



*The contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated - Thomas Aquinas*

# Confident Christians

## Does Absolute Truth Exist?

The poet Steve Turner, in his work entitled “Creed”, pens these words in one section:

*“We believe that each man must find the truth that is right for him.  
Reality will adapt accordingly.  
The universe will readjust. History will alter.  
We believe that there is no absolute truth  
excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.”*

With surveys showing that nearly 2/3 of people do not believe in absolute truth, Turner’s words are both amusing and a little frightening. Why do people believe that absolute truth does not exist, when the very statement “There is no such thing as absolute truth” is itself an absolute truth claim. The only conclusions that can be reached are either that society is dazed and confused and unable to think logically, or that the extreme political correctness that our culture is awash in has paralyzed people so that they make no claim to real truth for fear of “offending” someone in a situation where a person could actually be perceived as being (gasp!) wrong.

When one strips themselves of the modern day muzzle of supposed tolerance and thinks clearly, it becomes quickly apparent that absolute truth does indeed exist. In reaching this conclusion it is helpful to first understand what truth is *not*, then look at what truth is, and finish with a response to the most common ideologies that reject absolute truth along with other miscellaneous objections.

## What Truth is Not

Beginning in a negative fashion, let’s take a look at what truth is not. There are six statements that can be made about what truth is not:

1. Truth is *not* what works. This is pragmatism – an ends vs. means type approach. The reality is, lies can appear to “work”, but they are still lies.
2. Truth is *not* what is coherent or understandable. A group of people can get together and form a conspiracy based on a set of falsehoods where they all agree to tell the same false story, but it does not make their presentation true.
3. Truth is *not* what makes people feel good. Unfortunately, bad news can be true.
4. Truth is *not* what the majority says is true. The fact is, 51% of a group can reach a wrong or false conclusion.
5. Truth is *not* what is comprehensive. A very detailed and long presentation can still reach a false end result.
6. Truth is *not* what is intended. A good intention can still be wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Armed with the knowledge of what truth is not, we can now move on to what truth actually is.

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<sup>1</sup>Norman Geisler, “Truth, Nature of” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1999), 741-2.

## What Truth Is

Ask people what truth is, and you will likely get a blank stare or a struggled definition as to what they believe truth to be. Truth, however, is not that hard to define. There are three simple ways to define truth:

1. Truth is that which corresponds to reality
2. Truth is what which matches its object
3. Truth is simply telling it like it is

First, truth corresponds to reality or “what is”. One of the definitions of “crazy” is someone who has lost touch with reality – how things really are, present themselves, and work.

Truth is also correspondent in nature; in other words, it matches its object and is known by its referent. For example, a teacher facing a class may say, “Now the only exit to this room is on my right”. For the class that may be facing the teacher, the exit door may be on their left, but it’s absolutely true that the door, for the professor, is on their right. This is the concept of reference. Truth also matches its object. It may be absolutely true that a certain person may need so many milligrams of medicine “X”, but another person may need more or less of the same medication to produce the desired effect. This is not relative truth, but just an example of how truth must match its object. It would be wrong (and potentially dangerous) for a patient to request that their doctor give them an inappropriate amount of a particular medication, or for that manner to say that any medicine for their specific ailment will do. No, truth in medicine is critically important and is just one illustration of how truth must exactly match its object.

In short, truth is simply telling it like it is – this is the way things really are and any other viewpoint is plain wrong.

### *Some Attributes of Truth*

Truth has a few, very critical attributes that must be understood, and unfortunately, these properties cause a lot of uproar in the current culture, especially when it comes to spiritual matters.

First, truth, by nature, is narrow. For example  $2+2$  only equals 4. It does not equal 5 or 6 or 100 – there is one and only one correct answer to the mathematical equation. Another example might be that it is not uncommon for only one key to fit a door. Note that it is not arrogant or “narrow minded” to insist that the proper key fit a door or that only one answer exists to a math problem.

The second attribute of truth is a kissing-cousin to the first property – truth, by nature, excludes its opposite. All other answers other than 4 are excluded from the reality of what  $2+2$  truly equals.

Truth also does not change over time. We may become more learned in a certain area (for example, finding out that the earth revolves around the sun), but those truths were always there. The bottom line is that truth is discovered, not invented.

Next, it is important to understand that truth is immune to belief. It doesn’t matter how much one sincerely believes a wrong key will fit a door – they key still won’t go in and the lock won’t be opened.

Truth is also unaffected by sincerity. Someone who picks up a bottle of poison and sincerely believes it is lemonade will still suffer the unfortunate effects of the poison.

Finally, truth is impervious to desire. A person may strongly desire that their car has not run out of gas, but if the gauge says the tank is empty and the car will not run any further, then no desire in the world will miraculously cause the car to keep going.

## **On to Absolute Truth**

Absolute truth is truth that is true for all people, at all times, and in all places. Note that the above properties already stated about truth still apply (truth is known by its referent, etc.) Many people say this is impossible, but the confusion comes when either they don't understand the real definition of truth (it must correspond to its object, etc.) or they don't ask the right questions.

For example, suppose someone walks into a room that has three people sitting inside it. The person who just entered asks the question, "Is it cold in here?" The first person says "Yes it's cold." The second person says "Nope, feels OK." And the third person says, "Actually, it's hot in here." Is not this an example of relative truth – that it all depends on the person or situation?

Actually, it's an example of how absolute truth works. The better question to ask is, "What is the temperature in the room?" Let's say it was 70 degrees. It is absolutely true that the first person was cold, the second person was fine, and the third person was hot – the temperature in the room was affecting them in different ways, but – and this is a key point – it does not change the fact that the temperature of the room is 70 degrees. Truth may affect different people in different ways, but a truth itself can not be different than what it actually is.

## **Challenging Ideologies to Absolute Truth**

Absolute truth is opposed today by five ideologies that say real truth does not exist or cannot be known:

1. Relativism – says all truth is relative
2. Skepticism – says we should doubt all truth
3. Postmodernism – affirms no truth
4. Pluralism – says all truth claims are valid, even ones that oppose each other
5. Agnosticism – says you cannot know what is true

### *Everything is Relative*

Relativism says that all truth is relative and that there is no such thing as absolute truth. However relativism fails for two main reasons. First, relativism fails to understand what truth really is – that it is correspondent in nature, just match its object, is known by its referent, etc.

Second, relativism is self defeating. Is the claim "all truth is relative" a relative truth or an absolute truth? If it is a relative truth, then it really is meaningless – how do we know when and where it applies? If it is an absolute truth, then absolute truth exists.

Further, some things are just plain and absolutely true. For example, a person can't deny the absolute truth of their existence – they have to exist to deny their existence.

Further, in a world of relative truth, no one would be wrong about anything – everyone would be right in some form or fashion, which naturally leads to a world full of contradictions.

Finally, the relativist betrays their own position when they state that the position of the absolutist is wrong – why can't those who say absolute truth exists be correct too?

### *Skeptical of the Truth*

The skeptic simply doubts all truth. Maybe someone is pushing a certain agenda, has a particular bias, etc., so you cannot really be sure of what someone is claiming.

But, is the skeptic skeptical of skepticism – do they doubt their own truth claim? If so, then why pay attention to skepticism? If not, then we can be sure of at least one thing (in other words, absolute truth exists) – skepticism. Ultimately, skepticism, like relativism, is self-defeating.

### *Truth is in the Eye of the Beholder*

The postmodernist just affirms no particular truth. They deconstruct all truth claims and reconstruct them so that truth is only in the eye of the beholder. “True for you, but not for me” is the battle cry of the postmodernist.

Postmodern’s epistemology (a word that means how we come to know things; the study of human knowledge) holds to the limitless instability of words. The text in a book or words spoken by individuals are stripped of their meaning and therefore given no point of reference.

Funny thing though – the postmodernist affirms at least one absolute truth: the truth that no truth should be affirmed. Like the others, postmodernism is self-defeating and cannot stand up under its own claim.

### *Tolerance and Truth for All*

Pluralism says that all truth claims are equally valid and true. Perhaps of all the ideologies, pluralism is the least logical of the bunch, because it says all claims are true, even those that oppose each other. Of course, this is impossible – for example, can a woman be both pregnant and not pregnant at the same time?

Pluralism crashes and burns at the foot of the law of non-contradiction, which says that something cannot be both “A” and “Non-A” at the same time and in the same sense. As one philosopher said, anyone who believes that the law of non-contradiction is not true should be beaten and burned until they admit that to be beaten and burned is not the same thing as to *not* be beaten and burned.

The spirit behind pluralism is an open-armed attitude of tolerance for all. Pluralism confuses the fact of everyone having equal and respected value vs. every truth claim being equally valid and true. The American Heritage Dictionary defines tolerance as “Leeway for variation from a standard. Physiological resistance to a poison.” In essence, tolerance is an engineering term and is a measure of far a system (a bridge, engine, etc.) can be skewed from what is good and right and true before it breaks.

In the end people’s views should certainly be respected, but drifting from what is true and right is simply not a good or smart thing to do.

### *I Don’t Know and You Don’t Either*

The agnostic says you can’t know truth and in reality, it is the root from which all the other ideologies previously covered spring. But like the others, agnosticism is self-defeating because it claims to know at least one truth: that you can’t know truth.

Agnosticism can take one of two forms: hard and soft. Hard agnosticism says you can't know truth, whereas soft agnosticism says truth may be knowable, but we just do not know it right now. However, when you press the soft agnostic as to why they do not know the truth, they often retreat into hard agnosticism and say it is because you cannot know the truth.

### More Objections to Absolute Truth

Besides the previously covered ideologies, there are other objections that people routinely make against absolute truth. Usually these descend into some form of ad hominem attacks, with the most common being that absolute truth advocates are narrow-minded, arrogant, and that absolute truth does not apply to the area of morality and what is deemed right and wrong.

With respect to being narrow-minded, it is better to be 'broad minded' and say there are many answers to the question of what is  $2+2$ ? To repeat some of the properties of truth, it excludes its opposites and is narrow by definition. In addition, it is simply illogical to try and refute the law of non-contradiction; it just cannot be done. Also, do not forget that those claiming that absolutists are narrow-minded are exhibiting narrow-mindedness as well because they are not "open" to accepting absolute truth.

What about the charge that clinging to absolute truth is arrogant? Again, is it arrogant for a math teacher to mark a student wrong for claiming that  $2+2=5$ ? Is it arrogant for a doctor to tell a patient they are going to die without a single/specific operation? Is it arrogant to tell someone that only one key will fit a locked door? Of course not. Lastly, those claiming that absolutists are being arrogant are themselves demonstrating arrogance in their claim that the absolute truth position is wrong.

In other words, it is not arrogant to be right about something. Further, the attitude or spirit with which truth is dispensed does not matter. A very kind person can be wrong and a mean-spirited, nasty individual can be right about a claim.

Finally, in the areas of right and wrong, absolutes most certainly apply. No one believes that torturing babies is proper to do – it is absolutely wrong. And poll any married couple and ask them if they would prefer their spouse be *absolutely* faithful to them or *relatively* faithful to them.

### Conclusions

Steve Turner's poem "Creed" does a masterful job at exposing the logical fallacies of how people think about things like truth and how it applies to everyday life. In the end, it is clear to see that absolute truth exists, and that the most popular ideological claims against it are self-defeating, with any remaining objections being easily put to bed as well.

Thomas Aquinas was so right when he said, "The contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated."

## WORKS CITED

Geisler, Norman. *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999.