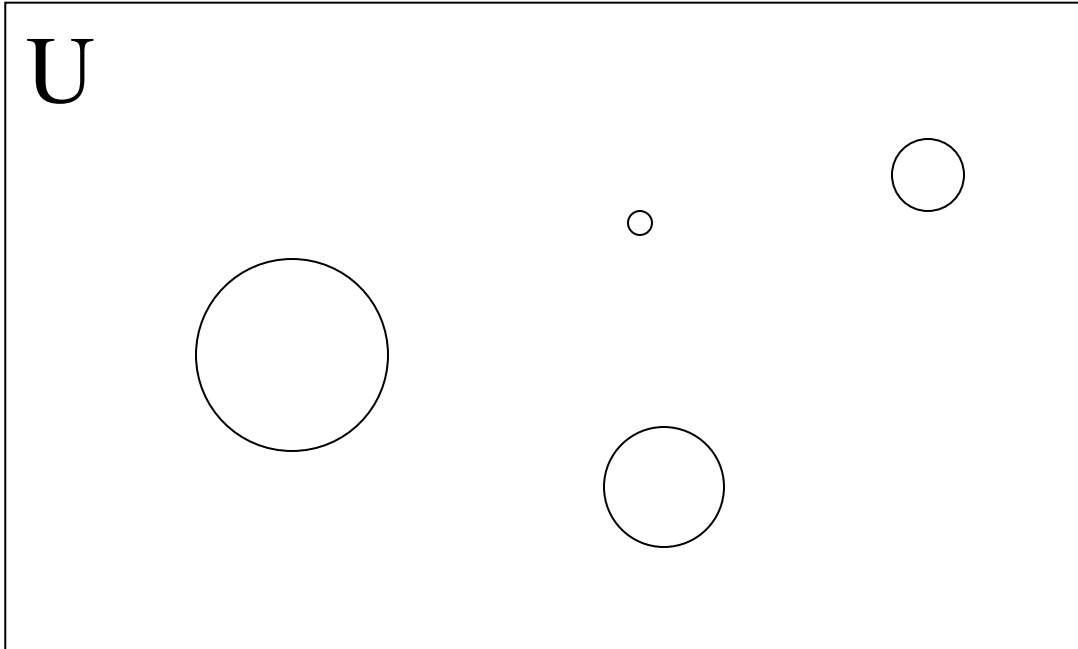


The Humility Bubble Lesson

The teacher begins class with his back to the class, marking on the board. Soon, the board looks like this—



The teacher turns around and smiles. “Today, we’re going back to high school and learning a lesson from Algebra 1!” The students greet this message with a chorus of boos and hisses. A paper wad is hurled from the back—and this is a class of 30-year olds!

“Venn diagrams, actually,” the teacher continues, nonplussed. “We won’t do any equations.”

“The ‘U’ stands for universe—not the universe we live in, but the universe of knowledge. The board represents everything that anyone could possibly know, or more precisely, this is what God knows.”

“The circles are the information that various individuals know. Actually, they’re all too big, compared to God’s knowledge, but I had to make them big enough to see.”

“You’ll notice that some are bigger than others, because some people know more than other people do.” The teacher approaches the board and points inside a circle.

“Okay, the area inside the circle is what this person knows. The area outside is what he doesn’t know. ... What’s the circle ... the perimeter?” He indicates the circumference with his finger.

The class isn’t very sure how to respond. One student says, “Well, it’s the boundary between knowledge and, I guess, ignorance.”

“Very true,” the teacher says. “This is where what I know ends and where what I don’t know begins. What’s another way to look at it?”

After a couple of more guesses, a woman in front lights up. “I know! It’s what you don’t know and know you don’t know! That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely right,” the teacher smiles. But the class looks very uncertain. And so he continues, “The perimeter is the information you don’t know but because it’s on the edge of your knowledge, you know you don’t know this. Information that’s farther out is so far beyond you, you don’t even know the information exists.

“Notice that the more someone knows, the bigger the circle gets. As we age and mature, we learn more and more stuff, and we become aware of more and more things we don’t know.

“When we had our first child, we read a baby book or two and figured we knew everything there was to know about children. Now that we have a teenager, we know *vastly* more, and yet we feel more ignorant than ever because we also know much more about what we *don’t* know! I become more aware of my child-rearing ignorance every day!”

A couple of amen’s resound from the back of the room, and the class laughs.

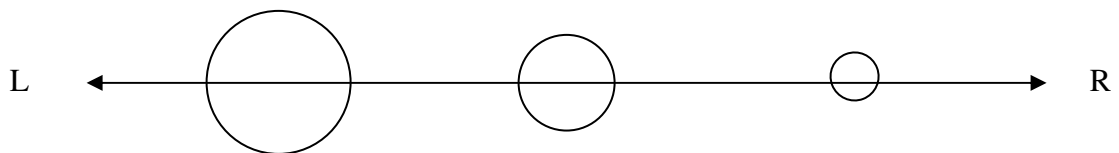
“Oddly enough, therefore, for most people, the more you know of a subject, the more you are aware of your limitations. In fact, the more you know, the more humble you should be. That’s certainly true about parenting, isn’t it?

“On the other hand, in those areas where we’re incredibly ignorant, we often think we are experts! I mean, how many of us consider ourselves more qualified than the head football coach when it comes to picking the starting quarterback?

“The fact is that we never see the quarterbacks in practice or in the film room or break down the tapes, and yet we just *assume* we know all there is to know, when we only know how the second string quarterback looked in the spring game.

“Anyway, the point is that knowledge leads to humility and ignorance leads to arrogance. The more certain we are that we know everything, that we have absolutely the last and final word, the more certain it is that we are actually *unaware* of how very little we know. We may not even know the *questions*—much less the answers!

“No it’s time for another bit of geometry.” The teacher erases the board and draws this—



“This is the Great church of Christ Continuum!” announces the teacher. “The GCCC, for short.” The class looked puzzled but intrigued. He continues, “All the churches of Christ are represented somewhere on this line, aligned from left, “L,” to right, “R.” The churches are aligned based on how many laws they consider to be fellowship or salvation issues.

“A church way over here on the far right imposes lots and lots of rules. If you miss three services in a row, you go to hell. Mixed swimming, kitchens in the building, paid preachers, and bake sales are all not only wrong but damning—until repented of by specifically admitting the error and no longer participating in it.

“A church a little further left believes these are wrong, but doesn’t think anyone will be lost over these issues. A church even further left thinks these activities are, perhaps, inadvisable but not sin at all—just a matter of opinion. One more step to the left and there’s a church that thinks these things are just fine and does them all.

“Now, the church on the far right is absolutely certain they are right. In fact, they think they have the right position on every single issue that God cares about. They have no doubt at all. Therefore, they have a very small humility bubble. Obviously enough, the reason they are so certain is there just aren’t many things they know that they don’t know. For this to be true, they have to not know very much at all. As a result, they don’t consider anyone else saved unless they agree on almost everything—or else they are even further to the right. To go to heaven, you have to be in their humility bubble or to their right. After all, there’s nothing wrong with binding where God doesn’t bind.

“The next church over is just a bit more tolerant. There are a few things they aren’t so sure of. This has to be because they know more of what they don’t know. They are somewhat more knowledgeable and therefore more humble. As a result, a church can be a little bit to their left and still be saved. This next church just isn’t 100% sure about some questions, so they have room in their bubble for a few more churches. Of course, they fellowship all the churches on their right, too.

“The church with biggest bubble is the most tolerant. They are aware of more things they aren’t too sure about, and so they gladly extend grace quite a bit to their left. Nonetheless, they won’t go but so far, since they are entirely sure about some things, and there’s no reason to extend grace on matters where we for-sure know the answers.

“Now, notice a few things about our chart. Each church extends the right hand of fellowship to its right, and yet there’s hardly anyone over there reaching back to their left! The church on the far left would gladly fellowship all the churches to its right, but hardly any of the guys on the right think these guys on the left are even saved. Therefore, there really is *no fellowship at all*.

“Also, notice how very subjective this is. As I learn more and more from my Bible study, I find out that those guys down the road are wrong. Yesterday, I wasn’t so sure, so we disagreed on a ‘disputable matter,’ and we were both saved. Then I read a

great article, became certain of my belief, and that church down the road became damned in their sins!

“The more I study, the more I lose fellowship with other churches. After a while, I’m afraid to learn any more for fear of being in heaven all alone!

“Of course, this assumes I’m learning doctrinal positions rather than the deeper truths of God. If I was instead learning more and more about my God, then as I learn more and more, I’d become more and more like God and so I’d become more and more humble—and forgiving.

“Of course, God’s grace doesn’t depend on my level of knowledge. Nor is it my place to extend grace at all. Rather, *God* extends his grace, and I have to treat all who are within God’s grace as brothers, even if they are wrong or ignorant or stupid.

“Now, class, just how big is God’s humility bubble?”

The class wasn’t quite ready for a question, as the teacher had been dominating the conversation. “Well,” a student offered, “since God knows everything—right?—it fills the board. But I’m not entirely clear how God can be humble?”

Another student said, “It’s not like God can be unsure of what he knows. I mean, he knows everything and he knows he knows everything.”

The teacher paused to reflect and then responded, “Those are really good points. Clearly, God knows everything, and so God’s bubble is as big as the board. It’s so big, there’s not even room for a line, when means there’s nothing God doesn’t know and so there’s nothing that God knows he doesn’t know.

“If we define ‘humility’ as knowing that there’s a lot of things you don’t know, then God can’t be humble. But Jesus was. He said in Matthew 11:29, ‘I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’ It seems like a paradox for Jesus to be humble, as he is all powerful and all knowing.

“But there’s another way of looking at humility that is more Biblical. Turn to Romans 12:3,

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

“Paul doesn’t say think badly of yourself. Rather, he says to think accurately about yourself. Humility is not the same thing as low self-esteem. Humility is assessing who you truly. In the next few verses, Paul tells the Romans to use their gifts in God’s service. His point is that you can’t use your gifts if you don’t realize what they are. You don’t honor God by looking down on your abilities. He wants you to recognize what he’s

given you so you can use those gifts. But humility is recognizing that your talents are *gifts* and not boasting in your abilities.

“Now God has no problem accurately assessing himself, and in that sense, God’s humble. And so, even though God is God Almighty, God is a servant to his people. He’s not too good to even give his Son for us. This is true humility—the willingness to give up what you have in the service of someone you love who doesn’t deserve your love.

The teacher draws a circle all the way around the board. “Here’s God humility circle. And so, class, whom does God fellowship?”

“Everybody?” a student suggested.

“Everybody?” the teacher responded.

Another student said, “No, not everybody. It’s everybody on the line. The Great Church of Christ whatever you called it.”

“Right!” the teacher beamed. “The Great Church of Christ Continuum. God’s bubble covers the whole line. To be on the line you have to be a church of Christ, that is, one of Christ’s churches. You have to be a body of baptized, penitent, believers—people who’ve heard, believed, repented, confessed, and been baptized. And, obviously enough, they have to have remained true to the faith and their commitment to make Jesus Lord. But that still makes the bubble very, very big.

“Now for the easy question: If this is how big God’s bubble is, how big should ours be?”

“Just as big,” several students said together. They looked at each other and laughed. One of them said, “We didn’t actually plan that, you know.” The class broke out laughing.

The teacher looked at his watch and saw that it was time to wrap up. “Here’s the thing. When we judge other congregations, we make several mistakes. The first one is to tolerate those more legalistic on our right but to damn those less tolerant on our left. But it’s just as wrong to loose where God doesn’t loose as to bind where God doesn’t bind. Imposing the traditions of men as though they were the laws of God is condemned in the Bible. So is treating God’s laws and something to be trifled with and ignored.

“That being the case, where is the safe place on the line? As a church leader, where can I position the church and be certain I’ve not imposed too many laws and not failed to impose enough laws?”

“Plainly, until I’m as smart as God, I’m always at risk of being too far right or too far left. Plainly, as long as I’m counting on my intellect to save my church, my church is in big trouble.

“The only safety is in God’s grace. Now to *be* in God’s grace, I have to always deeply want to do God’s will. I have to let God word dwell in my heart and mold me. I have to be open to his instruction. I can’t be willfully ignorant and I can’t ever stop studying.

“But I’m studying to be saved. I *am* saved. I’m studying to honor my God because from the deepest fiber of my being, that’s all I want to do! That’s what it means to repent.

“And here’s the lesson. For me to expect God to save me despite my doctrinal mistakes, I have to treat everyone else on the line the way I want to be treated. It’s the Sermon on the Mount. It’s the Golden Rule. It’s ‘Judge not that ye be not judged.’ It’s actually pretty elementary stuff.

“And when those ‘digressives’ on my right refuse to build a kitchen in their building, they’re binding a law God doesn’t bind. I have no business treating them as deserving salvation, because they don’t. But they inconvenience themselves to honor God, and God accepts them by grace. When God looks at them, he sees his perfect Son, and he saves them.

“When those ‘disgressives’ on my left replace beautiful congregational singing with a rock band, they’re making a mistake. They don’t deserve to go the heaven because they’ve badly misunderstood God’s will. But they brought in that band in an effort to reach the lost for Jesus, and God judges the heart, and so he accepts them. I have to accept them, too.

“Of course, I don’t approve either practice. At appropriate times and places, I try to teach both churches how to better serve God, and I hope they listen. But I’m not God, and they don’t have to listen to me. And as you all well know, I’m not always that persuasive. Sometimes I’m too blunt. And they don’t go to hell because they dare to disagree with me.

“But—and I’ve done this—as I sit down with them and discuss our respective views of Christianity, I’m often astounded how touching their traditions opens my eyes to whole new ways of looking at God. They sometimes wrestle with issues and perspectives that never even occur to me to think about—much less have the right position on!

“So maybe as we leave today we are all know a little more about God and so are a little more humble—and maybe just a little more accepting.

“I’ll see you all next week.”