



*Redeeming*

REASON

—  
A GOD-CENTERED APPROACH

—  
VERN S.  
POYTHRESS



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## *Redeeming Reason*



# Redeeming Reason

*A God-Centered Approach*

Vern S. Poythress

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*Redeeming Reason: A God-Centered Approach*

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*To my wife, Diane*





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# Introduction

HOW DO WE GROW in reasoning well? One way is to study logic. There are already books that explore this route, with a focus on formal logic.<sup>1</sup> Here, we want to go beyond that study to explore the nature of human *reasoning*, which is a broader subject.<sup>2</sup> Reasoning includes formal logic as a subdivision. It also includes informal reasoning, such as occurs in jury deliberations, general decision-making, and evaluation of causal explanations. How well are we doing in the use of reasoning?

Our goal is to explore how human reasoning depends on God. God is the source of all truth and all rationality. Our communion with God makes a difference in how we think and reason. We also want to take into account how human reasoning is corrupted by sin and how it can be renewed by the redemption that Christ accomplished.

One main area to explore is the use of analogy in reasoning. Our human reasoning is analogous to God's original rationality, but it is derivative. Our understanding of truth is likewise derivative. We will consider how the use of analogy is pervasive in reasoning, and how analogy depends on guidance from a larger context. God himself is the ultimate context. Renewal in our knowledge of God therefore affects all of our reasoning.

1 Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

2 Stephen Toulmin's book *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), is one example that uses the term "logic" more broadly to describe many forms of reasoning; "idealised logic" is one label he uses to designate what others might call "formal logic" or simply "logic." What label we use is a secondary issue.





## Where to Start in Redeeming Reason

SO WHERE CAN WE START, if we want to improve in our reasoning?

### **Reason, Intuition, and Emotion**

People who take pride in reasoning sometimes complain about others who are swayed by emotion or impulse or intuition. For example, let us say that Bob buys the latest cool gadget on impulse. Then he finds that he does not really need it. Not only that, but if he had first looked up some consumer evaluations, he would have found a better and less expensive alternative. He regrets his impulse buying. His impulses have overcome his better rational judgment.

But people may also regret decisions they have made on the basis of rational arguments. Let us say that Sue's conscience warns her not to cheat on her income tax. Conscience is an intuitive source for decisions. But instead of listening to her conscience, she makes excuses. She produces a whole series of arguments for why the government does not deserve her loyalty, why her way of cheating on her taxes will never be found out, or why hers is an exceptional case. She is reasoning things out. Perhaps she is quite careful. She had *better* be careful, if she thinks she can create a scheme that will not be found out. But the whole project exemplifies a situation where reasoning is being used *against* the truth and *against* genuine moral principles rather than in support of the truth and against mere impulse.

John Frame, in his book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*,<sup>1</sup> points out that human knowledge involves several aspects. Certainly reason has a role. But so does our emotional life, and so do human impressions from our situation. In none of these realms is human knowledge infallible. We are fallen, sinful human beings. And sin infects all of life. All three aspects—reasoning, emotions, and our impressions of the situation—need reform. All three need redemption, we might say.

In the Bible, redemption comes from God the Father, through Christ, who is the one true Redeemer (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5). Strictly speaking, God redeems *people*, not ideas. But the people who are redeemed have their minds and their hearts renewed (Rom. 12:2): “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” So, secondarily, we can talk about the redemption of a person’s mind.<sup>2</sup> This renewal includes a renewal of how we reason, as well as a renewal of our emotional life and our intuitions. What does a renewal of reasoning look like? We will see that it involves communion with God himself, and that it involves the proper use of *analogy*, as a key aspect of reasoning.

### Mystery and Transparency

Let us begin by reflecting on formal logic, as a subdivision of human reasoning. It is an impressive subdivision. Can we be instructed by logic in a way that renews all human reasoning?

Aristotle’s syllogisms and modern forms of symbolic logic may seem on the surface to offer us clear, cogent, transparent ways of reasoning. Moreover, much insight into rationality can be gained by using these modes of reasoning as models or perspectives on human rationality in general. But there are difficulties underneath

1 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987).

2 Vern S. Poythress, *The Lordship of Christ: Serving Our Savior All of the Time, in All of Life, with All of Our Heart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 96–99.

the surface.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of transparency is achieved by crafting special environments that enable the core patterns in formal logic to possess their impressive cleanness.

In the end, the difficulty traces back to the very nature of human reasoning. Our reasoning powers reach limits when we undertake

- 3 Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), esp. part I.C.; Vern S. Poythress, “Semiotic Analysis of Symbolic Logic Using Tagmemic Theory: With Implications for Analytic Philosophy,” *Semiotica* 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2020-0018>, <https://frame-poythress.org/a-semiotic-analysis-of-symbolic-logic-using-tagmemic-theory-with-implications-for-analytic-philosophy/>; Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

Toulmin’s concerns in *Uses of Argument* overlap with those in this book. He does not want the pattern of analytic reasoning in the syllogism to become the exclusive standard for all reasoning whatsoever (esp. in his ch. 4). But an additional difficulty that he does not directly address is the question of where we get the norms for considering some reasoning—perhaps syllogistic reasoning—as superior to other forms, and whether therefore other forms of reasoning are “deficient” or in need of correction. There are at least two positions, namely that many forms of practical reasoning are deficient, or that they are okay as they stand.

Philosophers drawn to the ideal of perfect mastery and perfect transparency in reasoning are tempted to make syllogisms a central example, because syllogisms seem to approach the ideal that those philosophers desire. Ordinary forms of reasoning appear to be deficient, when measured against this ideal. But in many of the contexts of philosophical discussion, this ideal of perfect transparency is corrupted by a lack of distinction between divine knowledge and human knowledge (Poythress, *Logic*, ch. 7 and part I.C). God’s knowledge is the standard for human knowledge. But God’s knowledge is also distinct from human knowledge. God’s knowledge is never transparent to us who are human. There is always mystery. So the goal of perfect transparency is muddled. The ideal of transparency is suspect, for religious reasons. It is also suspect for practical reasons. It is never actually achieved!

On the other hand, consider the other position, namely, that many cases of practical reasoning are okay as they stand. If there is no deep reliance on a divine standard, who is to say that normal, practical uses of reasoning are all right? Toulmin rightly sees gaps between ordinary forms of reasoning and a philosophical ideal. But how does he or any of us know that the ordinary forms are actually okay, according to the proper norm? The fact that human beings in various fields *treat* the reasoning in that field as acceptable may be a merely sociological observation. Maybe the reasoning is nevertheless deficient or defective, and this deficiency is disconcertingly widespread. So some philosophers search for a route to “save” us from our alleged follies. The ordinary person on the street does not think his reasoning needs saving. The Christian, on the other hand, acknowledges the need for salvation from God, as well as the need for God to sustain and ground our reasoning powers themselves.

to reason about God. God is not man (Num. 23:19). God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55:9). Nevertheless, there is a relation between God and man. According to the Bible, man is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). As one aspect of being in the image of God, we have abilities to appreciate truth. We can know truth. In fact, we can know God: “For although they *knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, . . .” (Rom. 1:21). The verse in Romans indicates that some kind of knowledge of God extends even to unbelievers.

But we do not know God in the way and to the extent that God knows himself. There is mystery. If there is mystery in our knowledge of God, there will also be mystery at a deep level in our knowledge of everything else. All our knowledge imitates God's original knowledge. And this imitation is mysterious, because God's knowledge is mysterious.

We find mysteries at every point in our understanding of God.<sup>4</sup> Does that leave no room for human reasoning? No, there is room. But our human reasoning at its best merely reflects God's own rational self-consistency, which is the original standard. If there is room for our reasoning, what is the shape of that reasoning? In what ways should our thinking be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2)?

### Renewal in Romans 12:1–2

What does Romans 12:1–2 actually say about the renewal of our minds? Here are the verses:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

4 Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), esp. ch. 2.

The verses do not become specific about just what is involved in this transformation and renewal. Other verses indicate that when we belong to Christ, we are to be progressively conformed to his image:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed* into the same image from one degree of glory to another. (2 Cor. 3:18)

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up in every way into him* who is the head, into Christ, . . . (Eph. 4:15)

This conformity includes the mind as well as other aspects of our nature:

“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”  
But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:16)

The context of Romans 12:1–2 indicates that our renewal means discerning “the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The next verse, verse 3, specifically exhorts us to humility in what we think about ourselves: “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” What now does it mean to know God’s will, and what might be our limitations in knowing it? The description of God’s will as “good and acceptable and perfect” calls to mind the positive descriptions of the word of God, as a guide to God’s will.

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,

enlightening the eyes;  
 the fear of the LORD is clean,  
 enduring forever;  
 the rules of the LORD are true,  
 and righteous altogether.  
 More to be desired are they than gold,  
 even much fine gold;  
 sweeter also than honey  
 and drippings of the honeycomb. (Ps. 19:7–10)

In addition to these words in Psalm 19, Psalm 119 is a long poem celebrating the goodness and perfection of God's word:

Your testimonies are my delight;  
 they are my counselors. (v. 24)

As “counselors,” God's testimonies show what his will is. The law of the Lord is “perfect” (Ps. 19:7; 119:96). The righteous man “meditates [on it] day and night” (Ps. 1:2).

At the heart of renewal of our minds is the knowledge of God in Christ (Matt. 11:27; John 17:3), which includes having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). The Bible does not focus on a renewal of some technical aspect of reasoning, but on a comprehensive and deep renewal that we cannot fully explain or make self-conscious. If there are changes in some more technical way, they are subordinate to a more fundamental renewal. Renewal is not primarily renewal through *self* reflection, but renewal through a saving relation to God. In that saving relation, God's word in the Bible has a central role. We are to meditate on it. The absorption of the word can be compared to “eating” it:

Yours words were found, and I ate *them*,  
 and your words became to me a joy  
 and the delight of my heart. (Jer. 15:16)

In a similar way, Jesus tells us to abide in him, and that his words should abide in us (John 15:1–7).

Within this pattern of comprehensive renewal, we may nevertheless ask whether we can learn to think and reason better, in accord with the Bible's content.

### Reasoning Forward to New Conceptions of Reasoning

The difficulties in dealing with reasoning include a kind of circularity. How do we use reasoning to *reform* reasoning? How can we arrive at a refined concept of human reasoning if we are not already there, that is, if we are not already reasoning correctly? And if we are *not* going to use reasoning, are we going to proceed forward by an irrational leap? If it is a leap not already controlled by reason, how can it give us assurance that the place at which we arrive is reasonable?

Ludwig Wittgenstein in his remarkable work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* sketched out what he thought was one way to do this.<sup>5</sup> He built an account of the world that was like a conceptual ladder. When one reached the top of the ladder, one had a correct view of the world. And, from the standpoint of that view, one understood that the ladder itself was not correct. One threw it away.

We are *not* going to use a route like that. It is difficult to see how one could have full confidence in the endpoint if one saw that the route itself depended on illusion.

But what is the alternative? The alternative is to reason forward soundly the whole way up the ladder. But to do so, we must already, at the beginning, have the correct view of reason. If we are not already there, it seems that we cannot get there.

This difficulty seems great because the questions about correct reason have typically arisen in a larger environment, produced ultimately by the fall of man and the desire for human autonomy. Adam and Eve desired to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5). They

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: The German Text of Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul/New York: Humanities Press, 1963). The book is remarkable, but very far from a Christian approach.



wanted a kind of independence that was rebellious at its core. Ever since, philosophers have often set out to reason independently. They think they must depend on themselves and their reason, not on God.

### **Reasoning from Revelation**

The difficulty does not have the same shape when we adopt a Christian point of view. God breaks into the neat circles of our autonomy. Or we might say that he breaks into the circular trap of being unable to conceive of an alternative. The alternative form of reasoning is an alternative rooted in God. And then, secondarily, it is an alternative that comes to us through God revealing truth to us. He reveals himself, and also reveals truths about himself, about ourselves, and about the world.

This alternative makes sense only if God first rescues us out of our sinful, fallen, rebellious condition. He sends the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and to renew our hearts. God gives us new birth (John 3:3–5). Then we are willing to admit that we are creatures and that we are dependent. We admit that we need the Holy Spirit to give us spiritual understanding (1 Cor. 2:14–16).

God reveals truths in general revelation (through the world around us) and in special revelation (the Bible). God reveals himself in nature, and in the very mind of man. Studying God using only the input from nature is sometimes called “natural theology.” (We must distinguish “natural theology” from “a theology of nature,” such as we might learn from the Bible itself and what it says about nature.) In this book we are not going to do natural theology, independent of Scripture. It is treacherous for us, who have minds corrupted by sin, to detach ourselves from the instruction in Scripture when we observe nature. So the Bible, as infallible verbal revelation from God, is our source of true knowledge in our present discussion.

Though the Bible is true, our understanding of the Bible is not flawless. So neither is our exposition of the nature of reasoning going to be flawless. But because God exists and speaks to us in the Bible, our exposition can still make progress in comparison with the conceptions of the godless world.

### Reasoning in a Context

Our reasoning takes place in the context of the rest of our lives. And that context includes many things that we take to be true. That is true of me as well. It is not feasible within the scope of one book to defend everything with a full exposition. So readers will have to bear with the fact that this book sometimes refers to other sources.

We are going to be reasoning things out. It may appear, then, that sometimes we are reasoning purely in the abstract. But that is not the case. Rather, we want to be thoroughly influenced by the Bible's teaching. We are reasoning in a way that intends to trace out some of the natural harmony in different aspects of the Bible's teaching. But it would take much more space to confirm *in detail* that the Bible supports what is said here.