

## Rethinking the Enlightenment

I have always been fascinated by the history of ideas. Why do we think the way we do about particular subjects, and where do those thoughts come from? Nine times out of ten, the ideas we ruminate on today are recycled compilations from what was said long ago. As the writer of Ecclesiastes rightly attested, "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So, there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Nevertheless, not many of us take the time to trace the "genealogy" of many of our ideas. But doing so reveals the interesting origins to the ways in which we think and view the world today.

Recently, I began one of these genealogical journeys through the historical period known as the Enlightenment. Most scholars agree that the "Enlightenment" or "Age of Reason" began in the early seventeenth century with the writings and work of Francis Bacon and ended with the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>(1)</sup> The great "idea" of the Enlightenment was that human reason, human autonomy, and human progress would lead to ever-expanding knowledge about the created order and ever-expanding ways in which to exercise dominion over creation. Fueled by scientific and philosophical discoveries made by Copernicus, Galileo, Isaac Newton, and Rene Descartes, the view of the world as the dominion of God's providence and rule from on high shifted to the god of the mind, where reason could discover all that was necessary to advance humanity toward its highest destiny.

While we can certainly hear echoes of these ideas in our world today, I was particularly interested to see if there were other ways in which we have assumed principles of the Enlightenment religion—without batting an eyelash. As a result of the quantification and methodology shifts in the scientific realm of the Enlightenment, theologians came to view religion in the same way: as something that could be quantified, categorized, and proven by the power of reason. As a result, revelation came to be understood as simply the function of human reason. "Natural religion," or, what came to be the orthodoxy of the day, "deism," began to subsume all of the supernatural elements of faith since they were "unprovable" by the Enlightenment methods of inquiry. Theologians wanted to reduce and quantify religion to its most basic elements, which they believed to be universal and therefore reasonable.<sup>(2)</sup> The Christian faith became reduced to a bare minimum of dogma: the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and postmortem retribution for sin and blessing for virtue. These were all that were left of pre-Enlightenment faith. All of

Christianity's supernatural claims and all of its revelatory content were seen as unnecessary in a world where the Creator had endowed human beings with enough reason to discern what was important simply by looking at the great book of nature. The autonomous, rational human became the arbiter of truth and knowledge, and that was enough.

Inherent in this Enlightenment mindset, and common in our day as well, is the assumption that knowledge is good, certain, and objective. We often uncritically accept this Enlightenment idea as we look at Christian faith today, and we leave little room for ways of knowing that go beyond the rational or the scientific. As Blaise Pascal once said, "The heart has its reasons which reason cannot know."<sup>(3)</sup> But Christians do well to re-think this Enlightenment assumption, for we acknowledge that the fall of humanity impacted the whole self—including the mind.

Without jettisoning intellectual rigor and study, or succumbing to a faith without content, we must make room for the concept of "mystery" and be cautious about assuming an Enlightenment way of viewing knowledge and truth. Sometimes we simply *do not know*. Our minds are limited and God is infinite. We must reject the hubristic optimism of the endless, upward progress of human rationality to attain to omniscience. Moreover, our faith cannot be "reduced" to a set of fixed doctrines, even while it surely contains them. Rather, we must acknowledge "that the fundamental reality of God transcends human rationality" and "the heart of being a Christian is a personal encounter with God in Christ, who shapes us and molds us."<sup>(3)</sup> We come to know in and through personal encounter—both with God and with God's people in community—and we must reject the notion that we are ultimately and only autonomous, thinking selves. We are reminded by the apostle John that Truth is ultimately and completely revealed in a person—"The Word (logos) *became flesh and dwelt among us*"—and it is as a result of this person that we come to know anything that is worth knowing at all.

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(1) Stanley Grenz and Roger Olsen, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 16.

(2) Grenz and Olsen, 23.

(3) Cited in Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 166