

GOD AND REASON (1)



T. M. Moore

A ReVision Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *God and Reason (1)*

This is the first of a two-part study on the role of reason in the life of faith. Christians are sometimes charged with being a bit short in the reasoning department – we’re looked upon as more emotional and gullible than thoughtful.

And, to be fair, we’ve brought some of that opprobrium upon ourselves by our conduct. But the mind plays an important role in the life of faith, as is everywhere testified in Scripture. And that means reason matters, and, to the best of our ability, we ought to understand and make use of reason in ways consistent with knowing the Lord and serving Him.

In the two studies in this series, therefore, we will take a closer look at what the Bible teaches about reason and how it fits into the life of faith. Our goal is to make sure that we’re making the most of our ability as reasoning creatures to know, love, and serve the God Who made and redeemed us.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don’t be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you’re in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to “have all the answers.” Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We’re happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you’ll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Unreasonableness of Faith

When He came into the house, He permitted no one to go in except Peter, James, and John, and the father and mother of the girl. Now all wept and mourned for her; but He said, "Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping." And they ridiculed Him, knowing that she was dead. Luke 8.51-53

Not uncommon

It was not uncommon, during the period of His incarnation, for the Lord Jesus to be looked upon by the people around Him as not quite having it all together. How, for example, could He insist that a child was merely "sleeping" when everyone who had been there long before He arrived *knew* she was dead?

Such regarding Jesus with incredulity began early on in His life. His mother expressed disbelief that He would lag behind in Jerusalem, without advising His parents, leaving them to worry about Him for three days. What was He thinking (Lk. 2.41-50)?

When, later, Jesus preached in His hometown synagogue, the people were at first happy to hear Him opening the Word of God to them. Soon, however, they regarded as altogether unreasonable His views on the subject of hope for the Gentiles, and sought to kill Him (Lk. 4.16-30).

The religious leaders of the Jewish community considered His claims to be able to forgive sins as not merely unreasonable, but heretical. (Lk. 8.17-26)

People considered it unreasonable that Jesus should consort with the lower and vulgar people; should want to know who among the thronging multitudes had touched Him; should denounce the religious leaders of His day as hypocrites and toadies; should teach that being "born again" was a criterion for entering the Kingdom of God, or that one should turn the other cheek to whoever strikes him; should claim to be the Son of God and heir of David's throne; and should walk unarmed onto the turf and into the grasp of those who planned to kill Him.

Jesus' contemporaries listened to His preaching and observed His behavior, and many – indeed, *most* – of them considered that He was either out of His mind or possessed by the devil. His way of thinking was unfamiliar to them, abnormal, confused, discomfiting, and even dangerous.

So we're not surprised that even those who followed Him became subject to the same opinions. Peter and John were considered to be unreasonable because they did not submit to the demands of the Jewish leaders. The people of Thessalonica were alarmed at the witness of their neighbors who had come to faith in Christ (Acts 17.1-9). The Apostle Paul, testifying before Agrippa and Festus, was accused of being out of his mind because he was full of Jesus (Acts 26.24).

Unreasonable

The accusation persists in our own day. Christians are subjected to the same charges as Jesus and His first followers. We're not reasonable. We are opposed to science and rational thought. We are easily duped, mindless, naïve, ignorant, medieval, superstitious, and even dangerous.

Sadly, we in the Christian community have sometimes invited this opprobrium upon ourselves, by being ill-informed, lacking tact, sounding judgmental and condemning, and acting hysterically in the face of supposed threats. Our preaching and worship at times appear too emotionally-charged to be any intellectual good. Our arguments in defense of our views are often shallow, incomplete, and merely subjective. We make demands on sinners without considering their point of view. We expect government to treat us as some kind of special

case. We cite spurious historical examples and precedents, or make up “facts” out of thin air, in order to justify some position or point of view. We wrench, twist, and contort the plain meaning of Scripture in order to accommodate our convenience, justify our views, or pass ourselves off as “scientific.” We seem unable to appreciate the many good things which have resulted from the best efforts of talented, hard-working well-meaning unbelievers.

Indeed, we seem to position ourselves *against* everything this age considers to be normal, acceptable, and reasonable.

And when our unbelieving age charges us with being *unreasonable*, and points to its own views and achievements as being more in line with what “everybody knows” to be true, we respond by some variation of “So’s your old man!” and go off in a huff.

But is it true?

It is certainly true that the Christian worldview flies in the face of every nonbelieving philosophy of life. The Kingdom of God challenges every existing order and society, and turns the world rightside-up for Jesus Christ.

But does this mean that Christianity is not *reasonable*? Is it true that Christians are the foes of reason? That reason and faith just don’t mix? And that we simply must *believe* the things of the Gospel, without any serious resort to thinking, logic, persuasion, or *reason*?

The answer, of course, is “No.” As I hope to show, God is reasonable, the faith of Jesus Christ is reasonable, and we who know God and believe in Jesus must learn to *use* reason in ways that honor God and further the faith and Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Christians must learn to be reasonable in living their worldview and holding out expectations for others. But being reasonable is no guarantee that we will be regarded as such. Instead, like Jesus and the Apostles, we must be prepared with reason to assert our convictions boldly, clearly, and confidently, so that we leave our detractors to consider in a new and brighter light, their own *reasons* for not believing the Gospel.

For reflection

1. What does someone mean who says of another person, “He’s not being *reasonable*”?
2. Why do you think Christians appear to be unreasonable to our unbelieving neighbors?
3. What is the role of reason in religious faith? Must we “just believe” without reasons for believing? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: We’re going to be investigating the role of reason in Christian faith. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn? How will you be able to tell that you have understood the right use of reason for your walk with and work for the Lord? Talk with a Christian friend about these goals, and encourage your friend to read the articles in this series.

2 Reason and Faith

Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason." Acts 26.24, 25

Reason, faith, and God

The challenge that Christians and Christianity are not *reasonable* – a challenge we are not unfamiliar with in our day – actually begs a larger and more fundamental question: Is *God* reasonable?

That is, can we understand the way God “thinks”? Are His reasons accessible to our reasoning ability? Can we weigh and consider God’s reasons for this or that? Can we know God by means of reason? Are there good *reasons* for believing in Him? Or is reason contrary to faith? Can reason be a tool of faith? A hindrance to it? And what is the relationship between reason – the human ability to figure things out logically – and divine revelation?

All these questions were sparked in my mind as a result of reading Roger McCann’s article, “Is God Irish?”, which appeared in *Philosophy Now* magazine (Sept., 2012).

Mr. McCann provides a helpful overview and summary of various attempts to prove the existence of God by the use of reason alone. His inquiry is not limited to Christian efforts to know or justify the existence of God; he looks at the question from the perspective of various religions, as well as from a strictly philosophical point of view.

Mr. McCann arrives at what might appear to be contrary conclusions: First, he does not believe that we are likely to be able to *prove* the existence of God by reason alone; at the same time, his reasoning leads him to believe that “God is more likely to exist than not to exist.” Furthermore, he explains, this doesn’t mean that reason can lead us to a clear understanding of the nature of God or whether there are more gods than one.

An exercise in reason?

Now this is the kind of quibble and hedge that we might expect from a philosopher. Readers are left to decide for themselves, using their own reason, whether or not Mr. McCann’s conclusions are *reasonable*. In the end, as with so much of contemporary philosophical thinking, Mr. McCann’s argument is a kind of intellectual game without any real significance – an exercise in reason *per se*, but not one intended to change minds or lives.

But it is not my intention to debate him or to respond to his conclusions. Instead, I want us to take the subject of his article seriously and, acknowledging the importance of this subject, see what we can learn about the place of reason in the life of faith.

Mr. McCann’s article throws a gauntlet at the feet of the believing community. Charges to the contrary notwithstanding, we like to believe ourselves to be a reasonable people, with a faith and worldview that can stand up to intellectual scrutiny. But for this to be the case, we shall need to make sure we understand the role of reason in religion, and whether or not it is possible to make any cogent conclusions about God, belief, and the life of faith on the basis of reason.

Our project

Over the next several installments of this column, I intend to guide us through a series of questions concerning the relationship between God and reason, and to consider the implications of this relationship for

our own practice of faith. We will investigate the following questions:

Is God reasonable?

Can people know God by the use of reason?

Should Christians expect that reason will help them to grow in the knowledge of God?

Is there a role for reason in the work of evangelism?

Is reason useful in seeking to gain the benefit of divine revelation?

What role exists for reason in constructing a Christian worldview?

In considering these questions I hope to show that, in each case, the answer is “Yes” and “No.” Reason, we will see, is an important component of a full and lively faith. But reason does not circumscribe the limits of faith, and can be, in certain circumstances, an *obstacle* to faith and to knowing God.

The overall objective of this series is twofold. First, I hope to stimulate readers’ love for God and His Word, and to provoke them to greater enjoyment of the salvation we have by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We will see that reason has an important role in helping us to achieve these outcomes, as long as we use reason *reasonably*.

Second, and closely related to the first objective, I hope to encourage readers in the right and full use of reason as a most valuable gift for seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. The better we understand the role of reason in the life of faith, the more we might be inclined to use reason in seeking the Lord and His Kingdom. And thus, the more likely it will be that we will live our faith out of the perspective of the mind of Christ, which we have by *grace* through *faith*, and not as the result of *reason*.

For reflection

1. Why did Festus think that Paul was being *unreasonable*? That he was out of his mind?
2. Peter said we should be always ready to give a *reason* for the hope that is within us (1 Pet. 3.15). What *reasons* would you give for believing the Gospel?
3. Are reason and faith opposed to one another? Complementary to one another? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Do your unbelieving friends or coworkers think that Christianity is reasonable? Ask a few of them. Tell them you’re involved in a study of faith and reason, and ask whether they believe Christianity is reasonable. What reasons do they give in support of their view?

3 Is God Reasonable?

*“Come now, let us reason together,
Says the LORD...”* Isaiah 1.18

Assumptions

For our purposes, examining this and the other questions we will consider in this series from the perspective of a Christian worldview, we will make certain assumptions consistent with our faith as foundational to our inquiry.

And in doing so, we are doing nothing more or less than what every *reasoning* person does. All reason proceeds on the basis of *assumptions* – ideas, views, convictions, and beliefs which *cannot* be proved by reason, but which serve as the *foundation* upon which reason does its work. Every reasonable person must be mindful of these *assumptions*, and this is true for us as Christians as well.

What are the assumptions *on the basis of which* we as Christians engage the discipline and tool of reason?

Among these are the convictions that God exists, that Scripture is His Word, and that by believing in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins we may have access to God by His Spirit. By this means, moreover, we may understand the teaching of God’s Word for our lives in Christ.

We make these assumptions as Christians for the simple reason that, being Christians, we cannot deny them. We know them to be true both by our experience and by reflecting on our experience in the light of these assumptions. It is *reasonable* for us to assume these things because we cannot deny them.

Already, therefore, we are acknowledging that *reason* has a large role to play in the life of faith. Our task is simply to clarify that role as much as we can.

Reasonable...

To our question then: Is God *reasonable*? That is, is He *amenable* or *agreeable* to reason in any way? Two observations argue for an affirmative answer to this question.

First, the fact that God invites sinful human beings to *reason* with Him would seem to require that we answer this first question in the affirmative. God is reasonable. He communicates with us in words, using sentences and paragraphs that convey meanings we can easily understand. We understand the words “Come now” to indicate an invitation. God invites us to Himself, to engage with Him *reasonably*.

The next phrase, “let us reason together”, is cohortative, and offers an opportunity for human beings to dialog with God, as it were. He will present His views, and He invites us to present ours. The same principles of reasoning will obtain between us, so that we may understand one another. He will explain His ways, and we may seek to justify our own. We will be able to hear and understand Him, and He will consider our explanations and justifications.

So, it seems clear, God *is* reasonable. He can communicate with us in ways we may expect to process successfully using the skills of reason. This is precisely what we might expect from a God Whose only-begotten Son is the *Word* of God – the Logos, Explanation, or *Reason* of God Himself. And we may communicate with Him, fully expecting that whatever is in *our* minds and on *our* hearts, He will hear and understand, and respond to using the same kind of reason with which we present our views and requests before Him.

So, yes, God, as He is represented in the Bible, is reasonable.

...but not limited by reason

God is reasonable. He uses reason, the same kind of reason that we human beings use to make our way in this life. We can know the mind of God and understand His ways through the use of reason.

However, we cannot know God's mind or ways *exhaustively* by reason, or by any other means for that matter. For while it pleases God to *use* reason in His dealings with men, God is not *bound* by reason or *limited* by our ability to make sense out of what He thinks or does. Some of what He thinks and does, and some of the reasons why He thinks and does as He does, is beyond our ability to understand by reason (cf. Is. 55.8, 9; Eccl. 3.11). God knows things we cannot know. He does things we cannot understand. He is not obliged to limit His plans or ways to whatever we can understand, even if only by the exertions of our most skilled reasoners and thinkers.

God is reasonable, and He can reason with us, so that we understand Him, and He understands us. But He is not bound by our reasoning abilities. He reasons within Himself at a level and in ways that will *only ever make perfect sense to Him*. He is not obligated to explain to us things He knows we simply cannot understand, so great is the ontological distance between us; and we must not expect Him to justify His thoughts or ways in terms that we will be willing, through the use of reason alone, to accept.

So, Yes, God is reasonable, and uses reason to make Himself and His ways known. At the same time, no, God is *not* reasonable, and reason is not, in every case, the best way to relate to God or to find our place in the economy He is unfolding on earth as it is in heaven.

For reflection

1. What is the difference between an *assumption* and a *fact*? How does each work together in the reasoning process?
2. The Bible presents God as a *reasoning* Being. How should this encourage us to want to know Him? In seeking to make Him known to others?
3. Yet the Bible insists that God's reasoning powers are far more advanced than ours. How should this guide and caution us in seeking to know God? Will we need something other than *reason* to know God as He reveals Himself in the Bible? Explain.

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a non-Christian friend or co-worker about the difference between assumptions and facts. When it comes to your friend's worldview, what assumptions guide their reasoning? See what you can find out.

4 Since God Is Reasonable

“*And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.*” Jeremiah 29.13

Improve reason

Thus far, we have answered our first question, *Is God reasonable?*, both affirmatively and in the negative: With respect to humankind’s *ability* to reason, God *is* and *is not* reasonable. He is reasonable in that He invites us to reason with Him, using the familiar tools and protocols of reason. And He is *not* reasonable in that there are matters relating to God, His works, and His ways that our reason will never be able to understand, at least, not in the same way God understands them.

What are the implications of this for humankind’s ability to *reason* with God?

First, since it pleases God to use human reasoning skills to communicate Himself and His will, we do well to *improve our use of reason* to the fullest possible extent, and to apply our reasoning powers to every medium and means by which God is pleased to reveal Himself to us. *Reason* can be understood as the action of our minds in seeking to understand the nature, associations, and implications of a particular fact. The fact of God is accessible to our reason, at least in part; yet only as we *apply* our reason to the fact of God may we expect to gain the *benefit* of that activity which God intends by inviting us to reason with Him.

Put another way, if we are *sluggish* in reason, so that we do not like to have to think hard and long about matters; or if our *skills* in reasoning are inadequate, poorly honed, or rusty from disuse, then we should make it our business to overcome our laziness and improve our use of reason, since the great prize of reasoning with and knowing God lies open to us.

Seek the sources

Second, the fact that we can know God through reason encourages us to appeal to all those places where God has declared that He is willing to meet and reason with us. These may be described in two general categories: the revelation of God in Scripture, and the revelation of God in creation.

First, we should apply our reasoning powers to the study of Scripture. We will hear God speaking to us in Scripture when we seek Him there with all our heart. The Bible over and over declares itself to be the very Word of God, the primary verbal source by which we may reason with and know Him. The Bible is written in human language, following the rules of human grammar and syntax, using words and meanings accessible to human reason. The more we read and study the Bible, and the more we use the tools of reason in doing so, the more we should expect to engage with God in a reasoning exchange of mutual knowledge and understanding.

Conversely, if we *neglect* the Scriptures, or if our use of Scripture is spotty or haphazard, or merely for what we may gain for ourselves, then we will not be using our reason aright, and cannot expect to gain the benefit God intends for us by His invitation to come and reason with Him.

Second, and in the light of what God reveals about Himself in Scripture, we ought to ponder the creation, where the glory of God is being revealed, and the works of human culture as well, as part of the revelation of God in creation (Ps. 68.18; Acts 14.17).

We should pay careful attention to the works of God, the history of His relationship to the world and to His people, the counsel and experience of our forebears and elders, and the indications of the Spirit’s workings in the world today. We may learn about God from studying the art and literature, history and biography, the

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human as well as the natural sciences – but only as long as we allow the Scriptures, the *primary* revelation of God, to guide our reading and study.

God can be known by our reason, and He urges us to seek and search for Him where He may be found. We will be good stewards of our ability as reasoning beings as we take up His invitation and come to reason with Him in Scripture and creation.

Two caveats

At the same time, we must not waste our reason on frivolous or sinful things, for this would not be good stewardship. We may find ourselves embarrassed, ashamed, and filled with regret when we actually do sit down with God to give a reasonable accounting of the life we have lived with the gifts He has provided. God has given us reason, in part, so that we may know Him and grow in our love for and obedience to Him. If we compromise or corrupt our reasoning powers by applying them to things that do not contribute to the knowledge of God and His intentions for us, then we betray the fundamental purpose for which God has given us reasoning skills.

But, second, since God *is not* bound by our reason, we must consider whether there are *other* ways of knowing Him which *go beyond* reason, or *work alongside* or *with* reason, or which *complement our reasoning abilities*. For if such means to the better knowledge of God exist – and we believe they do, and that God Himself directs us in how to make use of them – then we are not being *reasonable* in allowing these to lie fallow.

We shall have more to say about such matters as we work through the remaining questions in this series.

God is reasonable, but He is not limited in His will or ways by our ability to figure Him out. Let us accept His invitation to come and reason as He guides us into a deeper understanding of the use of reason in our relationship with Him.

For reflection

1. God invites you to come and reason with Him, and to seek and search for Him with all your heart. Describe your present approach to this summons.
2. What does God promise to those who take up the call to seek and search for Him with their reason?
3. Meditate on Hebrews 11.6. Besides sound reason, what else is necessary to gain the benefit God intends from reasoning with Him? What's the difference between this and reason?

Next steps – Preparation: Review your practice of seeking and searching for God. What's one thing you could do to engage more of your reason in seeking to reason with God?

5 God by Reason Known

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse... Romans 1.18-20

Our "reasonable" God

We have seen that, according to the teaching of Scripture, God is reasonable. He invites us to reason with Him, to learn His purposes and will, and to prosecute our lives and destinies in the light of His Word and plan. God approaches us, who have been made in His image, with the protocols of reason, so that He may engage with us in ways that go *beyond* reason in a relationship of love we can *experience* more readily than *express* (Eph. 3.19).

At the same time, God is not *limited* by reason, that is, by the tenets, protocols, and powers of the human mind, so that He must sort things out in ways that satisfy intellectual curiosity and "make sense" to us in every part. God's ways are not our ways; His thoughts are higher and more profound than ours (Is. 55.8, 9). At some point we simply must cease trying to figure things out and *trust* God in His Word, until – if ever – it pleases Him to grant us more understanding.

Such a view does not excuse the use of reason on the part of human beings, or in seeking or searching for God. Christians have a mandate to exercise dominion over the world and to advance the Kingdom of Jesus Christ on earth as it is in heaven (Gen. 1.26-28; Matt. 6.33; Heb. 2.1-9). This necessarily will find us engaged with people and things in ways that require profound understanding, which we may expect to gain through the use of our God-given reason, in the light of His revealed Word and will.

Of course, the highest object of our contemplation, that which we have been created and redeemed to know, is God Himself (Jn. 17.3; 2 Pet. 3.18). Believers in Christ understand that our greatest joy, highest fulfillment, and most satisfying reason for being are to be found in Christ, and in the presence of God with Him (Phil. 3.14; Ps. 16.11). Thus, we must engage all our faculties – reason being chief among them – in this quest to know God and to make Him known, taking as our focus, and as the supreme revelation of God to men, our Lord Jesus Christ.

But is reason reliable by itself to bring us to the knowledge of God? Let's consider how the Scriptures direct us in thinking about this question.

God knowable by reason

Because the entire creation is the handiwork of God, the second of two "books" of divine revelation, it makes sense that we should expect to see the stamp of His authorship on every page. The heavens, the earth, and all creatures – from the largest, most far-flung galaxies to whatever makes up the Higgs boson – have something clear to say to us about the being, attributes, or will of God (Ps. 19.1-4).

And because human beings are made in the image of God and endowed with reasoning minds, it is reasonable to expect that they should be able to discern God on every page of the book of creation.

According to the Apostle Paul, this is precisely the case with every human being: "*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse...*" All human beings are *able* to discern the existence of God from observing the world of creation. They can know something about His being – He is eternal – and His

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attributes – His power and divinity (spirituality). And all human beings in whom reason functions unimpaired have made this conclusion; indeed, there is even evidence to suggest that those who, by defect of heredity, birth, accident, or disease are unable to reason “normally” nonetheless possess a sense of the existence of God. All human beings know God, and they have arrived at this knowledge of God through such rudimentary reasoning protocols as observation, questioning, pondering, comparing, analyzing, synthesizing, intuiting, and concluding.

All human beings know God. This is demonstrated by the way thoughts about God populate the records of philosophy, the arts, ancient religions, and human cultures from every place and time and at every level of sophistication. God is making Himself known through the things He has made, and human beings are *able* to use their reason to arrive at a true knowledge of God, at least, within certain general parameters.

God's purpose

God's purpose in making human beings this way is to pique their curiosity and draw them on in pursuit of more knowledge of God until, their restless hearts hungering and thirsting for Him, they find their full and complete rest in God through faith in Jesus Christ (Augustine). God has given human beings the gift of reason so that, to the extent they are able, they may discern His presence, hear His invitation to reason further, and seek and search for Him accordingly (Acts 17.27).

But this, as we shall see, is not the whole story.

Reason is a reliable resource for knowing God. And we whose calling is to make God known through Jesus Christ may assume that those to whom we communicate this Good News *already possess* a rudimentary but real knowledge of God, so that it is not necessary for us to invest our time or efforts trying to *prove* God's existence. Much more fruitful roads than this are available to us in reasoning with our neighbors on behalf of the God they already know.

For reflection

1. Why do we say that the Bible and creation are two “books” of divine revelation? In what ways are you presently reasoning with God through each of these?
2. In what sense can we say that all people already *know* God? How have they come to know Him? What do they do with that knowledge?
3. Why is it not more evident in our world that all people know God? How can this problem be addressed, so that people may heed God's invitation and come reason with Him for the benefits He offers?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some friends – Christian or non-Christian – about what it means to know God. How do your friends know Him? What do they know about Him? Those who deny Him, how do they know He does not exist?

6 Reason Subverted

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse... Romans 1.18-20

Thwarted by sin

The Apostle Paul says flatly that God has made Himself known to every human being. Everyone who has ever lived knows God exists, a conclusion he or she has arrived at through observation, questioning, and thinking about the things of the world. Everyone knows God, since God has engaged their reasoning powers to make Himself known to them.

Since this is true, since, that is, all human beings have come to know God through the use of reason, why is it that so many continue not to believe in Him or to pursue more knowledge of Him?

The answer is that their reason has been subverted by sin.

According to the Scriptures, sin, which is the spiritual inheritance of every human being, is a real and powerful spiritual malady, powerful enough to darken understanding (Eph. 4.18), corrupt affections (Rom. 1.24), cause priorities and values to be turned from uprightness and truth (Eccl. 7.29; Heb. 9.14; Rom. 1.25), and render all our lives such an abomination in the sight of God that they cause Him really, albeit reluctantly, to distance Himself from us (Rom. 1.21-32).

Rather than seek out the knowledge of the one true God Whom they all know, human beings, under the influence of sin, refuse to acknowledge God, fail to give Him thanks and praise, reject His invitation to seek and search for Him, turn away from Him in rebellion, and seek to satisfy their unquenchable, inner need for transcendence through the folly of hoping in created things.

Claiming to be wise by smugly denying the existence of God, we become fools – and worse, we become enemies of the very God we *know* in our hearts but *deny* by our words and deeds (Rom. 5.10).

No amount of mere persuasion, no regimen of reason's tools or tricks, no weight of rhetorical power is – by itself or in combination – capable of overthrowing the grip of sin and rekindling a merely reasoning pursuit of the knowledge of God.

So, no, it is *not* possible, because of the powerful and all-pervading presence of sin in the human soul, to attain to the knowledge of God through reason alone. God invites us to reason with Him. But the failure of so many to accept that invitation and enter into the benefits such communion entails is not because they *cannot* reason with God, but because they *will* not.

Nevertheless...

However, we who hold the truth of God in the frail earthen vessels of flesh should not despair. We who *have* come to know God, with the *aid* of reason, but not by reason *alone*, are tasked as His ambassadors to extend His invitation to reason to all those who *know* God but have thus far *refused to reason* with Him. And for fulfilling this task, we shall need to make good use of the protocols of reason.

God calls us to use reason, to master the arts of persuasion, to improve our skills in conversation and our ability to explain difficult ideas, and to employ all these, as often as we may, in seeking to penetrate the

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barricades of sin erect in the hearts of our neighbors, and liberate and renew the knowledge of God in their souls (cf. Acts 17.4, 17, 18; 28.23).

Only, because of the blinding power of indwelling sin, we must not rely on reason *alone*.

A twofold challenge

God can be known through reason, but not through reason alone. This presents a twofold challenge to those who know the Lord.

First, we must exhaust the capabilities of reason which are available to us to increase in the knowledge of God, so that the love of God, which surpasses knowledge, may be ever more apparent in all our words and deeds.

And second, we must understand the *limits* of reason in seeking to make God known to others, and discover the *best ways* of using reason to penetrate the barricades of sin and pique the knowledge of God in human souls. No one will hear and accept God's invitation to reason with Him through reason alone. But no one will enter that privileged conversation, or know its benefits, without reason, albeit it only rudimentary or impaired.

Reason, in other words, has a role in helping us to help others hear and heed God's invitation to reason with Him. We need to make sure we understand both the *limits* of reason and the *right use* of reason as we, the Lord's ambassadors, extend His *invitation to reason* to the people around us.

For reflection

1. Who are the people around you to whom God has sent you as His ambassador, to extend His invitation to reason with Him? Have you identified your [Personal Mission Field](#)?
2. Paul says that all human beings know God. What evidence do you see of this? Why do some people continue to insist that there is no God?
3. Reasoning with someone implies conversations. What opportunities do you have for conversations with others? What might you do in order to increase these opportunities?

Next steps – Preparation: How do you understand the role of reason in your own relationship with the Lord? How do you use it? Are you using it as fully as you should? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

7 What Reason Requires

Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again." But they understood none of these things... Luke 18.31-34

The importance of the mind

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the mind in human life, and of reason as a primary tool of the mind. The mind is that component of the soul, intimately enmeshed with the heart and the conscience, which receives and processes information. The mind oversees such functions as thinking, remembering, planning, evaluating, associating, comparing, concluding, and much, much more.

So important is the mind in the life of faith that believers are called to be renewed in their minds, so that they can avoid the snares of worldly thinking (Rom. 12.1, 2). We are commanded to set our minds on Christ exalted, so that our thoughts may be informed by His Kingdom glory, outlook, and agenda (Col. 3.1-3). We are charged with overcoming and laying aside the old darkened, sinful ways of thinking that characterized us before we became believers (Eph. 4.17-24), so that we might put on the mind of Christ, which we have by virtue of being renewed by His indwelling Spirit (1 Cor. 2.16; Jn. 14.17, 26). We read of the Holy Spirit that He engages with us in intellectual activities, comparing spiritual things with spiritual things in order to teach us what God wants us to know.(1 Cor. 2.12, 13).

The mind – and reason as its *modus operandi* – is an important portal for spiritual input and, therefore, a valuable resource for spiritual growth. With our minds, we may reason with God according to the terms of His invitation. Even those with minimal reasoning abilities – and doubtless, in some case, those with none – can know the Lord, because all human beings are made in His image and likeness. But deeper and more fruitful knowledge of God requires engaging our minds to reason with Him in response to His invitation.

This being so, why were Jesus' disciples, of all people, completely unable to understand the very clear and detailed information He communicated to them in our text?

Knowing God

The disciples' problem was the same as that of every other person in their generation, and every person today who has not come to salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ: They did not know the Lord. This is not to say that they did not have *some* knowledge of God and Christ. They certainly did. But not even the disciples were *convinced* that Jesus is the Christ, in spite of Peter's confession. They knew Him, knew something about His capabilities, and even seemed to have a measure of love for Him. Reason had taken them far enough to be able to grant that Jesus was someone very special, perhaps even the Son of God and the Messiah of Israel. But no *true spiritual power* attached to that knowledge, so that whatever they had come to know of Christ and God by reason alone would not enable them to do anything other than deny and abandon Him when push came to shove.

"Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip?" Thus Jesus responded to Philip's desire that He should show them the Father (Jn. 14.8, 9). Jesus knew that Philip did not *know* Him. He wanted Philip to know it as well.

But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, all whom the Spirit was bringing into the Kingdom of God's Son would know Him, and that in a way that *employs* but *goes even beyond* the powers of reason (Col. 1.13; Jer. 31.34). God's Spirit catalyzed the life and teaching of Jesus in the minds of His disciples in a new and more

compelling way. Suddenly they understood. While their reason had only taken them so far in knowing the Lord and loving Him, with the coming of the Spirit, their minds were truly illuminated to the reality of Christ and His Kingdom.

A spiritual intervention

Reason apart from the teaching, comparing, and illuminating work of the Spirit of God can take us only so far in knowing God. At some point, without the Spirit's intervention, sinful human beings will begin to bury what true knowledge of God they possess, and will erect a new, albeit false, framework of knowing around their thinking, which they use to make sense of their experience apart from God. False assumptions become the platform for all subsequent reasoning, as those who *deny* God build up walls *against* the knowledge of God, using the tools of reason graciously *given* by God.

We should not think, therefore, that we will be able by reason alone to bring a lost person to see the error of his thinking and to welcome him to the Kingdom of God. Reason can help to prepare the way for this, but it can only take us so far.

With the Spirit of God, however, reason becomes a powerful tool of the mind for increasing knowledge of God. By reason we understand the teaching of God's Word – little by little, precept by precept (Is. 28.9, 10). By the use of reason, we apply ourselves to understanding the works of God throughout the creation, so that we grow in love for and fear of Him, and thus increase in wisdom (Ps. 111.2, 10; Eccl. 1.13). By reason and practice we learn to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, and truth from error (Heb. 5.14).

In order to help our neighbors heed the invitation of God to reason with Him, we shall need the Spirit of God to be at work in them, as He is at work in us. And if *we* reason with God about this matter, it may please Him to send His Spirit to them, just as He did to us.

For reflection

1. Meditate on Ezekiel 36.26, 27 and Galatians 4.6. How does the Spirit of God renew the knowledge of God in us?
2. What new assumptions does the Spirit bring to help our reason function as God intends?
3. Suggest some ways you might pray for God to send His Spirit to work in you, in your fellow believers, and in the non-Christians in your Personal Mission Field.

Next steps – Preparation: Make it a point to pray daily for the people you will see that day, that God's Spirit will work in you and them for the purposes of His will.

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For reflection or discussion

1. What is reason? How does it work? Why is it so important to human life?
2. What benefits might we expect to gain from reasoning with God? How have you experienced these?
3. What is involved in reasoning with God? Where can we meet Him? How can we improve our ability to reason with Him?
4. Why is it that some people's reason leads them *away* from God, rather than to *reason* with Him? How does this work in the world at large, to reinforce the idea that God is either non-existent or irrelevant to the real issues of life?
5. How should we, as ambassadors of God's Kingdom, use *reason* to invite and persuade others to heed God's invitation to *reason* with Him?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.