

QUESTION

What role does intelligence play in knowing God? What Scriptural basis do you have for your answer?

ANSWER

The Bible states that we can know God through creation. In fact, he calls all of humanity to account for this knowledge.

...what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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. (Romans 1:19-20)

Three times in this passage we can read that God has made it very plain and clear that he can be known through Creation. So plain and clear that people are without excuse. Many people find it easy to agree with the premise of the Romans passage: Knowledge of God can be “understood from what has been made.”

Furthermore, we are told that even though the Gentiles were not given the words of God they were given the moral laws of God in the form of conscience. In other words, there is a universal idea of right and wrong that is embedded in human nature. Sometimes this is called “natural law.”

Indeed when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them. (Romans 2:14-15)

Knowledge of God through the witness of creation and through the witness of conscience has been called “general revelation.” It would have to be assumed that this knowledge would require some level of intelligence or cognition.

We also have the inspired Scriptures themselves. The Bible has been called “special revelation.” In other words, Scripture is very specific about the identity and the nature of God which sets it apart from general revelation. The reasoning and thinking involved in the revelation of God through Scripture would presuppose the need for intelligence. Since the Bible clearly states that we are made in the image of God it would follow that we would, in a limited way, share in some of the attributes of God. In other words, it would not be realistic for God to give us his word if he did not also give us the intelligence to understand it at some level.

There is a problem. Human intelligence is limited. It must be understood that we are fallen creatures and, as such, are cut off from a right relationship with God. Our fallen nature is cause for much difficulty in knowing God through any of the three avenues I have just mentioned. In short, sin gets in the way of knowing God despite human intelligence. We all need help.

God promised a New Covenant by which all may know him. Please refer to Jeremiah 31:31-34. The power of the New Covenant is that we will receive the help we need to use our intelligence in a way that will lead to the proper knowledge of God. Once we enter into that relationship our knowledge of God will grow as the grace of God allows. As people answer the call to enter into a discipleship relationship with the Lord knowledge of God will grow even more.

An expert in the law asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment. Here is a portion of Jesus' answer:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)

People who have not entered into the promised New Covenant cannot love the Lord with all their minds. Jesus told Nicodemus that "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). To prove that mere intelligence wasn't enough Nicodemus continually had trouble coming to intellectual terms with the things Jesus was telling him. Through this interchange in John 3, we discover that the Holy Spirit plays an essential role in redemption from sin. Jesus spoke of being born of the Spirit.

The Apostle Paul would write a beautiful and powerful treatment on the limits of unaided human intelligence when it came to knowing the things of God.

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Take the time to read the context of this passage by starting in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and go all the way to the end of chapter two and you'll get a clear picture of the limits of the human intellect without the help of God. The things of God are beyond intellect and, in fact, impossible without the help of God. Jesus gave this great statement while talking about being born again:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

The key is in being one of the “whoever’s” Jesus referred to in John 3:16. People who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ become “born again” by the power of God. It is then that both general and special revelation will come alive by the Holy Spirit. Intellect has a role in knowing God, but our intellect can be infected with the ravages of sin and rebellion. Sin makes knowing God (the way he wants all people to know him) impossible. By the grace of God he has made a way. The way is through Jesus Christ our Savior. All people are invited to come to God through Jesus Christ. This is the intelligent thing to do.