

WEEK 1

Introduction

This is not a class on apologetics. Apologetics is the Christian endeavor which seeks to prove the rationality of faith, or defend the Christian faith against accusations of incoherence, inconsistency, or falsehood. While apologetics is an interesting and worthy pursuit, it is not the subject of this class. Nor is this a comparative religions class, as we won't be diving with any depth into the thought of any other specific faith traditions.

Instead, this class will look at sensibilities which seem to exist in humans of all times, places, and cultures. Specifically, we will seek to identify "universal sensibilities" that push us to seek after God. These might be described as longings, desires, nagging suspicions, or just a deep-seeded *sense* that there is a God. These universal sensibilities have existed throughout the history of humanity, and they take specific shapes in the lives, thoughts, and hearts of different faith traditions.

How does Christianity speak to these universal sensibilities? And how do these Christian teachings align with the reality that we know and experience? Do they seem *true* to us? And how do they differ from the ways other faith traditions have spoken to those same sensibilities (if they have)?

Why does being a *Christian* set us on a path to having these universal longings and existential anxieties answered? And what can we expect if we follow this man named Jesus?

1. Transcendence, Eternity, and Salvation

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to allow the soul to escape or rise above the pain, illusions, and physical limitations of the material world. The unshakeable sense that this is not "all there is", but coupled with the lingering suspicion that all is not right. More than the desire to simply transcend, this is also the deep longing for rescue and eternal salvation – life beyond that "great enemy" of death. While the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, there is a deep longing and hope within us that the infinite is not only possible, but approachable, touchable, connected, and attainable.
- **Christian Teaching:** The Reformed tradition rejects notions of escaping away into secret mysticism, or any idea that the world we experience is anything less than real – though it readily embraces the notion that "there is so much *more*" (1 Cor 2). Instead, it acknowledges that this world is currently fractured by sin (Gen 3; Rom 8), encouraging believers to anchor their ultimate hope in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, our future bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15), and

the final consummation of Christ's Kingdom (as opposed to the kingdom[s] of this world) (Rev 11 & 21). God is both transcendent and imminent, meaning that the transcendent exists, but that it providentially reaches toward us, incarnates in our midst, actively lives within and around us, and graciously self-reveals (John 1; Acts 17). This incarnational revelation leads to salvation, guaranteeing the defeat of death and eternal life that our souls yearn for (1 Cor 15). In a twist, this transcendence and eternal life is not attainable on our own merits, but on the merits of Jesus Christ, who is the Incarnate Savior of the world (Eph 2).

WEEK 2

2. Divine Benefits

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to negotiate with, experience, and receive immediate power, help, health, and security from the divine in the present life. This is the hope that if the gods are worshiped, followed, and appeased, they will take care of us. More than this, it is the hope that blessing – material and spiritual – will come our way if we rightly relate to “the ones in control”. More than just the simple hope or expectation of reward, this is sensibility suggests good things come to those who deserve it, providing a sense of order, meaning, motivation, and promise in both our lives and the cosmos – both of which can often feel out of our control.
- **Christian Teaching:** Divine benefits cannot be negotiated, nor do they *tend* to be a response by God to some favorable action or behavior, according to Scripture (Job 41; Rom 11). Instead, the sovereign God graciously bestows blessing upon his children because it is in God’s nature to do so – it is what God wants for us (Gen 1). Eternal blessing was the original design, before sin entered in and messed with the plan. The righteous being blessed is in the natural framework of creation (Proverbs), but the fallen world and fallen individuals within it do not always follow the rules (Ecc 9). The story of Redemption returns us to eternal blessing, though this world and its distorted, disorientated framings can make the opposite true in the interim (Job 21). Jesus’ calling to follow him guarantees neither blessing or safety, and he in fact suggests it may involve the opposite: suffering, persecution, rejection, and self-imposed humility (Matt 16; Philp 1). God acts within creation, providentially blessing us through the Holy Spirit’s inhabiting of our hearts and communities, as well as “ordinary means of grace” found in sacraments, Scripture, prayer, charity, and Christian fellowship (Acts 2; 1 Cor 10).

3. Peril Avoidance

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire for existential insulation and mitigation against catastrophe, whether immediate or ultimate. Historically and culturally, this manifests as a pragmatic effort to appease the divine to avert temporal disasters—such as famine, economic ruin, or illness—or as a calculated metaphysical insurance policy (akin to Pascal’s Wager) to escape eternal condemnation. At its core, it is the pursuit of a protective canopy against the vulnerabilities of a fragile existence and the fearful unknowns of death and the afterlife, including our hope that the shame and guilt of our misdeeds will not be held against us.
- **Christian Teaching:** Initially, same response as above: the wicked being punished is built into the natural order of God’s good creation, but sin (on individual, communal, and cosmic levels) throws wrenches in the cogs. Our

faithful response to God should transcend mere damage control or “fire insurance”, and be borne out of Spirit-given belief, grateful response, and faithful obedience. This grateful response is to the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ – that sin has been forgiven, reconciliation made possible, eternal life secured, and (eventually) wrongs made right. Reformed theology acknowledges the reality of sin, God’s anger concerning sin, and the according divine judgment (Rom 2), but shifts the believer’s posture from fear-driven appeasement to faith-driven assurance. Because Christ has fully endured and exhausted the penalty for sin, the believer is delivered from the paralyzing anxiety of legalistic box-checking (Rom 8). Security is no longer a fragile human negotiation to ward off peril, but an irreversible, blessed reality achieved by grace (John 10) and by God alone, allowing obedience to flow from perfect peace rather than panic (Luke 7; Rom 12).

4. Moral Transformation

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to use religious teaching and spiritual power as a vehicle for ethical growth, virtue, and personal character development. How can I grow as a person? And if I grow, how can I be sure I am growing into something *better*? More than a desire for self-improvement, this is about moving from complacency to calling, from broken to mended, from happy to deeply satisfied.
- **Christian Teaching:** Moral, ethical, and spiritual growth is a cooperative effort between God and human beings (Ezek 36; Philp 2), but success is driven primarily by the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5) through a process known as sanctification (from the Latin *sanctificationem* – *sanctus* + *facere* – “to be made holy”). Good deeds cannot merit us salvation, faith in Christ’s atoning sacrifice alone secures our salvation, by the grace of God. Growing in personal piety and character is thus a lifelong project with daily rewards (and possibly eternal ones), though this is less a motivation than joyful response, willing submission, and the intentional placement of Jesus Christ as Lord over our lives (Luke 9; Rom 12). These daily rewards come in the form of deep satisfaction, growth in wisdom, and healthy relationships (both human and divine) (Ps 1; John 15). Ultimately, no amount of growth arrives us at a place sufficient to merit salvation – we all still fall short of the glory of God – so it is Jesus’ righteousness that is granted to us through divine propitiation – the “great exchange” where Christ receives our sin and we receive his righteousness (2 Cor 5; 1 John 4).

WEEK 3

5. Societal Stabilization

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to protect and maintain the existing social, civic, and political order through corporate religious devotion and public ritual. A desire to place oneself within a community of belief in the hope that shared belief will mean security, and security will mean survival. Beyond this, shared belief provides the architecture of civility and mutually held agreement – from manners to laws to allegiance. This desire is about transcending communal agreement to abiding covenant; moving beyond shared activity to sacred ritual.
- **Christian Teaching:** Christianity expresses this desire through the Great Commission (Matt 28) and public theology. Christians do not isolate themselves from society; they actively engage in governance, law, education, and social justice (Matt 5). They seek to bring orderly flourishing to the public square to reflect the righteous rule of God over every square inch of creation (Ps 24; Col 1). The sense of civic duty and societal security is found by aligning the kingdom of this world with the Kingdom of God (Amos 5; Mic 6; John 18), not through theocracy or divine appointment, but through mission and evangelism, allowing the Gospel to transform the culture (Rom 12), society, and governmental authority through Spirit-led sanctification and prophetic justice (Jer 29).

6. Identity Finding

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to discover an anchor for self-identification, discovery, and purpose. In a world of shifting definitions and constantly changing ideological fads, who – really – am I? And what am I here for?
- **Christian Teaching:** Roots human identity firmly in the doctrines of unconditional Election and Adoption (Eph 1). This is the belief that we are loved by God, chosen for service, and adopted into the family of God as co-heirs of Christ's inheritance (Rom 8). Believers do not carry the exhausting modern burden of inventing themselves; their identity is a secure gift from God (1 John 3). We are defined not by biological characteristics (race, gender, physical appearance, etc) (Gal 3; Col 3), but primarily as "one who is created in God's image (Gen 1) and loved (John 3)". We find purpose in living out our Christian vocation – the belief that every ordinary, secular job is a sacred calling (Col 3; 1 Cor 10) to serve God and neighbor (Mark 12). One finds meaning and purpose in participation in the arriving Kingdom of God and participation in that movement (Eph 2; 1 Pet 2). Identity is found in recognizing and trusting one's place in the divine metanarrative of redemption.

7. Story Placement

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to place the human experience within a massive, overarching cosmic (Divine?) narrative to find ultimate meaning and belonging in history, as well as the story of one's life. In what way is my story a part of something larger?
- **Christian Teaching:** Christianity speaks to this through covenant theology (Heb 13) and the redemptive history (Eph 1) of God and God's people. It teaches that all of history follows a unified, unfolding metanarrative directed by God and found in Scripture (Luke 24). This One Story includes all of creation, as well as each and every individual within it. It is both humbling (you are a part of something cosmic that is not about you) (Job 38; Rom 11), glorifying (Jesus died for you and wants to be Lord of your life) (Rom 5; Gal 2), connecting (your story is part of the same story everyone else is a part of) (1 Cor 12; Eph 4), and redeeming (you have been rescued from sin, death, and eternal peril) (Rom 8; Col 1). Individual believers find their place by knowing they are living characters written into God's story of unshakeable covenant promise (Philpp 1; Heb 6).

WEEK 4

8. Ecological Relationship

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to understand one's interconnectedness to and place within creation itself. In a world (universe!) of such immensity, how does one find a place of significance within it? What is my relationship to the natural, material, embodied world in which I dwell?
- **Christian Teaching:** Begins with the idea that we are created in love (Ps 136; Eph 2) and goodness (and therefore *are* creation) (Gen 1). As divine image-bearers (Gen 1), our place in creation is set apart and favored (Ps 8), but not strictly for the purpose of blessing. We are called to stewardship of creation (Gen 1-2), giving us a significant role within the divinely ordered cosmos (Ps 24). Not only is our role significant, but each individual is, evidenced by God's redemptive work of love in Jesus Christ (John 3; Rom 5), which included incarnation, when the Creator became Creation (John 1), and God became fully human (Philpp 2; Col 1). Creation's larger purpose is to declare the glory of God (Ps 19; Isa 6), and as creation is the "theater of God's glory" (Calvin), we play a unique and vital role in the carrying out of that purpose (1 Cor 10).

9. Communal Belonging

- **Universal Sensibility:** The desire to overcome existential isolation by being woven into an accepting, deeply committed network of mutual care and shared life. This desire extends beyond security and seeks connection and belonging. How does one live a worthwhile life that is also shared? This is the desire to be seen, known, and (even unconditionally) loved by the other, and even by God. It is the desire to be a part of something bigger than oneself, not just in *story*, but in *relationship*.
- **Christian Teaching:** We are created in the image of the Triune God (Gen 1). As three-in-one, there is relationship built into the Godhead, and thus we are created and built for relationship with God and one another (Gen 2; John 17). The church is the beloved community (1 John 4), the Body of Christ in the world (1 Cor 12), and diverse family of God united in calling and faith (Eph 2). This shared faith is the foundation of a community defined by love (John 13) and charged with sharing the Gospel and being salt and light in the world (Matt 5; Matt 28). The bond of faith runs deeper than blood, class, nationality, gender, or any other difference we imagine (Gal 3; Col 3), and binds us to one another (Eph 4) in temporal work (Rom 12) and eternal redemption (Rev 7). This new community forgives one another (Col 3), bears each other's burdens (Gal 6), lifts each other in prayer (James 5), sharpens as iron (Prov 27), holds in mutual accountability (Matt 18), encourages in discipleship (1 Thess 5), blesses in generosity (Acts 2), hopes in suffering (Rom 5), and strives together for the Kingdom of God (Philpp 1).

10. The Longing for Teleological Meaning

- **Universal Sensibility:** The quest to find intelligibility, purpose, and cosmic intentionality within a world frequently characterized by random tragedy, seemingly haphazard luck, natural and self-inflicted catastrophe, and the crushing weight of the mundane and monotonous. Faced with the silent indifference of the universe, the human spirit exhibits an innate teleological longing—a refusal to accept that suffering is gratuitous or that daily labor is Sisyphean. It is the deep-seated desire to discover an ultimate, governing rationale that dignifies human grief, decodes historical unfolding, and imbues ordinary, repetitive existence with transcendent significance.
- **Christian Teaching:** Christian theology rejects the notion that the universe is governed by blind fate, chaotic chance, or cosmic apathy (Prov 16). Instead, it asserts that God is sovereign over all time and creation (Isa 46; Eph 1), and though events of this world seem random, inconsequential, or meaningless, all things are held in his inscrutable wisdom (Rom 11; Eph 1) and unfolding story of redemption (Rom 8). Crucially, it does not offer an explanation for the griefs and tragedies of this world; rather, it offers a Person. In Jesus Christ we find a God who knows our suffering (Isa 53) and transforms it into redemptive glory (Rom 8; Philpp 2). Christianity invites believers to rest in the goodness of a Heavenly Father (Ps 34; Matt 6) whose ultimate purpose is the cosmic renewal of all things (Rom 8; Col 1; Rev 21), transforming the mundane into a sphere of holy calling (Col 3) and assuring the suffering that their pain is never meaningless (Gen 50), but is being woven into a story of salvation (Isa 53), just as it was for the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. In him, we not only find meaning and will to live (John 10; Philpp 1), but the scars of this world point to something beautiful and transcendent (2 Cor 4; Gal 6).