







## Epistemic Circularity, Christian Virtue, and Truth

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### I. Introduction

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This paper aims to show that human beings obtain truth 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. In a word, the key to the process of coming to know the truth is submission. As Pascal put it, there are two extremes to avoid with respect to our powers of cognition as rational creatures: "to exclude reason, to admit nothing but reason."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, he gives a marvelously concise definition of Christianity, "Submission and the use of reason; that is what makes true Christianity."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Thomas V. Morris, Making Sense of it all: Pascal and the Meaning of Life (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 81.

<sup>2</sup> Morris 81.

What then is involved in a submissive use of reason in coming to know the truth? To answer this question we will stipulate some definitions, introduce the notion of epistemic circularity, discuss some key passages of Scripture, make some applications, and give some concluding remarks.

## II. Key terms

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Definition of some key terms will help put epistemic circularity into perspective. The key terms are truth, knowledge, autonomy, and circularity. By stipulating the meaning of these terms, we limit our task and put certain structural notions in place as reference points for our main objective. Obviously, then, support for these definitions lies outside the scope of this paper.

### 1. Truth

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, regarding God (defined by Scripture) and everything else (all that He made) that constitutes the metaphysical make up of all that is real. It is the actual state of affairs, as God knows it in perfect self-knowledge and perfect knowledge of all that He created and controls. In this light, Jesus is the truth (Jn. 14.6) in that He embodies and reveals the truth (the metaphysical state of affairs), in human terms (as a human being with complete humanity, being fully God and fully man) for human knowledge regarding God, the world, and His relationship to the now fallen world.

### 2. Knowledge

Knowledge refers to knowing the truth or understanding the actual state of affairs in the world, which is God's creation that operates under His rule, and is dependent on Him. Thus, to have true knowledge or knowledge of the truth means a person understands something about the real world (the real world that God created) 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. Naturally, it is incomplete knowledge of what God knows; hence, knowledge involves process; it involves "coming to know." Although man is not omniscient, he still may know things truly though not exhaustively.

Incomplete knowledge that corresponds with the mind of God, at some humanly finite point, must cohere with exhaustive knowledge of all things; because God's knowledge and revelation is perfectly and completely coherent. At bottom is the fact that God is true in all He knows and reveals, so, there can be no contradiction in His thoughts; otherwise, something false would be present, and that is impossible.

Of course, one must believe what he claims to know or it would not be knowledge. In this sense, knowledge involves assenting to the truth of something and relying upon it in some way. The fact that people may believe things that stand in contradiction to one another shows that believing, though necessary for knowledge, is not sufficient for it. Contradictory things cannot both be true, thus, when two people contradict each other, someone believes what is false (perhaps both do so) and believing what is false is not true knowledge. Knowledge involves true belief. Furthermore, holding true belief is not sufficient for knowledge because someone may believe something that turns out to be true on some arbitrary basis. It may turn out that a person's firm belief that he will win at the gambling table is true, but a belief grounded in arbitrariness is surely not knowledge. Nor is it knowledge if we arrive at a true conclusion through invalid argument form. Therefore, philosophers speak of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB). This indicates that there must be some evidence or good argument based on good evidence that grounds (rationally justifies) true belief.

The philosophical definition of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB) functions within the context of philosophical disagreement, with an orientation to propositions. JTB is surely necessary in some contexts, in contexts where disagreements abound and important implications are at stake. However, not all knowledge has the three ingredients of justification, truth, and belief. I can know that I have pain in my back, that God is my Father, and that the blue-feathered thing in front of me is a blue jay, without being able to justify these beliefs. How could I prove that I have back pain? To whom would I offer such proof? Must I offer it to the doctor to whom I give testimony of my pain? Why is it even necessary to prove it (outside any legal context)? These questions reveal a practical dimension to knowledge that JTB does not govern or even address.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edmond Gettier, *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-23. Gettier's challenge to JTB is significant. Alvin Plantinga builds on Gettier's examples to ground his view that we attain sufficiency in knowledge when we have warrant, but establishing the conditions for warrant is not an easy task, *Warrant and Proper Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 31-40.

Notably, a Christian epistemology goes beyond JTB in more than one way. It transcends the narrow philosophical definition, claiming, as we shall see, that JTB may be necessary for knowledge in *some* cases, but *it is not sufficient in any case* because it lacks the single ingredient that is both necessary and sufficient for knowledge. The goal here, therefore, is to show that in the rich biblical notion of knowledge, submission to God is that ingredient (necessary and sufficient for knowing truly, rightly, properly). We need to say more about submission, but for the moment, it is enough to note that “submission” is an umbrella term that includes such things as: acknowledgment, assent, reliance, commitment, obedience, and love. In this paper, Christian virtue refers primarily to submission.

### 3. Autonomy

Autonomy is a term that designates the claim or practice of independence from God. 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. As we shall see, the assertion by human beings of autonomy is the central problem of epistemology. It is the problem for human understanding of God, man, and the world since the fall.

Submission to God contrasts with autonomy. It refers to acknowledgement of God's Word in Scripture as the ultimate standard of truth; it indicates 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 that man must pursue in a process that aims at restoration in the image of God by sinner-saints. The consequence of autonomy is deception, and the consequence of submission, along with avoiding deception, is growth in knowledge.

### 4. Circularity

In trying to exercise wisdom with respect to how people know things, and in trying to do so in a Christian way (thus, in trying to develop a Christian philosophy regarding epistemology), it will become evident that circularity is inevitable. Rather, the challenging claim is that in a Christian theory of knowledge, people must begin with knowledge of God and His world in order to know God and His world (properly and truly) and to grow in this knowledge (properly and truly). It is *epistemic* circularity because it

is a function of human knowing. We can now give some development to the notion of epistemic circularity.

### III. The notion of epistemic circularity

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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. 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 through Scripture (Scripture is a restorative word from God that is necessary because of man's fall into sin). 2) Moreover, epistemic circularity 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; Rom. 1.18-25). The foundation of coming to 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). They suppress what they know of the world and, through it, of God (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, *if man is going to know anything in truth he must submit to what he knows but denies*. Before the fall, knowledge of the world and of God (of God through the world, and of the world in knowing God) did not have the encumbrance of insubordination (asserted autonomy and willful disobedience). Since the fall, insubordination blocks man's knowledge of the world and of God through it.

What then is epistemic circularity in this context? The circularity is that man must begin with the knowledge of God and the world that he possesses by God's gift, in order to know God and the world in an ever-expanding way. He must acknowledge what he knows of God and God's creation in order to grow in knowledge. Critically, he must submit to God (to Him personally in knowing His world) in order to know Him. Therefore, the great problem of knowledge is not human fallibility but human culpability, because sinful man suppresses what he knows of God and the

world by God's gift. The problem is not some abstract intellectual deficiency. Instead, the problem is ethical; it is a concrete personal unwillingness to submit to God. Hence, human disobedience breaks the circle of knowledge, and man seeks to build a house of knowledge on the foundation of his denial, denying that he knows God and His world by His gift in every act of human discovery.

Pointedly, the supposed "advance" into the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3.5) plunged the human family into 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 add 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. Granted, he has some kind of knowledge of this formula: he does "know" that  $2 + 2$  does not equal five, but four. However, it is not true knowledge because true knowledge involves submission to God in the act of knowing.

To be sure, the formula *per se* ( $2 + 2 = 4$ ) is not ethically qualified. Furthermore, the claim here is not that the knowing person is ethically qualified, say, as a responsible person in his intellectual pursuits. What I am claiming is that a person's knowledge is ethically qualified. That is, knowing things (knowing objects, knowing what *it* is) is not only personal knowledge (knowing by a responsible person), but it is also interpersonal in that it inescapably involves a relationship with God with respect to every fact that human beings come to know. Therefore, as we shall argue below, there is no bare "I-it" (subject-object) dimension to knowledge. Knowledge is an integral aspect of a human being's personal relationship with God. Therefore, if we deny (or simply neglect and deny by default) the interpersonal dimension of our knowing, if we thus claim some kind of autonomy in our thoughts, then all of our "knowledge" is lost in great darkness (Mat. 6.23).

True knowledge is not simply seeing something "out there" in the world in such a way that what is in the mind is coherent (that is, consistent with other things embraced in the mind) and conforms to what is out there. Coherence and conformity are *necessary* but not sufficient for growth in true knowledge. In this connection, it is important to distinguish between how a person *begins* to know the truth properly and how he or she *grows* in knowing the truth properly. Submission is the only requirement that is both necessary and sufficient for the knowing process



to begin (for a person to enter the epistemic circle). True knowledge is ethically and personally qualified and stands in contrast to distorted knowledge. Knowledge that man suppresses is real “knowledge,” but it exists in a heavy fog of denial, in the denial of what man knows of God and the world by God’s gift.

Submission to God is necessary for true knowledge, and when it is present, true knowledge is present (it is thus also sufficient for knowing properly and truly). This is the case for the beginning of knowledge but not for growing in it. For growth in knowledge, submission is necessary but not sufficient because other things are also necessary such as: critical thinking, open-minded humility, and the principles of JTB.

True knowledge is like a truly good act in a rich biblical sense of what is good. To help a little old woman cross a street is a “good deed,” but if the one helping does not do this act from a heart of love for God and for the glory of God, then despite the conformity here with the standard of a good act, the action is not good in a full biblical sense. The claim that unbelievers (those who do not believe in Christ by submitting to His authority) do not have true knowledge of the formula  $2 + 2 = 4$  does not deny that they may have some of the ingredients necessary for knowledge. However, it means that they lack one ingredient that is necessary for knowledge in all cases: submission to God in the act of knowing. If we focus, as we do in this paper, on the beginning of knowledge and on what is required to get the ball rolling, then we should note that submission to God is not only necessary, but it is also sufficient for true knowledge. To know the truth is a much richer reality than a quantitative thing. The goal, therefore, is to capture some of what a biblical and *qualitative* conception of knowledge means. Here we face the need to defend epistemic circularity, as we discuss what it means. To that task, we now turn.

#### IV. Biblical support for epistemic circularity

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We will now cover the biblical meaning of knowledge in five points. Each point will add another weight to a scale until the full weight of the argument becomes evident. A Christian view of coming to true knowledge by epistemic circularity comes to expression in Scripture when we consider the following passages: 1 Timothy 6.3-5, Colossians 2.1-10, 1 Corinthians 13.1-2, Romans 1.18, Matthew 6.22-23, and 1 Corinthians 2.14.

## 1. Understanding nothing and deprived of the truth

A good place to begin to set forth a Christian conception of epistemic circularity is 1 Timothy 6.3-5.

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 (μηδέν 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.

This example of a false teacher presents a case in point regarding knowledge of the truth that helps us understand epistemic circularity. 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” (v. 5). There is an intellectual side to this condition but it is inseparably ethical because it does not accord with godliness (v. 3). They are epistemologically empty because what they “know” does not conform to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ (it is *μη προσέρχεται*, it does not even *come near to* His teaching), nor does it accord with godliness (it is out of accord with teaching that is “respect for God” oriented).

From this starting point, we can state the essence of a Christian epistemology. In the most fundamental sense, unless there is humble submission to the words of Christ, (ultimately the Scriptures of OT and NT) and thus to God speaking in Scripture through Christ by the Holy Spirit, there is no worthwhile epistemology, there is no understanding of anything, and there is no access to the truth. It is bold to affirm that a form of “knowledge” exists in an epistemological void.

What then is required to access the truth and to understand things, to have true knowledge or knowledge of truth? Submission to God’s speech is required. Thus God must speak. He must reveal Himself, His will, and His mind regarding things, and man must hear His voice in a virtuous way; man must follow God in humble submission to image Him, with the goal of godliness. If we enquire about how human knowing begins, we can put this requirement for accessing truth in better light.

How then does knowing begin? The answer to this question presupposes the fact that fallen man is in the extraordinary condition of understanding nothing and of being without truth. It presupposes the problem of sin and man's need because of the fall. Granted, man's knowledge is always incomplete. Hence, the fact of process is unavoidable, but the problem within view here is not human fallibility but human culpability.

Thus, the question has two dimensions. How does knowing begin? How does knowing continue? For both questions, the answer is that knowing begins and knowing continues by God speaking and man submitting to God's speech. This epistemological answer relates to the definitive and progressive renewal of man created in the image of God; but fallen from it and in need of restoration to that image and likeness (Eph. 4.24; Col 3.10). The answer is humble submission to the words of Christ. Personal submission to Him is required. We must submit to His voice wherever He speaks because God always speaks with authority.<sup>4</sup>

Now we can see the circularity in relation to Scripture. Man must line up his thoughts with the words of Christ for teaching and living in a God-like way ("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, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing," 1 Tim. 6.3). In a word, there must be submission to the words of Christ, to His speaking, in order to attain knowledge. It is not a matter of coming to know to ground submission (not initially or foundationally for beginning to know, nor for continuing to grow in knowledge). There must be submission to what is spoken in order to avoid being in a state of understanding nothing (the state of epistemological emptiness).

The "Knowledge" that people have of things (doctrine, teaching, thoughts, imaginings, and corresponding conduct to which the knowledge is inseparably bonded) is not actual knowledge in a rich biblical sense of the term when it does not accord with the words of Christ. That is, what they know, what they have thoughts about, and what they grasp in their minds or imagine is true are all void of truth in the full sense of the term.

Does this refer to those thoughts that do not line up with the words of Christ in contrast to other thoughts that do so line up? No, the language here is much more radical than that. Because their thinking does not accord with Christ, they know *nothing*.

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<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Van Til, Christian Apologetics (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976) 33.

How can this be so? This brings us to a significant epistemological problem. Being out of accord with the words of Christ must involve something more than having points of discord. It is deeper than that. It is not simply a matter of quantity. If the point here merely concerns pieces of information that are out of accord, then there would not be utter epistemological emptiness (false teachers would know some things; there would be partial or incomplete knowledge). Given man's finitude, all human "knowledge" is incomplete in a quantitative sense. However, the idea here is that the amount of knowledge one has that is true, right, and proper knowledge is such because the person who has it meets the requirement of submission to God, by submission to the words of Christ.

Of what then is Paul speaking when he mentions the disagreement with the sounds words of Christ? What is at work in the different doctrine that is not according to image-bearing godliness? It is a posture of heart. It is a frame of mind affecting all their thoughts. Their understanding is empty (they understand nothing, v. 4), they are depraved in mind, and they are deprived of truth (v. 5, the teachers are in the same category as the people they teach). Because Paul speaks of a mindset, it is difficult to restrict the ignorance in view to religious matters or biblical teaching (cf. Eph. 4.17-18, they are darkened in their understanding; Rom. 1.18-25, they exchanged the truth of God that they know by means of created factuality for a lie).

Even if we interpret Paul's words to Timothy in a restricted sense (limited to biblical understanding), the point of epistemic circularity remains: if teachers (or students) of Scripture do not submit to God speaking in Scripture, then all that they "know" of Scripture is "deprived of truth" (1 Tim. 6.5), and they in fact understand none of it (6.4). Unless a person submits to God's voice in Scripture, he cannot understand anything that God says in any portion of the sixty-six books of the Bible. For example, he may "know" that Adam is the first human being, but his knowledge of this fact is deprived of truth; he totally misunderstands it.

## 2. The assertion of human autonomy

In Colossians, Paul sheds more light on the "frame of mind" (1 Tim. 6.4) of those "deprived of truth" (1 Tim 6.5).

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, <sup>2</sup> that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding

and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ,<sup>3</sup> in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>4</sup> I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.<sup>5</sup> For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,<sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.<sup>8</sup> See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits [stoicei/a, principles] of the world, and not according to Christ.<sup>9</sup> For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,<sup>10</sup> and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Col. 2.1-10).

The mindset in view involves the pursuit of wisdom (the empty and deceitful pursuit of wisdom or claims to 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 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.”<sup>5</sup> In these two phrases, we have man-centeredness not God-centeredness and creature-centeredness instead of Creator-centeredness respectively. In that these people “do not depend on Christ,” they involve a principle of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The philosophy of life comprised of wisdom and knowledge (v. 4) in a belief system (v. 7), and based on plausible arguments (v. 4) has a standard to which it conforms. In terms of the two main standards of truth (often at odds and often working together in the history of philosophy), rationalism and empiricism, the standard of truth about which Paul warns is the autonomy of human reason and the self-sufficiency (autonomy) of human experience.

The two passages (1 Tim. 6 and Col. 2) fill each other out. Therefore, the mindset that disqualifies even partial knowledge from true knowledge is the assertion of, and commitment to, human autonomy. This is the ultimate presupposition of the non-Christian worldview. It governs all that people grasp with the mind, it deceives, and it deprives of truth in such a radical way that those who commit themselves to human autonomy know nothing (especially in their reasoning or arguing, Col. 2.4). In modern

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<sup>5</sup> There is some ambiguity regarding the “principles” of this world because we only have access to Paul’s meaning through his refutation of the false teaching in view. Nevertheless, the warning about asserted autonomy is clear.

application, this warning alerts us to the danger of the Cartesian principle of belief in: the self-sufficiency of human reason and experience in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

On the other hand, to acknowledge dependency on Christ everywhere is the consistently Christian position. Paul is telling us how to avoid deception. If we operate on a man-centered or creature-centered presupposition, which is simply the presupposition of human autonomy, then we will be susceptible to deception. If we accept the autonomy meat grinder, then whatever goes in at the top comes out at the bottom as “autonomous ground beef.” Caution: there is danger here for believers in Christ. This is a warning to guard against a man-centered outlook in which autonomous self-sufficiency is a harmful remnant of the believer’s sinful past.

Commitment to human autonomy leads away from truth. It prevents access to true knowledge. It locks man in the darkness of epistemological emptiness (1 Tim. 6.3). Thus, insubordination to God or lack of submission to the words of Christ bars man from true knowledge.

Is this darkness simply something spiritual? That is, does it refer to spiritual truths in contrast to the general factuality of the “real” world? The problem here is that the darkness is so great, so radical, that those in this condition “understand nothing.” We cannot restrict the darkness to a spiritual compartment over against a physical compartment of reality. The only two “compartments” of reality that exist are the self-sufficient God and everything that He created. Consequently, knowing a frog in a pond is a spiritual act; just as knowing God is a spiritual act because we know God by means of the expression He gives of Himself in created things.

### 3. 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): “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

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 words of the mechanic to those of the

philosopher. A clanging makes no sense. The sound a clanging object produces is meaningless. The understanding that lies behind “communication” is so far from truth and knowledge that it reduces the personal “communicator” to nothing. The things known, the knower, and the attempted communication of knowledge are all nothing; they are all meaningless.

If I *am* a noisy gong or a clanging symbol then my speech is meaningless noise. If I *am* nothing then my knowledge, understanding, and even faith are meaningless. Therefore, the “knowledge” I have is in a profound sense not knowledge at all. It is not true and it fails to attain to truth. We have to call it false knowledge, distorted knowledge, or relative knowledge. In a sense that sounds extreme to say the least, Paul categorically classifies knowledge without love as something unintelligible.

Is this simply exaggerated rhetoric to make a point? Scripture calls this unintelligible something “knowledge” at the same time that it refers to it as meaninglessness and nothingness. Obviously, both ideas are here in 1 Corinthians 13 since that which is meaningless is what someone may 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 imperfect knowledge.

The force of this claim (that Scripture refers to the unintelligible something as knowledge) stands even despite the fact that the comparison in verse one is between meaninglessness and speech and not between meaninglessness and knowledge (i.e. understanding). Two points show why this is the case. First, speech is the communication of thought and 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. This is not simply exaggeration. Paul is making a far-reaching claim about knowing the truth.

Why call this a case in point of epistemic circularity? We can call this 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 growing in knowledge. Our rational and empirical faculties are necessary for growth in knowledge, but they are not sufficient. Love is what is sufficient for knowledge. Ultimately, the love in view is love for God. Love for our neighbor manifests the love of God “shed abroad in our hearts” (KJV, Rom. 5.5). Our love has its cause in His love for us: we love Him because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4.19). 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), and we are, therefore, in epistemological darkness, utter darkness.

#### 4. Romans 1.18

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. <sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

This text shows that man knows God and His world by God's gift (what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them, v. 19), but he suppresses what he knows by his unrighteousness (v. 18). The knowledge that is in reality darkness (knowing things but understanding nothing) is much larger than some kind of partial knowledge of spiritual things in contrast to the remaining things in the field of knowledge. This cannot be the case because there is no metaphysical realm of spiritual truth that exists in contrast to a metaphysical realm composed of the rest of reality.



All knowledge is thinking God's knowledge after Him (even knowing error correctly). Therefore, man knows nothing without knowing God in knowing it. So intellectual darkness, when it occurs, must cover the entire realm of truth.

Thus, being in epistemological darkness is like being physically blind. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is like being deaf or mute. Recall that in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul makes a connection between meaningless thoughts and meaningless speech. Being mute simply goes a step further because not just the sounds are meaningless; the distance from intelligibility is so great that there is no perception of sound (unbelievers are deaf), and there is no utterance of sound in communicating speech. Moreover, when a person receives definitive restoration in the image of God, the new creation in the image of God occurs by the action of God that is analogous to, and illustrated by, the healing of people who are blind, deaf, and mute. Fallen man's epistemological condition is such that He cannot see, hear, or speak the truth of God that surrounds him within reach of his sense perceiving faculties.

Are we to restrict the impact of these 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, as Psalm 19.1-6 indicates.

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. <sup>2</sup> Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. <sup>3</sup> There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. <sup>4</sup> Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, <sup>5</sup> which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. <sup>6</sup> Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat.

This Psalm helps us understand the references to the creation in Romans 1. We should note that the things of the created order in their existence in time have a voice and they speak in words through all the earth. Heavens and sky "proclaim his handiwork" (v. 1). The day and night cycles pour out speech and reveal knowledge (v. 2). Consequently, no

place on earth lacks the warmth of God's speech, just as no place from east to west lacks the warmth of the sun (v. 6). Moreover, God controls every fact for the good of His people (Rom. 8.28). All of history is the unfolding of His plan (Eph. 1.11). Every event is a providentially governed stage in the realization of God's plan.<sup>6</sup>

In a word, all that God created and controls is theology. Theology is literally God's speech ("theo-logos," God speaking or God's speech). He speaks in Scripture and in creation. Granted, we call the study of God's speech by the same term, theology. In a derived sense and in distinction from God's own action of speaking, theology is man's study of God's speech (God's speech is infallible and man's speaking about God's speech is obviously fallible). Because God speaks in Scripture and in created reality, there is an inseparable connection between metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Metaphysically speaking, the world *is* God's speech (this answers the "what is it?" question). The *content* of knowledge (epistemological substance) in all fields of study is therefore God's speech. Finally, God speaks with authority wherever He speaks; so, man *ought* to receive all that he studies in science, in the broadest sense of the term, for the glory of God in humble submission with awe, thanksgiving, praise, and love.

Again, consider the epistemic circularity that is present here. In all acts of coming to know, man confronts the face of God and hears the voice of God. He has the obligation to acknowledge that this is the case and He is to learn with that mindset, or he misses the point of it all. If he denies (neglects, does not acknowledge) the voice of God that he hears in created factuality, then his "knowledge" is cast into utter darkness.

What then is necessary and sufficient for knowledge? The conditions for knowledge are not truth and justification regarding beliefs (JTB); these conditions may be necessary at times, but they are not sufficient. Instead, one condition is both necessary and sufficient. It is humble submission to the voice of God (unpacked as awe, praise, thanksgiving) regarding any fact; it is humble submission of the perceiving/reasoning image bearer to what God clearly causes him to know. Presupposed, understandably, 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. However, that which is necessary and sufficient

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1967), "The facts and laws of the world are what they are because of God's plan with respect to them. Therefore his knowledge of the world is involved in his plan for the world. Thus his knowledge of the facts and laws of the world precede the existence of the world," 11.

for human knowledge of any fact is a humble heart that submits to that fact as the language of God, the voice of God, and a communication from God, which man is to receive and use for the glory of God.

## 5. Matthew 6.22-23

What solves the problem of the great darkness that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 6? "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, <sup>23</sup> but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" Context deals with the choice of love for God over all earthly things (v. 24). 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. Physical blindness illustrates the blindness of the natural man (of man in his fallen, abnormal, and actually *unnatural* condition). This great blindness extends farther than physical blindness; it goes deeper than physical blindness. A person could be physically blind yet have a good eye of the heart. In that case, he is not in great darkness even though the body may have difficulty functioning.

What then is the nature of this great darkness? How does it relate to physical objects that the person with a bad eye cannot see? Because Jesus speaks of the deepest seat of perception and function, the darkness is total. He 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. Although he looks at the sun, perceives it, and reflects upon it, he does not see it. He is in total darkness! 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 such as the new birth.

In John 3, for example, Jesus says that Nicodemus cannot understand earthly things (3.12). This means that he cannot see (v. 3), believe (vs. 12, 15), understand (v.10), receive (v. 11), come to (v. 20), speak (v. 11), bear witness to (v. 11) know (vs. 8, 11) and do (v. 21). What is it that he cannot understand? He cannot understand-believe-receive 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 (3.4-8). 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” (3.8).

Interestingly, Christ enlightens all fallen men (Jn. 1.9), but still 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. They are in total epistemological darkness and “how great is the darkness!” (Mat. 6.23).

The only way out of this darkness, this epistemological 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”). The choice of love for God is a choice to serve Him in relation to all earthly things. 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. We must sell all that we have and subordinate it to the kingdom (Mat. 13.44). Then, having met the precondition for knowledge, a sinner has freedom from his former darkness and can understand both earthly and heavenly things. Then, the journey of true discovery begins.

## 6. 1 Corinthians 2.14

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

When we hear that the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2.14), we must take this as a reference to more than a narrow section of reality, the spiritual section. Like Jesus, Paul speaks in a broader vein. To be sure, the center of Pauline theology is “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2.2). However, it includes the wisdom, thoughts and mind of God (2.7, 11, 16) related to “what God has prepared for those who love him” (2.9, note the place of love for God in relation to understanding His thoughts or thinking His thoughts after Him), and to “all things” (2.15). We cannot restrict the reference to “all things” to all *spiritual* things. This is 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). 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. Therefore, fallen and unredeemed man knows nothing in a way that meets the test of truth. He is in ignorance or epistemological darkness that is astounding in its density.

## V. Application

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Our perceiving faculties are afflicted with an abnormal condition in which everything is yellow to the jaundiced eye.<sup>7</sup> If the world out there to behold is not blue tinted, but if the lens of the eye is blue tinted, then the eye will see everything incorrectly and the knowledge gained will be distorted and false at every point. 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 them. This means that there is no justification for what the natural man believes. He asserts the self-sufficiency of human reason and experience. This starting point in the quest for truth bars him from true knowledge.

Some illustrations will help unpack the fullness of true knowledge before we draw together some conclusions.

### 1. The number one tennis player in the world

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. This "tension" about human knowledge is complex, and it pertains to the rich biblical notion of knowing.

Because of what it takes to have true knowledge, we can affirm that a non-Christian Roger Federer, though number one in the world of tennis,

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<sup>7</sup> K. Scott Oliphant, "Epistemology and Christian Belief," *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 2001): 179.

does not understand tennis. He does not know what he is doing (he does not know it, he does not know himself in his experience of it, and he does not understand his doing of it). 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 God's common love (Mat.5.44-45) and the fact of a remnant image of God in fallen man (Gen. 9.6; James 3.9). Christian and non-Christian tennis playing may overlap in nature or quality and there may be some actual 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. That said, we must think broadly 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 for communication, for co-union, and therefore it is an invitation to fellowship with God (Ps. 19.1-6; of course, redemption requires God's restorative word that the Psalm goes on to explain). 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 can someone have 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 (narrowly and broadly conceived) are words in a message from the Creator to His creature. They are components of communication that are there for our understanding. If the communication is not received for what it is and used in obedience to the Speaker, then it is not understood. The game of tennis is not known. The number one tennis player does remarkable things *in the dark* because, though fallen, he is still the image of God, but he does many remarkable things in the dark.

What are the implications of this view of knowledge? Could I still speak 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”? Could I say, “you serve and volley in ‘tennis-ological’ darkness (in epistemological darkness)”? If there is true knowledge of the game, then the player will enjoy it, 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. Accordingly, the tennis player will acknowledge God's voice and submit to His will in the way he plays the game. He will seek to please the Lord in the attitude with which he plays and put to good use all his earnings. He will not do his tennis work on Sunday unless he has assurance from His risen Sabbath king that such work is fitting on the Lord's Day.

## 2. Blue Jays and the knowledge of God

Epistemic circularity can be “fleshed out” by consideration of our personal experiences with animals. While typing these words, blue jays came within inches of my laptop to take peanuts I put there. I enjoyed watching them, in effect, sneak up on me, grab the peanuts and scurry off. Then one came, took a peanut, hopped on the chair, dropped it to the ground and left. I picked it up and placed it on table again. Eventually, he (or one of his friends), came back, picked up the nut, then dropped it, and stayed a while looking at me as if to say, “What is going on?”

When he flew away, I asked myself the same question, “What is going on?” I picked up the nut and shook it; it did not rattle; the shell had not been broken, but there was nothing inside. That is why the jay left it in wonderment. I can only marvel at this ability to perceive the value of a peanut on the part of a blue jay. I can only wonder, and take delight in seeing this evaluation, and devaluation of the peanut. I can only marvel in the Lord as I experience this gift to the human family, to me. This awesome creature displays the wisdom of God in an interesting and delightful way.

Surely, I must conclude that this created thing is God's voice that among other things expresses a warm invitation to fellowship with Him. He invites me to have even more delight in Him as He shares His thoughts with me in this way. Thus, I know Him, it, and myself in the same act. I know the thoughts of the Lord and see the delightful wisdom of my Creator. I know it (the jay, a sunset) as His word to me inviting me to fellowship, calling me to learn more of His creation, and through the creation to learn more of Him. Marvelously, I know myself as a person in personal contact and relationship with the Lord. I know myself as someone

loved by the Lord, and because I can think His thoughts after Him, I know myself as His image bearer, able to image His thoughts in my thoughts, to reflect them in a creaturely way, as His creation myself, but still able to reflect them. Since He speaks to me in this way (showing love, warmly inviting to fellowship, indicating my image bearing ability) and since He speaks with authority as my Creator, I must also conclude that I have obligations before Him. I have the obligation to learn more and more of the world aiming to reflect His wisdom in my understanding of it. Here I have the deepest foundation for learning the three R's; this teaching grounds a philosophy of education that knows no limits in either scope or enthusiasm. Learning about blue jays, flowers, color, and shape is a duty that I have to God and a delightful, fulfilling, and satisfying duty it is as well. Moreover, I have the obligation in my knowledge to acknowledge Him, to acknowledge His speaking to me, to welcome it, to praise Him for it and for what it reveals about Him. As His image bearer, I have the obligation to receive His communication to me as clearly and correctly as I am able, and to use it for Him, to reflect Him (to be what I am before Him), and thus to use it for His glory.

However, the delight of my experience of the Lord turns to dismay when I try to glorify Him but find myself failing to do so. I forget to acknowledge Him in all my ways; I forget that the blue jay is His gift to me, which He gives me to enjoy and to know in knowing Him for His glory. In other words, I see myself as a sinner, an ingrate surrounded by the marvelous gifts of God. My sins block my vision of the world around me, turning the brightness of the sun into the darkness of night. In this condition, I am a blind man walking around stumbling over the facts of life. I am so in the dark that I cannot hear or even speak. I am blind, deaf, and mute regarding the facts of life that I sense but cannot understand.

At this point in my experience, I need the rest of Psalm 19 about God's speech. I need to hear about the "creation-speech" of the Lord to understand better, how it is that I confront the face of God in every fact surrounding me (19.1-6), but I also need to hear the good news that the rest of the Psalm conveys to sinners like me:

<sup>7</sup> The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; <sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; <sup>9</sup> the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. <sup>10</sup> More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of



the honeycomb. <sup>11</sup> Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. <sup>12</sup> Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. <sup>13</sup> Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. <sup>14</sup> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Here is the relief to my heart that I need, as I own up to my sins in the acknowledgment that goes with my acknowledgment of the Lord in every fact and circumstance of life. I find the answer to my sinfulness in “my rock and my redeemer.” The same Lord that speaks to me with such astounding love in His creation-speech also speaks to me in the Scriptures, in the perfect law of the Lord (v. 7). This word is a restorative word that revives the soul (v. 7) and rejoices the heart (v. 8). His commandments enlighten the eyes (v. 8); they are delightful beyond the delight of “much fine gold,” and beyond the sweetness of honey dripping from the honeycomb (v. 10).

### 3. Seeing stars

Another way to illustrate epistemic circularity (as defined in this paper) is to make some comments about seeing a distant star through a telescope on a clear night. To know what it is that I am seeing as I gaze heavenward, I must acknowledge God’s Word written large across the heavens. Denying or simply failing to acknowledge God’s speech is comparable to opposing or forgetting the fact that I see the star in another galaxy because of the telescope. Accordingly, I misperceive the object in view. In the case of the telescope, I will think that the star is something “near” within reach of the powers of human vision. I will think that the star is in one galaxy when in truth it exists in another galaxy. I may see the star at the same time that I am light years away from understanding it. On one hand, I see it, but on the other hand, I do not see it. With regard to the matter of distance, though I see the star, I am “worlds” from seeing it correctly. Likewise, if I do not see the star as a communication from God (if I blatantly deny this truth or simply neglect to affirm it), then I am light years away from understanding and knowing it. I do not know what it is as to its metaphysical makeup; I totally miss the point regarding what it is. I am so far away from seeing it in truth that my view of the stars amounts to darkness, and great is that darkness.

Moreover, if I miss the fact that the star is a medium of communication from God through His creation, then I miss the point of the information regarding every detail that I think I understand about the star. This is the case because the content of every fact is theology as God's indirect act of speaking. In turn, I fail to know and understand the call to fellowship that God extends to all people (and thus to me) in the act of sharing His thoughts with human beings through created things. Because He shares His thoughts with His image bearers, then the communication is a warm and loving invitation to human beings everywhere to draw near to Him. If I do not know and acknowledge the Speaker who reveals Himself in the facts of stars and all other things, then I do not have an intimate knowledge of the star I see. Because it is a revelation of God (His self-revealing speech), then I must know Him in knowing it. Knowledge involves personal relationship with God. The person lives in radical tension that grows in his grasp of things that invite him to fellowship with God, if he does so without fellowship with God.

The personal dimension of true knowledge means that to know a star includes grasping it in the mind, with thanksgiving to God, for the warm display of wisdom that He shares with human beings. How could I *know* that the star is God's word to me, and thus know it truly, if I do not receive the experience of knowing it with joy and thankfulness to Him?

Finally, as His image, I have the design of reflecting and glorifying God. This fact governs the use to which I must put what I learn, if it is to yield true knowledge. Do I know what poison is if I drink it to quench my thirst? Do I know what a razor blade is if I run my fingertips over its sharp edges for fun? To know the facts in truth, I must know how to use that which I know. If I am to know any particular thing, then, in how I discover it and make use of what I discover about it, I must obey God's commandments, love my neighbor, and seek to glorify God in thought, word, and deed.

#### 4. Coming to know and growth in knowing as a Christian

If submission is both necessary and sufficient for true knowledge, then how can it be that Christians disagree with one another in their interpretations of the Bible? The answer to this question is that in the cases of disagreement there are deficiencies regarding many things that are necessary for knowledge. For example, critical thinking is a requirement in Christian discipleship. Disciples have the duty to test all things and to hold fast to the good (1 Thess. 4.25). This is just to say that

Christian love is to abound in knowledge seasoned by discernment (Phil. 1-9-11). Accordingly, different levels of growth in critical thinking skill that come by practicing open dialogue will lead to different conclusions. Where conclusions contradict one another, someone lacks a necessary requirement for growth in true knowledge.

How does submission function as both necessary and sufficient for knowledge in a definitive sense and in a progressive sense? The example of a professed belief in Christ may help make this point. Consider the person who "knows" and states the truth that Jesus is Lord. However, if he does not commit himself to Christ from the depths of his heart (if he does not choose Christ above all earthly things), then he does not know the truth that Jesus is Lord. Thus, a person can only say (from the heart) that Jesus is Lord by the Spirit's enlightenment (1 Cor. 12.3). Now, to focus on Christian development, growth in knowledge requires both a submissive heart and a meditative process of testing all things. Christians come up short in both of these requirements; they must grow in both, and as they do, they will arrive at different stages of true knowledge. Recognition of this fundamental fact is critical for growing love between believers with differences that are sometimes contradictory, and sometimes not, but merely cases of semantics, at other times.

Therefore, by submission to the voice of God (in Scripture and in creation), the believer has true knowledge of God, but this does not mean that he knows God exhaustively, or that he automatically knows all the teachings of the Bible. Submission is necessary and sufficient to know God truly and to begin the journey of coming to know Him progressively. Of course, presupposed in the necessity of submission to God, at every step on the Christian journey, is the hearing of God's voice in creation and Scripture. Many things are necessary for righteous hearing, such as critical thinking and careful gathering of information (good rational extrapolation and good empirical judgment). Both are necessary in a Christian understanding of the glory of God, by hearing His declarations through creation and in Scripture. However, excellent logical skill and acute powers of observation are not sufficient for knowing God or His world. Knowing God and His world are inseparable. To know God, we must know Him through His creation because it is through the creation that God reveals Himself to us. To know the creation, we must know God because the creation is His personal and self-revealing speech. Therefore, unless we submit ourselves (our data gathering and reasoning selves) to God and to the authority of His speech, then we know neither God nor His world.

## VII. Concluding Remarks

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The fact that the natural man is in total epistemological darkness has many implications. One thing we can conclude is that it is wrong to give ground to the unbeliever's claim to 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 where necessary in order to bring all thoughts captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10.5). However, Paul warns of the deception of 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 on the other hand. 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 Scripture. We must be alert to the smoke screen that is "let loose" when the unbeliever requires proof that this world has the triune God as Creator, and proof that He speaks clearly not only in creation but also in Scripture.

There can only be one ultimate and final standard of truth. If we grant merit to the Cartesian principle (and we must be on guard as to how we may do this in subtle and deceptive ways), we operate on thin ice rather than avoiding it. We go directly into the snare of philosophy and empty deceit. The request for evidence and proof for God involves commitment to the claim that the facts are not clear words from God that in fact make Him known to all people, and that require submission to the triune God as a key ingredient necessary and sufficient for true knowledge. We ask to be deceived, thinking perhaps that we are rationally equipped and capable to hold our ground. This pathway is through a minefield. The only way of escape from a harmful captivity is by a disciplined mindset of devoted dependence on Christ. As Calvin put it, "Christian philosophy demands of

us that we surrender our reason to the Holy Spirit."<sup>8</sup> In other words, God's people find intellectual freedom in the way of submission to Christ, speaking clearly in the world He created and, in the Bible He inspired. Bondage to deception is the alternative for believers that do not remain alert and on guard in relation to the claim and the practice of autonomy.

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 which begin an answer.

### 1. Recognize the fact of epistemic circularity

We must recognize the fact of epistemic circularity, admit it, work with it, and work from it in our view of knowledge. That is, we must work with conviction regarding the fact that God has made Himself known to all people in such a way that they are without excuse for their unbelief, rebellion and sin. Thus, *the beginning of knowledge as well as its continuance is submission to what is already made known and grasped in the understanding*. We know God by divine revelation, by God's voice in creation and, because of the fall, now by God's redemptive revelation of Himself in Scripture. The fact of deaf ears does not alter the reality that fallen man knows God through His self-revelation. Being blind, deaf, and mute refers to the lack of light, sound, and speech that results from the determined rebellion against the knowledge of God that man has in his experience of every fact he encounters.

### 2. Note the loss of justified belief

Among other things, epistemic circularity 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 they also fail to have justification for any belief about any fact. This point is astoundingly simple and profound at the same time: the unbeliever cannot construct a sound argument because he knows nothing properly or truly; thus, he begins to argue with false premises that lead only to false conclusions. Simply put, every claim of knowledge regarding something (every truth claim) that he articulates fails to acknowledge, at least implicitly, if not explicitly, that it is the speech of God, an indirect personal

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952) 22.

communication from God to all human beings. The unbeliever lacks the necessary and sufficient condition to enter into the circle of true knowledge, which is submission to what he knows by God's gift but suppresses.

### 3. Avoid formal knowledge

The natural man's reasoning from premises to conclusions gives him a form of knowledge only. That becomes clear by evaluating his understanding by 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 God's authoritative speech. Knowing requires thankfulness, elicits praise, and points the way to obedient service. 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, then all his "knowledge" is a form of knowledge that he continues to "learn" without arriving at the truth. All his understanding is *misunderstanding*.<sup>9</sup> He operates in empirical and rational darkness and how great is that epistemological darkness!

### 4. Fear God and not man

Believers in Christ have no basis to fear the arguments of the most intellectually elite of our day. Those who oppose Christianity in their conclusions must do so because something is wrong with their premises. Apologists have the assurance that discovery of what is wrong with the arguments of unbelievers is there for the finding. It may take greater or lesser amounts of effort to find the failures and to explain them clearly in a way that communicates with unbelievers, on their turf, using their language. We step on their turf for sake of argument and for sake of love

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<sup>9</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6-16," Westminster Theological Journal (Spring 1995): 116.

to the neighbor. This must sound viciously circular to many, but this is an assurance that rests everything on the self-attestation of God's wisdom in Christ and in Scripture.

### 5. Turn away from autonomy

Therefore, whatever we do in trying to pursue excellence in learning in any field of endeavor, and whatever we do in trying to share the claims of Christ with unbelievers (of the philosophical or non-philosophical bent), we must seek to do good to them. We must speak according to the need of the moment, and call them to turn away from their bottom line claim of autonomy. This of course may "turn some off" from our message, it may incur the mockery of many, but others may desire to listen on another day, and still others may believe by grace (Acts 17.32-34; cf. "those who through grace believed," Acts 18.27, because God opened their hearts as in the case of Lydia, Acts 16.14).

### 6. Rest on the creative work of God

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; the process of growth in true knowledge begins. Finally, submission to the authoritative speech of God in both creation and Scripture is fundamental in the Christian pursuit of excellence in all the sciences.

The remedy must address deaf ears, blind eyes, and mute tongues. Therefore, we have illustrations of restoration in the miracles of Christ regarding those afflicted in various ways by which they access the created

world. 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 to bear witness to what we have seen (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? We must learn how to cast the lifeline to the dead, blind, deaf, and mute. 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.

By Dr. Richard Ostella  
<http://westminsterreformedchurch.org>  
[rostella@comcast.net](mailto:rostella@comcast.net)



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