

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning

What is Truth?

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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]

Dear God,
Thank you for You giving us Your Truth.
Please grant us grace this morning
To study it well,
To your glory,
and our edification.
In the name of Jesus we ask, Amen.

Today is our second meeting of this class
about A Christian Philosophy of Learning.
Today,
we want to answer the question
What is Truth?
at least within the context
in which we're interested for this class.

[Next slide]

We'll start with a review of the first week,
then we'll talk about what we need to know
about propositions,
and then we'll develop the working definition of truth
that we'll be using throughout this class.

[Next slide]

In the first week,
I explained that what I mean by
A Christian Philosophy of Learning
is
a biblically sound,
comprehensive
way of thinking about
acquiring and applying
truth.

We looked at several Bible passages
that led us to our first
valuable verity:
A wise person
will continually seek
to acquire and apply truth
for the glory of God.

An unwise person will not.

We talked about two implications of this verity.

What was one of them?

You are not wise
if you are not seeking truth.

What was the other implication?

Even if you are seeking truth,
you are not wise
if your reason for seeking it
is something other than the glory of God.

For your week's work —
in this case, two week's work —
I asked you to consider how
to answer two questions:
What is truth?
and
What is the starting point for truth?

I also issued a quote identification challenge,
who was to identify who said,
"Our American atmosphere is vocal
with the flippant lococoquistry
of half knowledge."

Does anyone have an answer?

[If no one gets it right ...
Here's another hint:
The man's last name is the same
as a famous fictional character.]

Are there any questions about the last class?

We want to answer the question this morning,
"What is truth?"
in a way that is useful for this class.

To do this,
we'll need to discuss several things first.

This discussion will be —
because of time constraints —
necessarily a bit sloppy philosophically,
but it could be made tight
if we had some more time.

I suspect that some of you
will think that the discussion

is longer than it needs to be,
and others will think it
is shorter than it needs to be.

I don't think that this can be avoided —
my hope is that at least some of you
will think it is about the right length,
too.

[Next slide]

Let's talk now a bit about propositions.

In basic terms,
a proposition
is simply a statement
that is
either true or false.

Perhaps you can think of it this way:
If a statement would appear appropriate
within a True / False test,
then it is a proposition.

Questions,
commands, and
nonsense statements are not propositions.

Here are some examples.

First, three examples of statements that
are
propositions.

"We are in a class about learning."

That's a true proposition.

"It is raining outside."

That's a [true / false] proposition.

"If it is raining, then the exposed grass is wet."

That's a true proposition,
independent of whether it is raining at the time.

Now,
the following three
are not
propositions.

"Are we learning anything?"

That's not a proposition,
because it is a question.

We can make it a proposition
by changing it to, for example,
"We are learning something."

"Do your homework!"

That's not a proposition,
because it is a command.

We can make it into a proposition
by changing it into something like,
"If you do not do your homework within 10 minutes,
then you will not go to Joe's house
after supper."

Finally,
"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe"
is not a proposition,
because it is simply nonsense.

We can, however, make this into a proposition,
by, for example, saying,
"Winston Churchill first wrote
Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe."

That would, of course,
be a false proposition.

What would we have to do to make it a true proposition?

Replace 'Winston Churchill'
with 'Lewis Carroll'.

[Next slide]

Now it is your turn to say whether these are propositions.

"Jesus is the only way to heaven."

Is that a proposition?

[advance slide]

Yes, it is a proposition.

"Is Jesus the only way to heaven?"

Is that a proposition?

[advance slide]

No, it is not a proposition,
it is a question.

“Either Jesus is the only way to heaven or He is not.”

Is that a proposition?

[advance slide]

Yes, it is.

“If Jesus is the only way to heaven, then Muslims are going to heaven because they believe in Jesus.”

Is that a proposition?

[advance slide]

Yes, this, too, is a proposition.

“Believe on Jesus today.”

Is that a proposition?

[advance slide]

No,
it is not a proposition,
because it is a command.

Finally,

“It is a sin to be unwise.”

Is that a proposition?

[advance slide]

Yes,
that is a proposition.

Are there any questions about recognizing propositions?

So, now we know how to recognize propositions,
but that’s not all we need to know.

[Next slide]

Another thing that we need to know is that
a proposition is either
affirmed
or
denied

To affirm
a proposition
is to assert that it is true.

To deny
a proposition
is to assert that it is false.

That seems pretty simple,
I suppose.

Let's look at the propositions from our previous example
and see whether we want to affirm or deny each.

[Next slide]

"Jesus is the only way to heaven."

Affirm or deny?

[advance slide]

Affirm.

[advance slide]

"Either Jesus is the only way to heaven or He is not."

Affirm or deny?

[advance slide]

Also, Affirm.

"If Jesus is the only way to heaven, then Muslims are going to heaven because they believe in Jesus."

Affirm or deny?

[advance slide]

Deny.

Muslims do not believe in Jesus
in the way that the Scripture says
they must believe in order to go to heaven.

The last example proposition was
"It is a sin to be unwise."

Affirm or deny?

[advance slide]

At this point,
I'm going to say we don't know.

In a later class we'll talk about this in more detail.

In fact, it'll be one of our Evident Enigmas,
because I'll show how
an apparently good argument can be given
to show that the proposition should be *denied*,
and
that an apparently good argument can be given
to show that the proposition should be *affirmed*.

But that's for a later class,
for now,
our purpose has been
to illustrate that
propositions are either affirmed or denied,
or, sometimes,
the truth value is unknown.

That seems rather simple
and straightforward.

[Next slide]

What isn't quite so simple,
is answering this question:
What constitutes assertion?

That is,
when may we legitimately conclude
that someone has asserted
that a proposition is true?

Or,
to make it quite personal,
when may I legitimately conclude
that I
have asserted
that a proposition is true.

Most of the time,
whenever a logician
or most anyone else
talks about affirming or denying propositions,
they do so
based solely
on what a person
says.

So, for example,
if someone simply says,
"I believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven,"

that person will be thought to
have legitimately asserted
that the proposition is true.

Now,
the Scripture
does not
take what someone says
as the measure of what he truly asserts,
instead,
the Scripture
takes what someone *does*
as the measure of what he truly asserts.

Someone may say as often,
and as loudly,
as he wants
“Jesus is the only way to heaven”,
but he has not truly affirmed this proposition —
according to the Scripture —
unless he **acts**
according to the truth of that proposition,
recognizing, of course,
that sin will, in this life,
always keep him from doing so perfectly,
for this,
and nearly all other meaningful propositions.

It is common now a days,
to label the distinction that I’ve just made
between what a person says
and what he does
as the
head/heart
distinction.

As I mentioned in the first class,
this is one of my Pet Peeves
(it was the 2nd pet peeve I mentioned the first week,
which is why the superscript 2 is on the slide.)

Using head/heart as the label
accomplishes nothing useful,
and isn’t really very true
to the way the Scripture
usually discusses the distinction, either.

A more useful,
and, I believe,
scripturally accurate,
label for the distinction is
the
words/works
distinction.

(Or, if you want to stick to the body parts motif,
the lips / legs distinction.)

So,
from now on,
whenever we talk about
affirming propositions,
remember that we're talking about affirming
in the biblical sense —
that is,
with words and works.

Are there any questions about this?

[Next slide]

There's still a bit more we need to know about propositions.

There are special terms
used to describe
a proposition that is affirmed
without 'proof'.

('Proof' is in quotation marks here
because we've not defined proof,
and won't for several weeks,
but I'm assuming here
that all of us have a general idea
of what the word means.)

The terms that are used include
axiom,
assumption,
and,
presupposition.

You might also hear the term
postulate.

Definitions may be considered a special case
of these accepted-without-proof propositions.

Let's look at some examples.

[Next slide]

"All right angles are equal."

That's one of Euclid's axioms for geometry.

It is accepted without proof.

"A circle is a plane curve everywhere equidistant from a given fixed point, the center."

That's a definition.

It is accepted by,
well,
definition.

"A proposition may not be both true and false at the same time and in the same way."

That's a statement of the law of non-contradiction.

This law hasn't been proven,
but it is generally accepted.

"There is no God."

This is a proposition
that is held, without proof,
by many professing atheists.

There are some atheists who attempt to offer proofs
of the non-existence of God,
but there are many who do not,
but who accept it simply as a presupposition.

Now,
there's an interesting implication
of the law of non-contradiction,
which is this

[Next slide]

Denying a proposition
is the same
as affirming its opposite.

This means
that we don't have to talk about,
for example,
all the propositions that a person affirms
and
all the propositions that a person denies.

We can simply talk about
all the propositions that a person affirms,
recognizing that this includes
the opposite of all the denied propositions.

You'll see in a couple of minutes why this is useful.

Before we go on,
let me offer one more example
of a proposition that is considered
as a presupposition
or axiom by some people.

[Next slide]

“(?) There is a God who has spoken in the Bible.”

I put a question mark here,
because I don't intend to enter into
the debate today about
whether this is really a presupposition,
as both Van Tillian's and Clarkian's would affirm,
or
whether it is a proposition to be 'proved'
as many others would say.

I do want you to realize, however,
just in case you don't already,
that there are people who consider this to be
a presupposition.

In a later class,
I hope to have time to discuss the issues
involved here.

But we're not going to do that today.

Now that this foundation about propositions
has been laid,
we're now ready to answer
the question,
“What is truth?”
at least
for the purposes of this class.

[Next slide]

Before we go through my answer,
does anyone who gave some thought to the question
during the last couple weeks
want to give your answer?

[Advance slide after some answers are given.]

We'll start
where all
searches for definitions of English words
should start
with the Oxford English Dictionary.

The relevant OED entry says this:

“conformity with fact;
agreement with reality;
accuracy,
correctness,

verity (of statement or thought).”

I must confess
that I don't find this particularly helpful,
because nearly all of these words and phrases
are at least as difficult to understand
as the word 'truth' itself.

[advance slide]

So, the OED doesn't help much, here.

Let's think about it
in the terms that we've just talked about,
namely in terms
of affirming propositions.

[advance slide]

How can we describe
what a particular person
(let's call this person Adam)
thinks is truth?

We can describe it like this:

[advance slide]

All the propositions that Adam affirms.

Of course,
in practice,
for most people at least,
actually writing out all the propositions
that a person affirms would be quite difficult,
but,
conceptually,
it could be done,
and it would fully characterize what that person
considers to be truth.

Any questions about this?

As a bit of an aside,
For those of you who are symbolically inclined,
we can write this like this:
 $\{p \mid_{A_{\text{Adam}}}(p)\}$

[advance slide]

Don't worry if this doesn't make any sense to you —
it is basically the same thing
as the English that I just said.

Of course,
this doesn't describe truth —
it only describes what Adam thinks is true.

[advance slide]

How, 'though,
can we use the same idea to describe
what truth really is?

We can describe it like this:

[advance slide]

All the propositions that God affirms.

That is, if God says it is true,
then it is true,
and truth consists
of everything that God says is true.

We can't, of course,
write out all these propositions,
but the basic idea is simple,
and it is consistent with Scripture.

[advance slide]

For example,
Jesus says in John 17:17 —
"Sanctify them by Your truth.
Your word is truth."

And in Psalm 119:160 we read these words:

The entirety of Your word is truth,
And every one of Your righteous judgments
endures forever.

Now it is very important to realize
that these passages alone
do not say that what God says
is *all* there is truth.

They say only that all of what God says is true.

But, taken with the rest of Scripture,
we can make the stronger statement, too.

[advance slide]

Once again, for the symbolically inclined,
we can write this like I have here:
 $\{p \mid A_{\text{God}}(p)\}$

[advance slide]

This is such an important concept
that it seems appropriate to give it a special label,

For no particularly good reason,
I've chosen to use the Hebrew letter aleph (א)
for that symbol.

Are there any questions?

Let's put this on a single slide
in the form of a Valuable Verity.

[Next slide]

So, our second Valuable Verity is this:

Truth consists of all the propositions that God affirms.

[Next slide]

Our second quaint quote discusses this verity,
using slightly different words.

It comes from Jonathan Edwards
who wrote it in
entry #10 of "The Mind":

Truth,
in the general,
may be defined,
after the most strict and metaphysical manner,
as the consistency
and agreement of our ideas,
with the ideas of God.

Now, this isn't really a definition of truth,
rather it is a description of how we know
whether a particular idea we have—
which can be thought of as a collection of propositions —
is true.

Let's explain that a bit more directly.

[Next slide]

In general, how do you know if a particular proposition is true?

In the abstract,
this is actually quite simple.

A particular proposition is true
if and only if

God affirms it.

[advance slide]

Which can be written in symbols as I have it here.

The difficulty, of course,
comes in knowing whether God affirms or denies p,
for all the interesting propositions.

As this class continues,
we'll be looking how we go about doing this.

[If time permits: Are there any questions or comments
before we close?]

[Next slide]

In the next few weeks,
we'll consider how to answer these two questions:

What is the starting point for acquiring and applying truth?

What is the relationship
between regeneration and
acquiring & applying truth?

For your Week's Work to prepare for next week's class,
consider this question:

Do there exist any propositions
that are affirmed by every sane person?

That's all for today.