

Persistent and Deadly “ISMS” - Rationalism

“For to those who are perishing, the preaching of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18, Modern English Version)

After looking at October’s newsletter article, a pastor who visited last month at St. John’s guessed that my “ism” for this month would be “antinomianism” – the false teaching that the Law no longer applies to the Christian’s life in this world. Perhaps I could talk about this subject someday. But it’s not the final “ism” for this series. The “ism” that I shall write about this month is “rationalism” – the sinful demand that God’s Word must conform to human reason.

Like the two other “isms” we’ve looked at in this series (pietism and legalism), rationalism also has tempted God’s people pretty much from the beginning. It certainly makes an appearance in the account of mankind’s fall into sin. Remember that Satan tempted our first mother’s reason. And after doing so, the devil then tempted her to consider that God was hoarding the source of knowledge and understanding – Satan was tempting her to reach out and grab what would give her godlike discernment. *“[The serpent] said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?”’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:1b-6, ESV).*

See, the devil tempted Eve to listen to her reason instead of God’s Word. But as we know, this act of disobedience didn’t result in Adam and Eve becoming more wise. Quite the opposite. Instead, the fall into sin resulted in Eve and Adam (and all their descendants) losing the good image that God had given them at creation so that now the human intellect we are born with is unable to know the identity and the ways of God. Oh, fallen human reason can still deduce through the existence of the creation and the existence of human conscience that a Supreme Being exists. As the Apostle Paul wrote: *“For what may be known about God is clear to [all men] since God has shown it to them. The invisible things about Him—His eternal power and deity—have been clearly seen since the creation of the world and are understood by the things that are made, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:19-20, Modern English Version).* Yet, as St. Paul continued in the very next verse, *“having known God they did not glorify [Him] as God, nor gave thanks, but were made vain in their reasonings, and their unintelligent heart was darkened” (Romans 1:21, Young’s Literal Translation).* Therefore Martin Luther wrote in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed: **“I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him” (Luther’s Small Catechism, Concordia Publishing House, Copyright 1986).**

But fallen and sinful human reason is not content with being told that there is something which it cannot do. And this is true for the believer as well as the unbeliever – for Christians also continue to have a sinful nature that clings to them throughout this earthy life. And many Christians, even many church bodies, are tempted by rationalism. In general, over past decades, many of what are called “liberal” mainline Protestant denominations in America have succumb to what is known as the Higher Critical Method of Biblical interpretation. This method demands that the Bible’s claims (including the miraculous things mentioned in Scripture) must be explained in some way by human reason – which of course has resulted in many, if not most, of the supernatural accounts in the Bible being dismissed as fables, fabrications, or figurative accounts by those employing this method. Perhaps the book *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (also known the *Jefferson Bible*) stands as the epitome of such efforts. This piece of literature was produced by the third U.S. president. He cut out and removed all the claims to Jesus’ miracles and divinity in the Holy Gospels, and then reconstructed these Scriptures as his reason thought they should read.

We in the LCMS also went through tough times in the early 1970’s in what has come to be dubbed as “the battle over the Bible” – resulting in a walk out of faculty and students at the Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. It was called “Seminex.” At the heart and center of this controversy was the misuse of reason in interpreting the Bible. As you undoubtedly are aware, the Missouri Synod remained faithful to Scripture in this affair, and restructured its seminary in St. Louis.

Rationalism also rears its head among more conservative and Bible believing Christians when they contend that they must make a decision to follow Christ – placing one’s intellect & will at the center of coming to saving faith and remaining in saving faith. See, each and every one of us, pastor and people alike, are confronted by doubts and questions all the time. But our fallen human reason cannot believe, confess, or follow God without the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). For miraculous occurrences, as well as even the ability to believe in God, are beyond the grasp of the human understanding that we fallen sinners were given at birth. Therefore trying to explain or accept the supernatural within the Bible is outside the reach of natural human reason – be it the story of creation, Noah’s flood, Jesus’ miracles, and perhaps most importantly, the account of Jesus’ sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Therefore, ***“to those who are perishing, the preaching of the cross is foolishness.”***

And it’s not that God’s revelation to us is unreasonable in and of itself. Rather, it’s beyond/greater than natural human reason. And that can be a little uncomfortable to admit - even for the believer. Why? Because we live our everyday lives by our wits. But the Bible tells us that this reason that we daily depend upon is supposed to stand down in the presence of God’s Word. In fact, the Apostle Paul says: ***“We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7, ESV)***. Such words undoubtedly are completely foreign to the unbeliever. But this shouldn’t surprise the Christian because the Bible tells us that human beings are born spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. Therefore, saving faith is a gift that God must give.

My friends, the problem with legalism is that it seeks to put the Law and our obedience in the front seat and Jesus and the Good News of His obedient life and sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection in the back seat. The problem with pietism is that it seeks to place feelings in the front seat of the Christian life and God's Word in the back seat. And similarly the problem with rationalism is that it seeks, even demands, that reason be put in the front seat and God's Biblical revelation in the back seat. And every one of these "isms" is deadly because it places God and His Word in the background – sometimes an "ism" will even push God's Word completely out of the picture if it cannot or will not be reshaped to fit the demands of that particular "ism." For these "isms" demand to be in charge of our lives – therefore they are idolatry in every sense of the word.

But how is the Christian to respond? Should we hate and denounce human reason? No. As with feelings and God's law, we also place reason in its proper perspective. We use reason as a servant of God's Word, not its master. Christians study God's Word (even in the languages in which it was originally written), and also familiarize themselves with the historical background of the places and times in which Holy Scripture was written. Why? To help us understand what God is telling us. Throughout history, Christians generally have not been anti-literacy or anti-education. To the contrary, Christians have supported learning – not only as a way of enabling them to serve their neighbors, but even more importantly as a means to learn how to read the Bible and then communicate God's Word to others. Christians aren't to be unreasonable. Instead, they are called upon to be truly reasonable - reasonable in a Godly way. For after all, their understanding has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit who converted them. Therefore, Godly reasonableness uses the intellect for the purposes and reasons that God gave it – not as something to be used to judge God or rework His revelation. For Godly rationality humbly distinguishes the boundaries of human reason by not venturing to explain or do what the human intellect is not able to ascertain. For science cannot prove or disprove miracles because science is unable to subject miracles (especially those of the past) to the rigors of analysis by the scientific method. For what God would have us trust to be true by faith are things that our minds cannot fully comprehend. So why would a reasonable person emphatically declare that God's revelation cannot be true simply because it reports things that the human mind is not able to prove or disprove one way or another? *That strikes me as unreasonable.*

So my fellow Christians, we are called upon to defend God's Word – to push back against rationalism. ***“For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness,’ and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile. So let no one boast in men’ (1 Corinthians 3:19-21a, ESV).*** But may we always push back in a loving way. For the unbelieving rationalist truly is confused and deserves our empathy, love, and kindness. For see, trusting in and aligning ourselves to human reason cannot forgive our sins, reconcile us to God, or overcome death and the grave. Therefore, the way of rationalism will end in condemnation. For as St. Paul rhetorically asked: ***“Where is the one who is wise?***

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Corinthians 1:20, ESV).

So, we keep faithfully proclaiming a Word that the rationalist will laugh at. For tweaking that Word, in an effort to be conciliatory, won't convert the unbeliever to Christ – it will only result in us acting unfaithfully, and immersing ourselves in the pitfalls of rationalism. God's Word has power, even though the fallen human heart and mind may doubt it. ***“For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21, ESV).*** So, ***“we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:23-25, ESV).***

Therefore, the church does as her God and Savior asks – no matter how much pietists may scream for emotional stimulation, or legalists may cry for more rules, or rationalists may jeer and laugh. We baptize and teach. We announce absolution and distribute the body & blood of our crucified and risen Redeemer. For this is how our God delivers the salvation and eternal life that He has earned for sinners. It doesn't have to tickle the fancy or satisfy the reason of fallen sinners because it is the truth of the everlasting Creator of the universe. So let us shun every sin and deadly “ism,” and teach our loved ones and neighbors to do the same. And let us also proclaim the Word of the living God. ***“For to those who are perishing, the preaching of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”***

In Christ,
Pastor