

Thinking Christianly (Part 3) – Reason

By David Fields

Defining Our Terms

Faith: The word for “faith” in the Bible doesn’t mean “*blind faith*” or “*believing things we know aren’t true*”; it means, essentially, “trust.”

Reason: “Human reason is just the power we have to organize and interpret our sense experience (what we see, hear, touch, smell, or sense in any other way) as well as the power to draw conclusions that move beyond the confines of immediate experience...”

[Reason is best thought of as] a cluster of skills and abilities, abilities to work with and process what we’re given as we make contact with the outside world and reflect on ourselves.”

– Thomas Morris

I. Reason is Possible – *An Ordered Cosmos (Genesis 1)*

“Indeed, the whole enterprise of science rests precisely on the assumption of an ordered world in which patterns can be discovered and categories established. The ordered rationality of the created world, deriving from the transcendent rationality of the creative Word, is a basic assumption – not usually expressed in those terms – of natural science. There would be no science at all without an ordered world.”

– David Atkinson

The book of Genesis tells us that God gives order to the world. And without that ordering, natural sciences would be impossible because you could never be sure that an experiment one day would be repeatable and yield reliable results the next day.

II. Reason is necessary – *Reason (Science) in the Garden (Genesis 1 and 2)*

We as humanity are given this task of being co-creators alongside of God, of “ruling” his good creation as his representatives.

Adam is working in agriculture and horticulture. Says in Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” We also see that Adam is given the task of naming the animals – the scientific work of taxonomy.

Without reason we cannot do the things which God himself has called us to do – cultivate the earth, create spaces for human flourishing, and love God with our minds, as well as our heart, soul and strength.

Orienting Points:

Reason is possible, and necessary – but also only *one* of many resources for knowing.

Blaise Pascal, the brilliant 17th C French philosopher, and Christian thinker said: “The heart has reason which reason knows nothing of.” Like, ‘heart’, that part of us that connects with our sense ‘experience’; we ‘know things’ because of our encounters with God, or through painful experiences, that cannot be taught – they can only be known through experience. The Christian view is that ‘reason matters’, but it’s only one of the ways that we ‘know’.

“The Christian view of human reason strikes a balance between expecting too much and expecting too little from human rationality. The Bible’s repeated affirmation that the world, let alone God, is too complex for our final comprehension cautions us against epistemological hubris [cautions us against arrogantly thinking we know more than we actually do know, or even can know].”

– John Stackhouse

1. We can have a measured sense of confidence in the scientific method – the process of developing hypotheses, creating a detailed plan for study, doing the experiments, and then subjecting the findings to rigorous peer review.

Common Grace: Common grace means that God ‘graces’ or ‘gifts’ humanity in general.

“The doctrine of common grace is the teaching that God bestows gifts of wisdom, moral insight, goodness, and beauty across humanity, regardless of race or religious belief. James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” That is, God ultimately enabling every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty – no matter who does it.”

– Tim Keller.

There is this helpful maxim that we need to reckon with: **“All truth is God’s Truth.”**

That’s what Paul is doing when he quotes Greek philosophers in his sermon in Acts 17. He sees what they say as having grabbed a little corner of the truth – and Paul can affirm that. But he shows how it’s connected to the much bigger story of God’s work.

2. Previously held scientific knowledge is continually being challenged and sometimes overturned by new research.

That should mean that we are also not *overly confident*. To function in the world, we will have to trust the best of the current science, and to give most credence to those ideas that find consensus in the world of peer review. But even so, we should not see scientific findings as ultimate or ‘finished’.

3. Though ‘reason’ includes thinking logically and carefully about all areas of the world, including theological reasoning and biblical studies, we know that *science* only deals with the material world, with the natural world and natural processes.

This means that scientific findings can never prove nor disprove the existence of God or his work in the world.

III. Reason is broken –*The Fall of Our Minds (Genesis 3)*

The pattern of living with the ‘self-at-the-centre’ – impacts every part of us, all our relationships. That includes our minds.

It requires us to be humble and self-critical

1. **Humble**, because we know that we don’t know it all. And humility is necessary to ‘learn’, to ‘generate’ new learning. It means we are willing be corrected.

2. **Self-Critical.** This means being able to ask ourselves hard questions, like: “Do I just *want* that to be true, so I’m ignoring the best information available? Am I willing to change my mind?”

IV. Reason Has a Name

Logos is a Greek word that meant something like “reason” – or even “the reason for life” – and is usually translated “Word” in English. This was seen as a ‘unifying principle.’ But by the first century, many of the Greek philosophers were doubting that we could find any ‘reason for life.’

But then we read these words at the beginning of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the *logos* [the Word], and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God.” Then in John 1:14 we find out the identity of this “logos” the “reason for life” – “And the *logos* became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The *logos*, the reason, the Word is Jesus. God himself, come in the flesh. He is the ultimate source of all true wisdom and truth – and “in him all things hold together”, as Paul says in Colossians 1:17.

Here's what this means: The way to be truly in line with the truth, to live ‘truthfully’, is by following this One – the one who came to give his life in love for others. When we do that, when we make our decisions based out of his way of being, we are ‘more in tune’ with life as it was designed to be.

Jesus, who comes to us in love, now says to us – all of us: “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and **learn from me**, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” – Matthew 11:28

The One who is “Reason” himself says, “Come to me. Follow me. I’ll teach you how to live.”

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions

Open Up:

1. When you think about “human reason”, how have you typically thought about that in relation to your faith? (Positive? Negative? Mixed? Something different?).

Dig In:

2. In the message we looked at how God’s ordering of the world makes reason ‘possible,’ and how the God-given task of ruling/having dominion means that reason is ‘necessary’. Discuss the ways you have seen reason to be a necessary part of your good work in the world?
3. In what areas of your life do you need to engage the realm of ‘reason’ more regularly?
4. Genesis 3 describes the ‘fall’ of humanity – a fall that includes our minds (theologians call this the “noetic fall” – based on the Greek word for mind being *nous*). In the message we saw that the fallenness of our minds impacts our ability to ‘see clearly’, and also affects our biases – that we tend to see what we want to see, and even downplay information or data that doesn’t suit what we desire. How does this challenge you toward ‘humility’ and ‘self-critique’ with regards to your thinking on important matters?

Take home:

5. **Read Philippians 4:8-9.** Here Paul says that we are to “think on these things.” The Greek word for “think” here is *logizomai* – it’s where we get the word ‘logic’ from. These ‘virtues’, however, are not self-evident: they need to be interpreted according to a certain story – the story of Jesus’ self-giving that we find in Philippians 2:5-11. Take time this week to commit this verse to memory and consider how the story of Jesus gives you more insight into how to live out these virtues.

Prayer:

Take some time to pray for your group members as they share requests. Pray also for the areas that you discussed in the discussion – about areas you would like to grow more in.