

The Gift of Reason and the Aid of Revelation

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Whether "reason" or "faith" takes priority in the conversion of a Christian requires definition of both terms and analysis of both in their relationship to "revelation." Rice asks: How does man come to show faith in God? Is his decision an extension of reason? Or is his decision independent from, and prior to, reason? Rice decides for the latter — stressing what he calls the basic tension between reason and faith, because reason cannot enable a man to understand God.

I believe that Rice develops a nonexistent problem — because, in his desire to narrow his field of consideration, he discusses reason and faith independently of revelation. But God's revelation of himself appeals to reason also, whether it be through nature, conscience, or inspired prophecy. Human reason, guided by the Holy Spirit, understands this revelation; faith then acts on it, because God, to some degree, is now realized and understood. Faith in any degree is essentially trust, and trust is based on understanding.

Further developing his theme, Rice stresses the difference between Augustine's emphasis that we must believe in order to understand and Thomas Aquinas's desire to build faith on reason. It is true that this difference of emphasis is a continuing theme in Christian history (nowhere more so than in the controversial period that followed Aquinas's great work); but it is necessary to remember that the tasks facing these two individuals were altogether different. Augustine wrestled with the inward problem of concupiscence and sought to provide the Latin church with a firm theology during the troubled early fifth century when the Roman empire was foundering. Aquinas endeavored to equate established church dogma with the new learning issuing from the Moslem and Grecian East. These scholars of the church must be viewed in relation to their times and circumstances.

Throughout the development of his paper, Rice emphasizes that we will see

truth in our own way because we order our facts differently and view them in different perspectives. Consequently, faith cannot build on reason. To demonstrate this view, he uses some strange illustrations that seem to work against him. Particularly is this the case when he compares a doctor's diagnosis to that of a person lacking the specialized knowledge that the physician enjoys. Actually, Rice is proving that the doctor comes to the right diagnosis because he puts the facts in the correct perspective. This hardly supports the position that we can all have different but justifiable viewpoints. Here, there is a right view and a wrong view, and it is the business of sound reason to gain the correct information and so come to the right conclusion.

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God reveals himself to man so that man might have the correct understanding on which to base his faith. This principle is illustrated by the statements of Paul in the first and second chapters of Romans, in which the Apostle to the Gentiles deals with the background of faith. Paul suggests that the Gentiles are guilty before God because they perverted in their own minds God's revelation of himself, both in nature and to their own consciences. They had evidence, but they did not use it.

Similarly, explaining the Jewish rejection of his messiahship, Jesus stated, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:31). It was the Jewish rejection of evidence that condemned them. They should refuse any self-appointed messiah — but Moses and the prophets had provided them with adequate evidence that Jesus was the long-awaited One. This proper conclusion they should accept and their faith act on.

It is the role of reason to examine evidence. Consequently, reason acts first. As Rice says, our understanding of God is not complete. Our understanding of God will never be complete. "Now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). But we can understand enough to develop a rational foundation for our faith.

Obviously reason must operate first. Possession of reason makes man different from the animals. God has always wished man to serve him of his own free will. Therefore God works by persuasion rather than by compulsion. To persuade man to serve him, God appeals to man's reason. When man sees to even a small degree what God is really like, he trusts God — has faith in him.

We sometimes misunderstand the importance of reason, because we approach this quality from a Greek rather than the Hebrew or Christian standpoint. As Greek philosophy discarded earlier religious perspectives, there was no revelation of God to take the place of the earlier pagan ideas. Consequently, the Greeks approached reason from the standpoint that they must view all available facts ob-

jectively and think their way to truth. The Hebrew accepted this principle of objectivity in some things but added to it the concept of revelation. "The fear of the Lord," to the Hebrew, was "the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).

We do order our knowledge from this perspective, but it is a function of reason rather than of faith. This is precisely the point that Ellen White makes in the *Steps to Christ* quotation cited by Rice (p. 22). As he says, she is writing of the evidences of God's being and activity to confirm the faith of a believer. But when she states, "*God never asks us to believe, without giving us sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith*" (italics supplied), she infers that we should also build on these rational foundations at the very beginning. We may certainly draw from her words a conclusion that we might have justification for not believing if God had not provided these evidences.

Rice stresses that Christ counseled his disciples to have the faith of little children. Children, Rice emphasizes, are not strongly rational. His argument here is based on misuse of context. Christ does not advise a child's lack of reason. He is stressing, rather, the way reason operates in a small child. The child learns to trust and depend on his parents. This one lesson his reason will teach him. From his birth the child's parents have cared for and nurtured him. Our reason should bring us to the same conclusion about God. God created us and redeemed us. Our attitude to God, therefore, should be like that of a child to his parents. We must trust him and totally rely on him. But this trust comes from our appreciation of God. We learn this because of revelation operating on our reason.

Finally, Rice cites what he calls the evidence provided by the martyr. Here he is on truly dangerous ground. Study of martyrdom indicates that people will die for a variety of reasons. They have embarrassed magistrates who really did not wish to persecute them. Certainly they are not always justified, or even admirable, in their reasons for accepting martyrdom. Calvin martyred Michael Servetus for his denial of the Trinity. Did Servetus get his "absolute conviction" from the "immediacy of faith"? No!

Reason is the gift that God has given us to enable us to assess facts and make sound decisions. This is just as true in matters of religion as in all other concerns. The only real difference is that unaided reason cannot see or understand God. It requires a combination of revelation and reason to do that.