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## ABSOLUTE TRUTH IN A RELATIVISTIC WORLD

BY LINDY KEFFER  APRIL 1, 2019

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*Even though our society tells us that it's narrow-minded to believe in ultimate truth, there's lots of evidence that says we should run after it with all our hearts. Christ says the truth will set us free. And that promise is true for all time.*

Whatever happened to the *truth*?! In our world, the idea of ultimate truth — something that is true at all times in all places and has relevance for our lives — is about as extinct as the dinosaur. In fact, nearly three out of four Americans say there is no such thing as ultimate, or absolute, truth. And the numbers don't look much better among those who claim to follow Jesus.

In a society where ultimate truth is treated like a fairy tale, an outdated idea or even an insult to human intelligence, the motto of the day becomes, "WHATEVER!" Believe whatever you want. Do whatever seems best to you. Live for whatever brings you pleasure, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. And of course, be tolerant. Don't try to tell anyone that their *whatever* is wrong.

But where does that leave us? If we have ultimate truth, it gives us both a way to explain the world around us and a basis for making decisions. Without it, we're alone. We're just 6 billion organisms running around, bumping into each other with nothing unifying to work for or believe in. It's every man for himself. And we're without a purpose; if there's no true story of where we came from and why we're here, then there's nothing

that really gives our lives meaning. Sounds a little depressing, huh? And maybe frightening.

Has life always been like this? Do we have to carry on this way? No! In fact, in the scope of history, *whatever* is a pretty new way of viewing the world. If you're interested in finding out how we lost truth, where we can find it again and what we're expected to do with it, read on!

## When *Truth* Wasn't a Bad Word

If you consider that the human race has been around for thousands of years, the last two or three hundred don't seem that long. And it is in that short time that our beliefs have shifted from a certainty in truth to a denial that it even exists.

From before Jesus was born until the late 1700s, people believed in a spiritual or supernatural world that coexisted with the physical world, affecting all aspects of it. Gene E. Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Crossway, 1994), p. 29. People who lived during that time also generally believed that the natural world was orderly, that it could be studied and that truth was touchable, based on supernatural rather than natural realities. Veith, p. 31.

Those people gave spiritual explanations for what went on in their physical lives. They also made moral decisions on the basis of the supernatural; things were believed to be right or wrong based on what God thought. Of course, not everyone believed in the God of Israel, but history shows that every civilization developed a way of thinking that looked for truth in the supernatural world. Societies that didn't recognize the one true God were sometimes closer to finding Him and finding truth than people are today because they were actively seeking these things.

That's what the apostle Paul found when he visited Greece. He walked into a group of scholarly Athenians and said, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To an unknown god. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23). Paul went on to talk about the real God, and many Athenians listened. They had not formerly known God, but they knew that there was something supernatural that they were missing. The altar they had built showed that they were looking for truth, so when Paul showed up, they were eager to hear about Jehovah — He was what they had been missing!

Another thing is clear about how ancient people looked for truth — they watched and listened for signs of the supernatural within the natural world. Bottom line: They expected God to reveal himself through words and circumstances. *Revelation* was their source of ultimate truth.

## So, How'd We Get Into This Mess?

Around the mid-1700s, common ideas about truth and the supernatural changed. At first, the new ideas weren't bad. People started focusing on the uniqueness of humans and the human mind. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Eerdmans, 1996), p.2. And they were right — *we are* unique and God *has* made us special. Unfortunately, the good idea took a wrong turn. Instead of praising God for creating our minds, people started treating the human mind as if it were a god.

Scientists made astounding discoveries, and the scope of knowledge seemed limitless. Charles Darwin had given people an excuse for forgetting God with his ideas about evolution and natural selection. People began to think that maybe the world just happened by chance. And Sir Isaac Newton proved that the natural world is a big machine that runs according to a certain set of laws. If we could just discover these laws, then we'd know how to better manage our lives and thus improve the world. Grenz, p. 3.

But there was one huge problem with these ideas — science can discover truth only in the natural realm. In other words, it works only on things that can be tested. Rather than admitting that *our ability* to discover truth is limited, we decided to say that *reality* is limited. People began to believe that the physical world is all there is — no supernatural world and no God (or if there is a God, He doesn't have much to do with us). Veith, p. 33.

Since people no longer believed in the revelation of a supernatural standard, they had to find another basis for moral decisions. Their sources of truth were reason, facts and science, so it's no surprise that those same sources became the standard for moral decisions. Instead of asking, "What would Jesus do?" people asked, "What does reason tell us is best for humanity?" Veith, p. 34.

## What Happened Then?

Everything worked fine until we started coming up with questions and problems that science couldn't answer. It took nearly 200 years, but eventually people started to realize that science and reason hadn't eliminated the problems of poverty, crime and hunger. After a while, we became discouraged with trying to find a better solution and decided that there just *isn't* a solution.

Science isn't the answer; it isn't *the* source of truth. And of course, God had been excluded from the picture long ago. So what did that leave us? Nothing. Oh, of course, there are true statements that can be made about what we see around us: "I have three apples," "The law of gravity applies," etc. But once we've excluded both God and reason, there's nothing left to provide ultimate truth — the kind of truth that is true always and everywhere, the kind of truth on which to base our moral decisions. And that leads us to *whatever*.

## Living in a "Whatever" World

If there is no basis for moral decisions, then *whatever* you choose to do is fine. Of course, most people like to believe that they have *some* basis for the decisions they make. So we've constructed our own standards:

- *Science and reason* Even though most people have thrown out reason as the source of ultimate truth, some still cling to it. "If I can't see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it and test it, it can't be true," they say.
- *Popular opinion* You only have to look as far as your TV to know that society thinks popular opinion is a good basis for making decisions. Otherwise, why would our advertisements tell us to "catch the wave" or make the "choice of a new generation"? All these ads appeal to the idea that "everyone is doing it" and that you should, too.
- *Feelings* Emotions are perhaps the most popular basis for making choices today. After all, how can anyone argue with how you feel? If feelings are a good standard for decision-making, then you'll never have to come up with a better defense than, "I did it because I felt like it."

It doesn't take a lot of "what if" scenarios to realize that there are *major* problems with all these approaches to decision-making. What if you're asking a question that science can't answer? What if the group changes its opinion? How do you know which one was right? Randy Petersen, *My Truth, Your Truth, Whose Truth?* (Tyndale, 2000), p. 43. And what if following your feelings leads you to an action with consequences you can't handle? Petersen, p. 31. We've gotten ourselves into this *whatever* mess, but it's getting harder and harder to live here. So how do we get out?

## Recognizing the Need for Truth

The first rung on the ladder out of this "no-truth" hole is realizing that it's reasonable to desire truth. In fact,

those who tell you it's useless or narrow-minded to believe in ultimate truth have more explaining to do than they can pull off. When someone says, "There is no such thing as absolute truth," that person is actually making a statement that he or she believes to be absolutely true. Contradictory, isn't it?

And it's even reasonable to search for ultimate truth in God. Those who say there is no God on whom to base our standards have a very hard time dealing with these questions:

- Why do we have personalities? If there is no personal God who "shared these bits of His personality with us," where did we get them? Petersen, p. 139.
- Why do the pieces of the universe fit together so intricately? If there isn't a higher standard outside the natural world ordering the way things work, then why do they work so well?
- Why do we have a strong desire for purpose and meaning in life? If there is no "big picture" that explains where we came from and why we're here, why do we ask questions about purpose and spend our lives trying to find the answers?

These questions don't automatically take us to the truth, but they do give us a place to start looking.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

If you got lost hiking in the woods, what would you do to find your way? If you knew anything about outdoor survival, you wouldn't keep wandering around, trying new paths and hoping you'd eventually stumble upon the right one. Instead, you'd turn around and retrace your steps until you found where you went wrong. Then you'd make a better choice and go on from there.

In our search for truth, we are obviously lost. In fact, many of us have given up hope of ever reaching our destination. Those still looking for truth have chosen to keep wandering rather than turn around and fix past mistakes. But making that 180-degree turn and taking a hard look at where we've gone wrong in the past is exactly what we need to do.

We have already discussed the fact that through most of history, people believed in objective truth and the supernatural. And they believed that the two were closely related. When these ideas got lost, it was because society made two distinctly wrong turns. First, people abused human reason and intellect. Second, they threw God out the window. If we are to get back on the right track, we've got to go back and fix these mistakes.

## Fixing the "Science and Reason" Mistake

It's important to remember that the *use* of reason isn't what destroyed belief in truth. The problem was that people *misused* reason, mistaking it for something much bigger and more powerful than it really is. Many have already discovered this wrong turn, but in trying to fix it, they've made another, equally dangerous, mistake.

Have you ever heard someone say that Christianity is based on ignorant, blind faith? Unfortunately, in some ways, Christians have earned that insult. Many Christians today don't want to be like the people of the 1700s, who relied on reason instead of God as the source of truth, so we've put thinking on the back burner of our faith. But the human intellect is not a bad thing. God created our minds, and He wants us to glorify Him by *using them!*

Dr. J.P. Moreland, a professor at Biola University, wants to make sure that we get a good grasp on what faith really is. He tells us that faith does not mean making a blind choice to follow something or someone. Instead, faith is acting in line with what you have good reason to believe is true. J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (NavPress, 1997), p. 25. Wait a minute! Good reason? That sounds as though it requires

some thinking! It does. And as you dig into Christianity, you'll find that there are *lots* of good reasons to believe in God, Jesus, the Bible and the truths that are found there.

There is no way to discuss all those reasons in this article (because there are a TON of them!). But many intelligent men and women have already done their homework on the evidence for finding truth in Christianity.

Many Christians think it's enough to have a checklist of easy answers they can rattle off when someone challenges their faith. That might get us out of some sticky situations, but it usually isn't enough to convey the depth and fullness that Christianity can offer to those who are searching for truth. It's important to remember that one reason God is worthy of our worship is that He's big enough to answer all our questions. So we shouldn't get scared and defensive when someone asks us something we can't answer. Instead, we should dig into the questions with our friends, knowing that we're not going to turn up any answers that disprove God. When we glorify Him by using our minds, our faith will grow and become more attractive to others as well.

## Fixing the “No God” Mistake

The second wrong turn we've got to find and correct in our search for truth is the decision to throw out God as the source of truth. How was He forgotten in the first place?

You'll remember that when people believed in God as the source of ultimate truth, they depended on the *revelation* of His will as the basis for what they would believe and how they would act. But the more people relied on — and glorified — reason, the less they relied on revelation, until they had forgotten about it completely. You see, revelation can't be proven. You can't see God or touch Him. You can't hear His revelation audibly, so scientists began to say that it didn't exist.

But think about this statement: “If it can't be proven by science, it's not true.” Many will tell you that you can't just assume that God exists — you've got to prove it. The problem is, you can't just assume that God *doesn't* exist. That's not provable by science either. What do you do with something that can't be proven? Well, you gather all the evidence you can, then you act on the evidence. *You act in line with what you have good reason to believe is true.* Hmmm ... haven't we heard that before? Yep! That's *faith*. And scientists, even though they don't like to admit it, have to take some things (the things that can't be proven) on faith.

For instance, scientists have some pretty good ideas about how dinosaurs lived and moved. They base these ideas on the evidence found in fossil records, bone structure, organic deposits, etc. But there comes a point beyond which scientists can't prove anything, because they can't replicate the creatures and experiment on them directly. So they just have to believe what the strongest evidence suggests. There is no difference between that faith and the faith we place in God and the Bible, as long as that faith is founded on the best facts we can find.

There is a huge mound of evidence *for* Christianity, God, Jesus and the Bible. And based on this evidence, it's reasonable to believe that God reveals truth through revelation. *Wow!* So now, you've got a whole new category of information. It's a sound, logical choice, even though many people just reason it away.

Where can we find revelation today? And what do we learn from it? The best source of revelation is God's Word — that's right, the Bible! In the Bible, God gives us history lessons as well as guidelines for how to live our lives. What does the Bible have to say about truth? Check this out:

- “Do not withhold your mercy from me, O Lord; may your love and your truth always protect me.” (Psalm 40:11)
- “Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear

- your name." (Psalm 86:11)
- "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts [truths]." (Psalm 119:45)
  - "These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts." (Zechariah 8:16).
  - "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)
  - "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" (John 14:6)
  - "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." (John 16:13)
  - "[God's] word is truth." (John 17:17)
  - "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." (Romans 1:18)
  - "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth." (1 Corinthians 13:6)
  - "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place." (Ephesians 6:14)

And those are just a few. In fact, the word *truth* appears more than 200 times in the Bible! In addition, the Bible makes lots of other statements about things that are absolutely true. The most famous ones are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and Jesus' instructions to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). The Bible holds the truth for all kinds of circumstances, and we can trust it for answers to all kinds of questions.

Are there any truths outside the Scriptures? Yes, many. Truths about gravity, aerodynamics, photosynthesis, modern history and many other subjects are never specifically addressed in the Bible. Yet we use them for explaining life and making decisions every day. It's important to remember that not everything that's true is in the Bible, *but* everything that's in the Bible is true. So, a good standard for discerning truth that's not specifically addressed in Scripture is to ask, "Does this contradict the principles of the Bible?" You see, what the Bible doesn't talk about specifically, it usually covers generally in some fashion. For example, we can't read about the Internet in the Bible, but we can discover principles for its use. We are to fill our minds with "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, [and] whatever is admirable" (Philippians 4:8). Now that's a different kind of *whatever!*

## So What?

We said earlier that when we have a standard for ultimate truth, it gives us a way to explain what goes on around us and provides a basis for making decisions. As our source of truth, the Bible does both of these things.

First, the Bible gives us an explanation for the way things work — in the physical world and in the moral realm. The Bible's story of how the world came to be and how humans were given life is called creation: God made the universe, and He made man in His own image. *How* He did that is another thing we need to take on faith; we weigh the evidence and form our beliefs based on that evidence, because nobody can test and prove all the details. [Creation](#), as a way of explaining the world, answers many of the questions that evolution leaves blank, including the questions of personality, design and purpose mentioned earlier.

In the moral world, the Bible tells us that actions have consequences. Perhaps that's one reason why many people today don't want to consider God's Word as a source of ultimate truth: They don't want to be held responsible for their actions. But no matter how much you fight the idea of consequences, you can't get

around the fact that they're a part of reality. In this case, we have yet another good reason to believe that the Bible is true because what God says matches up with what we see around us.

The second thing the Bible provides is a basis for making decisions. In fact, it not only *allows* us to make decisions, but in some cases it *commands* us to do so. That's another reason why people are reluctant to admit the truth of the Bible — once you've searched it out and come to the conclusion that it's *the* truth, you can't pick and choose which parts of it you'll allow to influence you. God doesn't leave room for that. John 14:6 says that Jesus is *the way, the truth and*

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the life and that no one can come to God except through Him. For some, this is hard to accept because for generations humankind has wanted to earn salvation or find its own way to God. But again, if we conclude that the Bible is true, we've got to make our decisions based on

**all** of it — not just the parts that we like.

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From just the verses about truth that you've already read, you can learn a great deal. Some of the truths are difficult to swallow. For instance, there are serious consequences for sinning and not following the truth (Romans 1:18). In the first place, sin brings consequences in the physical world: Someone who shoplifts will have to face paying fines or being jailed if he is caught. Even if he "gets away with it," there's often the consequence of a guilty conscience. Second, there are consequences in the spiritual world. That's why Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." You probably won't die on the spot, but in the eternal perspective, sin always brings death.

Sometimes, truth requires us to do things we don't want to do. For example, Zechariah 8:16 admonishes us to speak the truth to each other and aim for truth as we seek justice. In a world where tolerance is the highest ideal, standing for the truth in public can get you slammed. But as long as you're following Paul's instruction to speak the truth *in love* (Ephesians 4:15), you're doing the right thing. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean you'll always be rewarded. In fact, you'll probably even be ridiculed. Truth is tough, but that doesn't make it any less true.

It's a good thing the truth also brings a **lot** of encouraging news. First, truth is a weapon (Ephesians 6:14). Paul tells us that it's part of the armor we're to put on as we live simultaneously in the physical and spiritual worlds. Having "the belt of truth buckled around your waist" helps you to hold everything together — it gives you a system for thinking about things and filtering them through your biblical understanding. When you do this, it'll be harder for the enemy to blindside you.

Also, it's reassuring to know that we're not alone in deciphering the truth that God gives us. It's a great idea to ask the Lord to teach us His truth (Psalm 86:11). Two specific resources He gives us for learning His truth are His Word (John 17:17) and His Holy Spirit (John 16:13). These are always available to us, and God *wants* to teach us through them.

The final two lessons are closely related: truth protects us (Psalm 40:11), and truth brings freedom (Psalm 119:45; John 8:31-32). These are perhaps the most exciting of all, because they help us understand why God is so serious about laying out His truths for us. He doesn't do it to make our lives miserable or keep us from having fun. He made us, and He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows what will bring us lasting happiness and what will cause us pain. He instructs us so that we will walk in a path toward joy and away from punishment, and He gives us the choice to obey.

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you. ... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life."

(Deuteronomy 30:15-16,19-20)

The funny thing is that we often think we know better than God; in that human weakness, we fail. But God is always there, waiting for us to return to Him and His truth.

## OK, I Believe It!

Reaching the conclusion that truth is found in the Bible and Christianity and choosing to find life in that truth is not the end of the story. You still have to live in a world that thinks believing in ultimate truth is intolerant. How can you discuss the issue in a way that allows you to keep your beliefs *and* your friends?

- **Know what you believe.** The more you know about the truths of the Bible, the more you'll be able to keep your cool when difficult questions come up. So dig in! And ask wise adults for help when a topic or passage is hard to grasp.
- **Know where others are coming from.** When the apostle Paul gave his speech in Athens, he earned the people's respect because he had read their poetry and toured their city.

He cared about them and their beliefs. He started with the little bit of truth they already grasped and went on to explain the whole truth to them. If you take the time to ask your friends what they believe, you'll find common ground for talking about truth and you'll earn their respect in the process.

- **Watch your words.** The Bible tells us that the truth will be offensive to unbelievers (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Since what you're talking about may already be difficult for others to accept, take care not to further offend them by how you say it. In Ephesians 4:2, Paul tells us to "be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." And in Colossians 4:5-6 he says, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."
- **Remember, people are of highest importance.** Though it may feel great to win a debate or prove a point, keep in mind that Jesus called us to be fishers of men, not winners of arguments. In God's book, people are the highest priority because He created us and He loves us. That's why author Randy Petersen says, "It's more likely that your relationship — not your arguments — will win [your friends] over." Petersen, p. 148. It's right and good to defend the truth, but remember that you're trying to lead people to the truth because you love them, not to fill a quota.

## The Whole Truth

Truth is powerful. It brings life. It has been here since the beginning, and it still exists today. Truth is available to all who seek it in the person of Jesus Christ. Even though our society tells us that it's narrow-minded to believe in ultimate truth, there's lots of evidence that says we should run after it with all our hearts. Christ says the truth will set us free. And that promise is true for all time.

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Lindy Keffer is very fond of her preschool daughter and toddler son, who are worth every ounce of energy it takes to keep up with them. Her husband makes videos for a living and helps with the dishes, which makes her smile. Her favorite thing about living in Colorado is 300-plus days of sunshine per year. She is currently Manager of Connection at First Presbyterian Church in downtown Colorado Springs.

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