

Faith and Reason: Relationship and Connections Explored

Rachel J. Richter

Kids are more comfortable with mystery and God than [adults] are.¹

As the above quotation explains, in today's society many people are quite uneasy when faced with the unexplainable, the illogical, or with mystery. On the other hand, when children begin life, they are open-minded to the world around them and soak up information as eagerly as sponges. Children feel no need to explain or reason everything out in detail--when they are told that something is so by an authority figure, they often take it as truth and leave their questioning there. In relationship to God, these differences in approach today create much controversy within Christian circles as to how faith and reason relate to one another. Some view reason as an anti-faith essence that has no place in a Christian's faith life. Others view reason as an order that supercedes faith and insist that all aspects of faith must be logically or rationally worked out in one's understanding. However, there are distinct scriptural flaws contained within both of these views. Therefore, when used appropriately, reason is an excellent tool in conjunction with faith.

First of all, according to traditional Lutheran theology, reason ought to have no part in one's faith life. "The more gifted a man's reason, the poorer his understanding; and the poorer his reason, the better his understanding,"² as German thinkers of Luther's time believed. While this perspective has some truth to it in the sense that, when combined with pride, reason does not respect the sovereignty of God and insists upon placing itself over and above the mysteries in Scripture, it is also not entirely accurate.

To make a sweeping judgment call as such about those who possess exceptional reasoning abilities, in and of itself, is quite judgmental and therefore, unchristian behavior.

Furthermore, this statement, as worded, promotes poor use of reasoning. Based upon the logic contained within the statement, one may even infer that Christians should try not to use reason in order to somehow come closer to the truth, and therefore, to be closer to God. However, God states within His Word that He wants Christians to use all of their talents to His glory, and this also includes reason. For, as Jesus was questioned by an expert in the law, the man defined the first portion of Christian motivation as such: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with *all your mind*” (Luke 10:27). Jesus reply to this profession was “You have answered correctly” (Luke 10:27).

Based upon Christ’s affirmation, it cannot be antichristian to facilitate one’s use of reason within faith life. However, reason must be used within boundaries. “It is not Christianity that needs to be made reasonable. It is reason that needs to be made Christian.”³ Christianity, deriving itself from an All-knowing Creator, need not be understandable to faulty human logic and reason in order to be true and real. As Proverbs 3:7 commands, “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.” Thus, true use of Christian reasoning abilities entails using reason as pleases God, not as pleases oneself. Additionally, reason, if used to properly glorify God, must absolutely be made Christian—used in a God-fearing manner. This is best explained as follows: “[People]...ought to be on [their] guard against all attempts to explain the ways of God to men. If the Lord has not himself revealed the explanation or the reason...[people] must take off [their] hats and stand in awe before his majestic excellence.”⁴

This idea encapsulates a significant point that has been shown throughout history to be the cause, if not taken into account, of conflict between one’s use of reason and one’s faith. For example, Luther himself asserted that, if people would insist on comprehending the articles of faith with reason, the Church would soon lose baptism, Lord’s Supper, the Word, grace, original

sin, etc., for none of these are understood by reason.⁵ Concerning disputes within the church with the sacramentarians during Luther's time, Luther's specific prophesy concluded that their sophistic use of reasoning would eventually "...come to this that they would also deny that Christ is God."⁶

Modern developments have confirmed Luther's conclusions in regard to where misuse of reasoning, holding reasoning above Scripture's direct words, have led to the denial of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion in sects of Protestantism today. Therefore, this example serves as a warning to Christians to conscientiously and meticulously apply reasoning to their understanding of faith, and to also know at which point they should lay reasoning aside for faith to take its proper place *alone*. For, when in seeming contradiction, "Since Scripture cannot be broken, it is reason that must break."⁷

This is vitally important when examining the conversion process. "If men could come to faith by the use of their rational faculties...then there would be no need of the Holy Ghost, who alone works faith in the heart."⁸ This is another significant boundary of reason in relationship to faith. For, as Luther humorously and honestly states, "...nothing is more fit to understand the words of God than a weak intellect. Christ was sent to imbeciles and for imbeciles."⁹ This may be interpreted that, the unintelligent or cognitively challenged among society are a wonderful symbol within this word picture to show Christians how truly each and every person, in comparison with God's awe-inspiring wisdom, is a complete "imbecile." This leaves no room for pride in one's efforts to reason, as it should be.

However, during the time of the Reformation, the Church did just that—managed to find pride in human efforts of reason. As the Lutheran Confessions discuss issues at the time of the Reformation, "...the scholastics have followed the philosophers. Thus they teach only the

righteousness of reason—that is, civil works—and maintain that without the Holy Spirit reason can love God above all things.”¹⁰ This was manifested within the Catholic Church in the idea that people could merit forgiveness of sins by the reason within them, in its sorrow over sin, prompting them to perform acts of love for God. Examples of this that existed within the Church at this time are: abuses of the Mass (such as holding masses for the dead), monastic vows (that they gained men greater spiritual merit than those men who chose to marry), etc.¹¹ Further heresy included the idea that God granted grace through these things out of necessity.

However, it is false for believers to assume that, through their reasoning, they can increase their faith of their own merit. The Bible explains that, true wisdom from God is given as God chooses, not as people see fit. “Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children’” (Matt 11:25).

Scripture specifically states that God is the giver of all reasoning abilities and wisdom. Daniel states, “He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things” (Dan 2:21b-22). Therefore, due to the unique and personal nature of the reasoning abilities that God grants to each of His children, it would display a blatant disregard for God’s gifts of intellect for believers to throw their intellectual abilities aside when pondering aspects of their faith that can well be aided by reason. The Lord gives to each person as He sees fit in all things, including understanding of faith. Reason, while not to be placed upon the highest spiritual pedestal, does indeed serve a wonderful purpose in explanation and understanding of faith at times, especially in connection with practical levels of comprehension.

This is exemplified in the idea that “since God has spoken to [people] in human language, he also wants to be understood by [them] according to the rules of language, according to human

grammar. The elements of speech are to be grasped as what they are, nouns as nouns, adjectives as adjectives, verbs as verbs, conjunctions as conjunctions.”¹² God Himself is logical in the means by which He conveys his message verbally as He inspired the gospel writers. Humans know, through countless biblical examples, that God is a God of order and therefore, logic. For example, the universe is run in an orderly fashion. Days are always a 24-hour span of time (or very close to this), the sun always rises, the sun always sets, and all of these examples are established immediately from the beginning of God’s created world (Gen 1). During the days of creation, God created everything in a specific *order*, as well, for the highest benefit and purposes of His created beings.

True, not every facet of the Bible may be understood or examined properly through the eyes of reason, for sinful human beings ought not to be able to fathom the depths of God’s wisdom and works fully. If that were possible, why would people need God, for they could obtain all understanding and reasoning by themselves. Appropriate room must be left in reverence for the mystery of God. God’s thinking is above that of those He has created, “for the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom,” (1 Cor 1:25). This is meant as a true comfort, and should create a greater sense of humility within Christians as they arrive at various points in their walks of faith where they cannot decipher God’s order or reason behind situations.

At times, years of experience and spiritual growth may reveal to the Christian later on, at God’s discretion, why it was that certain situations existed as they did and the Christian may see God’s direction. However, even if Christians do not ever see the reasoning of God behind situations, they are still fully able to trust that God has a loving purpose in mind because “[Christians] know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

However, Christians must be cautious not to overemphasize any one side of the understanding of God's workings through reasoning. If one leans too much upon the fact that God is reasonable, then one may begin placing God into a box in the sense that he/she always expects to be able to see God's reasoning. If he/she does not see it, he/she may begin to question God and doubt his/her faith because he/she cannot understand. On the other side of this viewpoint, if one begins to overemphasize that God is a mystery, he/she may lean upon this facet of God as a crutch/excuse for lack of motivation to study Scripture and spiritual issues, or to soulfully grapple with aspects of faith life and begin rejoicing in "dumbing down" his/her Christianity. This is inappropriate, also, as God wants His people to be interested in Him, to love Him, and to explore the mysteries with heads bowed in reverence and humility. Choosing not to do so can lead to stagnation in one's life of faith.

A good example of why one should continue to seek understanding when it will never fully be possible is Christian marriage. God made man and woman very different, as is apparent through communication inconsistencies and struggles daily. However, to tell one's wife/husband that he/she will never fully understand the other so he/she is going to "give up trying" is completely asinine. Not only would this lead to a poor relationship, but this behavior would reflect a complete disregard, disrespect, and lack of love for the person on the receiving end of this decision. Therefore, if this is so within a Christian relationship, how much greater is the disregard, disrespect, and lack of love for God if Christians decide to "give up trying" to know him better, through the help of his Holy Spirit!

The Lord tells His people, time and again, that He wants to extend Himself and His grace to them, including extending greater understanding of Himself. He wants His people to draw near to Him through the means He has graciously established that this might be so. As Scripture

commands, Christians should "...continue in what [they] have learned and have become convinced of, because [they] know...how from infancy [they] have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make [them] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:14-15). Therefore, as Proverbs further clarifies that "he who walks with the wise grows wise..." (Prov 13:20), Christians ought to strive to grow spiritually through reading the Word, studying the works and ways of those who study the Word ("the wise" in today's Christian society), and striving and praying for spiritual growth and change.

In conjunction, these two aspects of faith life—knowing that God enables human reason as a tool through which He grants understanding of Himself at times, and also knowing that God is not fully understandable by reason—create a complex but more correct view than merely abolishing reason entirely or embracing reason wholeheartedly with faith. Thankfully, some modern theologians appear to grasp this concept, also, indicating that theology and those interested in the study of spiritual matters will continue to examine this issue.

Some "...plead for a greater modesty in theological discourse" for "A theology that wishes to answer all questions clearly and thoroughly is guaranteed to miss its proper 'object.'"¹³ This, in turn, "...is linked to a central tenet of...theology, namely...the God of incomprehensible mystery, who cannot be explained with rationalistic clarity."¹⁴ Furthermore, since God is mystery, and mystery by definition cannot be contained nor defined, "...the most [theologians/Christians] can do is provide opportunities to explore the mystery, question it, and wonder about it."¹⁵ This is as far as limited human effort can take the Christian.

In reflection, the beauty of the relationship between reason and faith is found in this—that the sinner must ultimately recognize at this point in his/her searching that all human efforts

to understand the Divine Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier must then leave room for God to work His wisdom within Christians as only He can. What a gift this is!

END NOTES

1. Arthur Jones, "Teaching Kids Faith Means Stepping Back," National Catholic Reporter 34, 17 (Feb 27, 1998): 3.
2. Siegbert Becker, The Foolishness of God, 2d ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 157.
3. Ibid., 166.
4. Ibid., 150.
5. Ibid., 167.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 165.
8. Theodore G. Tappert, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 108.
9. Ibid.
10. Siegbert Becker, The Foolishness of God: Second Edition (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 156.
11. Ibid.
12. J.P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller, The Wauwatosa Theology, ed. Curtis A. Jahn. Vol. 1. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 158.
13. Karl Rahner, "Experiences of a Catholic Theologian," Theological Studies 61 (March 2000): 3.
14. Ibid.
15. Arthur Jones, "Teaching Kids Faith Means Stepping Back," National Catholic Reporter 34, 17 (Feb 27, 1998): 4.

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