

# Epistemic Circularity, Christian Virtue, and Truth

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This paper aims to show that human beings obtain truth<sup>1</sup> by means of a process of epistemological circularity that is virtuous. This means that the way to truth is unclear to those who approach it without Christian virtue. The key to the process of coming to know<sup>2</sup> the truth is submission. As Pascal put it, we must avoid two extremes in order to define Christian faith: “**to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason**” (*Pensees* 183). Accordingly, he gives a marvelously concise definition of Christianity, “**Submission and the use of reason that is what makes true Christianity**” (Ibid. 167). What then is involved in a submissive use of reason in coming to know the truth? To answer this question we will explain the notion of epistemic circularity, discuss some key passages of Scripture and apply the findings.

## 1A. The notion of epistemic circularity

Epistemic circularity refers to the Christian claim that in order for human beings to know God or to know anything that God has created, they must submit themselves to God rejecting autonomy and embracing theonomy.<sup>3</sup> This needs clarification in the following four ways. 1) First, to access truth man must submit to what God has revealed through His creation and now through Scripture because of the fall. 2) This means that knowledge is the possession of all people because God revealed it to them in such a way that they know Him in knowing His world (Ps. 19.1-6). The foundation of coming to a knowledge of the truth is the fact that knowledge has *already been granted*; man must already know (and *he does in fact already know*) in order to grow in knowledge by data gathering and rational extrapolation. 3) However, the knowledge of God that people possess in knowing His creation is darkened because of the sin of attempted autonomy, rebellion, and insubordination (they are “**darkened in their understanding**,” Eph. 4.18). What they know of the world and thus of God is suppressed (Rom. 1.18). What they know because of God’s revelation granting them knowledge (knowledge that they clearly perceive, Rom. 1.20), they do not understand because they have exchanged the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1.23). What they know is now under a cloud of utter darkness. 4) Therefore, man must submit to what he knows but denies if he is going to know *anything* in truth. Before the fall, knowledge of the world and of God (of God through the world, of the world in knowing God) was unencumbered by insubordination. Since the fall, insubordination blocks man’s knowledge of the world and of God through His creation.

Consequently, the supposed advance into the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3.5) plunged the human family into a radical ignorance. It is so radical that fallen man can know *nothing* in truth without submission to the voice of God. Does this mean that the natural man does not understand that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? A simple answer that gets to the heart of this paper is that things stack up quite differently for believer and unbeliever regarding this formula. The Christian has true knowledge of this equation and he is justified in believing it while the non-Christian does not have true knowledge of it, and he is not justified in believing it.

## 2A. The rich biblical meaning of knowledge

We will now cover the rich biblical meaning of knowledge in five points.

### 1B. Point one: Understanding nothing and deprived of the truth

The example of a false teacher presents a case in point regarding knowledge of the truth that helps us understand epistemic circularity.

**If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness,** <sup>4</sup> **he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing** (μηδὲν ἐπιστάμενος). He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, <sup>5</sup> and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain (1 Tim.6.3-5).

With all that he knows and teaches, remarkably, he “understands nothing” (he knows nothing; he is epistemologically empty). These people (false teachers and their disciples) are in epistemological darkness because of disobedience to the sound words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Together with their disciples, they are “depraved in mind” and “deprived of the truth.” This frame of mind *affects all their thoughts*; the darkness therefore pertains to all perceptions and cogitations.

### **2B. Point two: the assertion of human autonomy**

The mindset in view in Colossians 2 involves the pursuit of *empty* wisdom in a way that is “not according to Christ” (v. 8). In view is the standard of a philosophy (v. 8) that advances its claims to truth by plausible but deceitful arguments (v. 4). The standard on which this philosophy grounds itself is twofold: “the traditions of men” and “the elementary principles of this world.” In these two phrases, we have man-centeredness not God-centeredness and creature-centeredness instead of Creator-centeredness respectively. In that these “do not depend on Christ,” they involve a principle of autonomy and self-sufficiency. Therefore, the mindset that empties “wisdom” of its content is the assertion of, and commitment to, human autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

### **3B. Point three: meaningless noises that amount to nothing**

From 1 Corinthians 13.1-2, we derive a precondition for intelligible communication between human beings and between human beings and God: love (i.e. Christian virtue). Without love, I am a clanging cymbal or a noisy gong and I am nothing. Speech (v.1) and knowledge (v.2) without love are nothing more than meaningless noises that amount to nothing.

This applies to all levels of speech and thought from the mechanic to the philosopher. A clanging makes no sense. The sound produced is meaningless. The understanding that lies behind “communication” is so far from truth and knowledge that it shows that the personal “communicator” *is* nothing. The things known, the knower, and the attempted communication of knowledge are all nothing; they are all meaningless.

Therefore, the knowledge I possess is in a profound sense not truly knowledge. It is not true and it fails to attain to truth. We have to call it false knowledge, distorted knowledge, or relative knowledge. Paul categorically classifies knowledge without love as something unintelligible.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, speech that expresses understanding and understanding that comes to expression in speech are together unintelligible because they both reveal what I am without love. This is not simply exaggeration. Paul is making a far-reaching claim about knowing the truth.<sup>6</sup> *We know nothing without knowing God in knowing it (Rom. 1.18, “what can be known about God is made plain...because God has shown it to them...clearly...in the things that have been made”).* Therefore, intellectual darkness, when it occurs, must cover the entire realm of truth. Thus, it is like being physically blind, deaf, and mute.<sup>7</sup> We can see, hear, and speak plenty of evil but no truth.

Again, consider the epistemic circularity that is present here. In all acts of coming to know, man confronts the face of God and *he in fact hears* the voice of God. He is obligated to acknowledge that this is the case and He is to go about the learning process in that mindset *or he misses the point of it all*. If he denies (neglects, does not acknowledge) the voice of God that he hears clearly in created factuality, then his “knowledge” is cast into utter darkness. He misstates every fact; every premise of every argument is a false premise.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4B. Point four: great epistemological darkness (Mat. 6.22-23)**

Jesus states that if the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness (Mat. 6.23). The consequence of the unloving heart (the bad heart illustrated by the bad eye) is that the inner man lives in extreme darkness like the darkness of a blind person. This profound blindness extends farther than physical blindness. A person could be physically blind but have a good eye of the heart. In that case, he is not in great darkness even though the body, the person, may have difficulty functioning in a world of unseen objects.

Because Jesus speaks of the deepest seat of perception and function, the darkness is total. The person with a bad (unloving) heart can see nothing. It is not the case that he can see the sunrise and sunset but not see spiritual things. He cannot see anything. He is in total darkness!<sup>9</sup> This is so because the darkness is at the deepest center of the inner person and it is so because the sunrise and sunset are spiritual things no less than matters of the kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

The only way out of this darkness is by making the choice of love for God above all earthly things (Mat. 6.24, “no one can serve two masters, for...he will hate the one and love the other”).<sup>11</sup> Only when there is love for God can we understand (know) both earthly and heavenly things.<sup>12</sup>

#### **5B. Point five: the inability to understand**

We must take 1 Corinthians 2.14 (“the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit because they are spiritually discerned”) as a reference to more than a narrow section of reality, the spiritual section. This is so because “the things of the Spirit” refer to the wisdom, thoughts and mind of God (2.7, 11, 16) related to “what God has prepared for those who love him” (2.9)<sup>13</sup> and to “all things” (2.15). We cannot restrict the reference to “all things” to all *spiritual* things because the things prepared for those who love God include the resurrection of the *body* associated with the placing of *all things* in subjection under Christ (1 Cor. 15.20-28).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, man knows nothing in a way that meets the test of truth. His ignorance is astounding.<sup>15</sup> It is total.

#### **3A. The abnormality of the knowing subject**

Our perceiving faculties are afflicted with dysesthesia.<sup>16</sup> The abnormality involves the condition that everything is yellow to the jaundiced eye. If the world out there to behold is not yellow tinted but if the lenses of the eyes are yellow tinted, then the beholder views everything incorrectly and the knowledge gained will be distorted and false *at every point*.<sup>17</sup>

Picture a three dimensional object with one side representing empirical knowledge (we “know” objects and see them there in the box) another side representing rational knowledge (we “know” premises and conclusions also in the box) and the third side representing the rich biblical meaning of knowledge (what we know in a the rich biblical sense of knowing). If we turn the object toward us so we can only view the third side, then what we see in the box is black; *we cannot see anything in the box*. From this angle, what we know by sense perception in some combination with reason is nothing more than epistemological blackness. All that we know is fool’s gold. The view we have of the facts of science and the systems of thought into which we put them are such that we understand nothing, we are nothing, our speaking is meaningless, and we gain nothing by means of these facts.

This means that there is no justification for anything the natural man believes. His claim to empirical observation as the “be all and end all” of knowledge is untrue. His claim that reasoning man is the measure of all truth and His use of both of these ways of knowing in one conglomeration or another expresses the empty wisdom of autonomy that leads away from truth.<sup>18</sup>

If we deny or simply do not acknowledge the Creator when we experience the beauty of a leaf or the radiance of a sunset, then *we do not understand the communication*. We miss the point. *We do not know what we experience and know*. We cannot help but “know” the things that

we perceive with our eyes like a sunset. However, if we see but do not understand then we know in some sense and we do not know in another sense. The latter is the most profound and pertains to the rich biblical notion of knowing. Then a non-Christian Roger Federer, though number one in the world of men's tennis, does not understand tennis; he does not know what he is doing.

If we grant this perspective as an ultimate perspective that is biblical, then we ask this question, "What difference does it make in the real world?" Because of common grace and the fact of a remnant image of God in fallen man, Christian and non-Christian tennis playing may overlap in nature or quality and there may be areas of overlap in the knowledge that each player has of the game. Obviously, the non-Christian may come to an "understanding" of the game narrowly conceived that excels Christian understanding.<sup>19</sup>

That said, we must think broadly and not narrowly about the game of tennis. Whether acknowledged or not, the one who takes up the game takes up a sacred task. Playing tennis is not secular in contrast to something sacred like reading Scripture. All the facts that a tennis player learns are indirect words of a message from God to His image bearer. These words share God's thoughts with man so that man can think God's thoughts after Him. This sharing is an invitation to fellowship with God (Ps. 19). The world where man plays is the kingdom of God (the field is the kingdom, Mat. 13) whether we are thinking of a country, city, or stadium. The principles of gravity, inertia, friction, and geometry that govern the activity of all participants are nuances of God's wisdom. We grapple with God's wisdom when we study the relationship of string tension to weather conditions, court surface, and ball speed.

How then can someone have wise-wisdom or true knowledge of tennis if they do not acknowledge God's kingdom and speech? How can they know the game if they do not know (acknowledge what they know but suppress) that tennis *is* an expression of divine speech that calls to fellowship with God and obedience to Him? All of the principles, details, and nuances of factuality that make up the game of tennis are words in a message from the Creator to His creatures. They are components of communication that are there for our understanding. If we do not receive the communication for what it is and use it in obedience to the Speaker, then we do not understand it; we lack true knowledge. In that case, we do not understand the game of tennis even if we have mastered it. The number one tennis player does remarkable things *in the dark*. This happens because though fallen he is still the image of God.

What are the implications of this view of knowledge? Could I talk like this if I were to play against Federer at Wimbledon? Could I look across the court and say, "Roger, you do not know the game of tennis, you serve and volley in "tennis-ological" (i.e. epistemological) darkness"? The answer is unquestionably yes.

The answer is yes because if there is true knowledge of tennis, then there will be enjoyment, and every bit of enjoyment will lead to thanksgiving to the triune God. Every marvel and every challenge will lead to a sense of awe at the wisdom of God and it will encourage praise to the God of such wisdom. Experiencing tennis (or biology, or mechanical engineering) will mean experiencing an invitation from the Lord to fellowship with Him. The tennis player will acknowledge God's voice and submit to His will while playing the game. He will seek to please the Lord in the attitude with which he plays and in the use to which he puts all his earnings. Controversially perhaps,<sup>20</sup> he will not do his tennis work on Sunday unless he is assured by His risen Sabbath king that such work is fitting on the Sunday-Sabbath.<sup>21</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

How do we put these things to work in the academy? How do we put them to work in the factory? The full answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper but we can at least note some very important principles with which to begin.

1) Caution regarding autonomy: as disciples of the risen Lord, we must recognize the fact of epistemic circularity, admit it, work with it, and work from it in our view of knowledge. Among other things, this means that it is impossible for those who cannot submit themselves to the law and authority of God (Rom. 8.7) to attain justification for any belief they may hold. They fail to have justification for belief in God that they suppress in their darkness, but, astonishingly, they also fail to have justification *for any belief about any fact*.

Both technical and non-technical Christian philosophy should travel down this road. If we are not careful regarding our use of the unbeliever's principle of autonomy, we ask to be deceived thinking perhaps that we are rationally equipped and capable to hold our ground (there is danger here of remnant autonomy and pride). This pathway is through a minefield and the only way of escape from a harmful captivity is by a disciplined mindset of devoted dependence on Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Accordingly, we do unbelievers no good if we encourage them down the path of their presumed independence from God. In this connection, it is wrong to give ground to the unbeliever's claim of autonomy while trying to call him to repentance. This is a subtle point when we try to communicate to unbelievers in a way that not only communicates but also allows us to go on their turf and expose their failures and need of Christ. Surely, we have to "communicate" everyday with those outside the household of faith, and surely, it is legitimate to destroy arguments in order to bring all thoughts captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10.5).

However, Paul warns of the deception of philosophy defined, permeated by, the principle of autonomy.<sup>23</sup> We must not cater to the assertion of autonomy by using reason *as the final court of appeal* by which to judge the truth of God clearly displayed in creation and in Scripture. We must be alert to the smoke screen that requires proof that God speaks clearly in creation and Scripture (the smoke masks untruth in a subtle and deceptive way).

If we do cater to asserted autonomy, are we not throwing pearls to swine? We are to cast the gospel net everywhere in the marketplace and among the nations, but as we do so, we must be on guard against throwing the treasures of the gospel beneath trampling feet. For all of this we need wisdom, the kind that God gives in answer to prayer (James 1.5).

2) Insight into true knowledge: the natural man's reasoning from premises to conclusions only gives him a form of knowledge when measured against the rich biblical meaning of knowledge. The basis here is the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing anything. The world of facts makes up the indirect speech of God. Man encounters, hears, and experiences factuality under the authority of God. It is inescapably personal. Therefore, knowing something is inseparable from hearing and harkening to the voice of God. To know a fact is to acknowledge that it is a word from God. Understanding it means submitting to God's authority. To know it is to receive it from God with reverence. Hearing the voice of God in every fact requires thankfulness, elicits praise, and points the way to obedient service.

Thus, man must go where the facts take him. He must receive the data of sense in awe of the Creator, praise God for His marvelous wisdom that is displayed in the objects of the created world, work with the facts out of a sense of love for God, and use all that he learns to glorify God. Unless he uses his data collecting faculties and his extrapolating capacity of reason with the motive of love, according to the standard of God's speech, and for the glory of God (in word, with submission) then all his "knowledge" is a form of knowledge that he continues to "learn" without arriving at the truth. Then all his understanding is *misunderstanding*.<sup>24</sup>

3) Light in the darkness: because the believer and the nonbeliever live in different cognitive universes, the only hope for fallen man, whether intellectually inclined or intellectually

disinclined, is the creative work of God that causes the light of the gospel to shine in the heart (2 Cor. 4.6). It is not that we say “yes” to the risen Lord to receive a new birth. Instead, we must be born from above in order to say “yes” to Christ. In order for those who hate the light (Jn. 3.20) to embrace it with love (to receive it, Jn. 1.12) as is required for true knowledge, they must be “born of God” (Jn. 1.13). Being born of God explains how those who cannot understand the kingdom of God (Jn. 3.3) are able to receive Christ and believe in His name (Jn. 1.12). Ultimately, it is by grace through the proclamation of the gospel that the Spirit brings rebels to a place of submission. He breaks the vicious circle of asserted autonomy, changes hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, and sets prisoners free from the bondage of sin and epistemological darkness. Then, having been set free, they make the choice of love for God above all earthly things and the process of growth in true knowledge begins.

Restoration must address deaf ears, blind eyes, and mute tongues.<sup>25</sup> The remedy is a sovereign miracle that restores eyes, ears, and tongues. The implication for our work of speaking the truth in love (Eph. 4.15) and speaking what we know (Jn. 3.11) is that we throw out a lifeline to people perishing in the sea of fallen humanity. Have they drowned or are they drowning? Are they blind or going blind? Are they deaf or growing deaf? Are they mute or becoming mute? The answer is that we must learn how to cast the lifeline to people who in fact are blind, deaf, mute, and dead. As we do so, we depend on the surgical procedure that the Holy Spirit performs by the sword of Scripture. When He does His effectual work, epistemological darkness becomes epistemological enlightenment. Knowing this grace is cause for thanksgiving beyond measure.

To the risen Lord Jesus be the glory now and forevermore. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Truth refers to the actual state of affairs with regard to God and the world (all He created and controls). Thus, it refers to what is in fact the case regarding all that exists in the Creator/creature distinction and relationship. It is the actual state of affairs, as God knows them in perfect self-knowledge and perfect knowledge of all that He created and controls. How does this fit with Jesus as the truth? He embodies and reveals in human terms (as a human being with complete humanity being fully God and fully man) the truth (the metaphysical state of affairs) for human knowledge regarding God, the world, and His saving relationship to the now fallen world.

<sup>2</sup> Knowledge refers to knowing the truth or understanding the actual state of affairs in the world created by God that operates under His rule and is dependent on Him. Thus, to have true knowledge or knowledge of the truth means a person understands the real world (the real world of C/c) without error or contradiction. On one hand, it means there is conformity to what God knows is the truth about Himself and all things. On the other hand, this understanding is coherent in accord with God’s coherent understanding of all things. Of course, it is incomplete knowledge of what God knows; hence, the fact that coming to know is a process. Although man is not omniscient, he still may know things truly though not exhaustively. However, this is only a preliminary definition of knowledge, one that does not express the rich biblical meaning of knowledge. These ingredients are necessary but not sufficient; one more ingredient is required and defended in this paper, namely, submission to God speaking in creation and Scripture.

<sup>3</sup> Autonomy is a term that designates the claim or practice of independence from God in some way. It is claiming or functioning epistemologically in some way independent of Christ. It is man-centered or world-centered regarding the standard of truth. In various ways, this outlook denies God’s voice in creation and Scripture. Theonomy contrasts with autonomy. It refers to acknowledgement of God’s word in creation and Scripture as the ultimate standard of truth and to the refusal to operate in any way independent of Christ in the pursuit of truth. Operating according to this standard is teleological; it is a goal of a restored image-bearer that is a sinner-saint. The consequence of autonomy is deception and the consequence of theonomy, along with avoiding deception, is deep-rooted faith.

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<sup>4</sup> This is the ultimate presupposition of the non-Christian worldview. It governs all the mind grasps, it deceives, and it deprives of truth in such a radical way that those who commit themselves to the autonomy of man know nothing (especially in their reasoning or arguing, Col. 2. 4).

<sup>5</sup> Scripture calls this unintelligible something knowledge at the same time that it refers to it as meaninglessness and nothingness. Obviously, both ideas are here since that which is meaningless is something people can come to understand (namely, all mysteries and all knowledge). Granted, there is a rhetorical point in speaking about *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge but this is a powerful *a fortiori*. It argues that what pertains to all knowledge must be the case with regard to any knowledge that anyone may possess. Otherwise, the point Paul is making would have no relevance to anyone because everyone must admit to having quantitatively imperfect knowledge. The point is that if I were to grasp all these things with my mind but do so without love then this intellectual grasping would not only still fall short of knowledge it would also be something marked by unintelligibility. The force of this claim stands despite the fact that the comparison in verse one is between meaninglessness and speech and not between meaningless and understanding or knowledge. Two points show why this is the case. First, speech is the communication of thought or understanding. It is difficult to take Paul here as referring to elevated (angelic) speech in some kind of disjunction from analogously elevated (universal) understanding. Second, and most important, the meaninglessness of speech is parallel with the nothingness of understanding because they both apply to what "I am." Therefore, speech that expresses understanding and understanding that comes to expression in speech are together unintelligible because they both reveal what I am without love.

<sup>6</sup> Why call this a case in point of epistemic circularity? We can call this a case in point of epistemic circularity because the precise knowledge in view does not come by reasoning from premises to conclusions. It does not even come by experience through our sense perceiving faculties though there is no exclusion here of reason or experience from attaining and growing in knowledge. Our rational and empirical faculties are necessary for knowledge but they are not sufficient. The addition of love to our rational and empirical faculties is what secures sufficiency for knowledge. Ultimately, the love in view is love for God and our fellowman that manifests the love of God "shed abroad in our hearts." Our love has its cause in His love for us: we love Him because He first loved us. Without love for God (that overflows to others), all that we "know" and attempt to communicate is unintelligible, we understand nothing (1 Tim. 6.3), we are in epistemological darkness, utter darkness, and we have love for an earthly master: the autonomy and self-sufficiency of reason and experience.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 13, 1-2 on the connection between meaningless thoughts and meaningless speech; mute simply goes a step further for not only are the sounds meaningless, there is no sound in the first place. Are we to restrict the impact of these perception-faculty-analogies to spiritual things? More precisely, should we restrict the impact of these analogies to a spiritual dimension of metaphysics in contrast to a physical dimension of metaphysics? Are we to divide the knowledge of metaphysical reality between knowledge of the Creator and knowledge of His creation? The answer to all of these questions is no because every created fact is a communication from God. God controls every fact. All of history is the unfolding of His plan. Every event is a providentially governed stage in the realization of God's plan. In a word, all that God created and controls is theology. Theology is literally God's speech. He speaks in Scripture and in creation. Therefore, there is an inseparable connection between metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. The world is God's speech. That is what it is metaphysically. The content of knowledge in all fields of study is therefore God's speech; thus, every epistemological endeavor is inescapably theological. God speaks with authority, so, man ought to receive all that he studies in any science for the glory of God (in humble submission with awe, thanksgiving, praise, and love).

<sup>8</sup> What then is necessary and sufficient for true knowledge? We must speak of the condition for true knowledge *in the rich biblical sense*. This transcends the various versions of JTB, justified true belief. Biblically speaking, one condition is both necessary and sufficient for true knowledge on the part of the rational image bearer of God. It is humble submission to the voice of God (unpacked as awe, praise, thanksgiving) regarding any fact; that is, it is humble submission of the perceiving/reasoning image

bearer. Presupposed are the metaphysical realities present by God's creative work that include man's God-given faculties for perceiving, experiencing, and reflecting on God's voice in creation and Scripture. However we may state these presuppositions (are they conditions? etc.), that which is necessary and sufficient for human knowledge of a fact is a humble heart and reasoning self that submits to that fact as the language of God, the voice of God, and a communication from God. Man's obligation is to receive this communication from God in submission to His authority and to use it in love for the glory of God.

<sup>9</sup> This is a divine indictment and it has epistemological implications though it may be difficult to formulate clearly. The natural man mythicizes and he does so foolishly and responsibly, cf. Thieliicke's discussion of how modern man's Cartesian and Kantian self-understanding (thinking of himself autonomously) yields ethical mythicizing in the illusion of "I ought therefore I can." Thus he says, "The reality of man, e.g., his ethical reality, cannot be a systematic point of contact because it is a perverted and mythicized reality rather than the true one, because it is an illusion, and because it always isolates man. Only when God's prior reality is first disclosed to man does he learn to know his own reality," *The Evangelical Faith: Prolegomena, The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought-forms*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 144.

<sup>10</sup> Nicodemus (Jn. 3), for example, cannot understand earthly things (Jn. 3.12), which means that he cannot see (ὄραω, v. 3), believe (πιστεύω, vs. 12, 15), understand (γινώσκω, v.10), receive (λαμβάνω, v. 11), come to (ἔρχομαι, v. 20), speak (λαλέω, v. 11), bear witness to (μαρτυρέω, v. 11) know (οἶδα, vs. 8, 11) and do (ποιέω, v. 21). What is it that Nicodemus cannot understand? He cannot understand-believe-receive-speak the kingdom (v. 3), heavenly things (v. 12), Christ (vs. 15, 18), the name of the only Son of God (v. 18), light (vs. 20-21), what is true (v. 21), and earthly things (v. 12). Evidently, the things of the kingdom or "spiritual" things include both earthly and heavenly things; included are light and truth, which in a word means that knowledge is in view, particularly the knowledge of God (Jn. 1.1-18). Nicodemus does not understand birth and the blowing of the wind (vs. 4-8). He does not understand the lesser (the less difficult to grasp, the earthly) so *a fortiori* how much more difficult must it be for him to understand that which is greater (more difficult to grasp, the heavenly). It is so difficult that it is impossible for he is in darkness. He cannot see unless God gives him eyes to see by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit who works "where he will" (Jn. 3.8). Interestingly, Christ enlightens all fallen sinners (Jn. 1.9) but no one knows Him (1.10) or receives Him (1.11). Thus, though there is an enlightenment granted to all people, they are in darkness and cannot know either earthly or heavenly things. This text is parallel to Romans 1. They are in total epistemological darkness and "how great is the darkness!" (Mat. 6.23)

<sup>11</sup> There can be no sacred-secular compartmentalizing of human life. Money cannot be master; man must subordinate money to God and all it represents regarding our possessions that include our very bodies. We must sell all that we have and subordinate it to the kingdom (Mat. 13.44).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the *a fortiori* in Jn. 3.12.

<sup>13</sup> Note the place of love for God in relation to understanding His thoughts or thinking His thoughts after Him.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, there is an emphasis on matters of redemption because without redemption, there is no release from epistemological darkness, but clearly, the darkness pertains to the center of human existence at the depth of man's being.

<sup>15</sup> On the darkened condition indicated by Romans 1.21, Gaffin says insightfully, "The full impact of 'their foolish heart was darkened' (v. 21) must not be missed. 'Heart' bring the individual into view as a totality, considered from the center, the self as a whole, with all its capacities, purposefully directed, especially as a religious being (to or away from God). 'Heart' captures the self in its integrity or, we may say, unbelievers in their 'broken wholeness.' The heart, Paul says, is 'without understanding' – not just one aspect of the unbeliever but every function; and the attendant circumstance is darkness – total darkness, cognitive and otherwise...Unbelievers do know – they know God – and, within the parameters of unbelief, there are no categories or distinctions in terms of which that is not true; they know completely, that is, they know from the heart. But this knowledge in its actual possession is always

confused, inevitably unstable. To use Paul's language, it is in every respect 'futile'; it can serve no useful, constructive epistemological purpose – either in understanding God or, in that light (or better, that darkness), ourselves and the rest of the creation (“Some epistemological reflections on 1 Cor 2.6-16,” *WTJ*, Spring 1995, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Oliphant, “Epistemology and Christian Belief,” *WTJ*, Spring 2001, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Is this a peculiarly Christian theory of truth? Craig and Moreland (*Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 131) deny such a view. A peculiarly Christian theory of truth is “one that is used only in the Bible and not elsewhere.” The Bible does not present things in the technical vocabulary of philosophy. Must a “neutral” or common definition of truth govern the Christian understanding of it? Thus, they claim that if there were a peculiar theory then “two disastrous implications would follow.”

1) Claims about biblical doctrines would be equivocal in comparison with everyday assertions of truth. What does this mean? It means that truth would have one meaning for Christians and another for non-Christians.

Granted, “that is a tennis ball” conveys the same truth, narrowly conceived, for the Christian and the non-Christian. However, if the truth regarding all factuality is that every fact is God's speech (that is what it is metaphysically; that is what it is in truth) then a Christian view of truth is radically different from the non-Christian view of truth. The non-Christian begins every argument with premises that are not true because He presupposes that this fact and that fact are not indirect, clear and self-evident words from God (even if God is not explicitly denied, if they claim to start with “neutral” facts then they start with autonomous facts that imply the denial of God).

2) Craig and Moreland also assert that Christianity's claim to be true would be circular or system-dependent and, therefore, trivial. In reply, if factuality is God's speech then it is that for all persons, Christian or non-Christian. Furthermore, are not all claims system-dependent? We cannot understand them without the context of the system upon which they depend for what they claim to mean. It seems that circularity is inescapable and therefore not trivial or no claim reaches beyond the trivial.

This leads to comments contrary to Moreland and Craig on the centrality of philosophy in forming an integrated worldview (Ibid. 21), where they teach that drawing lines of demarcation between “science and theology, are largely philosophical matters” (22). However, the philosophical is the study of and application of God's speech that we properly understand by giving priority to God's speech in Scripture. Therefore, a Scriptural grasp of philosophy, of the theology of philosophy or of philosophy as theology rooted in creation and Scripture (with priority given to Scripture) must govern the lines of demarcation between different fields of study since they all are theological as divine speech. This does not mean that biblical teaching furnishes all the contents of biology or philosophy or any science. It furnishes principles that govern these disciplines and without which the picture will be falsified (cf. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 26). In this discussion, we have an example regarding the concern of this paper. For the understanding of epistemology and a general theology of all sciences, the biblical idea of knowledge must govern our thinking. How do human beings attain truth, or come to knowledge of the truth? It is by a virtuous epistemic circularity. This is not begging the question in an argument in which the premise depends on the conclusion (vicious circularity). It is *epistemic* circularity, which means that we obtain knowledge by submitting to God's voice in creation and Scripture, by acknowledging what is *already* known but suppressed. For this to come about for fallen sinners there must be a definitive renewal and progressive renewal; the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit secures both forms of renewal. Furthermore, Christian growth in knowledge involves the responsibility defined by the cluster of graces of open-minded humility and the submission of our reasoning selves to Scriptural paradoxes. Submission to the authoritative speech of God in *both* creation and Scripture is fundamental in the Christian pursuit of excellence in all the sciences including theology. Finally, we must not allow the lines of demarcation between the disciplines nor their governing principles to be permeated by or even tainted by the principle of asserted human autonomy.

<sup>18</sup> If all factuality is clear communication from God to His image bearer, then we can speak analogously of its spelling (its morphology) or its intonation and sound. That is, how we spell words is central in their

use as devices of communication. How words are pronounced and the intonations that go with them are hints, clues, and indicators of meaning. In the indirect speech of God in the created and divinely controlled factuality, there are devices of communication that serve as hints, clues, and indicators of meaning. For example, the “spelling” of a leaf includes the “morphological” device of color. What we perceive as the color of a leaf (or any object by a healthy eye in natural sunlight without obstacles) is part of the communication given by God to man. Color enables us to identify the object, to distinguish it from other objects, and to associate it with other objects. It enables us to hear the speaker and to grasp His message. The color of a leaf helps us see it as a distinct object of beauty. We have the God-given capacity to experience the beauty of the object and to enjoy it as a reflection of God’s delight in it as a reflection of His glory. As Chesterton put it, the color of a leaf in the fall or a flower in the spring is a matter of choice, God’s choice. It is as the image of God that we cannot deny the delights of the created order in one way or another despite our fallenness. Therefore, in one sense we may note that color is an experience in the knowing subject but this does not imply that the object is not red, but that part of the identity of the object is its redness because the identity of the object is a matter of communication from God. The Creator has fixed the identity of this object by this color when an image bearer with healthy eyes sees it in natural light. Redness is part of what the object is *as a communication from the Creator* (even if the experience of redness is in the receiving subject and even if we agreed that redness does not pertain to the object itself in a “scientific” sense regarding the refraction of light).

<sup>19</sup> The idea of knowledge “narrowly conceived” is an attempt to formulate the difficult fact that the natural man knows and does not know at the same time in that he suppresses what he knows. Suppressed knowledge leads to the radically great darkness of which Jesus spoke (Mat. 6.23). The natural man’s view of the world is mythical much like a science fiction story. Thus, his view of every fact is incorrect. Still, we can understand what he means by a chair that walks and talks, or by a being with four eyes and three heads. We understand by reference to the real world that we both see as image bearers of God but that he misunderstands by his suppression of the truth. In this way, we can understand the reference made by the natural man to  $2 + 2 = 4$  even though he is not justified in believing it while we are justified in believing it. Consider the illustration of someone who thinks the oak tree in his yard does not really exist and who reasons that if he is deceived then it does not exist and he is deceived. We can understand his enthymatic argument, and we know what the words “oak tree” mean. Similarly, all facts are indirect words from God that the natural man identifies and reasons with in a radically abnormal way. When he speaks about his empirical data and his reasoning with that data, we can understand him because as image bearers all people see and hear the communication of God in the created order. For more illustrations see Oliphant, “Epistemology and Christian Belief,” *WTJ*, Spring 2001, 178-79.

<sup>20</sup> For example, consider the case of Eric Little’s position on running in the Olympics on Sunday.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. my ETS paper last year, “Honoring Jesus as Sabbath King: Historical-redemptive Arguments for a Sunday-Sabbath.”

<sup>22</sup> Bondage to deception is the alternative if believers do not remain alert and guarded in relation to the claim and the practice of autonomy. In other words, God’s people find intellectual freedom in the way of submission to Christ.

<sup>23</sup> This is a philosophy that is world-centered and man-centered (Col. 2.8; cf. Eph. 5.6-8, “Let no one deceive you with empty words...at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord”). He warns against a captivity to which this mindset leads (Col. 2.8, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit” that is independent of Christ). Furthermore, though we must work with unbelievers according to the need of the moment (Eph. 4.29) with wisdom toward outsiders that comes to expression in gracious speech Col. 4.5-6), it is surely wrong to fan the flames of autonomy on one hand while trying to quench these same flames in a call to repentance.

<sup>24</sup> As Gaffin says, “the saving revelation of God in Christ, taught by the Holy Spirit, is the indispensable key to rightly understanding God himself, and, with that understanding, literally everything (πάντα) in his creation. Right knowledge is saving knowledge. Anything else, every other knowledge-no matter how operationally effective or functionally productive-is essentially *mis*understanding, Ibid 116.

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<sup>25</sup> Therefore, we have illustrations of restoration in the miracles of Christ regarding those afflicted in various ways by which they access the created world.