

## 2.0 Belief in God as Properly Basic

Last time we began an excursus in natural theology. Before we consider any specific arguments for God's existence, we want to ask whether arguments for God's existence are necessary in order for belief in God's existence to be rational or even warranted. The question here is whether belief in God is properly basic.

The claim that belief in God is properly basic isn't an argument for God's existence; rather it's the claim that you can know that God exists wholly apart from arguments. This is still part of natural theology, I think, because what its proponents are arguing is that belief in God can be rational and warranted apart from Scripture in accord with natural reason; but it doesn't need to be based on arguments.

The chief proponent of this point of view today is the great philosopher Alvin Plantinga, formerly of the University of Notre Dame, now retired. He has a book that I highly recommend called *Warranted Christian Belief*. What Plantinga argues is that belief in God can be warranted wholly apart from arguments. Plantinga makes clear in this book that he does think that when you consider the arguments for God's existence, it is more probable than not that God exists. The probability based upon the arguments alone is that there is a God. But while he thinks that the arguments are sufficient to warrant belief in God, they are not necessary. You can have rational, warranted belief in God wholly apart from arguments. Plantinga calls this view Reformed Epistemology, after the Reformed theology of John Calvin.

Let's look at this more view closely. As is my habit, I put it in the form of a simple argument, even though this isn't an argument for

God's existence. It is an argument that belief in God can be warranted wholly apart from arguments. This is an argument for taking belief in God as properly basic.

1. Beliefs which are appropriately grounded may be rationally accepted as basic beliefs not grounded on argument.

- a. Properly basic beliefs characterized

Philosophers call beliefs which are rational to hold but are not grounded on argument "properly basic beliefs." They aren't based on some other beliefs; rather they are part of the foundation of a person's system of beliefs. Examples of properly basic beliefs would be things like the belief in the reality of the past (that the world wasn't created five minutes ago with built-in appearances of age), belief in the existence of the external world around you, belief in the presence of other minds like your own. When you think about it, none of those beliefs can be proved on the basis of argument. How could you prove that the world was not created five minutes ago with built-in traces of age like breakfasts in our stomachs that we never really ate and memory traces in our brains of events we never really experienced? How could you prove that you are not a brain in a vat of chemicals wired up with electrodes by some mad scientist who is stimulating you to believe that you are here in this class listening to this lesson? In fact, he could be stimulating your brain to make you think that it is absurd that you could be a brain in a vat of chemicals being stimulated by a mad scientist. How could you prove that other people really have an interior mental life like your own, that they are not just like the *Star Trek* android Data who give all the external appearances of

individuals with a mental life but in fact are just soulless robot-like automata? There is no way to prove those sorts of beliefs. Rather, these are simply basic beliefs that we have that lie at the foundation of our system of beliefs.

b. Properly basic beliefs not arbitrary

Although these beliefs are basic for us (not founded on argument), that doesn't mean that they're arbitrary. Rather these sorts of beliefs are grounded in that they are formed in the context of having certain experiences. For example, in the experiential context of seeing and hearing and feeling things, I naturally form the belief that there is a world of physical objects around me that I am sensing. Thus, my properly basic beliefs are not arbitrary, but are appropriately grounded in experience. There may be no way to prove such beliefs, but you are perfectly rational to hold them. In fact, you'd have to be crazy to think that the world was created five minutes ago or that you are a brain in a vat! These sorts of beliefs are not merely basic, but they are properly basic because of their grounding in experience.

2. Belief that the biblical God exists is appropriately grounded.

This is the way that people in the Bible knew God, as Prof. John Hick (who was my doctoral mentor) explains:

God was known to them as a dynamic will interacting with their own wills, a sheer given reality, as inescapably to be reckoned with as destructive storm and life-giving sunshine . . . . They did not think of God as an inferred entity but as an experienced reality. To them God was not . . . An

idea adopted by the mind, but an experiential reality which gave significance to their lives.<sup>1</sup>

What Prof. Hick is saying is that for biblical believers, God was an experienced reality, not the conclusion of a syllogism. I maintain that, in fact, belief in God's existence is appropriately grounded in the experience of God through the witness of the Holy Spirit. I contend that fundamentally the way in which we know that God exists and that Christianity is true is by the self-authenticating witness of God's Holy Spirit.

a. The Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit

Now what do I mean by the self-authenticating witness of God's Holy Spirit? Let me mention six points by way of explanation.

1. *The witness of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable for him who attends to it.*

That is to say, if you are a person who genuinely is experiencing the inner witness of the Holy Spirit you can't mistake that for something else and think that it is just another god or some sort of fraudulent experience. You cannot mistake it. But this doesn't mean it is irresistible or indubitable. I think it is unmistakable and veridical for the person who attends to it, but nevertheless through sin we can quench the Holy Spirit in our lives. We can resist the Holy Spirit. This experience is not an irresistible or indubitable experience for him who has it.

2. *A person who enjoys the witness of the Holy Spirit does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know (and know*

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<sup>1</sup> John Hick, "Introduction," in *The Existence of God*, ed. with an Introduction by John Hick, Problems of Philosophy Series (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 13-14.

*with confidence) that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God.* The witness of the Spirit grounds belief in God as properly basic. So arguments are unnecessary.

3. *Such an experience does not function in this case as a premise in an argument from religious experience to God, but rather it is just the immediate experience of God himself.* It is important to understand that the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit is not an argument for Christianity from religious experience. It is not saying, “We have these religious experiences; the best explanation of these is that they are genuine and veridical and therefore Christianity is true.” It is not an argument. Rather, just as you have the immediate experience of the external world or the reality of the past, so for the person who is experiencing the inner witness of God’s Spirit, he grasps in an immediate way God’s presence and isn’t arguing for God’s presence on the basis of religious experience.

4. *In certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion, such as “God exists,” or in the case of an unbeliever, “I am condemned by God” when he is under the conviction of sin, or “I am reconciled to God” when someone is born again and comes to know Christ, or “Christ lives in me.”* These are the sorts of truths which one apprehends through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

5. *Such an experience provides one, not only with a subjective assurance of Christianity’s truth, but with objective knowledge of that truth.* I am not saying that the witness of the Holy Spirit just gives you a touchy-feely assurance that Christianity is true, a feel-good experience. Rather, I am saying that through the witness of

the Holy Spirit you come to have an objective knowledge that God exists, that you are reconciled to God through Christ, things of that sort. We are not talking here about fuzzy, warm experiences. We are talking about objective knowledge.

*6. Arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth are overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit for him who attends fully to it.* A person who is experiencing the witness of the Holy Spirit may confront unbelievers who offer arguments and evidence against Christianity which he cannot answer. He may not be in a position to answer these objections to his faith. But what I am suggesting is that for someone who fully attends to the witness of the Spirit, who doesn't quench the Spirit, who doesn't live in sin, for one who attends fully to the Spirit, the witness of God's Spirit will simply provide such warrant for the truth of Christianity that it will overwhelm the arguments and evidence that are brought against it. It doesn't answer the objections; it just exceeds them in warrant and makes the truth of the Christian faith more evident than its falsity. Think, by analogy, if you were confronted with a Buddhist who tries to convince you that the external world does not exist and that this is all illusory. Any argument that he would offer for that conclusion would be based on premises which are less obvious and less certain than your properly basic belief that there is an external world. So those alleged defeaters are simply overwhelmed by the warrant that you already have in a properly basic way for the belief in the external world. My contention is that something similar is the case with the witness of the Holy Spirit.

It seems to me that the New Testament teaches the view that I've just laid out. It teaches it with respect to both the believer and

unbeliever alike. Now at first blush it might appear to you that it is somewhat circular to appeal to scriptural prooftexts to prove the witness of the Holy Spirit, as if to say that we believe in the witness of the Holy Spirit because the Scripture says that there is such a witness of the Holy Spirit. But insofar as ours is an “in-house” discussion among Christian believers who do accept the authority of Scripture, it is perfectly legitimate for us to lay out what Scripture teaches about religious epistemology, that is to say about the theory of knowledge with regard to religious truths. If you were interacting with an *unbeliever*, you obviously would not appeal to Scripture. You would simply report to him that you do have an inner witness of the Holy Spirit which vouchsafes to you the great truths of the Christian religion – including that God exists.

Let’s open our Scriptures and look first at the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. According to Galatians 3:26 and 4:6, when a person becomes a Christian, he automatically becomes an adopted son of God and is indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Paul says, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. . . . And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Paul makes this very same point in Romans 8:15-16. Paul explains that it is the witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit that allows us to know that we are God’s children. He says, “for you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Paul says that through the witness of the Holy Spirit we can know that we are

God's children. That obviously entails, for example, that God exists.

Paul uses elsewhere the Greek word *plerophoria* (which means "complete confidence; complete assurance") in order to indicate that the believer has knowledge as a result of the Spirit's work. For example, he uses this word in Colossians 2:2 and in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 to indicate the confident assurance that one has by the witness of the Holy Spirit that one is a child of God. In popular Christian piety this is usually called "assurance of salvation." People will ask you "Do you have assurance of your salvation? Do you know that you are saved? That you are going to heaven if you die?" Obviously the assurance of salvation (if you have it) entails certain truths such as "God forgives my sin," "Christ has reconciled me to God," "I am a child of God," and so forth, so that by having assurance of salvation one has assurance of these truths.

So, although evidence and arguments might be used to support the believer's faith or to confirm the believer's faith, they are not properly the basis of that faith. For the believer, God is not just the conclusion of a syllogism; he is the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob living within us. How then does the believer know that Christianity is true? Fundamentally, he knows because of the self-authenticating witness of God's Holy Spirit living within him.

If that is the case for the believer, what about for the unbeliever? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of an unbeliever? The unbeliever is not regenerate and therefore is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit and therefore does not experience the witness of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the Christian faith as we Christians do.

Since the unbeliever is bereft of the Holy Spirit, does this mean that he has to rely on arguments and evidence in order to convince him that Christianity is true? I think the answer is no, not at all. According to the Scripture, God has a special ministry of the Holy Spirit which is geared to the needs of the unbeliever in particular. Jesus describes this ministry in John 16:7-11. Jesus says,

It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

Notice here Jesus is addressing the ministry of the Holy Spirit not to the church but to the world. He is talking about people who, as he says, “do not believe in me.” The ministry of the Holy Spirit that is here described is three-fold: he convicts the unbeliever of his own sin, secondly of God’s righteousness, and thirdly of his condemnation before God. The unbeliever who is so convicted can therefore be said to know such truths as “God exists,” “I am guilty before God,” and so forth.

This is the way it has to be. For if it weren’t for the work of the Holy Spirit, no one would ever become a Christian. According to Paul, natural man left to himself does not seek God. Romans 3:10-11: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God.” Unregenerate man, Paul says, cannot understand spiritual things – 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The unspiritual man does

not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” The unregenerate man is hostile to God – Romans 8:7: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot.” As Jesus said, men love darkness rather than light. Left to himself, unregenerate natural man would never come to God.

The fact that we do find people who are seeking God and who are ready to receive Christ when we share the Gospel with them is evidence that the Holy Spirit has already been at work in their lives, convicting them and drawing them to him. As Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

Therefore, when a person refuses to come to Christ, it is never just because of lack of evidence or because of intellectual difficulties with the faith. At root, he refuses to come because he willingly ignores and rejects the drawing of God’s Holy Spirit on his heart. This convicting power and drawing of the Holy Spirit may take time. It may take years in order for the unbeliever to finally come to Christ. Nevertheless, no one in the final analysis really fails to become a Christian because of lack of arguments or evidence; he fails to become a Christian because he loves darkness rather than light and wants nothing to do with God. But anyone who does respond to the drawing of God’s Spirit with an open mind and an open heart can know with assurance that Christianity is true, because God’s Spirit will eventually convict him that it is true. Listen to the words of Jesus in John 7:16-17 – I think two of the most remarkable verses in the New Testament. Jesus said, “My

teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." Here Jesus said that if anyone is truly seeking God, if his will is to do God's will, then he will know whether his teaching is from God or Jesus is just speaking of his own opinion. Jesus is affirming here that if anyone truly wants God's will – is truly seeking God – then he will come to know that Jesus' teaching truly is from God.

So then, I think, for the unbeliever as well as for the believer, it is the testimony of God's Spirit that ultimately assures him of the truth of Christianity. The unbeliever who is truly seeking God will be convinced of the truth of the Christian message.