



Knowledge Tradition Experience & Reason

How We Relate To Who God Is

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Preface

Have you ever wondered why Christians believe what they do? I have and I am sure you have also.

Think about it...we are putting our faith in a book that is thousands of years old, that informs us of a Savior, Jesus Christ, so we better know what we believe. The Bible was written over a period spanning over 2,000 years with over 40 authors. Throughout history humankind has gained knowledge about themselves, the world, and God. But how do we know who God is? How do our experiences, individual and corporate, relate to our understanding of God? What about all of the traditions that we follow, do they comport with scripture or are they simply man made? What role do the traditions that have been handed down over the millennia play in our theology? Can we trust “reason” and “logic” to guide us as we look for the truth? It is these and other questions I hope to help answer in this short eBook. I pray it will help you in your journey in seeking the truth.

Chapter 1

The Nature of Our Knowledge of God

The nature of our knowledge of God can only be understood based on what God has revealed to humanity and on humankind's ability to accept this revelation through faith. God's revealed knowledge of Himself comes in four forms:

- His Holy Word (The Bible)
- The God man Jesus Christ
- The Holy Spirit
- Logical sense that we were made in God's image

It is the, the Holy Spirit, who gives "wisdom and revelation, so that (we) may **know Him better**" (Ephesians 1:17). You see, humankind's ability to accept this revealed knowledge of God is based upon our **faith as a higher knowledge**. Knowing God is the highest form of knowledge that a person can have. When I call faith a higher form of "knowledge" all I am saying is that faith is far above the ability of a person's intellect and knowledge to really grasp and totally understand it. If we could fully understand, and intellectually comprehend and quantify what faith is through some "scientific method", then it wouldn't be faith. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1). This is why our ability to know God is based on faith and that faith is a "higher" knowledge than human intellect.

Knowledge of God From the Bible

What we know about God is first revealed in His Holy Word. This knowledge is based upon an "understanding" that was given by God's Son, Jesus Christ. 1 John 5:20 states "And we **know** that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an **understanding**, that we know him that is true, and we are in

him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.” When we know Him, we have a **spiritual knowledge and understanding of who He is**. There were times that even the disciples were without understanding. In Matthew 15:16 Jesus asks the disciple “...Are ye also even yet without understanding?” So it’s not something only we struggle with, but Jesus’ closest friends who followed him for 3 years also struggled with fully knowing and understanding. With the knowledge of God, we must also have an understanding of God and we get that through God’s Holy Word. Psalm 119:104 states that “through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way.” It is through the Word of God that we understand. Paul in writing to the Philippians stated “what is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ.”

Knowledge of God Through Jesus Christ

God is also revealed to us through the person of Jesus Christ. We should know Jesus just like Jesus knew the Father. He knew the Father, because He and the Father were one. They were one in unity, one in agreement, and one in spirit. Jesus repeatedly told the people that if “you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” When the Pharisees came to challenge the validity of Jesus’ testimony, Jesus rebuked them with these words “you do not know me or my Father...if you knew me, you would know my Father also” (John 8:19). **Jesus is the revealed Word of God the Father**. The nature of our knowledge of God is based upon our knowledge and understanding of His Son, Jesus.

Knowledge of God Revealed Through The Holy Spirit

A third way, our knowledge of God is revealed is through the Holy Spirit. Knowing God is more than just intellectual knowledge. It is knowing Him deeply and intimately through the Holy Spirit. How can we know that we are the children of God except the Spirit reveals it to us? Romans 8:16 states: “the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Paul prayed for the Ephesians that “the God

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our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, **so that you may know him better**" (Ephesians 1:17). We know God through this Spirit of wisdom and revelation.

It's a Matter of Logic

There is a fourth way we can know God and it is through the logical sense that humankind was made in the image of God. If humankind is made in God's image, then naturally we will have knowledge of our creator. Is this knowledge of God complete? No, because we cannot fully know an incomprehensible God. Let me say that again, God is incomprehensible and as a human being we cannot fully fathom and grasp God in His totality. God declares in Isaiah that His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts, but God has revealed enough of who He is, that we can grasp knowledge of the nature of God.

The nature of our knowledge of God is found in His revealed Holy Word, the revealed God man Jesus Christ and the revelation knowledge that comes from the Holy Spirit. Thus our knowledge of God is based in trinity theology. If we know the Father, we know the Son because they are the same. If we know the Son, we naturally know the Spirit, because they are one. When Jesus told the disciples I will send you another comforter, He was speaking of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word "another" is "allos" and it means "another one of the same sort or kind." So when we know Jesus, we know the Holy Spirit because He dwells within us. We know God through His Spirit that dwells in us. We know God's nature because we are created in His image and when we accept His revealed Son, we are "re-created" to be like Him. The nature and attributes of God become our nature. These are manifested in the lives of God's children through the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, temperance, and faith. When we accept God's revealed Son, we become a new creature. The old has gone and the new has come.

Chapter 2

The Role of Tradition in Christian Theology

Throughout history, Christian tradition has played and still plays a major role in Christian theology and how we relate to God. In fact, the very nature of “tradition” lends itself as a major influence in all aspects of our societal and cultural thinking and behaviors; and the Christian church and its theology isn’t insulated from the impact of Christian tradition.

Tradition vs. God’s Word

‘Tradition’ comes from the Latin *traditio*, simply meaning ‘a handing over,’ and there hasn’t been any piece of literature more ‘handed over’ than the Bible and the teachings it contains. Tradition in and of itself is neither “good nor bad.” The problem with Christian tradition is whether or not we assign to it the same authority as we do the written Word of God. We have to be careful, because **when Christian tradition takes on the same value and weight as the Holy Scripture, we devalue the written Word of God** and place ourselves in a the tenuous position of teaching doctrine that may not be supported by scripture.

This isn’t the case with all Christian tradition as it relates to Christian theology. There are some Christian traditions that have influenced Christian theology that, although the support for the theology may not be ‘specifically’ cited in a Biblical text, it does have the support of an overall Biblical principle. An example of this would be the Christian doctrine of the ‘Trinity.’ The words trinity and triune are not mentioned in scripture. Yet the ‘concept’ of a triune Godhead is most certainly supported by a number of scriptural references. For instance the Father is called God (1 Corinthians 8:6), the Son is called God (1 John 1:1-2), and the Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3-4). These and other scriptures have led to the accepted theology of the Trinity in the Christian church.

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The danger of Christian tradition influencing Christian theology is whether or not that tradition is scripturally based. It is entirely possible and even probable, that some 'traditions' are nothing more than the 'traditions' of men, which is what Jesus himself so vehemently spoke against. For instance in Matthew chapter 15, when the scribes and the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of "transgressing the traditions of the elders" because they didn't wash their hands before eating bread, Jesus replied with the words "why do you transgress the command of God by **your tradition.**" By His words, Jesus was implying that some of the traditions that the Pharisees were following and requiring others to follow were merely traditions of man and not something that was from God nor scripturally based. Yet the Pharisees had 'elevated' it to the authority of God's law. In fact, many of the traditions of the Pharisees were held to be the finishing touches to the Divine revelation.

The Value of Tradition

Just because there is this danger of following a Christian theology that is based on a human implemented Christian tradition, doesn't mean tradition should be disregarded and not followed. There is a role for Christian tradition to influence Christian theology, but it has to be based on the Holy Word of God and what was originally handed over to the Apostles. For instance, the Apostle Paul and other apostles passed on what they themselves had received, and warned the faithful to hold fast to the '**traditions**' which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter and to fight in defense of the faith handed down once and for all (2 Thessalonians 2:15 and Jude 3).

Another aspect of Christian traditions influencing Christian theology is there are times when traditions and theology will change if they are based on man's authority but should not change if they are established on the infallible and unchanging Word of God. God and His Word are very specific in that they don't change. Malachi 3:6 states "For I am the Lord, I change not..." and although Revelation 22:18-19 refers directly to the prophecy of The Revelation, you can take from this verse an inference that no man should add to or take away from the Word of God. Therefore if a theology has been

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established on the authority of man or the church, then the man or the church has the authority to change that theology as they deem necessary. On the other hand, if a theology has been established based on a tradition that is supported by the Word of God, and has been handed down from the Apostles, then neither man nor the church has the authority to change it. An example of this might be the three creeds; Nicene Creed, Athanasius' Creed, and what is commonly called the Apostles' Creed. These passed on traditions should be accepted by the church and by Christians because they can be proved by God's Word. They aren't the made up traditions of men.

The Role of Christian Tradition In Christian Theology

There is a role for Christian tradition in our Christian theology, but this role must be examined on the authority of its origin. If a theology that is based on tradition is not supported by scripture, it is not necessarily wrong. But it does bring into question our obligation to embrace a belief and tenet that isn't firmly established on the Holy Word of God. Not even the apostles were free to go beyond the Word, much less their successors. Even Peter admonished the believers in 1 Peter 4:11, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." Peter also informs us, "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:19-20). All this gives us the assurance, as long as our Christian traditions are founded on the truth of the Holy Scripture, we can be certain the theology based on that particular tradition is sound.

Chapter 3

The Role of Experience in Christian Theology

All experiences, not just religious ones, have a role and influence how we approach theology. It cannot be assumed that somehow a person can devoid themselves, intentionally or unintentionally, from interjecting their experiences into how they approach and conduct theology. Individual experiences can be problematic since each person's experience and interpretation of that experience is "individualistic" and can vary greatly. Yet some authority can be given to public experience as it informs our Christian theology. As you approach theology, it would be a mistake to think a person could begin a theological study on a certain subject without including their human experiences on the matter, public or private. However, it would also be a mistake to depend upon internal or private experiences as a source of "reliable knowledge." The reason is our personal experience is subject to our own understanding and interpretation. As a result, this personal understanding and interpretation may not line up with the general and broader public reality of that experience.

This is how that might look: When a person becomes "saved" there is an implicit expectation by the church that this person is now "changed." The "old man" and the "old things" are gone or "passed away" and all things are now "new." This premise is based on their understanding of how the scripture treats the "regenerative birth" and there is an expectation that this "born again" person will now act in a certain way because they are now part of a larger religious community of faith. They have come out from the world and are no longer of the "darkness" but are now a child of the "light." The question that arises then is "what are the old things that have passed away?" You cannot imply that the persons "old experiences" are now somehow gone just because they have accepted Jesus' atoning work and God's forgiveness. If that were the case, then the person would have to have their entire memory erased. It

stands to reason that which has “passed away” is something other than our experiences and because of this, we still have “all” of our experiences to draw upon as we approach Christian theology.

As stated earlier, the church’s tendency is to separate the “religious” from the “ordinary” or you might also say the “spiritual” from the “carnal.” This separation is especially evident after a person comes to know Jesus in a personal relationship. The church wants to emphasize to the new convert the need for a change. If the church is not careful, they will tacitly endorse the idea that the new converts “experience” is no longer helpful in their walk with Christ. Our experiences pre-salvation and post salvation play a vital part in our journey with God especially if we view experience as an event.

Beware of Experience

Although experience is necessary in forming Christian theology, it can be deceptive if it is of a purely personal nature. Experiences that tend to be more reliable are those experiences which are passive and public. These tend to be more quantifiable than experiences which are of an active and personal nature. Experiences, especially as they relate to God, that are “feeling and self-consciousness” based tend to be unreliable. Feelings cannot be depended upon as a reliable source for informing theology. Feelings are real, they are what the person experiences, but they are not the same for everyone. Two people can “experience” the same event, and they will come away with different “feelings.” One might ask two different people who attended the same wedding how they felt about it. One could respond “oh it was beautiful, I cried when they exchanged their vows” and another may respond “oh it was ok...I thought it was kind of long.” Two people attending the same event and coming away with different feelings about the wedding. This happens because each person viewed the wedding through different “lenses.” We tend to have a bias based on the “lenses” we look through. If however you were to ask everyone who attended how they felt about the wedding you could get a general consensus and then there may be some validity to “feelings” about the wedding. Even though each person would have an individual bias, this bias would diminish as it was challenged by others’ bias as well.

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This would be especially true as it relates to our feelings about God and how our feelings inform our theology. Asking two different people how they feel about God will most likely solicit two different responses. It is entirely possible that those responses will be completely opposite: “I believe there is a God, but I don’t feel like I am important to Him” or “I know God personally and feel His presence in my life every day.” Individually, our feelings about God are not reliable experiences to inform Christian theology. However, if you were able to assess (which I am not sure of the practicality of this) the collective feelings of the church about God and theology, there may be some validity to the experience of “feelings,” as they inform our theology.

There is an inescapable connection between experience and Christian theology. However this experience must be validated by the broader public Christian community to accept it as a reliable source for informing our Christian theology.

Chapter 4

The Role of Reason in Christian Theology

In *The Institutes of Elenctic Theology* Francis Turretin asks the following question: “Is human reason the principle and rule by which the doctrines of the Christian religion and theology (which are the objects of faith) ought to be measured?” He answers this question and concludes that there is a place for reason in Christian theology, but if we attribute too much weight to logic in matters of the faith, we will err. Reason does have its benefits when it comes to applying it in matters of theology. Even Jesus relied on reason as he spoke with the disciples and others. A specific example of this is in the Gospel of Matthew, when He addresses the people during His sermon from the mount. He poses to the people two questions followed by a statement question: “Or what man is there of you whom if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?” Then He follows those questions with a statement question: “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” He does this to draw upon the logical conclusion that reason dictates. The inference He is making is that a father would naturally and logically give to their son what he asked for, not something ridiculously “opposite.” Jesus does this to make a principle spiritual point that just as a natural father wants to meet the needs of their children, so too does the heavenly Father want to meet the needs of His children. From Jesus’ use of reason in these verses, we can conclude that it is practical to use reason and logic in our theology in order to make some points of “illustration; comparison; inference; and argumentation.” No harm or injustice to the scripture or the faith is done when we use reason in this manner.

There's More Than Reason

Although reason has a value and role in our theology and faith, it cannot be foundational to those principles of faith. Reason and its principles are but “instruments of knowledge.” The principles of reason **assist our understanding** of the spiritual; they do not found and establish the divine revelation. The divine inspiration is reserved for the function of the Holy Spirit. Paul addresses this when he prays that “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.” Even the “unlearned and ignorant” disciples, after being filled with the Holy Spirit were marveled at and taken notice of because of the “new” wisdom they had. This new boldness and wisdom didn’t come through reason, but revelation.

Although reason has its value, in assisting one in their theology, it also has its dangers. If one is not careful there may be a tendency to “rely on the wisdom of nature” to the exclusion of the divine revelation God gives. Given the background of his conversion in Acts 9, you can easily see why the apostle Paul very ardently writes against relying exclusively on “the wisdom of this world” because he called it “foolishness to God,” who takes “the wise in their own craftiness.” Additionally, Paul writes that God has taken “the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.” He is well aware of the influence of worldly wisdom and reason on the church. No doubt this awareness comes from Paul’s background especially in his own conversion. Paul’s conversion and Ananias’ involvement were of divine guidance more than reasoned action. After the Lord tells Ananias to find the man from “Tarsus named Saul,” Ananias struggles with the Lord on the logic of looking up Saul given his background of harming the “saints in Jerusalem.” Yet through divine revelation he is told to go to a certain place and he goes and finds Saul. If Ananias were to have depended upon reason alone, he may have never found Saul.

In Tertullian’s writings he seems less than enthusiastic about the “philosophies of men” when it comes to matters of the faith. “These are the ‘doctrines’ of men and ‘of demons’ produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world’s wisdom: this the Lord called foolishness,’ and ‘chose the foolish things of the

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world' to confound even philosophy itself." Tertullian makes a valid point, but seems to dismiss entirely the possibility of reasoned evaluation as we engage scripture to shape our theology. Humankind, made in the "image" of God are to encounter God on many levels, including "heart, mind, and soul." We cannot depend upon philosophy entirely to develop our faith. As Paul warned against "ever learning, but never coming to the knowledge of the truth" we too must be careful not to rely exclusively on reason and logic but couple it with our faith and the divine.

This leads us to the conclusion, there are some truths about God that are understandable by using the method of reason. These truths however, are not sufficient in knowing everything there is to know about God. Some of the knowledge of God has to come through revelation knowledge. When Simon saw the apostles lay their hands on people and they received the Holy Spirit, he thought he could "buy" this ability with money. But Peter told him "he had neither part nor lot in the matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God." The issue was a matter of revelation knowledge in the heart of Simon, not what he reasoned he could buy with money. There are issues of faith that only God reveals not logic. St. Thomas Aquinas comes to the conclusion that "mankind would remain in the deepest darkness of ignorance, if the path of reason were the only available way to the knowledge of God." We know from experience and tradition that reason isn't the only way to gain knowledge of God. This knowledge and understanding comes to people as they encounter God in His Word, prayer, His love, creation, and the miraculous, especially in the miraculous acts of healing. There are certain aspects of faith, as mentioned prior, which take you beyond reason so that faith and the divine revelation surpass reason and logic. In other words faith and divine revelation operate in the spiritual realm whereas reason and logic operate in the carnal or physical realm. This puts faith and revelation far above reason and logic when it comes to knowing who God is and understanding what we believe.