

Instructor's Information

The follow materials are intended to be flexible enough to use in many applications. Feel free to rearrange and revise to fit your situation. You may wish to cut/paste specific sections for use with students. For example, the Discussion Points and Case Studies could be printed separately.

Your feedback is useful. Please help make the material better by contacting me with results and suggestions.

Black and White in a Gray World: Whatever Happened to Truth?

EXPLORING THE ISSUE

A brief history of truth...

For most of the history, people accepted the proposition that some things are “just true” and other things are “just false”. An idea or concept could have an intrinsic quality of “trueness” that depended on the reality behind the idea and not a person’s belief about it. This is sometimes referred to as *correspondent truth*—that is, truth claims are a reflection of the real world.

But then came the 1700s when we began to learn many new concepts, especially in science. Renaissance ideas put Man at the center of the universe, with man’s thinking paramount. Now this wasn’t all bad. Humanity *is* a special creation of God, made in His image for a relationship with Him. God gave us minds capable of reaching and stretching to understand more and more about the created world. But something went terribly wrong when we decided that God’s ideas were not as relevant as ours, or even worse, that God’s ideas don’t exist at all.

A recent survey showed that 75% of Americans today don’t believe that absolute truths exist.¹ Essentially, a portion of Christianity and a handful of old-school scientists are the last tethers to absolute reality with regard to the nature of the universe, that is, a particular reality exists whether or not someone observes it or believes it.

Truth in the real world...

So, how does absolute truth fit into our current thinking? Consider this statement:

“The apple I am eating is red on the outside, and moist on the inside.”

My mind can observe and describe the reality of the apple, but it doesn’t create or alter

it. (There are some worldviews that would doubt even this proposition, but we’ll discuss this later.) However, I could also give a description based on a value or judgment:

“The apple is very tasty.”

Obviously no one could argue that this is an *absolutely* true description of the apple. It could be true for the person making the claim, but another person may truly perceive the apple as “not tasty”. Another may truly claim that it is just “somewhat tasty”. We might define each of these assertions as *relatively true*. Then the term *absolutely true* would be reserved for those propositions which are true independent of the opinions or preferences of the observer making the claim.

The issue with truth claims usually emerges when these two categories of truth are confused or denied. There has been a clear trend in recent decades to move more and more truth claims from absolute to relative, especially with regard to moral issues. And really, can a person truly (no pun) believe that there is *no* absolute truth? When the statement is made: “There is no absolute truth”... is that intended to be a true statement?

Evangelical Christians and others who hold to a literal interpretation of scripture, believe that God has declared some truths as absolutely true regardless of what society or the majority believes. And to be even more accurate, it’s not that God simply declared something true or false (although He has every right to do so). Some concepts are true or false because they are directly derived from God’s own nature. For example, the truth claim “murdering the innocent is wrong” isn’t simply a rule that God made up arbitrarily to keep us alive. Taking innocent life goes against the eternal, loving, just, righteous nature of God. The proposition doesn’t correspond with His revealed attributes. God has always been absolutely the way He is, therefore, that truth

claim is simply and absolutely true. Naturally, one who doesn't believe in God will have no reason to accept that absolute truth, but correspondent truth is based on what's really real, whether believed by any human or not. God's truth is independent of any other beings belief or opinion.

DIGGING DEEPER

There are several philosophical approaches to truth in contemporary worldviews. As mentioned earlier, *correspondent* truth requires a foundation in reality, and has traditionally been the Judeo-Christian stand. There is a real universe created by and based on the eternal nature of God.

Consensus truth, by contrast, is based on the majority belief of a society. This is not necessarily bad when applied to some amoral, secular issues (if those are truly such). In a way, our democratic form of government often relies on this. We vote in a person or policy that the majority deem best. However, it is entirely possible that the majority can have wrong beliefs about correspondent, absolute truth.

Coherent truth is a bit more complex. Suppose one believes the following to be true:

1. Speckled chickens have souls.
2. White chickens do not have souls.
3. The soul is what feels pain.
4. It's wrong to cause gratuitous pain.
5. It's wrong to kick a speckled chicken.
6. It's okay to kick a white chicken.

As long as I believe *all* of the premises to be true, everything works out all right. Right? All of the premises are coherent. I might even believe *some* of these premises from a correspondent view. The problem is that one or more of these may not reflect correspondent, absolute truth. And for example, if either premise 1 or 3 is wrong, then 4 and 6 are not necessarily true. The whole set becomes incoherent.

Science often builds its theories on coherent truth. Our early views of the solar system

postulated that "Earth is at the center." It would then follow with coherent truths:

1. The sun orbits the earth.
2. The planets and stars orbit the earth.
3. We should see the heavenly bodies rise in the east and set in the west.
4. The earth must be special.

This set of coherent truth worked fairly well for hundreds of years in predicting celestial motions, however, the main premise was not correspondently true. When science finally discovered this, a new set of truths had to be put into place.

Scientists and other theorists may also propose *pragmatic* truths. Pragmatism says "If it works, let's just consider it true." Just as with the early solar system ideas, much of chemistry, physics, and biology is based on workable beliefs that give consistent, reasonable outcomes. When a more productive set of truths is discovered, it will become the preferred theory. Too often, moral issues are weighed by the pragmatic results rather than absolute truth.

APPLICATIONS FROM THE STORY

"Let me enlighten you!" we hear when someone brings a proposed truth to our attention. We can imagine all sorts of things in darkness, but when the light comes on, the *true* nature of things becomes apparent. The Bible frequently uses the "light" metaphors when speaking of truth, knowledge, and wisdom:

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. John 3:21

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness. Isaiah 5:20

Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. John 12:35

For the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth. Ephesians 5:9

Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. 1 John 2:8

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 1 John 1:16

Like many people today, Paul seemed to believe intuitively that some things were fundamentally true, yet he was conflicted about how this belief fit into real life. He argues in chapter 10...

“I guess I’ve studied science too long... It seems to me that truth is not something you can decide on. It’s something you discover. And there are some things that aren’t true regardless of what someone believes.”

Relativists (those who claim that all truth is dependent on the whim of the observer in a particular situation) often show their true colors when their ideas are pushed to logical conclusions. Few, if any, relativists actually practice pure relativism in a day-to-day sense. Although tolerance for others’ view of truth is the “Golden Rule” today, it would be difficult to find proponents of relativism who would accept the Nazi’s “truth” regarding human rights. Is it possible that choices about true and false may be

made, not by logic, but by expediency? Scripture seems to support this hypothesis:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:19-21, NIV)

Perhaps this gives Christians an even stronger impetus to stand firm on issues of absolute truth based on clear biblical principles. In response to those who ask “whose truth?” (Nathan Monroe, chapter 10), our answer should always be “His truth.”

Now, having taken this very black-and-white stance on truth, we should never use this as a club to beat the less dogmatic into submission. As mentioned previously, there are issues which involve relative truth. How many Christian brothers and sisters have bludgeoned each other over truth claims not clearly addressed in scripture? Naomi, with good intentions, often struggled with this boundary. She sometimes neglected the admonition...

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:6, NIV)

We should also develop a healthy attitude regarding the results of truth. Sarah McLane seemed to view truth with apprehension:

“Oh, Paul...I’ve been wrong,” she confessed. “I’ve always felt I had to protect you from the truth, but that was just wrong. Maybe when you were a child I needed to, but not anymore.”

Granted, there are graceful ways of handling truth, and some truths are obviously age-sensitive,

but scripture never presents truth as something to be feared or avoided. An important aspect of being a mature Christian is the ability to deal wisely and lovingly with truth. We would do well to form an intimate relationship with the One who claims to be “the way and the truth and the life.” (John 14:6)

SUMMARY POINTS

- There are clear distinctions between relative truth and absolute truth.
- The Christian worldview has traditionally been based on absolute, correspondent truth.
- There are four basic views of truth in contemporary worldviews.
- Our view of truth has changed significantly over past decades.
- Most Americans no longer believe in absolute truth.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Can you find metaphors and symbols of truth/light vs deceit/darkness in the story?
2. Monroe’s propositions of truth are typical New Age or pantheistic views. Do you see specific examples in current media, arts, and education?
3. How do specific characters in TLOMC perceive of and deal with truth? Are some ideas “better” or “worse”?
4. Those who hold to relative truth often have problems applying their philosophy to *all* of the truth they experience (relative truth is not coherent). Can you find examples of this in Monroe’s statements?
5. Despite modern-day assessments, true Christians have historically been some of the most tolerant people on earth. In what

respects should we “tolerate” truth claims that go against clear scriptural principles?

6. Do a Bible concordance study to find verses which deal with “truth”. Examine a sampling of these in context. Are there any uses of the word that imply coherence, consensus, or pragmatic truth?
7. Can you find examples of different approaches to truth in the media? Who could potentially be affected by these views?
8. Many contemporary issues revolve around differing views of truth. How would a Christian/absolute view of truth approach these issues:
 - abortion
 - euthanasia
 - gender preference
 - gambling
 - death penalty
 - welfare

1 Barna Report, *Research Releases in Culture & Media*, February 12, 2002.

Case Studies

Consider the following narratives or scenarios. Which view(s) of truth seem to be involved?
How would someone with a correspondent view of truth confront that particular view?

#1

“I’m not sure what I believe about abortion. I hear all the different opinions, but it still makes me sad to hear about it. One of my friends at school had an abortion. She was messed up for a while. Now she seems really happy. She’s even enrolling in nursing school and wants to help other girls with problem pregnancies. I guess everything worked out okay.”

#2

“I don’t look at a lot of pornography. Sometimes it pops up on my computer. I think most men that use it probably don’t let it control their lives. It’s kind of hypocritical I think. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it doesn’t hurt anyone. We should for sure go after the child porn perverts, but the others—I think consenting adults are okay. Maybe kids shouldn’t see it either. Not under sixteen or so.

#3

“I think stem cell research is a good thing. I know they say it saves a lot of lives. I saw on TV that they can get the best stem cells from human fetuses. I don’t know what the fuss is about. Clearly, a fetus is not human yet. You don’t see them walking around and talking. Before birth we don’t even have thoughts. I can’t remember anything before I was born.”

“I disagree with that. I’m pretty sure you’re a human way before you’re born. But stem cells come from aborted fetuses, don’t they? If someone didn’t keep the stem cells, they fetuses would still be dead. Why waste them. At least someone can benefit.”

#4

“I received a refund on my credit card for an unknown purchase. I just realized it actually was a purchase that I made, but the company was under another name. I probably should return the money. Maybe that would cause more confusion than just ignoring the mix-up. After all, last month I actually lost more than that on a real mistake that was never resolved.”

