

The Challenge of Relativism

Our theme is relativism. Let's begin by working on a definition. Since almost all of us here take that word *relativism* to refer to something bad, a helpful way to clarify what we mean by it is to ask how it is different from good ways of thinking relatively. Here are a couple of examples of how good and indispensable thinking relatively is.

Thinking Relatively

If I say *John MacArthur is tall* that statement may be true or false in relation to, that is, "relative" to, standards of measurement. "John MacArthur is tall" would be true in relation to me, and men in general. But the statement "John MacArthur is tall" would be false in relation to the Sears Tower or adult giraffes in general. So we say that the statement "John MacArthur is tall" is true or false "relative" to the standard of measurement.

This is a good and indispensable way of thinking and speaking. If you are unable to speak of truth claims being relative in this sense, you may accuse people of error who have in fact spoken truth because you have not clarified the context or the standard they are using for measuring the truth of the statement.

Many examples from our daily speech could be given. My father was old when he passed away. True, relative to men. False, relative to civilizations or Redwood trees. That car was speeding. True, relative to the thirty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit. False, relative to a NASCAR race. That baby's cry is loud. True, relative to ordinary human conversation. False, relative to a thunderclap. And so on.

The reason we do not call this way of thinking *relativism* is because we are assuming that the one who says John MacArthur is tall and the one who says he is short both believe there is an objective, external standard for validating the statement as true. For one, the standard is human beings, and for the other, it is giraffes. So as soon as the two people know what standard the other is using, they can agree with each other, or they can argue on the basis of the same standard. This is not relativism.

Relativism

Relativism would hold sway if a person said one of these four things: 1) There is no objective, external standard for measuring the truth or falsehood of the statement "John MacArthur is tall." Or 2) there may be an external standard, but we can't know if there is. Or 3) there may be one, but no one can figure out what it means, so it can't function as a standard. Or 4) there may be an external, objective standard, but I don't care what it is; I'm not going to base my convictions on it.

This starts to sound silly as long as we are talking about John MacArthur's height. So let's shift over to something explosive and immediately relevant. Consider the statement: "Sexual relations between two males is wrong." Two people may disagree on this and not be relativists. They may both say: There is an objective, external standard for assessing this statement, namely, God's will revealed in the inspired Christian Bible. One may say the Bible teaches that this is wrong, and the other may say, No, it doesn't. This would not be relativism.

Relativism comes into play when someone says, "There is no objective, external standard for right and wrong that is valid for everyone. And so your statement that sexual relations between two males is wrong is relative to *your* standard of measurement, but you can't claim that others should submit to that standard of assessment."

This is the essence of relativism: No one standard of true and false, right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful and ugly, can preempt any other standard. No standard is valid for everyone.

What does this imply about truth? Relativists may infer from this that there is no such thing as truth. It is simply an unhelpful and confusing category since there are no external, objective standards that are valid for everyone. Or they may continue to use the word *truth* but simply mean by it *what conforms to your own subjective preferences*. You may prefer the Bible or the Koran or the Book of Mormon or Mao's little Red Book or the sayings of Confucius or the philosophy of Ayn Rand or your own immediate desires or any of a hundred other standards. In that case, you will hear the language of "true for you, but not true for me." In either case, we are dealing with relativism.

In sum, then the essence of relativism is the conviction that statements—like "sexual relations between two males is wrong"—are not based on standards of assessment that are valid for everyone. There are no such standards. Concepts like true and false, right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, are useful for expressing personal preferences or agreed-upon community values, but they have no claim to be based on a universally valid standard.

Assessing Relativism

What shall we make of this? Why have I assumed this is a bad way to see the world? Let's begin our assessment of relativism with an interaction that Jesus had with some classic practical relativists—not self-conscious, full-blown relativists, just *de facto* relativists, which are the most common kind, and they are prevalent in every age, not just this one.

Consider [Matthew 21:23-27](#).

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Look carefully at how the chief priests and elders deal with truth. Jesus asks them to take a stand on a simple truth claim: Either John's baptism is from heaven or from man. Declare what you believe to be the truth. They ponder: If we say that John's baptism is from heaven, then we will be shamed because Jesus will show that we are hypocrites. We say we think his baptism is from heaven, but we don't live like it. We will be shamed before the crowds.

But if we say that John's baptism is from man, we may be harmed by the crowd, because they all believe he was a prophet. There could be some mob violence. Therefore, since we don't want to be shamed and since we don't want to be harmed by a mob, we will not say that either of those is true (that John's baptism is from heaven or from man), and we will assert another statement to be the truth: We don't know the answer to your question.

What are we to make of this? This is not full-blown relativism. Rather, what we see here are the seeds of

relativism. Here is the way the depraved mind works. This is the connection with last night's message on "Faith and Reason." The human mind, apart from transforming grace ([Romans 12:2](#); [Ephesians 4:23](#)), is depraved ([1 Timothy 6:5](#)) and debased ([Romans 1:28](#)) and hard ([2 Corinthians 4:4](#)) and darkened and futile ([Ephesians 4:17-18](#)). It was created by God to discover and embrace and be shaped by the truth—to respond to truth in knowing and enjoying God and serving man. But [Matthew 21:23-27](#) is a picture of what has become of it.

The elders and chief priests do not use their minds to formulate a true answer to Jesus' question. How do they use their minds? They reason carefully: "If we say this, then such and such will happen. And if we say that, then such and such will happen." They are reasoning carefully. Why? Because the truth is at stake? No, because their skin is at stake. They don't want to be shamed, and they don't want to be harmed.

So what has become of the mind and its handmaid, language? Answer: The mind has become the nimble slave of their passions (the adulterous heart, [Matthew 16:4](#)). And language does the dirty work of covering up the corruption. Truth is irrelevant here in guiding what they say. It doesn't matter whether John's baptism is from heaven or from man; what matters is that we not be shamed and that we not be harmed. So we will use language to cover our indifference to truth and our allegiance to the gods of pride and comfort, and we will say, "We do not know."

And Jesus responds: "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." In other words, I don't have serious conversations with people like you. Jesus abominates that kind of arrogant, cowardly prostituting of the glorious gifts of the human mind and human language.

I said this passage reveals the *seeds* of relativism. What I mean is this: The claim that there is no one standard for truth and falsehood that is valid for everyone is rooted most deeply in the desire of the fallen human mind to be free from all authority and to enjoy the exaltation of self. This is where relativism comes from. Relativism is not a coherent philosophical system. It is riddled with contradictions—both logical and experiential. Sophomores in college know that something is fishy when someone claims the statement to be true that all truths are relative. And every businessman knows that philosophical relativists park their relativism at the door when they go into the bank and read the language of the contract they are about to sign. People don't embrace relativism because it is philosophically satisfying. They embrace it because it is physically and emotionally gratifying. It provides the cover that they need to do what they want.

That's what we see in the chief priests and elders. They don't care about truth. They care about their skin. Therefore, their minds and their words simply function as useful means of avoiding shame and harm and covering their self-centeredness and cowardice. That's the deepest root of relativism.

So this is something we should avoid and grieve over and labor to overcome. And it seems to me that one of the ways that we might make some headway in preventing our young people from embracing relativism and rescuing others from it is by simply pointing out how evil and destructive its effects are.

The Evil and Destructive Effects of Relativism

Here are seven such effects.

1. Relativism commits treason.

Relativism is a revolt against the objective reality of God. The sheer existence of God creates the possibility of truth. God is the ultimate and final standard for all claims to truth—who he is, what he wills, what he says is the

external, objective standard for measuring all things. When relativism says that there is no standard of truth and falsehood that is valid for everyone, it speaks like an atheist. It commits treason against God.

In [James 2:10-11](#), we see the dynamics of treason in relation to God's law: "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it." Why? "For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.'" The key to James' argument here is that he connects our relation to God's law with our relation to God himself. The reason your failure in one point makes you guilty of all is that the same God gave all the law—and what matters is that in rebelling against the law you are rebelling against him.

Relativism is a pervasive rebellion against the very concept of divine law. Therefore, it is the most thoroughgoing rebellion against God. It is a treason that is worse than outright revolt because it is devious. Instead of saying to God's face, "Your word is false," it says to man, "There is no such thing as a universally binding divine word." This is treason.

2. Relativism cultivates duplicity.

Everyone knows in his heart that believing relativism to be *true* is contradictory, and everyone also knows intuitively that no one even tries to put it into practice consistently. Therefore, both philosophically and practically, it cultivates duplicity. People say they believe in it but do not think or act consistently with what they say. They are hypocrites. Relativism breeds hypocrisy and duplicity.

It is contradictory because the very process of thinking about relativism commits you to truths that you do not treat as relative. Relativists employ the law of non-contradiction and the law of cause and effect whenever they talk about their belief in relativism and its relation to the world, and these laws are not relative. If they were, relativists could not even formulate the premises and conclusions that they say lead them to relativism. This is a deep duplicity. And when one does it knowingly, it is immoral. The king keeps saying he has clothes on, when he knows he is naked. People keep saying all is relative when they know their very thinking and talking involves principles they do not think are relative.

This is most obvious when relativists live their lives. They simply do not live them as though relativism were true. Professors play the academic game of relativism in their classes and then go home get upset when their wives don't understand what they say. Why do they get upset? Because they know that there is an objective meaning that can be transmitted between two human beings, and we have moral obligations to grasp what is meant. No husband ever said, "Since all truth and language are relative, it does not matter how you interpret my invitation to sleep together." Whether we write love letters or rental agreements or instructions to our children or directions for a friend or contracts or sermons or obituaries, we believe objective meaning exists in what we write, and we expect people to try to understand. And we hold them accountable (and often get upset) if they don't.

Nobody is a relativist when their case is being tried in court and their objective innocence hangs on objective evidence. The whole system of relativism is a morally corrupting impulse toward duplicity. It is a great bluff. And what is needed in our day is for many candid children to rise up and say, "The king has no clothes on."

3. Relativism conceals doctrinal defection.

One of the most tragic effects of relativism is the effect it has on language. In a culture where truth is esteemed as something objective and external to ourselves that we should pursue and embrace and cherish and employ for

the good of the people, language holds the honorable place of expressing and carrying and transmitting that precious cargo of truth. In fact, a person's use of language is assessed on the basis of whether it corresponds to the truth and beauty of the reality he expresses.

But when objective truth vanishes in the fog of relativism, the role of language changes dramatically. It's no longer a humble servant for carrying precious truth. Now it throws off the yoke of servanthood and takes on a power of its own. It doesn't submit to objective, external reality; it creates its own reality. It no longer serves to display truth. Now it seeks to obtain the preferences of the user.

This gives rise to every manner of spin. The goal of language is no longer the communication of reality, but the manipulation of reality. It no longer functions in the glorious capacity of affirming the embrace of confessional truth, but now it functions in the devious capacity of concealing defection from the truth.

Eighty years ago, J. Gresham Machen described this relativistic corruption of language in relation to confessional affirmations:

It makes very little difference how much or how little of the creeds of the Church the Modernist preacher affirms. . . . He might affirm every jot and tittle of the Westminster Confession, for example, and yet be separated by a great gulf from the Reformed Faith. It is not that part is denied and the rest affirmed; but all is denied, because all is affirmed merely as useful or symbolic and not as true.¹

This utilitarian view of language is the direct fruit of relativism. It leads to evasive, vague speech that enables the relativist to mislead people into thinking he is still orthodox. Listen to Machen's amazingly up-to-date description of the mindset that comes from relativism:

This temper of mind is hostile to precise definitions. Indeed nothing makes a man more unpopular in the controversies of the present day than an insistence upon definition of terms. . . . Men discourse very eloquently today upon such subjects as God, religion, Christianity, atonement, redemption, faith; but are greatly incensed when they are asked to tell in simple language what they mean by these terms.²

In all these ways, relativism corrupts the high calling of language and makes it a criminal in covering the doctrinal defection of those who don't have the courage to publicly renounce historic evangelical faith. This is the exact opposite of the commitment that Paul had in the way he used language. In [2 Corinthians 4:2](#), he said, "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." O that every church and school and denomination would write that over every word preached, taught, discussed, and written!

4. Relativism cloaks greed with flattery.

Apparently, the apostle Paul was accused in Thessalonica of simply wanting money from his converts. When he responds to this, he shows the link between flattery and greed:

Our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of *flattery*, as you know, nor

with a *pretext for greed*—God is witness. ([1 Thessalonians 2:3-5](#))

What is flattery? It's the use of language to make someone feel good about himself with a view to getting what you want. Paul calls it a *pretext for greed*. When relativism has abolished truth as the governor of language, language itself goes on sale. If we can get more money by telling people what they want to hear, we will give them what they want.

Relativism is the perfect atmosphere for turning language into a pretext for greed by flattering people with what they want to hear. This is no surprise to Paul. "The time is coming," he says, "when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth" ([2 Timothy 4:3-4](#)).

Against this impulse of relativism, Paul stakes out his position and beckons us to follow: "We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ" ([2 Corinthians 2:17](#)). We speak before the face of God. We do not peddle the word of God.

5. Relativism cloaks pride with the guise of humility.

On September 9, 1999, the Minneapolis StarTribune carried a lead editorial that said, "Christians must abandon the idea that the Jews must be converted. That idea . . . is one of the greatest scandals in history" (p. A 20). So I wrote a letter to the editor and argued that since only "he who has the Son has life" ([1 John 5:12](#)), it is not a scandal but love that moves Christians to urge Jewish people to receive Jesus as their Messiah. This brought a blistering letter from the pastors of the four largest churches downtown which said, "Unfortunately 'arrogant' is the right word to describe *any* attempts at proselytizing—in this case the effort of Christians to 'win over' their Jewish brothers and sisters. Thoughtful Christians will disassociate themselves from any such effort."

The point of that story is that if you believe in a truth that all people must embrace in order to be saved, you will be called arrogant. On the other hand, relativism is put forward as the mark of humility. What I want to suggest is not that all lovers of truth are humble, but that relativism is not a humble stance but a cloak for pride.

It works like this. Truth with a capital T—Truth rooted in God's objective reality and word—is a massive, unchanging reality that we little humans must submit to. Knowing is the humble task of putting ourselves under this reality and submitting to it. *Understanding* is literally taking the humble position to *stand under* the truth and let it be our rule.

But what about relativism? It poses as humble by saying: "We are not smart enough to know what the truth is—or if there is any universal truth." It sounds humble. But look carefully at what is happening. It's like a servant saying: I am not smart enough to know which person here is my master—or if I even have a master. The result is that I don't have a master and I can be my own master. That is in reality what happens to relativists: In claiming to be too lowly to know the truth, they exalt themselves as supreme arbiter of what they can think and do. This is not humility. This is the essence of pride. The only way pride can be conquered in us is for us to believe in Truth and be conquered by it so that it rules us, and we don't rule it.³

Relativism enables pride to put on humble clothes and parade through the street. But don't be mistaken. Relativism chooses every turn, every pace, every street, according to its own autonomous preferences, and submits to no truth. We will serve our generation well by exposing the pride under these humble clothes.⁴

6. Relativism enslaves people.

In [John 8:31-32](#), Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” If we cultivate a view of truth that makes it unreachable or non-existent, then we create a kind of Christianity that will simply colonize slaves. People are not freed from sin through the fog of relativism. They stay in chains.

There is a remedy: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” ([John 17:17](#)). But if the people are led away from a love of the truth, they will not be set free, they will not be sanctified, and they will perish. Paul says in [2 Thessalonians 2:10](#), “[They] perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.” We are not playing games. Relativism leads people away from a love of the truth and so enslaves them and destroys them.

7. Relativism leads to brutal totalitarianism.

The formula is simple: When relativism holds sway long enough, everyone begins to do what is right in his own eyes without any regard for submission to truth. In this atmosphere, a society begins to break down. Virtually every structure in a free society depends on a measure of integrity—that is, submission to the truth. When the chaos of relativism reaches a certain point, the people will welcome any ruler who can bring some semblance of order and security. So a dictator steps forward and crushes the chaos with absolute control. Ironically, relativism—the great lover of unfettered freedom—destroys freedom in the end.

Michael Novak put it powerfully like this:

Totalitarianism, as Mussolini defined it, is . . . the will to power, unchecked by any regard for truth. To surrender the claims of truth upon humans is to surrender Earth to thugs. It is to make a mockery of those who endured agonies for truth and the hands of torturers.

Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas, odorless, deadly, that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. The most perilous threat to the free society today is, therefore, neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism. . . .

During the next hundred years, the question for those who love liberty is whether we can survive the most insidious and duplicitous attacks from within, from those who undermine the virtues of our people, doing in advance the work of the Father of Lies. “There is no such thing as truth,” they teach even the little ones. “Truth is bondage. Believe what seems right to you. There are as many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with your self. Do what feels comfortable.” Those who speak in this way prepare the jails of the twenty-first century. They do the work of tyrants.⁵

Embrace the Truth Whose Name Is Jesus Christ

The list of damaging effects of relativism could go on and on. I haven’t spoken of the cultural relativism that silences the prophetic indictment of personal and social dysfunction that destroys people in the name of morally neutral ethnic identity. I haven’t spoken of the poisonous effects on personal integrity as the commitment to keep one’s word as a sacred bond is eroded.

But we must stop. Remember the chief priests and the elders. If we say “from heaven,” we will be shamed for not believing. So we can’t say that is true. If we say “from man,” we will be mobbed because they say he’s a prophet. So we can’t say that is true. So we will make up a truth: “We don’t know.” What a bondage. They cannot own the truth because they are enslaved to the fear of shame and harm.

May it not be so with you. If you trust Christ to remove your shame and your guilt, if you trust Christ to protect you from harm, and bring you safely to his eternal kingdom, and be for you the supreme Treasure of the universe, then you will be free to see the truth and embrace the truth and love the truth and spread a passion for the truth whose name is Jesus Christ. Through whom and for whom are all things. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1. J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991, orig. 1925), p. 34. [↩](#)
2. *What is Faith*, pp. 13-14. [↩](#)
3. G. K. Chesterton said one hundred years ago (1908), “What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert—himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt—the Divine Reason. . . . We are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table” (Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1957], pp. 31-32). [↩](#)
4. For more on the nature of humility, see [“What is Humility?”](#) and “Brothers, Don’t Confuse Uncertainty with Humility” in John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 2002), pp. 159-166. [↩](#)
5. Michael Novak, “Awakening from Nihilism: The Templeton Prize Address” in *First Things*, August/September, #45, pp. 20-21. [↩](#)

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-challenge-of-relativism>

[John Piper \(@JohnPiper\)](#) is founder and teacher of desiringGod.org and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of [more than 50 books](#), including [Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist](#) and most recently [Why I Love the Apostle Paul: 30 Reasons](#).

What Is the Bible?

Any responsible look at a single Christian belief should be based on what God says about that subject. Therefore, as we begin to look at a series of basic Christian beliefs, it makes sense to start with the basis for these beliefs—God's words, or the Bible. One topic the Bible thoroughly covers is itself; that is, the Bible tells us what God thinks about his very words. God's opinion of his words can be broken down into four general categories: authority, clarity, necessity, and sufficiency.

The Authority of the Bible

All the words in the Bible are God's words. Therefore, to disbelieve or disobey them is to disbelieve or disobey God himself. Oftentimes, passages in the Old Testament are introduced with the phrase, "Thus says the LORD" (see Ex. 4:22; Josh. 24:2; 1 Sam. 10:18; Isa. 10:24; also Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 1:9). This phrase, understood to be like the command of a king, indicated that what followed was to be obeyed without challenge or question. Even the words in the Old Testament not attributed as direct quotes from God are considered to be God's words. Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:16, makes this clear when he writes that "all Scripture is breathed out by God."

The New Testament also affirms that its words are the very words of God. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter refers to all of Paul's letters as one part of the "Scriptures." This means that Peter, and the early church, considered Paul's writings to be in the same category as the Old Testament writings. Therefore, they considered Paul's writings to be the very words of God.

In addition, Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:18, writes that "the Scripture says" two things: "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain" and "The laborer deserves his wages." The first quote regarding an ox comes from the Old Testament; it is found in Deuteronomy 25:4. The second comes from the New Testament; it is found in Luke 10:7. Paul, without any hesitation, quotes from both the Old and New Testaments, calling them both "Scripture." Therefore, again, the words of the New Testament are considered to be the very words of God. That is why Paul could write, "the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

Since the Old and New Testament writings are both considered Scripture, it is right to say they are both, in the words of 2 Timothy 3:16, "breathed out by God." This makes sense when we consider Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would "bring to" the disciples "remembrance" all that Jesus said to them (John 14:26). It was as the disciples wrote the Spirit-enabled words, that books such as Matthew, John, and 1 and 2 Peter were written.

The Bible says there are "many ways" (Heb. 1:1) in which the actual words of the Bible were written. Sometimes God spoke directly to the author, who simply recorded what he heard (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12). At other times the author based much of his writings on interviews and research (Luke 1:1-3). And at other times, the Holy Spirit brought to mind things that Jesus taught (John 14:26). Regardless of the way the words came to the authors, the words they put down were an extension of them — their personalities, skills, backgrounds, and training. But they were also exactly the words God wanted them to write — the very words that God claims as his own.

If God claims that the words of Scripture are his own, then there is ultimately no higher authority one can appeal to for proof of this claim than Scripture itself. For what authority could be higher than God? So, Scripture ultimately gains its authority from itself. But the claims of Scripture only become our personal convictions through the work of the Holy Spirit in an individual's heart.

The Holy Spirit doesn't change the words of Scripture in any way; he doesn't supernaturally make them become the words of God (for they always have been). He does, however, change the reader of Scripture. The Holy Spirit makes readers realize the Bible is unlike any book they have ever read. Through reading, they believe that the words of Scripture are the very words of God himself. It is as Jesus said in John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me." Other kinds of arguments (such as historical reliability, internal consistency, fulfilled prophecies, influence on others, and the majestic beauty and wisdom of the content) can be useful in helping us see the reasonableness of the claims of the Bible.

As God's very words, the words of Scripture are more than simply true; they are truth itself (John 17:17). They are the final measure by which all supposed truth is to be gauged. Therefore, that which conforms to Scripture is true; that which doesn't conform to Scripture is not true. New scientific or historical facts may cause us to reexamine our interpretation of Scripture, but they will never directly contradict Scripture.

The truth of the Scriptures does not demand that the Bible report events with exact, scientific detail (though all the details it does report are true). Nor does it demand that the Bible tell us everything we need to know or ever could know about a subject. It never makes either of these claims. In addition, because it was written by ordinary men in an ordinary language with an ordinary style, it does contain loose or free quotations and some uncommon and unusual forms of grammar or spelling. But these are not matters of truthfulness. The Bible does not, in its original form, affirm anything contrary to fact.

If the Bible does affirm something contrary to fact, then it cannot be trusted. And if the Bible cannot be trusted, then God himself cannot be trusted. To believe that the Bible affirms something false would be to disbelieve God himself. To disbelieve God himself is to place yourself as a higher authority with a deeper, more developed understanding on a topic or topics than God himself.

Therefore, since the Bible affirms that it is the very words of God, we are to seek to understand those words, for in doing so, we are seeking to understand God himself. We are to seek to trust the words of Scripture, for in doing so, we are seeking to trust God himself. And we are to seek to obey the words of Scripture, for in doing so, we are seeking to obey God himself.

The Clarity of Scripture

As we read Scripture and seek to understand it, we discover that some passages are easier to understand than others. Although some passages may at first seem difficult to grasp, the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary to become a Christian, live as a Christian, and grow as a Christian are clear.

There are some mysteries in Scripture, but they should not overwhelm us in our reading. For "the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps. 19:7). And "the unfolding" of God's "words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple" (Ps. 119:130). God's Word is so understandable and clear that even the simple (people who lack sound judgment) can be made wise by it.

Since the things of God are "spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14), a proper understanding of Scripture is often more the result of an individual's spiritual condition than his or her intellectual ability. Often the truth of Scripture will appear to be "folly" to those who have rejected the claims of Jesus (v. 14).

This does not mean, however, that every Bible-related misunderstanding is due to a person's spiritual condition. There are many people — many godly, Christian people — who have greatly misunderstood some part of Scripture. Often the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was talking about (see Matt. 15:16, for example). Sometimes this was due to their hardened hearts (Luke 24:25); at other times it was because they needed to wait for further events and understanding (John 12:16). In addition, members of the early church did not always agree on the meaning of what was written in Scripture (see Acts 15 and Gal. 2:11–15 for examples of this).

When individuals disagree on the proper interpretation of a passage of Scripture, the problem does not lie with the Scriptures, for God guided its composition so that it could be understood. Rather, the problem lies with us. Sometimes, as a result of our shortcomings, we fail to properly understand what the Bible is specifically teaching. Even so, we should prayerfully read the Bible, asking the Lord to reveal the truth of his words to us.

The Necessity of Scripture

It is not only true that all things necessary to become a Christian, live as a Christian, and grow as a Christian are clearly presented in the Bible. It is also true that without the Bible we could not know these things. The necessity of Scripture means that it is necessary to read the Bible or have someone tell us what is in the Bible if we are going to know God personally, have our sins forgiven, and know with certainty what God wants us to do.

Paul hints at this when he asks how anyone can hear about becoming a Christian "without someone preaching" (Rom. 10:14). For "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). If there is no one preaching the word of Christ, Paul says, people won't be saved. And that word comes from the Scriptures. So in order to know how to become a Christian, ordinarily one must either read about it in the Bible or have someone else explain what the Bible says about it. As Paul told Timothy, "the sacred writings . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

But the Christian life doesn't only start with the Bible, for it also thrives through the Bible. Jesus said in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Just as our physical lives are maintained by daily nourishment with physical food, so our spiritual lives are maintained by daily nourishment with the Word of God. To neglect regular reading of the Bible is detrimental to the health of our souls.

In addition, the Bible is our only source for clear and definite statements about God's will. While God has not revealed all aspects of his

will to us—for “the secret things belong to the LORD our God”—there are many aspects of his will revealed to us through the Scriptures, “that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). Love for God is demonstrated by keeping “his commandments” (1 John 5:3). And his commandments are found on the pages of Scripture.

While the Bible is necessary for many things, it is not needed for knowing some things about God, his character, and his moral laws, for, “the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). Paul says that even for the wicked, “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19). Not only do the wicked know of God and about God, but they also have in their minds and consciences some understanding of God’s moral laws (Rom. 1:32; 2:14–15).

Therefore, this “general revelation” about God’s existence, character, and moral law is given to all people; it is seen through nature, God’s historical works, and an inner sense that God has placed in everyone. It is called “general revelation” because it is given to all people in general. It is distinct from the Bible. By contrast, “special revelation” is God’s revelation to specific people. The entire Bible is special revelation and so are the direct messages from God to the prophets and others as recorded in the Bible’s historical stories.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Although those alive during the Old Testament period didn’t have the benefit of God’s complete revelation, which is found in the New Testament, they had access to all the words of God that he intended them to have during their lives. Today, the Bible contains all the words of God that a person needs to become a Christian, live as a Christian, and grow as a Christian. In order to be “blameless” before God, we just have to obey his Word: “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!” (Ps. 119:1). And in the Bible, God has given us instructions that equip us for “every good work” that he wants us to do (2 Tim. 3:16–17). This is what it means to say that Scripture is “sufficient.”

Consequently, it is in Scripture alone that we search for God’s words to us. And we should, eventually, arrive at contentment with what we find there. The sufficiency of Scripture should encourage us to search through the Bible to try to find what God would have us think about a certain issue or do in a certain situation. Everything that God wants to tell all his people for all time about that kind of issue or situation will be found on the pages of the Bible. While the Bible might not directly answer every question we can think up—for “the secret things belong to the LORD our God” (Deut. 29:29)—it will provide us with the guidance we need “for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17).

When we don’t find the specific answer to a specific question in the Bible, we are not free to add to the commands of Scripture what we have found to be pragmatically correct. It is certainly possible that God will give us specific guidance in particular day-to-day situations, but we do not have license to place on par with Scripture any modern revelations, leadings, or other forms of guidance that we believe to be from God. Nor should we ever seek to impose such guidance on other Christians generally or on other people in our churches, since we can be wrong about such guidance and God never wants us to give it the status of his words in the Bible.

There are issues and situations for which God has not provided the precise direction or rules that we sometimes desire. But because Scripture is sufficient, we do not have the right to add to its commands or teachings. For example, while it may be appropriate for one church to meet at a certain time on Sunday morning, it could be completely appropriate for another church to meet at a different time, because the Bible does not speak directly to the issue of Sunday service times. If one church told the other that they needed to meet at a certain hour, that church would be in sin and would not be demonstrating a belief in the sufficiency of Scripture.

In the same way, with regard to living the Christian life, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication. Therefore, we

are not to add prohibitions where we don't believe Scripture is precise enough. From time to time, for example, there may be situations where it is inappropriate for a Christian to drink caffeine, attend a movie theater, or eat meat offered to idols (see 1 Cor. 8–10). But since there isn't any specific teaching or some general principle of Scripture that forbids these actions by all Christians at all times, these activities are not in themselves sinful.

Therefore, in our doctrinal, ethical, and moral teachings and beliefs, we should be content with what God has told us in Scripture. God has revealed exactly what he knows is right for us. Many differences that have divided churches and denominations are issues that the Bible places little emphasis on. Many individual conclusions on issues like the proper form of church government, the exact nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, or the exact nature and order of the events surrounding Christ's return are drawn more from skillful inference than from direct biblical statements. One should, therefore, exhibit a humble hesitancy in placing more emphasis on many of these issues than the Bible does.

Questions for Review and Application

1. Why is it important that the Bible be the basis for our beliefs?
2. Will the Bible definitively answer every question we bring to it? Why or why not?
3. What is one issue that the Bible speaks clearly on? What is one issue that the Bible does not speak clearly on? How does this affect the emphasis you should place on these issues?

What Is God Like?

Just as Scripture is the highest source of information about itself, God is the highest source of information about himself. That makes sense, for if there was a higher source of information about God, then God wouldn't be God. Therefore, it is important that any study of God look at what God says about himself—found on the pages of Scripture.

God Exists

Scripture simply assumes God exists. The first verse of the Bible—"In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1)—matter-of-factly presents God as Creator without any proof for his existence or actions.

Scripture also tells us that all persons everywhere have a deep, inner sense that God exists, that they are his creatures and that he is their Creator. In Romans 1:19, Paul writes that even for the wicked, this sense is "plain to them, because God has shown it to them." Although many today do not acknowledge that God exists, Paul says this is because "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25), therefore actively or willingly rejecting some truth about God's character and existence that they originally knew. In essence, they convince themselves that "there is no God" (Ps. 10:4).

The knowledge of God that Paul refers to can be "clearly perceived ... in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20). Every created thing gives evidence of God and his character. But human beings—created in the image of God—give the most evidence of God's existence and character.