

## **Presuppositions and Rational Belief**

An Apologetic Dialogue  
by Keith Welton

---

### **Keith:**

Hey Matt, how are things going? I wanted to write you because in my apologetics class we have been learning a lot about defending and contending for the Christian faith, and how we can prove our faith to other people. It has been really helpful for me by allowing me to better understand and refute claims that try to destroy the Christian faith. I remember talking with you several times in the past about having trouble refuting the claims of professors and other atheists about Christianity, and at times having a hard time justifying the faith yourself. I was wondering if you would want to talk about it and maybe some of what I have learned here at RTS could be beneficial to what you have experienced.

### **Matt:**

The biggest struggle I've had with Christianity lately is the utter lack of any evidence of anything outside the material world. Christianity is based, in part, on the idea that there is another realm, a realm of "spirits of the saints", "angels", and where we can "see God" with our eyes and not through faith. I'm not saying there is not any evidence for God in the world, as you could just say that all of creation is evidence for God. I'm saying there is not any evidence for the so

called “spirit realm”. There is a distinct difference between these two arguments. To have the God of Christianity, you must have a spirit world. To merely look at some facet of creation, point out how it could not have evolved from primordial soup, or to make some other argument for the existence of a god leaves us far from the God of Christianity. It, in fact, leaves us with nothing more than the god of pantheism; we aren’t even in the sphere of “conscious gods.” With that in mind, how do I know that when I die I will not stand before Allah and be told that I squandered my life worshiping the wrong god, or that I’ll not come back as a cow, or that Buddha will not say that I never found inner peace and I should go back and try again?

**Keith:**

I agree with you that we don’t see a lot of evidence of the spirit realm at work in the world today, but I think it is hard to say that kind of “stuff” doesn’t take place around us. Hebrews 13:2 says “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” Those who were demon possessed in the New Testament were not always easily identified. I am not an expert on this, but I do know that there are things that happen in this world that can’t be explained materially. However, I do think that though we do not see the spirits we see their effects in life.

The moving of the spirit is compared to the wind in John 3, you don’t see it, but you do see its effects on things and hear it. So also I don’t see the Holy Spirit working in me, but I do see its effects in my life as I am convicted of things

now that I never would have been convicted of before I was a Christian. I think the same can be said of those who do not have the Holy Spirit in them and have turned to things that by nature are not gods. I think there are many people that I can't say I have seen a demon on them, but I see effects in their life and I know that there is something dark in all they do.

As far as how to discern that the true religion is Christianity, and that we are not going to get to heaven and see that there is another king ruling up there is by the veracity of the word of God. It is the word of God that we need to interpret all that happens to us, including discerning between true and false gods. It is by comparing other religions to the word of God that one is able to determine the truth of Christianity. All religions besides Christianity either give you an ultimate being that you cannot know or they reduce God to little more than a human with some super powers, like the Buddhist and Greek mythologies. Only in the Christian faith do you get an ultimate God that is truly knowable. We know that God has revealed himself to us through his word and that this word has been made certain to us through the fulfillment of its claims throughout history.

I would also add that Jesus did such amazing things that most religions at least acknowledge him as a prophet that spoke the word of God, but like Islam they somehow reject what he said. It doesn't make much sense to hold someone to be a prophet of God, yet say you don't believe his claims to be God. The certainty which we have comes through the word of God and we test the truthfulness of all things by the His word.

**Matt:**

I think the key to Hebrews 13:2 is the phrase "without knowing it". If we don't know it, then we have no reason to believe it is true. Perhaps the people who made this statement up knew that it wasn't true so they added that statement to make disproving the idea impossible.

You said, "The moving of the spirit is compared to the wind in John 3." I can measure the wind speed. I can measure the barometric pressure of the atmosphere. I can tell you the humidity level and the dew point of the "wind". Tell me, what is the barometric pressure of the "spirit"? I have five senses. Three of them tell me about the wind. My ears tell me that the wind is blowing. My nose tells me that the wind is carrying the scent of the pumpkin pie in my neighbor's window. My skin, or sense of touch, tells me that the wind is cold, or blowing hard, etc. Which of my five senses tells me that the spirit is near?

If you can say "I am convicted of things now that I never would have been convicted of before," it can be more broadly defined as doing or feeling a way that is not part of your natural inclination, is not the same true of the Buddhist monk who commits himself to chastity, something he would never do if he were not a Buddhist. Or the Muslim who remains true to the seven pillars, though, if he were not a Muslim, he would never commit himself to the pillars.

As far as how to discern that the true religion is Christianity, and that we are not going to get to heaven and see that there is a different king up there is by "the veracity of the word of God." What is the basis for your claim that the "word of God" is accurate? Do other religions not make the same claim? How many

times have you heard a Muslim say that the Koran is full of lies? Never. So why would I expect you, a Christian, to say anything other than that your text, the Bible, is accurate. The word of God that we need to interpret all that happens to us, including discerning between true and false gods.” If this isn't a circular argument!!! Give me a break, I won't even respond to this idiocy.

If I compare Christianity to the Gita, would we not find the truth of Krishna? You can't claim to find the truth of one religion by comparing it to the text of another. If your basis for analysis is the text of Christianity, then, of course you will determine that Christianity is the only true religion. However, if your basis changes, if you use the text of another religion, you will find that that religion is the one true religion. More broadly put, I agree, if you compare the religions of the world to the "word of god" you will determine which is the truth, however, each religion claims to have a "word of god" and I don't know which "word of god" to use to compare all religions.

How do we know “God has revealed himself to us through his word and that this word has been made certain to us through the fulfillment of its claims throughout history”? Name a few of these claims that have been fulfilled, and give some independent verification of it. And no, you can't say 1 Peter is right because 1 John said so because I could just say 1 Matt says both are wrong. I want a few "prognostications" of the Bible that a secular history book says actually occurred.

**Keith:**

Pertaining to the moving of spirits in this world, or maybe the lack thereof you said that scripture is not sufficient because it shows that these are not clearly evident and since they are not easily perceived you said, "If we don't know it, then we have no reason to believe it is true." I think that this shows your own presuppositions influencing how you interpret life. If you were to see a man convulsing on the ground and foaming at the mouth you would probably say indigestion, whereas the New Testament could give insight to demon possession. If I prayed for a sick person to be healed and he was, you would probably give some kind of scientific explanation for how his immune system defeated the disease and the effects just happen to be seen the moment I prayed for him.

Your problem is not in a lack of evidence but in interpreting things by your own presuppositions. Any evidence I give to you can be suppressed. So using a lack of quantified evidence for the spiritual realm in this world as an excuse for not believing isn't valid, because even if you did see works of spirits you would probably come up with an alternative explanation for it. You are ruling out a Christian interpretation to life, because you are committed to a different unbelieving interpretation. The root of this lies in you supplanting the word of God with your own fallible reasoning as your ultimate criterion for truth.

This brings me to the next point, and probably the major point of our discussion- the word of God. Now you said this was a circular argument and is absurd for that reason. It is circular, but aren't all systems of thought circular when they come to their ultimate presuppositions? My using the Bible to prove

the Bible is just like you using your reason to justify your reasoning or Muslims using the Koran to justify the Koran. So you see it is inevitable to argue circularly, because it is impossible for an ultimate to be justified by anything higher than itself. It would be contradictory to justify an ultimate with anything other than itself. It is important to justify Christian beliefs with the word of God, and if scripture's self description is found to be credible, then at the same time, the message of scripture is credible. It would be a very narrow argument to say the Bible is God's word because it says so, but other evidence can make this argument much more broad.

You asked for evidence of affirmation of the Bible as the word of God and I could start out with the fulfillment of prophetic words such as Abraham being called by God to be the father of many nations whose descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ about 2000 years later. Perhaps it would be more credible if I pointed to the fulfillment of God's word to Abraham that his descendants would be "strangers in a land not their own and enslaved 400 years (Gen 15:13), which was fulfilled in the Exodus of Moses, or also the prophecies regarding King Cyrus to free the Israelites from the hand of their enemies hundreds of years before it happened. I name these fulfilled prophecies because I am sure you are quite familiar with the prophetic words of the city where Jesus would be born, his sufferings, and his own prophetic testimony to being resurrected. These claims and promises of scripture have been proven through history and therefore God vindicates his own claims and words.

But I suppose you are looking for extra biblical support for the teaching of the Bible. One such that comes to mind is Josephus the Jewish historian who in his day wrote this of Jesus, "At this time appeared Jesus, a very gifted man- if indeed it is right to call him a man; for he was a worker of miracles, a teacher of such men as listened with pleasure to the truth and he won over many of the Jews and many of Gentilic origin as well."<sup>1</sup>

There are about 2500 years of fulfilled prophecies from the Old Testament, as well as some extremely well preserved and attested historical information supporting what the Bible says. I don't think you will find any other religion supported by such evidence.

And as far as the legitimacy of other religions, I think that it can all come back to what their beliefs are based on. Someone could tell you that he is God and be perfectly sincere in his belief, but have no valid basis for that belief; it would be totally unjustified. Most of these religions, while being held sincerely by their followers can not give sufficient verifiable evidence to their claims or the claims that their "sacred writings" make.

I would really challenge you to stop adopting unbelieving presuppositions, repent where necessary, ask God for faith, and then examine these doubts in light of scripture. There is no indefeasible magic bullet that will annihilate all your doubts, and anything I or anyone else says can be repressed by something. It is unbelief that represses the truth of God as in Rom 1:18, and if you are repressing the truth there is nothing apart from a work of the Spirit that will convince you

---

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, The History of the Church, trans. G.A. Williamson, (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p29.

other wise. I think this work of the Spirit is essentially the way by which we believe. The Westminster Confession of Faith (14:1) even says this, saying 'The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts.'

**Matt:**

As for your first point: that my problem is that I interpret things by my own presuppositions, this is true. It is true of all of us. We each have our "presuppositions". And as for your argument, if I saw a convulsing man on the floor I would not naturally assume that it is a chemical imbalance. I would naturally assume that there is some outside force acting on him. (You would call it a demon.) I would then investigate the problem. Modern science has been doing this for hundreds of years and it has found that, often, people who are convulsing on the ground have a chemical imbalance in their brain, causing them to lose control.

You made the statement that "You are ruling out a Christian interpretation to life because you are committed to a different unbelieving interpretation". I am committed to being as objective as I can be. If that means unbelieving, so be it. I must, to the best of my (God given?) ability determine the truth. Not what I want it to be, not what you want it to be, not what any book says it is, but the absolute, objective truth. And yes, my reasoning is fallible. And to put my hope of finding the truth in my reasoning is dangerous, but it is all I have.

You said that it is impossible for an ultimate to be justified by anything other than an ultimate. This is true. I said this was stupid; I take it back. While it is circular to justify the truth of the Bible by saying the Bible says the Bible is true, if the Bible is the ultimate source of truth, then it is the only thing that can verify its own validity. This is really encouraging! While this statement cannot prove anything, it is a starting point to argue for the need for faith.

As for the historicity of the claims of the Bible, overall, the verification of all of "known history" is sketchy at best, because who knows if the writers saw what they were writing. It was the convention of the time, as it is now, to report what the locals said happened, and often, just like modern newspapers, what was written was not what really happened, but an exaggerated version of the truth. Reporters today work for the newspapers, back then they worked for kings, lords, and the like. I'm sure the kings wanted to hear exciting stories so the reporters could make it up. This is all conjecture, but hey, why not. Did Josephus meet Jesus? No. He reported what some people told him, many years after the fact. So who knows? People like to make little things big; it gives them meaning.

**Keith:**

I'm glad to see some of this helping you, but your attempts to justify everything by "objective" reason is almost cutting you off from knowing anything. As of now you are not only about to reject the Bible, but all of recorded history, because you can't see it repeated? I would like to hear you respond to David Hume who said that facts from observations do not exist in any necessary

relationship, meaning that much of our thinking does not rest on reason or empiricism but on human nature. Basically Hume shows the limits of reason saying that facts and logical relations cannot work together to give us certainty about reality. All it can do is help us to make guesses as it is merely a “habit of association.”

This just to show you your reason is not as solid as you might think. Reason is a perspective on knowing, but it's not all you are left with. There is much in life you know that you can't prove. Such as why you love your mom, why you shouldn't steal, what is morally right, etc. Try giving scientific evidence to your wife for why you married her and see what kind of response you get. All this to say that for much of life you do not base a lot of important decisions on scientific fact, so don't cut off other ways of knowing for the sake of your reason. The only way you can have certainty in life is by using God's word to guide all your seeing, feeling, and knowing. If reason was all you had, you might, like Hume, die a hopeless skeptic—not being able to know anything. So it is irrational to go through life without God's word guiding you. Remember God gives grace to the humble, and only if you humble yourself by seeing your need for his word in your life will you find the grace, hope, and meaning in life, which comes through Jesus Christ.