

## CHAPTER 4.

### KNOWING AND TRUSTING GOD

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In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus Christ prayed to his Father, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). This makes it clear that knowing God is very important. In fact, it is eternally important.

However, there are different ways in which we may know someone. For example, let us suppose that there are two students at university, the first is named Jane, the other Danielle. Jane asks Danielle, “Do you know Susan?” And Danielle replies, “Yes, I know Susan. She is the chemistry major who just won the annual science award.” “That’s right!” says Jane. So, it is true: Danielle knows Susan. But *how well* does she know Susan? Perhaps she has only heard Susan’s name and seen her picture in the student newspaper. Maybe she has seen Susan walking on campus or taken a science class with her. But this does not mean that Danielle and Susan are close friends. In sum, Danielle’s knowledge of Susan may be very limited.

Now let us consider another example. Suppose an extended family is going to have a reunion. Many of the relatives have not seen each other for a long time. The organizers of the reunion would like to have some live background music. One day Jack is talking to his cousin Brent and says, “Your father plays the piano quite well. Why don’t you ask him if he would play at the reunion?” However, Brent replies, “That will never happen. I *know* my father. Yes, he’s very musical, but he becomes

so dreadfully nervous when he has to play in front of a crowd. No, I can already give you the answer now. He will not agree to play piano at the reunion.” Obviously this is a situation completely different from the first one. Both Danielle and Brent use the same word: to know. But when Brent says, “I *know* my father,” he is emphasizing the depth of his knowledge. Indeed, he knows his father so well that he can even anticipate accurately how his father would respond if he were asked to play the piano at the reunion. Without a doubt there is a special way in which parents and children know each other.

So, how are we to know God? Is it sufficient to know about God in the way Danielle, in the first example above, knows something about Susan? Many people know about God that way. As we learned in chapter 2, people can obtain a notion that God exists from general revelation. They can also have some sense of his power and wisdom. However, they do not really know him as children know their father. That kind of knowledge comes only from special revelation, that is, from the inspired Scriptures, as we learned in chapters 2 and 3. Moreover, it is this kind of familiar and familial knowledge that Jesus Christ was praying about in John 17. At the end of his prayer he says to his Father, “O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you” (John 17:25). So, Christ knows him as the Son knows his very own, eternal Father. At the same time, Christ does not keep this knowledge to himself, for he continues, “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known . . .” (John 17:26; also see John 1:18). As we learn from Christ, we come to know God, not as Danielle knows Susan, but as earthly children know their heavenly Father.

#### KNOWING OUR LIMITS IN KNOWING OUR GOD

To this point we have compared our knowledge of God to the kind of knowledge that children have of their parents. It is a close, deep, and far-reaching knowledge. But how far can we take this comparison? It is true that a human child can know his human father well, even very well. But it is a different thing for a *human* being to know a *divine* being. After all, God is the Creator, and we are just creatures. He is eternal, and we are

temporal. He is infinite, and we are finite. In addition, there are passages in the Bible which clearly state that human beings cannot completely understand God. Here are a few examples:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:3).

Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? . . . The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable (Isa 40:13, 28).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Rom 11:33)

In these passages the LORD is not speaking about people who only know him from general revelation. On the contrary, he is speaking to his own people, who have learned about him from the inspired prophets and apostles. Even believers cannot fathom God. That is to say, they may know him well, but they do not know him *fully*. There is a boundary, a border line, to their knowledge of God. Once their minds reach that boundary line, there is a big sign posted that says, “No trespassing by human beings” (see also Deut 29:29).

These truths are summarized in Article 1 of the Belgic Confession. There we confess that God is “eternal, *incomprehensible*, invisible, immutable, infinite . . . .” The first and last word in that list are connected to the second one. Unlike us, God is both eternal and infinite. Therefore we cannot fully comprehend him, his ways, or his decisions. His ways and his thoughts are simply too grand and glorious; our tiny little minds cannot figure them out (Isa 55:8–9).

There are at least two areas of doctrine in which it is critical that we recognize the limits of our understanding. They are God’s providence and his electing grace in Jesus Christ. We will deal with both of these doctrines later on in this book (chapters 8 and 12). However, it is good for us to touch on them briefly here, in connection with the limits of our knowledge. Concerning providence the Belgic Confession says in Article 13:

And as to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which he teaches us in his Word, without transgressing these limits.

Concerning God's providence many questions can enter our minds. Why does God allow earthquakes to cause so much destruction? Why does God send me sickness, whereas unbelievers keep on living in very good health? Why does God give some people wealth while others remain poor? We are curious people; we have many questions. Sometimes our questions are fully answered in the Bible. Other times our questions are only partially answered in the Bible. There are also times when the Lord does not give us any answer in the Bible. Our question simply remains a question. But the key thing is this: in discussing all our questions we may go as far as the Bible goes—but not a centimetre farther. That is what the Belgic Confession means when it says we have “only to learn those things which he teaches us in his Word, *without transgressing these limits.*”

In a similar way the Canons of Dort remind us how the doctrine of God's eternal election should be taught. We confess that this doctrine is revealed in both the Old and the New Testament; however, then the Canons continue by saying:

Therefore, also today this doctrine should be taught in the church of God, for which it was particularly intended, in its proper time and place, provided it be done with a spirit of discretion, in a reverent and holy manner, without inquisitively prying into the ways of the Most High, to the glory of God's most holy name, and for the living comfort of His people (1.14).

Also concerning the doctrine of election God's children have many questions. Why does God pick one person for salvation and not another? Why didn't God just choose to save everyone? How can a loving God pass over certain people and allow them to be punished eternally? Now, the Bible does speak about election; therefore, we also ought to speak about

it and teach it. But we must be careful to stick to our limits. We must not try to pry and peek into things that God has not revealed to us.

There are theologians who try to go beyond Scripture and come up with their own answers on the basis of their own human reasoning. This is sometimes called *speculative theology*. Theologians are not the only ones who sometimes push beyond the limits. Well-intentioned adults and genuinely curious children do so as well. But in all these cases speculation needs to be replaced with discretion and humility. As the apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 9:19–21, we have to remember that God is the Potter and we are the clay. As “jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7) we should be joyfully content to pass on what our Saviour Jesus has taught us in his Word. We should also be vigilant that we do not go beyond that.

Perhaps it helps to think of it in this way: Parents do not share everything they know with their children. This may well be for the children’s own benefit. For example, does a four-year-old need to know everything about the household budget? Isn’t it better for a young child to live life without fretting about family finances? Furthermore, if we can all agree on that, we should be able to extend the analogy and grant that it is a good thing God does not reveal more than he does. Or are we forgetting our status as *children* of God?

#### ATHEISM, AGNOSTICISM, AND RATIONALISM

Some people insist that there simply is no God. They are called *atheists*. Bertrand Russell, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins are names of well-known atheists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Atheists believe that there is no God. Of course, they cannot prove this. Even Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), who was a highly acclaimed philosopher, wrote, “I do not think that there is a conclusive argument by which one can prove that there is not a God.”<sup>1</sup> At least on this point, Russell is entirely correct. However, logically speaking, this also means that since atheism is neither proven nor provable, it must be a belief. In fact, even

1. Bertrand Russell, *Last Philosophical Testament 1943–68*, ed. John G. Slater (London: Routledge, 1997), 91.

though atheists may disagree, they are following a false *religion* that denies the existence of God.

Truth be told, it is very hard to be a consistent atheist. Someone once said to me, “I’m an atheist, so long as I don’t go hiking in the forest.” If anyone walks in the beauty of creation, and actually stops to think about what he sees, he will be hard-pressed to believe that there is no divine Designer of all the intricate splendour that fills every corner of creation. Yet there are those who strenuously suppress this glaringly obvious truth and maintain that there is no God. The Lord himself gives a clear evaluation of this atheism. He calls it foolish. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps 14:1). Furthermore, the folly of atheism will be fully revealed on the final day, when every knee will bow before Jesus, and every tongue will confess that God exists and that Christ is the Lord (Phil 2:10–11).

Other people are uncertain about whether God exists. They do not want to say, “God exists.” Neither do they want to say, “God does *not* exist.” Instead, they try to find some middle ground on which they can stand by saying, “We simply don’t know. For us the existence of God is an open question without a definite answer.” These people are called *agnostics*, which literally means *those who do not know*.

Agnostics will often say that they are simply being honest with themselves. On the one hand, they might give some credit to the argument that since creation is so well designed, it must have a divine Designer. On the other hand, they are also persuaded by the argument that if God exists, it is shocking, or perhaps even objectionable, that he allows so much evil and suffering to occur in the world. In the minds of the agnostics these arguments, both for and against God’s existence, therefore cancel each other out, leaving them in a state of uncertainty.

In reality, though, agnosticism often works out to be essentially the same thing as atheism. Agnostics may say that they are not sure whether God exists, but most of them go ahead and live their daily lives as if they were, in fact, certain that God does not exist. They do not take time to

learn more about God in order to see if greater certainty might be gained. They do not take time to worship God and explore the possibility that he might be more real than they ever anticipated. Instead, most agnostics find an intellectual escape route by saying, “I don’t know if God exists, and I’m content to leave it at that.” Practically speaking, they carry on living as if they are completely unaccountable to God. In this regard agnosticism is as foolish as atheism.

Not only are agnosticism and atheism similar in practice, they are also rooted in the same error. That error is rationalism. *Rationalism* is the conviction that human reason is the sufficient, supreme, and final judge in all things. Simply put, rationalism says, “If it makes sense to my mind, I will accept it. Otherwise, I reject it.” There is an enormous problem with rationalism, and that is pride. Even Job, who was an upright man (Job 1:1), fell into this temptation. He had suffered greatly, losing all his wealth and his children in a single day (Job 1). Shortly thereafter he lost his health as well (Job 2). As he discusses these afflictions with his friends, it becomes clear that Job wants a reasonable and rational explanation. He wonders, “Why should I suffer so much even though I have been faithful to the LORD and his commands?” And he wants the LORD himself to provide the answer (Job 31:35).

Eventually the LORD does answer him, but the response is different from what Job initially expected. The LORD does not explain why Job had to suffer. Instead, he asks Job a series of questions such as: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (38:4), “Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?” (38:12), and “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, that a flood of waters may cover you?” (38:34) For four chapters in a row (Job 38–41) the LORD asks Job question after question. At the end and in reply Job says, “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3). In other words, Job was humbled; his pride was subdued. He admits that his small human mind is not the supreme or final judge. Rather, he learns to trust that what God says and plans is the final authority. This is true for all of us. Rationalism needs to be replaced by repentance and humility.

## WHAT IS FAITH?

Faith is not anti-intellectual. Faith is not opposed to reason. However, faith is convinced of things that go beyond our intellectual capacity. The most well-known definition of faith comes from Hebrews 11:1. There we read, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” There is a saying, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” People like visible and tangible proof. Someone may say to you, “I’ll give you \$10,000.” After hearing that, you might well think to yourself, “That is wonderful, but I’ll believe it when I actually see you put that money in my hand!”

Too many people treat God as if he were just another human being. They refuse to trust God completely until he actually does what they want him to do. If they are sick, they might agree to believe in God . . . so long as he heals them. If they are poor, they may agree to trust God . . . as soon as he gives them some more material wealth. But this approach does not show true faith, for it consistently begins at the wrong point. It starts with the idea that the holy God, like sinful human beings, is not always trustworthy. However, we must not think of God as if he were a supreme human being. *All* of his promises come true; *all* of his words are fulfilled (Luke 21:33). Our starting point must be that God is always completely trustworthy.

It is for this reason that the Apostles’ Creed is careful to say, “I believe in God the Father . . . I believe in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son . . . [and] I believe in the Holy Spirit.” That is to say, in the first place, faith is trusting in Someone, Someone who is entirely unique and eternally faithful. That special someone is our triune God. At the last supper that he had with his disciples, the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of faith in this way: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1). So, a one-word definition for faith is *trust*.

The Heidelberg Catechism captures this same emphasis. Consider, for example, Lord’s Day 7, Q&A 21:

What is true faith? True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that *God* has revealed to us in his Word. At the same time, it is a firm confidence that not only to others, but also to me, *God* has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation, out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.

Please notice that the Catechism describes faith as a *sure knowledge* and a *firm confidence*. However, both the knowledge and the confidence are directed toward and founded upon God—the God who never lies and always keeps his word (Num 23:19). In fact, the apostle Paul adds, “As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No . . . . For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Cor 1:18, 20).

Many things about the Christian faith cannot be fully and rationally explained. How could the eternal Son of God be born as a baby in a manger? How could Jesus Christ rise from the dead? How can God be so compassionate as to forgive all of my many, many sins? Our brains cannot figure out all these things. But the Holy Spirit, who is God, works faith in our hearts through the inspired gospel, so that we trust that what God says is true, and it is true for me, too! *That* is what true faith is.

#### DEFENDING THE FAITH

Apologetics is the study of how to make a reasonable defence of the Christian faith, especially when there are opponents who undermine or even ridicule the truths of Scripture. Christians should be willing and able to defend their faith. The apostle Peter instructs us with these words: “But in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet 3:15; see also 2 Cor 10:5). Furthermore, Acts 17 is a classic example of how the apostle Paul went into the pagan city of Athens and clearly defended the identity of the true and living God (Acts 17:22–31).

It is also instructive to read how the people responded to Paul's speech. God's Word says, "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, 'We will hear you again about this'" (Acts 17:32). Both groups heard exactly the same message, but they reacted in two very different ways. This reminds us to be sober and realistic in our apologetics. We may give a very clear, concise, and courageous defence of the Christian faith, but we cannot generate faith in someone's heart by argumentation. As Acts 17 reminds us, and as Lord's Day 7 summarizes for us, faith is a miracle that is worked in someone's heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the power of persuasive arguments (1 Cor 2:4).

As believers we may be disappointed that atheists, agnostics, and other unbelievers are so persistent in their rejection of God. But we should not be entirely surprised by this. As the apostle Paul explains, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). Also, as much as we may long and pray for the conversion of those with whom we speak, we must remember our primary motivation for defending the faith ought to be promoting the honour of God. In destroying "every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor 10:5) our first goal is to uphold the good and glorious reputation of our Redeemer.

*Suggested Reading: Isaiah 55:6–11*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Define atheism and agnosticism. Explain how each is related to rationalism.
2. What is speculative theology? Give examples of common questions that adults have which run the risk of treading into the territory of speculative theology. Provide some more examples of how children's questions can step over the boundary of what is revealed. How do we draw the fine line between acknowledging that the answer we want is not revealed and realizing that perhaps we have

not searched hard enough in the Bible to find it? In other words, are we sometimes too quick to say, “The Bible doesn’t talk about that”?

3. Read James 2:14–26. What is the key difference between living faith and dead faith? Sometimes the fruit of faith is quite small. What should we do if the spiritual harvest in our own life is quite meagre? How do we avoid slipping into a spiral of doubt about our own salvation? Make use of Canons of Dort 1.16 in your answer.
4. Faith is trust. Expand on this statement with a few descriptive phrases that elaborate on what kind of trust faith should be. One example might be as follows: faith is trust *that never gives up hoping in God, no matter how gloomy the future may look*. Can you think of more?

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Read Genesis 3:1–7 about the fall into sin. Would it be accurate to say that Eve sinned by desiring to transgress the limits of her human knowledge and obtain divine knowledge? Why is it that we sometimes have such a hard time being content to learn what God teaches us in his Word? Why are we often eager to know the very things he has decided not to reveal? How can we keep our curiosity in check?
2. Have you had any experience in speaking to agnostics? If so, explain how you spoke to them. Was it effective? What might you improve on next time? Run through these same questions again, only this time applying them to atheists.
3. When we are defending the Christian faith we sometimes use certain arguments to persuade people that their ideas about God are false. At the same time we know that faith does not rest on logical arguments but upon God’s inspired Word (LD 7, Q&A 21). How can we on the one hand use reason in our apologetics, but on the other hand prevent reason from becoming the foundation of our faith?
4. As children of God we are to know him and trust him as children know and trust their own earthly fathers. Yet what about those situations in which earthly fathers have been mostly, or entirely,

absent from their children's life, or in which they have been present but then in an abusive manner? How can such children learn to know and trust their heavenly Father? How can we help people like that, also later in life, overcome the psychological and emotional hurdles that they understandably face?

Jason van Vliet

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