

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning

From Truth to 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]

Today is the sixth meeting of
“A Christian Philosophy of Learning.”

This will be our only
class discussing in general terms
how we go about moving from the truth we know
to more truth.

Our discussion this morning
will be necessarily quite incomplete —
for example we’ll not be discussing today
anything about acquiring truth by observation —
but we’ll try to fill in some of the missing pieces,
when we discuss applications
to specific subject areas
in the coming weeks.

Before we begin that discussion,
however,
let’s quickly review some of what we’ve covered
in previous classes.

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Recall that in the first week
we defined
“A Christian Philosophy of Learning”
to be
“A biblically-sound
comprehensive way of thinking about
acquiring and applying truth.”

I said that we’d call the elements of this way of thinking
valuable verities.

We’ve seen five of these verities so far.

Here are all five,
listed in the order we’ve covered them.

First, **A wise person
will continually seek
to acquire and apply truth
for the glory of God.**

An unwise person will not.

Second, **Truth**
consists of all the propositions
that God affirms.

The third verity we discussed was
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.

Truth is not to be measured by what I know,
but by what God knows.

The fourth verity was simply
The starting point
for acquiring and applying truth is regeneration.

That is,
without the direct intervention
of God's Spirit
on our souls,
we are unable to know for sure
whether we know any truth.

The final verity that we've discussed is
No person
ever reaches a point
where he should stop acquiring and applying truth.

Those are the five verities we've discussed so far.

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Last week we talked about 3 applications
of these verities.

One application is as a **Sign of spiritual condition.**

For example,
one way in which I can judge
my spiritual condition
is by considering the extent to which
I am seeking to acquire and apply truth.

The second application we mentioned was as
a spur to superior scholarship.

In particular we said that
a Christian should be
a more diligent
and accomplished student
than non-believers

of comparable natural abilities.

I'll say a little bit more about that one in just a minute.

The third application we discussed last week
was as a **stimulant for humility**.

Because the gap
between my knowledge and God's knowledge
is vastly bigger than the gap
between my knowledge and anyone else's
(no matter who I am,
and no matter what area we're discussing),
there's
never
any cause
to feel superior to others.

The second of these three applications
generated the most discussion last week,
and I want to address one part of that briefly this morning.

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A very good question was raised,
namely,
might less accomplishment in some particular area
be expected from a Christian
because the Christian
might lead a more balanced life
than an unbeliever of similar ability?

I said last week that,
"Yes", this might be well be true.

I stand by that answer,
but I think it is important to qualify it a bit,
like this:

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Less **quantity** may well be justified;
but less **quality** is not justified.

That is,
because a Christian should lead a balanced life
and not devote excessive amounts of time
to any particular endeavor,
it may well be the case that
there will exist situations in which
a Christian will choose to do less
than an unbeliever might choose to do
in the same situation:
perhaps traveling less,

for example.

Nevertheless,
I believe it is still the case
that whatever a Christian chooses to do,
he should always do it to the highest quality
he is capable of obtaining.

Too often,
I'm afraid,
balance is used as an excuse
for bad quality,
and this ought not be.

That's it for our review.

Are there any quick questions
or comments before we continue?

Before we discuss the homework I gave you,
I want to state our sixth
valuable verity,
which is something that we've been assuming,
but which hasn't been stated explicitly.

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There are several possible ways to express this verity,
but since a direct quotation from the Scripture
is the closest we can come to reproducing exactly
some of the propositions that God affirms,
we'll state it this way,
which comes from 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture
is given by inspiration of God,
and is profitable for doctrine,
for reproof,
for correction,
for instruction in righteousness,
that the man of God may be complete,
thoroughly equipped for every good work.

From now on,
we'll use the shorthand
"The Bible is the Word of God"
or something like it
to stand for this proposition.

This leads us directly to your homework for the week.

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The week's work was to answer these questions:

If I affirm that the Bible is the Word of God,
is there anything else that I also need to affirm,
before I can affirm that I am a sinner?

If so, what else do I need to affirm?

How many of you say
that there is nothing else
that you need to affirm?

How many think
that there is something more
you need to affirm?

Let's talk a bit about
what these additional propositions might be.

Name one of them. And another

The Bible doesn't mention me by name,
and it doesn't mention any of you by name either,
so I can't simply turn to the right page of the Bible,
and see the proposition written there that says
"Michael Holloway is a sinner."

[Next slide]

Instead,
to get from knowing
the Bible is the Word of God
to knowing I am a sinner,
I have to construct an argument;
that is, I have to reason
from known truth
to new truth.

We'll talk more about how we do this
in just a minute,
but now is a good time
to introduce two more valuable verities,
which go together.

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First,
**God does not need to reason
from known truth to new truth,
because
He knows everything all at once.**

However,
we are not God,
so
Humans must reason

**from known truth to new truth,
because we do not know
everything all at once.**

God doesn't have to reason,
but we do.

He knows everything,
but we do not,
and even for what we do know,
we're not able to hold it all in our minds
at one time.

Are there any questions or comments,
before we talk more about constructing arguments?

Let's return to the homework example.

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Here's a basic argument,
consisting of three propositions:

All humans have sinned
(which comes directly from Romans 3:23).

I am a human.

and

I am a sinner.

[Next slide]

We call the first two of these propositions
the premises,
and the last one
the conclusion.

What this argument says is
something like this:

Because I affirm
that all humans are sinners,
and because I also affirm
that I am a human,
therefore,
I must conclude that
I am a sinner.

Does that make sense?

This is a valid, deductive argument
(I'll explain what that is in a minute),

and so everyone who affirms the premises,
has no choice but to affirm the conclusion.

But,
is this argument alone
enough to cause every person
to affirm that he is a sinner?

No,
it is not.

It is not
because not everyone will affirm
both of the stated premises.

In reality,
we really need to write this argument
in a different way,
because there's an important part missing.

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Namely what is missing
is a whole bunch of
affirmed,
but unstated propositions.

Such propositions as
"the Bible is the Word of God",
which is why we affirm the statement from Romans 3:23,
and "we can accurately
distinguish humans from non-humans",
which,
along with a lot of other things,
allows us to affirm that "I am a human."

[Next slide]

Every argument in real life
follows this same basic framework,
although we don't always realize
that we're following this framework,
or even that we're constructing arguments.

There's a conclusion,
which is based on some number of
stated premises,
and also on some
(much larger) number of
affirmed,
but unstated,
propositions.

Any questions at this point?

[Next slide]

Now,
there are two basic types of reasoning
(or argument,
or logic,
for our purposes,
those 3 words are interchangeable).

We're going to go through this very quickly.

Don't worry too much if you don't grasp everything,
because we'll be going over these things
many more times in future classes,
as we discuss applications.

So, the two main types of reasoning are
deductive reasoning,
and inductive reasoning.

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In deductive reasoning,
the conclusion
must
be true
if the premises are true,
and the form of the argument is valid.

That is,
a person cannot accept the premises
and deny the conclusion
of a valid deductive argument
without giving up any claim to being rational.

Consider the example we've been using,
its form is valid, so
anyone who accepts both premises,
must,
unless he wants to be irrational,
accept the conclusion.

If this were a course in logic,
we'd spend months
talking about how to determine
whether a deductive argument
is valid in form.

A valid deductive argument
with true premises
is called a sound argument.

A rational person
will always accept the conclusion

of a sound argument.

Now,
if the form of a deductive argument is invalid,
or if one or more of the premises in the argument is false,
we can conclude nothing
about the truth of the conclusion.

These two points
often cause people the most difficulty.

If we had more time
we'd go through some examples to illustrate this.

Any questions?

[Next slide]

The other main type of reasoning
is usually called,
at least by logicians,
inductive reasoning.

As we'll see in the coming weeks,
the majority of all real-world arguments
turn out to be inductive.

For inductive arguments,
good form and true premises
yield a strong argument,
which **provides evidence**
for a true conclusion

This means,
among other things,
that it is possible for a rational person
to accept the premises of an inductive argument,
while denying the conclusion.

Also,
for inductive reasoning,
the notions of validity and soundness
don't make sense
instead,
inductive arguments are evaluated according
to strength.

In talking about the strength of an inductive argument,
there are two important concepts:
the burden of proof,
and the standards of proof.

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Let's consider **burden of proof**, first.

The question here is,
Who must give a strong argument?

Theoretically, there are three basic possibilities:
the one who affirms the conclusion,
the one who denies the conclusion,
or both equally.

Your choice
of who you think has the burden of proof
for a particular issue
will often determine your opinion
about the conclusion.

Which choice is made
can often determine the result.

Safety issues are a prime example of this.

One of my current areas of professional research
is accident analysis.

One of the things that often is the case
when an accident happens
is that the burden of proof concerning safety has changed.

Whereas,
once it was required that
a strong argument be presented that
a system *was* safe,
before the system would be used,
over time,
this changed to a requirement
that a strong argument be presented that
the system *was not* safe,
before use of the system would be stopped.

The Challenger accident is a prototypical example
of this sort of thing happening.

There are many other issues
for which determining who
has the burden of proof
often determines the result.

Can anyone think of some other examples?

Christian liberty issues are another prime example.

Is the question being asked
Is this permitted,
or

is this forbidden?

Which question is asked
very often determines the answer.

So, that's burden of proof.

This concept will be very important
in the coming weeks
as we discuss specific applications.

The other important concept in evaluating
inductive arguments is that of
standards of proof.

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The important question here is
How strong must an argument be
to be considered determinative?

There are lots of different ways
of thinking about standards of proof.

I'll give you one here,
which I've made up,
listed in order of increasing strength.

At the lowest level of strength,
we have the standard that says
we'll take a conclusion to be true,
if based on the argument given,
affirming the conclusion
will have more practical benefits
than denying it.

The famous —
or infamous depending on your point of view —
Pascal's wager
is an example of an argument
that is convincing
only if you have this weak
standard of proof.

At the next level of strength,
we affirm the conclusion
if the argument demonstrates
that the conclusion
is more likely to be true,
than to be false.

This standard is pretty much equivalent to
the **preponderance of the evidence** standard
used in most civil court cases in the U.S.

The next standard is somewhat stronger than this,
it requires that the argument show
that the conclusion is
much more likely
to be true
than to be false.

This is basically analogous to
the **clear and convincing evidence** standard
used in some cases in civil courts.

The second strongest standard,
which I'm sure you all recognize
from our criminal justice system,
says that the argument must show
that the conclusion is true
beyond a reasonable doubt.

For our purposes
this basically means
that any doubts about the truth of the conclusion
are supported, if at all,
by arguments,
weaker than any on this list.

The strongest standard
goes further and says
that the argument must demonstrate
that the conclusion is true
beyond any conceivable doubt —
that is,
it is not possible for the conclusion to be false
without destroying our worldview.

All sound deductive arguments meet this standard,
in fact,
a strong case could be made
that only sound deductive arguments
meet this standard.

There are also
a whole slew of weaker standards,
such as
the personal standard: I say so;
the anecdotal standard: some other people say so;
the authority standard: some important people say so;
the majority standard: a lot of people say so; and
the everyone but you standard: nearly everyone says so

For most arguments of importance,
standards such as these are all weaker than
even the level 1 standard.

For some conclusions, however,

these may be strong standards of proof.

Consider for example the conclusion,
Michael Holloway talked about standards of proof
in Sunday School class today.

For those of us in this class,
both the personal and anecdotal standards
might yield rather strong arguments.

That's standards of proof.

We'll talk about this more in the coming weeks, too,
[but are there any questions now?](#)

Let's summarize all of this in our ninth valuable verity.

[Next slide]

**Human reasoning may be divided
into two main types:
deductive reasoning,
which is evaluated as to
validity and soundness;
and
inductive reasoning,
which is evaluated as to
strength,
burden of proof,
and standards of proof.**

[Next slide]

Last week I asked you to tell me
what application areas you were most interested
in being discussed in the class.

The results surprised me a little bit,
but made the decision about what to cover,
and also about whether to cover 4 or 5 fairly easy.

My biggest surprise came
at the very top.

The area selected by the most people,
by a fairly wide margin was

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current events.

In second place,
also by a fairly wide margin over the rest
was

[advance slide]

history.

Third place was
a three way tie
among

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apologetics,
literature,
and science.

In sixth place,
but fairly far behind the third place trio
was

[advance slide]

political theory.

And finally,
tied for last place,
were

[advance slide]

mathematics
and theology.

The temptation
to make a joke or two
about you people caring so little
about theology
is difficult to resist,
and
I didn't.

These results may be a good example
of how God sometimes protects us from ourselves.

Theology and mathematics
are probably the two areas
in which I'm most likely
to say things that would annoy many of you.

Abuse of statistics
and unjustified dogmatism
are two of my major hot buttons.

It is interesting that,
with the possible exception of apologetics,
you all chose the areas

for which inductive reasoning is primary,

This will give us plenty of opportunities
to talk further about burden of proof
and standards of proof.

Given this distribution of interests,
here's what I've decided to do.

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We'll cover the five most requested areas,
which are
current events,
history,
apologetics,
literature,
and science,

but
we're not going to do them in that order.

Here's the order I plan to cover them in.

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Next week,
we'll discuss apologetics.
We'll discuss science on the first Sunday in May,
then literature on May 12,
with history on May 19,
and we'll finish the class
talking about current events on May 26.

Are there any questions or comments
about this order,
before I give you your homework for next week?

[Next slide]

Here's your's week's work.

For the apologetic methods you know,
think about these two questions:

One, what are some of the similarities
among the methods?

Two, if you had to come up with
one phrase or sentence
to summarize the major difference
among the methods,
what would it be?

Also, Quote ID challenge #2 continues.

We want to know who said,
“If a picture is worth a thousand words,
then why did God give us His Word,
instead of His drawings?”

There have been two wrong guesses so far.

That’s all for this morning. Thanks.