Reformed Epistemology

Matthew Jacoby

Bertrand Russell, the famous twentieth century philosopher, sceptic, and atheist, was once asked what he would do if he died and it turned out that God did exist after all. What would he say to God who would now call him to account for not believing? His answer was simple: "not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence!" Certainly many people feel the same way. They feel that they could not be held accountable for believing something that is not perceptually obvious or logically necessary. How can God hide so irretrievably from the senses of mankind and then hold us accountable for not believing in his existence? Another famous atheist, W. K. Clifford, went further than this. Working on a Kantian model for rationality and ethics Clifford insisted that, in the absence of evidence, belief in the existence of God is not only irrational but also immoral.

The Christian is confronted here by a serious challenge. The challenge is to show that belief in God is rational and specifically by producing evidence. Now in most cases Christians will respond to this by immediately summoning up in their minds all the available evidence for God’s existence that they feel is at least persuasive enough to give them a few moments of credibility. And this is very often how Christians deal with the situation precisely because they feel that almost everything in life is proof that God exists. But the Christian quickly realises that what is so evident to him or her is not at all obvious to the objector. In the present philosophical climate the result is very often a long and tedious battle to work oneself free of the constant cycle of relativity.

If only there were some universal principle to which I can appeal, whether it be the proof of the senses or that of indubitable logical formulae, then I can transcend my own subjectivity and show that my belief is entirely coherent with objective reality. But there is in this overall response, and in any of its sort, a rashness and a naivety which causes the desperate defender to be unwittingly entrapped before the argument has even begun. Let us consider the challenge again. The objector says that belief in God is not rational because there is not sufficient evidence for this claim to be made. Before we rush off to look for evidence we should first of all examine the logic of the objection itself. What we will find is that there is already much that is presupposed here. If we proceed to answer the objection as it stands we need to be
aware that we are launching our case upon the presuppositions of the objector. We are already agreeing with the logic of the objection.

Now, as we shall see, many Christian scholars do indeed agree with what is assumed in this objection and they have reasons for their approach. But there have also been an increasing number in Reformed circles of recent times who have found some serious quirks in the foundations of objections of atheists such as Russell and Clifford. Hence a kind of pre-apologetic battle has been fought and the ground over which the battle is waged is the epistemological issue of how we define what is rational. What does it mean to be rational and by what criteria do we judge a proposition rational? It is said that evidence must be presented in order for belief in God to be rational. But what sort of evidence is needed to make something rational? Is it possible for something to be rational without evidence? The line of questioning here is aimed at the epistemological foundations of apologetics. The approach is that of a recent trend known as Reformed epistemology. Its leading contemporary proponent is Alvin Plantinga. Though the trend is recent its roots lie deep in the Protestant tradition stemming from the work of Calvin mainly, hence the title \textit{Reformed} epistemology. Plantinga does not claim to have founded a new approach, but rather he has presented a new case for an old approach.

In the following article we shall endeavour to set out the argument presented by Reformed epistemologists in contrast to the classical way of dealing with the apologetic issues and with reference to Calvin and the biblical testimony. The view presented by Plantinga following Calvin deals with the very heart of the Christian world view at the most fundamental level. Upon what is our knowledge of God based? In presenting our case for belief in God today we must be careful to seek a biblical process as well as a biblical result.

\textit{Foundations of the Evidentialist Objection}

The objection to belief in God which we have introduced here is called the \textit{evidentialist objection} because of its assumption that belief in God requires evidence. According to the evidentialists a belief is only reasonable if it is either a \textit{properly basic belief} or a belief that can be shown, by logical deduction (however long that series of deductions may be), to be based upon a properly basic belief. The mind is envisaged here like a family tree of ideas. Some ideas are derived from others or from a
combination of others which are more primary in the tree. All ideas are ultimately traceable back to the basic ‘parent’ beliefs, what are known as ‘properly basic beliefs.’ The complex system of relations between beliefs in the mind as they stem from the properly basic beliefs is called the *noetic structure* of the mind.

Perhaps another analogy may be useful here: that of colour. There are an infinite amount of different colours but all are based upon the three primary colours: red, blue and yellow. Properly basic beliefs are primary beliefs, like primary colours. The difference of course is that properly basic beliefs are numerous. We can however distinguish a few broad categories, and this is indeed how they are dealt with. In the same way as every colour can be traced back to these primary colours so, too, can every belief of the human mind be traced back to a primary belief, what we call a ‘properly basic belief.’ The system of relations between colours is again like the noetic structure of the human mind. If something is to be reasonable it must be coherent with our noetic structure. The concept of a colour that does not derive from red, blue or yellow is a contradiction and an absurdity. Likewise an idea that is not related, however distantly and complexly, to our properly basic beliefs is absurd and contradictory. To be reasonable therefore a belief must either be properly basic or must be deducible from a belief that is properly basic.

So which beliefs are properly basic? The classical view is that there are only two categories of properly basic beliefs. The first category is sensory beliefs and the second is self evident beliefs. The first is that which is an impression on the mind resulting from some form of sensory perception. That I see a chair over there is something which I cannot doubt, nor do I need to prove it. It is simply there. The second type, self evident beliefs, are those of mathematics for example. That 2+3=5 is not something that I can doubt. It simply **is**. That every effect has a cause is another proposition that I cannot doubt. These are properly basic beliefs.

There is a qualifying category which has been added to these in modern philosophy. This category arises with the dualist tendency that follows Descartes. Descartes introduced the problem of what we perceive to be there as opposed to what is really there. Hence, I see a chair but to prove that the chair is really there apart from my perception of it is a different matter. But this is no matter here; the point is that, even if I can doubt that the chair is really there, thanks to Descartes, I cannot however doubt that I am seeing a chair – I am being appeared ‘chairly’ to. This belief is properly basic inasmuch as it is ‘incorrigible.’

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_Vox Reformata, 2001_
This view of what beliefs qualify as properly basic beliefs is called *classical foundationalism*. The evidentialist objection to belief in God is based upon the assumption of classical foundationalism that only those beliefs are properly basic which are either evident to the senses or logically self evident. The evidentialists therefore say that if belief in God cannot be shown to be derived from a properly basic belief then it is not reasonable and we ought not to believe it.

**The Classical Apologetic Response**

How then are we to respond to this challenge? In our introduction we described a situation in which the atheistic objection, with all its assumptions, was basically accepted and answered accordingly. We said that this is certainly the most common knee-jerk reaction to the objection against the rationality of belief in God. Many apologists believe that the evidentialists demand for evidence is reasonable and that there arises here an opportunity for the Christian to reply with the strongest possible evidence for the existence of God. This approach, called *theistic evidentialism*, has been taken up by B.B Warfield, C.S. Lewis, R.C Sproul, John Gerstner, Henry Morris, and Josh McDowell to name just a few.

The above approach, *classical apologetics*, was the dominant approach at least up until the time of the Reformation. It is called classical because it is championed in the work of Aquinas. It was the view of Thomas Aquinas that the existence of God could be so thoroughly demonstrated that the unbeliever was rationally obliged to believe in God. In the *Summa Theologica* he gives the justification for his approach. There are two facts upon which he proceeds. In the first place, the existence of God is neither self evident nor directly perceivable. In the second place, there is in man a natural hole which can only be filled by God. This second point is taken over from Augustine, and while Aquinas does not refer to it explicitly, the same idea is present in his work. Consider the following passage:

To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. 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; for many there are who imagine that man's perfect good which is happiness, consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.\footnote{Summa Theologica, FP Q[2] A[1] R.O. 1}

What Aquinas is doing here is seeking a point of departure for the question of the existence of God. Many atheists argue that the question itself is simply a waste of time. The positing of the existence of God is seen here as being as arbitrary as the positing of the existence of a giant invisible pumpkin somewhere in the universe. What is the point of the proposition? The question simply does not arise. But Aquinas argues that because of the ‘gap’ in the being of mankind the question naturally arises inasmuch as God is man’s beatitude. He is not saying that man has knowledge of God naturally but that man naturally needs to know God.

From here Aquinas puts the question whether the existence of God can be demonstrated. His appeal is initially a biblical one; he appeals to Romans 1:20, “God’s invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.” This is a clear indication, according to Aquinas, that the existence of God can be demonstrated. For in what sense can it be said that God’s existence is clearly seen if this is not through the demonstrable logically necessary connection between the world and God?

This line of argument receives hearty support from many present day Christian apologists. In their Classical Apologetics, Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, by way of defence of this approach, likewise appeal to Scripture to support their theistic evidentialism: “God commands Christians to reason with unbelievers.”\footnote{R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley, Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, Zondervan, 1984), 18.} This, of course, is a matter of agreement for Christians beyond the bounds of theistic evidentialism. The question is how one reasons and to what one appeals. What is conspicuously lacking in the said work is any justification of the classical foundationalist assumptions upon which their apologetics proceeds. The appeal here to a faith that does not exclude reason is one thing; the account of reason assumed, however, is another. This is the point at which Plantinga and the Reformed epistemologists bring their objection. While the imperative to reason with the unbeliever is a biblical one the account of reason assumed here is not. More will be said of this
in due course, suffice it to say at present that the ground for the classical apologists claim that the church can only fulfil the biblical apologetic imperative by presenting irrefutable proofs is a shaky one.

The proofs appealed to by the classical apologists have been broadly categorised under three heads: The ontological argument, the cosmological argument and the teleological argument. Of course there are many versions of each of these and there are others that do not neatly come under these categories. Each one is an attempt to connect the notion of God to properly basic beliefs by an intricate process of logical inference.

A version of the ontological argument was championed by Descartes in his Meditations. Descartes begins his philosophical pursuit by doubting everything and then seeking to reconstruct on the basis of logical necessity what he can hold to be indubitable. He decides that the possibility of his being somehow deceived in his perceptions of reality can only be ruled out if there exists a supremely sovereign and perfect being – God. But how can he be sure that God exists? His conclusion, to cut a long argument short, is that such a being must exist for this idea to be possible in the first place. The idea of a perfectly good being could not come from himself since the idea has no analogy in his mind. It could only come externally from one who actually possesses this attribute.¹

The cosmological argument like the ontological argument appeals to causality, though with an appeal to the sensible world rather than to ideas. Here the world-in-motion is cited as an effect for which there must be a sufficient cause. Aquinas refutes the idea that the world has existed eternally by appealing to the idea that what is possible not to be cannot always have existed.² Since the existence of the world is not necessary it only exists contingently. Whatever is contingently true is dependent upon something else for its truth. Since the universe exists as such it must have an explanation outside itself. There are two versions of this argument:

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If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by

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¹ Descartes, Mediations on First Philosophy, Meditation III.
³ Vox Reformata, 2001
another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God. ¹

The *teleological argument* is similar to the cosmological argument initially but goes further in that it has the additional advantage of being able to state the personality of God. In the first place it appeals to the intricate design in the universe and argues for God as the designer. David Hume writes:

> Look round the world: contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines . . . All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument *a posteriori* . . . do we at once prove the

existence of the Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence.¹

This leads on to the aspect of this argument that is truly teleological. Aristotle had noted that every creature tends toward an end. This is expressed in Hume’s idea of all things being “adjusted to each other.” If this is the case then their must be one who purposed what is inherently designed to follow a certain tendency. The question that this raises is, “could purposive creatures be from a being without purpose? Could there be all these fighters for ends and not be a Fighter for Ends?”²

As we have said there are many versions of each of these arguments and others that do so easily fit into these categories. What we simply wish to note here is the appeal that each of these arguments is making and the basic understanding of rationality upon which they are based. In each case there is the endeavour to demonstrate the connection between belief in God and properly basic beliefs. The ontological argument dealt directly with ideas in the mind appealing to logically self evident principles to trace these to a point of ‘divine deposit.’ The cosmological and teleological arguments used a combination of sensory perception with logically self evident propositions to deduce its conclusions. There is the assumption here not only that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of God but also that there is a biblical imperative to offer a reasonable defence of belief in God by this account of reason. That is, that in order to give a reasonable defence of the existence of God one must give evidence that such belief in God is connected by way of necessary inference from either the perceptions of the senses or from the laws of logic or a combination of both.

The classical apologists deal with the atheistic challenge by giving this evidence in the way of the theistic arguments outlined above. Whether these arguments achieve what the apologists claim they achieve is an awkward question for the apologists because if the connection were of such indubitable necessity, why is it not recognised by all rational people? They have obviously not succeeded in making the existence of God an irrefutable fact given that atheists still find reasons not to believe. And the reasons that atheists give are reasons of the same

² Classical Apologetics, 124.

Vox Reformata, 2001
intellectual criteria as that of the theists. The apologist might interrupt here and speak of the effects of sin upon the understanding of people and so forth. But by claiming that objectivity is not possible for atheists, the classical apologist cuts off the branch he is sitting on, since he himself is claiming that objectivity is possible for him. Proving this is another matter.

Another difficulty in arguing for the existence of God is a purely logical one. It has to do with the claim of the classical apologists that there is a logical line of continuity between the concepts of infinite, eternal and finite, temporal. At least this is what is implied in their arguments. The inconsistency here has been pointed out not only by sceptics but has been happily asserted by many theists for whom such a discontinuity is a positive attribute of God's absolute other-ness, that is, his distinctness or holiness. Those who argue this point tend to be called 'irrationalists' or 'fideists' since it appears that they are cutting theology off from rationality and setting up a dichotomy between faith and reason. Tertullian and Kierkegaard are among those vulnerable to this charge.

One of the problems with this approach is that it is simply impossible to reject reason without using the laws of logic to do so and therefore the name 'irrationalist' as applied to anyone is possibly misleading. For Tertullian and Kierkegaard the existence of God was not something against reason but above reason. What they pointed out is the fact that one cannot make a logical connection between God and the world. There is of course a necessary connection between the world and God but it cannot be demonstrated logically. Consider what happens as we try to build a bridge of syllogisms to God. It is like trying to add infinity into any mathematical equation. The fact is that logic simply breaks down here. God does not contradict the rational faculties He has given to us but merely transcends them. Logic, which is defined by space-time categories, breaks down as soon as we reach outside of the space-time universe. This was something painstakingly pointed out by Kant who defined at length the limits of pure reason in these terms, and indeed on biblical grounds we should not shy away from such observations. “To know what questions may reasonably be asked,” Kant remarks, “is already a great and necessary proof of sagacity and insight”\(^1\) Was not Job corrected for reaching into areas which the human mind had no capacity to deal with?

In order to make the logical connection between the world and God we would have to submit the concept of God to the categories of space time logic. And since the concept of God involves certain incommunicable attributes such as infinitude and eternity we find that we cannot build a logical bridge to God without making God somehow less that He is. If the bridge is to connect with God, God must be brought inside the realms of logic where the rules apply. As soon as one reaches outside space and time the very principles of logic by which the argument is built lose their validity and the argument topples. The law of non-contradiction, to use an example, is a rule of space-time logic as is the law of sufficient cause. Outside this, as Pascal indicated, “a hundred contradictions might be true.”

What we will note here though, lest this seem at all like an irrationalist claim, is that this itself is a logical necessity. It is logical that logic does not apply outside space and time. Pascal points out that: “Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realise that.” Not only are there logical reasons, therefore, to avoid trying to build a tower of syllogisms to God but there are also strong moral-spiritual reasons. We do not see a way of avoiding the conclusion that a god proven by human reason is a god of lesser qualities than the God who has revealed himself in Scripture.

This does not mean that arguments for the existence of God as such are of no value. The point is how we propose that these arguments function and what status they are given. The theistic evidentialists see in the evidentialist objection to belief in God an opportunity. What they find here is a common ground for rational discussion. This common ground is classical foundationalism. If something can be shown to be either evident to the senses or self evident, or at least necessarily connected to these properly basic categories, then the evidentialist objectors are left with no excuse to believe.

Indeed this goal of classical foundationalism is a biblical one. The question is whether the process is a biblical process. Paul says that God has “made it plain” to unbelievers that He exists (Rom. 1:19). In what sense is the fact of God’s existence plain to all people? The classical apologists say that this is because it is a logically necessary fact once the

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1 *Pensees*, 505.
2 *Pensees*, 188.

*Vox Reformata, 2001*
deductions are made. But would this then make it plain to all people? Presumably by the process commended in classical apologetics only those with the intellectual capacities to make these deductions can have it so clearly in their minds. What about the 'simple hearted,' the children, and so forth? How is it plain to them? Consider the following scenario:

We once heard a radio debate among scholars concerning the existence of God. When the phone lines were opened to the public, an irate woman called in who obviously lacked academic sophistication. She was thoroughly frustrated by the scholarly debate and, though she had never heard of the cosmological argument. She complained, “Ain’t you guys got your eyes open? Look out the window. Where do yins think all that come from?”

The interesting thing about this example is that it is cited in the *Classical Apologetics* as somehow giving support for the broad usability of the classical theistic arguments. But we would argue that examples like this work against classical apologetics. The writer in this section comments that “she had reasons for her belief.” Certainly this is true. And she was also seeing what God has made plain: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). What is it that enabled this woman to see God so clearly evidenced in nature? It was not the cosmological argument and the writer acknowledges this. Neither was she using a simplified form of the argument because there simply is no simplified form of the cosmological argument. It seems that her reasons were more immediate than the syllogistic chains of the evidentialists.

The first chapter of Romans indicates another factor. The text goes on to say that the reason people do not believe is because they do not want to believe and because God has therefore given them over to a depraved mind: “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). The picture we get here is that people closed their eyes to God because they wanted to live in sin. And because they did this God let them go blind. All this is of course acknowledged by the classical apologists and up to this point there is nothing that obviously contradicts their approach. But consider where the epistle goes from here. Romans is a treatise on the gospel and hence it is about God’s redemption. Broadly speaking the redemption of Christ is from sin and

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1 *Classical Apologetics*, 22-23.
more specifically this includes the *depraved mind* spoken of in the first chapter. Using the metaphor of blindness we will say that those who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit are given ‘sight’ again. Presumably once their sight is restored they will see clearly that God exists and so forth.

But how do they see this? Here is our point. How do they see this? It seems that there is something more immediate in man that enables him to know that there is a God. The person who is regenerated sees God not because of any theistic arguments but because this capacity which was wilfully vandalised in sin *is restored within him*. What is this capacity? Is it merely reason as defined by classical foundationalism? Or is it something else? John Calvin and the Reformed epistemologists have argued that it is something else. They argued that there is something in the way that God originally created man that enabled him to know God innately. This leads to an altogether different account of the noetic structure by which rationality is defined and thus to an altogether different account of rationality. To this we now turn.

**Reformed Epistemology**

I am interested . . . in the claim that it is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of evidence or reasons. Why suppose that is true? Why should we think a theist must have evidence, or reason to think there *is* evidence, if he is not to be irrational? Why not suppose, instead, that he is entirely within his epistemic rights in believing in God’s existence even if he has no argument or evidence at all.\(^1\)

Alvin Plantinga draws attention to the fact that the classical foundationalist claim on rationality is itself without foundation. The concern here is to give an account of the noetic structure of the human mind. That which is rational is that which is coherent with the human noetic structure. According to classical foundationalism all beliefs in the human mind are built only and exclusively upon two kinds of belief: self evident beliefs and beliefs arising from sense perception. But why accept this thesis? Why accept that *only* beliefs which fit these categories are coherent with the human noetic structure and therefore rational? What justification does classical foundationalism have for these fixed

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*Vox Reformata, 2001*
boundaries? Plantinga notes that when classical foundationalism, which is itself a belief about reason, is put to its own test it fails. It is neither a self evident truth nor is it a matter of sensory perception. Classical foundationalism is therefore self referentially inconsistent and by this its authority is lost. It is up for question on these grounds.

The fact is, and this is the central point in Plantinga's work, that there are many things which people generally believe, which people could not live without believing, which do not meet the criteria of classical foundationalism. Memory beliefs for example do not qualify as rational according to the limited twofold criteria.

I believe, for example, that I had lunch this noon. I do not believe this proposition on the basis of other propositions; I take it as basic. It is in the foundations of my noetic structure. Furthermore, I am entirely rational in so taking it, even though this proposition is neither self evident nor evident to the senses nor incorrigible for me.¹

The main example for which Plantinga is well known is belief in other minds. In his book *God and Other Minds* Plantinga demonstrates that the same problems facing belief in God from the point of view of evidentialism also face the belief in other minds. In short he places the two beliefs in the same epistemic boat. What I perceive when I see a person is a physical form like myself, one that sounds like me and seems in every way to be like me. I therefore conclude that the other is the same kind of entity as myself. That is, I assume that the other is a thinking, feeling, self reflective entity like myself. But the fact is I cannot give evidence for this. I cannot perceive that the other is a thinking, feeling, self reflecting entity. Certainly I can see the form and listen to the sounds but it does not necessarily follow from this that the other is like me in 'mind.' I cannot observe the mental states of another person and it does not follow logically from what I do see that these mental states are present. Does this then mean that the belief that I have in other minds is irrational? If we want to have a notion of rationality that includes beliefs such as this then we must broaden the rigid boundaries of classical foundationalism.

Obviously this belief in other minds is not something we form by our powers of perception or reasoning from self evident truths. In order to

¹ 'Reason and belief in God,' 60.
include it in our account of rationality we shall have to make room for beliefs that are somehow innate. The capacity which we have to relate personally to other minds is a capacity based on innate knowledge that we appear to be born with. Belief in other minds is therefore properly basic by virtue of the fact that we have this knowledge in potential from birth. What we will note here is that its qualification for being included in our account of the noetic structure is that it is a generally held belief. We move here outside the strict and rigid boundaries of the evidentialists to the view that it is possible there are things which are entirely rational by virtue of being innately present in our minds.

But this does not mean that any belief can now become rational. Of course, once we open up the boundaries of classical foundationalism this charge will come: the boundaries for reason are gone so that now anything can become rational. Here, of course, rationality itself loses its meaning. Belief in other minds is not arbitrary. It is a fact of life. Any account of reason must include as properly basic, beliefs which are simply a part of the human mind by virtue of the way we are. And here is where Plantinga introduces belief in God. Belief in God is just one such belief. Plantinga’s thesis is that belief in God is properly basic by virtue of its being innate – a natural part of the human mind. At this point Plantinga’s argument is quite unoriginal and he himself is quick to acknowledge this. What he is affirming here is a view that was asserted already in Calvin:

That there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service. Certainly, if there is any quarter where it may be supposed that God is unknown, the most likely for such an instance to exist is among the dullest tribes farthest removed from civilisation. But, as a heathen tells us, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God.¹

¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.3.1.

*Vox Reformata*, 2001 16
From both a theological and biblical point of view this thesis is a strong one. If we say that our beliefs are based upon evidence then these beliefs are dependent in some way upon fallible human reason and variable philosophical climates and so forth. The view presented by Calvin and Plantinga is that belief in God is essential to our human-ness. As far as belief is concerned this places the believer on far more solid ground than evidentialism does. On these grounds Plantinga goes so far as to say that Christians ought not to believe on the basis of evidence:

Furthermore, the Christian ought not to believe on the basis of argument; if he does, his faith is likely to be “unstable and wavering,” the “subject of perpetual doubt.” If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favourite argument.\footnote{Reason and belief in God,’ 67.}

Calvin insists that the truths of Scripture cannot be the subject of argument in any case. They transcend reason. “We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgement,” says Calvin, “but we subject our intellect and judgement to it as too transcendent for us to estimate.”\footnote{Institutes, 1.7.5.} The connection between the truth placed in us by God and the truth as it is in God is not a logical one but a spiritual one. It has to do with our necessary relationship to God as human beings. Because, as human beings, we bear a necessary relationship to God, inasmuch as He is our creator, we have the truth of his existence indelibly inscribed into our very being.

The sceptic will of course ask for evidence for this claim that belief in God is innate in this way. Here is the value of Plantinga’s observations about the analogy between belief in God and belief in other minds. He recognises that every human being has the capacity for inter-personal relationships by virtue of an immediate assumption within the human mind that other people are like me in personal self reflective and emotional capacities. This belief in other minds is neither self evident or sensible. But does it therefore need to be proven? We would say – no, because it is innate. And innate beliefs must be added as a third category to what we regard as properly basic beliefs. But must we prove that it is

\footnote{‘Reason and belief in God,’ 67.}

\footnote{Institutes, 1.7.5.}
innate? This is like asking for proof that $1+1=2$ is a self evident belief. The fact that it is properly basic means that there can be no proof given on the grounds that it is an immediate fact. There is simply no room for proof. It just is. In such a matter the burden of proof lies with those who wish to deny the belief.

Here is an important point in the response of the Reformed epistemologists to the evidentialist objectors. Everyone believes in ‘other minds.’ This is simply a fact of the human psyche. On these grounds, therefore, there is no reason to doubt this belief. Anyone who wishes to doubt it must produce evidence that would necessarily falsify the belief. Plantinga argues that it is likewise with the belief in God. It is a fact of the human psyche. There is no instance of any people group in any time in history however far removed who have not developed with some consciousness of God. Atheism is something which involves a positive dismissal of beliefs which naturally occur in the mind. It is a phenomenon of intellectual development where people positively decide to reject something. There has never been such a thing as a naturally atheistic people group.

Atheism is not a passive state nor is theism an actively acquired belief. If it were there would at least be some instance of a people group who did not acquire it. This is the ground for the epistemic right to believe such a thing. It is simply human to believe in God. The burden of proof lies with those who wish to deny God’s existence. They must give reasons to doubt this by producing evidence that necessarily falsifies the belief. Indeed many have attempted to do this. They speak for example of the incoherence of theism, that, for example, a sovereign omnipotent and all good God exists in a world of evil. The problem with arguments like this, which try to falsify belief in God, is that they are likewise applying space-time logic to the ways, means and reasons of God. The fact is that there are many statements about God in Scripture which are simply incoherent from a logical point of view. Take the statement, “all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). This is logically incoherent since it raises questions like, for instance, ‘can God therefore create a stone too heavy for himself too lift?’ The problem with this question is that it applies logical categories where they do not apply. It asks a logical question about a God who transcends logic. The rules of logical coherence cannot apply to an infinite and eternal God and therefore it is simply foolishness to ask such questions. The fact is that given the transcendence of God there is a sense in which his existence is immune.
to human rational falsification. The theist concludes therefore that there is no reason to deny God’s existence.

So why then is there such thing as an atheist if God’s existence has been made so immediately evident to our minds? The answer is, of course, *sin*. The fact is that people want to deny this. As we said, atheism is always an active conscious choice made by individuals within a community or culture. In this way they actually depart from something which was always a natural part of the psyche of individuals within the community. This inclination is the natural tendency of the human will against God: sin. It is notable that in the biblical wisdom literature sin and foolishness tend to be always connected. Sin leads people into self deception and this is the essence of foolishness. The epitome of self deception moreover is the denial of the most immediate knowledge. Given that belief in God is innate, atheism therefore becomes the epitome of self deception and foolishness: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). The power of such self deception seems to increase through generations of atheism so that this capacity which was presumably quite powerful and specific in its original form is greatly marred with time.

We should note though that atheism is not the only way in which belief in God is suppressed by human rebellion. In fact atheism is by far the least common way in which people respond to the imperatives of their natural knowledge. The most effective way to do away with the belief in God originally present in the human psyche is not to eradicate it, for this is a difficult matter, but rather to change it. Hence we find in the world everywhere belief in God but when we get into specifics about what kind of God is believed in we find beliefs in which God’s character is reduced, neutralised, ossified, distanced or made easy and user friendly in some other sense. Here is the phenomenon of idolatry and the human agenda is quite apparent. It is the desire for a user friendly religion. Hence while Calvin and the Reformed epidemiologists appeal to the general presence of the belief in God in the minds of all people they are quick to recognise the effects of sin upon this belief:

But though experience testifies that a seed of religion is divinely sown in all, scarcely one in a hundred is found who cherishes it in his heart, and not one in whom it grows to maturity so far is it from yielding fruit in its season. Moreover, while some lose themselves in superstitious observances, and others, of set purpose, wickedly revolt from God, the result is that, in regard to
the true knowledge of him, all are so degenerate, that in no part of the world can genuine godliness be found.¹

The essence or key factor of sin, according to Paul in the first chapter of Romans, is the desire to suppress this truth in order to be autonomous. Upon this ground Paul makes men responsible for believing. The great shortfall of the theistic evidentialists is to make responsibility dependent upon the perception of evidence. The theistic evidentialist would answer Bertrand Russell's comment quoted at the outset here by producing evidence to show him that he was wrong. And it seems also that by the evidentialists account the answer of God in this case would be to retort: “you are wrong, there was evidence which you simply closed your eyes to.”

However, Russell’s objections are not a mere passing over of evidence. He deals quite thoroughly with the proposed evidence for the existence of God. No doubt he would then be in some position to differ with God on this matter. But in Calvin’s account of the situation any possible excuse is obliterated. Evidence is simply irrelevant. The knowledge of God was inscribed into Russell’s being and evidence for or against is simply of no bearing. His arguments against God’s existence do not justify his unbelief because God has made his existence more immediate than anything which can be substantiated by evidence. Not only has God provided this ‘subjective’ witness but He has provided also an objective witness to his existence which in connection with the subjective witness serves to powerfully remind man of God.

The status of the evidence differs here from that of the evidentialists. The theistic evidentialists, in their acceptance of classical foundationalism, must connect their belief in God to their properly basic beliefs to substantiate it. Hence they must show, for example, by the laws of necessary connection that the world they see is a logically necessary product of God. But in the account of Calvin belief in God itself is a properly basic belief and creation merely reminds him of what he already knows innately. Calvin begins with God and then appeals to the visible creation as proof of this while the evidentialists being with the proof and try to arrive at God, which, as we have seen, is a precarious process.

We should note then that the Reformed epistemologists, following Calvin, do not reject evidence. Rather the evidence has a different status. Van Til’s presuppositional approach to apologetics is quite consistent

¹ *Institutes*, 1.4.1.

*Vox Reformata*, 2001 20
with this because, like Calvin, Van Til begins with God’s existence as a given and then goes to show the consistency of all the facts with this belief. The evidence is only evidence, though, because of this innate capacity which God has implanted in man. There cannot be a ‘logical’ connection between man and God but there is a necessary *relational* connection. The evidence works on man’s consciousness by virtue of this.

Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.¹

It is in this sense that Paul can hold the unbelievers so utterly and unequivocally responsible for their unbelief. God has indeed made it plain to them in creation that He exists. This ‘plainness’ is possible because of the capacity He has put within them.

**Conclusion**

The strengths of Reformed epistemology are as follows. In the first place it justifies belief in God without reference to anything but the belief itself. Belief in God is not dependent upon any other belief and a person is therefore deemed well within his epistemic rights to believe without evidence. The theistic evidentialists position is defective by its addition of evidence into the simple theology of the reconciliation between man and God. In their account there is always this other factor which must be addressed. But in the Reformed approach what is required for a person to believe in God is simply the conviction of sin.

This approach is in keeping with the focus of the Gospel message. The Gospel is aimed in the first place not at correcting errors in thought but with the conviction of moral corruptness. Once a person is thus

¹ *Institutes*, 1.5.1.
awakened to his own self deception in sin, the fact of God will at once become an immediate fact to him again. What is required here is the *release of the suppression process* that a person in sin is so preoccupied with. This is something that God does through the means of preaching and Christian witness.

We walk on unsteady ground if we are going to introduce the cognitive technicalities of the evidentialists into our soteriology and into a Gospel focused evangelism. This does not mean that we should not reason with the unbeliever. Peter tells us to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1Peter 3:15). The classical apologists use this to justify their method, but at a closer view, the passage works in quite the opposite direction. What *is* the reason for our hope? Is it evidence? Is our hope based upon the proven rationality of our beliefs? Surely not. Christian hope is based upon the work of Jesus Christ in our lives. God calls us to be witnesses to this work. In this way we not only speak the Gospel but we ourselves embody it and this is shown outwardly by our distinctness in character and conduct from the world. When Peter exhorts us to give reasons, he is not talking about the objective intellectual issuance of certain logical rules and evidence. We are to bear witness in the most personal sense to the fact that Jesus saves with ourselves as an example. Through this process God works by way of convicting the other of the truth of this witness.

And here is the second strength of the Reformed approach. It places the emphasis in evangelism on personal witness and preaching rather than objective intellectual debates. To this we will add a third strength and that is the reliance of evangelism in this perspective upon God. In classical apologetics some ground in evangelism may be covered through the process of evidentialist reasoning. Here, they say, an intellectual obstacle is removed. But what part does God have in the removal of this obstacle? There arises here a greater apologetic dilemma than the one we began with. If the thing is to convince people of the rationality of belief in God through evidence, why does God not prove *himself* to people? Why the veiled presence and the secondary indicators? Why does God not present himself immediately to people and thus make them fully responsible without any excuse to disagree? This is a serious and common question which becomes somewhat embarrassing for the classical apologist. The Reformed epistemologists, of course, say that God *has* made himself immediate to people. Reformed epistemology has added *innate* beliefs to those of the sense
and those self-evident beliefs and has claimed that belief in God is innate. This means that God is as immediate to man’s knowledge as any perception gained through observation.

Does the existence of other minds need to be proven? No, it does not. The fact is that people believe this and they always will. It is an essential part of human nature and human thinking that they see others as being like themselves in personal capacities. There is no reason to question this. Likewise, memory beliefs are assumed to be real because there is no reason to question them. Belief in God must be given the same status. It is simply a fact that human beings in all places and all times are religious creatures with some consciousness of God. According to the Reformed account of rationality a belief of this sort is innocent until proven guilty, so to speak. The burden of proof belongs to those who wish to deny the existence of God, not to those who would affirm it. In affirming God’s existence we are simply following the most basic human instinct.

This then brings us to the fourth strength in this view. Here there is total responsibility for unbelief. In the evidentialist approach man’s responsibility is limited to the amount of thought he gives to making the logical connection, for example, between God and the world. But what about those who do not have the capabilities to think such things? Are these exempt? In the Reformed approach the connection between God and the world is immediate to their consciousness. They are able to see the world as the handiwork of God, not because of certain intellectual abilities to establish lines of logical connection, but because of their innate capacity which is stirred by constant visual reminders. It is in this sense that God has made his existence ‘plain’ to human beings in nature. If the connection required any degree of reasoning from other logical premises then it is not absolutely plain and therefore man is not absolutely responsible.

The Reformed epistemologist is committed to epistemic coherence as well as to evidence. ‘Reason’ in this account is the web of interrelated ideas in the human mind based upon the properly basic beliefs which fall into three categories as opposed to the two categories of classical foundationalism. They are perceptual beliefs, self evident beliefs and innate beliefs. Belief in God is of the third type. As for evidence, the Reformed epistemologist can boast a far greater weight for evidence than can the evidentialist. The connection between the belief and the evidence in the human mind is not one which is mediated by logical thought. It is
rather an immediate connection made naturally and pre-reflectively by the human mind.

When we see nature we are prone at once to define it in our minds as ‘creation.’ This is simply how we think. But of course sin has caused human beings to suppress this truth in wickedness and hence there is such a thing as atheism as well as the many various distortions of the original idea of God implanted in us. The task of the church is to facilitate the work which God is doing in the world in this time through the Holy Spirit, that is, the work of convicting “the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement” in order to lead people to Christ and reconciliation with God (John 16:8). Once sin is exposed so too is the lie of unbelief.

We will conclude then with a comment on how this relates to evangelism. When challenged about belief in the existence of God, the Christian has a choice in how s/he is to respond. What we have tried to point out here is that there is a choice at this point which needs to be made and the basis for choosing must not simply be the easiest way to a truthful result but the most truthful way to the truthful result. An example of the former is given in a collection of letters published recently between a son and a father in which the son, who is a Christian and an apologist, debates his faith with his non Christian father. The result is a wonderful one and everybody lives happily ever after, but it is hard to ignore the quirks in the process. Greg Boyd is using the classical apologetic option to convince his father of God’s existence and his father responds with the incoherence of theism argument. If God is in control, his father argues, why does He allow bad things to happen? Is man’s freedom worth all the suffering in the world? Basically the problem has to do with the sovereignty of God and human choice.

What we will note here is that the son, by the approach he has chosen to take, has committed himself to strict logical coherence at every point. The problem is that once we arrive at the issues of God’s sovereignty and his eternal decrees in relation to human freedom we reach into areas which simply do not cohere with space time logic, and reasonably so. But since Greg has committed himself to this and cannot back down at this point he responds by limiting God to the confines of time. He says that God does not see what actions we are going to perform beforehand because until the acts are done there is nothing to see. Therefore “God
can’t foreknow the good and bad decisions of people.”¹ This is a highly erroneous view of God given here but the error is already present in the commitment that Greg made to strict logical coherence. He ends up by defining God as limited by time simply because otherwise he has to face some logical paradoxes which would at once flatten the tyres of his apologetic enterprise.

Christians have every reason to be bolder than a merely defensive response would indicate. Belief in God is reasonable without evidence and the burden of proof lies with those who would deny this. We have good reason to be in a position to question rather than be questioned. Evidence is of course at our disposal but we do not depend upon the evidence, we merely use it to show that everything is consistent with God’s existence and that in fact the atheist himself is incoherent. Hence we use the evidence but we use it differently. The better option, we believe, is that which renders evidence irrelevant to the existence of God. In this way evangelism is not put off by the endless parenthesis of rational argument. Any approach that is defensive by nature should be questionable at once for the Christian. We have a strong case upon which to convince the world of the inconsistencies of its way of life and the errors of its views. Moreover, if we regard evangelism as being in any way dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of unbelievers, we must realise that God is always prior, his work is always proactive, never reactive. We, therefore, are called in our evangelism to be proactive rather than reactive. Reformed epistemology lays the foundation for proactive evangelism.