

Rationality and Warrant

I've argued that belief in God and the great truths of the Gospel are properly basic both for the believer and for the unbeliever alike, grounded in the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Plantinga distinguishes proper basicity with respect to rationality and warrant. He argues that belief in God is not merely rational for someone on the basis of the Spirit's witness, but that it is actually warranted for him so that he can know that God exists. A belief can be rational even though it is in fact false. When we say that a belief is rational, we mean either that the person doesn't violate any epistemological duty in believing it--he is within his epistemological rights in believing it--or we mean that he exhibits no defect in his cognitive structure. He is not doing anything wrong or misshapen with regard to his system of beliefs. It is clear that a belief could be rational in that sense and yet be false. For example, if you were to meet someone for the first time and he were to say to you, "Hello, my name is Mark," you would be rational to believe that his name is Mark. But it is possible that it is not Mark. He might be lying for some reason. So you would be rational in believing what turns out to be a false belief. Being properly basic merely with respect to rationality isn't really enough. What we want to know is: is this belief warranted for us in such a way that we can be said to actually have knowledge of the existence of God and of Christianity's truth?

In Plantinga's view we do have warrant and not merely rationality. For Plantinga, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is the close analogue of a cognitive faculty. In that sense it is a belief-forming "mechanism," which can be reliable. He thinks that the beliefs

formed by this “mechanism” meet the conditions for being warranted. Therefore he would say that we can know the great truths of the Gospel through the witness of the Holy Spirit. So these are warranted for us. We have genuine knowledge of the truth of the existence of God and the great things of the Gospel.

Because we know the great truths of the Gospel through the Holy Spirit’s work, it follows that we don't need to have any evidence for them. Rather they are properly basic for us, both with respect to rationality and with respect to warrant. Plantinga affirms that “according to the model, the central truths of the Gospel are self-authenticating,” that is to say, “They do not get their evidence or warrant by way of being believed on the evidential basis of other propositions.”

I've argued that Plantinga’s view is in accord with New Testament teaching. For the believer and unbeliever alike it is the self-authenticating work of the Holy Spirit that supplies knowledge of Christianity’s truth. So I would agree with Plantinga that belief in the God of the Bible is a properly basic belief, and I would simply emphasize that it is the testimony of the Holy Spirit that grounds this belief and therefore makes it properly basic. And because this belief is formed in response to God's own witness (God's own self-disclosure via the witness of the Holy Spirit), it doesn't need any external authentication. It is not merely rational for us to believe what God says, but it constitutes knowledge. We actually have knowledge of Christianity’s truth through the witness of the Holy Spirit.

What, then, is the role of argument and evidence in knowing Christianity's truth? I’ve already said that the fundamental way in

which we know the truth of Christianity is through the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit. But a person who knows that Christianity is true on the basis of the witness of the Holy Spirit may also have a sound apologetic which reinforces for him the truth of what the Holy Spirit says. We can imagine a person who has both the witness of the Holy Spirit and good arguments from natural theology and Christian evidences for the great truths of the Gospel. This person can be said to have a kind of dual warrant for the truth of his Christian beliefs. Such a person is doubly warranted in his Christian belief in the sense that he has two sources of warrant for what he believes which are independent of each other.

I think you can see there can be great advantages to having this sort of dual warrant for your Christian beliefs. Having sound arguments for the existence of God and evidence for the reliability of the Gospels in addition to the Holy Spirit's witness could increase your confidence in the truth of Christian truth claims. On Plantinga's theory, at least, that would mean you have then greater warrant for what you believe as a result of these arguments and evidence as well as the Holy Spirit's witness. Greater warrant then, in turn, could lead, for example, an unbeliever to come to faith more readily when he sees this great warrant that Christianity has, or it could inspire a believer to share his faith more boldly because he has greater warrant for what he believes and therefore more confidence. The availability of independent warrant for Christian truth claims apart from the work of the Holy Spirit might prompt an unbeliever to be more open to the drawing of the Holy Spirit when he hears the Gospel. He might not come to Christ *because* of the arguments he hears, but nevertheless these might make him

more open to responding to the Holy Spirit when the Spirit bears witness with his heart. Or, in the case of the believer, having independent arguments and evidence could give the believer support during times of spiritual dryness or doubt when he is struggling in his Christian life and the witness of the Holy Spirit seems eclipsed. Having this independent warrant could shore up his faith when going through these times of doubt or struggle. I am sure you could think of many, many other ways in which this sort of dual warrant would be of great benefit in the Christian life.

So I would argue that as Christians we have in the work of the Holy Spirit and in the arguments of natural theology and Christian evidences dual warrant for the truth of our Christian beliefs so that we can be said to know these things via these two sources of warrant.

What we will talk about next time is this now long-delayed objection about defeaters. What about the person who has the witness of the Holy Spirit in his heart but encounters objections or arguments against his faith which he cannot answer? How do we deal with the rationality and the warrant of belief in Christianity in that kind of difficult circumstance? That is the question we will take up next time.