

The Heart Of The Matter

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Knowing and Believing

Christians are often called "believers," while non-Christians are termed "unbelievers." Scripture itself speaks this way: we read that "believers were the more added to the Lord" (Acts 5:14), and that they should not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). There is obviously two classes of people distinguished by whether they believe or not. It can rightly be said that what separates Christians from non-Christians is the matter of faith.

Christians believe certain things which non-Christians do not. Christians believe the claims of Christ and the teachings of the Bible to be true, but non-Christians disbelieve them. Christians have faith in Christ and trust His promises; non-Christians do not believe in Him and doubt His word. It is quite natural, then, that the gospel can be called "the word of faith" (Rom. 10:8). Becoming a Christian entails that you "believe in your heart that God raised Him [Christ] from the dead" (v. 9); likewise, "he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of them who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). Examples could be multiplied. What sets Christians off from non-Christians is the matter of belief or faith.

However, the difference between them is more than that in an important sense, and we need to understand this if we are going to do a faithful job in defending the faith. The Christian claims to "believe" the teachings of Scripture or to have "faith" in the person of Christ^[1] because the element of trust is so prominent in our relationship with the Savior. But the Christian actually claims more than simply to believe Christ's claims to be true. The Christian also affirms that he or she "knows" those claims to be true. What is involved in saving faith is more than hope (although that is present) and more than a commitment of will (although that too is present). Job confidently asserted, "I know my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). John indicated that he wrote his first epistle so that those "who believe on the name of the Son of God" "may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). Paul declared that God "has furnished proof" that Jesus will judge the world (Acts 17:31). Jesus promised His disciples that they would "know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32).

In what way does knowledge go beyond belief? Knowledge includes having justification or good reason to support whatever it is you believe. Imagine that I believe there are thirty-seven square miles in a particular city, and imagine also that it just so happens that this claim is accurate - but imagine as well that I simply got this answer by guessing (rather than doing measurements, mathematics or checking an almanac, etc.). I believed something which happened to be true, but we would not say that I had "knowledge" in this case because I had no justification for what I believed. When we claim to know that something is true, we are thereby claiming to have adequate evidence, proof or good reason for it.

The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is not simply that one believes the Bible and the other does not. People's beliefs can be frivolous, random, or silly. The Christian also claims that there is justification for believing what the Bible says. The non-Christian says, to the contrary, that there is no justification (or adequate justification) for believing the Bible's claims - or, in stronger cases, says that there is justification for disbelieving the Bible's claims. Apologetics amounts to an inquiry into and debate over who is correct on this matter. It involves giving reasons, offering refutations, and answering objections.

Conflicting Worldviews

Whose perspective is intellectually justified, the Christian's or the non-Christian's? Many budding Christian apologists approach the answer to this question in a very simplistic and naive fashion, thinking that all we have to do is go look at the observable evidence and see whose hypothesis is verified. "After all," it is thought, "this is how we resolve disagreements in our ordinary affairs, as well as in science."^[2] If a dispute arises over the price of eggs at the store, we can jump in the car, drive down to the market, and go look for ourselves at the price listed on the eggs. If scientists disagree over the claim that smoking causes cancer, they can run tests, do statistical comparisons, etc. In such cases, it seems that what we do, at base, is "look and see" if one hypothesis or its opposite is true. Of course, disagreements such as these can be readily resolved in this fashion only because the two people who disagree nevertheless agree with each other regarding more basic assumptions - such as the reliability of their senses, the uniformity of natural events, the accuracy of data reporting, the honesty of researchers, etc.

However, when the dispute is over more fundamental issues, as it is between believers and unbelievers, simple appeals to observational evidence need not be decisive at all. The reason is that a person's most fundamental beliefs (or presuppositions) determine what he or she will accept as evidence and determine how that evidence will be interpreted. Let me illustrate. Naturalism and supernaturalism are conflicting outlooks regarding the world in which we live and man's knowledge of it. The naturalist claims that what is studied by empirical science[3] is all that there is to reality, and that every event can (in principle) be explained without resorting to forces outside the scope of man's experience or outside the universe. Christian supernaturalism, on the other hand, believes that there is a transcendent and all-powerful God who can intervene in the universe and perform miracles which cannot be explained by the ordinary principles of man's natural experience. Now then, having well-accredited reports of a "miraculous" event is not in itself sufficient to change the mind of the naturalist - and for good reason. The naturalist's presuppositions will require him to dispute the claim that such an event really occurred, or alternatively, will lead him to say that the event is subject to a natural explanation once we learn more about it. Simple evidence need not dislodge his naturalistic approach to all things - any more than simple eye-ball evidence could ever in itself refute the Hindu conviction that everything about man's temporal experience is Maya (illusion). Our presuppositions about the nature of reality and knowledge will control what we accept as evidence and how we view it.[4]

Everybody has what can be called a "worldview," a perspective in terms of which they see everything and understand their perceptions and feelings. A worldview is a network of related presuppositions in terms of which every aspect of man's knowledge and awareness is interpreted. This worldview, as explained above, is not completely derived from human experience, nor can it be verified or refuted by the procedures of natural science. Not everybody reflects explicitly upon the content of his worldview or is consistent in maintaining it, but everybody has one nonetheless. A person's worldview clues him as to the nature, structure and origin of reality. It tells him what are the limits of possibility. It involves a view of the nature, sources and limits of human knowledge. It includes fundamental convictions about right and wrong. One's worldview says something about who man is, his place in the universe, and the meaning of life, etc. Worldviews determine our acceptance and understanding of events in human experience, and thus they play the crucial role in our interpreting of evidence or in disputes over conflicting fundamental beliefs.[5]

We saw above that apologetics, in the nature of the case, involves argumentation over the justification of belief or rejection of belief. And what we have just observed is that one's treatment of the issue of justification of belief will be governed by his underlying worldview or presuppositions. Effective apologetics necessarily leads us to challenge and debate the unbeliever at the level his most basic commitments or assumptions about reality, knowledge and ethics. Our approach to defending the faith is shallow and ineffective if we think that the unbeliever simply lacks information or needs to be given observational evidence.[6]

The Bible teaches us that the mental and spiritual perspectives of believers and unbelievers differ radically from each other. In principle, and according to what they profess, the basic worldviews - the fundamental presuppositions - of the Christian and non-Christian conflict with each other at every point.[7] The all-pervading sinful depravity of the unregenerate man touches his intellect as much as anything else. "The mind of the sinful nature is at enmity with God, for it is not subject to the law of God, nor can it be" (Romans 8:7). Paul's description of the unbelieving mind in Ephesians 4:17-19 is graphic. Unbelievers walk in vanity of mind, with darkened understanding, ignorance and a hardened heart. "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22). On the other hand, believers are said to be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:2; cf. Eph. 4:23-24). They now have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16) and bring every thought captive to Him (2 Cor. 10:5). It is not surprising, therefore, that believers and unbelievers - with their conflicting worldviews and heart conditions - do not really share a common view of knowledge, logic, evidence, language, or truth. Pilate arrogantly asked, "what is truth?" (John 18:38). Agrippa differed with Paul over what is "believable" (Acts 26:8). What unbelievers call "knowledge," believers shun as "pseudo-knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20). What believers call wisdom, unbelievers call foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5).

The Impossibility of the Contrary

If the way in which people reason and interpret evidence is determined by their presupposed worldviews, and if the worldviews of the believer and unbeliever are in principle completely at odds with each other, how can the disagreement between them over the justification of Biblical claims be resolved? It might seem

that all rational argumentation is precluded since appeals to evidence and logic will be controlled by the respective, conflicting worldviews of the believer and unbeliever. However this is not the case.

Differing worldviews can be compared to each other in terms of the important philosophical question about the "preconditions of intelligibility" for such important assumptions as the universality of logical laws, the uniformity of nature, and the reality of moral absolutes. We can examine a worldview and ask whether its portrayal of nature, man, knowledge, etc. provide an outlook in terms of which logic, science and ethics can make sense. It does not comport with the practices of natural science to believe that all events are random and unpredictable, for instance. It does not comport with the demand for honesty in scientific research, if no moral principle expresses anything but a personal preference or feeling. Moreover, if there are internal contradictions in a person's worldview, it does not provide the preconditions for making sense out of man's experience. For instance, if one's political dogmas respect the dignity of men to make their own choices, while one's psychological theories reject the free will of men, then there is an internal defect in that person's worldview.

It is the Christian's contention that all non-Christian worldviews are beset with internal contradictions, as well as with beliefs which do not render logic, science or ethics intelligible. On the other hand, the Christian worldview (taken from God's self-revelation in Scripture) demands our intellectual commitment because it does provide the preconditions of intelligibility for man's reasoning, experience, and dignity.

In Biblical terms, what the Christian apologist does is demonstrate to unbelievers that because of their rejection of God's revealed truth, they have "become vain in their reasonings" (Rom. 1:21). By means of their foolish perspective they end up "opposing themselves" (2 Tim. 2:25). They follow a conception of knowledge which does not deserve the name (1 Tim. 6:20). Their philosophy and presuppositions rob one of knowledge (Col. 2:3, 8), leaving them in ignorance (Eph. 4:17-18; Acts 17:23). The aim of the apologist is to cast down their reasonings (2 Cor. 10:5) and to challenge them in the spirit of Paul: "Where is the wise? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor. 1:20).

In various forms, the fundamental argument advanced by the Christian apologist is that the Christian worldview is true because of the impossibility of the contrary. When the perspective of God's revelation is rejected, then the unbeliever is left in foolish ignorance because his philosophy does not provide the preconditions of knowledge and meaningful experience. To put it another way: the proof that Christianity is true is that if it were not, we would not be able to prove anything.

What the unbeliever needs is nothing less than a radical change of mind - repentance (Acts 17:30). He needs to change his fundamental worldview and submit to the revelation of God in order for any knowledge or experience to make sense. He at the same time needs to repent of his spiritual rebellion and sin against God. Because of the condition of his heart, he cannot see the truth or know God in a saving fashion.

Self-Deception

Until the sinner's heart is regenerated and his basic outlook changed, he will continue to resist the knowledge of God. As we just said, given his defective worldview and spiritual attitude, the unbeliever cannot justify any knowledge whatsoever and cannot come to know God in a saving fashion. This does not mean, however, that unbelievers do not have any knowledge, much less that they do not know God. What we said is that they cannot justify what they know (in terms of their unbelieving worldview), and they cannot know God in a saving way. The Bible indicates that unbelievers do, nevertheless know God - but it is a knowledge in condemnation, a knowledge which enables them to know things about themselves and the world around them, even though they suppress the truth of God which makes such knowledge possible.

According to Romans 1:18-21, unbelievers actually know God in their heart of hearts (v. 21). Indeed, that which is known of God is evident within them so that they are without excuse for their professed unbelief (vv. 19-20). Since He is not far from any of us, even pagan philosophers cannot escape knowing Him (cf. Acts 17:27-28). What unbelievers do is "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). They are guilty of self-deception. Although in one sense they very sincerely deny knowing God or being persuaded by His revelation, they nevertheless are mistaken in this denial. In fact they do know God, they are persuaded by His revelation of Himself, and they now are doing whatever they can to keep that truth from sight and to keep from dealing honestly with their Maker and Judge. Rationalization and any number of intellectual games will be enlisted to convince themselves and others that God's revelation of Himself is not

to be believed. In this way unbelievers, who genuinely know God (in condemnation), work hard - even if habitually (and in that sense unconsciously) - to deceive themselves into believing that they do not believe in God or the revealed truths about Him.

It is the knowledge of God which all believers inescapably have within themselves that makes it possible for them to know other things about themselves or about the world. Because they know God, they have a rationale for the laws of logic, the uniformity of nature, man's dignity and ethical absolutes. Accordingly they can pursue science and other aspects of life with some measure of success - even though they cannot account for that success (cannot provide the preconditions for the intelligibility of logic, science or ethics). For this reason every bit of the unbeliever's knowledge is an evidence supporting the truth of God's revelation, and a further indictment against unbelief on the day of judgment.

The task of apologetics is to strip the unbeliever of his mask, to show him that he has really known God all along but suppressed the truth unrighteously, and that knowledge would be impossible otherwise. Apologetics in this way goes to the heart of the matter. It challenges the heart of the unbeliever's philosophical outlook, and it confronts the self-deception which grips the unbeliever's personal heart.

[1] It should be observed that "faith in" a person involves believing certain things about that person ("belief that"), and in the case of Christ, faith in Him particularly includes believing that the things He said about Himself and everything else are true (Matt. 7:24; John 8:31; cf. 12:48).

[2] This view is also imprecise and naive regarding ordinary experience and the practice of science, but this is not the place to get into a long and detailed discussion of the theory-laden nature of all human knowing. Observing "there is a rose in the garden" itself necessarily presupposes a number of further beliefs which are theoretical and not observational in nature.

[3] "Empirical" is a term applied to that which is known by experience, observation, or sense perception. "Empiricism" as a school of thought boldly claims that all of man's knowledge is dependent upon empirical means.

[4] We would realize this if we paid attention to the history recorded in the Bible. The Israelites saw miracles first-hand in the wilderness, but still disbelieved and disobeyed God. The Jewish leaders saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, and responded by plotting to kill Jesus! They paid the soldiers to lie about the Lord's own resurrection! The Lord has provided us with plenty of empirical evidence of His veracity, but the way evidence is treated is determined by more fundamental beliefs and commitments in a person's life. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

[5] For instance, someone who rejects the reality of abstract entities (e.g., a nominalist like David Hume) will thereby not grant the legitimacy of intuition in his theory of knowledge (e.g., as Plato did by seeing knowledge as "recollection" of transcendent forms or ideas). Someone who thinks of the objects of knowledge as discrete and clearly categorizable as true or false (e.g. Hume again) will have a difficult time arguing meaningfully with someone who thinks of truth as the whole of reality and discrete propositions as nothing more than approximations (e.g. Hegel). A person's theory of knowledge and view of reality mutually affect each other.

[6] Of course there are a few cases where what the unbeliever needs is simply the evidence which is at our disposal in favor of certain claims in the Bible. For instance, a person may be so misled by the prejudiced and hostile voices about religion all around him (from the school classroom to the popular media) that he has the unstudied impression that absolutely "no thinking person" sees any credibility to creationism, the historical or textural accuracy of the Bible, etc. His mind needs to be cleared of such a misconception. He may be quite amazed to find that very competent scientists, historians and other scholars can present thoughtful evidence in favor of Christian claims in science or history. If that is all he needs in order to give a more open and honest reading to the message of Scripture, fine. However, in most cases, the resistance of unbelievers to the evidence is more principled and tenacious than this.

[7] We will see shortly that the unbeliever does not live consistently according to his professed principles. To a certain degree this is also true of the believer. Therefore the antithesis between them is not in actuality complete or absolute, although it would be in principle.