

SAYS WHO?

RELATIVISM



BIG IDEA: Many worldviews seek to undermine or overthrow Christianity, but the Christian can and should stand firm on God's Word.

Relativism—the belief that there is no authoritative worldview or interpretation of the world—is becoming our culture's prevalent worldview. According to the relativist, it is arrogant—or, at best, misguided—to claim the superiority of one worldview over other worldviews. But is relativism compatible with a biblical worldview?

The answer is “No,” because in the Bible God reveals Himself to us as authoritative and as the essence of truth. The Christian, therefore, should think rightly about God and represent Him as He reveals Himself. The broad cultural acceptance of relativism, however, undermines the confidence and courage of many Christians to believe in and to proclaim the message of Christ as absolute truth. This *InterActa* lesson provides one dramatic illustration from Acts 17:16-34 of a Christian responding to worldview conflict by holding fast to God's Word.



DESIRED LIFE CHANGE: As a result of this study, your group members should be motivated to study and rely on God's written revelation to gain confidence in their beliefs and courage for communicating Christ to others.



AUDIENCE: This lesson is designed for students who, because of our relativistic culture, waver in their faith and who, therefore, need more confidence and courage for standing firm in biblical truth and communicating it to others.



LEADER'S PREPARATION: Familiarize yourself with the entire flow and order of the lesson. Give particular attention to the initial illustration and its purpose. Be familiar with all the Scriptural passages. *Please note:* this lesson is not attempting to be a “how-to-guide” for defeating a relativist. It is instead attempting to teach the need for the Christian to stand firm on God's revealed Word in the face of opposition.



AT A GLANCE

As your group interacts in this study, they will observe . . .

This is my WORLD: As a Christian college student, I often face significant personal and evangelistic challenges in a culture that has embraced relativism.

This is my NEED: In confronting my relativistic environment, I need confidence that my Christian view of the world comes from God.

This is my ANSWER: God reveals Himself to us.

This is the DIFFERENCE: I can stand confidently against false beliefs because of how God speaks truth in the Bible.

This is what I'll DO: Since the Bible comes from God and teaches me the absolute truth, I will study it to gain confidence and to be a better witness for Christ.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?



Many contemporary Christians are sapped of confidence in absolute truth and Christ's exclusive claim to give salvation. But within the book of Acts we have a model of how believers can proclaim the gospel with confidence and courage to a non-believing world. Early in both books he wrote, Luke states his purpose in writing: “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-11). In other words, Luke wrote to instill into his readers the confidence that Christ is the Lord, and that He is risen and active.

This lesson primarily focuses on relativism because it is **currently**—but not permanently—a major opposing belief to the Christian worldview. Relativism, like any non-Christian worldview, is a false belief, and Christians should stand against it by relying on the Bible's authoritative interpretation just as Paul does when standing in opposition to the Athenians. Your group members will gain confidence and courage to proclaim God's truth which changes lives as they understand the crucial nature of a belief system's source—perhaps the first apologetics question is, “Says who?”

1 READ: Ask each person to read the EXPLORE box and think through on their own what the story describes.

2 ASK & DISCUSS: Ask each person to tell the group what the story describes.

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- Rocky is a bull at a rodeo
- Rocky is a prisoner planning an escape
- Rocky is a wrestler in a match
- other

LEADER'S NOTE: The effectiveness of this illustration depends upon people eventually seeing different interpretations. If everyone sees Rocky as a wrestler (or a prisoner, etc.), you need to point out that Rocky could also be a prisoner planning an escape, or a bull at a rodeo.

3 ASK

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- the story is unclear
- people see things differently
- we don't know what the author intended

4 STATE: "This story was part of an experiment showing that recreation majors tend to see Rocky as a wrestler while people from other majors may see Rocky as a prisoner, a bull, or something else. The experiment demonstrates that a person's view of the world depends upon prior knowledge and assumptions. People tend to interpret the world based upon who they are and what they are most familiar with."

5 READ: Select a person to read the definition of RELATIVISM.


6 ASK: "What difference would it make in your interpretation of the Rocky story if you knew the author is a Pulitzer Prize-winning sports journalist who has told you he/she is writing a story about an Olympic wrestler named Rocky?"

ANSWER: We would now have an authoritative reason for thinking that Rocky is a wrestler.

LEADER'S NOTE: Knowing what the human author means doesn't prevent someone from making up his/her own completely different interpretation; but the fact that different interpretations exist doesn't prove that there is no true interpretation.

7 SUMMARIZE: "In sum, once we know what the author's interpretation is, we have a good reason to say that Rocky is in fact a wrestler. The bigger point of this illustration is that when the Author of the Word (that is, God) gives us His interpretation of the world in the Bible, we also have good reason for believing it to be absolutely true."













8 STATE & READ: "Here are some actual examples of students expressing their commitment to relativism ..." Ask different group members to read each of these eight quotations to the group.



VERSION 1.1

SAYS WHO?

TOOLBOX

-  THINK
-  OBSERVE
-  CLOSE-UP
-  WRITE
-  DISCUSS
-  FEELINGS
-  BRAINSTORM
-  REFERENCE
-  PASSAGE
-  ARTICLE
-  BIG IDEA
-  CROSSROAD

EXPLORE

Rocky slowly got up from the mat, planning his escape. He hesitated a moment and thought things were not going well. What bothered him most was being held, especially since the charge against him had been weak. He considered his present situation. The lock that held him was strong but he thought he could break it. He knew, however, that his timing would have to be perfect. Rocky was aware that it was because of his early roughness that he had been penalized so severely. Much too severely from his point of view. The situation was becoming frustrating; the pressure had been grinding on him for too long. He was being ridden unmercifully. Rocky was getting angry now. He felt he was ready to make his move. He knew that his success or failure would depend on what he did in the next few seconds.

—Anderson, Reynolds, and Goetz (1977)

DISCUSS

What's happening in this story?

CRITICAL THINKING

Why might there be different interpretations of this story?

DEFINITION

RELATIVISM: The belief that there is no authoritative interpretation of the world or no authoritative worldview.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE IF SOMETHING IS RIGHT OR WRONG?

1. "Basically, if I don't like it then it's wrong. If I like it then it's right. Simple."
2. "Basically from experience—from what I see, read and feel. Just what feels right for me. There's no particular thing that makes me say this is morally right or this is morally wrong."
3. "Whether something is right or wrong, I mean, that's up to the individual. I think that it all depends on circumstances in your life. I decide whether something's wrong for me. If it's not morally correct for me then I won't do it. Something's good for me if it's going to make me happy or it's going to get me what I want."
4. "I'm always consistent with what I'm sure is right. But whether or not the man upstairs perceives that as being right—that's another story."

(R.C. Sproul, *Choosing My Religion*, Ligonier Ministries)

DOES THE GOD OF THE BIBLE EXIST?

1. "If two people came together and one person said that there is a god and one person said there isn't a god, they could both be right at the same time because it's all just opinion of what you believe and what you were brought up to believe."
2. "When it comes to everybody, like, giving different opinions of God and what He looks like and all that, everybody has their own opinion of God. When you get to know God, He's whoever you want Him to be. He could be that tree. God's a tree today."
3. "I like to respect all religions the same. Just because I was socialized into Christianity it doesn't necessarily mean that that's the only belief that's valid."
4. "I guess God exists for some people, and then for some people He doesn't."

CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

"There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."

Professor Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p.25.

DISCUSS

On whose authority are these students basing their judgments?

9 ASK

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- themselves
- professors
- parents

LEADER'S NOTE: All of these students appeal to themselves —their own internal preferences and opinions—when determining right and wrong or whether or not God exists.

10 READ

BACKGROUND TO ACTS

Luke, the author of Acts and the gospel of Luke, gives as his reason for writing, "that you may know the certainty of things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-11). Through historic accounts of people and places, Luke records the early development of the Christian movement to instill confidence in his reader that Christ is God, and that He is risen and active. In sum, this book documents the spectacular life of the early church—all of the challenges, opposition and problems that early believers faced and overcame. We see that, though the church encountered numerous obstacles, "the word of God continued to increase and spread" (12:24) throughout the first century world.

PAUL IN ATHENS

During his second missionary journey, Paul arrives in the busy, cosmopolitan city of Athens, Greece. A few centuries earlier, Athens had reigned as the political, cultural, and intellectual center of the world. Even after the Roman Empire conquered the region, Greek language and culture dominated peoples' lives. Paul talks about Christ with many types of people during his stay in Athens: Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, fellow Jews, and "God-fearing" Greeks. Finally, Paul is taken before the Areopagus—a prestigious Greek council of diverse religious and moral rulers, and like a savvy defense attorney turns the tables on the council. Thus demonstrating both the interpretive authority upon which a Christian should rely, and how a Christian can represent the biblical interpretation of the world in opposition to false beliefs.

PREPARATION ACTS 17:16-21

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

BABBLER

a man who picks up scraps of information and retails them secondhand, a plagiarist, or [someone] who make[s] a show, in unscientific style, of knowledge obtained from misunderstanding lectures.

W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1940), p. 93.

COMPARE

1. In what ways is our cultural situation like the one Paul faced?
2. How do you think Paul felt when he was called a babbler?

WHO IS PAUL?

Luke 6:12-16
Acts 9:1-16
Galatians 1:11-2:10
Romans 1:1
Galatians 1:11
Timothy 1:1
Ephesians 2:19-3:6

ANALYZE

Based on these verses, would you say Paul is a credible source? Why or why not?

1 READ

2 READ

3 READ: Have a group member read Acts 17:16-21.

4 ASK : COMPARE #1

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- very diverse
- people making fun of Christians
- lots of idolatry
- non-Christian leaders

ASK : COMPARE #2

5 STATE: "Let's look at a mini study on who Paul is." *Quickly assign passages to different group members, and have them read aloud.*

LEADER'S NOTE: Luke 6:12-16 is included to demonstrate that just as Jesus selected the first apostles during his earthly ministry, after his ascension he personally selected Paul to be an apostle (rf. Acts 9).

5 ASK

ANSWER: Paul is an apostle which means he is one appointed by Jesus Christ to have special authority. He has received from God the message he is commissioned to proclaim.

Epicureans believed what is termed atomism—the view that the world results from the random motion and combination of atomic particles. Atomism does away with all fear of divine punishment after death, and according to Epicureans, the gods followed the life of serene detachment to perfection, having nothing to do with human existence. Therefore, people of the school of philosophy sought happiness in serene detachment, in limiting desire, and in the joys of friendship.

Stoics believed that everything happens according to the will of the impersonal reason of the universe. Stoicism is a form of radical determinism, meaning that what we do ultimately will not affect life's outcome. So, persons should live life as actors in the predetermined play of life, and can only be happy when they do not want to be any other way than they are. The Stoics sought to do nothing out of emotional impulse and believed that salvation came from aligning one's will with the inherent reason of the universe.

The **Areopagus** was a prestigious Greek council in Athens with special jurisdiction in matters of morality and religion. Members of the council—who represented almost every school of thought of their era—would hold councils not unlike a congressional hearing where they daily discussed the latest philosophical thought and religious practices.

1 READ: Ask someone to read Acts 17:22-31.

2 ASK
LEADER'S NOTE: Paul mentions many biblical doctrines, and quotes from the Old Testament in some cases. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the following verses. If time permits, read these references in your group. This is only a partial list. Be sure to convey how much Paul's speech relies on biblical concepts.

ANSWERS:

- v. 23 -God is knowable (John 17:3)
- v. 24 -God creates all people (Genesis 1-2; Isaiah 42:5)
- v. 24 -God is spirit, doesn't dwell in temples (1 Kings 8:27; John 4:24)
- v. 26 -All people descend from Adam and Eve (Genesis 2)
- v. 26 -God controls all things (Psalm 22:28; 135:6)
- v. 27 -People should seek God (Psalm 105:3,4; Matthew 6:33)
- v. 27 -God is near (Psalm 145:18)
- v. 29 -Don't have idols (Exodus 20:4-6)
- v. 30 -God is patient (Psalm 103:8; Romans 3:25)
- v. 30 -People need to repent (Matthew 4:17)
- v. 31 -Christ will judge the world (John 5:27)
- v. 31 -Jesus was raised (Matthew 28)

3 ASK : CRITICAL THINKING #1

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- no, he believes God is the sovereign Lord of all creation—heaven and earth
- no, he believes his message is from the one, true, sovereign God
- no, he speaks in absolute terms by using words like "all," "every," "whole," etc.

ASK: CRITICAL THINKING #2

POSSIBLE ANSWERS:

- study the Bible
- go to church
- read books by Christians



PROSECUTION ACTS 17:22-31

²²Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³For as I walked around and observed your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

²⁹"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. ³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."



OBSERVE

What are some of the biblical teachings Paul proclaims to the Athenians in this passage? Where else in the Bible are these teachings mentioned?

Teaching

Reference

Teaching	Reference
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



CRITICAL THINKING

1. Based solely on what Paul says in his speech, would you say Paul believes his view is only one of many possible true views? Why?
2. How could you gain similar knowledge to help you interpret your world from a Christian perspective?



PLEAS OF THE CROWD ACTS 17:32-34

³²When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." ³³At that Paul left the Council. ³⁴A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.



DISCUSS

1. What are the responses of the crowd?
2. How do people respond to Christ today?

4 READ: Have a group member read Acts 17:32-34

5 ASK: DISCUSS #1

ANSWERS:

- some sneered
- some wanted to hear Paul again
- some believed

ASK: DISCUSS #2

1 **STATE:** "Here are some examples of how relativism might affect you as a college student."

2 **READ:** Have a group member read SOCIOLOGY 101 and HALEY DORM aloud.

3 **ASK:**
POSSIBLE ANSWERS FOR #2:
– social science (i.e., probably a non-Christian worldview)
– themselves
– friends

POSSIBLE ANSWERS FOR #3:
To Professor Burns
1) The Bible *claims* to be an absolute, authoritative interpretation of the world.
2) How does Prof. Burns know for certain that there is no way to know the world as it really is? Isn't *that* statement absolute, and therefore contradictory?
3) The presence of religious diversity doesn't prove Christianity is not true.

To Dan
1) The Bible says a loving marriage is the best context for a sexual relationship.
2) God can and does tell everybody what is good for them through the biblical writers.

4 **READ & ASK**

5 **READ**

6 **ASK**
POSSIBLE ANSWERS FOR #1:
– command of Christ
– confidence in Christ's identity as Lord
– compassion for the lost
– past successes

How relativism might affect you . . .

SOCIOLOGY 101

During her lecture one morning Professor Burns says, "Most cultures describe reality through religious stories. Social science shows that religious beliefs are not only very diverse, but completely relativistic. It seems there is no way to know the world objectively, that is, as it really is." She pauses, then continues, "Furthermore, all religions are culturally conditioned. No religion is more true than any other. . . the benefit of religion is in how well it helps people cope with life."

HALEY DORM-ROOM 505

Before studying one evening, you're watching re-runs with friends. At the end of a public service announcement about AIDS awareness and safe sex, the narrator says, "Of course, abstinence is the best way to avoid AIDS"—the comment elicits several groans from the group. Wanting to understand the response, you ask Dan—the outspoken guy from down the hall—what he thinks about abstinence. He's glad you asked; "The only people who push abstinence are sexually repressed, and eager to force their morality on everybody," he says. "No one else can tell me what's good for me—much less what's right or wrong."

DISCUSS

1. Do you agree with Dan and Professor Burns?
2. Who or what are Professor Burns and Dan relying on to make their judgments?
3. How would you respond in each situation?

After his cabinet had voted NO on emancipation of slaves, President Lincoln raised his right hand and said, "The ayes have it!"

Why do you think it is sometimes a little embarrassing to admit you believe something simply because the Bible says so?

KEY IDEA
The Christian must know and rely on the Bible to overcome doubts and opposition.

PERSONALIZE

1. What do you think motivated Paul to keep pressing on in his belief in, and communication of, Christ to such a diverse and skeptical group?
2. How does Paul's example of standing up for Christ affect your confidence in Christ and your motivation for communicating the Gospel in a relativistic culture?
3. Write down one thing you have learned from this study, and one thing you will do as a result.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are taken from the *New International Version*, ©1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Published by Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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L E A D E R ' S R E S O U R C E



BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The Quest for Faith – C. Stephen Evans (InterVarsity Press)

Miracles – C.S. Lewis (Macmillan)

Scaling the Secular City – J.P. Moreland (Baker)

Worldviews in Conflict – Ronald Nash (Zondervan)

Every Captive Thought – Richard Pratt (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers)

VIDEO:

Choosing My Religion – R.C. Sproul (Ligonier Ministries)



TOPIC CONNECTION

Related *InterACTA* small group study: *God's Word*

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Even though you might not bring up the following questions during the study, you can cover them with group members individually or as a group at a later time:

1. Has the sovereign God really spoken to us in the Bible?
2. Is the biblical view of the world supposed to be authoritative for everyone?
3. How do I know the Bible is a true interpretation of the world?
4. Even if I believe the Bible, how do I persuade a non-Christian to believe it?
5. What about conflicting interpretations of what the Bible says?



Planning your group session

Allocating your time

O V E R V I E W O F M E E T I N G T I M E

	INTERACTION AS A GROUP	INTERACTION WITH THE STUDY & WORD	INTERACTION WITH GOD	UPCOMING INFORMATION	OTHER IDEAS
	Ice breaker? Refreshments?	Provided. Add personal story?	Worship / Praise / Prayer time?	Next meeting? Special event?	Music / Video?
	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.	_____ min.

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