

Biblical Apologetics

Isn't belief just a matter of opinion? (relativism)

Part 1

I am not sure Friedrich Nietzsche (the ideological father of Nazi-ism) would be high on your people from history you would really like to do coffee with list. But just suppose you were doing coffee with him in town at Crema Café. And in the conversation he said (and this is a quote)

“You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist,”

What might a Christian say in response?

1. Undermining of Truth and the absolute

Underlying this kind of statement is a way of thinking that is commonplace today. It partly stems from the once bold notions that humanity had of himself that it was improving with every generation and given enough time would be able to understand everything with the power of reasoning and data collected interpretable by the 5 senses the sciences.

Then came world war one and the death toll of 15 million! The war to end all wars was followed by world war two and a death toll of 48 000 000 and of

course the technology to kill many many more. At the height of the cold war the so called developed nations had enough nuclear arsenal to destroy the world 12 time over!

Far from becoming more civilised we seemed to be becoming more barbaric! In the effect of these things was to undermine human arrogance and the idea we could know and understand everything – a system of thought called modernism. The resultant system of thought is called post-modernism which has at its core ideas like there is no absolute truth, it is relative to circumstances (upbringing, culture and so on). This idea of relativism has left the discussion papers of the academics and is very much at large in popular culture today.

So for example people might say as Nietzsche did:

1. There is no absolute Truth, it is all relative to the individual. All there is what is true for you. (Philosophical Relativism)
2. Hence all moral and ethical decisions are a matter for the individual or social group in which they are constructed (Moral/Ethical and Cultural Relativism)

2. Tolerance and relative truth become the new absolutes

If everything is relative then tolerance becomes the new watchword. Hence in society we are seeing a greater tolerance for what some might call moral and social diversity but others might call moral and social decline in our nation. Absolutes are removed from the equation and pretty much anything goes! The irony is that people are only tolerant to a certain degree – even tolerance has limits and so it becomes a new absolute in a relativist society!

Of course relativism is not all bad. Some cultures drive on the left and some on the right. It is relative to which culture influenced you. Some people enjoy punk music and others classical – it is relative to personal choice.

It is true what the writer of Ecclesiastes says

Ecclesiastes 1:9 ⁹ *What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.*

500 years later than that was written when Aristotle the famous Greek philosopher was around he engaged in debate with a group called the Sophists who had the maxim 'man is the measure of all things' by which they meant the question of whether a thing is right or wrong, good or bad must always be considered in relation to the individual – there are no absolute norms or Truths. Apart from the truth that man is the measure of all things!

500 years later when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate and said

'for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.' (Pilate asks) "
What is truth?" **John 18:37-38**

In other words we make our own truth – you have yours and I have mine! What do you mean that for everyone Pilate? So you are saying for absolute sure we all have our own truth? But isn't that an absolute truth then Pilate? Little did he know he was standing before the Son of God in whom all the truth of the universe exists! Who defines truth!

Today here is how some typical conversations on the topic may run

Video Slot

Did you notice how when society removes God from the equation he is replaced with a new set of absolutes. The absolute truth that there is no absolute truth. Which is of course a contradiction of terms.

3. Analysing Relativism

So in encountering relativism on of the first questions that has to be asked of it is – Is it coherent?

i. Is it coherent

The answer is of course no. I can't be. It just doesn't make sense to say everything is relative because if it is true then it is also relative but relative to what?

So if someone says – Christianity is your truth, I have mine. It doesn't make sense because either Christianity is true or it is not! It can't be true for one and not for another just like Buddhism is either true or it is not.

Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life no-one comes to the father except through me'.

Interesting he did not say he was a truth or he could be true for you. It is a bold and exclusive claim to be at the same time the only way to God, part of the triune Godhead and the giver of eternal life. Saviour, Judge and King.

We'll come back to that.

Part II

Having asked if it is coherent we must next ask

ii. Does relativism correspond with reality?

Imagine a multiple car-car collision at a busy junction near your home. Now stretch your imagination further. Assume we live in a less lawsuit-happy world. Instead of all parties silently exchanging licence and insurance information and driving away without admitting even a sliver of blame, every one runs into the junction to explain his or her side of the story: 'You pulled out in front of me!' 'But I had the right of way. Don't you know that red means stop?' Pedestrians who witnessed the accident from the curb interject what they saw. A trucker with an elevated, commanding view of the junction weighs in. Then perhaps the guilty part steps forward: 'Well, actually, it was my fault. I was talking on my car phone. I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. I caused the accident.'

For all the post-accident debate, when a police officer arrives and begins taking notes, one truth will be clear: an accident happened. And in time, other truths will be determined. Ultimately, a description of the accident will emerge that corresponds to reality. We live our lives relying on the belief that objective truth exists – if only we can find it. We gather evidence; weigh credibility and truthfulness; make difficult judgements. In the end, we arrive at a close proximity to truth. We can make truthful statements that describe with reasonable accuracy how events really happened. We believe that if we had a helicopter over every junction and a video camera inside each car – to see who is on the phone, or

shaving, or turning up the volume – we can even discover truth about ‘accidents’.

Truth is more than our subjective reporting of a car crash. It has objective existence. It has universal application.

Truth is true – even if no one knows it
Truth is true – even if no one admits it
Truth is true – even if no one agrees what it is
Truth is true – even if no one follows it
Truth is true – even if no one but God grasps it fully

Hence though a person may say it’s all a question of subjectivity, no-one can actually know what is true that does not mean that truth does not exist. It exists in every day life. E.g. I am standing on a floor. It is true, it is not relative, it is not subject to my perspective. Truth is part of life – relativism does not correspond with reality. It’s nonsense!

iii. Does relativism work?

Sometimes at the end of the day people are not interested in the philosophical merits of an idea they just want something that works.

Well does it work?

Well if truth is relative what is the point for example of accumulating knowledge. Imagine a confirmed

relativist marking an essay or exam paper. Well the traditional answer to that question was Napoléon Bonaparte but if Hulk Hogan is true for you then full marks! It can’t be right for you but wrong for me!

Absolute truth exists but how do we find it?

We are drawn back to the question, does God exist? If he does then absolute truth is a reality whether we know it or not.

Christianity claims that God left footprints in the sand of Palestine 2000 years ago. Let’s spend the final section examining the eyewitness writing of John a disciple of Jesus.

John uses the word truth 52 times in his account of Jesus. Let’s look at a few of them:

John 1:14 14 The Word (Jesus) became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John is clever in his use of the idea of Word. It is at the same time that spoken creative force of God exemplified in Genesis 1 and the divine reason and logic of the universe in Greek thought. So this Word, Logos, came from the Godhead, infused with humanity to bring what? Unmerited love and truth. That creative force of Genesis creating a restored

love relationship with God and that reasoned logic of the universe bringing the truth about God, humanity and the universe. It's either true or it is complete nonsense.

John 8:31-36 Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

The truth that comes from heaven is that we are not as free as we think. Ideas like relativism seem freeing but actually they are not, they are just another set of misplaced absolutes to follow. The truth from God is that we are slaves or held captive to sin. Not just to what we have done or omitted to do but also in how we have been sinned against.

We might think like the folks Jesus spoke to we are not slaves to anything.

Ulrikka – I am a sex addict!

Exercise:

Q. Read John 3:11-13 Why is Jesus' knowledge unique? What must we do in response to Jesus words according to these verses?

A. The unmissable claim of the New Testament is that God left footprints in the sand in Palestine. Jesus is to be obeyed. His words are true, because he is God. His revelation of God is perfect. He is, in the words of Colossians 1 the image of the invisible God the exact representation of His being.

And most importantly He is the unique offering for sin. We cannot pay the price ourselves except with judgement and death and Hell. But God the Father gave His only Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin. He made Him who knew no sin to BE sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Cor 5:21. And that, far from being self-empowering is deeply humbling. Far from being able to claim my own merits, I have to come to the foot of the cross and admit my sin, admit that that was God there dying for me, and humbly asks for His forgiveness. When Thomas falls at Jesus feet and worships Him as Lord and God, that is in no way a subjective or relativist thing. He wasn't just God to Thomas, but I can take or leave Him or make up my own version. He is God over all. Read Col 1:15-20.

So when He commands He has the right to perfect obedience. We are His, by the fact that he made us and as Christians by the fact that he bought us with His blood.

Exercise:

So we need to ask ourselves, how does Christ's uniqueness impinge on this whole question of postmodernism. Remember our three pillars of postmodernism: distrust of metanarratives, relativism and pluralism.

Q. How do each of these challenge Christ's unique right to our obedience? What do they say about His authority and Godship?

Q. How does understanding Christ's uniqueness challenge these three pillars of postmodernism? With Bible references.

Q. Why is it vital to be secure about the uniqueness of Jesus?

A. Metanarrative: God's salvation plan of which Jesus is the culmination, is a vital metanarrative. Misunderstand this and you are doomed, literally.

A. Relativism: Jesus knows and reveals accurately. He commands obedience and deserves it. Makes him the centre, not me. Relativism says everything is there to fulfil me, finds meaning in me, etc. Jesus says that the one who needs satisfying is not me but God. Only in Jesus' sacrificial death does God's justice find the satisfaction for our sinfulness.

A. Pluralism: John 14: I am the only way to God. How then should we respond to the confrontation between a culture that denies Christ's uniqueness and the God who demands that fall on our knees and honour His Son?

3 things: know and think Christianly, live Christianly and speak Christianly.

Truth 52 times in John

John 3:3 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

John 4:24 24 God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."

John 5:24 24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 8:31-36 31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 16:13-14 13 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. 14 He will

bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.

If someone said to you – ‘God exists for you but not for me. It’s all relative isn’t it? I mean if I was brought up in India I would be a Hindu.’ In what ways might you reply?

Brought up in a ‘Christian country’ and you are not a Christian! So what you are saying is if you were brought up in Nazi Germany you would be a Nazi!

It’s not that easy a question to reply to because you have to unpick the foundations of the statements in order to build a reasonable response.

Here is how a conversation may run