



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### The Truth Series: IV. TRUTH IN THE MARKETPLACE

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2 Timothy 4:1 - 5

#### INTRODUCTION

We're launching into **The Truth Project**. Simulcast yesterday. . .small groups are forming. Our task is to build a comprehensive world-view based on the nature and character of God. Otherwise, we will get absorbed in the world's way of thinking and act like the world.

TRUTH deals with "what is" (i.e.: what is REAL). You can arrive at it in a lot of ways:

- In the Natural World: through mathematical proof, scientific method, logic
- In Relats. & Human Affairs: through simple honesty (i.e.: telling it like it is)
- Ultimate / Spiritual Truth: it is revealed

God is the source of this truth. The nature & character of God is perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ.

**Hebrews 1:3** – *"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word."*

That's why I preached last Sunday from the well-known text **John 14:6** – *"I am the Way, the TRUTH, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* I wanted you to identify Truth with a Person—not just a concept, mental construct, or an exercise in deductive reasoning.

You could describe Christianity as:

- A set of ideas or ideals
- A philosophy or a religion
- A way of life (a lifestyle)
- A political strategy, a movement, a sub-culture
- A system of morality & ethics

Christianity is and has all those things. But before it is any of those things, **it is falling in love with a Person**. And who is that Person? He is (as He unfolded His identity in John's Gospel):

- *The Truth*            ← that delivers to you a perfect representation of God
- *The Bread of Life*       ← that fills you up in the empty places of your life
- *The Gate*            ← to get you on the right path (i.e.: small & narrow; not always easy, but always right)
- *The Vine*            ← if you attach your life to His, there will be fruit
- *The Light*           ← for all the dark places

Today, let's take this understanding out into the "*marketplace of ideas*" and see how it fares.

To do that, I'd like to direct your attention to a passage in **II Timothy 4**—written by Paul to his protégé, Timothy, a young church leader and pastor in Ephesus.

Now **Ephesus** was a cosmopolitan city. . .very influential in the Roman empire. . .a lot like Ann Arbor. . .a

hotbed of wild & crazy ideas and false teachings. Paul's concern was that a worldliness antagonistic to sound doctrine would creep into the church and take it from its "first love" (Jesus). So he admonished Timothy to hold to sound doctrine, to reject error, to correctly handle the word of truth, to keep his life pure. Let's read **vv. 1-5 [vv. 1-4 from NLT; v. 5 from NIV]**:

<sup>1</sup> *I solemnly urge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who will someday judge the living and the dead when he appears to set up his Kingdom:* <sup>2</sup> *Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not (in season and out of season). Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching.*

<sup>3</sup> *For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear.* <sup>4</sup> *They will reject the truth and chase after myths.*

Now, four things. . .

<sup>5</sup>*But you, keep your head in all situations. Endure hardship (approval ratings ↓; disdain ↑). Do the work of an evangelist (later). Discharge all the duties of your ministry.*

### IS TRUTH RELATIVE?

I'm afraid we have come to the time mentioned in **v. 3**—a time when all truth is seen as relative (not absolute). It's called MORAL RELATIVISM == the view that all philosophies, religions and opinions are equally valid. Pretty much anything goes. Everybody gets to make up their mind about what is true-false. . . what is right-wrong. There is no outside, independent, absolute standard of truth. It's all inside of us. You have your truth. . . I have mine. We operate with an implicit agreement: I won't try to change your beliefs if you won't try to change mine. In other words, we won't try to impose our "beliefs", our "truth" on anyone.

A. Truth these days seems to **depend on your bias**—so that you never really get to what's real. I read an intriguing article<sup>1</sup> this past week that made the case that "*we live in a post-fact world*". Truth is determined by "what your bias is", not "what the facts are".

For instance, the Swift Boat controversy—remember that, 4 years ago? The big furor over whether or not John Kerry earned his medals in Viet Nam. Either he did ~OR~ he didn't. Incredibly, people made up their minds based on whether they were Republicans or Democrats, not what was documented and verified through investigation. In other words, people believed what they wanted to believe.

Same thing with Saddam Hussein. Was he "personally involved" in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon OR wasn't he? You can't have it both ways. There were several investigations of the issue—including one by the nonpartisan 9/11 Commission—and then the White House came out and said, "Saddam didn't do it". Yet in 2003, a poll commissioned by the *Washington Post* showed 70% of the nation thought he had been personally involved. Four years later (in 2007) a *New York Times* survey still found +30% believing this.

There are many other black-white, either-or issues. The state of the economy is one. A Pew study found that answers to the question "*What is the state of the economy?*" tended to vary according to which political party you belong to and your income level. 2/3 of the Republicans who earn over \$75,000 think the economy is great (because a Republican president is in office); only 1/3 of the Democrats feel that way.

So we have "people living in the same economy as one another. . . swimming in the same pool—but half of them think the water is lovely, while the other half are dying of chill." They are living DIFFERENT realities, when there can be only ONE truth.

B. Truth has fallen on hard times in the spiritual arena as well. A **Barna Research Poll** completed a couple years ago brought to light some troubling data about where the American public is intellectually and

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<sup>1</sup> ". . . *And Nothing But the Truth*" by Farhad Manjoo in the September/October (2008) edition of the Cornell Alumni Magazine.

spiritually:

- The poll examined several different beliefs and found that “most adults reject the notions of original sin, the existence of Satan, and salvation by God’s grace alone”. Presumably because they seem “out of date”.
- The poll also discovered that “Americans tend to think that the core documents of the world’s major faiths (e.g.: the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon) are ‘different expressions of the same spiritual truth’”—in other words, equally inspired.
- The poll concluded: “People are just as likely to order their lives after what they hear from Oprah or Dr. Phil as they are the Bible. Most see no difference between them.”

The U.S. has become the greatest melting pot of cultures. *Diversity*—and its first cousin, *Tolerance*—are now cardinal doctrines.

C. Follow it far enough, and you come to this proposition: **No one is really wrong. Everyone is right, and the important thing is that we live & let live → unity.** But that’s a prescription for *chaos* more than it is for *unity*. What it means is:

- The morals of a serial rapist on the loose are just as valid as the ethics of Mother Teresa.
- We can’t call Hitler, Saddam, or Stalin evil—*that would be judgmental*. They were simply following the truth they believed in.

Here’s the prevailing philosophy of the day: “Truth is something you discover on your own. There are no facts, no absolute truths, no rights or wrongs. It’s up to you to come up with your own truth.” These days we hear teachers (and parents) saying: “We want to teach our students, our kids how to think, not tell them what to think.” Sound good??? Almost, but not quite!!!

It makes me want to scream when I hear a well-meaning mother (in a movie or TV show) say to her 16 year old daughter who’s looking to her for guidance: “*Well, honey, you’ll know when it’s right.*” This young girl whose hormones are raging.....This mother who will tell her daughter to get her homework done or take out the trash, but will offer no guidance on one of the most important moral decisions she’ll ever make. ☹

D. This kind of wishy-washy thinking—“*There are no absolutes*” / “*Don’t impose your morality on someone (even your own child)*”—has **crept into the church**, sad to say. Maybe the church was too strict years ago, and this is a reaction in the opposite direction. But we’ve gone too far.

**Josh McDowell**, who has written a lot on this subject, tells about a conversation with a 16 year old girl, AMBER—a Christian girl from a solid youth group.

- Josh: “Is it wrong to engage in premarital sex?”
- Amber: “Well, I believe it’s wrong for me.” [OK]
- Josh: “Do you believe that the Bible teaches premarital sex is wrong for everyone?”
- Amber (now uncomfortable): “Well, I know it’s wrong for me, and I have chosen to wait until I’m married. But I don’t think I can judge other people on what they do.”

It seems Amber, like so many others, doesn’t think truth is universal. But now, what if Amber did believe this truth to be universal, not relative (i.e.: applies to everybody): Would that make her judgmental? Would she need to “force” others to believe it? NO—on both accounts. It’s still her choice to believe or not believe, to accept or not accept—same as for everyone else.

“Moral Relativism” is appealing on many fronts:

- It allows me to think what I want to think. . .believe what I want to believe. . .continue doing what I want to do. Moral Relativism gives people “*whatever their itching ears want to hear*” (v. 3).

- There's a great deal of freedom. I get to make my own rules (they're not imposed from without).
- There's tolerance for everyone's viewpoint—except the Christian's. ☹--when, it seems, prejudice kicks in. [Could we call it “reverse prejudice”?]

On the other hand, “moral relativism” is extremely dangerous—because it leaves us with no basis for morality. If you don't have a moral compass built on truth (**the** truth, not **my** truth), you will crash & burn.

### ARE THERE ABSOLUTES?

As Christians, we believe there are important truths that govern life. These truths are **absolute** because they come NOT from within us BUT from beyond us. **EXAMPLE:** 2+2=4. That's true whether anyone believes it or not. . . agrees with it or not. . . likes it or not. Absolute truths are *absolute* because they come from an absolute God. And they are the foundation of life itself. God created this world and it operates on principles He built into the universe.

**EXAMPLE:** You can disbelieve there is such a thing as gravity if you want. You can dislike the law of gravity. You can even defy the law of gravity. But if you do, you will not break the law of gravity; it will break you!

If there are moral absolutes, where do I go to find them? If absolute truth exists, where can it be found?

Answer (from last week): In Jesus (cf. John 14:6) + Jesus' teachings (found in the Bible).

### WHAT ABOUT TOLERANCE?

It's sad this has become such a bone of contention. I think the main intent of tolerance is to en-gender RESPECT—something we can all be of the same mind on. In fact, Scripture expects it! **I Peter 3:15-16**. . .

*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

But you know, I've noticed there's not much tolerance exhibited in some arenas (e.g.: in *athletic contests* or *political elections*). Each side believes their side is the right side, and will try to get you to believe that too. Do Michigan fans believe in tolerance when engaged in a battle for the championship? PLEASE! ☺

Under our Constitution, all viewpoints are equally *protected*. . . but not all are equally *valid*. People can believe whatever they want, but that doesn't make it right or true.

### APPLICATION

Let's go back to that verse in our Scripture: *“Preach the Word. Be prepared in season and out of season. . . Do the work of an evangelist. Discharge all the duties of your ministry”* (vv. 2 & 5).

Before Jesus left the earth, He commanded us to *“be (his) witnesses”* / *“to make disciples of all the nations.”* That word “make” doesn't mean *to force*; rather it means *to witness*. Our job is to bear witness (in word, deed and testimony). . . and leave the rest (the convicting and convincing) to the Holy Spirit. Jesus spells out our respective roles in **John 14-15-16**:

- **Ch. 15:26-27** – *“When the Counselor comes==the Spirit of Truth==He will testify about Me. And you (he doesn't let us off the hook) also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”*
- **Ch. 16:8&13** – *“When He comes, He (not you & me) will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment”. . . “He will guide you into all truth.”*

We don't tell people how to think or to vote. We preach the Gospel, we bear witness to our own experience in Christ, we let that love relationship show! We might even ask someone to weigh the truth claims of Jesus Christ and come to a decision, but that's where it ends. None of us can force someone to believe; we can only offer someone the opportunity to make their own choice.

Our text says, "*Do the work of an evangelist*" (v. 5). You can be an evangelist without being a "nut case". ☺ EVANGELISTS have gotten a bad rap. In some instances, deserved (there have been abuses). An evangelist feels strongly and is passionate. An evangelist will do all within his/her power to *influence* someone for Christ (but never to *pressure* or *coerce*). Evangelists are known for their fervor, dedication, intensity, and eagerness to deliver the Word. They want everybody (or, as many as possible) to "get it" (i.e.: that the Creator of the Universe loves them).

PARENTS, you need to be evangelists in your homes. You are charged with "training your children up in the ways of the Lord". Their eternal destiny is in your hands. Yes, your kids will struggle with what you are teaching them; they will pull against you, challenge you, even rebel. That's because they have to test it out for themselves to see if they're going to embrace truth. And, I might add, they want to see if you really believe what you've taught them.

### CONCLUSION

May none of us believe for a moment longer that truth is relative.

May you cut any & all ties you have with *moral relativism* and believe once again in an absolute-eternal-unchanging God.

May you commit to following the Bible as your sure source of moral authority.

May you do the work of an evangelist—including taking a stand, using your influence, and being a witness.

### **Study Guide**

**Monday: Re-read II Timothy 4:1-5.** Why was it important for Timothy to preach the gospel? If Timothy had not been faithful to this mission, chances are we wouldn't believe in Christ today. What does it mean to "be prepared in season and out of season"? Should we be "doing the work of an evangelist" in this day & age, with all the different religions? Shouldn't we all just work on getting along?

**Tuesday: Read Colossians 1:1-12.** Bible scholars often talk about the "Colossian heresy". It was a belief system that combined the Bible with pagan philosophy. The result? Christ was no longer supreme. The system was a combination of Judaism and paganism, but it wore the mask of Christianity. It did not deny Christ a place, but it did not give him the supreme place. The point of this little epistle is to unfold the cosmic implications of Christ's absolute pre-eminence and to direct us to trust in the sole sufficiency of his saving work. Here is *absolute truth* at its best!

**Wednesday:** Do you see any signs that we are moving away from Biblical theology in favor of culture-based theology? Do we sometimes try to combine beliefs from many different faith perspectives? Consider this: 44% of adults in America contend that "the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon are all different expressions of the same spiritual truths." What are your convictions with respect to Biblical authority? Do you believe that the Bible is our standard for testing everything else that claims to be true? Is it reliable as our only source of knowledge about how we can be saved? Is it our source of guidance for how we should live?

**Read II Timothy 3:16.** Could a more solid commitment to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture keep us from wandering over into other religions for truth?

**Thursday:** If we combine beliefs from many different faith perspectives (e.g.: Christianity, Islam, Wicca, secular humanism, and eastern religions)—under the guise that all religions contain truth—aren't we watering down Truth? Is this any different from the idol worship that was so prevalent in the Old Testament?

**Friday:** Are there any absolute truths? Name a few that govern and shape your life.