



STATEMENT DE-195

WITNESSING TIPS

Confronting the Challenge of Ethical Relativism

by Douglas Groothuis

An indispensable pillar of Christian truth is the proposition that God is the lawgiver and moral governor of the universe. God is a personal and moral being, unlike the impersonal and amoral Force of New Age imagination. What is good, right, and virtuous is grounded in the triune God of the Bible. Jesus said, "Be holy as the Father in heaven is holy" (Matt. 5:48).

Because the all-knowing and eternal God is the source and standard of ethics, the moral law is universal, absolute, and objective; it is based on His unchanging, holy character. Although the *application* of unchanging moral principles may change throughout history, the *principles themselves* are perpetually binding and irrevocable. God isn't morally moody.

Given this eternal anchorage for ethics, sin must be seen as the transgression of God's law. John says that "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). David cries out to God and says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). Sin is an offense against God, ourselves, and others. R. C. Sproul calls it "cosmic treason"; we rebel against our creator and "do our own thing."

In the modern Western world, ethical relativism poses a challenge to the biblical basis for ethics. Relativism affirms that moral right and wrong are only socially and individually determined. Ethics is split off from any objective moral order. Cultural norms of morality are relative to particular societies, individuals, and historical periods. What is "right for you" may not be "right for me." What is wrong today may not be wrong tomorrow. When the idea of moral law is held in disrespect, the notion of sin softens and then dissolves. If all is relative, absolute evil is impossible. If sin is nonsense, then the notion of a Savior from sin is absurd. There is nothing from which to be saved.

Because of its denial of abiding ethical standards and of sin against a holy God, relativism is a roadblock to effective evangelism — besides undercutting values essential for a healthy society. But the key arguments for relativism are fatally flawed.

1. Relativists often argue that a society that honors free speech and freedom of religion must relinquish any notion of absolute truth or morality because this stifles the free exchange of ideas. Dogmatism and moralism are unwelcome in the pluralistic public square. Relativism is seen as required for a democracy of ideas and norms.

But this is flatly false. One may believe there are moral absolutes and also believe that the best way to reach ethical

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conclusions is through open discussion, dialogue, and debate. Freedom of religion and speech does not necessitate that there can be no objectively true religion or morality. A free society guarantees your right to be right — and your right to be wrong! I can try to persuade you of the truth of my convictions without using coercion. In fact, I may take it as a *moral absolute* that I should not coerce those I believe to be absolutely wrong.

The relativist has abandoned the very concept of objective moral truth. It is all a matter of opinion because everything is relative. There is, therefore, nothing objective to argue about and no good reason to believe one thing over another. This is hardly what the American founders envisioned for a free society. It more resembles anarchism and nihilism (i.e., rejection of all values) than a "marketplace of ideas."

2. The sheer diversity of moral and religious ideas within and between societies is invoked as evidence for relativism. With so many options before us, who is to say what is true or false, right or wrong? We are left with relativism.

Here again, the facts do not deliver the conclusion. A diversity of ethical and religious beliefs hardly insures that they are all somehow true. A tribal culture may be *scientifically* wrong in thinking that the sun revolves around a flat earth. Why can't the same culture be *ethically* wrong for practicing head-hunting? If you say that abortion is right and I say it is wrong, how can we both be correct when we contradict each other? Ethical relativism eliminates the notion of a moral mistake. But this is just as fallacious as saying that every answer on a multiple-choice test is correct because there is a diversity of answers.

There may also be less diversity between cultures than is often thought. Every culture has taboos against stealing. Yet a desert culture may penalize the theft of water much more highly than would a tropical culture. The diversity of moral *codes* does not rule out a basic agreement on deeper ethical *principles*. In an appendix to his excellent book against relativism, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis listed common moral principles spanning thousands of years from diverse religions and civilizations. As Paul tells us in Romans 1-2, God has endowed with a conscience all those created in His own image, however much we efface or neglect it.

Relativism also leads to absurd conclusions which undermine its credibility. If there is no true moral law that applies transculturally, then there is no basis for one culture to condemn actions in another. Surely any morally sane person must ethically condemn Nazi atrocities as evil and praise the heroes who resisted the Reich by saving Jews from extermination. But relativism cannot permit such judgments. The morality of everything is relative — even genocide.

If we can reveal flaws in the case for relativism, we can further argue that the moral law is best understood as flowing from the moral lawgiver of the universe. God, as our Creator, knows what is best for us and calls us to obey Him for our own good and for His glory. Yet, as Paul said, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 6:23). The universal fact of guilt and shame testifies to that, whatever the cultural setting might be.

But the good news is that the Lawgiver is also the Redeemer of those who lament over their lawlessness and trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Those who cry out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13), can find mercy and eternal life. But the unrepentant relativist must face the absolute justice of a holy God who admits no interpretation other than His own. In the end everything *is* relative — but it is relative to God's absolute standards, not ours.

This article was revised and expanded as a chapter in the book, *Christianity That Counts* by Douglas Groothuis (Baker Books, 1995).