

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology Revelation and Reason

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In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
(1917-2005)

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4. Revelation and Reason

For the next several chapters I will describe and evaluate in more detail the liberal theologies of revelation. I shall organize this discussion under my three perspectives, normative, situational, and existential. Under the normative perspective, I shall consider the relation of revelation to reason. Under the situational, I shall discuss revelation and history. And under the existential, revelation and human subjectivity. Then there will be a chapter on the important relationship between revelation and God in these views.

I have said a great deal already about the relation of revelation and reason, and the liberal view of it. But there is more to be said.

I hope it is understood that my complaint against liberalism is not a complaint against reason itself, but against the propositions (1) that human reason operates autonomously, and that (2) autonomous reason provides the ultimate criteria of truth and falsity, right and wrong, by which everything including Scripture is to be judged.

Reason itself is a good gift of God. English translations of Scripture do not use the term reason in anything like a philosophical sense. But the Bible is full of what we call reasoning. For example, God often gives us reasons for his commands. In Ex. 20:11, God commands Israel to keep the Sabbath day “for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth...” Israel is not only to rest one day a week, but to rest for that reason. Deut. 5:15 adds another reason: God rescued Israel from bondage in Egypt and gave them rest, so they should give rest to their households. In Isa. 1:18, God calls Israel, “Come now, let us reason!” Paul’s letters often contain the term “therefore,” as Rom. 8:1 and 12:1. He uses it to indicate the reasons why God’s people should hope in God and obey him.

Even when God’s commands appear arbitrary, as in his command to Adam to abstain from the forbidden fruit, there is a reason: “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Even if there is no obvious connection between eating the fruit and bearing God’s judgment, a rational person will not make a choice that opposes God’s desires, that brings estrangement from God and death.

Service to God, then, is rational service. Service of the head as well as the heart. Those who disbelieve and disobey are not reasonable people: they are “fools” (Ps. 14:1, Prov. 1:32, 1 Cor. 1:20).

But Scripture does distinguish between right and wrong reasoning. In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), the fellow who chose not to invest his talent but to hide it in the ground thought that he had good reasons for doing so: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (verse 25). This is actually fairly plausible

reasoning, reasoning that I might well have used in the same situation. But Jesus condemns it, as not only fallacious, but “wicked” (verse 26). Reason is a good gift of God, but it is fallible, and it is affected by sin.

It is best, I think, to define reason as a human faculty, like our ability to see, hear, or touch. Reason is our ability to judge consistency and logical validity. It enables us to see whether two statements are logically consistent or inconsistent and when an argument is valid or invalid. Like our sight and hearing, it is not always accurate, and it can be distorted by sin. Sin gives us a bias against God’s authoritative reasoning. And it commits us to intellectual autonomy which, as we’ve seen, destroys knowledge, the more consistently it is carried out.

The term *reason* can be used either descriptively (referring to the faculty just described) or normatively (referring to the right use of this faculty). In the first usage, even bad reasoning is reasoning. On the second usage, bad reasoning is not really reasoning at all; it is unreason.

It is then important to ask what constitutes good reasoning. There is, of course, a close relation between reason and logic, so that we regard violations of the laws of logic to be violations of reason as well. But an argument can lead to a false conclusion even when it is a logically valid syllogism. For example, consider “All professors of theology eat rats. Dr. Clark is a professor of theology. Therefore Dr. Clark eats rats.” This is a valid argument. But because the first premise is false, the conclusion may be false as well. That is to say, sound syllogisms require not only logical validity, but also true premises. Logic alone does not tell us whether our premises are false or true. That knowledge must come from elsewhere. One cannot, therefore, judge the rational strength of arguments by logic alone. Logical reasoning presupposes knowledge of reality beyond knowledge of logic.

In the context of a biblical worldview, logical reasoning presupposes God, the author and ultimate standard of logical truth and all human rationality. Denying God, as we have seen, leads necessarily to irrationality (and to rationalism as well!).

Now as we have seen, the liberal theologies of revelation began among philosophers like Spinoza of the “rationalist” tradition.¹ It seemed obvious to them that reason should have the final word in evaluating claims to revelation. Indeed,

¹ I am here using the term *rationalist* in a narrower sense than before. In the wider sense, all would-be autonomous thought is rationalist (and of course irrationalist as well). In the narrower sense, *rationalist* refers to a distinct school of philosophy, philosophers who give more authority to reason than to sense experience. In this sense, the rationalist school is opposed to the *empiricist* school (e.g., Locke, Berkeley, and Hume), which favored the primacy of sense experience. Descartes and Spinoza were rationalists in both broader and narrower senses.

the only alternative appeared to be that we should make those evaluations *unreasonably*. I will surprise readers by saying that Christians too ought to believe in the ultimate authority of reason. But in saying this I take reason in the normative sense, reason functioning at its best. Reason has the last word, because it presupposes the reality of God and subjects itself to the “premises” of God’s revelation to us.

The point was often made (as in Immanuel Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*²) that even if an angel speaks to us, our reason must determine whether it really is an angel, and whether the angel’s words deserve to be followed. This point is just as cogent (if a bit more startling) applied to the personal words of God himself. Even if God himself were to speak to you, as to Abraham, Kant would say, your reason must determine whether it is really God speaking, and whether God deserves to be obeyed.

In my surprising mode again, I agree with this argument. Yes, indeed, our reason should evaluate every claim to revelation, including the claims of the biblical God. But what constitutes a sound rational analysis of these claims? The problem with the argument as presented by Spinoza and Kant is its assumption about how reason should function. It simply assumes, without raising the issue, that reason should function autonomously. As we have seen, this assumption must be challenged. It leads to rational unintelligibility as well as to spiritual disaster.

A legitimate rational evaluation of God’s personal words will consider the authority of God and conclude that the hearer should certainly believe these words, without objection. In making this evaluation, reason is doing its proper work in the proper way, and it is completely trustworthy.

Later liberal thinkers, as we shall see, didn’t like the idea of subjecting God to human reason, but they still conceived of reason as functioning autonomously. Indeed, it was the autonomous character of reason that led them to be suspicious of reason. So they subordinated reason to history (Ritschl, Cullmann), feeling (Schleiermacher), Jesus Christ (Barth), personal encounter (Buber, Brunner), self-understanding (Bultmann), community (Roman Catholic thinkers and some Protestants), the experience of an oppressed community (Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone, Elizabeth Johnson), hope in an open future (Moltmann), and others.

But these alternatives offer no remedy to the problem. If “history” means anything, it is a rational account of events, to be analyzed by rational people. It is not an alternative to reason, but a rational proposal. Schleiermacher’s “feeling” generated a great deal of rational reflection on Schleiermacher’s part. Certainly he intended his account of feeling, and his assertion of the primacy of feeling, to be a rational account. The same is true of the others, including Barth’s “Jesus

² Many editions, such as NY: Harper and Bros., 1934, 1960.

Christ.” For Barth himself emphasized that in our understanding of Christ there must be no *sacrificium intellectus*, no sacrifice of the intellect.

Evangelical Christians, too, should not claim that there is anything wrong with reason as such, or that it is unfit to identify and evaluate God’s revelation. Scripture never suggests that there is any defect in human reason as such. The problem with reason is not that it is naturally unfit to examine revelation, but that it is fallen. The problem is that fallen man tries to use his reason autonomously. All of his arguments are founded on the false premise that God is not the author and final standard of truth. We should not seek to be less rational, or to substitute something else for reason. Rather our reason, with all the rest of us, should be regenerated by God’s grace. Then we should learn to use reason in a new way, suited to regeneration, under the authority of our covenant Lord.

There is a certain circularity in saying that we should base our reasoning on God’s word, while evaluating God’s word. I have discussed this circularity in DKG and elsewhere. Arguments are always circular when they seek to validate an ultimate principle of thought. To show that reason is ultimate, one must appeal to reason. To show that sense experience is ultimate, one must show that this view is warranted by sense-experience itself. Similarly with history, feeling, experience, etc. Christians should not fear charges of circularity when they are proving God’s word by God’s own principles of rationality. All alternative systems of thought are in the same boat. And, as we have seen, reasoning in accord with God’s word is the only kind of reasoning that doesn’t dissolve into meaninglessness.

There is one limitation of reason that I have not so far referred to in this section. That is that reason, like all human faculties, is incapable of knowing God exhaustively, knowing God as he knows himself. This fact implies that there may be arguments that seem sound to us that God himself (because of his superior understanding of logic and because he has a better knowledge of the truth of the premises) disallows. And there may be, for the same reason, arguments that seem invalid to us, but not to God, or conjunctions of sentences that seem inconsistent to us (like “God is good, but he foreordains evil”) but not to God. (I have discussed the problem of evil and the paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in DG.)

Reason, however, ought to acknowledge the limitation of being less than divine, of being creaturely. That is, paradoxically, the rational thing for reason to do. The creator-creature distinction applies to reasoning as well as everything else. So God’s higher knowledge is a limitation of human logic, but it is also a presupposition of it and a condition of its validity. To deny this limitation is to deny the ultimacy of God’s thought and to assert human autonomy in its place. And autonomy leads to incoherence.

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