

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning

First Class

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(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by [Winston Churchill](#) for his speech notes.)

[Title slide up at the beginning]

Let's start with prayer.

Seek not

to grow in knowledge
chiefly for the sake of applause,
and to enable you
to dispute with others;

but seek it
for the benefit of your souls,
and in order to practice.

...

Practice according to what knowledge you have.

This will be the way to know more. ...

You all have by you

a large treasure of divine knowledge,
in that you have the Bible in your hands;
therefore be not contented
in possessing but little of this treasure.

God has spoken much to you in the Scripture;

labor to understand as much
of what he says as you can.

God has made you all reasonable creatures;

therefore let not
the noble faculty of reason or understanding
lie neglected.

Content not yourselves

with having so much knowledge
as is thrown in your way,
and as you receive
in some sense unavoidably
by the frequent inculcation of divine truth
in the preaching of the word,
of which you are obliged to be hearers,
or as you accidentally gain in conversation;

but let it be very much your business

to search for it,
and that
with the same diligence and labor
with which men

are wont

to dig in mines of silver and gold.

Does anyone recognize those words
or who said them?

Those words are from a sermon
by Jonathan Edwards
titled
“Christian Knowledge,
or the Importance
And Advantage of
A Thorough Knowledge
Of Divine Truth.”

They provide an excellent introduction,
I think,
to the class that I’ll be leading this quarter:
A Christian Philosophy of Learning.

The slides that I’ll be using in each class
will be available on my web site at
www.logicteacher.com/pol/,
as you see here.

[next slide]

Here’s the outline
of what we’re going to be talking about today.

We’ll first talk about
the subject of the class —
That is,
what, in general terms,
is the class about —
What does
“A Christian Philosophy of Learning” mean?

After that
I’ll give you a quick synopsis of the class,
which will explain a few specifics
about the things we’ll be studying this quarter.

Next,
I’ll briefly explain
the structure I plan to follow in the class.

Then we’ll conclude this morning
with a quick look at the scriptural motivation
for having a class on this particular subject.

So,
let’s get started.

[next slide]

The title of the class,
as we've already said,
is
A Christian Philosophy of Learning.

This may sound a tad strange
to some of you,
and you may be wondering
why the last word is Learning
instead of Education.

Certainly, today,
there's much talk
and much literature
about Christian philosophies for education,
and that's great,
because it is an important subject.

But learning,
which,
after all,
should be the goal of education,
is just as important —
or, actually,
even more important,
despite the relative lack of discussion and writing
about it.

During this quarter,
I hope you'll come to understand,
if you don't already,
how important our subject really is.

So,
we'll be talking about
A Christian Philosophy of Learning.

But what is that, really?

Let's look at each word in the title
to find out.

[next slide]

First,
'A'.

Someone tell me what the word 'a' means,
especially as contrasted to the word 'the'.

[advance slide]

'A' is the indefinite article.

One of its uses
is to indicate
one out of (possibly) many alternatives.

It does not
denote
or connote
uniqueness.

By using 'A' instead 'the'
I'm intentionally denying
that the things we'll be discussing
necessarily represent
the complete and only correct
'Christian philosophy of learning.'

[next slide]

Now,
let's consider 'Christian'.

[advance slide]

In this particular context,
I'm using word to mean
'consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ',
which can also be
called, simply,
biblically sound.

[next slide]

The next word is 'philosophy'.

This word has quite a few different meanings. ...

One of the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions
is as follows:

"A particular system of ideas
relating to the general scheme of the universe;
a philosophical system or theory.
Also, more generally, a set of opinions,
ideas, or principles;
a basic theory;
a view or outlook."

That's basically how we're using the word here.

[advance slide]

It is a synonym for 'worldview'
or
a comprehensive way of thinking.

[next slide]

The next word is 'of',
which has 63 separate definitions
in the OED,
and 21 in the slightly less comprehensive
American Heritage Dictionary.

Here, I'm using definition #15 from the AHD
which is simply

[advance slide]

'about'.

[next slide]

The last word is 'learning',
which is also the most difficult one
for which to give a short,
accurate definition.

Let's start with the American Heritage Dictionary's
first entry which is as follows:

[advance slide]

"The act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skill"

There are several reasons why this definition
won't do for our purposes.

One problem is that
'Knowledge' isn't sufficiently well-defined.

Another problem is that,
what is meant by 'gaining'
isn't entirely clear.

A third problem is that
even without having a clear definition for 'knowledge',
it is pretty clear that there are substantial differences
between
learning knowledge
and
learning a skill.

For example,
there's a big difference between
learning how to solve partial differential equations,
and learning how to do a triple lutz.

That doesn't mean there aren't people who can do both —

from what I've read,
it appears that the women's Olympic
figure skating gold medalist
might be someone who can eventually do both —
but it does mean
that the way one goes about learning them
is quite different,
so different in fact,
that using the same word for both
is probably quite unhelpful.

To resolve these 3 problems,
I'll use the following definition
for the learning in which we're interested:

[advance slide]

acquiring and applying truth.

This resolves the first problem
by replacing 'knowledge' with 'truth',
which emphasizes
that what we want to learn
is only what's true,
not anything else.

We'll see in a later class
exactly what we mean by truth,
but for now,
we'll assume that we generally know what it is.

It resolves the second problem
by replacing 'gaining'
with 'acquiring and applying'.

So, for example,
we will **not** say that someone has learned the truth
that God is sovereign over all things
simply because he repeats the proposition,
but we'll insist that he must also
apply the truth of that proposition in his life.

Finally,
this definition resolves the third problem
by eliminating from consideration the idea of 'skills'.

By doing this,
I'm not saying that skills aren't important,
I'm just trying to make this class manageable,
which it would not be
if we were to try to discuss how to learn skills, too.

Putting this all together
gives us the following short description of the subject of the class:

[next slide]

A biblically sound
comprehensive way of thinking
about
acquiring and applying
truth.

So that's the subject of the class.

[next slide]

For the purpose of this synopsis,
I'll be using the metaphor of a tree,
like the one in Psalm 1:1-3 (NASB):

How blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
And he will be like a tree
firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season,
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.

[advance slide]

We'll begin by looking at
the roots of learning,
for several weeks.

During that time,
we'll consider questions such as:
What is truth?
What is the starting point for truth?
Are there varieties of truth?
How much truth can we acquire and apply?

[advance slide]

After that we'll move up to the branches for 4-5 weeks,
where we'll consider the question
How do we acquire and apply new truth?

In answering this question
we'll talk about such things
as deductive and inductive reasoning,
strength of evidence,
observation and experience,
authority,

and the nature of proof.

[advance slide]

We'll finish up in the last several weeks
by considering the fruits of learning.

In particular,
we'll give answers to the question,
What are some specific examples
of acquiring and applying truth?

My current plan is to consider
examples from theology,
history,
and science.

That's a quick synopsis of the class.

Are there any questions
before I talk a bit about how the class will be structured?

[next slide]

The basic structure for each week
is the same one that I usually follow.

We'll begin each week
by reviewing what we've covered in the previous weeks,
then I'll present the new material.

Throughout the class,
there will be plenty of opportunities for discussion,
and I'll be frequently asking you questions.

From time to time,
we'll even have periods in which you all will
be doing actual work,
beyond just listening to me,
or asking questions or making comments.

My plan is to use the overhead slides
most of the time,
which should aid you in taking notes.

For this reason, I generally won't be giving handouts.

As I mentioned earlier
my slides will be available at
www.logicteacher.com/pol
each week.

As another aid to note taking and memory,
I'll be including several special elements

from time to time during our discussion.

You see the names of those listed here,
along with the abbreviations we'll be using.

An inquisitive interlude will occur
when we're going to talk about something
that many people might consider to be
especially abstract or philosophical.

Those of you who aren't interested in such things
are welcome to do something else during these interludes,
read your bulletin perhaps,
or write a letter to a friend.
I'll let you know when the interlude is over,
so you can begin paying attention again.

Week's work will denote
a homework assignment for the week.
Of course,
these assignments are entirely voluntary,
as I have no enforcement mechanism to ensure
that you do them.

I'll use Valuable Verity to signify
a particularly important truth
that I think you should be careful to remember.

Some times these valuable verities
may take the form of a Quaint Quote,
which will be exact words from another person
that I think express some particular idea quite well.

An Evident Enigma will occur
when we're talking about something that appears
difficult to understand
or perhaps even paradoxical,
but which can be understood when viewed properly.

Ubiquitous Untruth denotes
something that is widely believed,
but which can be shown to be false.

Finally,
the last special element is a Pet Peeve,
which I'll use to denote something
that is especially annoying to me,
even though it may not necessarily be false or wrong.

If alliteration is one of your pet peeves,
then you have my sympathy,
but not my regret.

Are there any questions about the class structure,
before I continue?

I opened this morning
with some words from Jonathan Edwards
that provided motivation for having a class such as this.

Let's finish up this morning
by looking at words from God
that provide the motivation.

[next slide]

Listed here are some passages from Scripture
that provide motivation for having this class,
because they show the importance that God
places on learning.

I'd like some volunteers to read these please:

Deuteronomy 5:1; 14:23

Psalms 119: 7, 71, 73

Matthew 9:13; 11:29

Ephesians 5:8b-10

Proverbs 1:5; 9:9

(Deu 5:1; 14:23) Then Moses summoned all Israel, and said to them, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. ... "And you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God, at the place where He chooses to establish His name, the tithe of your grain, your new wine, your oil, and the first-born of your herd and your flock, in order that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always.

(Psa 119:7, 71, 73) I shall give thanks to Thee with uprightness of heart, When I learn Thy righteous judgments.

It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Thy statutes.

Thy hands made me and fashioned me; Give me understanding, that I may learn Thy commandments.

(Mat 9:13; 11:29) "But go and learn what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." ... "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.

(Eph 5:8b-10) walk as children of light {9} (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), {10} trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

(Prov 1:5; 9:9) A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser, Teach a righteous man, and he will increase his learning.

These are just a few
of the many passages we could've cited
to show that God considers
learning to be very important.

One of the truths that these verses teach
is our first valuable verity,
which is this:

[next slide]

A wise person
will continually seek to
acquire and apply truth
for the glory of God.
An unwise person will not.

There's at least two important implications
of this statement.

If you're not continually seeking
to acquire and apply truth —
if you're satisfied with how much truth you know —
then you're not wise.

And also,
If you are continually seeking truth,
but you're doing for some reason
other than the glory of God,
then you're not wise, either.

Some people are inclined
to errors of the first type —
not seeking truth,
that is,
not trying to learn.

Some people are inclined
to errors of the second type —
seeking truth for the wrong reasons,
such as,
simply for the sake of knowing more,
or to beat others in argument,
or to show off.

Generally speaking
those within the broad evangelical community today
tend towards errors of the first type,
while those within the reformed community
tend towards errors of the second type.

Of course,
that's not universally true —
there are reformed people with no desire to learn,
and there are broadly evangelical people
with a passion to learn
so as to show off what they now —
but,
more often than not,
the tendencies are as I stated.

The attitude that a wise person will have,
which is
the only attitude that will please God,
is described well by

Gresham Machen
in his book,
What is Faith?,
in this,
our first Quaint Quote:

[next slide]

We prefer,
instead of seeing how little
of the Christian truth we can get along with,
to see
just how much
of the Christian truth we can obtain.
We ought to search the Scriptures
reverently and thoughtfully
and pray God that He may lead us
into an ever fuller understanding of the truth....
There is no virtue whatever in ignorance,
but much virtue in a knowledge of what God has revealed.

My hope and prayer
is that God will use this class
to help us all
to have such an attitude,
and to help equip us to
to know how to best acquire and apply truth
for his glory.

[next slide]

Next week,
we will not meet,
as there'll be a combined adult class,
as described in the bulletin.

So the next class meeting
will be on March 17 –
be sure to wear your orange on that date.

Your assignment between now and then
should you choose to accept it
is to consider how to answer these two questions:

What is truth?

What is the starting point for truth?

That's all for today.

Thanks for your attention.