

Is Faith Reasonable? by Dr. Aaron J. Werner

Skeptics often ask, “How do you know that God exists?” Many Christians answer, “I just have faith.” Is that a good answer? In the eyes of many, faith means believing ideas that conflict with reason. For instance, in the movie *Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street*, little Susie is told, “Faith is believing in something when common sense tells you not to.” The Bible, however, does not encourage this kind of faith. Instead, we are expected to have a reasonable faith. In fact, 1 Peter 3:15 exhorts us to have reasons (*apologia*) for our faith. Likewise, Jude 3 instructs us to “contend” for the faith. But how can our faith be faith if we have reasons for it? In other words, “What is the relationship between faith and reason?”

Christians have debated this issue for centuries. On one end of the spectrum, we have the theological rationalists, on the other end we have the fideists. Rationalists claim that our beliefs are not justified, “unless they can be shown by convincing reasons to be true.”¹ In other words, we should not believe anything unless we have convincing reasons. Fideists, on the other hand, believe that “religion is a matter of faith and cannot be argued by reason. One must simply believe. Faith, not reason, is what God requires.”² Consequently, fideists often oppose the rational defense of the Christian faith.

Refuting Fideism

I once encountered a fideist who criticized my apologetic endeavors. He said, “If you prove to me that God exists, you will destroy my faith.” Since “without faith it is impossible to please God,”³ he reasoned that studying apologetics would reduce his ability to please God. I responded, “When you sat down in that chair, you exercised faith, by believing it would hold you. Since the chair seemed to have been designed for holding men, your faith was reasonable. However, suppose that I took that chair to an engineer who proved that it could hold 1,000 pounds. Would that information increase your faith or decrease your faith in the chair’s ability to hold you?” The answer is obvious—having reasons for our faith does not weaken it, it strengthens our faith.

Defending Fideism

As an apologist, I have favored the rationalist side of the debate. However, I often wonder, “Do we need to have reasons for our belief in God to be justified?” Philosopher Alvin Plantinga argued, “The Christian ought not to believe on the basis of argument; if he does, his faith is likely to be ‘unstable and wavering,’ the ‘subject of perpetual doubt.’”⁴ He continued, “If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favorite argument.”⁵ Plantinga concluded, “And what do I do if someone does find a flaw in my argument? Stop going to

¹Michael Peterson, *Philosophy of Religion* (2001), 65.

²Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 246.

³Hebrews 11:6

⁴Alvin C. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, (1983), 67.

⁵Ibid. Anthony Flew was the world’s most influential atheists. Recently, however, he has renounced his atheism. See his new book, “Why I am Not an Atheist.”

church?”⁶ In other words, arguments must not be the basis of our belief. What then is the basis of our belief?

A Solution

I believe that William Lane Craig has developed the best answer to this epistemological question. His view enables one to hold to a rational faith—supported by argument and evidence—without our making that argument and evidence the foundation of faith.⁷ He does this by distinguishing between “knowing” and “showing” Christianity’s truth.

Craig argued that one could “know” that Christianity is true by the “self-authenticating witness of God’s Holy Spirit.”⁸ In other words, assurance of Christianity’s truth comes from one’s experiences with God. Craig continued, “Although arguments and evidence may be used to support the believer’s faith, they are never properly the basis of that faith. For the believer, God is not the conclusion of a syllogism.”⁹

Reason, however, still has a role. Although we Christians know that God exists because we have experienced him, we can also show that God exists by employing reason. According to Craig, “A person who knows Christianity is true on the basis of the witness of the Spirit may also have a sound apologetic which reinforces or confirms for him the Spirit’s witness, but it does not serve as the basis of his belief.”¹⁰ In short, reason can strengthen our faith, but it is not the basis of our faith.

The Hiddenness of God

If having reasons for our faith, increases our faith, then why doesn’t God make his existence more clear so that we can have a stronger faith? We all agree that God could do so. So, why doesn’t he? God could stand on top of the Empire State Building and declare, “I am God, and Jesus is my son. If you don’t turn from your sin, and turn to him, you will spend eternity in Hell.” In fact, the Bible says that one day God will make his existence so real that “every knee will bow” and “every tongue will confess.”¹¹ If God does not want “anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance,”¹² why does he not make his existence that clear? I think his reason for doing so is to separate those who want to follow him, from those who despise him. According to Turek and Geisler, “God has provided enough evidence in this life to convince anyone willing to believe, yet he has also left some ambiguity so as not to compel the unwilling. In this way, God gives us the opportunity either to love him or to reject him.”¹³

Conclusion

In conclusion, God does not want us to have blind faith—he wants us to have good reasons for trusting in him. He also wants us provide others with reasons to do the same.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 49.

⁸Ibid., 31.

⁹Ibid., 34.

¹⁰Ibid., 36.

¹¹Romans 14:11-12

¹²Peter 3:9

¹³Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 31.