

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning
Application to Literature and Other Arts
12 May 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.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, copyright by The Lockman Foundation.)

[Title slide up at the beginning]

Today is our 9th meeting,
and our third class
in which we're trying to make applications
of a Christian philosophy of learning
to particular areas of study.

So far,
we've looked at apologetics
and science.

Today we'll look at literature,
and to a lesser degree,
other arts.

As with our discussion about the other two subjects,
our discussion this morning
will be grossly incomplete,
but I hope that you will
find something useful in it
nonetheless.

Before we start talking about literature, however,
let's run quickly through
some of the main elements of the
biblically-sound
comprehensive way of thinking about
acquiring and applying truth
that we're trying to develop.

So far,
we've covered 12 of these
valuable verities.

I've listed these on the next 3 slides:

[Next slide]

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.**

Third, **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.**

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

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

[Next slide]

Sixth, **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,
which comes from 2 Timothy 3:16-17**

Verity number 7 is
**God does not need to reason
from known truth to new truth,
because He knows everything all at once.**

Where as, verity number 8 says:
**Humans must reason
from known truth to new truth,
because we do not know everything all at once.**

Verity 9 talks a bit about human reasoning:
**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]

Verity 10 recognizes that
**Proponents of a particular theory
rarely give accurate descriptions**

**of opposing theories,
no matter how hard
they try to be accurate.**

Valuable verity 11 says that

**All legitimate apologetic methods
affirm these two propositions:**

**(1) Unbelief in the Gospel
stems from sin,
not
from intellectual problems
with the message;**

**(2) Only God,
by his grace,
saves anyone.**

And verity 12,
which we introduced last week
says

**All legitimate scientific inquiry
operates within the
framework and constraints
established by God's revelation
in Scripture.**

We had some very interesting discussion last week
about this, and related, ideas
concerning science.

I'm sure that if I provided the opportunity,
we could continue that discussion
this morning,
but I don't want to spend too much time doing that.

There are two things I do want to do,
however,
before we move on to talk about literature.

First,
I want to reply to a comment
that was made after class,
under the assumption that perhaps
there are more folks with similar thoughts
who didn't say anything to me.

The comment was specifically addressed
at my criticism of many creation scientists,
but the essence was quite general.

It goes like this:
Because we Christians are so frequently criticized

by non-believers,
we ought not be critical of ourselves,
especially about matters —
such as creation science —
about which we're under attack by the world.

This idea may sound nice and pious,
but it is not Scriptural.

In fact it is directly opposed
to Scriptural teaching,
including much of the teaching
we've discussed in this class.

Our God is the God of truth,
and we do His Kingdom no good
when we accept anything less than truth
simply because
members of that Kingdom
are teaching it,
even,
or perhaps especially,
if they are teaching it
in support of the real truth.

God created the world in 7 days
is truth,
but we do no honor to that truth,
or to the Creator,
when we support that truth
with bad science
or bad logic.

As we talked about in a previous class,
Christians have no excuse
for bad science,
or bad logic,
or bad math,
or bad anything else.

We ought never see
scientists who are Christians
use bad methods
to support their pet theories.

We ought never see
Christian lawyers
use bad logic
to convince juries to vote for their clients.

We ought never see
Christian schools
use bad statistics
to suggest that they

are doing a better job
of educating students
than they really are.

Of course,
we will see these things,
and we'll even do it ourselves sometimes,
because we're all fallible, sinful creatures,
but when it happens,
we should not be afraid to point it out
if it is in others,
or admit it and repent of it
if it is in us.

That is,
I think,
the proper attitude for Christians to have.

It is, however,
a very difficult attitude to maintain
in our modern world,
because most people,
even most conservative, reformed people,
are so thoroughly egalitarian
that suggesting that someone
might be doing something less than competently
is looked upon as being an evil
not much less severe
than suggesting that
Noah's flood didn't really happen.

The second thing I want to do
before we turn to literature is
read you a few quotes
from *The Philosophy of Science
and Belief in God*,
by Gordon Clark,
which I think
provides a pretty good
summary of some of the important points
that we made last week.

I'll be taking excerpts from near the beginning
and ending of the book.

“Various scientists and several philosophers
have used scientific conclusions
in an attack against religion.
Some have denied the possibility of miracles
but allowed the existence of God;
others are completely naturalistic
and rule out God altogether.” (p xiii)

“The theologians who reply to these attacks

are under a disadvantage.

When a scientist or a philosopher
argues against religion,
he does not need to know much about religion;
but when a theologian discusses science,
he must know quite a lot.

The scientist can get by if he understands no more
than that Christians believe God to be an incorporeal spirit;
but the theologian is called upon
to discuss space, time, motion,
energy, electrodynamics,
the solar system,
quantum theory,
relativity,
and other assorted items.

There is something else the theologian must know,
and something more important.

In addition to a selection of particular pieces of information,
such as the details just mentioned,
the theologian must have an over-all view
of science as a whole.

He must have a philosophy of science;
that is, he must know what science is. ...
This holds true for the scientist also." (p xiv)

And now from the last paragraph of the book:

"Science is forever incapable
of producing a valid argument
against the existence of God,
the occurrence of miracle,
including a supernatural revelation,
and a life beyond the grave. ...

[Next slide]

And finally this, slightly edited,
which we will make a Quaint Quote,
since we've not had one in a while:

"[Science, including] physics,
with its derivatives chemistry and biology,
is totally,
totally incompetent,
both positively and negatively,
to make
any metaphysical
or theological pronouncement." (p 113).

That's our review,
and a little more about science.

Are there any quick comments or questions?

Let's move now to talking about
how a Christian philosophy of learning
applies to literature and other arts.

[Next slide]

We'll begin this discussion
by talking about a few things
that we're going to take as foundations of our discussion,
but which I'm not going to take any time to prove.

These include the following.

First, God, in the Bible
does not forbid the use of literature,
painting, sculpture, or other arts.
Certain arts,
such as particular literary forms,
are explicitly condoned in the Scripture,
while
others are condoned implicitly,
or by good and necessary consequence.

Second,
the Bible does not limit
the arts to "religious" subjects alone.

And third,
the Bible does not require
that Christians only read literature by Christian authors,
or only view paintings by Christian painters, or

All three of these propositions
have been usually affirmed throughout the ages
by the orthodox church.

If you deny one or more of them,
I'll be happy to talk to you privately,
but we'll conduct the rest of the class
under the assumption that we all agree
with these propositions.

The primary focus of our discussion
will be literature,
but most ideas will apply equally well
to any of the arts,
and you're welcome to mention other arts,
in your comments and questions.

[Next slide]

Remember that what we're talking about in this class
is how to go about acquiring and applying truth.

With that being the case,
if literature is a legitimate topic for us to discuss in the class,
what does that mean about literature?

At the very least,
it means that literature
must have some relationship to truth;
otherwise we probably wouldn't be talking about it.

[Next slide]

In particular,
most literature,
especially good literature,
makes claims about truth.

We could probably have an interesting discussion
about whether the 'most' here
should be an all,
but I'm not sure that this discussion
would be profitable —
as I've said before in other contexts,
'Most' does not preclude 'all'.

It is certainly the case
that the vast majority of literature
(and other arts, too, for that matter),
especially that which is considered 'good'
by a large number of people
makes claims about truth.

The other two subjects we've looked at
(apologetics and science)
also make claims about truth,
but there's something fundamentally
different about the way in which
truth claims are made in those areas
and the way truth claims are made
in literature.

What is this difference?

[Next slide]

Here's the way that I've chosen to say it:

Literature differs from
the other subjects we've studied
(and will study)
in that
many of the truth claims are not explicit.

[Next slide]

The actual truth claims being made
may not appear anywhere in the text,
but must be inferred from the text.

And,
as I'm sure you realize,
for non-verbal arts,
all the truth claims must be inferred,
because there are no
explicitly stated propositions.

Of course,
as I hope we saw in the last couple of weeks,
not all of the truth claims in science or apologetics
are explicitly stated either,
but the intent in those fields
is to try to state truth claims explicitly.
whereas
the intent in literature and other arts
is to exemplify,
rather than to explicitly state,
the truth claims.

There are plenty of examples
in the Scripture when this sort of approach is used,
too.

This basic idea is so important
that I'll put it into
a valuable verity.

[Next slide]

Valuable Verity (V²₁₃)

**Most truth claims in literature
(and all truth claims in non-verbal arts)
are made through exemplification,
not through explicit stating
of the propositions
that are affirmed.**

One fallacy that afflicts some people
is thinking that,
because literature and other arts
often do not make explicit,
propositional claims of truth,
then
no truth claims are being made.

This simply isn't true.

The difference between
explicitly propositional statements of truth,

and the truth claims made in the arts,
lies **only in the method**
of making the claims,
not in the nature of the claims themselves.

This is a very important thing to remember,
because there appears to be a growing tendency
within the conservative, reformed
Christian community
to assert that there is some sort of
fundamental difference —
not just a difference of expression —
between propositional statements of truth,
and the exemplification of these same truths
in literature or the arts,
or even in Biblical examples and symbols.

This idea is a very, very dangerous one,
in my opinion,
and it saddens me greatly to see it
starting to appear in the writings
of some of our friends from Idaho.

A truth claim is a truth claim,
no matter how it is expressed,
but to talk about any truth claim intelligibly,
we have to eventually express it
in propositional form,
which is what God does in the Bible.

Are there any questions
are comments at this point?

Now is a good time to talk about the homework,
which was intended to serve as
an exemplification of the main ideas of today's class.

[Next slide]

Your homework for the week was
to pick a short passage from a favorite literary work,
and list some of
the propositions affirmed
by this passage.

I also said that you can do something similar
for a painting, or other work of art.

Did anyone do this?

It was tough for me to find a passage
short enough that I could read it in class,
and sufficiently self-contained
that the truth claims being made

could possibly be determined in a short time.

I'm not sure that I succeeded,
but we'll see.

The main purpose
of going through this
is to give an example
of some of the things
you might want to do when studying literature.

[Next slide]

This passage is from the novel
Intruder in the Dust,
which was written by William Faulkner
and first published in 1948.

The passage here is taken from pages 190-191 in
the 1st Vintage International edition
(ISBN 0-679-73651-4).

As I read this,
think about what truth claims
Faulkner may be making in this passage,
and also about what claims
he is not making.

It's all *now* you see.

Yesterday wont be over until tomorrow
and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago.
For every Southern boy fourteen years old,
not once,
but whenever he wants it,
there is an instant when it's still not yet two oclock
on that July afternoon in 1863,
the brigades are in position behind the rail fence,
the guns are laid and ready in the woods
and the furled flags are already loosened
to break out
and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets
and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other
looking up the hill
waiting for Longstreet to give the word
and it's all in the balance,
it hasn't happened yet,
it hasn't even begun yet,
it not only hasn't begun yet
but there is still time for it not to begin
against that position and those circumstances
which made more men
than Garnett and Kemper and Armstead and Wilcox
look grave
yet it's going to begin,

we all know that,
we have come too far with too much at stake
and that moment doesn't need even
a fourteen-year-old boy to think
This time.
Maybe this time
with all this much to lose and all this much to gain:
Pennsylvania,
Maryland,
the world,
the golden dome of Washington itself
to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory
the desperate gamble,
the cast made two years ago; ...

[Next slide]

Here's some possible truth claims made in this passage.

As I read each of these,
raise your hand
if you think that Faulkner
was making this claim.

There is no such thing as history.

The Confederacy can still win the battle of Gettysburg.

The battle of Gettysburg
was the Confederacy's last chance to win the Civil War.

There's a golden dome in Washington.

Many people think and talk in long,
grammatically deficient sentences and phrases.

The past has a profound influence on the present.

with the Lord one day is as a thousand years,
and a thousand years as one day,
which comes from 2 Peter 3:8.

Does anyone have some other truth claim
you think is being made?

[Next slide]

I think a main truth claim being made —
and perhaps you have to read the whole novel to see it —
is the second to last one:
The past has a profound influence on the present.

Some of you may not agree with my assessment,
but that's OK,

you can still profit from considering some questions.

[Next slide]

The first question is simply this:
Is this truth claim true?

That is, as we've seen before,
does God assert this proposition?

Or, in symbols,
which will make sense to you
only if you recall the symbols from the 2nd class:
is $p \in \aleph$, (is the proposition an element of aleph)
where $\aleph: \{p \mid A_{\text{God}}(p)\}$
(aleph is the set of all propositions
that God affirms)?

Is it true?

Yes, it is true,
as the Scripture teaches in many places.

Another question to consider is this:

Which is a more effective statement of the truth claim:
the bare proposition,
or Faulkner's prose?

What do you think?

It depends on the purpose of the truth claim.

If the purpose is to summarize it,
or put it into a form for discussion or analysis,
the bare proposition is the more effective statement.

But,
if the purpose is to cause someone to think
about the truth claim,
when they've never really thought about it before,
perhaps,
at least for some people,
Faulkner's prose is the more effective.

I think it probably depends on your personality.

Let me give you a quick example
from the Scripture
of the use of two methods of expressing truth.

[Next slide]

We see the simple statement,

Love your neighbor as yourself,
in many places.

Here's one in Romans 13:9-10:

For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." {10} Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.

Now, technically, this is a command,
and not a propositional statement,
but we can make it into a proposition easily:
"The person who pleases God will
love his neighbor as himself."

For some people,
the simple statement alone is enough.

For others,
a literary exemplification of the statement is needed,
such as Jesus gave in the story of the Good Samaritan.

(Luke 10:29-37) But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

If time permits, say,
We have time for one or two people
to quickly tell us about their homework answers.

[Next slide]

Let's wrap up with three suggestions
that I have for those of you who want to
acquire and apply truth from literature
or other arts.

First,
when you read a book,
or look at a painting,
(or ...)
don't only admire its beauty,
also think about what propositions
it affirms about God and His world.

Be constantly thinking
“What is it saying?”
And “Is it true?”

Second,
Careful and prayerful study of literature
that is filled with non-Biblical truth claims
may be helpful in understanding the culture.

This applies, also, of course,
to other art forms.

Don't over do it,
don't spend the bulk of your time
reading stuff with an anti-Christian world-view,
but don't necessarily ignore it, either.

We need to understand our times,
and often there is no better way to do it
than by understanding some of the current trends
in the arts.

Finally,
If God has given you talents,
use them to express His truths to the world.

Are there any quick questions or comments,
before I close?

[Next slide]

Next week, we'll talk about learning history.

Here's your's week's work.

W₉²: Think about this question:
What is the best approach to
trying to learn the truth
about something that happened in the past?

Also, Quote ID challenge #2 continues,
with the number of wrong answers
now up to 5:
Teddy Roosevelt,
Woody Allen,
David Holloway,
Gordon Clark,
and C. S. Lewis.

That's all for this morning. Thanks.