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There's no "intelligence test" for the family of God

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"So far as I can remember, there is not one word in the Gospels in praise of intelligence."

I ran across that rather jarring statement the other day on the Internet. It came from the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), an extraordinarily intelligent man — and a very vocal atheist. One of his more famous works was his 1927 essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian."

I found this little gem of a quote, not surprisingly, on Richard Dawkins' home page. Dawkins is Oxford University's influential "Public Professor for the Public Understanding of Science," and he sees himself as standing in Russell's tradition of rational atheism. Both men have said that intelligent people know better (or at least ought to know better) than to believe in God.

Russell's quote caught me off guard because his memory is indeed correct: there is not one word in the

Gospels in praise of intelligence. Does that mean Christianity is irrational? Is it something that brighter people know they should steer clear of?

Upon further reflection, though, I realized what Russell's statement really means, and it's actually a very good thing: there is no intelligence test for entering the family of God. And why should there be? God isn't building a big university in the sky. He's building a community of love and worship drawn from every tribe, tongue and nation, from both the rich and the poor, the more naturally talented and the less.

Virtue, in the Bible, is about character. It's about the choices we make. The Gospels (the first four books of the Bible's New Testament) speak of love, worship and obedience to God, and other things of that sort. For God to reward intelligence would be like rewarding someone for how tall she is. She didn't really have much to do with it, did she?

Yet it isn't that faith has nothing to do with knowledge. The Bible urges us to pursue hard after truth. Based on a quick Web-assisted search, the word "know" appears over 150 times in the Gospels. Even the greatest intellect, though, cannot find its way unaided to the great truths of God. The best any of us can do is orient ourselves toward understanding God. Actually, the initiative is God's: He comes to us, meets us on our level, and there reveals Himself to us. No matter how high our standing may be on the intelligence ladder, God still covers infinitely more distance coming toward us than we do toward Him.

The greatest moral failing against which Jesus stood was pride. One of His followers said, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." This isn't about the kind of pride a parent feels when his son scores the winning points in a school basketball game. It's about the kind of pride that says, "I'm better than the rest," or especially, "I'm fine on my own. I don't need God."

God says we do need Him. We need Him because He created us for a relationship of love with Him and each other. We need Him because we've broken that relationship by turning our backs on Him, and we're not the ones who can fix it. Only He can, through Jesus Christ. We need Him because, whether we like it or not, the world is bigger than we are, and things come our way that are genuinely more than we can manage.

Russell rebelled against that reality. Near the end of "Why I Am Not a Christian" he wrote,

"We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world — its good

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facts, its bad facts, its beauties and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it."

We certainly ought to "stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world." We will not, however, conquer it by intelligence. Intelligence will never rid us of the heartache of broken relationships, the reality of death, the possibility of disaster, the tragedy of human violence. Have the past centuries of increasing knowledge led to increasing peace in the world?

(Russell's response to all that, by the way, is that we must courageously accept that in the end it's all going to be meaningless anyway. Some "conquering" that is.)

There is no intelligence test for entering the family of God. It only requires that we recognize God's goodness and our need for Him, and accept His invitation to come to Him. A four-year-old could do that — or a Nobel Prize winner. Jesus even said, in words I'm sure Russell himself would find jarring, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

**Travel**  
It would be a different matter if Russell were right, if Christian belief really were irrational. If Christianity didn't square with intelligent thinking and the relevant evidence, it wouldn't be true, of course. Down through the centuries, though, many extremely able men and women, no less talented than Russell, have tussled and torn at this question, and have concluded that Christianity makes great sense. They've even given sound (intelligent) answers to every argument in Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian."

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There is no intelligence test, but if there were, the Bible and Christianity would pass. That's not the issue for us, though. The issue is whether we'll set aside our pride and accept God's simple and truthful invitation to join His family.

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