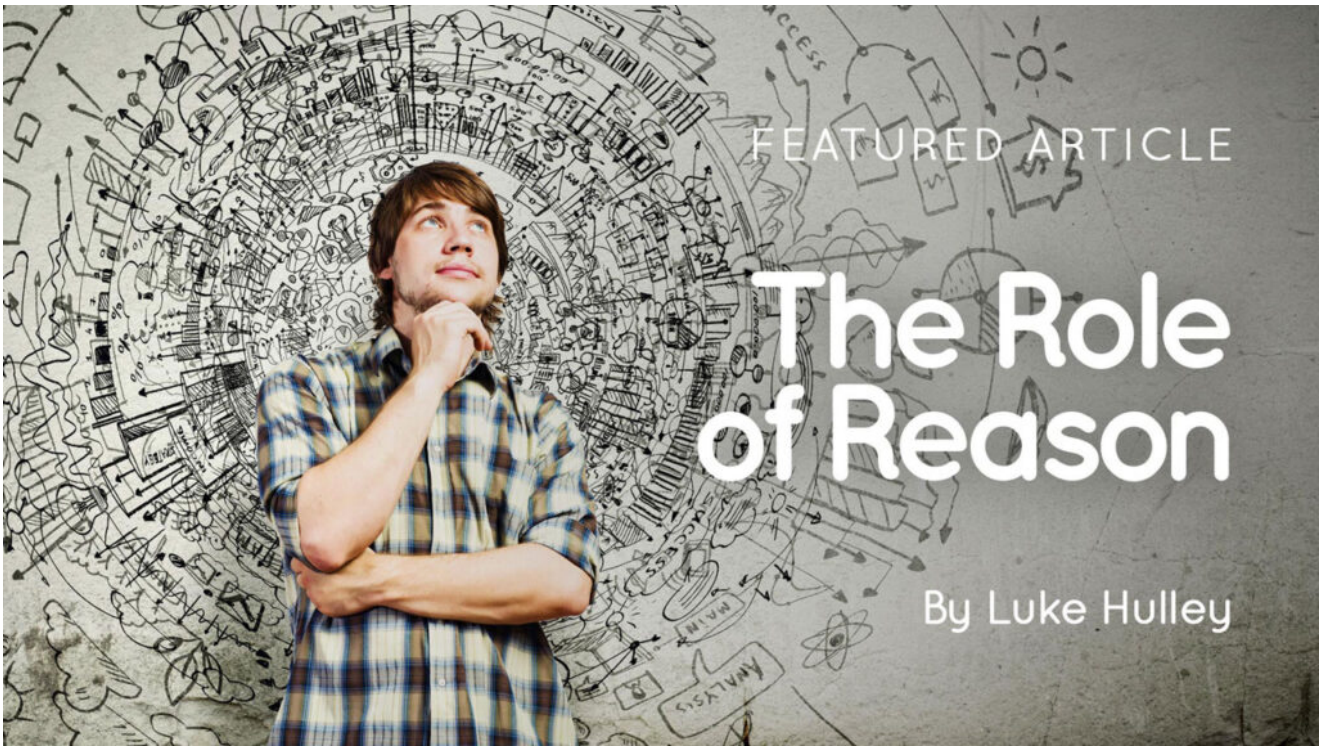
The Role of Reason

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As one of the many good things that God has given us, why is it that our rational minds seem to trip us up so often in our journey following after God? The story of Abraham having a son through his servant girl, Hagar, is often held up as the quintessential example of trying to 'make a plan' to accomplish something which God has promised, but, let's be honest, our desire to understand how it's all going to work out is one of those typically human attributes that seems to get us all into trouble from time to time.

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It would be wrong to paint our faith as 'anti-intellectual' – after all, God gave us reason for a reason! And yet when our desire to understand becomes more important to us than it should, it quickly begins to de-rail our walk with God. In Western culture (which has its roots in the great Greek civilization of history), our preoccupation with wanting to understand can easily raise itself up to the point of becoming an idol.

Intellectual Pride in the Corinthian Church

In Paul's letters to the Corinthian church, there is a story-behind-the-story which peeks out throughout his letters regarding their own struggle with intellectual pride. Let's take a look and see what we can learn. These passages at the beginning of 1 Corinthians are leading up to something:

'Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.' (1 Corinthians 1:17)

'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.' (1 Corinthians 1:20,21)

As you read through these letters, the words 'folly', 'foolish' and 'weak' come up a lot. Paul is actually addressing some issues that came up after his visit to their church. It turns out that they had been disappointed with Paul – with his ministry and with his preaching style. They had expected something different, something more.

The clue to their disappointment lies in the verse already quoted (chapter 1:20). He did not compare favourably with:

- "the one who is wise" – these were the sages of their time, the philosophers,
- "the scribe" – the men of learning,
- "the debater" – the sophists and the Greek academics.

> Their outward appearance was very important because it was also a part of the act.

The Sophists

The sophists were the public speakers of the day who would wow the crowds with their incredible way with words. It seems that the false preachers had adopted a similar style and so Paul seemed to be falling far short. These speakers would appeal to people's emotions through rhetoric and beautiful language. They would appeal to their intellect through sophisticated use of argumentation, philosophy and logic. Their outward appearance was very important because it was also a part of the act. This manner of speaking was well received in Corinth because it appealed to the Greek mind, which exalted reason to the level of idolatry. In response to this Paul says,

‘And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, **so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God**.’ (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Paul, to his credit, did not adapt his manner of speaking to feed into an unhealthy expectation on their part. He recognised that they were building on a faulty foundation.

The Power of The Word

Paul intentionally kept his message and his speaking style simple, because if the basis of our faith is that we become convinced by a compelling argument, our faith won’t last. All it will take is a compelling counter-argument and our whole ‘house’ will come crashing down. If, however, the basis of our faith is a revelation of God in Christ, our faith will last. Ultimately the storms of life will test the foundations of our faith and reveal what it is truly built upon.

> Do we believe that the Word of God carries its own power?

Paul felt so passionately about this that he said that his intention was ‘to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, **lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power**‘ (1 Corinthians 1:17). Do we believe that the Word of God carries its own power? We do not need to:

- ‘**Soften it’** – when it is not culturally appropriate
- **‘Polish it’** – when it sounds a bit foolish
- **‘Strengthen it’** – with appeals to philosophy and logic

If we do this, we actually empty it of its power! So what can we learn from the mistakes that the Corinthian churches made?

> What changed in us that God’s Word became ‘foolishness’?

Paul later went on to say, ‘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. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” (1 Corinthians 1:18,19)

This raises two important questions:

1. Why is the Word foolish to some and salvation to others?
2. Why does God 'frustrate' the intelligence of the intelligent?

What changed in us that God's Word became 'foolishness'? We get a glimpse into this mystery in Rom 1:21-23, 'For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.'

The key phrase in this passage is 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools'. Our mistake was attempting to make sense of the world without God. We put our 'faith' in our own understanding rather than in God. Jesus put it this way when He was speaking about the Pharisees, 'For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind may see and those who see may become blind.' (John 9:39) This means that in order to gain wisdom, we first need to acknowledge our 'blindness'.

In The Light of God's Revelation

There is a very famous quotation by William James which says, 'The philosopher is likened to a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that is not there.'

It is fascinating that the Bible makes use of a similar analogy when it says of Jesus that He is 'the light that came into the world'. Our ability to think and reason is comparable to 'eyes', but without the 'light' of God's revelation, we are as good as blind.

The Bible speaks about the philosophies of this world as vanity or futility, which means that human wisdom does not achieve its purpose. It is not able to ultimately answer the questions which really matter.

The Rightful Place of Reason

The pitfall we fall into, even as Christians, is that we think truth is 'self evident' and if we can only have enough access to the facts, we will be able to gain wisdom by putting all the pieces together in our minds. Yet again we fall into the trap of over-estimating our ability to 'figure things out'. There is a beautiful quotation from a very famous ancient theological called Anselm of Canterbury that sums up so much of what I am trying to convey here,

'Lord, I am not trying to make my way to Your height, for my understanding is in no way equal to

that, but I do desire to understand a little of Your truth which my heart already believes and loves. I do not seek to understand so that I can believe, but I believe so that I may understand; and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe, I shall not understand.'

There is a vital truth hidden in here:

- When my faith is in **the revelation of God** in Christ – God begins to teach me
- When my faith is in **my understanding** – God will frustrate my 'intelligence'

Signs of Intellectual Pride

So how can we recognise when we have begun to build upon the wrong foundation?

1.

Searching for Principles Rather Than a Person

Our faith is based upon a relationship with the person of God. We study to learn about Him and His ways so that we can know Him and worship Him well.

As soon as we find ourselves studying our Bibles in an attempt to 'crack the code to success' (however you define success), Jesus has actually become a means to a 'greater' end.

1.

God's Word Often Seems a Bit Foolish

If you find that your faith takes a knock every time you encounter a 'hard to understand' passage, this is a sign that you are 'seeking to understand in order that you may believe' and your faith is built upon your own ability to reason.

1.

Studying to Stimulate the Intellect

The study of theology can easily become just another ‘ology’. Instead of a source of awe and worship, God becomes an intriguing ‘subject matter’. When we listen to sermons or study our Bibles, our posture should be one of wanting to know God and to hear His voice. This will keep us from becoming unfruitful in our faith.

1.

Factions and Controversies

We see that the Corinthian church fell victim to this as a consequence of their intellectual pride. Paul’s admonition to them is that the goal is love, because ‘knowledge puffs up, love builds up’.

1.

Titles Mean Wisdom

If we measure wisdom according to the letters in front of a person’s name, we have missed God’s definition of true wisdom. The Corinthians wanted a ‘letter of reference’ from Paul, yet his reply was, ‘You are my reference letter!’ His point was that we judge wisdom by the fruit of a person’s life and ministry not by how knowledgeable they are or how many references of commendation they have.

1.

Intellectual Elitism

As soon as we begin to think of ourselves as superior to others because of our knowledge or our grasp of the ‘deeper truths’, we have missed God’s value system. God is a relational person who cares much more about love than about the accumulation of knowledge.

1.

Understanding to Gain Control

Because the world is a scary, unpredictable place, we begin to put our confidence in our ability

to ‘make a plan’ rather than putting our trust in God who knows what is still unknown to us.

‘Teach Me Your Ways’

David maybe said it best when he said, ‘In you, Lord my God, I put my trust. I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame… Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.’ (Ps 25:1,2,4,5)

I would leave you with this question, ‘Do you seek to understand so that you can believe? Or do you believe based upon God’s revelation and now you seek understanding so that you can worship him well?’

Your reasoning abilities need not be a hindrance to your faith in God, so long as it keeps its rightful place. Let us fully submit our reason to the lordship of Christ that He may use us (and our minds) for His glory.

Related Resources:

- Counterfeit Christianity
- Deception & Compromise
- Falling Away Through False Teaching
- Signs of Immaturity
- The War on Culture