

Relativism in the Church

by

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Relativism is an all-pervasive philosophy in our times. It dominates the education system, permeates social media, influences decisions of the higher courts and is forming the fabric of modern culture.

We must be exceptionally alert as it tries to infiltrate the church. It wears many disguises. One comes in the form of the *balance of truth* idea. Christian leaders anxious to reconcile viewpoints sometimes use it. Yet it plays right into the hands of our enemies.

A Bible study group was divided over a doctrinal issue central to the gospel. The pastor, attempting to be conciliatory said, “After all the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle.” A few agreed with this apparently reasonable conclusion without realizing the pastor just undermined the gospel itself.

For him to suggest the Bible is too obscure for resolving essential issues was bad enough. He also implied that truth is largely a question of personal perspective. His attempt to conciliate the group propelled them toward the trap of relativism...the denial of absolute and objective truth. He failed to see the consequences are worse than the dispute he was trying to quell.

Truth cannot be balanced

We may compare opposing concepts, but cannot balance truth. That is inherently irrational. The fundamental principle behind all logic is that whatever is true, cannot be false at the same time. In philosophy this is called “A is not non-A,” and means that a thing cannot be itself and not itself at the same time. Without this simple principle, logic is impossible. Consequently, any given truth can't be itself and its opposite simultaneously. Truth therefore cannot be balanced.

Can there be different facets to the same truth? Certainly. The deity of Christ is an example. It involves the virgin birth, the relationship between Christ's two natures, His preexistence and so forth. But this truth can never be *balanced*, since it would involve an absurdity such as: “Christ is God versus Christ is not God...and the truth lies somewhere in the middle.” Some issues are not negotiable. One of them is that truth is absolute and not relative to any individual.

The early Christians understood that absolute truth is worth fighting for. In Acts 15, this resulted in a dispute with the Judaizers. Some acknowledged that salvation is by grace

alone. Others claimed it is by a mixture of grace plus Law. How fortunate this dispute didn't take place in the twenty-first century! Invariably someone would have declared: "Well, I can see Paul's viewpoint. But the circumcision party has some good thoughts, too. I think the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. After all, let's not go to extremes. We may never know for sure anyway. In the name of brotherly love, let's all agree to disagree and go home in peace."

Imagine the result if the Reformers had held to Relativism. Picture Martin Luther saying, "I believe in justification by faith. But I know some good folks who don't agree. If they're sincere, it doesn't really matter what they believe. After all, we must be careful not to create divisions."

Luther, Calvin, Knox and their contemporaries had a notion that sounds extreme to many today. They felt truth was not only absolute but worth creating division over. Yes, even dying for. They seemed to feel if we are sick of doctrinal disputes, then we're sick of truth. And if we're sick of truth, then we are sick indeed.

Atheism in disguise

Another problem with relativism is that it is atheism in disguise. If God exists, then truth must be relative to what he is. The buck stops there.

So when a Christian is thinking like a relativist, he is practicing Christian atheism. The blatant contradiction is there, whether he sees it or not.

How is relativism manifest in the church today?

Lack of church discipline

Relativism in the church reflects itself in a lack of church discipline. Fornication has become so widely accepted in American society at large that it is not even viewed as a moral misdemeanor, let alone the scandalous immorality it is. The Bible makes it clear that unrepentant fornicators do not go to heaven. Rev 22:15

In one church, evidence existed that some members were participating in the Lord's Supper who may have been living in fornication. The leadership seemed more concerned about what other churches tolerate and what the participants felt when they took the communion, than the plain teachings of the word of God. Relativism in a Christian disguise.

A pastor tells about counseling a member who had committed adultery. The member began talking about his feelings, not of remorse but of how the relationship evolved and how he felt about it. The pastor told the member that if he wants to talk about feelings, he had better start with God's feelings first, which for the moment is pure wrath. And if he wants God's feelings to change, his own feelings had better be those of deep grief, remorse and repentance. He is welcome to trash any other feelings as irrelevant.

Good pastor! Influenced by the word of God and absolute truth, not relativism!

Disregard of scholarship

Theologian R.C. Sproul recalls an incident during a Bible study in which each person expressed what he or she felt the particular passage meant to him or her. Sproul said, “I don’t care what it means to anybody. I want to know what it *means*, period!”

Sproul was rightly rejecting relativism in a group of Christians. He understands that if two believers disagree on the interpretation of a verse, one at least is wrong, possibly both.

Reason-based rules of interpretation enter in at this point. By applying these rules to any text, we can come to the truth on most questions of interpretation.

True, some secondary issues are difficult or appear obscure. Martin Luther acknowledged that some things seem unclear but added that the obscurity is in us, not in the word of God. The Lord gave us light from heaven, not darkness.

The statement, “That is just your interpretation,” should never be uttered by a Christian. It implies that the meaning of scripture may be divorced from fact, reason, scholarship and the rules of interpretation. This is a Christianized form of relativism and is really saying, *your view is a subjective perception and since truth is merely a matter of perception, then it has no absolute value*. While the speaker is not articulating those words, the concept is there, an ungodly worldview spoken through a Christian filter.

When evidence is lacking to nail down the truth with certainty then varying opinions are legitimate. That is not relativism. It is being open-minded toward the possibility of future evidence that will help establish a truth as absolute.

Passion for truth

Relativism sometimes reflects itself in a lack of passion for truth.

In one conversation, a believer insisted, “different groups have different opinions on that subject.”

What does that mean? Does it mean the truth is unknowable, just because opinions differ? If such a proposition were rational, we would have to abandon all knowledge whatsoever.

When I preach, I start by saying something like, “We are going to study some truths from the word of God. These truths are absolute, universal, eternal and final, not relative to any individual.”

I do this to add my shot to the battle for truth going on in the minds of the hearers. I know they have spent an entire week at the work place, school or with entertainment

media, being brainwashed into a view of truth that is self-contradictory, atheistic and soul-destroying. I do this with the prayer that God will use not just my words, but also his own words to help his people stand for absolute truth.

Exposing the contradiction

A simple way to expose the contradiction in relativism is to ask, “is that absolutely true, or is it just relative to you?”

During a college class I attended, a liberal professor was commenting on a political issue. She made the statement, “after all, everything is just relative anyway.” I raised my hand and asked her, “Professor, is that absolutely true or is that just relative to you?” I intended no disrespect but wanted to counter her influence on other students as to relativism.

She realized the contradiction and was flustered. She replied, “Well some things are relative and others are absolute.” I did not want to embarrass her further but if I had, I could have asked, “Would you be so kind as to explain where you got the absolute standard by which to decide what is absolute and what is not, and what is the absolute authority for that standard?”

For parents

How can parents prepare their children to resist the current cultural brainwashing? Many parents seem to feel that teaching kids the gospel at an early age, along with a good catechism, is sufficient. Wrong.

At the risk of seeming sacrilegious, I am declaring those measures insufficient. When the kids get old enough to interact with social media and go to school, the relativistic brainwashing will start. At some point, they will hear, “that’s just your personal perspective.” If they are not trained early as to why that statement is absurd, then that is what parents will hear from their kids later when they try to talk to them about absolute moral truth.

An excellent catechism is the Westminster Shorter Catechism used by millions of Christians since it was written in 1648. It was sufficient until now. The issue then was defining what is the truth about the gospel, not whether such a thing as truth existed at all. For today’s kids, it does not start at the point where needed.

Some years ago, I wrote a short document to stimulate thinking about how parents can prepare their children to confront today’s relativism. I call it a pre-catechism. In it, I have 12 questions having to do with truth and the proof of God’s existence. Children can understand them since they contain no scholarly terms nor are philosophically difficult.

Other material better than mine could be written for this purpose. This is not the challenge, however. The challenge is getting parents to see the need.

On the horizon

Days of persecution are coming. Christians who think more in terms of personal perspective than absolute truth, may stumble because the ground under them is their own feeble perspective, not absolute truth.

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