

“Evidentialism, Reformed Epistemology, and the Holy Spirit”  
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Evidentialism,<sup>1</sup> the view that one must have reasons to believe in God rationally, is commonly criticized for allegedly eliminating the possibility for justified belief in God among the unlettered faithful. In his important essay, “Reason and Belief in God,” Alvin Plantinga questions how evidentialism can confer epistemic justification on a fourteen-year-old theist who is raised in a community where most everyone believes in God but who does not assent to his theistic views on the basis of evidence.<sup>2</sup> Kelly Clark ends his treatise against evidentialism, *Return to Reason*, with the example of his grandmother who Clark claims does not have sufficient evidence to believe in God on evidentialism’s criteria for knowledge. If this is so, Clark complains, “then my grandmother has a noetic defect—she believes in God without sufficient propositional evidence. [...] It is difficult for me to imagine that God has put her in a cognitive situation which makes her belief in God positively irrational.”<sup>3</sup> These untoward consequences have led certain theists to reject evidentialism altogether. Jay Wood summarizes this anti-evidentialist argument this way:

Not only does seeking to secure justification for religious belief through argument limit the number of beliefs we can be said justifiably to believe, but it also severely restricts the number of people who can actively participate in the task of justifying even minimal theism. [...] Even if it is possible to prove God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Or stated negatively, evidentialism is the view that belief in God is not properly basic as reformed epistemologists are noted for claiming. Often, evidentialists structure epistemic justification combining classical foundationalism and internalism. One example of evidentialism is exemplified by Gary Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 92-121.

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); reprinted in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 117 (page references refer to reprint ed.).

<sup>3</sup> Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 157-58.

existence—and this too is roundly disputed—it is not a task to which most persons are suited by aptitude, training or leisure time.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, this tragic and counterintuitive consequence—that only the philosophers could have justified belief in God—indicates to epistemologists like Plantinga, Clark, Wood, and many others that something is fundamentally wrong with evidentialism.

Another criticism against evidentialism claims that it obligates believers to abandon their faith in circumstances when the evidence more powerfully supports claims that undermine central tenets of the faith.<sup>5</sup> For example, suppose a young graduate student is attending a liberal theological school where her belief in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus is constantly assailed by her professors. She searches for satisfying rejoinders in her textbooks and from her classmates, but she finds nothing sufficient to overturn the evidence presented by her professors. If evidentialism is true (or so the claim goes), she ought to follow the evidence—even if it entails abandoning her orthodox faith. Given this adverse result, critics of evidentialism believe this occasions a reason to reject evidentialism.

I believe that these criticisms of evidentialism fail for a variety of reasons. In this paper, I will articulate one response that, if successful, defeats them soundly. Furthermore, my defense of evidentialism will bring to light a criticism of Reformed Epistemology's (mis-)use of the Holy Spirit. My contention is that a biblically sound epistemology of the Holy Spirit serves a valuable role in an evidentialist's epistemic framework and presents a difficulty for the Reformed Epistemologist.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*, Countours of Christian Philosophy, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 157.

<sup>5</sup> Such as William Lane Craig, "Classical Apologetics," in *Five Views*, 33-34.

### The Epistemic Works of Holy Spirit

Before looking at the role of the Holy Spirit for evidentialists, I'd like quickly to review how the Bible describes the Holy Spirit's epistemic works. One striking feature that different writers throughout the New Testament ascribe to the Holy Spirit is his role as a *witness* or *testimony*.<sup>6</sup> In John 15:26-27, Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit will give testimony about Jesus along with the apostles' own testimony. This is significant because it parallels the Holy Spirit's testimony with the testimony of the apostles. Similarly, in Acts 5:32 both the apostles and the Holy Spirit are appraised as witnesses to the basic tenets of the gospel. Romans 8:16, a passage from one of Paul's most elaborate discussions on the Holy Spirit, declares that "the Spirit Himself *testifies* with our spirit that we are children of God."<sup>7</sup> The author of 1 John writes, "it is the Spirit who *testifies*, because the Spirit is truth. [. . .] If we receive the testimony of men, the *testimony* of God is greater; the one who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the *testimony* that God has given concerning his Son" (1 John 5:6b, 9). Clearly Scripture teaches that one role of the Holy Spirit is to provide a witness or testimony to the basic truths of the gospel.

Another remarkable epistemic role of the Holy Spirit is the work of conferring confidence and resolve to believers. 1 Thessalonians 1:5 declares that the Holy Spirit gives "full conviction" of faith. Moreover, various passages of Scripture describe the Spirit as a "seal" or "pledge" that provides ultimate confirmation of faith for believers

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<sup>6</sup> In the Greek, *martureo*, indicates a witness who provides testimony for a claim. The basic definition of this word means "to be a witness," "to come forward as a witness," "to bear witness to something." See H. Strathmann, "*martus, martureo, marturia, marturion*" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 474-514.

<sup>7</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the Updated New American Standard Bible.

(e.g., John 3:33-34; 2 Cor. 1:21-22, 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14, 4:30). The Holy Spirit also vouches safe believers' confidence in their faith by dwelling in them (e.g., John 14:16-17, 20; 1 John 2:27, 3:24, 4:13).

These two epistemic works of the Holy Spirit—providing testimony to the truth of Christianity and conferring confidence to believers—are notable and need to be included in a robust Christian epistemology. I propose that evidentialists can account for these epistemic works of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, I will show that the way evidentialists can account for the Holy Spirit's epistemic works can allay the problems posed at the beginning of this paper.

### **Evidentialism and the Holy Spirit**

Evidentialists do not need to shy away from the epistemic works of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, by incorporating the robust epistemic roles that the Bible ascribes to the Holy Spirit, evidentialists can present a strong religious epistemology that surmounts its leading detractions.

First, consider the Holy Spirit's work as a witness to the truth of the gospel. Evidentialists can include the Holy Spirit's testimony as part of their evidential basis for belief that God exists or that Christianity is true. According to evidentialists, any belief that is not properly basic requires some argument, evidence, or supporting reason of some sort to justify that belief. All non-basic belief will require evidential support in order to be justified. Now, the belief that God exists is not basic according to many evidentialists, so it follows that some epistemic support is necessary to justify that belief. Other evidentialists make room for the belief that God exists to qualify as a basic belief, but

even in this case they maintain that the belief must have underlying evidence that supports it.<sup>8</sup> So, for the belief that God exists, sufficient evidence is needed to justify it.

The problem with this approach, according to Plantinga and other reformed epistemologists, is that many people lack sufficient evidence to believe in God. Since the philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God are rigorous and technical, they worry that very few people will have time to go over the evidence carefully, and even among those who do, they may not find sufficient evidence.

The problem with this criticism is that it is too closefisted about what counts as evidence. In the literature, reformed epistemologists only consider classic arguments for and against belief in God such as the ontological argument,<sup>9</sup> cosmological argument,<sup>10</sup> teleological argument,<sup>11</sup> the historicity of the Resurrection,<sup>12</sup> the problem of evil,<sup>13</sup> and Marxist/Freudian criticisms of religious belief.<sup>14</sup> Reformed epistemologists want to saddle evidentialists only with this sort of technical, philosophical evidence for belief in God.

But why should one's evidential support for belief in God only consist of these items? Not only are there other philosophical arguments worth considering (and more plausible versions of the ones they consider), but one should also consider the evidence of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in one's evidential set of reasons for belief in God. As we've already seen, a *prima facie* reading of Scripture teaches that one of the epistemic

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<sup>8</sup> In correspondence, Doug Geivett suggests that this is the type of evidentialism he holds.

<sup>9</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, 2d. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 26-94.

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, 3-25; Clark, *Return to Reason*, 17-26

<sup>11</sup> Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, 95-111; Clark, *Return to Reason*, 26-34.

<sup>12</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford, 2000), 273-80.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, has numerous publications on the problem of evil, perhaps most notable is his *God, Freedom and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Clark, *Return to Reason*, 57-91.

<sup>14</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 135-63.

works of the Holy Spirit is to provide a witness for belief in God. When one also considers that most Christians are not tutored in philosophy of religion, it may be the case that many believers' evidential sets will *primarily* consist of the testimony given by the Holy Spirit. No matter what a believer's educational background and philosophical expertise are, all believers' evidential support for belief in God will include at least one piece of evidence—the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, it is important to remember that for most people the main source of acquiring beliefs comes through testimony. The use of testimonial evidence to justify beliefs is perfectly reasonable, and it is one of the most common sources of evidence, especially for young children. Christians who wish to take seriously what the New Testament teaches about the epistemic works of the Holy Spirit will welcome the incorporation of this testimony to one's evidential set of beliefs. After all, testimony is a natural source of evidence for many beliefs we hold.

Of course, the difference the Holy Spirit's testimony will make as evidence for belief in God depends upon the strength of this additional piece of evidence. If the testimony of the Holy Spirit has insignificant evidential value, this adjustment hardly improves the believer's position for assenting to belief in God. This is where considering the second epistemic work of the Holy Spirit—conferring confidence to believers—is useful. At first blush, it seems that taking this second work of the Holy Spirit seriously commits one to *fideism*. If the Holy Spirit's testimony is construed in such a way that it *always* swamps the opposing evidence for belief in God, the rest of the evidence seems irrelevant. Moreover, assigning an indefinitely large evidential value to the testimony of the Holy Spirit would make Christianity infeasible—a position non-believers find

frustrating (at best) or intellectually dishonest (at worst). Finally, this evidence may seem unfair since it is “private.” Unbelievers will hardly be impressed by alleged evidence to which they have no access.

These problems only ensue if one assigns an indefeasible evidential worth to the testimony of the Holy Spirit. But there is no need to insist that a proper interpretation of the relevant scripture passages requires us to assign an unassailable value to the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Rather, these teachings can be explicated such that the Holy Spirit’s testimony provides *sufficient confirmation* of the believer’s faith. Sufficient confirmation denotes that the evidence by itself provides rational grounds to accept that belief. Sufficient confirmation, however, does not mean that the evidence for a belief is indefeasible. In this way, evidentialists can say that the testimony of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with Scripture, gives sufficient reason on its own (*ceteris paribus*) to accept belief in God.

The evidence of the Holy Spirit’s testimony may also seem problematic for its subjective element, since a variety of conflicting religious claims can be supported using subjective religious experience. In response, the evidentialist can claim that the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not intended to provide “public” evidence for belief in God. This is evidence that is only accessible to the individual experiencing it. In some ways, the testimony of the Holy Spirit is like the evidence one has for experiencing pain. One cannot be mistaken in his belief that he is in pain, although he might be mistaken about the cause of the pain. Likewise, the Holy Spirit’s testimony provides immediate personal evidence for belief in God, although this evidence is defeasible.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The idea here is that my mental experience of pain can provide evidence for specific physical pain, but this connection is not absolutely certain. Perhaps I feel a sharp pain on my hand, and I think I’ve

So, by incorporating the testimony of the Holy Spirit into one's evidence for belief in God, the solution to the problems presented against evidentialism at the beginning of this paper become apparent. People like Plantinga's fourteen-year-old believer and Clark's grandmother do not believe that God exists without any evidence. Indeed, they have at least one reason, the Holy Spirit's testimony, to believe that God exists. As Thomas Aquinas wrote, "[T]here is the inspiration given to human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom."<sup>16</sup>

A solution to the second example also surfaces in light of the evidence of the Holy Spirit's testimony. For the young theology student is not confronted only with the evidence against the Resurrection presented by her professors, but she also has the evidence of the testimony of the Holy Spirit to consider. Upon assessing the evidence, even though her professors' evidence *by itself* constitutes sufficient evidence to abandon orthodox Christianity, she might find that the evidence to the contrary, supplied by the Holy Spirit's testimony (in conjunction with her other beliefs), allows her to maintain her belief in orthodox Christianity on the basis of the evidence.

### Objections

Finally, I would like to consider some objections to my incorporation of the Holy Spirit's testimony with an evidentialist epistemology. The following four objections do

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smarted it. As it turns out, I could be feeling a phantom pain (if my hand has been amputated) or I could be a brain in a vat (thus, I have no other body parts). Likewise, the Holy Spirit's testimony provides evidence for belief in God, but it is plausible that it could be overturned. The onus rests on critics, though, to show that there is a better explanation for one's experience of the Holy Spirit's testimony than that God exists.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 6.

not, of course, exhaust the objections I expect to encounter, although I anticipate that these ones in particular need to be addressed and will shed light on my project.

**(1) How is this different than Plantinga’s use of the Holy Spirit in *Warranted Christian Belief*?**

The most significant difference is that Plantinga does not treat the work of the Holy Spirit as evidence for the belief that God exists. Rather, Plantinga’s alleged Aquinas/Calvin model uses the Holy Spirit to trigger a mechanistic belief-forming faculty (*sensus divinitatis*) that is supposed to be properly basic.<sup>17</sup> Evidentialists find this unsatisfying for at least two reasons. First, this employs an externalist concept of “warrant” that strikes us as a far cry from traditional rationality and justification. Second, it seems that the Bible does not teach that the Holy Spirit is some belief-forming mechanism that triggers the belief that God exists. Rather, the scriptures speak of the Holy Spirit working as a witness who gives testimony to accept the belief that God exists. We wish to avoid “mechanizing” the Holy Spirit and compromising his personal nature. This forthright interpretation seems to fit an evidentialist framework better, for belief in God is not presumed to be formed as a properly basic belief through a mechanistic process. Instead, belief in God is made plausible given one’s evidence, which includes the Holy Spirit’s testimony.

**(2) How does this approach differ from fideism?**

Fideism is a slippery term. If one defines fideism as holding one’s religious beliefs without any evidence, then reformed epistemologists would qualify as fideists. Others take fideism to mean holding one’s religious beliefs when there is sufficient evidence to undermine those beliefs. On the first interpretation, my approach differs

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<sup>17</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*. See especially chapter 6.

because I believe that the testimony of the Holy Spirit provides some form of evidence for all believers to base (to some degree) their belief that God exists, whereas reformed epistemologists take belief to be properly basic, which requires no evidence to accept it.

On the second interpretation, my approach differs because belief in God is never justified with sufficient evidence to the contrary. There may still remain unresolved evidence against belief in God, but as long as it is sufficiently weaker than the positive evidence one has for God's existence, the belief that God exists remains rational. This may strike some as dangerous, for it leaves open the possibility of abandoning one's belief that God exists if enough evidence can be mustered to reject it (even when it includes the evidence of the Holy Spirit's testimony). But this presumes that believers should not even accept the possibility that belief in God could be false. This presumption seems too strong, though. I see no reason why believers must take belief in God's existence to be indefeasible. Even with the testimony of the Holy Spirit, it remains possible to refute the existence of God with enough evidence. Since I believe that God exists, I doubt this will actually occur, although I maintain that this is a possible state of affairs.

**(3) Aren't those who only possess the evidence of the Holy Spirit's Testimony failing to fulfill their epistemic duties on evidentialism?**

Some have objected to evidentialism because they believe that if evidentialism is true, it entails imposing stringent epistemic duties in order to justify any belief.<sup>18</sup> While it may be true that some forms of evidentialism include a deontological component, this

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<sup>18</sup> See Clark, 98-102; Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 136-37; Wood, 106-13; Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11-29; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 98-99.

is not an essential feature for evidentialist epistemologies.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, evidentialism requires that one have sufficient reasons available that one could appeal to when asked to justify a belief.<sup>20</sup> This is because many reasons that one possesses for a given belief are not always in the “front” of one’s mind. Many evidentialists will side with Timothy McGrew who explains that “We all hold many beliefs of which, in one obvious sense, we are unaware. I believe (and so do you) that  $677 + 2 = 679$ , but a moment’s reflection is required to raise the belief to full consciousness and assent to it.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, evidentialists can claim that they only require one to have a sufficient reason to justify a belief. So, there is no need to worry that evidentialism commits one to epistemic absurdities like counting every blade of grass in one’s yard.<sup>22</sup>

#### **(4) Doesn’t this make *all* religious claims based on personal experience justified?**

One might wonder that if the Holy Spirit’s testimony can be used to justify belief in God, doesn’t that allow any subjective religious experience to justify any religious belief? True, this might follow for a number of religious beliefs, but justification does not have to be construed so strongly that it cannot allow justified false beliefs. In other words, just because a variety of religious claims could be justified by certain subjective experiences, it doesn’t follow that all these religious claims are, in fact, true.

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<sup>19</sup> See Timothy McGrew, *The Foundations of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Littlefield Adams, 1995); “A Defense of Classical Foundationalism,” in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, 3d. ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 194-206; Earl Conee and Richard Feldman *Evidentialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 7; Richard Fumerton, *Epistemology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 33-36.

<sup>20</sup> McGrew (*Foundations of Knowledge*, 9) is worth noting here: “It is not obvious that justification is itself an ethical concept, and certain simplistic views are readily assailable. [...] [E]ven if an individual with a justified belief is secured against certain kinds of moral disapprobation, it does not follow that justification simply *is* a matter of doing one’s epistemic duty.”

<sup>21</sup> McGrew, *Foundations of Knowledge*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> As Clark (99-100) does.

Of course, if one is concerned about this objection, he probably will not find comfort in reformed epistemology either, which does not have criteria that rules out other religious beliefs as properly basic. Even Plantinga acknowledges that his epistemology could be applied to confer warrant for several other religions.<sup>23</sup> The difference with the evidentialist model I am proposing is that subjective religious experience, like the testimony of the Holy Spirit, is only one piece of evidence that is open to further investigation and could be countered by other evidence. The upshot is that this leaves room for genuine discussion of the evidential merits between people with different religious beliefs. If there is no way to rule out differing religious beliefs as properly basic, which reformed epistemologists claim, discussion as to the truths of different religious views reaches an insurmountable impasse.

### **Conclusion**

Despite criticisms to the contrary, evidentialists can account for the positive epistemic status of the beliefs held by “ordinary people” like fourteen-year-old teenagers and naïve grandmothers. By incorporating the Bible’s description of the epistemic works of the Holy Spirit with an evidentialist’s epistemology, evidentialism can maintain that all believers have some access to at least one reason that can sufficiently justify their religious beliefs. Rather than reinterpreting the traditional concept of rationality to save one’s religious beliefs,<sup>24</sup> evidentialists can happily conclude that some religious beliefs are justified in the good old-fashioned sense.

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<sup>23</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 350.

<sup>24</sup> Note how Clark states the thesis of his project (9): “What is needed is a radically new conception of rationality; the emerging notion of rationality will prove more hospitable to religious belief.”