the atheism of fallen man, who says in his heart, "No God", whatever evidence may be presented to him, however rationally or eloquently or even biblically. Years later he was to note "that the great difficulty which the whole of divine revelation grapples with is atheism; and that its struggle is to recover man to his first impressions of God. This point comprehends the whole of man's recovery, as atheism the whole of man's apostasy". He was convinced that "every sin has atheism in it", and his own experience taught him the reality, power and evil of this atheism in fallen human nature.

1b. The question of how God may be known – as Halyburton confronted it in the writings of those who advocated a natural theology and religion.

To some extent his interaction as a young man with those of Deist persuasion contributed to his perplexity over the being of God. His experience of that perplexity in turn contributed to his concern to expose the fallacy of the Deist position. The Deists contended that all that needs to be known of God can be discovered by human reason in the light of nature without special revelation. We are not so much concerned with the knowledge which they professed to have as with how they claimed to obtain it, but we notice in passing the five articles of natural religion which the Deists asserted were innate ideas or ascertained by human reason and common to all religions: "(1.) That there is one supreme God. (2.) That He is to be worshipped. (3.) That virtue is the principal part of his worship. (4.) That we must repent of our sins. (5.) That there are rewards and punishments both in this life and that which is to come." These, as Colin Brown states in *Christianity and Western Thought, vol 1*, "served as a kind of launching pad to attack religion based on revelation. . . . The attack on revealed religion in the name of reason, morality and historical truth was the central theme of Deism."

In effect the Deists were claiming that the God of the Bible did not exist or that His existence could not be known. The God whom they professed to discover by reason was very far removed from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They described a God who was, in effect, nothing other than an ultimate cause. The end product of their reasoning was evidence enough of the inadequacy of reason to search out God. It was natural that the building of religion upon reason rather than revelation led to further scepticism. Men like David Hume "employed reason to demonstrate [reason's] own ineffectiveness" in providing certainty regarding the being of God³, leaving many with nothing more than the probability that some kind of supreme intelligence existed behind the design of the universe. Although Deism as a system was restricted in its support and duration, its ideas gained currency and promoted materialism and the exclusion of the supernatural.

Halyburton accepts that "all the world, in all ages, has been possessed of some notion of a God, of some power above them, on whom more or less they did depend, and to whom on this account some respect is due". He quotes Romans 1:19,20 in support. He acknowledges that "man has a conscience that sometimes drags the greatest and most obstinate offenders to its tribunal in their own hearts". He admits that by the light of nature men know the fundamental laws necessary for government, order and society. He puts these things down to remaining tradition amongst the heathen and some capacity to make use of the light of nature. But, with the Epistle to the Romans, he insists that, while what may be called the light of nature is "sufficient to justify God in punishing sinners", it is not sufficient to lead them to the knowledge of the true God so as to engage them to trust Him and pray to Him and love Him and obey Him. It cannot lead to a worship of God which is assuredly according to His will and pleasure. It cannot lead to that wherein man's happiness lies. It cannot show the way to obtain pardon, or even give assurance that there is such a thing as pardon. It cannot eradicate our inclinations to sin or subdue its power. He concludes that, "after all their painful endeavours, we find them groping in the dark as to useful and necessary knowledge of God, or the way of worshipping Him; [or] of ourselves, our happiness, our sins, the way of obtaining pardon, our duty, our corruption".

The Deists said all that could be said, and more, regarding the function of reason in bringing man to the knowledge of God and yet left the question of how God may be known without a satisfactory answer, demonstrating that man by searching cannot find out God. Indeed, Halyburton concluded that no people "are more credulous, nor have less reason on their side, than they who set up for rational religion".

Is it by the exercise of human reason or by faith in divine revelation that one comes to know God? That, in all its various forms, is the question.



[Contents](#)



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2. The answer to this question to which Halyburton was led by his study of the Bible and by his own experience of the power of the truth.

Sinners cannot come to know God by the exercise of reason. His experience taught him that he "had need of some further evidence and establishment about the truths of religion than hitherto" he "had either attained or knew how to attain". Reason cannot lead man to the knowledge of God, or solve all the problems connected with that knowledge. Those who make reason their ultimate guide end up in atheism, scepticism or rationalism. Even before he was graciously enlightened, Halyburton was brought to what he calls "a deep rational conviction of the shortness of human knowledge, and that there is no truth we receive – whether upon the evidence of metaphysical, mathematical or moral principles, or even on the evidence of our senses – against which there lay not insoluble objections, on which no man yet thought it reasonable to question these truths. . . . It was reasonable to expect more inextricable difficulties about truths supernaturally revealed than about others, because they lie further out of our reach. . . . When difficulties occurred, I was led rather to suspect myself of ignorance than the truths of God." As he puts it elsewhere, "Our short line cannot measure God".

Reason cannot lead man to the knowledge of God even with the light of revelation shining around him, much less with the light of nature alone. Halyburton makes this point thus: "Let us view men living under the gospel, embracing it in profession, but unacquainted with that Spirit that gives life and power to its doctrines, precepts, promises, threats and ordinances. They, besides that they are possessed of all the advantages of nature's light, have moreover the superadded advantages of revelation and its institutions. They have ministers and parents instructing them, and discipline to restrain them; they are trained up in the faith of future rewards and instructed in the nature and excellency of them for their encouragement; they have punishments proposed to them to deter them from sin, which they profess to believe; yet if we consider the practice of the generality of such persons, it gives a sufficient evidence that all this is not enough. Who but a man blind or foolish can then dote so far as to pretend the light of nature alone sufficient when it is not so, even when helped by so many accessory improvements?"

He looks at this also from the standpoint of the experience of those who "have received the gospel in truth and felt its power. . . . What is their sense of the sufficiency of the light of nature? . . . [If you were to listen, probably] you should hear heavy outcries of their own darkness, weakness and wickedness; you

may hear serious prayers for divine light, and life to quicken them, strengthen and incline them to follow duty and support them in it against the power of temptations, which they own themselves unable to master without the powerful aids of divine grace."

That reason cannot lead man to the knowledge of God even with the light of revelation shining around him, much less with the light of nature alone, was not simply a conclusion drawn by Halyburton from his own experience. The Scriptures testify that this is the universal experience of fallen mankind: "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor 1:19-21). Certainly, as we have it in Romans 1:19,20: "that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." But the reason they need an excuse which they do not have is "that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."

Sinners come to know God by being enabled by divine grace to receive the revelation which God has given of Himself in His Word, and to receive it only because it is His Word. Halyburton explains that "that which brought" him "to a soul-satisfying assent, and repelled all temptations against the being of a God, was the view of Him in His glory. . . . All the mountains of opposition, the bulky arguments that appeared like rocks and hills, shook at the presence of the Lord and were carried into the midst of the sea." He lays stress upon three basic elements in his coming to know God: the *Word of God, faith, and enlightenment by the Spirit of God.*

The Word of God. He tells us: "That which yielded me relief was a discovery of the Lord, *as manifested in the Word*". By the Word, God conveyed into his soul "sweet and satisfying evidence as to His being – satisfying, consistent and some way God-becoming notions of His nature". What he has to say on the subject is along the lines of the Westminster Confession of Faith 1:1: "Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy Scriptures to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased."

Faith is knowledge which depends upon the testimony of a credible witness. Saving faith rests upon the witness of God in His Word. Faith is not unreasonable. It has the most firm reason in the Word itself and

it fits in with all known facts. "It neither leans upon the eloquence nor reasonings of man, but upon the powerful evidence of the Spirit's demonstration." "However they may be relieved against the objections and capacitated to deal with adversaries by other arguments and means, yet that whereon believers of all sorts, learned and unlearned, lean is the Word of God evidencing itself unto their faith by its own light and power." In a sermon, Halyburton says that "to believe is to credit the Word, not because of any suitableness in the things to our thoughts, or probabilities, or feasible means of the Lord's accomplishing what is promised therein . . . but faith looks only at the Lord's authority . . . it leans only on the testimony of God, approving itself such to the souls of believers by its own glorious power, whereby, without borrowing help from any other signs, it evidences itself to be the Lord's Word, with a light so strong as carries the soul into an assent; this is, we conceive, the meaning of the passage, 1 Corinthians 2:5²".

Faith may be called supernatural "because the power or ability for it is supernaturally given, and the evidence whereon it rests is supernatural". "It is faith alone that . . . reproveth contrary arguings and plants in the soul an abiding light that keeps the soul firm in its adherence to truth." "The Scriptures demand our assent, and offer no evidence but this of God's authority." The Bible was written to be believed. Sin has rendered man culpably unable to believe, and "light, however clear, cannot of itself supply the defect of the discerning power". "All our faculties have suffered a dreadful shock and are mightily impaired by the entrance of sin and corruption of our natures thereon ensuing; and particularly our understandings are so disabled, especially in things pertaining unto God, that we cannot in a due manner perceive, discern or entertain divine revelations upon their proper evidence, unto the glory of God and our own advantage, unless our natures are supernaturally renewed." The absence of faith is not due to any defect in the Word, which has to be supplied from some other source. In the Word, faith finds an altogether adequate basis.

Enlightenment by the Spirit of God. Halyburton explains that, when he came to know the Lord, "it was not the Word alone that conveyed the discovery; for most of the passages by which I was relieved I had formerly in my distress read and thought upon without finding any relief in them. But now the Lord shined into my mind by them (2 Cor 4:6)³. . . . It was not a spark kindled by my own endeavours. . . . It came by the Word of God. . . . It opened heaven, and discovered heavenly things – the glory of God. . . . It was a 'true light' (John 1:9), giving true manifestations of God, even the one true God, and the one mediator between God and man. . . . No words can convey a true notion of light to the blind; and he that has eyes, at least while he sees it, will need no words to describe it." "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance" (1 Thess 1:5).

Halyburton discusses the connection between the *Word* and *gracious enlightenment* and *faith* in bringing men to the knowledge of God. He does so by enquiring as to "the ground whereon the mind thus subjectively enlightened, or by the Spirit of God disposed, fitted and enabled to discern and assent to divine revelations, builds its assent, and wherein it rests satisfied or acquiesces. . . . What is that ground whereon our reason moves and determines us to receive the Scriptures as the Word of God? . . . What is that evidence of God speaking or giving testimony to truths supernaturally revealed, whereby the mind is satisfied that God is the revealer?" Of course he rejects what he calls the *Socinian* view that man's understanding is capable of seeing the truth so long as it is presented to him. And he rejects what he calls the *rationalist* view that something other than the Word is necessary to confirm the Word and to require

belief.

He is strong on the point that "we are not to believe the Scriptures upon the authority of any man or church". While rational arguments for the truth of Christianity have their uses, they are not the ground upon which men are required or enabled to receive the Scriptures as the Word of God, or to receive the testimony which they bear to God. The fact that writers of Scripture performed miracles is not the basis upon which we receive the Scriptures as from God. Neither is the ground of faith any private voice separate from the Word saying to us that this is the Word of God. This faith is not even brought about by any word of scripture bearing testimony to the divine origin of the Bible, as 2 Timothy 3:16⁴. We do not receive Scripture as God's Word because it fits in with our own ideas or our own needs. Many of these things have a place in the experience of individual Christians, but "this faith builds its persuasion on the testimony of God evidencing itself such unto the mind, and not on human testimony". He writes of a "God-becoming impress of majesty, sovereignty, omniscience, independence, holiness, justice, goodness, wisdom and power" which "is not only a sufficient and real, but in very deed the greatest objective light and evidence imaginable" and which secures an assent founded on the impress of God in His own Word.

He develops this theme at length. Here are a few extracts from what he has to say: "The formal reason or ground whereon I assent to, or receive, the whole Scriptures, and every particular truth in them, and am obliged in duty so to do, is the authority and truth of God speaking in them, and speaking every truth they contain, evidencing itself to my faith, when duly exercised about them, and attending to them, by their own divine and distinguishing light and power. . . . I do believe them because they carry in them, to my faith, an evidence of God, or do evidence themselves by their own light and power, to my faith duly exercised about them, that they are the Word of God and not of man. . . . The Word, by a God-becoming manifestation of the truth . . . dives into the souls of men, into all the secret recesses of their hearts, guides, teaches, directs, determines and judges in them and upon them in the name, majesty and authority of God. And when it enters thus into the soul, it fills it with the light of the glory of the beamings of those perfections upon it, whereby it is made to cry out, 'The voice of God and not of man'". "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb 4:12). "But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all; and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth" (1 Cor 14:24).

God becomes known by the Holy Spirit giving the soul the gracious capacity to receive by faith the testimony to Himself which God has given in His word, and to receive it, not on the basis of something external to the Word itself, but on the basis of the testimony itself. As James Hog of Carnock puts it in his preface to Halyburton's work: "No demonstration can vie with this, inasmuch as the authority of the God of truth, that conveys His own testimony into the heart with a strong hand, has a glory and evidence peculiar to itself; and though well known to those who enjoy it, yet of a beauty great and mysterious, such as the tongues of men and angels could not suffice to describe". "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess 2:13).

The result of being brought by faith to receive the revelation of God given in His Word and conveyed to his soul by the power of the Holy Spirit is described by him at some length in his *Memoirs*: "I saw the glory of God, as represented in the Word, shining with the clearest lustre, that satisfied me it was truth, and no lie (2 Cor 3:18). The glory was so great that it not only let me see and convinced me of its reality, but really convinced me in some measure that nothing else is real. The sight gave me more consistent, God-becoming notions of Him, His nature and attributes than I ever attained before, which shook the foundation of many of my former scruples, which proceeded only from my ignorance and darkness about the nature of God. . . . I heard Him speak, not to my bodily ears, but to my soul; and His voice did sufficiently distinguish itself from the voice of any creature. . . . His words had light and power peculiar to a God going along with them, both when He spoke for me and against me. . . . I had likewise a feeling of His power . . . casting me down and raising me up again. . . . I was now made to taste and see that the Lord is good. . . . I was made to feel the savour, and relish a fragrant sweetness in His Word, works and ways. . . . Hereby all my objections were solved. 'Faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen' (Heb 11:1); it not only satisfies the soul about them by the clearest evidence, but it reproveth contrary objections". What broke the force of all his temptations was "seeing the truths of God in His own light".

Throughout his life his desire was to know the Lord. On his deathbed, as he reflected on his experience, we find him saying: "The God of glory appeared to me; and the first sight I got of Him was such as it won my heart to Him, so as it was never loosed. Though I have had many wanderings, yet I can say I was never myself till I won back to the centre again." The God whom he had come to know was also a present reality and at the centre of his prospects for the future as he looked forward to leaving this world: "Shortly I shall get another sight of God than ever I had and be more meet to praise Him than ever. O the thoughts of an incarnate God are sweet and ravishing! And O how I wonder at myself that I do not love Him more – that I do not admire Him more! O that I could honour Him! . . . The little acquaintance I have had with God within these two days has been better than ten thousand times the pains I have all my life been at about religion. It is good to have Him to go to when we are turning our face to the wall".

Coming to know God is by a direct act of faith upon the revelation God has given of Himself in His Word – for which we are enabled by His Holy Spirit.



[Contents](#)



[Previous Article](#) [Next Article](#)



