

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 31 May 2009

No. T0575

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Absolutely Certain: Are Some Things Absolutely True?

Imagine you are sitting on a train in the station, waiting for it to begin its journey. At the next platform is another train, ready to move off in the opposite direction. You glance up and notice that there is movement, but for a few seconds it is impossible to tell if your train is moving north or the train at the next platform is moving south. The only way to be sure is to look at some part of the station that is definitely not moving. Then you can judge whether your train is moving relative to that. We've probably all had this experience, but imagine what it would be like if the station could not be guaranteed to stay still! If you were not sure whether both trains were in fact motionless and it was the station itself that was moving away from them! The effect would be total confusion. In a world where nothing was fixed we could never be sure of anything. We could not even be sure which direction was up and which was down. Life, if it was possible at all, would be one endless nightmare of uncertainty and confusion. With no fixed points of reference, life would be intolerable. This is precisely the kind of moral universe that we do inhabit if there are no absolute truths.

Many people today insist that all truth is relative. No view or belief can be labelled as wrong, they say. Everything is a matter of opinion or viewpoint. It is fine for some people to believe in Christianity if it 'works for them', but Christianity is no more or less true, it is said, than Buddhism, Islam or secular humanism. Nothing is absolutely true. Everything depends on your perspective and circumstances, and therefore nothing is absolutely certain. This series of talks, entitled 'Absolutely Certain', will attempt to tackle that view and challenge it. We will study what the Bible has to say about these matters and consider what the consequences are of abandoning the idea of absolute truth. We will try and show, not only what the Bible says, but why it is logically consistent, morally defensible and practically essential, to maintain the absolute certainties that the Bible presents.

Today I'm going to tackle the fundamental question of whether some things are absolutely true. To do this I will divide the subject up under four broad headings:

- What the Bible says
- The objections
- The consequences of two competing worldviews
- Absolute truth made flesh.

Just before I do that I will define two terms that I will be using quite frequently this morning: 'absolute truth' and 'exclusive claim'.

By 'absolute truth' I mean something that is true everywhere, under all circumstances all the time. Mathematics and science are disciplines that aim for this kind of truth. If two plus two equals four today on a peaceful day in the UK it will also be true in two thousand years time, in a meteor storm in outer space. If a truth is not dependent on time, circumstance or space, it can be said to be absolute.

By 'exclusive claim' I mean a claim that, not only is one thing true, but that this prevents other things being true. To claim that dogs bark is not an exclusive claim, because other animals may bark as well. To claim that only dogs bark, is an exclusive claim. It suggests that no other animals, apart from dogs, are capable of barking.

What the Bible says

The Bible contains many absolute statements and frequently makes exclusive claims based on them. Genesis 1:1 commences the whole book with, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". Building on this God says in Exodus 20:3, "You shall have no other gods before Me". In other words, the Bible commences with the absolute certainty of God's existence and then presents the exclusive claim that He is the only one who may be worshipped. In Leviticus 20:26 God says, "I the LORD am holy". In saying this, He not only tells us something about His character, He also establishes Himself as the very definition of what holiness is. He then insists that everything and everybody that comes near Him must be holy too. The instructions in Exodus and Leviticus on how people are to approach the LORD have the word 'holy' appearing hundreds of times. When Aaron's two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, failed to take these instructions seriously we read, in Leviticus 10:2, "Fire went out from the LORD and devoured them". God clearly took the claims that He based on His absolute holiness very seriously!

This pattern of absolute truth and exclusive claim continues into the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Himself says in John 3:14-15, "The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." Saying this, He declares, absolutely, that those who believe in Him shall not perish but will have everlasting life. In verse 18 He goes on to say that, "He who does not believe is condemned already". In this way He declares that belief in Him is the exclusive source of everlasting life and that those who will not believe are condemned. The apostles carry on this theme. When Paul was asked by the Philippian jailer how he could be saved, Paul does not hesitate to give an absolute answer. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved", Paul replies. In Acts 4:12 Peter makes this salvation exclusive when he says, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

From this brief review it is clear that the Bible makes many statements of absolute truth, and bases its most essential teachings on those statements. If absolute truth is not possible then the apostles, Jesus Christ and Jehovah are all deluded at best and liars at worst. The Bible is simply stripped of its meaning if we try and make it just another sacred book. It is of no value if its claims cannot be relied on, and Christianity is not true if the claims of its Founder and first preachers are manifestly false. Clearly a great deal is at stake. It will not do to make Christianity one truth among many, since that is not what it claims to be. If it is false in its absolute and exclusive claims then it is not to be trusted in any of its claims and therefore cannot be relied on at all in anything relating to this world or the next.

These are the claims of the Bible and the reasons why they matter. This brings us to our second section, what then are the objections?

The Objections

I will consider the objections to claims of absolute truth by considering two statements which summarise the main arguments people raise.

- 'Claims to absolute truth imply that other positions are inherently wrong and this makes claims of absolute truth morally wrong and intolerable.'
- 'We are all influenced in what we believe by our background and upbringing, and we are also finite in our capacity to understand. This means that we cannot really claim that we know anything as an absolute truth.'

Let's look at the first statement – 'Claims to absolute truth imply that other positions are inherently wrong and this makes claims of absolute truth morally wrong and intolerable.' I will happily confess that the first part of this statement is true. Claiming that one thing is absolutely true clearly means that anything that contradicts this is false. I have two children, a girl and a boy. If my daughter insists that she is taller than her brother and my son insists that he is taller than his sister they cannot both be right! If I measured them, or stood them back to back, and proved my son to be correct I would be simultaneously proving my daughter to be wrong. I could perhaps refuse to measure them, forbid all tape measures from the house and insist that they are exactly the same height! This might make me something of a diplomat but it would be at the expense of the truth. Two contradictory statements cannot both be true. To say so is a statement of fact rather than morality.

It is the second half of our statement that I disagree with, namely 'this makes claims of absolute truth morally wrong and intolerable'. You will hear something similar to this stated regularly today. My principal objection to this statement is that it is fundamentally self-contradicting. If you analyse it you realise that there is an assumption made that absolute truth is either not possible or not morally valid. This is itself an absolute assumption! What is being said is that there are no absolute truths, apart from the fact that there are no absolute truths! Even if we were to pass over the logical absurdity of this, we are entitled to ask "What is the moral basis for deciding that nobody can be declared wrong? Who can state with authority that there can be no absolute truth?" What has happened is that a single point of view (a secular humanist point of view) has assumed absolute authority to dictate what is acceptable. It then condemns all those who attempt to define another truth! In short, this approach does exactly what it accuses Christianity of doing, but without presenting any divine authority or moral basis to support its claims. Christians should certainly not feel the need to apologise that the Bible makes absolute and exclusive claims. At least we have the authority of God behind us!

Our second statement attempts to undermine our confidence in what we believe. Let me state it again. 'We are all influenced in what we believe by our background and upbringing, and we are also finite in our capacity to understand. This means that we cannot really claim that we know anything as an absolute truth.' The implication is that I am a Christian because of the influence of my parents, culture and natural temperament. Another person is a Sikh because of the influences on him. Another person is a Zoroastrian because of the influences on her, and so on. It is implied that we all think we have the truth, but none of us really possess all of the facts and we are all inherently biased by our background. So we can all be said to have 'our own truth' but not 'the truth'. I would have to agree with some of the

components of this statement. No Christian would claim that anybody apart from God has total knowledge. Not only is our knowledge partial and shaped by our background, the Bible says that our capacity to know has been drastically damaged by the effects of sin. Ephesians 4:18 speaks about unbelievers as “having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart”. I am happy to endorse the view that human hearts are badly flawed and that human understanding suffers because of it. Again it is the conclusion drawn in our statement that I reject. This stated, “This means that we cannot really claim that we know anything as an absolute truth.” The flaw in this argument is that it makes the knowledge of truth entirely dependent on the ‘knower’, that is the human being, and insists that he must have perfect knowledge before there can be an absolute truth. The Bible makes truth dependent on the perfect and infinite person of God, and then makes man’s knowledge of that truth dependent on God’s communication. The Bible portrays a God who speaks. The acts of creation in Genesis 1 are all introduced by the phrase “Then God said”. As soon as man is created God is portrayed as speaking to him in Genesis 1:28. This communication continues, through the patriarchs, Moses, the judges, the prophets and, finally, in God’s Son, Jesus. In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, we find God still speaking in the person of the Lord Jesus. One of the last things that Jesus says, in Revelation 22:13 is “I am the Alpha and the Omega”, that is the start and finish of everything God has to communicate. The finite knowledge of human beings does not prevent there being absolute truths, nor does it prevent them being communicated. It does prevent us from having total (that is omniscient) knowledge of those truths, but the all powerful God has moved heaven and earth to ensure that we can know them well enough to believe and be saved.

The consequences of two competing worldviews

Matthew 7:20 quotes Jesus as saying, “Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” Jesus meant that you can recognise false prophets by the behaviour that their teaching produces, both in their own lives and in the lives of those that follow them. So it is not unreasonable to ask what kind of outlook and behaviour a particular teaching produces. If we contrast Christianity with the worldview that claims all truth is relative and no absolutes exist, what do we see?

It is fashionable to say that all the world’s wars and strife are due to religion and that Christianity is a major culprit. You can then go on to claim that if we abolish religion then all strife will cease. This will not stand up to reasonable scrutiny. Nobody can deny that some terrible things have been done in the name of Christianity. We should always be ready to recognise that indefensible things have been connected to the name of Christ by the actions of professed, or perhaps even real, believers. However, it must be seen that such actions are obviously against the teachings of the Bible and the spirit shown by the Lord Himself. These things are a blot on Christianity precisely because they are contrary to its teachings and attitudes. Just because people distorted the teaching of the Bible to justify their actions, does not make the teaching of the Bible false. On the other hand the fruits of genuine Christianity have been enormously positive for the world. Christianity has turned many murderous Sauls into hard working Pauls. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 6, he gives a list of undesirable characters that includes thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers and extortioners. He then says that some of the Corinthians had been like that themselves, but Christ had transformed them completely. Christians have abolished slavery, built hospitals and universities, reformed prisons, fed the hungry, housed the homeless and many more things besides: all in the name of their Saviour. The fruits of true Christianity are apparent for all to see.

What can we say about the view that claims that no truth is absolute and that we must all make our own moral choices? We could take the example of the atheist communist bloc. Perhaps we could consider the practical application that Nazi Germany made of the concept of ‘survival of the fittest’ and Nihilist philosophy. We might consider more recent history and look at the availability of abortion and voluntary euthanasia in Western Europe, or the breakdown of the family and respect for authority. You might say that I was deliberately choosing the worst examples, just as opponents of Christianity do when pointing to wars fought in the name of Christ; but there is a very important difference. Atrocities in the name of Christianity contradict the teachings they claim to represent, as I have already pointed out. The things that I have attributed to a ‘no absolute truth’ worldview are totally consistent with that philosophy, indeed they are a logical consequence of it. If there is no moral absolute who can object if I take my own life or even somebody else’s? If all truth is relative what can be labelled evil? Evil demands a standard of good to have been violated. If that standard is set only by common consensus what is to stop a Hitler or a Pol Pot redefining that standard, and making evil acceptable, or even declaring it good? As I said at the beginning, once there are no fixed reference points, life becomes intolerable; either due to horror or sheer pointlessness. Very few people are prepared to live as if there really are no fixed truths and then follow this to its logical conclusions. It would lead almost inevitably to madness or suicide. Throwing off the restrictions of God and His morals seems to offer freedom and pleasure but the actual results are extremely bleak. This cannot be ‘corrected’ by a few new laws and a little education. It is the natural fruit of this worldview.

Absolute truth made flesh

For Christians absolute truth is not an abstract concept, it is found in a person. “I am the way, the truth and the life,” Jesus said in John 14:6. This means rather more than that Jesus always told the truth and taught what was true. It

means that He actually embodied all that was true. Since Jesus was God, and God is the ultimate source and guarantee of all truth, when Jesus came into this world, as a man, all truth became visible and tangible for the first time. God is the source of all life and no life could exist in the universe without Him as its creator and maintainer. Therefore it is true to say that God is life and, because God is life, so Jesus could properly say "I am the life". In the same way Jesus could say "I am the truth" because God is the source of all truth. Notice that these are absolute claims. Jesus is not saying "I am a truth" or "I am part of the truth" or "I am one way of viewing truth". He declares that there is an absolute truth and that it is embodied in Him. Notice also that these are exclusive claims. This is perhaps most obvious when we look at the statement "I am the way". The clear implication is that if Jesus is the way then it is not possible to have some other way. In fact this is spelled out plainly in the second half of John 14:6 that I have not yet quoted. The verse ends, "No one comes to the Father except through Me." The Lord Jesus understood that to say that some things are absolutely true is to say that some other things are false or impossible.

Nobody can claim today that the consequences of believing in absolute truth are a harsh and unforgiving spirit, hatred of anybody who believes differently and narrow minded bigotry. We have the record of the life of One who not only believed in absolute truth but claimed to be it. In His life we see demonstrated the polar opposites of these characteristics. It is not possible to imagine a gentler, more loving and open hearted man than the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. The lives of most Christians are poor reflections of Christ's life and so it is possible to criticise the truths of Christianity by focussing on the failures of its followers. But the truths of Christianity do not rest finally on the testimony of Christians, but on Christ Himself.

None of this should be taken to absolve Christians of their responsibility for living lives that demonstrate Christ's character and bearing positive testimony to the power of His gospel to transform sinners. It is to our great shame if our lives make it harder for honest people to believe the Gospel or give ammunition to dishonest people to attack the Gospel.

Conclusion

In a world where truth, and the very concept of truth, is under constant attack we need to be certain of the ground on which we stand as believers in the Lord Jesus. If there are no absolute truths then we have no Gospel to offer and the Saviour that we preach is found to be a fraud or a simpleton because He plainly taught that there were absolute truths and claimed to embody them. People around us are in desperate need of fixed points of reference in a confusing, constantly shifting, world. Only an unchanging God can provide that, and only His Son came as truth incarnate to make Himself a Saviour of sinners. We will look in later talks in this series at some of the absolute certainties that the Gospel is founded on. Until then may we "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" Jude 3, as we stand with our feet firmly planted on the solid rock of God's word.

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