

AN ANSELMIAN METHOD FOR CONTEMPORARY SOTERIOLOGICAL DEBATES

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Abstract

Reformed Epistemology successfully defends the rationality of Christian belief against evidentialist objections. Plantinga demonstrates that belief in God can be properly basic and warranted without inferential justification. But this apologetic achievement leaves a methodological gap: believers know they are rational to believe, yet lack rigorous tools for adjudicating between competing doctrines. Both Calvinist and Arminian can claim warranted beliefs about salvation; Reformed Epistemology offers no criteria for choosing between them. This paper argues that Anselm's *fides quaerens intellectum* fills precisely this gap. Beginning with faith and deploying reason to explore internal coherence, Anselmian method provides constructive theological tools that complement Reformed Epistemology's defensive posture. Three case studies demonstrate the method's utility: the logical order of salvation, the relationship between justification and sanctification, and the grounds of assurance. In each case, Anselmian analysis clarifies underlying commitments, reveals logical structures, and enables more productive theological dialogue. The paper concludes that this medieval method addresses a critical need in contemporary evangelical thought—transforming apologetic defense into constructive systematic theology.

Keywords: Reformed Epistemology, Anselm of Canterbury, soteriology, *fides quaerens intellectum*, theological method, Alvin Plantinga

INTRODUCTION

Alvin Plantinga changed religious epistemology. His Reformed Epistemology demonstrated that Christian belief can be properly basic—held without inferential justification yet still warranted when produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (Berkouwer, G. C. (1954). Classical foundationalism's evidentialist demands collapsed under their own weight. Believers need not prove their faith to skeptics. This apologetic victory secured intellectual breathing room for Christianity.

But then what? Suppose we grant that Christian belief is warranted. A Calvinist believes regeneration precedes faith; an Arminian believes faith precedes regeneration. Both read Scripture prayerfully. Both experience their beliefs as Spirit-produced. Both construct internally coherent systems. By Plantinga's criteria, both can be warranted (Calvin, J. (1960). Yet their views are mutually exclusive. Reformed Epistemology can say both are rational to believe what they do, but it offers no guidance for determining which belief is *true*. It defends belief externally but does not develop belief internally.

This gap appears throughout soteriological debates. Does justification include transformation (New Perspective) or remain purely forensic (traditional Reformed)? Is assurance grounded

solely in Christ's work, or must it include evidences of grace? Should the atonement be understood as definite or universal? In each case, competing views claim biblical warrant, internal coherence, and Spirit-confirmation. Reformed Epistemology vindicates the rationality of holding Christian beliefs; it remains silent on *which* Christian beliefs to hold and *how* to reason between alternatives.

Plantinga acknowledges this limitation. He writes: "I am not trying to show that Christian belief is true...I am only trying to show that Christian belief has or can have warrant (Plantinga, A. (1983)." This honest admission defines his project's scope. But it leaves believers who want to think theologically not merely defend faith's rationality—without methodological resources. We need a way to move from warranted belief to theological understanding, from faith to articulated doctrine, from commitment to comprehension.

Anselm of Canterbury's *fides quaerens intellectum* faith seeking understanding provides exactly this missing element. While Plantinga establishes that Christian belief can be warranted without inference, Anselm shows how to reason *from* faith toward deeper grasp of its meaning. Reformed Epistemology answers the skeptic; Anselm guides the believer. The relationship is sequential: first establish that faith is rational (Reformed Epistemology), then explore what faith entails.

The difference is methodological, not merely terminological. Reformed Epistemology addresses warrant conditions when beliefs count as knowledge. Anselmian theology addresses reasoning procedures how to explore faith's content logically. The former is epistemology; the latter is theological method. Someone could accept Reformed Epistemology while rejecting Anselmian method (embracing fideism instead). Conversely, someone could practice Anselmian theology with a different epistemology. They address different questions.

Three soteriological debates demonstrate the method's utility. Section IV examines the *ordo salutis* (does regeneration precede faith or vice versa?), the justification-sanctification relationship (are they distinct or integrated?), and the grounds of assurance (objective promise alone or plus subjective evidences?). In each case, Anselmian analysis clarifies what is at stake, reveals underlying commitments, and transforms exegetical stalemate into theological-logical conversation.

Two clarifications: First, this is methodological retrieval, not historical exposition. I appropriate Anselm's *method* for contemporary debates, not provide comprehensive medieval theology. Second, "beyond" Reformed Epistemology means building upon, not abandoning. The foundation (faith's rationality) remains essential. But foundations alone are not buildings. We need both defense (Reformed Epistemology) and construction (Anselm).

Reformed Epistemology: Achievement And Gap

Classical foundationalism demanded that rational beliefs be self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Everything else required inference from these foundations (Wright, N. T. (2009). Applied to religion, this framework generated an ultimatum: either provide sufficient evidence for God's existence, or admit that belief is irrational. W.K. Clifford crystallized the

challenge: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

Plantinga's response proceeded in two moves. First, he showed classical foundationalism self-refuting. The claim "beliefs are rational only if self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses" is itself neither self-evident, incorrigible, nor evident to the senses Plantinga, A. (2000). The criterion fails its own test. Moreover, consistently applied, it would undermine belief in other minds, the past, the external world—none of which meets foundationalist criteria yet all seem obviously rational.

Second, Plantinga proposed that belief in God could be properly basic held without inference yet warranted when produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in appropriate environments. Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, an innate disposition to form beliefs about God in certain circumstances, provided the mechanism.⁷ Just as we form perceptual beliefs ("I see a tree") non-inferentially yet rationally, we form theistic beliefs ("God created this") in response to beauty, guilt, or gratitude. Such beliefs can have warrant if the *sensus divinitatis* functions as designed.

The *Warranted Christian Belief* project extended this to specifically Christian doctrines through the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS) (Barth, K. (1960). When believers encounter Scripture, the Spirit produces faith including cognitive assent to propositions about Trinity, Incarnation, Atonement. These beliefs, too, can be properly basic and warranted. Christians need not first establish theism philosophically, then argue for Christian specifics. If the IIHS is functioning properly, Christian belief enjoys immediate warrant.

The implications are substantial. Believers need not satisfy evidentialist demands or produce knock-down arguments to be intellectually responsible. Faith, on Plantinga's account, can be perfectly rational without proof. This does not mean evidence is irrelevant arguments can play supporting roles but Christian belief is not epistemically dependent on such evidence.⁹ The apologetic victory is genuine.

The Gap

But epistemic warrant does not equal theological method. Plantinga defends *that* beliefs can be warranted; he does not provide tools for adjudicating *which* beliefs are true when multiple warranted beliefs conflict.

Consider the *ordo salutis* dispute. Reformed theology holds that regeneration logically precedes faith fallen humans are spiritually dead and therefore incapable of faith until regenerated. God's sovereign act of regeneration produces the human response of faith Schaff, P. (1983). Arminian theology reverses this order—prevenient grace enables genuinely free faith, which God then responds to with regeneration. Faith is not caused by regeneration but enables it Clifford, W. K. (1879). Both views cite extensive biblical support. Both construct internally coherent systems where each doctrine fits logically with others. Both believers experience their positions as Spirit-confirmed.

By Plantinga's criteria, both could be warranted. The Calvinist's belief might be produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties (including IHS) in appropriate environments (prayerful Scripture reading). So might the Arminian's belief. Both could enjoy warrant. Yet the views are mutually exclusive they cannot both be true.

Reformed Epistemology offers no criteria for choosing between them. It can defend the rationality of holding either position, but it provides no method for determining which position better integrates biblical data, displays tighter logical coherence, or coheres with fundamental theological commitments. The program is silent regarding constructive theology.

This pattern repeats across soteriological debates. Traditional Reformed theology sharply distinguishes justification (forensic declaration) from sanctification (moral transformation). The New Perspective integrates them justification includes covenant membership, which necessarily involves Spirit-given transformation Westminster Confession of Faith. (1983). Both sides cite Paul extensively. Both construct coherent frameworks. Reformed Epistemology can say both are warranted; it cannot help us think through which is right.

The problem is not that Reformed Epistemology gives wrong answers. It gives no answers at all to these kinds of questions because these are not epistemological questions but methodological ones. They concern how to reason constructively from faith, how to weigh competing interpretations, how to adjudicate between internally coherent yet mutually exclusive systems. These tasks require theological method, not merely epistemic defense.

Multiple theological traditions Reformed, Lutheran, Arminian, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox could appeal to Reformed Epistemology to vindicate their beliefs' rationality. If all these believers have warranted beliefs (produced by properly functioning faculties), how do we determine which tradition grasps truth most fully? The question is not whether these believers are rational (Reformed Epistemology answers yes) but how to engage in substantive theological reasoning about competing claims. For this, we need something Reformed Epistemology does not provide: a method for constructive systematic theology.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Logical Order of Salvation (Ordo Salutis)

Reformed theology holds that regeneration logically precedes faith. The logic is straightforward: fallen humans are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Murray, J. (1955). Dead people cannot act. Therefore, God must first regenerate giving spiritual life before the sinner can respond in faith. Regeneration causes faith (Olson, R. E. (2006).

Arminian theology reverses this: faith logically precedes regeneration. Scripture commands faith Commands imply ability ought implies can. God's prevenient grace restores the ability to believe, but faith itself is a genuine human decision. God then responds to faith with regeneration. Faith enables regeneration.

Both views marshal biblical support. Calvinists point to Jesus: "No one can come to me unless the Father draws him" the drawing precedes coming. Arminians point to Peter: "Repent...and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" repentance precedes receiving. Both construct internally coherent systems. Both believers experience their positions as true.

Anselmian analysis begins by identifying shared commitments: salvation is wholly by grace, humans must respond in faith, fallen humanity is spiritually unable apart from divine aid, God's sovereignty and human responsibility are both real. These are not disputed. The question is how to integrate them.

Reformed reasoning:

If salvation is monergistic (God alone acting), then regeneration must precede faith logically. Faith is a human act; regeneration is a divine act. In monergistic soteriology, divine acts necessarily precede human acts because human acts depend on prior divine enabling. Therefore: regeneration → faith.

Arminian reasoning:

If human responsibility is genuine and libertarian free will is real, then faith must be a decision not causally determined by regeneration. If regeneration causes faith, then faith is not genuinely free but necessitated. Preventing grace restores ability without causing decision. Therefore: enabled faith → regeneration.

What does this reveal? The dispute is not primarily exegetical (what does this verse mean?) but theological-logical (how do we integrate biblical emphases?). Both sides reason consistently from their premises. The Reformed prioritize divine sovereignty and derive regeneration-first as necessary. Arminians prioritize libertarian responsibility and derive faith-first as necessary. The question, then, is not "Who reasons better?" but "Which starting commitments better capture biblical teaching?"

This clarifies the debate's nature. It is not that one side is ignoring Scripture or reasoning poorly. Both are doing theology responsibly from different foundational emphases. Reformed theologians are not denying human responsibility; they are defining it compatibilistically. Arminian theologians are not denying grace; they are insisting on libertarian freedom. The disagreement concerns which biblical emphasis to prioritize when constructing systematic doctrine.

Anselmian method does not settle this dispute. I have not shown one side is right. But it achieves something else: clarity about what is at stake. This prevents fruitless debates where each side simply quotes more verses. It enables conversation about *why* positions differ (different axioms about divine-human agency) rather than merely asserting *that* they differ.

Justification and Sanctification

Traditional Reformed theology, codified in Westminster Confession, holds that justification and sanctification are "inseparably joined" yet "distinct." Both occur at conversion (simultaneous in time) but differ in nature. Justification is forensic—a legal declaration that the believer is righteous based on Christ's imputed righteousness. Sanctification is transformative: the Holy Spirit progressively makes the believer actually righteous.

This distinction is considered essential for maintaining *sola fide* and assurance. If justification includes transformation, we can never know if we are sufficiently transformed. But if justification is purely forensic—based solely on Christ's perfect righteousness credited to us then assurance rests on Christ's work, not our progress. Paul's language demands this: "to the one who does not work but believes...his faith is counted as righteousness".

N.T. Wright's New Perspective challenges this sharp separation. Wright argues that justification in Paul is not merely legal declaration divorced from transformation but includes covenant membership and Spirit-given new life. To be justified is to be declared a member of God's people, and covenant membership is not merely legal status but transformative reality. The Spirit given to the justified produces moral renewal. Justification and transformation are not simply simultaneous but integrated.

Anselmian analysis starts with shared commitments: salvation changes both legal status and moral condition; union with Christ grounds all salvation benefits; God cannot declare righteous what is objectively unrighteous (God's truthfulness); believers receive both forensic righteousness and transformative renewal.

Traditional Reformed reasoning:

If God cannot declare righteous what is not righteous (God's truthfulness), and if believers are not yet morally perfect (ongoing sanctification), then justification cannot be based on inherent righteousness. Therefore, justification must be forensic—based on *imputed* righteousness, not *inherent* righteousness. Otherwise, assurance becomes impossible because our transformation is always incomplete.

New Perspective reasoning:

If salvation is covenantal (participation in God's people through Christ), then being justified means being declared a covenant member. Covenant membership necessarily includes the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit necessarily produces transformation. To separate justification from transformation is to divide what God joins. Justification includes transformation not as its *ground* but as its necessary *accompaniment*.

What emerges? Both positions grasp partial truth. Traditional Reformed theology is right that justification's *ground* must be Christ's righteousness alone, not our transformation otherwise assurance crumbles. The New Perspective is right that justification's *result* necessarily includes transformation through the Spirit God does not give one without the other.

The synthesis: forensic ground, transformative accompaniment. God declares righteous (forensic) and makes righteous (transformative) in the single act of incorporating us into Christ. The distinction remains legitimate for analytical purposes we can discuss justification and sanctification separately but in reality, God gives both simultaneously and inseparably. Westminster's "distinct yet inseparable" captures this, though perhaps "distinguishable yet integrated" states it more clearly.

Anselmian method does not simply choose one side. It explores how to maintain multiple biblical truths simultaneously—forensic declaration and transformative renewal, objective

ground and inevitable result, legal standing and moral condition. This is constructive systematic theology: showing how apparently competing emphases can be coherently integrated.

The Ground of Assurance

One view emphasizes the *objective* ground of assurance: Christ's work alone. G.C. Berkouwer articulates this position: "Faith looks away from itself to Christ. Assurance is not found by introspection but by looking to the objective work of Christ." When believers doubt, the remedy is not examining their lives for evidences but rehearsing the Gospel: Christ died for sinners; I am a sinner; therefore Christ died for me. The syllogism is objective.

The alternative emphasizes *subjective* grounds alongside objective grounds. Westminster Confession states that assurance rests on three foundations: divine promises in Scripture, internal evidences of grace, and the Spirit's testimony. Peter writes: "Practice these qualities...and you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom" suggesting that diligent obedience provides assurance. First John repeatedly connects assurance with evidences: "By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments"

The tension: if assurance rests solely on objective promises, why do believers still doubt? If Scripture directs us to evidences, does that undermine Christ's work's sufficiency?

Anselmian analysis identifies shared convictions: salvation is objectively secure in Christ's work; believers subjectively experience doubt; Scripture commands both trust in promises and self-examination; assurance is attainable (not presumptuous); false assurance is possible (not all who claim salvation are saved).

Objective-focused reasoning:

If salvation depends solely on Christ's work, then assurance must likewise depend solely on Christ's work, not on believers' experience. Subjective experience is unreliable emotions fluctuate, sin remains, spiritual feelings vary. To ground assurance in evidences shifts focus from Christ to self. Therefore: assurance must rest on objective ground alone.

Evidences-focused reasoning:

If assurance equals salvation (all the saved are necessarily assured), then Scripture's warnings about false assurance become incomprehensible. But Scripture clearly warns against false assurance: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom". Therefore, assurance and salvation must be distinguishable. Salvation is objective; assurance is subjective apprehension. Subjective apprehension requires subjective grounds—evidences confirming that faith is genuine.

The resolution: both are right about different things. Objective emphasis is right that salvation is secure in Christ alone—nothing about our subjective experience adds to Christ's work. Evidences emphasis is right that assurance and salvation are distinguishable—a person can be saved yet lack assurance (doubting believer), or have false assurance (self-deceived professor).

The synthesis: objective ground, subjective appropriation. Christ's work is the exclusive ground of salvation and thus the ultimate ground of assurance. But the subjective appropriation of assurance—psychological confidence that I am saved—often requires evidences. Not because evidences add to Christ's work, but because evidences confirm to me that I am trusting Christ's work. The evidences do not save; they assure me I am among the saved.

This resolves the tension. When Scripture directs us to Christ's work, it addresses salvation's ground (objective). When Scripture directs us to self-examination, it addresses assurance's appropriation (subjective). Both are necessary. The objective ground secures salvation; the subjective evidences secure confidence. Neither undermines the other when properly distinguished.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reformed Epistemology established that we can begin with faith—belief in God is rational without proof. Anselm shows how to think from faith—reason can explore what faith affirms. Together, they answer both the skeptic (you are rational to believe) and the theologian (here is how to think theologically about what you believe).

The path forward for evangelical theology lies not in choosing between faith and reason but in integrating them properly. We need both apologetic defense and systematic construction, both epistemic vindication and theological method, both confidence in faith's rationality and humility about reason's limits.

Medieval method addresses a modern need. In an age of theological fragmentation, Anselm shows how to engage disputes productively. In an age suspicious of reason, he shows how reason serves faith. In an age separating apologetics from systematics, he shows how defense and construction integrate.

Fides quaerens intellectum—faith seeking understanding. Not faith hoping someday to understand, nor faith resigned to never understanding, but faith actively seeking, confident that understanding is possible yet humble enough to recognize its dependence on revelation. This is theology as it should be: intellectually rigorous yet spiritually reverent, logically careful yet biblically submissive.

Faith is not the end of thinking but its proper beginning. This is Anselm's enduring insight. Reformed Epistemology establishes that we can begin with faith; Anselm shows how to think from faith. Together, they enable theology that is both epistemically justified and methodologically sound. This synthesis—reaching back to the 11th century to move forward in the 21st—is what contemporary evangelical theology needs.

CONCLUSION

The Unified Methodology

Reformed Epistemology achieved something remarkable: it vindicated Christian belief's rationality against evidentialist objections. Believers need not satisfy skeptical demands or

produce inferential justification. Faith can be properly basic and warranted. This apologetic victory is substantial.

But apologetic success creates new questions. Once we know we are warranted in believing, how do we think theologically? How do we move from warranted belief to systematic doctrine? How do we adjudicate when multiple warranted beliefs conflict? For this constructive work, Reformed Epistemology offers no guidance.

Anselm provides what is missing. His *fides quaerens intellectum* shows how to reason from faith toward understanding, how to deploy logic in service of revelation, how to trace necessary connections between doctrines. Where Reformed Epistemology says "You are rational to believe," Anselm says "Now think carefully about what you believe." Where Reformed Epistemology vindicates faith against objections, Anselm develops faith through reasoning. Together, they enable comprehensive theology:

Stage 1 (Reformed Epistemology): Establish that Christian belief can be warranted without proof. Answer skeptics. Vindicate faith's rationality.

Stage 2 (Anselmian Method): Reason from warranted faith toward deeper understanding.

Explore doctrinal implications. Adjudicate competing interpretations. Construct systematic theology. Neither stage reduces to the other. Both are necessary. The synthesis is not "faith versus reason" but "faith seeking understanding"—reason operating within faith, serving revelation, deepening comprehension.

For Contemporary Evangelical Theology

This unified methodology addresses evangelical theology's current needs in three ways. First, it **resolves the ambivalence about theological reasoning**. Evangelicals care deeply about doctrine yet often suspect "mere human reasoning." The Reformed Epistemology-Anselm synthesis shows how reason serves revelation without replacing it. We need not reason *to* faith before believing (Reformed Epistemology), but we can and should reason *from* faith toward understanding (Anselm). Reason is neither faith's judge nor faith's enemy but faith's servant.

Second, it **provides tools for intramural disputes**. Calvinist-Arminian debates, New Perspective controversies, discussions about assurance all involve Christians who share fundamental commitments but differ on specifics. Anselmian method enables productive engagement. Rather than trading proof-texts, theologians can identify shared convictions, trace logical implications, evaluate coherence, and clarify where disagreements actually lie. This does not always produce resolution, but it achieves clarity and fosters charitable dialogue.

Third, it **models intellectual confidence with theological humility**. We can employ rigorous logic, philosophical precision, and systematic integration (confidence) while recognizing that all reasoning occurs within faith, dependent on revelation, subject to Scripture (humility). Anselm demonstrates this balance: sophisticated argumentation that begins and ends with faith. Contemporary theology needs this model—neither rationalism (reason establishing faith) nor fideism (faith opposing reason) but Anselmianism (faith seeking understanding through reason).

Addressing Key Objections

Three objections might be raised against this proposal:

"Isn't this just Reformed Epistemology renamed?" No. Reformed Epistemology addresses warrant—when beliefs count as knowledge. Anselmian theology addresses method—how to reason constructively from faith. The difference is not merely terminological but categorical: epistemology versus theological method. Someone could accept Reformed Epistemology while rejecting Anselmian method (embracing fideism). The programs address different questions.

"Doesn't Anselm's method beg the question?" Not if we understand his aim. Anselm does not try to prove Christianity to skeptics from neutral premises. He explores faith's meaning from within faith. This is not question-begging but methodological honesty—all theological systems begin somewhere. The question is not whether we have starting points (everyone does) but whether reasoning from those points is valid and fruitful. Mathematics begins with axioms; theology begins with faith. Both can reason rigorously from their foundations.

"Why privilege Anselm over other medieval theologians?" Because Anselm provides the clearest articulation of *fides quaerens intellectum* as a distinct method, and his approach proves most compatible with Reformed Epistemology. Aquinas's integration of natural theology (reason establishing God's existence) conflicts with Reformed Epistemology's claim that belief can be properly basic without inferential justification. Anselm's method—beginning directly with faith rather than constructing natural theology prolegomena—complements Reformed Epistemology perfectly.

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