

LESSON 2

HOW MAN KNOWS

Introduction

The possibility of doctrine

Christian doctrine has been described as divine and human in its origin—God making Himself known (revelation) and man conceptualizing what is made known. What man conceptualizes becomes his personal theology (his thoughts and understanding about God). When he places those thoughts in words to express them, he formulates doctrine (teachings about his understanding of God).

The possibility of doctrine depends on two factors:

1. God making Himself known; and
2. Man's ability to conceptualize a hidden and spiritual God.

A problem arises at the point of understanding how man, who is physical, can know God, who is invisible. Man's facilities for knowing are his five senses—sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing. These enable him to relate knowingly to the material world, but can he employ them in knowing God? God is not identical with the material world, nor is He known in the same way as man knows physical objects about him.

Is man destined to behold creation with awe and reverence while being limited to the agnostic position of not being able to know the probable Infinite Being who created the world? Or, is there some way he can have direct and experiential (personal knowledge through experience) knowledge of God? This lesson attempts to answer these questions.

Thought questions

1. How does man know? Does he know only that which he experiences through the five senses? One can smell bad odours even though he cannot see them. One can know the difference between fresh water and salt water not by looking at it but by tasting it. Is it possible for man to know reality which is invisible, makes no sound, and cannot be felt, smelt, or tasted? The empiricists maintain that all data for knowledge comes from sense experiences. According to their view, man cannot know God because God cannot be experienced through the senses.
2. Can man know God? If one can know only through the five senses, can man know God who is invisible and immaterial?

Below and on the next page, several thought questions are presented. Briefly state your opinion concerning these questions before reading the discussion.

1. *How does man know objects apart from himself? _____*
2. *Can man know the invisible God through the use of his five senses? _____*
How can man know the invisible God? _____
3. *Can man be sure that his claim to having religious experience is real instead of an illusion? _____*
4. *Is God an objective reality who can be known by man? _____*

Empiricists believe that all of man's knowledge must come from _____.

(sense experience)

3. Is man's claim to having religious experience real or only an illusion?
4. Is God an object which can be known by man, the subject? Does man apprehend a real God or does he create an imaginary God?

The Question of Knowledge

Although the question of the possibility and validity of knowledge belongs to the study of philosophy, it is also important to the study of Christian doctrine. The student of theology is concerned with the problem of how to know God and how to distinguish between true and false religious experiences.

The science of the nature and possibility of knowledge is known as epistemology. Philosophy has been concerned with this science since the time of Socrates and Plato.

Plato (427-347 B.C.)

Plato conceived of the world of Ideas, immaterial essences. The world of sensible¹ things is only a vague, transitory, and untrustworthy copy of the Ideas or Forms which contain the true and ultimate realities. For Plato, true knowledge is the recognition of the eternal and unchanging Ideas or Forms. The world of sensible things changes and disintegrates. Only the perfect Idea exists.

Philosophers in the Middle Ages

They struggled with the question whether universal Ideas or notions have existence only in bare intellectual concepts or whether they have real existence outside the mind. The Realists followed the teachings of Plato and contended that the universal Ideas or notions existed before their material counterparts. Realists believed that the universal Idea (the Genus) is the real and is present in all created forms. The Nominalists held that the universal Idea is only a concept of the mind (mere name for universal notions) without any objective reality.

¹ Sensible usually refers to the capability of being perceived by the senses or by reason or understanding in this lesson instead of 'having good sense'.

In the realm of knowledge, a student of theology deals with the problem of _____ to know _____ and how to distinguish between true and false _____.

(how, God, religious experiences)

Define epistemology. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Plato believed that real or true _____ is the recognition of the eternal and unchanging _____ or _____.

(knowledge, Ideas or Forms)

Realists believed that the universal Idea is the _____ and is present in all _____ forms.

Nominalists believed that the universal Idea is only the concept of the _____ without any objective _____.

(real, created, mind, reality)

Kant (1724-1904)

Kant maintained that true knowledge cannot go beyond experience. He believed that the mind possesses a faculty or unifying principle which can relate and organize the knowledge which comes through the senses. The faculty or unifying principle of the mind determines how material things are conceived. He changed the question of philosophers from "What is real?" to "What and how does the mind know?" He concluded that we can only know phenomena, that is, things as they are modified and transformed for us by the action of the mind itself. He later concluded that the mind possesses such concepts as God, soul, freedom, and immortality even though these do not come through sense experiences. The supersensible² objects cannot be proved by speculative reason in the same way as the objects of the material world. The mind necessarily thinks of the supersensible concepts of God, freedom, and soul, but the knowledge of them is not the same as knowledge of the material world which is given in experiences. Although knowledge of the supersensible cannot be proved, it can be thought—it forces itself into our consciousness.

Knowledge of supersensible objects is concerned with the questions, "What shall we do and what may we hope?" instead of "What can we know?" The questions of purpose and destiny demand that a person rise above the world of sense experience.

The Christian answer to the question of knowledge

John's Gospel presents Christ as the Logos (the Word). The Word of the invisible God became visible; "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (1:14). In Jesus Christ, the glory of the invisible Father took on the form by which men could know God through the senses of sight, hearing, and feeling. God's grace and truth were manifested in the sensible world through his Son who was born in the flesh. Apart from Jesus Christ, religion may be elusive and abstract. Through the birth of the Son of God in Bethlehem, the nature and relation of God and man became concrete and comprehensible.

²Supersensible refers to that which is immaterial, hence it is not apparent to the senses; the spiritual realm.

<p><i>Kant believed that we can only know things as they are _____ and _____ for us by the action of the _____ itself.</i></p> <p><i>(modified, transformed, mind)</i></p>
<p><i>Define supersensible. _____</i></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p><i>(Compare your answer with the footnote.)</i></p>
<p><i>John believed the _____ God can be known sensibly because He took on _____ form.</i></p> <p><i>(invisible, visible)</i></p>

to be distinguished from nature. Man's destiny is to be assimilated (absorbed) back into nature. Neither man nor God is a spiritual personality who transcends material existence.

Pantheism does not leave room for the existence of a god who created the world in the beginning. Neither does it allow man to be created in the image of God. The distinct characteristics of man are no more than the intelligence of the universe being expressed in individuals. Pantheists do not deny there is a God, but they identify Him with the material. There is little practical difference between the pantheistic and the materialistic views of the universe. One view gives the name 'god' to the universe while the other denies that name for material or any other kind of existence.

Personalism

A fourth view holds that personal spirit is the source of material existence. The personal Spirit, God, created and rules over natural existence. God created man from the material of the universe, but He placed an element of His own likeness or image in man (Gen. 1:26f.). Man has affinities with both created material and the Creator God. Man's body is from the created material, but his spiritual personality is in the image of God. Because man's spiritual personality is in the likeness or image of God, it gives an indication of the nature of God as spirit. Man relates to the material world through the five senses of the body, and he relates to God "in spirit and in truth."

Personalism differs from materialism in holding to a higher spiritual reality which is the source of the material. Material existence is related to the spiritual personality as the created is to the Creator.

In contrast to agnosticism, the personalistic view holds that the spiritual personality beyond the world can be known. By giving man His image, God placed man on a level of existence whereby there can be spiritual fellowship. The supersensible spiritual personality made Himself known in the Son by assuming a material body through which His personality was expressed. To look upon the material form of Jesus' body would not be to know God. To encounter the Christ who expressed his life and nature through the body is to know the Father. Since God is personal, His highest manifestation to man had to be in terms of a person. Personalism differs from agnosticism in that God can be known and is revealed as a personal being in His Son.

Is this statement true or false?

Pantheists believe man is a spiritual personality. _____

(false)

Pantheism does not accept man's creation in the image of _____.

The Pantheistic view of the universe is similar to the M _____ view.

(God, Materialistic)

Read the balance of the page before attempting to fill in the following blanks.

Personalism says that reality is both _____ and _____.

God is _____ and _____.

Man is a _____, spiritual being.

Religion is a personal relation to _____.

Future hope is for eternal fellowship with _____ through Christ.

(material, spiritual, personal, spiritual, physical, God, God)

Personalism differs from pantheism in that God stands apart from the world as Creator and Sustainer of the world instead of being identified with the world. The immaterial God brought the material into existence, not as a part of His own nature and being, but as an entity separate from Himself.

Methods of Knowledge

The a priori method

'A priori' refers to knowing by reason alone prior to sense experience. This is the method of philosophy. Man attempts to determine by reason alone where his concept of God and the relation of God and man originated. This concept is also called the speculative method. The a priori method deals with the questions whether it is possible to know God and how man can know God.

The empirical approach to knowledge

The empiricists claim that all data for knowledge comes from sense experiences. The method of science begins with facts known through sense experiences and seeks to explain and organize the facts on the basis of a cause and effect relationship.

The pragmatic approach

Pragmatism rejects the speculative or intellectual approach that the truth of ideas is a property independent of human experience. Pragmatists say truth is something that happens to an idea rather than being a fixed property of an idea. Unlike the theologians who insist upon the truth of certain religious beliefs and the scientifically-inclined persons who insist upon determining the truth of reality by the latest scientific findings, the pragmatists are concerned with examining the practical value of a belief or theory. They do not rule out either speculative or experiential knowledge if it works to the benefit of man. Unfortunately, the standard of what works is not clearly defined. One man may believe that his financial difficulties are solved by bank-robbing. Some people believe that being religious is beneficial and others believe that the non-religious life is the better way. Both cannot be true.

The Christian view

Ultimate truth is not determined by speculative reasoning nor personal experiences. Man can learn from experience and must use his reasoning powers

A priori means to _____ by _____
alone prior to sense _____.

(know, reason, experience)

The empirical approach to knowledge is that
all _____ for _____ comes
from _____ experiences.

(data, knowledge, sense)

The pragmatic approach accepts as truth either
_____ or _____
knowledge if it works.

(speculative, experiential)

to evaluate experiential knowledge, but knowledge of the Ultimate Being is through revelation. God has revealed the ethical standards for man's conduct and the values and purpose of his life. By faith man knows God, who reveals Himself, without actually understanding how he knows God. The assurance of knowing God brings practical results which are satisfying. Receiving and using knowledge which comes through revelation satisfies the pragmatic test of truth. There are many things which man does not understand, but lack of understanding does not rob him of a meaningful life. He does not understand how the food he eats becomes part of the living cells of his body, but his lack of understanding does not prevent growth and satisfaction.

Two Factors in Knowledge

The object

Man does not understand how mind knows matter, but he is convinced that there must be an object before the mind can know it. In religion, God must be objectively real for man to know Him. If there is no God to know, religion is only an illusion.

The subject

The person who knows is referred to as the subject. Man as a person distinguishes himself from objects which he knows. In self-knowledge, man is both the subject who knows and the object which is known.

Conditions for Knowing God

God's self-disclosure

Since God stands outside the world which He created and cannot be known directly through sense experiences, He must make Himself known to man before man can know Him. God's activity in making Himself known to man is called revelation. Revelation is not man's discovery of God but God's self-disclosure of Himself to man. God has placed Himself within the range of man's ability to know.

The image of God in man

Man must have the capacity to apprehend God who discloses Himself to him. The Bible teaches that man is created in God's image and has the

You have read a description of four methods of knowledge. Now match the description with the method.

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a priori | 1. All data for knowledge comes from sense experiences. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> empirical | 2. Man accepts as truth either speculative or experiential knowledge if it works. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> pragmatic | 3. Man knows God through revelation. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christian | 4. Man can know by reason alone prior to sense experience. |

(4, 1, 2, 3)

In all knowledge, there must be an _____ and a _____.

(object, subject)

Define revelation. _____

Revelation is (man's, God's) activity.
CHOOSE ONE

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Kant (1724-1904)

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(modified, transformed, mind)

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(Compare your answer with the footnote.)

John believed the _____ God can be known sensibly because He took on _____ form.
(invisible, visible)

The Question of Knowledge and

General World Views

A world view is concerned with man's understanding of the origin, movement, and plan of his universe. Is the fundamental reality of the world material or spiritual?

Materialism

In our age of science, much emphasis is placed on knowing and proving reality through the scientific method. Many people (philosophical positivists) conclude there is no reality which cannot be proved through scientific experiments and known through sensory perception. Scientific knowledge is the only genuine or valid form of knowledge. This view reduces existence either to matter or some manifestation or product of matter. Life is no more than "the result of the working of material energy under the law of mechanical necessity."³

Materialism is the world view of Communism. It is also the philosophy underlying Freudian psychoanalysis which attributes man's thoughts and anxieties to energy derived from the chemical changes of matter within the body. Freud believed that religion is an illusion. Communists say that religion is a superstition which the capitalists use to control and enslave the masses of people. They believe that progress in the world is dependent on scientific accomplishments. As soon as man makes sufficient progress and has his material and economic needs met, he will no longer need religion.

Materialism offers no future hope because the soul or spirit (life generated by the working of material energy) ceases to exist when the material body ceases to function. Man should not base the standard of right and wrong on the moral requirements commanded by God who does not exist nor the question of future judgement. Right and wrong are determined by that which satisfies the physical and sensible needs of man. The differences in world views of Communist and Western nations make it difficult for agreements to be reached.

Man is both material and spiritual. One of his great problems is keeping the proper balance between the two. Jesus often warned of the error of selling one's soul to gain the world.

³W. T. Conner, Revelation and God (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1936), p. 37.

Materialism says that existence or reality is _____ or some manifestation or product of _____.
(matter, matter)

This world view believes that man's thoughts and anxieties are attributed to _____ derived from the _____ changes within the _____.
Materialism holds that religion is an _____ or a _____.
(matter, chemical, body, illusion, superstition)

Are the following statements true or false?
Materialism believes in a future hope because the spirit ceases to exist when the body ceases to function. _____
This world view does not believe that God exists. _____
(false, true)

Agnosticism

'Agnostic' comes from the word which means 'not to know' or 'to be ignorant of'. The word 'gnostic' means 'knowledge'. The 'a' prefixed to the word gives it the opposite meaning. In Athens, Paul saw an altar with the inscription, "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23). God has ended the time of the 'agnoias' (ignorance or not knowing), for all men can know the Lord through Christ. (See Acts 17:30f.)

Agnostics or sceptics do not deny the possible existence of a supersensible Being, but they deny that His nature can be known. Agnosticism can be pro-theistic or anti-theistic. Sir William Hamilton (1788-1856) held the position of denying that God can be known while affirming that God ought to be believed in. Other agnostics conclude that since man cannot know supersensible reality, he should not believe. Since man cannot know God, he cannot establish a relationship with Him. Religion is reduced to the attitude of reverence and awe towards the universe or the unknowable God behind nature. For the agnostic, the religious experience cannot include the total man—intellect, emotions, and volition. Since man cannot know, religion is reduced to sentiment or feeling.

A religious experience which includes response only of the feelings and will becomes perverted and degenerates. It may take the direction of mysticism which emphasizes the emotions and equates emotionalism with spirituality. It may emphasize moral activity which reduces religion to legalistic rules.

Pantheism

This word comes from the Greek *pan* (all) and *theos* (god). It means that God is in all. He is the mind or soul of the universe and cannot be distinguished from material existence. Pantheists claim that to think of God as a personal being with self-consciousness and self-determination, such as we have, is to make God a projection of man or a form of magnified man (anthropomorphism). This way of thinking places human limitation upon God.

Pantheists believe that God is the soul of the universe and nature is the sensible manifestation of God. Just as soul and body are united in man, so the soul of the universe (God) is united with the material existence. God cannot be known apart from nature.

Pantheism denies there is a personal God who transcends nature. To express awe and reverence towards nature is to worship God. Since He is not a distinct personality, man is not a personality.

What does agnostic mean? _____

(not to know)

Agnostics believe God (can, cannot) be known.
CHOOSE ONE

(cannot)

For the agnostic, religion is merely an attitude of _____ and _____ towards the _____ or the unknowable _____ behind nature. Religion is no more than _____ or _____.

(reverence, awe, universe, God, sentiment, feeling)

Pantheists (do, do not) think of God as a
CHOOSE ONE
personal being. He is the mind or _____ of the _____ and cannot be distinguished from _____ existence.

(do not, soul, universe, material)

Is this statement true or false?

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(true)

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(object, subject)

Define revelation. _____

Revelation is (man's, God's) activity.
CHOOSE ONE

(Compare your answers with the text.)

capacity for spiritual fellowship with Him. The image of God in man includes the capacity of man to know his Creator.

Man Can Know God

Man's origin

The Bible account of man's origin regards him as capable of knowing God. It does not give a detailed description of his origin, but it affirms that God is the cause and source of man's existence. In the Genesis account of Creation, the writer notes that the creation of man required a special activity (see 1:26ff.). With regard to the previous creative acts, the Scripture states, "And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creatures after his kind ... " (1:24), and "God created ... " (1:21). The writer implies that the natural laws of reproduction are related to God's continuing creation. When the author comes to the creation of man, a new statement appears: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (1:26a). The Creation account in Genesis 2 identifies man's body with the material world: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (2:7). Of no other creature is it stated that God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."

A description or definition of the image of God in man is difficult to give. One element is probably the authority of man over the rest of creation. God has authority over all creation, including man, and man has been given dominion over other created things. The writer probably intended for the statement that God made man in His own image to convey the concept that man has the capacity for communication and fellowship with his Creator. The author makes reference to God's Word to living creation to bring forth (reproduce) after its kind (God is the source of the natural law of reproduction). Only to man does God give direct commands. Man is subject to natural law but he rises above it and is personally responsible to God. The writer implies that the presence of God in the Garden and His communication with Adam were normal occurrences (3:8ff.). The Creation account teaches:

1. Since man's body is made from the dust of the earth, he is related to material existence.
2. Since man is created in the image of God, he has the capacity to know and to enter into fellowship with his Creator.

The Bible (does, does not) give a detailed
CHOOSE ONE
account of man's origin, but it does affirm
that God is the _____ and _____
of man's existence.

(does not, cause, source)

What two facts are implied in man's creation
in God's image.

(Man has authority over the rest of creation,
Man has the capacity for communication and
fellowship with God.)

Man's nature

Although man is both spiritual and physical in nature, the two elements of his nature are not to be distinguished sharply. Man's physical body is essential to the expression of his spiritual being. His body establishes a vital relationship to the material existence. His body came from dust and shall return to dust. The image of God in man explains his likeness and relationship to God. Man, like God, has intelligence, the ability to make decisions, and the ability to love. Man is not perfect love like God nor is he perfect in his loyalty to obedience and truth. Nevertheless, he is a spiritual person like God. He is a moral being who has the awareness of right and wrong, but he also has a free will by which he can choose to do the wrong. He has the intellectual power to analyse and contemplate upon his present and future existence. He has the ability to love in the sense of having concern for the well-being of the other person. These qualities are, apparently, part of the essence of the spiritual personality of both man and God. These qualities separate man from the animal kingdom.

The relation and balance between the spiritual and material elements of man's nature pose serious problems for man. He is constantly tempted to give the greater attention to the material. He has been permitted to work six days in providing for the physical needs of his life, but he has been commanded to devote one-seventh of his time to his spiritual nature—his relationship to God. Since the physical is tangible and the spiritual is elusive, man often neglects to give attention and nurture to his spiritual growth.

Man is religious in nature. He is able to know God and responds to God because it is an innate (inborn) quality of his nature to pray and worship. Those who rationalize that there is no God immediately create substitute gods for the Creator. Either man makes himself god as creator of his own idols or he gives his loyalty and devotion to some part of creation. Man's actions show that he is religious by nature.

The Incarnation of Jesus shows that man is capable of understanding and responding to a personal God who made Himself known in His Son. Man's Christian experience and his awareness of the presence of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit reveal that man is capable of a knowledge of and a fellowship with God.

Man is both _____ and _____
in nature. However, can these two elements
in man be separated? _____

(spiritual, physical, no)

Why does man often neglect his spiritual
growth and nurture the physical?

(The physical is tangible and the spiritual
is elusive.)

How do we know man is religious by nature?

(It is his nature to pray and to worship.)

Home Study Exercises

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, 3). Answer the following questions based on the study guide.

1. What do empiricists believe? _____

2. Why is the question of knowledge important to the student of theology? _____

3. What is epistemology? _____

4. Match the following concepts with the person or belief:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ___ Kant | 1. The invisible God can be sensibly known because He took on visible form |
| ___ Nominalism | 2. The real is the Ideas or Forms. |
| ___ Realism | 3. Things can only be known as they are modified and transformed for us by the action of the mind itself. |
| ___ Plato | 4. The universal Idea is the real and is present in all created forms. |
| ___ Apostle John | 5. The Universal Idea is only the name of a mental concept which has no objective reality. |

5. Discuss briefly the following world views, giving something of their beliefs concerning the nature of reality, God, man, religion, and future hope.

(1) Materialism: _____

(2) Agnosticism: _____

(3) Pantheism: _____

(4) Personalism: _____

6. What is the a priori method of knowledge? _____

7. What is the empirical approach to knowledge? _____

8. What is the pragmatic approach to knowledge? _____

9. What is the Christian claim for knowledge of Ultimate Being? _____

10. Name the two factors in all knowledge. _____
11. Define revelation and tell why it is essential for man to know God. _____

12. Give two implications of the image of God in man. (1) _____
_____ (2) _____

13. Name two elements of man's nature. _____
14. What evidence is there that man was made with a religious nature? _____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3):

1. Compare and contrast materialism and pantheism.
2. How does personalism resemble and differ from the other three world views?
3. Read pages 29-41 in Christian Doctrine by Shirley C. Guthrie and answer the following questions:
 - (1) List the characteristics of creeds and confessions.
 - (2) Why do creeds need correcting? Does your denomination recognize creeds as authoritative?

Advanced activity (Level 3):

1. Describe the function of reason in the four ways of knowing as discussed in this lesson.
2. Why is the doctrine of "man in God's image" important to the question of man's knowledge of God?
3. What is the theologian's task? (See Guthrie.)
4. Read pages 37-45 and 170-176 in Shaping Your Faith by C. W. Christian and answer the following questions:
 - (1) Why does the Church need a "well-thought-out" theology?
 - (2) Explain the challenges to faith caused by "man's self-sufficiency" and "finding a place for God" in the universe.

Optional reading: Revelation and God by Conner, pages 34-54.

Seminar Discussion

1. Why is the question of knowledge important to the theologian?
2. How does man know?
3. How does man know God?
4. Does one's world view influence his concept of religion?
5. Is man's knowledge of God through religious experience empirical, a priori or speculative, or pragmatic?