

Faith and Reason

Introduction

Martin Luther said, in a treatise on reason, that reason should be dispatched to the toilet (his language was more colourful). He was combating the medieval schoolmen who taught that the Bible was to be understood by reason and logic; that man could penetrate God's wisdom by the mind, with naturally occurring infused grace, and that godliness was a Semi-Pelagian matter of will. The scholastics, therefore, used Greek philosophy to reconcile faith and reason, which angered Luther.

This may seem odd to people who know that Luther was a university professor who used rational arguments a great deal and who wrote books that evidenced considerable rational thought. Indeed, Luther could marshal logical arguments so well that his Catholic academic opponents could not withstand him – and thus the Reformation was born.

This gives us cause to discuss exactly what role reason and logic plays within Christianity as it confuses some. Reason is both to be rejected in certain areas but utilised in others.

Where reason is to be avoided

Essentially, reason is of no use in coming to God to find salvation. Man cannot find God by will and logic alone. Indeed, coming to God is considered foolishness by the wise of this world:

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. 1 Cor 1:18

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 1 Cor 1:21

We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness. 1 Cor 1:23

The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Cor 2:14

The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. 1 Cor 3:19

The doctrine of total depravity means that every part of man's nature has been corrupted by sin and cannot help him come to God. The fleshly mind is blinded by sin. Man's very understanding is perverted and dark regarding spiritual truths. When 'wise' Epicurean and Stoic philosophers heard the Gospel for the first time, they thought it was babbling (Acts 17:18).

This is why salvation is not a matter of human will, and thus both Pelagianism and Arminianism are wrong. In Pelagianism the will is sufficient to be saved; in Arminianism (Semi-Pelagianism) the will is the driving force to initiate salvation as a co-operative agent.

For My people are foolish, they have not known Me. They are silly children, and they have no understanding. They are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge. Jer 4:22

The understanding of natural man, tainted by the corruption of sin, is dark about godliness; it does not comprehend the things of God.

No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. 1 Cor 2:11

Who has known the mind of the LORD. 1 Cor 2:16

For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counsellor? Rm 11:34

When man fell, his mind was darkened and disabled.

God gave them over to a debased mind. Rm 1:28

Man cannot know God unaided because his very heart is corrupted.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? Jer 17:9

This explains Luther's passion to denigrate reason in the sense that by it a man can find God. He cannot. Thus the theological structures of the medieval scholastics, driven by a desire to wed Biblical doctrine with Aristotelian logic, was abhorrent to Luther.

Reason and logic are founded upon the qualities of the mind and the fleshly mind cannot discern the things of God. It is part of the man that needs saving. The fleshly mind is part of the carnal heart that is defiled and futile.

To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled. Titus 1:15

You should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind. Eph 4:17

Indeed the fleshly mind is the enemy of God:

The carnal mind is enmity against God. Rm 8:7

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works. Col 1:21

This is why the Gospel brings with it the gift of a changed mind. Repentance (a change of mind) is the first act of this sound mind.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. 2 Tim 1:7

And the Christian must ensure that his mind is constantly renewed to continue thinking God's thoughts.

Be renewed in the spirit of your mind. Eph 4:23

The Gospel must come in power, not mere words

Thus those who teach that the Bible can be understood by human logic, or that salvation can be found by mental activity, or that God can be understood by a fleshly mind are all liars. The unregenerate man cannot find God by human strength.

So then *it is* not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. Rm 9:16

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. Jn 1:12-13

It is by God's will, not human will, that we are saved:

Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth. Jm 1:18

So, human will, a fleshly mind, human logic, natural reason – all cannot assist in understanding God, the Bible or salvation. Indeed, to be saved, human logic must be first dispensed with and a man come to Christ by faith alone.

How is this achieved? It is achieved by the power of God in the word of the Gospel. When a man is called by God in the Gospel proclamation he is given power to be converted by the Holy Spirit. He is drawn by God (Jn 6:44), regenerated by the Spirit (Titus 3:5), sanctified by the Spirit (1 Cor 6:11) and justified by faith in Christ (1 Cor 6:11). Thus all the power in the salvation of man is in God alone (1 Cor 1:18).

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. Rm 1:16

Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. 1 Thess 1:5

Salvation comes to the weak, the childlike, and the needy in spirit.

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. 1 Cor 1:26-29

When you trust in your own logic and power you are unable to receive the grace of God. Those who receive salvation must first come to God utterly dependent upon his help and mercy. As Jesus said, we must come as a little child, just trusting with no prior understanding.¹

Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Matt 18:3

Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it. Mk 10:15

Conclusion

Luther was right. Reason (as with all the powers of fleshly man) is of no use whatsoever in coming to God for salvation, understanding the Bible or knowing God. These are spiritual matters that the fleshly mind cannot comprehend.

When intellectual powers are useful

In short, reason, logic, understanding, and rational investigation are vital in the Christian that is already saved and seeks to understand God and the Bible more thoroughly. This means that didactic instruction is of great value for the regenerate.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to speak about '*logic on fire*' in the context of prophetic ministry (usually in terms of evangelism for him). This is a good euphemism for the Christian's utilisation of the mind under the power of the Holy Spirit to achieve change in people.

¹ Note that this means that the doctrine of preparationism is not Biblical. You cannot be gradually schooled into conversion by learning more and more doctrine. However, Bible study is always beneficial but coming to God cannot be schooled over time by mental appropriation; a seeker must come in desperation for mercy. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.' Matt 5:3-4

Having been converted, and seeking to serve God, all the faculties of the person can now be used in the service of God. The sound mind, the clean heart, the changed will, pure emotions, can all serve God and achieve great things. The whole man is a clean vessel for the Lord's use.

Therefore if anyone cleanses himself ... he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. 2 Tim 2:21

Thus we are told to use our minds to do good things.

Gird up the loins of your mind. 1 Pt 1:13

Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. Col 3:2

With one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. Phil 1:27

For 'who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?' But we have the mind of Christ. 1 Cor 2:16

Didactic teaching

Because Christians have a sound mind, the gift of teaching in the church is very important. Believers need instruction in the things of God. Through teaching, their mind is renewed and stretched to enable them to learn more about God's attributes, law and will.

Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you. Matt 28:20

Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. Col 1:28

Bible study is merely the application of the mind to searching out the things of God. This is a worthy task. In such study we use all our powers of mind: logic, discernment, analysis, comparative research, observation, exegesis, interpretation and so on. The more we use our minds to study God's word, the more discerning we become and the better we know God. As we learn, we become able to teach those who are younger than us in the faith and thus we serve God's family. Through understanding, we become able to encourage, edify and exhort one another.

Conclusion

The powers of the mind (logic, reason, discernment, understanding) have a twofold application: before and after conversion.

In normal life the mind is used to be able to function in the world and prosper. The mind must be nurtured and developed to become mature. But the fleshly mind has limitations and it is unable to discover spiritual matters or the things of God. No man can be saved by the power of will or logic. It is in this sense that Luther dispatched reason to the toilet. Reason cannot save or understand the word of God to self-determination to good.

However, once a person has been regenerated and converted then the mind is brought into the service of God and all its powers can be used to serve God. When the intellect is brought into the service of God it can be '*logic on fire*'.

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