

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning

The Starting Point for Truth (part 2)

31 March 2002

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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 fourth meeting of
“A Christian Philosophy of Learning.”

Before we begin
I need to issue a warning.

From time to time this morning
I may lapse into incoherency.

I'm suffering from two afflictions
that have been proven
to have significant negative affects
on mental acuity:
sleep debt,
and
tie wearing.

All evidence suggests
that the effects of sleep debt
are reversible.

The evidence, sadly,
also suggests
that the effects
of tie wearing
are permanent.

[Note: the tie wearing part is a joke,
although supported by anecdotal evidence.
The sleep debt part is accurate.]

Today we want to focus on
The Starting Point for Truth —
In particular,
looking at the relationship between regeneration
and truth (or learning).

Because there's much I want to cover this morning,
we'll make our review of the last three classes
quite short.

[Next slide]

Recall that we're seeking a biblically sound,
comprehensive
way of thinking about
acquiring and applying
truth —
that's how we've defined
a Christian philosophy of learning.

So far,
we've seen three elements that make up
this biblically sound,
comprehensive way of thinking.

As you recall,
We're calling these elements valuable verities.

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

Our second variable verity is
Truth consists of all the propositions that God affirms.
Remember that we said
that this encompasses everything
that God declares is true,
even those things
He doesn't reveal to us,
which leads directly to our third verity.

The third valuable verity goes like this:
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.

[Next slide]

Last week,
we searched for a starting point for truth
in universally affirmed propositions —
that is,
we tried to come up with
one or more propositions
that every sane person affirms.

At best, this search was inconclusive,
that is,
we didn't come up with any such propositions,
although there were some propositions
that some people had difficulty believing

that any sane person would possibly deny.

Also,

I suspect that there were some people
for whom this search may
may have seemed pointless
or, even worse,
boring.

[Next slide]

One reason some of you
may have been a tad bored,
is that we already know the answer at one level.

Our second valuable verity,
which we just reviewed a bit ago,
tells us
that God Himself is the starting
(and ending) point,
because He defines truth.

But that answer alone
is a bit abstract,
and doesn't necessarily help —
by itself —
help someone to know where to start
acquiring and applying truth,
for the glory of God.

[Next slide]

And that's what we want to know —
that is,
we want to know the answer at a personal level:

What is the starting point
from which
↓
can begin to acquire and apply truth?

That's what we're going to talk about today.

For your homework,
I asked you to read several Scripture passages.

We'll begin with one of those.

[Next slide]

Everyone please turn to Matthew 16:13-17.

Will someone please read that for us?

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He began asking His disciples, saying, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" {14} And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." {15} He said[^] to them, "But who do you say that I am?" {16} And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." {17} And Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

[Next slide]

Let's talk about this passage in some detail,
and very carefully.

I'll ask you a series of questions.

Please answer only the specific question that I ask,
because I want us to go through this
in a particular way.

[advance slide]

Jesus pronounces Peter blessed.

For what did He make this pronouncement?

That is,
using the terms
that we've been using in this class,
for what did
Jesus pronounce Peter blessed?

[advance slide]

Jesus pronounced Peter blessed
for affirming a proposition about Him.

What was the proposition that Peter affirmed?

[advance slide]

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Peter affirmed this proposition,
while other folks were affirming other propositions,
such as,
Jesus was John the Baptist,
or Jesus was Elijah.

Jesus explains why Peter was able
to affirm that Jesus was the Messiah,
while others were not so able.

He starts this explanation by first
saying what
is not
an explanation.

According to Jesus,
what was not
the origin
of Peter's ability to affirm this proposition?

[advance slide]

Flesh & blood
(that is, natural means).

According to Jesus,
Peter
did not
come to be able to affirm
the Messiahship of Jesus
through natural means.

According to Jesus,
what was
the origin
of Peter's ability to affirm this proposition?

[advance slide]

The Father Himself.

That is,
Peter came to realize
that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah
through the direct intervention
of God the Father.

Peter did not reason his way to the proposition.

Peter did not observe his way to the proposition.

God, by some means not specified
directly
gave Peter
the ability
to affirm the proposition.

Does everyone understand
what Jesus is saying happened here to Peter?

[Next slide]

So, that's what happened between Jesus and Peter.

What implications does this passage have for us?

Please listen to,
and read this carefully,
because it illustrates

a very important point:

[Next slide]

By itself,
the only implication
this passage has for us is to
suggest
that
perhaps
the origin of our ability to affirm
that Jesus is the Messiah
might
come from the Father,
and not from natural means.

This passage
most certainly
does not
demand that this be the case.

Instead, it could
be the case
that **all** other people
are able to truly affirm
that Jesus is the Messiah,
without any supernatural work by the Father,
and that Peter alone
just happened to be
so dense
that he required supernatural work.

Surely,
there is Scriptural evidence
to suggest that Peter
wasn't always the sharpest knife in the drawer.

After all,
there is some evidence in the Scripture
that Peter wasn't
the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Or,
it could be the case
that **some** people are like Peter —
needing supernatural assistance —
while others need no such assistance,
but can come to affirm
Yeshua Ha' Mashiach
by natural means.

Or,
it could be the case
that **everyone** is like Peter,

and that apart from the supernatural work of God,
we'd all be unable to truly affirm
who Jesus is.

Which is it?

This passage,
by itself,
does not
answer the question.

Does everyone understand this?

Those of you who were here last week
will recall that we talked
about how important it is
that we do not claim
that God has said something,
unless He has actually said it —
remembering, of course,
that He may say it
by His Word
or by His works.

We mentioned that if we don't do this,
we are giving ammunition
to those who claim
that Christians are intellectually deficient.

The same thing applies here.

If we claim that this passage,
and this passage alone,
says something more than it does,
then we're doing the same thing,
appearing to be intellectually deficient —
actually,
it is worse,
we're not just appearing to be intellectually deficient,
we are
demonstrating conclusively
that we are,
at least in this instance,
intellectually deficient,
or, at best, sloppy.

Now,
one reason why some people
have difficulty understanding all this,
is that they know what the answer to the question
really is — We are like Peter,
we are all sinners,
and we are all unable
to come to Jesus

without the working of God —
but we don't know that
from this passage alone,
we know it from the teaching of lots of other
Scripture, too.

Because we know this truth,
we have a tendency to want it to be
explicitly taught in every passage —
such as this one —
even when it is not.

This passage is certainly
consistent with
the view that no one comes
to truly affirm that Jesus is the Messiah
except by the supernatural working of God,
but it only explicitly teaches
that Peter did.

Does everyone understand this?

As I'm sure many of you realize,
this passage is by no means
the only one with which
Christians have a tendency
to claim it is saying more than it is.

Interestingly,
critics of Christianity often do this, too.

Some of the most common
so-called contradictions in the Bible
are based on nothing more
than someone saying that a passage
says more than it does.

For example,
some people claim there are contradictions
in the gospel accounts of Jesus life,
because one gospel might mention 1 person
while another mentions 2,
forgetting
that these numbers do not contradict each other
unless both claims to be exact.

One does not preclude two,
unless it is claimed to be one and only one.

Does anyone want to mention some examples
of either type?

One of the most common ones
is James 2:19, which says,

You believe that God is one.
You do well;
the demons also believe,
and shudder.

I've heard people claim that this passage
teaches that the demons believe the entire Gospel.

Of course,
it says no such thing.

All it says is that the demons
are neither atheists
nor polytheists,
nothing more.

Perhaps other Scripture passages
tell us more about what demons believe,
but this one doesn't.

I'm emphasizing this point so much,
because a crucial part of learning
is not thinking that something says more than it really does.

[Next slide]

Back to the specific subject at hand.

Other Scripture passages tell us that
we **are** all like Peter.

Some of those passages are listed on the slide,
including ones you were to read for homework:
Matthew 11:25-27
Psalm 119:18
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
John 6:25-51,
and there are others, too.

Taken together,
these passages make clear
that one of the propositions that God affirms is this:
Knowledge of the truth about Jesus
does not come by natural means,
but by a divine and supernatural light.

The phrase
"a divine and supernatural light"
comes from a sermon by Jonathan Edwards,
which you should read, if you haven't.

An electronic version is available
through jonathanedwards.com.

Here's an excerpt to whet your appetite:

[With the divine and supernatural light]
The mind be[comes] sensible
of the excellency of divine objects,
[and] dwells upon them with delight.

The powers of the soul
are more awakened and enlivened
to employ themselves
in the contemplation of them,
and exert themselves more fully
and much more to the purpose.

The beauty of the objects
draws on the faculties,
and draws forth their exercises,
so that reason itself
is under far greater advantages
for its proper and free exercises,
and to attain its proper end,
free of darkness and delusion.

...

A true sense
of the divine excellency
of the things of God's Word
does more directly and immediately
convince of the truth of them,
and that because
the excellency of these things is so superlative.

There is a beauty in them
that is so divine and God-like,
that it greatly and evidently
distinguishes them from things merely human,
or that of which men
are the inventors and authors.

[There is] a glory that is so high and great,
that when clearly seen,
commands assent to the[] divine reality.

When there is
an actual and lively discovery
of this beauty and excellency,
it will not allow of any such thought
as that
it is the fruit of men's invention.

This is a kind of intuitive and immediate evidence.
[We] believe the doctrines of God's Word to be divine,
because [we] see a divine,
and transcendent,
and most evidently distinguishing glory in them.

Such a glory as,
if clearly seen,
does not leave room to doubt

of their being of God,
and not of men.

Now,
taking the valuable verities that we've already established,
remembering some Scripture passages
that we've not discussed explicitly,
and equating the divine and supernatural
light with regeneration,
we can get from this statement
to our 4th valuable verity,

[Next slide]

which reads like this:

**The starting point
for acquiring and applying truth
is regeneration.**

That is,
without the "divine and supernatural light"
that God gives us at regeneration,
we have no hope of truly
acquiring and applying truth.

Before I pause for questions
or comments,

[Next slide]

Here's a quaint quote,
which says the same thing as the valuable verity
using different words.

It comes from Anselm,
and is rather famous,
so famous in fact,
that it has often been
taken completely out of context,
and
distorted to mean something
entirely different from what it really means.

I do not seek to understand that I may believe,
but I believe
in order to understand.
For this also I believe —
that unless I believed,
I should not understand.

This is not a justification
for an unthinking

irrational
faith;
rather it is a recognition
that unless God supernaturally removes
the barriers to true rational thinking
that sin has erected,
we are unable to understand anything important at all.

Are there any questions
or comments?

We'll consider
two common questions.

Q1. Are you saying that an unregenerate person
doesn't know any truth?

A1. I might be, and I might not be,
depending on what you mean by know.

An unregenerate person
cannot have a foundation upon which to
be certain that he knows anything that is true.

In fact,
an unregenerate person
cannot give a coherent definition
for truth.

So those who say
"There's no such thing as truth,"
are, in this one point,
being fairly consistent with their own worldview.

An unregenerate person
who claims there is truth,
but who defines it differently
from how we've defined it
has — to use Schaeffer's phrase —
his feet firmly planted in mid-air.

With all that said,
it does turn out that God
often allows the unregenerate person
to affirm some propositions that are true.

So in that sense,
the unregenerate can know some truth,
but they can never
know
that they know.

Q2. Does this mean that we can't learn from the work of the unregenerate?

A2. Since God has chosen to allow some unregenerate people to properly affirm some true propositions, it is possible for us to learn from them.

We need to be sure that we apply the appropriate tests to determine whether what they say is true, of course, but that applies to regenerate, too.

We'll be looking at what some of those appropriate tests are in later classes.

We've found our starting point for truth.

Let's see where that puts us in the overall plan for the class that I showed you the first week.

[Next slide]

Here's a slide I showed the first week.

Recall that I said that for the synopsis of the class we'd use the metaphor from Psalm 1 of a tree firmly planted by the stream.

[Advance slide]

We're down here, talking about the roots of the tree.

[advance slide]

We've explicitly answered the first two questions:
What is truth?
and
What is the starting point for truth?

We've implicitly answered the third question:
Are there varieties of truth?

One of our previous valuable verities provides the answer to this question.

Which one,
and what is the answer?

[advance slide]

The answer is “No”.

[Some people interpreted ‘variety’ in such a way as to make ‘Yes’ a reasonable answer. I’ll address that in the review part of class 5.]

The second verity says
“Truth consists of all the propositions that God affirms.”

This answers the question
in the negative.

There are not varieties of truth,
there is only one,
namely,
what God says it is.

We are also in position
to answer the fourth question:
How much truth can we acquire and apply?

How many of you can answer this question
in 7 words or less?

How many can answer it
in 4 words or less?

2 words or less?

How about one word?

I can answer it in one word,
so long as we relax our grammar standards a bit.

How much truth
can we acquire and apply?

[advance slide]

More.

That is,
for each one of us,
no matter how much truth we currently affirm and apply,
there’s always more
for us to acquire and apply.

Now,
I’ve not really proven this,
but I’m going to assume that
you all will affirm it,
none the less.

Does anyone want to dispute this answer?

[There was some interesting discussion about this.]

This is important enough,
I think,
to write it out
as our 5th Valuable Verity.

[Next slide]

We'll put it this way:

**No person ever reaches a point
where he should stop
acquiring and applying truth.**

That's it for today.

[Next slide]

There's no class next week.

I was told yesterday afternoon
that we will have a special guest speaker
and a combined Sunday School class
next week.

Two weeks from now,
we'll move to the branches,
and start talking about
how we go about acquiring and applying
new truth.

For your homework,
I've got a new quote ID challenge for you.

Who said,
"If a picture
is worth a thousand words,
then why
did God give us His Word,
instead of His drawings?"

Here are two hints.

One, a google search won't be sufficient,
and
two,
the correct answer
is not
anyone who has been the answer
to a previous quote ID challenge.

That's all for today.

Thanks for your attention.