

3 A More on Faith and Reason

Think about how “faith” gets used in the popular culture: “Ya gotta have faith.” “Just believe. You can do anything.”

Have “faith” in your team, your organization, your leaders, and your ability.

Obviously, optimism and confidence are better than pessimism. If we exaggerate it, however, “faith” becomes a magical thing. Somehow your belief makes it happen. This is “Peter Pan” theology: think happy thoughts and you can fly (or rescue Tinker Bell). Engineers are notoriously logical and depend heavily on the use of reason. It is unnerving to hear the suggestion that faith and reason must be opposites.

Years ago, I heard this startling statement from a Christian: “When you become a Christian you need to take your brain, put it in a rocket, and send it to the moon.” I would expect such a statement from a committed atheist, but this was a fellow believer. It is just plain not Biblical. Faith is trust based on evidence.

Richard Dawkins is a popular writer who dismisses faith with a wave of his hand: “[Faith] is a state of mind that leads people to believe something - it doesn't matter what - in the total absence of supporting evidence. If there were good supporting evidence, then faith would be superfluous, for the evidence would compel us to believe it anyway.” [1]

This is an unsustainable view of the relation of evidence and belief in the natural sciences, or anywhere else. For a start, it fails to make the critical distinction between the "total absence of supporting evidence" and the "absence of totally supporting evidence." Think about it. [2]

Christianity holds that faith is basically warranted belief. Faith goes beyond what is logically demonstrable yet is nevertheless capable of rational motivation and foundation. It is not a blind leap into the dark, but a joyful discovery of a bigger picture of things, of which we are part. It is complex and rich idea, which goes far beyond simply asserting or holding that certain things are true. [3]

If faith is trust based on truth, the issue then becomes- What is an adequate test for truth?

Nash considers the following: [4]

- Reason?
Our thoughts can be biased and illogical.
- Experience?
Our senses can be deceived.
- Evidence?
Facts must be interpreted.
- Revelation?
How do we know it's from God?

Any of these foundations by itself alone would be inadequate. The corresponding positions are known as

- Rationalism (Truth is known by reason alone.)
- Experientialism (Truth is known by experience alone)
- Evidentialism (Truth is known by evidence alone)
- Fideism (truth is known by faith alone)

All four of these foundations enter into faith and knowing truth:

- Much of God's revelation is written as "propositional truth," statements that we can think about and accept (or reject).
- Our experience must be interpreted by revelation.
- God's revelation leaves "footprints" in history –real evidence that we can examine.
- Experience interpreted becomes a class of evidence (answered prayer, for example).
- As we move forward in the Christian life, we accumulate a large amount of experience which become evidence.

Faith and Divine Revelation

We have multiple sources of knowledge about the world:

- Sensory input
- Experience
- Reason

The believer also adds a fourth-

- Revelation –information told to us; information we wouldn't have unless it was revealed to us, in this case, by our Creator.

The issue of faith based on Scripture then boils down to this:

Could divine revelation occur?

Is (divine) revelation a legitimate source of knowledge about the world, along with reason, established authority, and sensory input?

The answer would be “yes,” provided that

- Revelation provides details about the world not available from any other source (such as the origin and purpose of everything.) Some of the knowledge is not available elsewhere – God's love for mankind, the identity of Jesus, the triune nature of God, sin and the forgiveness of sin.
- Revelation does correspond to known truth in the physical world (such as people and places of history.)
- Revelation proves trustworthy.

The decision to accept revealed truth involves both reason and faith. Since part of God's revelation is history, that part can be verified.

God's revelation is usually not so much contrary to our reason as to our *will*. Love your enemies. Pray without ceasing. Give the first portion of your income to God's work. These won't work unless God is really there.

History and Philosophy

How did we get such a false definition of faith?

According to Francis Schaeffer [5], Georg Hegel (1770-1831) developed a philosophy of history wherein history is always in flux. Any current position (thesis) is not simply opposed to or replaced by its opposite (antithesis) but rather merges with it to form a new system (synthesis). If this same pattern is applied to truth in general, then truth is always changing and relative. This is the unfortunate situation we often encounter today.

Following Hegel, Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the “father of existentialism” popularized the idea of belief as a “leap”: “Faith sees best in the dark.” The results have been unfortunate:

- Many people today talk about a “leap of faith” or “blind faith”
- Kierkegaard’s concept changed the meaning of faith
- Kierkegaard’s thinking led to the modern existentialists and the acceptance of “the Absurd.”

Mere undirected “faith” (or “faith in faith”) is not effective. The true object of faith is Christ Himself, the Lord of the Universe, not simply faith that God exists. Faith is trusting God instead of my own efforts, first for the forgiveness of sins (becoming a Christian) and then trusting God daily for every part of life (to provide, to direct, to transform, and to guide).

We can’t know any person through reason alone, and we can’t know God through reason alone. Trust in God, however, is reasonable.

There are some areas that are closed to us- we can’t see God directly. We don’t know exactly what the future holds. We do, however, have enough evidence to trust God for what we can’t see or know.

One faulty theology suggests that faith is somehow a force and our words direct that force to cause miraculous things to happen. If our faith makes it happen then we are more powerful than God.

Faith and Reason—Opposites?

Faith and reason are really not opposites. Trust in Christ is a reasonable action. Everything depends on our starting point. If God is really there, loving us, trusting Him is the *most reasonable* thing to do.

Without reason, the content of biblical faith would be unintelligible and meaningless. So, we say that biblical faith is not the same as reason, but that faith is rational and reasonable. The first assertion that faith is rational means that faith is intelligible. It is not absurd or illogical. If biblical revelation were absurd and irrational, it would be utterly unintelligible and meaningless. The content of the Bible cannot pierce the soul of a sentient creature without first going through the mind. [6]

Faith and reason are not at odds with each other. Faith is in fact rational behavior given who God is, and the reasons He's given for trusting Him, it's unreasonable not to trust Him...Not only does reason help faith, but faith helps reason. I see my life more clearly because of my faith in God. For example, we often hear encouragements to serve the rest of humanity, and I agree that this is good, but a secular mind gives me no reason why it is good. [7]

Christianity is not illogical. Concepts of the Christian faith are expressed as propositional truths. The pieces follow logically if the first premise (God is there) is valid (and do not follow if God is not there.)

There is no single air-tight “proof” for God’s existence but rather a large body of evidence consistent with His reality that points to the credibility of the message.

Christianity does not provide a “God of the gaps” to explain what we can’t see but instead makes sense of what we do see.

“There are not two separate avenues to understanding, one marked ‘knowledge’ and the other marked ‘faith.’ There is no knowing without ‘believing,’ and believing is the way to knowing.” [8]

On the other hand, we should not downplay reason. It is a gift from God to help us live in the world, even if fallen. As made in the image of God, we are rational creatures. Reason, starting from scriptural truth about God and man, and aided by the Holy Spirit, should be a valuable tool for life.

Let's examine the reasons why faith (Christian faith as defined above) is not the enemy of reason:

1. We are never commanded to turn off our reason or throw away our brains when we deal with faith.
2. God gave us reasoning power and told us to use it:

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.” (Isa. 1:18)
3. We are commanded to test all things and hold fast to what is good. (1 Thess. 5:21)
4. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with our mind as well as with our heart, soul, and strength (Matt. 22:37)
5. The key ideas of the Christian faith are presented a proposition truth described in words.
 - In the beginning, God created...
 - All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God
 - For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son...
6. Passages such as Romans 6 and I Corinthians 15 are masterpieces of logic:

“If Christ is not risen you are still dead in your sins.” (1 Cor. 15:14-19)
7. Historically, several believers have written deep philosophical treatises about the Christian faith, including Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, and Schaeffer.
8. If the first premise is valid (God created all that is) all the rest, including all the difficult ideas, can follow logically.

The opposite of faith is not reason. The opposite of faith in Scripture is “unbelief,” a deliberate refusal to consider the evidence and respond to God. The scribes and Pharisees were accused of “unbelief,” going so far as to attribute Jesus’ miracles to Satan.

What About Certain Verses in Scripture?

Isn't the Apostle Paul dismissing human reason when he writes:

“My message and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith would not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.” (I Cor. 2:4-5)

Or in I Cor. 1:18:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Also, 1 Cor. 1:21-23:

“For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks search for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,...”

Paul is certainly elevating God's revelation about Himself and about the universe above our best human reasoning. He is also contrasting thinking that begins with God as foundation with thinking that begins with man as foundation. The latter will end in futility and self-centeredness.

The passage concerns God's way of salvation: the atoning death of Christ and the preaching of that message. None of that fits with earthly “wisdom”.

Paul is contrasting God's wisdom with the “wisdom of this world”: the thinking of the Greek philosophers, the Gnostics, and the Pharisees (hair-splitting approach).

Most of our struggle is between God's righteous commands and our selfish desires; sometimes it is between God's promises and our tendency to give up. Occasionally it is between God's guidance (which we must be certain is actually God's guidance) and our best plans.

The contrast is not between “Christianity” and “philosophy,” but rather between Christian thinking and non-Christian thinking. Paul speaks of “philosophy and empty

deception,” “the tradition of men,” and “the elementary principles of the world,” and all these are contrasted with Christ. Thus, Paul’s point appears to be that Christ is the foundation of all thought, and the Christian is not to be taken captive to any other alternative. In short, Paul is making a plea for the radical lordship of Christ. [9]

What about Hebrews 11:1?

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.”

Is the writer of Hebrews commending a form of blind faith in which we simply hope for “things not seen”? No. The author is encouraging his readers to continue to trust in the promises of God, in spite of the fact they haven’t yet been fulfilled (and might not even be fulfilled in their lifetimes)...To make this point clear, the writer of Hebrews offers a short list of historic believers who trusted God’s promises for the future on the basis of what God had done in the past... The gospels describe many “things not seen”. God is immaterial and invisible, and many of the promises of God are yet unfulfilled. But we can trust the things we can’t see on the basis of the things we can. We can move in faith toward the future on the basis of what God has demonstrated in the past. [10]

Faith and the Leap – Indian Jones and 34th Street

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* there’s a scene that’s often been cited as an example of faith. Indiana is seeking the Holy Grail and desperate to save his father’s life. After reading the cryptic instruction, “Leap from the lion’s head,” he emerges through a door under a carved lion’s head to arrive at a deep chasm which he must cross with no bridge in sight. He steps into thin air, and a camouflaged walkway becomes visible which supports his weight to cross the canyon.

It’s a great movie scene but a terrible example of faith in God or believing Christ for salvation.

- Indiana Jones took a step, not a leap.
- The bridge was there all the time. His “faith” didn’t cause it to materialize.
- Biblical faith, faith in Jesus Christ, is based on real evidence.

The kind of lesson we might get from the movie is that life itself often requires us to move forward when we don't know what the future will bring. We don't want to be paralyzed by fear and doubt. Based on all that God has done in the past and confident that He is leading us we can step forward, knowing He is there.

Miracle on 34th Street is a classic holiday movie about a Macy's Santa Claus. It's a nice feel-good movie with terrible theology. We're told by one of the characters that "Faith is believing in things when your common sense tells you not to." Yikes! When the evidence points to the existence and presence of the God of the Bible it makes clear sense to trust in Him.

Perhaps the place where Christian living may seem contrary to reason is in the realm of our *obedience*.

Do I really have to tell the truth?

How can I possibly love my enemy?

Why can't I spend all I make on myself?...

Of course, all of our obstacles are answered if the loving and powerful God is really there.

Faith and Test Equipment

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." I'd had faith in our test equipment – even though I could not see the electromagnetic field inside the chamber, I was confident that it was correct. Was my faith foolish? Of course, not – the equipment was being used for the purpose for which it was made, and it had been adequately maintained and calibrated. People often associate faith with uncertainty, but we are told in the Bible that faith is about certainty – being certain of what we do not see. I cannot see God, but my faith makes me certain that he exists, and that he cares about me. My faith is not irrational – it is based on a personal experience of God and an understanding of him through the Bible and other people. [11]

Faith, Reason, and Truth

Consider reason, faith, and truth as three sides of a triangle.

We can't fully have truth (real facts) without reason and faith. We need to think reasonably about the facts. We need to trust that the facts are sensible.

We can't fully have faith without reason and truth. We need to think about what's true, examine the facts, and then commit (trust).

We can't fully have reason without facts and faith. We apply our reason to the facts, to the truth, and we trust our ability to reason properly.

Can reason lead us to God?

It depends on our starting point.

If we start with ourselves, we will soon hit a brick wall in explaining the universe.

If we start with denying God and proceed logically, we will end up in despair, according to Schaeffer, since we'll lose the value of humanity, meaning, and morality. [12]

If we start with God, we can proceed logically and find substantial answers to the large questions.

If we start with a blank slate, philosopher Joshua Rasmussen suggests, that reason can actually move us towards God if we proceed step-by-step to tackle metaphysical questions that lead to meaning. [13]

Conclusions

We know these things about faith-

- Faith is not simply mental assent but a conscious decision to trust.
- Faith is reasonable and built upon evidence.
- Faith is not proof and is not certainty. (Certainty and proof exist only in Mathematics.)
- Faith generates action. (Hebrews 11, James 2:14-26). We act on what we really believe.

Everyone accepts some things as givens and doesn't try to verify (Scientific laws, like Newton's laws, gas laws, laws of thermodynamics, Microscopic descriptions of the cell and DNA, Results of diagnostic equipment, "established" facts of history.)

Atheists sometimes accuse Christians of childish beliefs akin to those of beliefs in the Easter Bunny, leprechauns, or the tooth fairy. In saying this, they ignore archaeology, twenty centuries of church history, and the positive contributions of believers to society (hospitals, schools, care for the poor and the orphan) primarily because of their relationship to Christ. Believers can point to objective realities (answered prayers, transformed lives, actions prompted by love), not just subjective experience.

Faith, correctly viewed, is that illumination by which true rationality begins, as has been seen through history by men the caliber of Augustine, Pascal, Kuyper, and Polanyi. Faith, the capacity to trust, is inherent in human nature and is an integral part of all personal relationships... The willingness of a scientist as distinguished as Polanyi to present to the scientific community a viewpoint which is unpopular, should give Christians courage in developing a worldview in which faith plays an integral role. Only such a worldview can do full justice to the great richness, complexity, and order present in all of reality which is far wider and more comprehensive than we can imagine. Truly the more we know, the more we come to realize how little we really do know. [14]

Belief in God is not irrational but possesses its own distinct and robust rationality. It represents a superb way of making sense of things. "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else," said C. S. Lewis. [15]

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