

“Developing a Christian Mind, How to Get One and Keep It”

Bob Bullock

Session V

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Genesis 3:16-17)¹

WHAT IS ‘THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD’ AND WHERE DO I FIND IT?

Throughout the ages, the Great Question has always been: *“How do I know that I know?”* This is the basic question of the study of Epistemology (the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge). How we answer this question is important because in so doing, we express our concept of reality (the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to how we might like them to be). Movie buffs will recall the three cult sci-fi films starring Keanu Reeves about life in *The Matrix*, the first which was appropriately subtitled: *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. Reeves’ character, Neo, wakes up to find that what he had thought was real (life much as we know it now) is only an illusion and that what is really real is not unlike finding oneself living inside a horror movie over which you have no control. The three films together are an invitation to ‘the Theater of the Absurd.’

The Matrix movies show us how difficult and confusing it is to be living in a postmodern age where the chief values are pluralism² and relativism³. Gregory Bassham who is a philosophy professor at King’s College, explains:

“Although the Matrix contains many obvious Christian motifs, it is by no means a “Christian movie.” Rather, it is a syncretistic tapestry of themes drawn from Tibetan Buddhism, Gnosticism, classical and contemporary Western epistemology, pop quantum mechanics, Jungian psychology, postmodernism, science fiction, Hong Kong martial arts movies, and other sources.

¹ In his *Commentary on Genesis*, in answering the question, ‘What kind of death does God mean?’ John Calvin writes: *“His earthly life would have been temporal, yet he would have passed into heaven without death, and without injury...Hence the condition of man after his sin is not improperly called the privation of life, and death. The miseries and evils of soul and body, which man is beset so long as he is on earth, are a kind of entrance into death, death until itself entirely absorbs him; for Scripture everywhere calls dead, who being oppressed by the tyranny of sin and Satan, breath nothing but their own destruction.”* 127.

² The Oxford Dictionary defines “pluralism” as the existence or toleration in society of a number of different ethnic groups, cultures and beliefs.

³ “Relativism” is knowledge, truth and morality exist in relation to culture, society, and historical context, and are not always the same. As such, there is no such thing as ‘absolute truth’ or principles to live by such as the Ten Commandments” or the Teachings of Jesus, given to us by God to frame our lives and from which to derive meaning, significance, or value, through the Revelation of God.

“One of the prominent themes in The Matrix is the ‘emptiness’ or illusoriness empirical reality as we ordinarily experience it. This theme is sounded most clearly in the Zen-like “there is no spoon” speech of the Buddhist-looking child “potential in the Oracle’s waiting room: “Do not try and bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead try and understand the truth. There is no spoon. Then you will see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself.” The illusoriness of empirical reality, is a fundamental reality of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern traditions In Christianity, by contrast, the notion of that phenomenal reality is an illusion is generally rejected as inconsistent with the existence of an all powerful and truthful God.”

“Many Eastern religions view time as cyclical, relative, and ultimately illusory. Somewhat parallel views are reflected in the film. Time is relative and malleable in the Matrix: it can be sped up, slowed down, and even stopped; the temporal “present” is always set (and presumably periodically reset) at the end of the twentieth century; time loops back and repeats itself in experiences of ‘déjà vu’; and future events can be foreseen by the psychologically gifted. Such notions of time are more consistent with Eastern mysticism and New Age pseudoscience than they are with Christianity. From a Christian perspective, time is real, not illusory; it is progressive not cyclical; and prophetic foresight is a rare and miraculous gift of God, not a psychic ability of grandmotherly ‘oracles.’”⁴

“You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me.” (Job 42:3)⁵

To be perfectly honest, trying to define “knowledge” much less “the knowledge of God” in the midst of philosophy (the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge) is enough to make one’s head hurt. In session five of *“Developing a Christian Mind”* we will seek to discover how “the knowledge of God” makes it possible for us to *know ourselves*. None other than John Calvin in essence says, *‘To know oneself in truth is to know one’s need for God’s redemption.’*⁶ In the midst of all the craziness of life, and the siren calls for us to think of our Christian faith as some absurd, antiquated belief system, God might well ask each one of us, *‘So how is that working for you?’*

In his book, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*, University of Southern California philosophy professor, Dallas Willard assesses the situation in which college students find themselves today when he asks:

⁴ Gregory Bassham, “The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism” in *The Matrix and Philosophy* edited by William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court, 2002) 114-115. Bassham is fond of the word “illusory” which means: ‘apparently real but not actually so.’

⁵ Here Job is quoting God’s earlier questions for him in 38:2-3. As he faced God, Job he was the one who had been foolish. True faith begins with such humility and in recognition that God is indeed the Creator and we are but the creature. It is at this point that we take “an epistemological bow” saying in essence: *‘now I know that I know.’*

⁶ John Calvin, *The institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973). 35.

“...is it possible to know the things you believe as a Christian? To what extent? And does it really matter whether you do or not? Doesn't Christian faith automatically relegate you to an intellectual slum? Many religions or not—deeply feel that it does. Some even think you should be proud of the slum. That is the status history has managed to hang upon faith. The relationship of religion to knowledge has become severely misunderstood and distorted over the last two centuries. In particular, it has become the accepted view that religion stands free of knowledge, that it requires only faith or commitment. In some quarters great faith has become equated with a belief or commitment that manages to sustain itself, with great effort, against knowledge—or at least with no support from knowledge. Faith is regarded as essentially a struggle. Some speak of the 'lonely person of faith' as an admirable but odd manifestation of heroic willpower.

“In fact, such an interpretation of faith is only one part of the larger contemporary picture in which life and action are seen as fundamentally irrational—totally governed by feelings, traditions, 'willpower', and blind commitment. The significance of this picture for our contemporary is profound. Like gravity in the physical realm, the picture pervasively influences and guides our thinking and acting—even without any specific awareness of it. In religion its effect upon practice is to restrict the foundation of devotion to will and feelings, with no thought that it is based, wholly or in part, upon knowledge of how things really are.”⁷

Rather says Willard, “A life of steadfast discipleship to Jesus Christ is can be supported only upon assured knowledge of how things are, of the realities in terms of which that life is lived... there is a body of uniquely Christian knowledge, one that available to all who would appropriately receive it—whether Christian or not.”⁸

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'” (The Acts of the Apostles, 17:24-28)⁹

⁷ Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009) 3-4.

⁸ Willard, 7.

⁹ The Apostle Paul speaking to the philosophers of his day at the Areopagus in Athens.

In the words of Reformed theologian, Hendrikus Berkhof: "Christian theology teaches that we have access to God's nature and purposes only through only through God's willful deeds of revelation, of which Jesus Christ is the center."¹⁰

"When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers; the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you should care for him? You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." (Psalm 8:3-5)

For Calvin and the other Reformers, the center of God's revelation is Jesus Christ who is himself the center of the Word of God in Scripture. Knowledge of God involves "faith & reverence". (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.2)

"The highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it." (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4)

Knowledge of God, according to Calvin and the Bible, is more than knowing about God, it is always personal knowledge within a covenanted relationship. Only through Jesus Christ does this become a reality (John 1:1-4, 14; 14:6-11).

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-4, 14)

"I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58)

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

¹⁰ Hendrikus Berkhof, "Revelation" in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 322-325.