

What is Rational?

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the Lord” (Isaiah 1:18a).

“So he [Paul] reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17:17).

What a scam! The Enlightenment was supposedly modern man’s embrace of reason, which (secularists allege) replaced ancient and medieval superstitious and religious myths. This itself is a religious myth—a subtly anti-theistic one. The so-called Age of Reason is intellectualized nonsense. God created humans in His likeness, meaning with the power to think logically and to reason. The sin nature covers over that capacity with a thick blanket whenever man tries to think about God. But God (and God alone) is able to overcome this noetic effect of sin so that people can be saved. And God is able, by His indwelling Spirit, to influence us who follow Jesus to know Him and His will even though that sin nature remains to disorder our thinking and desires. To illustrate how sin blocks rational thought in unbelievers but how rational thought in believers is enabled, let’s imagine the following conversation between you and Joe Shmoe.

You: *Glad to meet you. What shall we talk about?*

Joe: *You claim to be a Christian. What’s the matter with you? Don’t you know that science has established that there is no God? To believe in God is enslaving and oppressive. You need to jettison such myths and know the happiness that freedom from religious superstitions brings.*

You: *God certainly exists, and we can know it. He’s revealed Himself to us in the Bible. You really ought to read it.*

Joe: *No way! Only what’s empirical is true. We know truth by what’s rational. We know truth by what we can see and observe. Believing in Christianity is irrational and who wants to be irrational?*

You: *Bear with me while I tell a story, a true story that you may recognize. Over a hundred years ago a certain man in Germany observed something strange: The cathode-ray tube he was experimenting with was giving off some new kind of radiation nobody before had ever known. He found that the CRT was emitting rays that showed up on photographic film. The rays passed thru everything except lead. He had a photograph of his wife’s hand that the rays had passed thru showing her bones. He did some further experiments then wrote up his findings and published them in a science journal. Now, let’s suppose everyone who read or heard about this screamed “No way! That’s all imagined, made up. Forget that stuff.” Let me ask you, was that man in Germany being rational? Yes or no. And was the response by everyone rational? Yes or no.*

Joe: *Yes, the man in Germany was rational in what he did because he was observing something that really happened. He experienced it. And he properly presented it to everyone else. And NO, the response by everyone else is terribly irrational because it was something empirically demonstrated.*

You: *OK, now let’s suppose that in response to that supposed discovery, five hundred people gathered together in an auditorium to see if that discovery was really true or not. And it was indeed true. All five hundred saw for themselves that it was real. Some of that group even felt obligated to go further and lay out the implications of that discovery. Now, I ask you, Yes or No, was that a rational response?*

Joe: *Yes. Certainly. They validated what was true thru observation. It made valid the knowledge of the existence of X-rays.*

You: *Joe, do you realize what you’ve just done? You’ve implicated yourself as being irrational. Jesus was put to death on a Roman cross. He was buried. And 3 days later He rose from the dead. And He was then seen alive by many, many people, as many as five hundred people actually saw Him, experienced Him, knew that He rose from the dead. And Paul also experienced Jesus and understood the implications of that resurrection and wrote it down for all to know. And because Jesus rose from the dead, everything—I repeat, everything—in the Bible is validated. So God exists, and we can know Him and know His will for us. And it’s all rational, that is, rational by your own understanding. To deny the existence of the supernatural as revealed in the Bible is . . . irrational.*

Joe: *Your analogy with Roentgen’s discovery of X-rays is bogus, though right now I can’t see exactly how it’s phony. But I’ll think of something. I’m not irrational. What’s irrational is your superstitious belief in the Bible. And don’t you know that language is problematic. And so are observations that people make. I am not being irrational. I am certain that God doesn’t exist.*

You: *God is invisible. He exists in another dimension, one that we cannot experience. We're limited to this space-time world. So God has to reveal Himself for us to know that He is really there. He's done that. And that's perfectly rational. Why is that so difficult for you?*

Joe: *We have to know what's true only if we can see it, hear it, experience it. Otherwise, we cannot know if whatever it is, is really true. Your "revelation" doesn't count as truth.*

You: *Revelation is true depending on the truthfulness of the one doing the revealing. God is holy and cannot lie. He knows the spiritual dimension in which He lives. We don't and can't—unless He reveals it. You're being irrational again.*

Joe: *I don't think you understand what reason is. There's no point continuing with this. Good-bye.*

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In this scenario, Joe Shmoe thinks he knows what reason is. To him, it's anything, any thought, any argument, any idea that denies the existence of God. *He* is the one who is playing with language. He is the one who has betrayed reason. But he can't do otherwise because of His innate sin nature. Only the Spirit of God can access his soul to change his heart so that he begins to desire God, and then he'll repent of his irrationality. Paul did his part in this process at Mars Hill in Athens, explaining how reason points directly to Christ.

The problem that's nearer and more concerning is all the irrationality that exists in our world of evangelicalism. It's just as foolish, just as absurd (and just as wicked) as Joe Shmoe's veiled rebellion against God. It's this: We refuse to obey Christ. We claim to acknowledge Him as Lord, we sing of Him as Lord, we hear about His lordship preached every Sunday, yet we refuse to live as if He really were Lord. We don't even know what Lordship is or means! We claim that the Bible is truth, yet we refuse to live what it demands. And I suspect we don't even want to know. Worse: We claim to believe in the Gospel as a free gift to all and a resurrection to eternal life or to judgment and a hell, yet we keep these things to ourselves as if nobody else in the world should know them. All the Joe Shmoes of the world have not only an intellectual problem but a moral problem. And so do we. And perhaps ours is worse.

Let me ask, Why all the Hebrew Scripture devoted to the period of the monarchy? It's one bad king after another. Even the so-called good kings were also bad. What's the lesson in all that? Is it that failure is inevitable if humanity tries to rule, and that we need to wait for the Messiah-King to come? OK, yes, of course. But I suggest there's something more. It's this, There must be in us a mind that understands God's will, a heart devoted to Him, and a will that obeys Him—or else failure, rebellion, and judgment necessarily result. God held those failed kings accountable. They were all acting irrationally because they knew God's will (or should have), but they ignored it.

Day and night, the Psalmist meditated on the Scriptures that he had (Psalm 1:2). Why? So that he might fully grasp the Word of God and all that it implied, and so to live it to God's glory. The prophets first understood then applied the Scripture they had for the people of their time. We today must do the same. We need to think deeply about Scripture and how to apply it to life today. And then live it. We're accountable also; to ignore our revealed responsibility is the height of irrationality. When God says, 'Let us reason together' He intends for us (1) to know His truths and His will, that they are good and wise; and (2) to understand that we're expected to live them, because not to is folly.

Jesus has not withheld warnings. In love He made His demands *and warnings* explicit and clear. Almost all the parables in the Gospels have a hook, a warning. Several times, Paul warns of accountability. The Book of Hebrews has one warning after another. The Book of Revelation is one massive warning. We've been warned! To ignore warnings is irrational.

If we're to follow Jesus, we're called to a life radically different from anything our unbelieving neighbors can even imagine. That kind of life isn't only for a few who desire deeper spirituality. No, it's the normal life for all who claim to believe in the unique, exalted Son of the living God. So, let's be faithful, and rational.