
KNOWING CHRISTIANITY IS TRUE

The Relationship Between Faith and Reason

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IN THE POPULAR CLASSIC CHRISTMAS MOVIE *MIRACLE ON THIRTY-FOURTH Street*, little Suzie Walker, played by Natalie Wood, is perplexed about how some of those around her are reacting to the enigmatic Santa Claus figure who has recently come into their lives. Her mother, Doris, played by Maureen O'Hara, tries to explain to her the need to have faith in Kris Kringle. Frustrated, little Suzie exclaims, "But that doesn't make any sense, Mommy," to which her mother responds, "Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to."

Unfortunately, too many people think this is exactly what faith is: accepting something against the evidence. But is it really better to believe something despite what our common sense tells us? In our culture today and throughout church history there have been several ways of understanding the nature of faith and its relationship to reason. What we want to do in this essay is to look at those various approaches to the issue of faith and reason and defend a view that we believe is biblical and does justice to who we are as God's creatures.

Before we can jump into the subject of the relationship between faith and reason, it is necessary that we define a few terms. Notice the essay

title: “Knowing Christianity Is True: The Relationship Between Faith and Reason.” This title suggests a number of notions that need to be examined: truth, knowing, faith and reason. What do we mean by the use of such terms?

WHAT IS TRUTH?

As Christians, what are we claiming when we say our faith is true? This may seem like an unnecessary question if we ask it about most things. If someone said, “It is raining,” and someone else said, “That’s true,” most of us would know exactly what is being said about the rain. But for some reason, when it comes to subjects like religion, the meaning of terms like “truth” becomes confused.

If unbelievers do not understand what we are saying when we say Christianity is true, this confusion can hamper our ability to effectively communicate the claims of Christ. What they need to understand is that when we as Christians maintain that Christianity is true, we are not merely claiming that it fulfills a certain function in our lives. Our contention is that religion is more than something to give us peace of mind, a purpose for life, and happiness. It should certainly do this, but there is something more. We believe that true religion must be grounded in reality, that it must make true claims about reality—who we are as human beings, who God is, and how we relate to God. The religion that cannot truthfully answer these questions is false, not because it fails to give one peace of mind, but because it makes false claims about the way things are.

WHAT IS KNOWING?

There are two familiar lines from two famous Christian songs that may help illustrate two different ways that our culture understands how to know something: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and “You ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart.” Sometimes these two types of knowing are referred to as objective (or public, external, factual) and subjective (or private, internal, personal), respectively. As far as they go, there is nothing wrong with thinking of things being known in these ways. After all, surely there are some things that

are publicly known, such as the distance the earth is from the sun, or who is the current president of the United States. Just as surely there are some things that are known privately, such as whether I have a headache or whether I am comfortable.

These examples are perhaps not controversial. What is controversial is when some people insist that certain broad issues are necessarily relegated to one realm of knowing or the other. For example, a popular notion is that science deals with the objective, public, external and factual and that religion deals with the subjective, private, internal and personal. Now, while it may be the case that there could be certain aspects of religion that are subjective, private, internal and personal, our contention is that there are important aspects of Christianity that are objective, public, external and factual. Christianity is a worldview that makes claims about reality. These claims are either true or false. If they are true, then there is evidence that can be given to support them. We discovered in the section on “What Is Truth?” that for Christianity to be true means that the claims of Christianity correspond to reality. Likewise, to know that Christianity is true must mean more than knowing it in some subjective, private, internal and personal way. It means that we can know that it is true in an objective, public, external and factual way.

WHAT IS REASON?

To understand what we mean when we talk about reason, let us consider reason in two ways, in terms of the acts of reason and the objects of reason.

Acts of reason. The expression “acts of reason” indicates all those subjective and personal acts of our mind by which we discover, understand or seek to demonstrate truth. The classical designations of these acts of reason are simple apprehension, judgment and reasoning. Although we are considering these as separate acts, we may never experience them as distinct acts of the mind. They normally occur almost simultaneously and automatically. We must not confuse the analysis of reason with the experience of reason.

Simple apprehension is the act of reason whereby the mind lays hold of a thing. This laying hold makes the thing present in and to our mind.

However, in simple apprehension, the mind is not engaged in affirming or denying. We simply lay hold of what a thing is. Apprehension may be extremely vague and general. We may lay hold only of the fact that something is a substance. Thorough knowledge of what something is will involve study and experience, and we may never fully comprehend any given thing we apprehend. As the first act of reason, simple apprehension is a simple laying hold of or grasping what something is.

Judgment, the second act of reason, is the act whereby we affirm or deny that the thing apprehended is or was or will be. This may be a simple affirmation or negation, or it may be according to some mode of necessity or possibility. Also, the act of judgment may involve negation, in which we deny that a thing is or was, and so forth. The act of judgment differs from a simple apprehension in that the act of judgment involves knowing the thing we have apprehended in terms of affirming or denying its existence.

The third act of reason, reasoning, is that act whereby the mind proceeds from known truth to new truth. The new truth will be distinct from the previously known truth, but the latter is implied in the former. However, reasoning involves not only logical movement from premises to conclusion. Reasoning may also involve a movement from question to answer. For example, one might inquire of a trusted colleague concerning the state of affairs in a foreign country. On the basis of trust in the person's honesty, we can gain new knowledge by moving from inquiry to response. Also, reasoning may be a movement from rhetoric to persuasion. On the basis of authoritative testimony and the persuasive presentation of evidence we might move from the knowledge of the existence of particles and waves to accepting the new knowledge of the nature of light. Any progress of the mind from knowledge possessed to knowledge gained is an act of reasoning, and the act of reasoning may involve more than the strictly logical relations of premises to conclusions.

Objects of reason. The objects of reason are whatever the mind can know by reason. The objects of reason correspond to the three acts of reason. Any object of reason can be grasped, understood either to be or not to be, and demonstrated, without any assumptions based on faith in

divine revelation, to be true or false. Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli have made a helpful chart delineating these acts of reason and their relation to faith.¹ This chart is represented in table 1.1.

Table 1.1

	Laying Hold/ Simple Apprehension	Understanding/ Judgment	Proving/ Reasoning
By reason alone and not part of revelation	What a star is	That the universe of stars exists	The Pythagorean theorem
By reason and by faith in divine revelation	That the universe is well ordered	That Jesus existed in historical space-time	That the universe was created
Not by reason, only by faith in divine revelation	God's plan of salvation	How much God loves us	God is a Trinity

Concerning the objects of reason corresponding to the first act of reason, simple apprehension, by human reason alone and without any relation to divine revelation, we can apprehend what a star is. This is not something that is revealed in Scripture but is apprehended by the mind. By human reasoning accompanied by faith in divine revelation, we can apprehend that the universe is well ordered and why it is so ordered. That the universe is well ordered is something we can discover and judge to be true by rational investigation. However, this is also something that is revealed in Scripture, and we can accept it by faith. By divine revelation we can apprehend what God's plan is for our salvation. This is not something that we can apprehend by observing the world, but only by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17).

Concerning the objects of reason corresponding to the second act of reason, judgment, by human reason alone and without any relation to divine revelation, we can judge that the universe of stars exists. By human reason accompanied by faith in divine revelation, we can judge that

¹Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 33.

Jesus actually existed in space-time history. Now the fact that Jesus existed as a human is something that we can discover by historical investigation. But it is also something that is revealed in Scripture. By divine revelation, we can know how much God loves us. We cannot judge that God loves us by simply observing the universe. We must come to know this through divine revelation.

Concerning the objects of reason corresponding to the third act of the mind, reasoning, we can, by human reason alone and without any relation to divine revelation, discover and demonstrate the truth of the Pythagorean theorem. This is not something revealed in Scripture. By human reason accompanied by faith in divine revelation, we can demonstrate that the universe was created. This is something we can demonstrate by philosophical arguments, but it is also something that is revealed in Scripture. So, we can accept it as a conclusion of reasoning, or we can accept it by faith as a truth revealed in Scripture. By divine revelation, we can accept the truth that God is a Trinity. However, we cannot prove this by philosophical reasoning. We can demonstrate that it is not an irrational belief, but we cannot comprehend it or prove it, nor could we have apprehended it apart from divine revelation. We have come to know it through divine revelation, and we must accept it by faith.

WHAT IS FAITH?

Definition of faith. Faith is a personal trust in someone or something. Saving faith is a personal trust in God, who is true to his Word. In the book of Romans, Abraham is presented as an example of saving faith (Rom 4:1-5). Abraham believed God when, in Genesis 15, God promised that Abraham would have an heir from his own loins and that God would give to him all the land that he surveyed. Genesis 15:6 (NASB) says, "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." The basic idea of the assertion in Genesis 15:6, "he believed in," is the idea of certainty and firmness, holding something to be certain. Abraham accepted God's word as a promise that would certainly be fulfilled. Abraham trusted God to give him a son and the land. Faith is not an amorphous wish or hopeful desire for something that one is not certain will be realized. Faith is a firm certainty grounded in the faith-

fulness of God and a certain expectation of the fulfillment of all of the promises which God has made to those who would trust him.

As was observed above, sometimes people will argue that faith is contrary to reason—the notion of believing in something in spite of reason. But this is not accurate. Faith is not contrary to reason or irrational. In fact, trusting in God is eminently reasonable. God has demonstrated his faithfulness and trustworthiness again and again. Even in those times when it seems that the promises of God will not be fulfilled, it would in fact be unreasonable not to believe in God. Faith is trusting God to do what he says he will do. Faith is a personal trust.

Act of faith. We must distinguish between the act of faith and the object of faith. Faith is more than simply believing something to be true. Kreeft and Tacelli present four helpful aspects of faith that we will summarize.² First of all there is the emotional aspect of faith. This involves the feeling of assurance, trust or confidence in a person. The emotional aspect of faith is characterized in the Bible as hope, but this is not simply wishful thinking. Rather, hope in this sense is the confident expectation of ultimately receiving that which has been promised.

The intellectual aspect of faith is belief. The intellectual aspect of faith is the stable and unchanging commitment that is grounded in truth. This is perhaps what people are talking about when they say they believe in spite of reason. Often, the circumstances of life may influence us to question the truth of God's Word. The intellectual aspect of faith, however, is not grounded in the appearances of the moment but in the truths about God and reality. Although I may not feel strong in faith, my mind can remain committed to trusting in God because of what I know to be true about him. This is not mere opinion but is a firm commitment of trust in God based on who he is.

The volitional aspect of faith is the act of the will by which I make a commitment to live, think and act on the basis of God's Word. The volitional aspect of faith is often characterized as faithfulness. It is realized in one's life and actions. Not only do I have a feeling of assurance, not only do I have a firm commitment to the truth about God, but also I act

²Kreeft and Tacelli, *Handbook*, pp. 30-31.

on that belief. My choices, values, pursuits and goals are based on that to which I am committed.

The act of faith is more than simply accepting something to be the case. The act of faith in the biblical sense involves the whole person, emotions, intellect, will and heart, in a total commitment of trust in another. This is what distinguished Joshua and Caleb from the rest of Israel. “Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, ‘The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it to us—a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they will be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them’” (Num 14:6-9 NASB). Without fear, Joshua and Caleb trusted God and were willing, based on their trust in God, to enter the land and take it from the inhabitants, because they trusted God when he said, “I will be with you” (Deut 31:23 NASB).

Object of faith. The object of faith is the person or the thing in which one trusts. This includes not only the person of God but the words of God as well. The words of God include all that we hold to be taught by the Word of God, including the doctrines that the Bible teaches. In other words, the object of our faith is not only God but everything he has revealed in the Bible. But what is revealed in the Bible are truths that can be expressed in propositions. The Bible teaches that there are certain things that we should believe. For example, the Bible teaches that the God of Israel is the only true and living God: “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me” (Is 46:9 NASB). But the statement “I am God” is a proposition that is presented to the person as something to be accepted as true and believed.

However, the propositions themselves are not the ultimate objects of faith. Rather, they are the proximate objects of faith. The ultimate object of faith is God, whose nature insures the truthfulness of the propositions he asserts. Simply to accept that a proposition is true is not the same as trusting in the one who makes the assertion. One must not only believe

the truth of the propositions, but one must actually trust in him who is the Author and Guarantor of the truth of these propositions. In Numbers 14, Israel knew (believed) God was able to bring them into the land, but they did not trust him to do it for them.

THREE VIEWS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON

Faith absent reason. One view on the relationship between faith and reason that we believe is an inadequate view has already been examined. It is the view that matters of faith are private and matters of reason are public. It is probably the most common view that people have about such matters. We have argued that when it comes to the Christian faith, while there are indeed aspects that are private, the claims that Christianity makes are claims about reality and as such are objective claims. Christianity claims that there is a God who is the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe and to whom every person will have to give an account one day. Christianity claims that Jesus Christ lived a life of miracles, was crucified and rose from the dead. These claims are such that they can be investigated philosophically, scientifically and historically. These claims are such that philosophical, scientific and historical evidence can be marshaled to support them. These claims are such that they can be reasoned about. We see that this is the case not only because of the nature of the claims themselves but also because that is what the Bible says about them and that is how the apostles treated them.

Faith against reason. Another view of the relationship between faith and reason that we believe is inadequate has shown itself at various times throughout church history, namely, the claim that reason is useless in spiritual matters. Fideism (from Latin, *fides*, meaning “faith”) asserts that a person cannot reason about matters of faith. You must simply believe. There is perhaps no better example of this kind of perspective than that proposed by Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Kierkegaard is popularly held to be the father of modern existentialism. For several reasons, he asserted that the human mind was unable to discover any divine truth. The reason that is most relevant here is that Kierkegaard claimed that though human reason could be used to iden-

tify and reject the absurd or irrational, it could not make any positive advance toward attaining divine truth. For Kierkegaard, God was so utterly transcendent, “wholly other,” that truths about God equally transcend the capacities of human reason. Consequently there is no way for the human mind to know any truth about God by the exercise of human reason.

However, the Bible declares that we must believe in the right things, not in the wrong things. If fideism is true, then how can we know what to believe in and what not to believe in? In fact, why should we accept fideism? If fideism offers no reasons why we should accept it, then there is no reason to accept fideism over some other system. But if fideism offers any reasons why we should accept fideism, then it is using reason to say that we should not use reason, which is self-defeating. It uses reason to make statements about divine truth and spiritual matters. Though there are many things about God that are beyond our capacity to reason about, there are many things about God that are within the grasp of our reason, like the reasons the Bible gives for trusting God for our salvation. In fact, Jesus commanded us to love God with our whole mind: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And [Jesus] said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’” (Mt 22:36-37 NASB).

Faith and reason. We believe that there is a better way to understand the relationship between faith and reason. Various aspects of our view have been touched on throughout this essay. It would be helpful at this point to pull these various aspects together and fill them out into a fuller picture. Our contention is that the best way to understand the relationship between faith and reason is to see that each has its proper role to play and that faith and reason complement each other in their respective roles. Let us put the pieces together regarding each of them.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The role of reason. You may ask yourself why there is a need at all for reasoning with someone about the Christian faith. After all, if it is the

case that one can come to faith in Christ only by the work of the Holy Spirit, then what place does reason play? We think that there are a number of good reasons why a Christian can and should give evidence for his faith in Christ. First, the Bible is clear about the mandate to give reasons. First Peter 3:15 (NASB) says, "But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." The word translated "defense" is *apologia*, from which we get the word *apologetics*. Another verse that commands us to defend the faith is Jude 3 (NASB), which says, "Beloved, while I was making every effort to write to you about our common salvation, I found the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints."

Second, not only does the Bible say that we should give reasons, but as the other chapters in this book will show, there is every reason to give reasons because the reasons are there. The evidence is strong for defending the faith. Since Christianity is rooted in history and is corroborated by science and philosophy, Christians have at their disposal ample evidence for its truthfulness.

A third reason why we should give evidence is that we find that the apostles contended for the faith by giving reasons. Throughout the book of Acts we see numerous examples of the apostles reasoning about the truths of Christianity. A look at a number of passages in Acts shows instances of disputing, proving, explaining, demonstrating, reasoning and persuading.³

While it is the Holy Spirit who enables someone to believe, he may sometimes use the presentation of evidence for the Christian faith as the means whereby someone can come to see the truth of the gospel. There is no conflict between the work of the Holy Spirit and the use of evidence and reason. The evidence and reason as such were never intended to supplant the work of God's Spirit but rather are intended to be the means by which the Holy Spirit brings someone to faith in Christ.

³Note Acts 9:22; 15:2; 17:2-4; 17:17; 18:4, 19, 27-28; 19:8-10; 28:23-24.

WHAT EVIDENCE CAN DO

As anticipated in the last discussion, we can see that evidence can answer honest intellectual questions. Throughout the history of the church as the gospel has spread around the world, many who have been confronted with the claims of Christ have had honest questions, if not objections, about what we are presenting. The marshaling of evidence and the use of reason enable Christians to give honest answers to these questions and responses to these objections.

Second, evidence can expose dishonest intellectual questions as spiritual problems. In John 10:24-28 (NASB) we discover that the recalcitrance of some of the Jews was not due to any lack of evidence or information but rather was due to their darkened hearts.

The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand."

A third thing that evidence can do is build up the faith of the believer. Take a look at what Acts 18:24-28 (NASB) says about Apollos and how he "greatly helped" those who believed:

Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

THE ROLE OF FAITH

Reason prior to faith. Reason precedes faith in that it is able to demonstrate the preambles of faith, such as God’s existence, the reliability of the Bible and that the Word of God is trustworthy. But reason does not produce faith. As Norman Geisler puts it, “Discursive thought, or reasoning from premises to conclusions, is not the cause of the assent of faith. Nonetheless, such reasoning ‘can accompany the assent of faith.’ The reason they are parallel but one does not cause the other is that ‘faith involves will (freedom) and reason doesn’t coerce the will.’ That is, a person is free to dissent even though there may be convincing reasons to believe.”⁴ Remember, faith is a personal trust in someone or something. Faith in God is a personal trust in him. Even though there are convincing reasons to trust God, some will not, but it is precisely because they *will* not. In summary, table 1.2 illustrates the relation between faith and reason and the role of each.

Table 1.2

Reason	Faith
Believing those things demonstrated by appropriate disciplines, e.g., philosophy, science, mathematics	Believing those things revealed by God through Christ and Scripture that could not be discovered by reason alone
God’s existence and certain attributes	The Trinity
The nature of light waves	Human fallenness
Pythagorean theorem	The Gospel
General revelation	Special revelation
Romans 1:19-20	2 Peter 1:21
Psalm 19:1-4	Colossians 2:9; John 14:9

CONCLUSION

Ultimately there is an essential agreement between faith and reason. The

⁴Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991), p. 58.

very fact that we, as Christians, study the Bible and discuss it and that we seek to understand how the Bible applies to our lives shows that we attempt to understand (reason) what we believe (faith). Reason does not cause faith, but our faith is not unreasonable.

FOR FURTHER READING

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