

# TRUTH: ABSOLUTE OR RELATIVE?

By  
Patrick Zukeran

Is truth relative or absolute? Is there such a thing as universal and objective truth? Can any group or individual honestly say they possess the truth? The popular postmodern view today is that truth is relative. Christianity, on the other hand, is built on the premise that truth is absolute and that the teachings of the Bible are universal. The notion that truth is relative presents one of the most significant challenges facing the Church.

A survey of the American public revealed that sixty-six percent agreed with the statement, "There is no such thing as absolute truth."<sup>1</sup> Among youth, seventy percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define "truth" in conflicting ways and both be correct.<sup>2</sup> Relativism has made significant inroads into the church as well. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe an objective standard of truth exists.<sup>3</sup> For two millennia, the Church has been the guardian of truth. The Church cannot allow its foundation to be dismantled by relativism. It is important that Christians understand the nature of truth and engage relativist thinking.

## Absolute Truth

Truth that is defined as being absolute, possesses the following qualities.<sup>4</sup>

- Truth is discovered not invented
- Truth is transcultural: it can be conveyed across different cultures.
- Truth is unchanging: it can be conveyed across time.
- Beliefs cannot change a truth statement no matter how sincere one may be
- Truth is unaffected by the attitude of the one professing it
- All Truths are absolute
- Truth is knowable

In order for truth to be absolute and holding these qualities, it must be grounded in a source that is personal, unchanging, and sovereign over all creation.

## Postmodern Relativism

---

<sup>1</sup> Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173

The popular view on truth in our culture today is that objective, universal and absolute truth is implausible. Those who hold to it are often viewed with contempt. Postmodern relativists build their understanding of truth on the foundation of the naturalist worldview. Truth then has its origin in man. This leads to conclusions that differ greatly from those who hold to absolute truth. They believe:

- Truth is created not discovered. Truth is a matter of perspective and each culture or individual defines for themselves what is truth.
- Since truth is invented, there is no universal transcultural truth. Each culture or individual will define truth differently according to their background and perspective.
- Truth changes. Since it is inseparably connected to individuals and cultures which continually change, truth perpetually to changes.
- Since truth is a matter of a group or individual's perspective, one's beliefs can change a truth statement.
- Since an individual determines truth, truth is affected by the attitude of the one professing it.
- There can be no such thing as absolute truth.
- Absolute truth is not knowable. Absolute and objective truth cannot be known since it is built on the shifting foundation of man's perceptions. As each individual's perception is different, truth cannot be known.

Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

Relativism says the truth isn't fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn't discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.<sup>5</sup>

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, "The cold, hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive."<sup>6</sup> Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist leading to the conclusion that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory. Before we can present the evidences for the existence of God and Jesus Christ, apologists today must present the case for absolute truth. In the following sections, I will build a case for absolute truth.

### **Relativism's Slippery Slide**

---

<sup>4</sup> Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2004), 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.

<sup>6</sup> John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.

The philosophy of relativism should be rejected for several reasons. First of all, postmodern relativism is built on a worldview of naturalism. Relativism is a logical conclusion if man is the measure of truth and God does not exist. However, the evidence indicates we live in a theistic universe. In a theistic universe, God whose nature is truth, created a universe built on His truth that He communicates to His created beings.

Secondly, relativism is a self-defeating position. A self-defeating statement is one that fails its own standard. To say, "There are no absolute truths," is, indeed, an absolute truth statement. To say, "there is no truth," is a statement of truth. When a relativist says, "All truth is relative," we need to ask him, "Is that a relative statement?" If it is, then why should we take his statement seriously? When a relativist claims that all truth is relative and believes that all should hold this principle, he just made an absolute truth statement.

What we learn from the previous point leads us to another instance of how relativism fails. To say, "there is no truth," requires one to acknowledge a truth statement. The truth that there is no truth, is self-defeating. Thus, truth does exist and is undeniable.

The fourth fallacy of relativism is their rejection of reason as a way to determine truth. The modern era rationalism was utopian in that they believed in the possibility of establishing all truth by reason alone. Postmodern relativists reacted with a harsh skepticism toward human reason. Relativists believe that humans cannot know the true nature of reality, individuals are shaped by their culture, and no one can be objective. Therefore, many reject the idea that truth can be arrived at through reasoning. The problem relativists run into is that all theories are derived through reasoning. Theories are tested as proofs are accumulated and presented in a coherent and logical fashion. For postmodernists to arrive at their conclusion requires the use of reason. If reason is not valid, it destroys any theory that requires us to arrive at it through reasoned thinking.

Furthermore, language can communicate objective truth. Based on the naturalist worldview, postmodern relativists believe language originates with man with communication being confined within the context of a person's particular culture. They then conclude language cannot convey objective truth. However, language originates with God and it is intrinsic to His personality and nature. Through His word, He created the universe (Genesis 1:3 and John 1:1). All creation finds its origin in God's word. Mankind uses language because we are created in God's image. It is through language God creates and maintains a relationship with man.

Granted, there is a difference between God's language and human language. Human language is fallen and therefore limited. However, God continues to communicate with humans through language found in His word and through His Son. Postmodern relativists view language as a prison house since it is a cultural construct and believe there is no transcendent meaning outside the text. This is true if God does not exist. Human language may have gaps and limits but it is an overstatement to say language cannot communicate objective truth.

Veith states,

"...human language is a sign, a trace, of a divine language. Language may get in the way sometimes, but it is revelatory. Meaning is not only subjective; the external world itself grounded in the Word of God, which established its form and

gave it an objective meaning. When we study science, we are not merely making up mental models, but we are, in a sense, reading the divine language inscribed in the universe. Language is not merely a prison house; God's language can break in from the outside and give us freedom."<sup>7</sup>

The world is built on God's word, which encompasses meaning and objective truths. God has ordained language and although human language is flawed, it is rooted in His being and can communicate truths about His world. Truth exists outside of language. It exists in the mind of God.

### **How Discover Truth**

How does one come to discover truth? Truth is discovered with self-evident laws of logic called first principles. Two key principles are the Law of Non-Contradiction and the Law of Excluded Middle.

The Law of Non-Contradiction states that two opposite statements cannot both be true at the same time in the same sense.<sup>8</sup> For example, if we make the statement, "God exists," then its opposite, "God does not exist," cannot be true at the same time. If one is true, the other must be false. Humans are designed so that we cannot believe contradictory propositions.

This is a universal law that cannot be refuted. Any truth statement requires that its converse cannot be true. Postmodern relativists and pantheists reject this law but that is not the same as actually refuting the law. Those who make the appeal that the Law of Non-Contradiction does not apply to religion or morality make a statement of truth that cannot be contradicted. In order to refute the law, they must appeal to the law itself. "Any meaningful affirmation about anything at all, regardless of how cryptic, vague, paradoxical or imprecise the statement might be, if intended as true, makes implicit appeal to the principle ruling out its negation as false."<sup>9</sup>

The second law is the Law of the Excluded Middle that states that something either is or is not and there is no third alternative.<sup>10</sup> The statement, "God exists" is either true or false. There is no third choice.

Not only do we use the first principles to discover truth, we also use our senses to observe the world around us. From these observations, we draw conclusions. This process of discovery is called induction. Through logic and observation we can make conclusions that are reasonably certain but not absolutely certain. For example we can be reasonably sure that the sun will rise and set tomorrow. However, we cannot be absolutely sure since we do not have perfect knowledge of the future. But we act on our reasonably sure knowledge and make our plans. Although we may not have absolute certainty, we can discover truth and make conclusions that can be trusted.

---

<sup>7</sup> Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1994), 67-68.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, IL.: Victor Books, 1989), 271.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 296.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2004), 62.

Postmodern relativists overstate their case when they say truth cannot be known. Truth is undeniable, objective, and absolute. Truth is also narrow since its opposite is false.

### **What is truth?**

Truth is defined as that which corresponds to its object or that which describes an actual state of affairs.<sup>11</sup> Truth then is what corresponds to reality. Truth is absolute and narrow by nature because it excludes its opposite. Although relativists will argue that we cannot truly know reality, this is an exaggerated and inconsistent premise. One must know reality to be able to question the nature of one's reality.

We also live in a theistic universe with a God who is involved and understands the character of His creation. Therefore, what He says about His creation is true and authoritative. God has created man in His image with the ability to understand truth and know reality. The correspondence theory is supported in the Old and New Testament.

#### **The Old Testament Definition of Truth**

The Hebrew word for truth is *emet* and involves ideas of support and stability. From this root we derive a twofold notion of truth as faithfulness and conformity to fact.<sup>12</sup> *Emet* can also mean that which is conformed to reality in contrast to anything that would be erroneous or deceitful. *Emet* can also connote what is authentic, reliable, or simply right.<sup>13</sup>

#### **The New Testament Definition**

The New Testament word for truth is *aletheia* and retains the Hebrew idea of truth. Truth is defined as conformity to fact. It also carries with it the ideas of genuineness and opposition to falsities. John, in his gospel, develops his unique meaning where truth refers to the reality of God the Father revealed in Jesus the Son. John's understanding of truth presupposes a correspondence view of truth, but it also builds this foundation theologically by adding specific content concerning the manifestation of truth in Jesus Christ (John 7:28 and 8:16).<sup>14</sup>

Both Old and New Testament emphasize that truth is conforms to reality and is an antithesis to lies and errors. The Biblical view of truth contains the idea of factuality, faithfulness and completeness. Truth is not a cultural construct of the Jewish people or the Christians. God presented His truth to them and they were expected to live in conformity to this truth.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Biblical Character of Truth**

---

<sup>11</sup> Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2004), 37.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Nicole, "The Biblical Concept of Truth," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and John Woodridge, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1983), 290.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>14</sup> D.M. Crump, "Truth" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel Green, Scott Mcknight, and I Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 859.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL.: 2000), 64.

## **Truth is Revealed by God**

Truth finds its source in God who is personal and moral. Paul states in Romans 1 and 2, that God has revealed Himself through creation and the human conscience. God has also unveiled Himself through the Bible, His special revelation. 2 Timothy 3:16 states, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,…” God, who embodies truth, communicates His truth through language which has eternally existed with God. He uses this language to convey truth to creatures created in His image.

## **Objective Truth Exists and is Knowable**

Objective truth is truth that is not dependent on the perspective or attitudes of any individual. God’s truth is objective because truth is rooted in the nature of God who is truth. He is the source of truth and His truths are true no matter what the beliefs or attitudes an individual or culture may have towards it. Those who do not acknowledge God’s truth will be judged by it. God is just to judge people because His truth is objective and knowable. Consequently, all are accountable to respond to it.

## **Biblical Truth is Absolute**

God’s truth is absolute, meaning it is true without exception and it does not change. Beliefs change but truth itself is unchangeable. God is the author of absolute truth because He is eternal and His character does not change.

## **Truth is Universal**

God’s truth applies to all peoples and all cultures at all times because He ruler over all creation (Philippians 2:6). His authority and truths apply to every area. In the Great Commission Jesus states, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go into all the world and make disciples, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” In the Great Commission, Jesus declares His rule over all creation and the authority of His laws extends to and must be obeyed by all people.

## **Truth is Eternal**

Isaiah 40:8 states, “The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of God endures forever.” God’s truth is rooted in His eternal nature. What was true two thousand years ago, remains true to this day. The application of truth will change, but the truth itself endures forever.

## **Truth is Exclusive**

Truth is narrow and exclusive since whatever opposes it is false. God states in Isaiah 43:10 “...before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.” God is saying He alone is God and there are no other gods. Worship of any other divine being is

an act of living in falsehood. Truth is precise and cannot be deviated from. The Law of Non-Contradiction states that two opposite statements cannot be true at the same time in the same sense. If God states He alone is God, polytheism cannot be true at the same time. The Law of Non-Contradiction is a universal law because God's truth is exclusive and narrow.

### **Truth is Coherent**

All truth statements cohere and are consistent with one another. "In a universe subject to the rule of one creator-God... truth is seen as an interrelated and coherent whole."<sup>16</sup> It is not God's nature to teach what is contradictory, illogical, or false. Therefore, truth statements will not contradict one another.

### **Truth is Comprehensive**

Although the Bible does not speak exhaustively on such subjects as geology, cosmology, philosophy, and other subjects, the Bible presents truths in a wide range of areas. Biblical truth is consistent with truth discovered in science, psychology, and philosophy. God's truth is not fragmented but fits together in a consistent and unified whole with His creation.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible, together with human logic, and experience support the notion that truth is absolute and not relative. Truth is narrow since it rejects its opposite. It is universal, unchanging and knowable. Absolute truth finds its source in God who is eternal, unchanging and sovereign over all creation. God, who is truth, communicates truth to beings made in His image. Relativism should be rejected because the evidence shows we live in a theistic universe. Since the worldview of naturalism is false, the foundation upon which relativists build is unsound. Relativism is also self-defeating, unlivable, and contrary to Biblical teaching.

---

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 7, quoted in Doug Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 80.

## Bibliography

Beckwith, Francis and Koukl, Gregory. *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1998.

C.S. Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Macmillan Publishing 1955.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1952.

Caputo, John. *That's Just Your Interpretation*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

Geisler, Norman and Turek, Frank. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*. Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2004.

Groothius, Doug. *Truth Decay*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

McCallum, Dennis ed. *The Death of Truth*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996.

McDowell, Josh and Hostetler, Bob. *The New Tolerance*. Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998.

Netland, Harold. *Encountering Religious Pluralism*. Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL.: Crossway