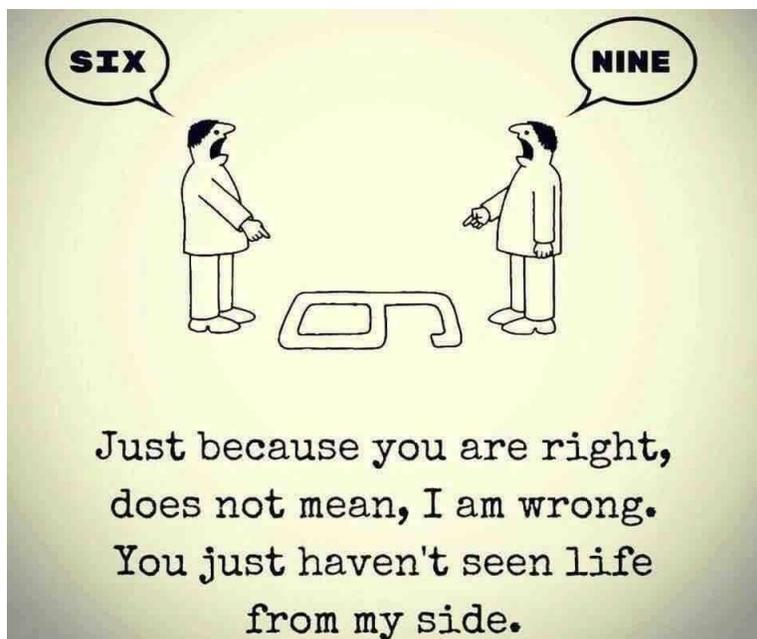


The Truth Is Not Relative

Peter Ditzel



It is one thing to have differing views about nonessential, subjective opinions (e.g. the best pizza toppings). But is biblical truth relative?

The picture above seems clever. Because the two men are looking at the figure on the ground from different perspectives, each of them has a different understanding of the "truth" of the figure. It appears to make truth relative and, therefore, not something anyone can assert dogmatically. This opinion of truth might, as the caption suggests, make for peace. But is it the definition of truth that God wants Christians to have?

Absolute Truth

The Bible speaks of people who are "always learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 3:7). This implies that there is such a thing as absolute truth. On the other hand, seeing truth as relative would seem to be an ideal way to be "always learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." In other words, seeing truth as relative is a good way to waste our time.

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In John 8:31-32, we read, "Jesus therefore said to those Jews who had believed him, 'If you remain in my word, then you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'" Again, this implies that there is an absolute truth. It also says that Jesus' disciples, unlike those who are "always learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth," will know the truth. And it suggests that the absolute truth is found in "my word."

But what about the picture? The figure on the ground can look like a 6 or a 9 depending on the perspective of the viewer. Doesn't this prove that truth is relative? Not at all.

The picture leaves out some critical factors. The figure on the ground is whatever it was intended to be by whoever put it there. We have to try to find additional evidence to determine that intention. For example, further investigation might find that it is part of other figures on the ground in this arrangement: $6 + 6 = 12$. This would prove that the figure is a six. That's using context to help us understand something. Sometimes, we have trouble finding enough additional data to reach a conclusion. But that doesn't mean it is merely a matter of opinion. It means we don't yet know. The truth is not something subjective to the observers. The figure is either a 6 or it is a 9 or it is neither (such as a natural formation that happens to seem like a 6 or a 9 to us). Sometimes an author or artist will purposely be ambiguous. Usually, however, there is a truth about the figure, and it is objective.

Is the Bible Objective Truth?

What does this mean for us as Christians? We live in a time when it is becoming popular for people to say that it is narrow-minded and mean-spirited to take a dogmatic stand about the meaning of the Bible. We hear things like, "If that's the truth you see when you read it, that's cool. I get a different truth from it. But whatever works for each of us is what's right."

This sounds very broadminded and loving. But we've already seen Scriptures that speak of the truth as objective and absolute. So, to treat the Bible as if it were a cloud formation that we can each use to see the shapes we want, is a way of wholly rejecting it. In other words, something that can mean anything, really means nothing.

Let's look again at what Jesus said to the Jews in John 8:31-32: "If you remain in my word, then you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth, and the

truth will make you free." "Remain" is in the active voice in the original Greek. It is not something that happens to us; it is something we do. If we are going to be Jesus' disciples, we need to remain in Jesus' Word. And if we are doing this, we will know the truth—not just any subjective "truth," but "the truth." And the truth of which Jesus speaks is a set of objective propositions that contain a liberating message. It is the truth that the Son sets us free of the bondage of sin (verses 33-36).

The disciples were able to write the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry because the Holy Spirit taught them all things and reminded them of what Jesus said (John 14:26). Also, as Jesus said, "when he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak from himself; but whatever he hears, he will speak. He will declare to you things that are coming. He will glorify me, for he will take from what is mine, and will declare it to you" (John 16:13-14).

In 2 Timothy 3:15-16, Paul tells Timothy, "From infancy, you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith, which is in Christ Jesus. Every Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness." This is speaking of the Old Testament, which some now foolishly want to reject or pick through and discard what they don't happen to like. But notice that the Old Testament Scriptures, like the process Jesus described for the New Testament, were God-breathed or God-inspired.

Now notice that Peter puts the letters of Paul on the same level with the Old Testament Scriptures: "Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given to him, wrote to you; as also in all of his letters, speaking in them of these things. In those, there are some things that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unsettled twist, as they also do to the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

By the way, "scriptures" is translated from the Greek word, *graphē*. It means "writings," but in the New Testament, context shows that it always means the inspired writings—the written Word of God.

So, the truth is absolute and objective. John 17:17 tells us, "Sanctify them in your truth. Your word is truth." And that Word for us today is composed of the Holy-Spirit-inspired Old and New Testament Scriptures. Because they are the truth, the Scriptures are not relative and subjective: "Knowing this first, that

no prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Don't fall for relativism and subjectivism. Not standing up for objective truth is a way to avoid controversy. But, by doing so, you will be turning from God's revealed truth to your own deceitful mind.