

Adult Sunday School Class: A Christian Philosophy of Learning

Application to History

19 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]

[Hand out the reading list.]

Today is our 10th meeting —
we have only one more to go after this —
and our 4th class
in which we're trying to make applications
of a Christian philosophy of learning
to particular areas of study.

Our area for today is history.

Once again,
I'll make the disclaimer I've made before:
our discussion this morning
will be grossly incomplete,
but I hope that you will
find something useful in it
nonetheless.

Let's review quickly what we've been doing
in the previous nine classes.

[Next slide]

Recall that our goal is
to articulate a Christian philosophy of learning,
which we defined as
a biblically-sound
comprehensive way of thinking about
acquiring and applying truth.

Although we're not going to quite make
the comprehensive part of this,
we have been discussing various
elements that make up
this way of thinking.

I've called these elements
valuable verities,
and we've seen 13 of them so far,
which I've listed on the following 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.**

Verity 12,
which we introduced two weeks ago says

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

Last week's verity was:

**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.**

That's it for our review.

Does anyone have a question or comment,
before we move on to talk about
history?

[Next slide]

Let's begin with what seems like a simple question:

What is history?

Someone give us an answer to this question.

Here are two of the entries for history
from the Oxford English dictionary,
along with my paraphrases.

Note that I am using OED definitions here.

One of you noticed that I cheated a couple of weeks
ago and used another dictionary
in our discussion about science.

[Next slide]

One entry is this:

“The aggregate of past events in general....”
(or, in other words,
we might say,
History is all that has happened in the past).

Another entry goes is

“The branch of knowledge which deals with
“past events as recorded or otherwise ascertained.”
(or, we might say,
History is all that has happened in the past
that we know about today).

To recognize the difference between these two definitions,
consider whether the following are part of history:

What Mary & Joseph had for dinner
on the day that Jesus was born.

and

The name of the Roman general
who led the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

According to the first definition,

both of these are history,
but the second definition
excludes Mary’s & Joseph’s breakfast
from the domain of history,
because it was not recorded,
and we have no other way of knowing it.

Now,

I’m quite sure
that there are some people,
perhaps even some of you,
who will say something like this:

“This first definition is the Christian one,
while the second one is humanistic,
because it arrogantly makes man the center of things,

by suggesting that if we don't know something,
then it isn't important."

While it is certainly possible
to use the definition in a humanistic way,
it doesn't have to be used that way,
because even those of us who acknowledge
God's control over all things,
and His knowledge of all things,
must admit that the only past events
about which we can talk intelligibly
are those about which we have some details.

In truth,
I think we can reasonably
think about these definitions in the following way.

[Next slide]

Speaking quite loosely,
for God these two definitions are the same,
because he knows all things,
and thus the second definition
is equivalent to the first —
He has "otherwise ascertained" it all.

I say speaking loosely,
because, for God,
there really isn't such a thing
as past events,
because He's not bound by time;
nevertheless,
He knows that we are bound by time,
so He certainly knows what constitute
past events for us.

Speaking loosely, in a similar way,
we can say that for us humans,
as far as learning is concerned,
the two definitions are also the same,
because
the only "aggregate of past events"
about which we can learn
are those that have been
"recorded or otherwise ascertained."

So, again speaking loosely,
for God, the second definition includes the first;
for us, the first definition reduces to the second.

[Are there any questions](#)
[or comments about this?](#)

Let's look now at what the Scripture says about history

[Next slide]

What are some of the things
God tells us in the Bible about history?

Here are three things that I think are important to remember.

I'm going to list them,
along with some supportive Scripture,
but I'm not going to give enough Scripture
to establish the truth of these propositions
beyond any doubt —
that can be done,
but I'm not going to take time
to do it this morning.

First, God tells us in the Scripture that
He is in complete control of all that happens.

(Gen 50:20) "And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

(Jer 1:5) "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

(Eph 1:11) also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

Second, God tells us that
His purposes will be fulfilled.

(Isa 55:11) So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

(Rom 9:10-12) And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; {11} for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, {12} it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER."

Sometimes I don't really think through clearly,
what all these two things mean.

Let me read you a few words
that help make the impact of God's control
over what happens quite vivid.

This deals specifically
with the writing of the Bible.

"When God wished to make a revelation,
at the time of the exodus
or of the captivity,
he did not suddenly look around,
as if caught unprepared,

and wonder what man he could use for that purpose.
We cannot suppose
that he advertised for help
and when Moses and Jeremiah applied,
God constrained them to speak his words.”

“Put it this way:

God from all eternity
decreed to lead the Jews out of slavery
by the hand of Moses.

To this end

he so controlled history
that Moses was born at a given date,
placed in the water to save him from an early death,
found and adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter,
given the best education possible,
driven into the wilderness to learn patience,
and in every event and circumstance
so prepared
that when the time came,
Moses’ mentality and literary style
were the instruments
precisely fitted to speak God’s words.”

(From *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, by Gordon Clark)

The Scripture makes it clear
that God is in control,
working out His purposes.

The Scripture also makes it clear that
We can learn much
from a careful study of history.

Listed here is one passage that supports this proposition.

(1 Cor 10:1-11) For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; {2} and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; {3} and all ate the same spiritual food; {4} and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. {5} Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. {6} Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. {7} And do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." {8} Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. {9} Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. {10} Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. **{11} Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**

Of course,
the way in which the Bible is written supports this too,
because much of the Bible is history itself.

Let’s put this together

into our 14th valuable verity.

[Next slide]

**God is in control of all things,
and He is continually
accomplishing His purposes
in history.**

Are there any questions
or comments before we go on?

Let's move now
to look at some of things
involved in learning about history.

Your homework was to think about
the approaches for trying to learn
the truth
about something that happened in the past.

Rather than discussing this directly right now,
I want to take a few minutes
to do an exercise
with you that I hope will
help illustrate some important concepts
about learning about history.

The exercise goes like this:
I have 4 multiple choice statements.

I'll read through each one with its choices,
then read each choice again.

Raise your hand when I read the choice
that you think best completes the statement.

We'll start with one that simply involves events,
and move on to slightly more complicated ones.

[Next slide]

Here is the first one:

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
A.D. 220 after working on it for nearly 30 years;
A.D. 655 after working on it for nearly 22 years;
A.D. 426 after working on it for nearly 14 years;
A.D. 345 after working on it for less than a year;
A.D. 505 after working on it for nearly 7 years;
your imagination, because he didn't write it.

Now I'll read each one separately.

Raise your hand when I read the one you think is correct.

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
A.D. 220 after working on it for nearly 30 years.

Or

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
A.D. 655 after working on it for nearly 22 years.

Or

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
A.D. 426 after working on it for nearly 14 years.

Or

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
A.D. 345 after working on it for less than a year.

Or

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
A.D. 505 after working on it for nearly 7 years.

Or

Augustine completed *The City of God* in
your imagination, because he didn't write it.

The correct answer is
A.D. 426 after working on it for nearly 14 years.

For the next 3, determining the correct answer
isn't quite as simple.

[Next slide]

Here's the statement and choices:

At the time of the drafting of the Constitution
most men in positions of political power were
Christians who generally held a biblical worldview;
Christians who generally held a non-biblical worldview;
non-Christians who generally held a biblical worldview
(even if they didn't acknowledge it);
non-Christians who generally held a non-biblical worldview.

As I read the choices,
raise your hand when I get to the
one with which you most agree.

At the time of the drafting of the Constitution
most men in positions of political power were

Christians who generally held a biblical worldview.

Or

At the time of the drafting of the Constitution
most men in positions of political power were
Christians who generally held a non-biblical worldview.

Or

At the time of the drafting of the Constitution
most men in positions of political power were
non-Christians who generally held a biblical worldview
(even if they didn't acknowledge it).

Or

At the time of the drafting of the Constitution
most men in positions of political power were
non-Christians who generally held a non-biblical worldview.

If you read most current secular histories,
you'd think the answer is the last one.

If you read most current Christian histories,
you'd think the answer is the first one.

I don't either one is correct.

Let's try another one.

[Next slide]

Here's the choices all at once:

In passing an ordinance of secession from the Union
after the election of Lincoln, the state of South Carolina was
exercising its rights under the terms
in which it ratified the Constitution;
engaging in an act of revolt against the current government,
just as the colonists had done some 80+ years earlier;
engaging in an attempt to circumvent the political process
through an illegal act.

Once again,
raise your hand when I read the one with which you agree most.

In passing an ordinance of secession
from the Union after the election of Lincoln,
the state of South Carolina was
exercising its rights
under the terms in which it ratified the Constitution.

Or

In passing an ordinance of secession
from the Union after the election of Lincoln,
the state of South Carolina was
engaging in an act of revolt
against the current government,
just as the colonists had done some 80+ years earlier.

Or

In passing an ordinance of secession
from the Union after the election of Lincoln,
the state of South Carolina was
engaging in an attempt
to circumvent the political process through an illegal act.

The modern pro-Southern view is
the first one,
while the modern politically correct view
is the last one.

Just out of curiosity,
how many of you would change your answer
if instead of South Carolina's ordinance of session,
we were talking about Virginia's.

Let's do one more.

[Next slide]

The main reason that New England,
which was once a center of biblical orthodoxy,
degenerated into a center of liberal heresy was
most of the true Christians moved elsewhere;
loose standards for church membership
promoted loose thinking and loose living;
belief in the guaranteed regeneration
of covenant children
led to inadequate attention
to the spiritual state of these children;
too many people were concerned with
intellectual matters of theology
instead of
issues of practical Christian living;
too many people were concerned with
issues of practical Christian living
instead of
intellectual matters of theology.

Raise you hand after I read the statement
with which you most agree.

The main reason that New England,
which was once a center of biblical orthodoxy,

degenerated into a center of liberal heresy was
most of the true Christians moved elsewhere.

Or

The main reason that New England,
which was once a center of biblical orthodoxy,
degenerated into a center of liberal heresy was
loose standards for church membership
promoted loose thinking and loose living.

Or

The main reason that New England,
which was once a center of biblical orthodoxy,
degenerated into a center of liberal heresy was
belief in the guaranteed regeneration of covenant children
led to inadequate attention
to the spiritual state of these children.

Or

The main reason that New England,
which was once a center of biblical orthodoxy,
degenerated into a center of liberal heresy was
too many people were concerned
with intellectual matters of theology
instead of issues of practical Christian living.

Or

The main reason that New England,
which was once a center of biblical orthodoxy,
degenerated into a center of liberal heresy was
too many people were concerned
with issues of practical Christian living
instead of intellectual matters of theology.

That's the last one.

I gave these to you,
not because I'm going to
give you definite answers
(except to the first one, I suppose),
but
to illustrate some of the things
that you have to consider
as you study history.

[Next slide]

Think about these four questions,
what's different among them?

There are at least two differences
that I can think of.

[Next slide]

One of these is
the object of historical study.

In these four examples,
we see four different types of objects:
Particular people and events —
 Augustine and when he wrote a certain book;
General culture —
 What the leaders were like
 in the late 1780s;
Right and wrong —
 Was South Carolina right
 to secede from the Union;
and
Causality —
 Why did New England become apostate.

The first of these categories —
particular people and events —
serves as the foundation for the other three,
and is really what constitutes history proper,
as we saw from the definitions earlier.

You can't intelligently talk
about the general culture of some past time period,
or the morality of what was done,
or about what caused something to happen,
without having a good understanding
of the particular events that happened
in the time period about which
you're interested in.

Last week when we talked about literature,
I emphasized the importance
of knowing what someone is saying
before starting to criticize it.

The same principle applies to history, too.

We need to understand what happened,
before we start talking about
why it happened,
or whether it was good.

Too often, it seems,
we fail to do this.

[Any questions or comments?](#)

There's a second difference, too,
illustrated by the four questions I asked.

[Next slide]

The second difference involves
the standard of proof that can be met.

For example,
statements about particular events
and about morality
may reach to level 5 (beyond any doubt),
although often they don't reach that high;

while
statements about long-term causality
and general culture
rarely,
if ever,
reach above level 3
(much more likely than not).

As you study any historical accounts,
you need to keep this in mind.

A good historical account
will carefully distinguish among
the different standards of proof met
by different statements —
probably not using those exact words —
but nevertheless making it clear
that some things can be known
with more certainty than others.

Not doing so, however,
is a frequent shortcoming
of many history books,
especially text books.

These books often give the impression
for example,
that we can be just as certain that
"Gettysburg was the turning point of the Civil War"
as we can be that
"The Army of Northern Virginia
lost the battle of Gettysburg."

The latter is certain beyond any reasonable doubt,
but the former is, at best,
only slightly more likely true than false,
and I believe it is actually false.

The real turning point of the Civil War
was Fort Sumter.

Any questions before I give you
some closing suggestions?

[Next slide]

As before,
I have three suggestions to consider
when you are trying to learn about history.

First,
**Spend the majority of your time
studying the history
of “the city of God”
not of “the city of man.”**

That is,
the history of God’s people
should be more important to you,
and should occupy more of your time,
than the history of the unregenerate.

Now, as the parable of tares illustrates,
which Pete preached about recently,
very often these two cities are so closely
intertwined that you don’t even
know who inhabits what city.

Nevertheless,
the general principle of concentrating
on the visible people of God
seems sound.

Second,
**To the extent possible,
let primary sources be your primary sources.**

That is,
read original documents,
not just commentaries on them,
or excerpts from them.

For example,
If you’re interested
in the ratification of the Constitution,
don’t just read books that talk about it,
but read the Federalist Papers,
and the writings of the Anti-Federalists,
Read the collections of the contemporary
reports of the debates
within the state legislatures.

Finally,
Use the study of history

to help you discover some of your blind spots.

When you study history,
especially when you read the primary sources,
you're likely to see some of the areas
in which your thinking has been clouded
by the current age.

C. S. Lewis wrote about this
in a forward to a translation
of Athanasius' "On the Incarnation":

"Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook---even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we would now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united---united with each other and against earlier and later ages---by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century---the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how *could* they have thought that?"---lies where we have never suspected it.... None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction."

Is there anything else
that someone wants to add?

That's it for history.

[Next slide]

Next week will be our last class.

We'll talk about current events.

I don't have any homework for you for this week.

I will remind you that Quote ID challenge #2 continues,
with the number of wrong answers
now up to 7:
Teddy Roosevelt,
Woody Allen,
David Holloway,
Gordon Clark,
C. S. Lewis.
Yogi Berra,

and J.R.R. Tolkien

That's all for this morning. Thanks.