

# 17 The Enlightenment: Knowledge versus Faith



## It's Great to Be Human

In the 15th century, European civilization began to experience a "rebirth." This period, known as the Renaissance, began a focus on human advancements in art, literature, science, and technology. The Renaissance was also a celebration of accomplishments in manufacturing, trade, and exploration. With a pride in human accomplishment came an increased emphasis on human reason and a shift away from God and His Word.

The Renaissance paved the way for the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. "Enlightened" people sought to free themselves from God's authority and to make their own accomplishments and abilities the central focus of their lives. Today, this way of thinking is sometimes called *humanism*.

## Great Thinkers and Great Books

The Enlightenment came during a period of history that saw many changes in society and the church. Following the Reformation, the church was no longer ruled by a single leader; there were Lutheran churches, Reformed churches, the Church of England, and what was becoming known as the Roman Catholic Church. The decisions of the pope in Rome were not "law" for all of western Europe anymore.

Sir Isaac Newton is remembered for "discovering" gravity under an apple tree, but Newton was looking for much more than just the law of gravity. In 1687, Newton published *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. This book said that the entire physical universe worked according to natural laws that could be discovered. For Newton, nature was a huge machine built by God, and humans did not need the Bible to tell them about how God worked.

John Locke picked up where Newton left off when he wrote his *Essay Concerning Human*

*Understanding* in 1690. Basing their beliefs on Scripture, Christians had long insisted that human nature was corrupted by sin. Locke insisted that human intelligence was naturally good and people could use their intellect to make the world a better place. Locke believed that the world could be made better using reason (another word for intelligence or thinking). Some historians have called the Enlightenment the "Age of Reason" because Locke's ideas became so popular.

Those who place human reason above a simple acceptance of the Word of God are called *Rationalists*. They believe that God's Word only applies to them when they can understand and apply its message to their lives. A Rationalist might, for example, reason that Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 was something other than a miracle, since miracles are beyond our ability to understand. Rationalists might guess that when Jesus broke the bread and fish, others in the crowd followed His lead and began to share with others the food they had hidden among their possessions.

The Enlightenment Movement was attractive to many in western Europe. Yet, by God's grace, many also remained faithful to God and the teachings of His Word, trusting only in Jesus as their Savior and the Lord of their life.

### Enlightened Thinking

1. How can an "enlightened" way of thinking lead someone away from trusting in Jesus as the Savior?

2. What good things do we have because of our intelligence? In what ways has human reason been used for evil?

3. Many Enlightenment thinkers believed that we can discover God by using our reason (intelligence). When you look at nature, what can you find out about God? Read Psalm 8:1, 3-4 for help.

4. Can nature tell us that Jesus died to make it possible for us to have an eternal relationship with God? Read Matthew 16:13-17.

5. Can our reason or intellect lead us to God? Read Romans 8:7.

6. Read Romans 10:17. What does the Holy Spirit work through to create faith in human hearts?

7. How did God begin a relationship with you? How and when did you first believe in Jesus as your Savior?

### To Review and Remember

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. *Romans 10:17*