Chapter 2.8

A Critique of Reformed Epistemology

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The model of epistemology being advocated in Knowing Our God puts our God-given reason at the center of the process by which we gain our beliefs. In fact, we would suggest that we have reasons, and have therefore reasoned to, all of our beliefs. Our view can generally be labeled as evidentialism. This perspective claims that God has made us in such a way that the strength of our beliefs are directly dependent on the kind and amount of evidence we have for them.

This view has most recently been countered by what has become known as Reformed epistemology. We hesitate to even enter a discussion on Reformed epistemology because of its relative complexity, but because of its indirect challenge to the God-given place of reason, and its growing popularity in Christian theology, we will address it here. We have already encountered this view in our discussion of its skepticism regarding the certainty of anything, including the Gospel.

While there is some complexity to this view, it essentially asserts that humans possess innate beliefs, which are “built in” so to speak, in the human psyche. In particular, it is claimed that beliefs such as God’s existence are among these innate beliefs and do not require any reasoning. They are therefore believed without reasons or evidence, but rather, are “basic.” Accordingly, the Christian apologist Gary Habermas writes, “the heart of the Reformed epistemologist’s apologetic strategy is the contention that belief in God is properly basic, and persons can be rational in this belief without having to garner evidence for their position.”

The recognized contemporary father of Reformed epistemology is the rightly respected Alvin Plantinga, Professor of Philosophy at Notre Dame. Plantinga introduced modern Christian philosophers to his view at a philosophy conference held at Wheaton College in 1980. The popularity of Reformed epistemology has grown significantly since then. Even a critic like William Abraham can write: “Plantinga's strategy to construe belief in God as basic ranks as one of the most interesting proposals in modern philosophy of religion. Even more favorably, Paul Feinberg, Professor of Theology at Trinity writes:

The scholarly world and evangelical thought owes a great deal to Reformed epistemology. Over the past twenty-five years, work done by philosophers identifying themselves with this movement have been responsible in large part for a renaissance of Christian philosophy or the philosophy of religion. They have defended Christianity as well as clarified our understanding of many important theological issues.

All of this may be true, but our concern is that the view directly attacks the traditional view that God designed us to base our beliefs on reasoning and evidence. For example, James Clark, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, in a book which seems to have the wrong title, Return to Reason, suggests that Christians should: reject the Enlightenment assumption of evidentialism and develop a radically different conception of rationality. Let us call this Reformed epistemology; by this I mean a theory of knowledge, belief, and rationality influenced by the Reformation theologians, especially John Calvin. Defenders of this position reject the evidentialist objector’s first principle that it is irrational to maintain belief in God without the support of evidence or argument. This would avoid the pitfalls of both evidentialism, constantly proportioning belief to the evidence, and fideism, embracing belief in God in the abyss of irrationality.
Dr. Feinberg likewise reflects such a perspective when he writes:

There are many very devout and simple Christians who have an unshakable faith in God, but who could not give you arguments or evidence for God's existence or the truth of Christianity [really?]. To argue that they were not within their epistemic rights to hold such a belief, or that that belief was in some way epistemically deficient, is wrong.  

Such an anti-evidentialist view seems to be reflected as well when John Frame, Professor of Theology at Westminster writes:

A child believes that there is a bird outside his window. If you ask him to justify that belief, he would probably be unable to [why?]. Does that mean that his belief is unjustified or groundless? Certainly not! Many of our beliefs are held in this sort of way: we believe them, we have a right to believe them, but we cannot articulate our reasons for believing them. . . . If we must be able to give a reason for every belief, then we must be able to give a reason for every reason, and so the process of justification would require infinite chains of reasoning. Justification would be a hopeless task.

Evidently, the eighteenth century Roman Catholic theologian John Henry Newman felt the same, as William Abraham explains:

Newman . . . was resolutely opposed to the application of evidentialism to the life of the mind; that is, he rejected the view that we are only entitled to our beliefs if we have gone through a process of validating them for ourselves. In Newman's view, we are rationally entitled to our beliefs in the absence of consciously examined evidence. This does not mean that there is no evidence for our beliefs. On the contrary, there is a wealth of relevant evidence; but we do not need to consciously base our beliefs on that evidence for our beliefs to be rational. Thus ordinary religious believers have every right to hold to what they believe without having gone through some sort of evidentialist calculus.

If these gifted theologians are suggesting 1) that we need not conduct exhaustive research, or 2) obtain absolute certainty, or 3) be able to convincingly and clearly articulate all of our reasons before we believe something, we would agree. But it seems they are saying more than that. There is the claim here that humans possess many beliefs, including a belief in God, without reasons or evidence.

It would seem this is not just a modern debate, but the great Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas wrote in his very influential *Summa Theologica*:

Damascene says (De Fid. Orth. 1. 1, 3), the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all. On the contrary, no one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as the Philosopher [Aristotle] (Metaph. iv. lect. vi) states concerning the first principles of demonstration [like rules of logic]. But the opposite of the proposition "God is" can be mentally admitted: The fool said in his heart, There is no God (Ps 52:1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident. . . .

Now because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature-namely, by effects. . . .

To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude [happiness]. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching.

Accordingly, Norm Geisler writes that Aquinas substantially agreed with our own epistemology in *Knowing Our God* when he writes:

Aquinas held that all knowledge begins in experience. We are, however, born with an *a priori*, innate capacity to know. . . . So nothing is in the mind that
was not first in the senses-except the mind itself with its capacity to know by means of first principles [like rules of logic]. These first principles are self-evident, once they are understood.  

Before discussing our own critique of Reformed epistemology, it should be noted that we are not alone, as Habermas notes that it: “has been criticized, even severely so, by many scholars.” This is for several reasons.

First, we note that evidentialism has been by far the most accepted position in epistemology throughout the history of the Church, let alone philosophy. Along these lines, William Abraham writes, “We can begin our exposition [of Reformed epistemology] by noting that the mainstream of Western thought has assumed that it is rational to believe in God only because there is good evidence for the existence of God.” Accordingly, Reformed epistemology is liable to the charge of fideism, historically a very unpopular epistemological view. While Reformed epistemologists are quick to argue against this because of the weaknesses and dangers of fideism noted elsewhere, it is unavoidable when their central claim is that belief in God does not require reasons to be rational.

Central to Reformed epistemology is the idea of “basic beliefs,” or those beliefs that we are simply created with and require no reasoning. We would suggest that there may be some such “beliefs,” if rules of logic were defined in this way. For example, we believe that God created us with the mental capacity to recognize the law of contradiction, the foundation of our ability to distinguish anything in order to have real knowledge of anything. However, in terms of an analogy to a computer, we would describe such mental constructs as “system software” enabling us to form beliefs, rather than data or beliefs themselves. In other words, unlike Reformed epistemology, we would suggest that there is a significant difference in how we obtain the laws of logic in our reason, and how we obtain a belief in God. The former are created in us by God, the latter we learn by applying reason to divine revelation that provides evidence for God.

We affirm with the Apostle in Romans that even the unregenerate with devil-darkened reason know that there is a God, but this belief is not simply implanted in them from the womb. As he explains: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen [with the eyes], being understood [by reasoning] from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Rom 1:20). There is no support here, or anywhere else in Scripture, for an innate or “basic” belief in God, but rather a reasoned belief in God based on God-given evidence.

The real problem, however, with Reformed epistemology and others is that they expand such “basic beliefs,” or those beliefs we obtain without reasoning, beyond mere God-given “system software” for our minds. For example, it is common to suggest that the fact that 2+2=4 is a “basic” belief, not requiring any reasoning, but simply the knowledge stored in memory. What seems to be missed in such discussions is that such an equation initially entered the memory through reasoning. In other words, no one is born with such knowledge, but we learn it.

The fact that all knowledge occurs through reasoning is supported by the Evangelical philosopher/theologian and former President of Wheaton, J. Oliver Buswell (1895-1977) when he writes:

It is generally agreed in all kinds of theories of knowledge that we do have some immediate experiences which are given without the involvement of any reasoning process, without any presenting of evidence or drawing of inferences. A common illustration of such experiences is the observation of the color of a dandelion. The word "intuition" comes from the Latin word intuere, which means simply "to look at." We find given in our experience the color of the dandelion. There it is and there is no arguing about it. . . . For us it is immediate intuitive data [without reasoning]. . . .

But the Gestalt must now be analyzed. Perhaps a dandelion is an hallucination. Perhaps I am dreaming. Perhaps I have indigestion and lights are floating before my eyes where no lights ought to be. An immediate
intuitive experience is not a substantive entity. It may be a part of reality simply in the category of mental images. The analysis must proceed if we are to come to any solid basis for knowledge.

I look steadily at the dandelion. It does not disappear or jump around or become a dozen dandelions. If it did I should be alarmed. I take the dandelion in experience as a signal of something in the world of substantive entities. I do not by any means assume that the something of which the experience is a signal, is necessarily like the signal itself. Suppose I walk out onto the grass and the dandelion jumps around as I turn my eyes. 22

There is also the suggestion in Reformed epistemology that “basic” beliefs are perfectly justified without evidence. For example, they would seem to claim that there is no reasoning involved when we believe that there is a Paris, France just because our high school geography teacher said so. To the contrary, we would suggest that we have reasoned based on evidence, that the teacher is trustworthy. The place of reason here is demonstrated by the fact that if we encountered any evidence that contradicted our trust in the teacher or in their claim about the existence of Paris, we would not believe their claim.

Demonstrating what would seem to be a misunderstanding of what constitutes evidence, James Clark writes the following in support of the idea that people believe in God without evidence:

Suppose that you come to believe that there is a God because your parents taught you from the cradle up that God exists. Or suppose that you are on a retreat or on the top of a mountain and have a sense of being loved by God or that God created the universe. You begin to believe in God, not because you are persuaded by the argument from design— you are simply taken with belief in God. . . . Think of how many of your beliefs, even scientific ones, are acquired just because someone told you. . . . A great deal of what we believe is based on faith, not on evidence or arguments. 23

All of the things mentioned by Clark as sources of belief involve evidence and reasoning. First, the testimony from others regarding a belief in God or a scientific belief is evidence by which we reason to a belief. While we may not be in a position to gather all direct evidence for a belief ourselves, we were made to rely on the indirect evidence provided by others to support our beliefs. This has been discussed thoroughly elsewhere. 24

Secondly, we would suggest the hypothetical person who is “simply taken with belief in God” apart from any evidence or reasoning is simply experiencing pure fantasy. As is all the examples described by Frame and Feinberg above. Feinberg writes, “There are many very devout and simple Christians who have an unshakable faith in God, but who could not give you arguments or evidence for God’s existence or the truth of Christianity.” Who are these Christians? If they have ever glanced toward the sky on a starry night they immediately have such evidence. Likewise Frame writes, “A child believes that there is a bird outside his window. If you ask him to justify that belief, he would probably be unable to. Does that mean that his belief is unjustified or groundless? Certainly not!” On the contrary, certainly yes! If the boy didn’t hear or see the bird personally, or no one told him there was a bird there, he is quite unjustified to believe there is a bird there.

The motivation for Reformed epistemologists to renounce evidentialism is equally misguided and unbiblical. Their concern is that many unregenerated pagans have claimed that there is inadequate evidence to believe in God. This is referred to as “the evidentialist objection to theistic belief” of which Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff write:

Many philosophers—W. K. Clifford, Brand Blanshard, Bertrand Russell, Michael Scriven, and Anthony Flew—to name a few—have argued that belief in God is irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or somehow noetically below par because, as they say, there is insufficient evidence for it. Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say
if, after dying, he were brought into the presence of God and asked why he had not been a believer. Russell's reply: "I'd say 'Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence!'  

Accordingly, Clark writes:

An immediate point, touching on both epistemology and theology, that will commend this [Reformed epistemological] hypothesis to those who are religiously inclined, is the impossibility of knowing God otherwise than by revelation. This is evident . . . because proofs for the existence of God are invalidated by the arguments of Hume and Kant. 

Several responses are in order. First, we would agree that no one can know God in a saving way except by a revelation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, it is incorrect to imply that human reasoning is unnecessary in order to make such a revelation effective. Secondly, unregenerated pagans like Hume and Kant have done nothing to invalidate the evidence for the existence of God. Paul says the available arguments just from Creation are so strong that all of humanity is "without excuse" (Rom 1:20) for not believing in God. The reason that unbelievers do not believe is not that the evidence is insufficient or that we gain beliefs by a different means than evidence, but rather, their unregenerated minds do not function properly. It is a mistake then for Reformed epistemologists to modify the biblical and well established epistemological position of evidentialism simply to reflect or appease those whom we have demonstrated elsewhere to be mentally insane. 

The specific "basic" belief being espoused by Reformed epistemology is the belief in God. From this perspective, Clark writes:

Belief in God is rationally accepted immediately. It is a fundamental belief which one reasons from and not to. It does not require arguments or evidence in order to be rationally accepted or maintained and the theist has a perfect right to believe without the evidential support of an argument. In fact, the evidentialist demand for evidence is perverse, obdurate, or improper. 

Neither Clark, nor any other Reformed epistemologist can offer even one verse of Scripture to support such a fideistic statement.

While no biblical support for Reformed epistemology exists, the theological foundation for it is John Calvin’s doctrine of the sensus divinitatis or “seed of religion.” Calvin suggested that every human is born with an innate sense of God apart from either viewing Creation or monitoring their conscience. As we have demonstrated elsewhere, there is no biblical or experiential support for such a doctrine. 

Because Reformed epistemologists have cut our beliefs from their God-ordained moorings in evidence, their philosophy is not only potentially harmful, but not useful. Because there is no universal credentials for what beliefs should be “basic,” this view, as William Abraham notes:

open[s] the floodgates to irrationalism on a grand scale. Why, for example, should we not believe that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween and defend this as basic in the same way as Plantinga has defended belief in God? . . . Suppose, for example, a sophisticated dualist who believes that there are two powerful opposing agents eternally at work in the universe, one good and one evil, turns up and masters Plantinga’s technical skills. He can surely thank Plantinga for his new-found status as eminently rational so long as he holds his dualism to be basic. Even more relevantly, suppose a sophisticated atheist finds on waking one morning that the belief that God does not exist is basic for him or her.
Philosophers who have been categorized as evidentialists include Aristotle, Augustine, John Locke, and more recently Richard Swinburne from Oxford and Arthur Holmes at Regent College. Based on their writings, we would suggest that such theologians as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, R. C. Sproul, and Norm Geisler would be in the evidentialist camp as well.

Some have tried to categorize St. Augustine as one who believed we could have beliefs without reason. In response, we would suggest reading B. B. Warfield’s “Augustine’s Doctrine of Knowledge and Authority,” in The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), IV:135-225. Maybe some would say the great theologian contradicted himself, but it is difficult to read Augustine’s writings on reason and conclude that he was not an evidentialist.

For further discussion on the relationship between faith and evidence see chapter 2.20.

We suggest it is both inaccurate and unfortunate that a view opposed to evidentialism has been commonly labeled Reformed epistemology as it is evident in the endnote above that most of the great Reformed theologians in the past, and many of them today, were and are evidentialist.

Those who could be said to have held to a Reformed epistemology in the past include Plato, Rene Descartes, and John Calvin. More recent proponents include Ronald Nash at RTS, John Frame at WTS, Alvin Plantinga at Notre Dame, Nicholas Wolterstorff of Calvin College, George Mavrodes of the University of Michigan, and William P. Alston of Syracuse University. The position would seem to be particularly promoted by the faculty of Calvin College.

See the Reformed epistemology position on certainty at 2.5.E.1.a.

Gary Habermas in Five Views on Apologetics, ed. Steven Cowan, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 294.


Paul Feinberg in Five Views on Apologetics, 302.


Feinberg, 303.


Abraham, Philosophy, 88-89.

For further discussion regarding fideism see section 2.17.B. and 2.20.F.

Others view Reformed epistemology as a dangerous version of fideism as well. See

This view can be labeled *foundationalism* which Norm Geisler and Paul Feinberg define as an epistemic view of the justification of knowledge that claims, “there is a structure of knowledge whose foundations . . . are themselves in no need of support.” (*Introduction to Christian Philosophy* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980], 152.) The only point we would add is that even such “beliefs” as the rules of logic constantly demonstrate themselves to produce reliable truth that corresponds with reality. In other words, we would suggest that even these beliefs provide evidence for our belief in them. If they continually failed us, we would not trust them.

What we have bumped into here is the ancient debate between *pure empiricism* and *foundationalism*. The latter we have defined in the end note above. The former has been held by such philosophers as Aristotle and John Locke, who believed that the mind is originally a complete blank, and that even the ability to possess logic is learned, rather than given. Accordingly, James Clark writes that, “Aristotle would not allow an infant to . . . possess any a priori equipment for learning” (*Return to Reason* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990], 30). This is what we would refer to as *pure empiricism*. Along the same lines, Herman Bavinck writes:

Empiricism also appears on the scene in various forms and systems, but its starting point is always the principle that sense perception alone is the source of our knowledge. . . . The human mind, therefore, is and must be a *tabula rasa* [“blank tablet”] on which nothing has as yet been written, an entity completely devoid of presupposition. (*Prolegomena, Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003], 219).

This simply would not seem true, as a blank mind, like a blank computer, could not learn. Rather, God gives us the “software,” the logical constructs in our reason to enable us to learn through our experiences and senses. This historical view of *foundationalism* insists that God has preprogrammed us with moral and logical reasoning abilities, just not data.

Accordingly, J. Budziszewski writes in his very good book, *Written on the Heart*:

The human mind is never a mere *tabula rasa* on which the external world can write what it pleases. . . . After all, we possess not only particular and incidental truths but also universal and necessary truths-in logic, mathematics, etc.-which empiricists have tried in vain to deduce from experience. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 220)

However, there is important truth in the *empiricist*’s position that is often denied. While we would maintain that we possess God-given reasoning abilities, we would also claim that all of the data that we process in order to gain our beliefs comes to us through our senses.

Some may suggest that the human conscience is an example of God divinely preprogramming information in us. However, we would suggest that the conscience is merely another aspect of our reasoning and that it learns right and wrong from experience and instruction. For further discussion on the programming of the conscience see section 2.6.C.

Finally, we would suggest that animals, unlike humans, probably do have some basic instincts created in them that do not come from reasoning. This is because they are not capable of reasoning to the degree that humans are, and need God to implant those instincts in them, from birth, for their survival. Bees and ants do not learn to build nests and gather food, but rather, such instructions, instincts, were given to them by God. We simply do not believe there is any parallel to this with the way God has created humans, again because of their much greater reasoning and intuitive abilities.

For example, Clark writes:

[Alvin] Plantinga calls the system of one's beliefs, with their relations to one another, one's noetic structure (R&BG, 48). Consider your own noetic structure. Notice that some of your beliefs are acquired immediately—that is, without the support of other beliefs. These are called basic beliefs: beliefs that one holds but not on the basis of other beliefs that one holds, that is, not inferentially. I believe, for example, that $2 + 2 = 4$ without the evidential support of any other beliefs [do we?]; the belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ is basic for me. A belief is called “basic” because it is in the foundations of one's noetic structure; while it is not based on other beliefs that one holds, it may provide the basis or foundation for other beliefs that one holds. (*Return to Reason*, 131)

To the contrary, it is logical laws that are the "foundations of one's noetic structure" not
mathematical formulas. The former are given to us as part of our initial makeup, the latter are learned.

In our view, William Abraham demonstrates the contradictions that occur when foundationalism is used to refer to more than the “system software” of our brain. He writes:

What beliefs can legitimately be seen as basic and why? Classical foundationalists suggest beliefs like the following as properly basic: $2 + 1 = 3$; no person is both married and unmarried; redness is distinct from greenness; the whole is greater than the part. These are accepted as basic because they are self-evident. We simply see them to be true when we understand their meaning. We do not derive them from other beliefs that we hold. (Abraham, Philosophy, 91)

Again, there is a recognition here that such beliefs were originally reasoned to and stored in memory, therefore constituting beliefs based on reasoning, evidence, and other beliefs.

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21 Webster’s defines “gestalt” as: “a structure, configuration, or pattern of physical, biological, or psychological phenomena so integrated as to constitute a functional unit with properties not derivable by summation of its parts.” Online at http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary.


23 Clark in Five Views, 267, 269, 270.

24 For further discussion regarding human testimony see section 2.6.D.


26 Clark, Return to Reason, 60.

27 For further discussion regarding the mental state of unregenerated humanity see chapter 2.15.

28 Clark, Return to Reason, 122.

29 For further discussion of Calvin’s doctrine of the sensus divinitatis see section 3.2.C.4.

30 Clark in Five Views, 273.

31 Abraham, Philosophy, 94-5.