

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning

The Starting Point for Truth (part 1)

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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]

Today is our third meeting of
“A Christian Philosophy of Learning.”

Our main subject today
is The Starting Point for Truth.

Before we start with that, however,
let’s review what we’ve done in the first two weeks,
and also expand just a bit on it.

[Next slide]

In the first week,
we discussed that what we’re seeking is
a biblically sound,
comprehensive
way of thinking about
acquiring and applying
truth.

I also explained
that during the course of our meetings
I’ll introduce several special elements from time to time.

These are listed here, along with their abbreviations:
I’ll use Inquisitive Interlude (I²)
to denote a time of discussion
that might be a bit more abstract or philosophical
than some of you will find interesting.

We’ve had none of those yet,
at least not intentionally.

Week’s Work (W²) denotes your homework for the week.

A Valuable Verity (V²) is
the summary of a particularly important truth —
we’ve had two of those so far,
which we’ll review in just a moment.

By the end of the class,
if you put together all of the valuable verities,
you will have — if I’ve done a good job —

a statement of the principles of
a Christian philosophy of learning.

We've had two quaint quotes (Q^2) so far too
both of which have served to
illustrate or amplify the verities,
but that won't necessarily always be the case.

We've not had any
Evident Enigmas (E^2) or
Ubiquitous Untruths (U^2) yet,
although I alluded to one of the former last week,
and we'll have some U^2 's later this morning.

Finally,
we've had two Pet Peeves (P^2) so far.

[Next slide]

The first
valuable verity we discussed was this:
A wise person
will continually seek
to acquire and apply truth
for the glory of God.
An unwise person will not.

This has two important implications:
One, If you do not seek truth, you are unwise
Two, if you seek truth, but not for God's glory, you are unwise.

We discussed the second variable verity last week:
Truth consists of all the propositions that God affirms.
Which, I showed can be written in symbols like this:
 $\{p \mid A_{\text{God}}(p)\} : \aleph$

Recall that
a proposition is a statement that is either true or false.

Recall also that as an implication of the valuable verity
A proposition is true
if and only if
God affirms it (perhaps only to Himself).
 $p \Leftrightarrow p \in \aleph$

Finally,
we defined affirmation by a person
based primarily on what the person does
(not just on what he says).

That's a very quick summary
of what we've talked about the first two weeks.

Does anyone have a question or comment before

we look at some important implications
of what we've talked about so far?

[Next slide]

Putting our two verities together,
and recognizing that our definition of
affirm
can reasonably include 'acquire and apply',
we can say this:
A wise person
will continually seek
to affirm the propositions that God affirms,
for the glory of God.

This, in turn, means that
If I am wise, then my attitude will be like this.

First,
If God says a proposition is true —
recognizing that He may say this
in His Word, either explicitly,
or by good and necessary consequence,
or in His works,
that creation —
If God says a proposition is true,
then I will affirm it.

Second,
If God says a proposition is false
(by His Word or His works),
then I will deny it.

And the third component of a wise person's attitude,
of no less importance
than the first two components,
is this:
If God is silent about a proposition
(in His Word and His works),
then I will neither
affirm
nor deny it.

By silent here,
I'm including
'not clear.'

This attitude is well summarized by Paul
in 2 Corinthians 10:5,
where he writes:
We are destroying speculations
and every lofty thing
raised up against the knowledge of God,
and

we are taking every thought captive
to the obedience of Christ

Now,
each of these 3 components
of a wise person's attitude
are often not present in many people today.

The lack of the appropriate attitude is so common,
that I think we legitimately
say there are 3 ubiquitous untruths.

[Next slide]

Here they are.

Denying what God affirms is a ubiquitous untruth,
so too is
affirming what God denies,
and so too is
Affirming
(or denying)
when God's position is not clear.

I have specific examples of each of these.

[advance slide]

As an example of denying what God affirms,

[advance slide]

Many people say:
"Evolution accounts for all living things."

But that is
an explicit denial
of many propositions that God affirms,
one of which is given here:
"In the beginning
God created
the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

As an example of affirming what God denies,

[advance slide]

Many people say:
"I can be neutral towards Christianity."

The U.S. Supreme Court has read this sort of proposition
into the Constitution,
by making 'neutrality towards religion'
a key test of whether

some government action
violates the establishment clause
of the first amendment.

The general rule is
that if a government program is neutral,
then it is OK,
if not,
then it violates the establishment clause.

This is an explicit affirmation
of a proposition that God denies
throughout Scripture.

For example, Jesus denies the possibility of neutrality in
Luke 11:23:
"He who is not with Me is against Me."

Neutrality is not possible,
no matter how much the Court,
and others,
may want it to be possible,
or may pretend that it is possible.

Finally,
as an example of affirming a proposition
about which God does not speak clearly,

[advance slide]

Many people say
"Xmillennialism is the right eschatology."

Where X can be
pre-,
a-,
post-,
or almost anything else.

Well,
the truth is that
God does not
say enough in the Scripture
to justify definitive propositions
on this subject,
which is why, I suspect,
that the historic creeds and confessions of the church
have not taken a position on this issue.

Before I pause to allow questions and comments,
there's one more slide I to discuss.

[Next slide]

You must remember this
A truth is still a truth
even if you do not believe it is true,
even if you do not know whether it is true,
even if God has not chosen
to reveal that it is true.

Our knowledge
has no effect whatsoever on the truth,
which remains constant,
because the set of propositions that God affirms
remains constant,
because God is unchangeable.

So, for example,
there is one, and only one,
view of eschatology that is correct,
we just don't know what it is,
but God does.

Truth doesn't change,
but our knowledge of it does.

So,
unless God has revealed clearly
(by His Word or his works)
that a certain proposition is true,
we
must not
assert that it is true.

If we do assert that something is true,
without having the necessary evidence from God
to support this assertion,
then we're claiming that
God erred in what He chose to reveal to us.

We are also
giving ammunition
to those who claim
that Christians are intellectually deficient.

This idea is so important,
let's repeat it as our third Valuable Verity

[Next slide]

A truth is still a truth,
even if you do not believe it is true,
or if you do not know whether it is true,
or if God has not chosen to reveal that it is true.

Are there any questions
or comments

before we move on to discuss the homework question?

[Next slide]

Your Week's Work to prepare for this class
was to consider how to answer the question:

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

For the symbolically-inclined
we might write a positive answer to this question
as $\exists p \forall S : A_S(p)$
There exists a proposition p
such that for all S (that is, sane people),
 S affirms p .

In particular, you were to
answer 'Yes' or 'No' to the question,
and if your answer was 'Yes',
to state the proposition
(or propositions)
that you think is
(or are)
affirmed by every sane person.

In giving this assignment,
I mentioned that it might be thought of as something
of a trick question.

Here's what I meant by that.

[Next slide]

It's fairly simple to come up with a fairly clever,
but totally useless answer,
which would go like this.

Define 'sane' as follows:
A sane person is a person who affirms the proposition
"Utilize' is a frequently misused word."

Then, answer the question, 'Yes', and
give as the proposition that is affirmed by all sane people,
"Utilize' is a frequently misused word."

This is a consistent answer,
but it isn't particularly useful,
and this uselessness remains no matter
what proposition is stated in the definition of 'sane'.

Do anyone give an answer like this?

[Next slide]

So, let's see what you all think.

I'm going to try to record this on the slides,
so I'll switch to the editing mode of Presentations now.

[Make the switch]

First, let's record the split between 'Yes' and 'No'.

For our purposes this morning,
don't assume that you have know what the correct answer is;
we're interested in what you think right now,
even if you're not sure.

So,
please pick either 'Yes' or 'No'.

How many of you think the answer is 'No',
there does not exist any single proposition
(or set of propositions)
that is affirmed by every sane person?

[record the answer]

How many of you think the answer is 'Yes',
there is at least one proposition
that is affirmed by every sane person?

[record the answer]

[Move to next slide]

Now, for those of you who said, 'Yes',
let's record the propositions that you think
are affirmed by every sane person.

We'll start by simply recording them without comment,
then we'll go back and comment on them.

Here's the first one,
which was suggested by my son, David:

I am sane.

What's another one?

[10 more propositions were suggested.
We discussed each of them, and determined that none could confidently be claimed to be affirmed by all
sane people.]

Before we wrap up discussing this question,
let me show you two more fairly famous answers,

[Next slide]

one made famous by a philosopher,
and the other made famous by an actress.

[advance slide]

Rene Decartes
said that a proposition that can not be doubted —
and thus, (though he didn't put this way),
must be believed by every sane person — is

"I think, therefore I am."

This proposition is,
however,
denied by quite a few people,
especially those who are materialists:

[advance slide]

Here's a quote from one such person:
'This is Descartes' error:
the abyssal separation between body and mind, ...
the suggestion that reasoning,
and moral judgment,
and the suffering that comes from physical pain
or emotional upheaval
might exist separately from the body....'

Now,
materialists are most definitely wrong,
but it would be a stretch
to say that they are all insane,
so Decartes answer isn't legitimate.

Here's one more answer,
which was made famous by an actress:

[advance slide]

"Whatever will be, will be."

[advance slide]

This isn't accepted
by non-determinists,
including many modern evangelical Christians,

and

[advance slide]

it should not be accepted by any Christian,
if it is intended to deny human responsibility for actions.

[Next slide]

So,
none of the propositions that we've mentioned
have turned out to quite satisfy the criteria
that they are affirmed by all sane people.

Does that mean that the answer is, 'No'?

It probably is "No",
if by affirm we mean both say and act
as if a proposition is true;
but if we mean only act,
then the answer is certainly "yes."

There are several propositions that every sane person
affirms in his actions.

The law of contradiction —
no proposition can be true and false at the same time
and in the same way —
is one.

The basic reliability of sense perception is another one.

Everyone acts as if these were true,
even if they deny them verbally.

The most ardent deconstructionalist,
who will vehemently claim non-contradiction,
will expect you to take his denial of non-contradiction
as a denial, and not an affirmation,
thus implicitly affirming what he denies.

Even someone who denies strongly
the reliability of the senses
almost always acts as if he generally trusts them.

For example,
I may stand here and tell you I deny the reliability of the senses,
while acknowledging that I am standing here
in front of you,
and only my senses can tell me that.

So, what is the right answer?

[advance slide]

Well, I believe it does not actually matter.

Please note carefully,
that I'm not saying for certain
that I'm right about this,
I could be wrong,

but I don't think that I am.

[advance slide]

It does not matter for learning because ...

[advance slide]

because
what is important is what God affirms,
not what other people affirm.

[advance slide]

I don't think it matters for apologetics either,
although much ink has been spilt,
and many spleens vented on the this very issue.

It doesn't matter for apologetics, because

[advance slide]

what matters for apologetics
is the set of propositions
affirmed by the person
with whom you're talking.

What other people may affirm
isn't really important.

In a later class
we'll talk about apologetics
in more detail,
and we'll revisit this.

Some of you may be thinking
"If it doesn't matter,
then why did we discuss it?"

Here's why I chose to discuss this question.

There's no way we could discuss,
in a general way,
the questions that do matter most,
such as,
for an individual,
"What are the propositions that I affirm?",
for each of us.

because that would be different

But, by asking you to think about the general question,
I hoped to stimulate you to think about the
specific question,
assuming that most of you would start your thinking

by considering propositions that you affirm
as possible answers to the general question.

Also,

I think that discussing the general question
helps to provide a context within which
to discuss questions
we'll talk in future weeks.

The answer to this week's question doesn't necessarily matter,
but the answer to a similar question
that we'll ask in a future class,
does matter.

[Next slide]

Next week,
we'll talk about the relationship
between
regeneration
and
learning.

To prepare for this class,
your week's work is to read these passages:

Matthew 16:13-17
Matthew 11:25-27
Psalm 119:18
1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

That's all for today.