



Reformed Epistemology

Or 'Divine Intervention'

By Shawn Nelson

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Basic Idea

People need a **divine intervention!**

- ▶ People are aware God exists.
- ▶ But because of sin (the Fall), they suppress God.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit must open our eyes.



Overview

People need a **divine intervention**.

- People already aware God exists ('sense of God' or *sensus divinitatis*)
- But because of sin, they suppress God.
- Holy Spirit must open our eyes.

Says people don't need more reason/evidence, but a change of heart!

People don't come to believe because they reasoned their way to that conclusion. Instead, they willfully skew their conclusions away from the evidence of God/Christianity. What people really is for their heart to be changed (born again) so they can truly draw near to God and believe.

Says people are wired with a 'sense of God'

The *sensus divinitatis* is said to be an innate cognitive faculty that produces belief in God under certain conditions. "The *sensus divinitatis* is a belief-producing faculty (or power, or mechanism) that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs... The purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God..." (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 149).

We don't have to prove God exists—it is "Properly Basic"

You will hear about "properly basic beliefs" with this apologetic. These are beliefs that are

self-evident or immediately known, **without needing evidence or arguments to support them.**

We cannot prove any of the following, but we believe them to be true:

1. The existence of the external world. Is there a reality outside of our own minds that exists independently of our thoughts and perceptions? We might not ever be able to prove it. Yet, we simply accept that it is the case that there's external reality that we can know and interact with.

2. The existence of other minds. How do we know that other people really exist? You could be the only real person, and everyone else is just an AI bot and you're living in a simulation. How would you ever know? Yet, you are not ridiculed for believing other people really do exist.

3. The length of your lifetime. How do you know that the entire universe didn't just pop into existence 5 seconds ago, complete with all your memories of your entire past? There's no way you could know this. But it's reasonable to hold the belief that you have lived your life.

Belief in God is also "Properly Basic"

Reformed Epistemology says that belief in God is like the above. It is reasonable to believe that God exists in the same way. Belief in God can be considered properly basic because it is a necessary assumption for making sense of certain experiences, like feelings of awe or transcendence, the existence of morality, the origin of the universe, or personal experiences that seem to be beyond natural explanation.

Also says we don't necessarily need to prove Scripture; it is self-authenticating

- "...it is by virtue of the activity of the Holy Spirit that Christians come to grasp, believe, accept, endorse, and rejoice in the truth of the great things of the gospel." (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 201)
- "Scripture (through the work of the Holy Spirit) carries its own evidence with it; as Calvin says, it is 'self-authenticating'..." (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 214)
- "...we don't require argument from, for example, historically established premises about the authorship and reliability of the bit of Scripture in question..." (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 216)



Reformed Epistemology Statistics

This was by far the highest-ranking apologetic at conversion:
63% of those surveyed had it as a top apologetic at conversion.

This makes it extremely important!

Data

How many times did an apologetic appear in the 90th percentile (top 10%)?

Most Influential At Salvation:

1. ReformedEpist 63%
(ReformedEpist appeared in top 10% of scores for a participant at conversion 642 out of 1023 times)
2. Psychological 49%
3. Pragmatism 35%
4. Experientialism 27%
5. Presuppositional 15%
6. Verificationism 14%
7. Classical 13%
8. Scripturalism 13%
9. Cultural 9%
10. Evidentialism 2%

Most Influential Post Conversion:

1. Classical 57%

2. Psychological 48%
3. Rational 28%
4. Experientialism 22%
5. ReformedEpist 21%
(Pragmatism appeared in top 10% of scores for a participant post conversion only 219 out of 1023 times)
6. Evidentialism 17%
7. Cultural 16%
8. Verificationalism 10%
9. Pragmatism 9%
10. Presuppositional 4%

A Note About Percentiles

It is possible for a participant to have two or more apologetics with the same highest rank value and/or lowest rank value. For example, a candidate could have a top score of 11.0 for both Experientialism and Psychological Apologetics. I use percentiles to accommodate for this. The 100th percentile are the highest-ranking apologetics for a participant. The 90th percentile are those apologetics that were in the top ten percent.



Why 'Reformed Epistemology'?

Why the Strange Name? 'Reformed Epistemology'

We must talk about the strange name!



John Calvin writing *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536

Theologian

John Calvin (d. 1564)
Major Protestant Leader

Idea

- *Sensus divinitatis*: an innate sense of God
- Total Depravity: Human reason corrupted by sin
- The role of the Holy Spirit in conversion

Huldrych Zwingli (d. 1531)
Swiss Reformer

- The clarity of Scripture and the need for the Holy Spirit's guidance
- God's Sovereignty: God's control and authority over all aspects of creation
- Scripture as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice

Heinrich Bullinger (d. 1575)
Swiss Reformer

- Covenant Theology: the importance of God's covenants in understanding salvation
- The role of divine grace in the process of salvation
- Perspicuity of Scripture: Scripture is clear and understandable to all believers

Theodore Beza (d. 1605)
French Theologian in Geneva

- The distinction between revealed and natural theology
- The role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating Scripture and regenerating the believer

John Knox (d. 1572)
Scottish Reformation

- The need for dependence on God in all aspects of life and understanding
- The emphasis on the preaching of the Word as a means of spiritual growth

Why the Strange Name? 'Reformed Epistemology'

"Reformed" refers to the Reformed tradition in Christianity, also known as Calvinism.

However, the principles found in Reformed Epistemology go back to before the Reformation and can be found in the writings of church fathers like Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Augustine (d. 430).

Even Alvin Plantinga Regretted the Name!

Alvin Plantinga coined the phrase "Reformed Epistemology" but later regretted the name because it seemed to tie it to the reformed tradition, when in fact, the principles it encompasses are not exclusive to the Reformed tradition.

Philosophy 101



Metaphysics:

Study of nature of reality and existence. "What is real?" "What's the nature of reality?"



Epistemology:

Study of knowledge. "What can we know?" "How do we know what we know?"



Axiology: Study of value. Could include beauty, justice, ethics. "Why is something valuable?" "What's right and wrong?"



Logic: Study of correct reasoning. "How do we think well?"



Why the Strange Name? 'Reformed Epistemology'

Now let's look at the "epistemology" part of 'Reformed Epistemology'.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge, including how knowledge is acquired, justified, and used.

Just FYI...

Philosophers like to debate everything! And they cannot even agree as to how many areas there are in philosophy! Some say 3, some 4, some 5! But here's a general overview.

Philosophy is the discipline that delves into the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. Through rigorous thinking and questioning, philosophy seeks to understand the world and our place within it. It addresses questions that science and religion sometimes cannot.

Metaphysics:

Metaphysics explores the nature, foundation, and essence of reality and existence. It questions what is fundamentally real and delves into concepts such as being, time, space, and causality. By examining the underlying nature of things, it hopes to discern what truly exists beyond mere appearance.

Epistemology:

Epistemology focuses on the nature, scope, and limits of human knowledge. It seeks to understand how we acquire knowledge, how we can verify its truth, and the difference

between belief and genuine knowledge. Central to this branch is addressing questions like "What is truth?" and the sources and validation of knowledge.

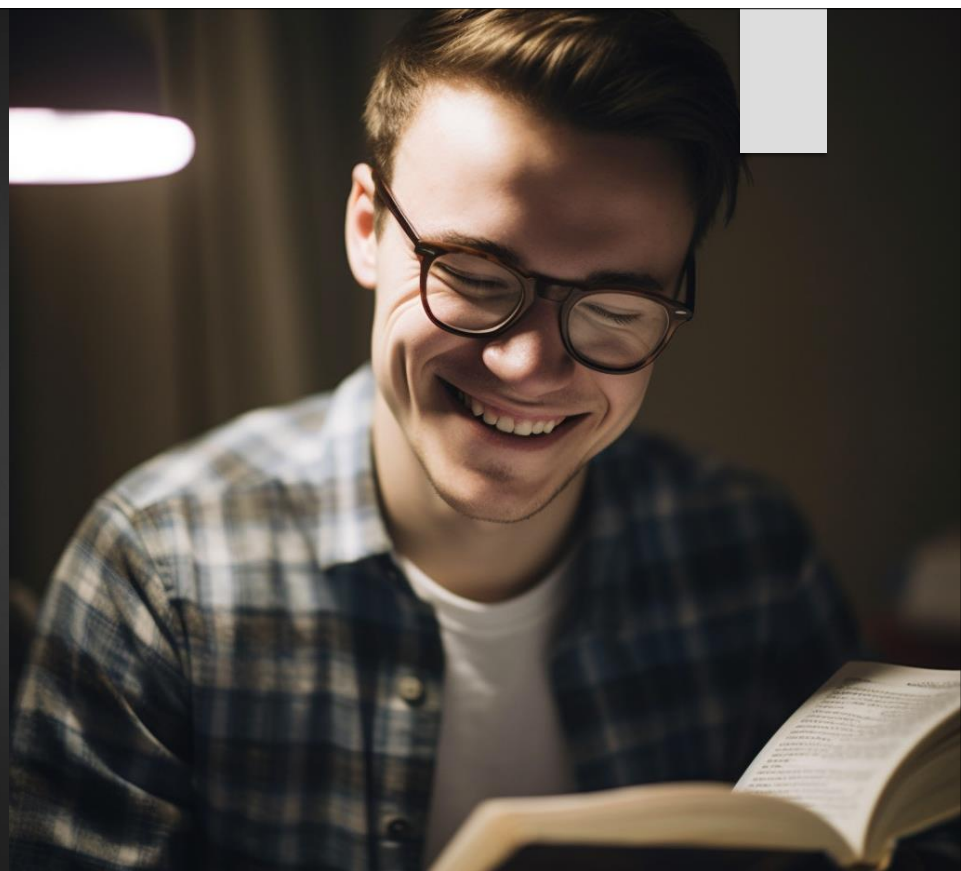
Axiology:

Axiology studies the nature of value, encompassing both ethics and aesthetics. It asks fundamental questions about what is intrinsically valuable, the nature of beauty, and the foundations of morality. The branch grapples with concepts of right and wrong, justice, and the inherent worth of things.

Logic:

Logic is concerned with the principles of correct reasoning and inference. It provides the tools to evaluate arguments for validity and soundness, ensuring that conclusions follow from premises. Logic acts as a framework for structured, coherent, and reliable thinking.

Biblical Support



Sense of God



- ▶ Romans 1:19–20 – “...his [God’s] **invisible attributes**, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, **have been clearly seen** since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse.”
- ▶ Romans 1:18 “...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who **suppress the truth in unrighteousness...**”

A Sense of God (sensus divinitatis)

People already have an intuitive sense of God.

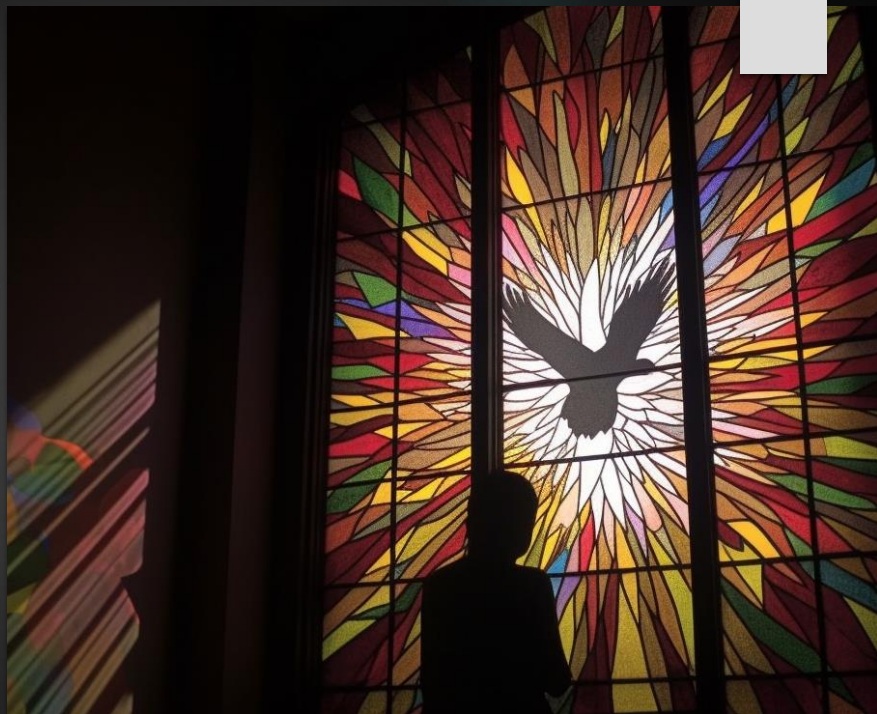
Romans 1:19–20 – “...his **invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen** since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse.”

But the problem is that people suppress this. According to v. 18:

Romans 1:18—“...the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who **suppress the truth in unrighteousness...**”

Holy Spirit must Open Eyes

- ▶ 1 Cor. 2:14— “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because **they are spiritually discerned.**”
- ▶ Ephesians 2:8–9— “For you are saved by grace through faith, and **this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift**—not from works, so that no one can boast.
- ▶ John 16:13— “When the Spirit of truth comes, **he will guide you into all the truth.** For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come.”



Holy Spirit must Open Eyes

Reformed Epistemology emphasizes that only through a special act of the Holy Spirit can a person become a Christian.

This is supported with the following verses:

1 Corinthians 2:14— “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are **spiritually discerned.**”

Ephesians 2:8–9— “For you are saved by grace through faith, and **this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift**—not from works, so that no one can boast.

John 16:13— “When the Spirit of truth comes, **he will guide you into all the truth.** For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come.”

Conversion ultimately depends on God's grace, rather than human efforts.



Focus on Faith (not Debates)

- ▶ 2 Cor. 5:7 – "For we **walk by faith**, not by sight."
- ▶ 1 Cor. 2:4-5 – "My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that **your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power.**"

Says to Focus on Faith (Priority of Faith)

The practical take-way is that **we can focus on faith** and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, rather than engaging in potentially unproductive philosophical debates.

Here are verses that support this idea:

2 Corinthians 5:7 – "For we walk by faith, not by sight."

1 Corinthians 2:4-5 – "My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power."



Did This Impact You?

THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN CONVERSION...

Did/Does Interventionism Impact You?

This apologetic method might have had an impact on you if...

- You remember having a sense of God before becoming a Christian.
- Nobody had to convince you that God existed; you already believed in God.
- You were an unbeliever, but then suddenly had a strong sense that God was calling you to himself.
- You came to believe Christianity is true because the Holy Spirit impressed it upon your heart at my conversion.
- You really did not need to be convinced by empirical evidence, scientific arguments, or philosophical proofs.
- What you needed was God to open your eyes!

You might continue to be influenced by it if...

- You pray for God to “open the eyes” of your unbelieving friend/family member.
- You don’t feel the need to prove the Bible, because you believe the Bible is self-authenticating.
- You think unbelievers are too damaged by the Fall to be able to use reason and logic when trying to figure out whether God exists.
- You place a strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture as the primary source of truth and knowledge about God and prioritize faith over reason.
- When you dialogue with non-believers, you emphasize the inner witness of the Holy Spirit rather than relying solely on rational arguments.

Advantages

- ▶ Takes pressure off
- ▶ Encourages prayer
- ▶ Encourages patience
- ▶ Emphasizes relationship
- ▶ Nurtures humility
- ▶ Reduces debate fatigue



Advantages

From an apologetic/evangelistic perspective, Reformed epistemology has these pros:

- **Takes the pressure off:** It emphasizes that the ultimate responsibility for bringing someone to faith lies with God, not with the individual sharing the Gospel. This can alleviate the pressure to "convince" others of the truth of Christianity.
- **Encourages prayer:** Since God must open a person's heart, this approach encourages believers to pray for non-believers.
- **Encourages patience:** This approach reminds Christians that conversion is often a process, not an event, which can lead to greater patience and persistence in apologetic efforts.
- **Emphasizes relationship:** It highlights the importance of having a relationship with God, rather than just intellectual understanding.
- **Nurtures humility:** By acknowledging that God's action is essential in bringing people to faith, it fosters humility among believers.
- **Reduces debate fatigue:** By not feeling pressured to win every argument, Christians can maintain a more relaxed and genuine approach in their interactions with others.

Challenges



- ▶ Neglects other approaches
- ▶ Could be less appealing to skeptics
- ▶ Some may feel inadequately prepared
- ▶ Could result in apathetic evangelism

Challenges with this Apologetic

The following challenges could be a challenge for this apologetic approach:

- **Neglects evidence and reason-based approaches:** It might neglect evidence and reason-based approaches, which strongly impacted 1 out of 10 people surveyed.
- **Could be less appealing to skeptics:** It may not resonate with individuals who require empirical evidence to believe in God.
- **Some may feel inadequately prepared:** By downplaying the importance of evidence-based arguments, Christians might not be as equipped to answer difficult questions or objections from skeptics.
- **Could result in apathetic evangelism:** Overemphasizing divine intervention may lead to passivity among Christians, resulting in apathetic evangelism.