

LOVING TO KNOW: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

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Summary

Esther Meek's *Loving to Know*¹ (*L2K*) radically reworks most people's fundamental assumptions about what knowledge is and how knowledge works. Meek calls her Copernican revolution Covenant Epistemology (CE). But this book doesn't simply argue for a new approach to knowledge—it enacts a new approach to knowledge. Meek's thorough reading of various thinkers models what she later calls “noticing regard” and “inviting the real.” As she “knows along the way” with these various thinkers, she shows us what it means to know covenantally. Moreover, by using non-Christian thinkers like Martin Buber, she models her own conviction that unbelievers can have true knowledge by virtue of knowledge's covenantal dimension. By reading the book, one comes to understand her approach to knowledge and begins to experience this kind of knowing first hand.

So what is CE? When it comes to knowing, Meek argues, we are all beholden to the “defective default,” a mode of thinking that treats knowledge simply as information (7). And because of the triumph of the Enlightenment perspective on knowledge, the “defective default” is pervasive. As a result, Meek insists that we are all in desperate need of “epistemological therapy” (5). Such therapy is necessary because the default mode excludes most of the ways we know in our day-to-day lives, a point Meek illustrates through the picture of the “daisy of dichotomies” (8-9). The daisy shows that by assuming knowledge equals information, we exclude things like belief, values, emotion, application, and imagination, in short many of things that it means to be human. It is no wonder that Meek argues the default leads to boredom,

¹ Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011. Subsequent references are handled parenthetically.

hopelessness, and betrayal (12)! Indeed, in the default setting, we are little more than observing eyes, disconnected and disembodied, exiled, really, “from the *world*, from *reality*” (9).

Meek offers CE as therapy for the defective default. The foundation of Meek’s approach is Michael Polanyi’s epistemology, which she summarizes in this statement: “All knowing is the profoundly human struggle to rely on clues to focus on a pattern that we then submit to as a token of reality” (67). Knowledge as “subsidiary focal integration” cuts through the dichotomies of the defective default by accounting for the ways in which we actually know in our day-to-day lives (86). But Meek sees something deeper in this model, something that Polanyi himself hinted at, that knowledge is “fraught with intimations of the personal” (102). The heart of Meek’s argument teases out the personal and covenantal dimension of Polanyi’s approach. As she argues, knowledge has a personal dimension because it “involves mutual indwelling” (128).

Meek expands this dimension by interfacing Polanyi with John Frame’s triad of knowing, and argues that this interface “make[s] sense of the person-like way the real responds to the covenantal self-binding of the aspiring knower” (181). Meek then expands the covenantal dimension of her approach by interacting with theologian Mike Williams, concluding that covenant best describes the normative dimension of Frame’s triad. She then defines the term covenantal as the dimension of knowing that constitute “its constitutive boundaries, character of commitment, substance or character, status” (202). In other words, just as Annie Dillard stalks muskrats by becoming like a muskrat, we must know people and things on their own terms. To do so is to “invite the real” (Chapter 15). This is what she calls the normative or covenantal dimension of knowing, which she helpfully describes as a metonym (180). All knowledge is metonymously covenantal because all knowledge derives from the covenantal dimension of God and takes places within his creation, which is covenantally constituted (199). With this important piece in place, Meek goes onto argue for knowledge as interpersonal (Chapter 8), knowledge as an I-You relationship (Chapter 9), and knowledge as face-to-face encounter with the holy (Chapter 10). If knowledge is interpersonal, then good knowing involves healthy interpersonhood, a point Meek develops from David Schnarch’s work (Chapter 11). But this

interpersonal dynamic also takes us into the very heart of God's triune nature, and Meek teases out the perichoretic dimensions of knowledge, the mutual indwelling inherent in personal knowledge (Chapter 12).

All of these threads weave together to form the beautiful tapestry of Chapter 15, "Inviting the Real." This chapter is the beating heart of the book. In this chapter, by offering us an epistemological etiquette, Meek gives us a way to enact CE in our lives. Of the many helpful aspects of the chapter, the most tantalizing is the idea of "noticing regard" (454). Here Meek recovers the gaze from the ocular metaphor that dominated Enlightenment thinking by insisting that we ought to gaze on what we know with love and kindness in order that what we behold might open itself up to us to be known. The experience and practice of "noticing regard" enacts the truth of CE. We must learn to see that all knowledge is personal and, as a result, all knowledge is transformative.

Implications

As the culture at large moves further and further away from the supposed certainty of modernism to the various degrees of relativism offered by the myriad postmodern critiques, we Christians need a new way to talk about truth, knowledge, and reality that moves beyond the simple dichotomy of certainty and skepticism. CE provides such an alternative, particularly in terms of its covenant realism (400). Because CE is fundamentally realist like modernism, but also admits to the incompleteness of knowledge like postmodernism, it provides a real alternative to both. But CE is more than an alternative because it both describes and enacts what it is to encounter reality. And people are desperate for the real. As I interact with people, Christians and non-Christians alike, I find that more and more of them are asking epistemological questions. Many of us live on the fault line between modernism and post-modernism, meaning that the defective default is alive and well even in the midst of a lot of confusion about the nature of knowledge. We are all haunted by the ghosts of certainty, but more and more we are possessed by the demons of uncertainty. Having CE and Meek's approach to knowledge at hand

means that I have a way to talk about knowledge that accords with my actual experience. CE both vanquishes the ghosts and casts out the demons.

CE also makes the most sense of our affectional dimension as people. This is the loving of loving to know. In order to truly know, we must truly love. As Polanyi showed, the picture of the scientist as a detached, uninvolved, unfeeling knower is a myth. All of us, even scientists, love in order to know. This is a challenge to me as a seminary student. Do I truly love all that I am supposedly knowing? In light of epistemological etiquette, in studying all the things I am studying, I am comporting myself correctly? Do I want to master material or do I want to be mastered by the material? Am I positioning myself to be wooed deeper and deeper into the possibility of encountering the face of God behind everything I am learning? To think of it in these terms reshapes my own sense of what seminary education is and what it ought to be. Without love, without inviting the real, I will never truly know all the things I am trying to know. If this is true for me, then it is true for anyone I might encounter along the way.

This has profound implications for approaching apologetics. If we love in order to know, and if we know by know along with and inviting the real, then my posture as an apologist must become one of openness and hospitality. All I really ought to be doing as an apologist is to create space for others to encounter the real. This might come in the form of proofs for God's existence or evidence of the reliability of the New Testament, or by an open examination of someone's presuppositions, but if there is no love in my approach, no sense that I am dealing with people, then what use is it to prove there is something on the other side? This question and others like it have the potential to explode our categories of what an apologetic encounter ought to be and what it can accomplish.

Indeed, any would-be Christian apologist who takes CE seriously ought to walk away both encouraged and humbled. Encouraged, because in *L2K* Meek provides an understanding of knowledge that not only makes sense of ordinary knowing in our ordinary lives, but also provides a way to discuss the mechanics of knowing with ordinary people. This is no small thing. Too often apologetics dwells solely in the realm of ideas and fails to intersect with the

day-to-day of our ordinary lives. By focusing on the various phenomena of knowing in the everyday, Meek provides would-be apologists with not only a new perspective, but also a new vocabulary to engage the world and the unbeliever. With everyday examples like riding a bike, driving a car, and playing an instrument, people can come to understand how it is that they come to know anything, including God. Moreover, the covenantal dimension of knowing means that our existence as persons and our existence as knowers are not separate but intertwined realities, resulting from the very character and nature of God as triune. CE encourages and frees the apologist by moving knowledge solely from the world of facts. If knowledge simply means right information and facts, then the apologist must simply download the information to the unbeliever.

But the reader is also humbled. Humbled, because the near universal need for epistemological therapy means that the believer along with the unbeliever is often beholden to the defective default. All of us then, whether Christian or non-Christian, are in need of epistemological therapy, and must be catechized in covenantal knowing (425). Moreover, even if we have somehow shaken off the vestiges of the defective default, we still only know in part; we are still, even as Christians, knowing on the way. So often apologists reek of arrogance because they speak as if they have arrived. There is a great temptation to be condescending if you have arrived at the truth. But if we are all still journeying, if we all just know in part, then we, as C.S. Lewis said, are just beggars who are telling other beggars where we have found some bread. We may see the deeper pattern in light of knowing God as covenant Lord and savior, but our knowledge is incomplete, provisional, and, hopefully, developing. In light of this, our entire approach as apologists towards the unbeliever must change. Indeed, if truly knowing means that we must invite the real by means of epistemological etiquette, then we must adopt a fundamentally different posture toward the unbeliever than has been typical in apologetic encounters. By and large, apologetics is couched in terms of tactics and techniques, so that the unbeliever, by extension, becomes an experiment, a testing ground, not a person. But if all knowledge is metonymously covenantal, then the posture of technique and experimentation is

the wrong way to approach the non-human world, let alone the living, breathing people we encounter.

Furthermore, Meek's high-view of common grace means that the apologist need not despair in conversations with the unbeliever because CE means that unbeliever has true knowledge (174-76). That knowledge may be partial and incomplete but it is knowledge none-the-less. Since we are knowing on the way, we come alongside unbelievers and encourage them in the ways they already know, the ways in which they are already inviting the real. Indeed, if all we accomplish as apologists in any given encounter is to both model and to teach invitation of the real by practicing "epistemological etiquette," then we have shown them a way forward.

For me, all of this means, that the primary task of the apologist is to invite the real in encounters with unbelievers. As those who God has beheld in his "noticing regard," we too must behold the unbeliever in noticing regard (454). This is not a posture of confrontation, but a posture of service, a posture of humility. If knowing is covenantal, then our apologetics must be inherently relational. Often apologists approach non-believers as adversaries with a posture of confrontation. Knowledge, facts, information, evidence all become weapons or, perhaps more fairly, tools by which the non-believer must submit to the truth of Christianity. This means that engaging non-believers should not primarily be seen in the confrontation of worldviews or in any competitive framework. Rather we are inviting others to know along with us, and significantly to know within the context of Christian community and within the context of Christian worship. In the history of apologetics, we have leaned so heavily on facts, proofs, arguments, presuppositions, on tactics and techniques, that we have forgotten the simply admonition of Jesus—"Come and you will see" (John 1:39).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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