

The Christian Idea of Truth (Law)

One of Seven Ideas that Made America a Success

By Stephen McDowell

America is a unique nation in history; she is exceptional. No nation has been as free, prosperous, charitable, and virtuous. Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.”

American exceptionalism was not a result of some inherent value within the American people, but came from the valuable ideas upon which the nation was founded. Christianity was the source of these ideas. Noah Webster wrote in the introduction to his dictionary:

The United States commenced their existence under circumstances wholly novel, and unexampled in the history of nations. They commenced with civilization, with learning, with science, with constitutions of free government, and with the best gift of God to man — the Christian religion.¹

These liberating ideas were released in modern history when the Bible began to be printed in the common language of the people during the time of the Protestant Reformation. The people who settled America carried this truth with them, planted it, and gave birth to this special nation.

In recent generations America has been rejecting these liberating ideas. To preserve liberty and to advance, America must embrace the seven ideas that made her free and prosperous. For one, she must embrace the Christian idea of truth.²



Noah Webster

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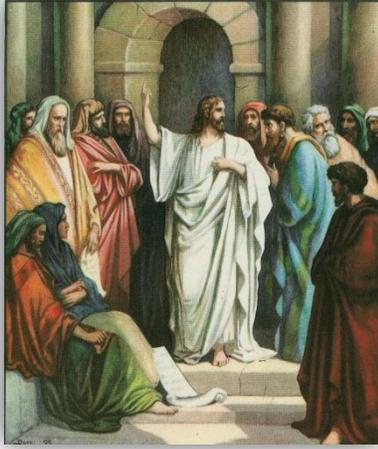
How do we know what we know? What is the basis for what we consider true and right? For Christians, the basis of truth is found in God’s Word. It is what the Bible proclaims. Jesus prayed to the Father: “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). His Word is not just true, but it is truth. Truth is what Jesus teaches, and He taught men must obey all the Scripture (Matt. 5:17-19). The Bible is God’s Word and the source of truth to all men. The degree to which men and nations have applied God’s Word to all of life, is the degree to which they have prospered, lived in liberty, and been blessed.

A Christian worldview proclaims that there is truth, there is right and wrong, there are absolutes that we can know. The secularist has a much different view of “truth.” From a humanistic perspective there is no absolute truth. All so-called truths are relative. The relativist says: “Whatever I want to believe, I may believe. Whatever I think is true is true for me, and whatever you think is true is true for you. If you believe in a God as the source of truth, that’s okay, but I don’t believe in God or absolute truth; and you shouldn’t force your view upon me or upon society.”

Relativism is the predominant view of those in academia, the media, and western governments. But such a view is completely illogical. When someone says “there is no absolute truth,” a simple question

will reveal the absurdity of this position. Merely ask them, “Are you sure?” If they answer no, they have jettisoned their epistemology, acknowledging that they do not know for certain that there are no absolutes.

If they answer yes, then they have affirmed the position that there are absolutes.



Jesus declared that the Word of God is truth.

After someone admits there are absolutes, the next point to consider is who is the source of those absolutes. For Christians, it is the Bible. For humanists, it is man, either as an individual or corporate man with the state expressing “truth” to society.

The belief in the certainty of no absolutes is not logical. It contradicts itself. One who believes this is like the man who built his house upon the sand — it cannot stand up under pressure of storms (see Matthew 7:24-27). If a worldview is built on this presupposition, it will fall.

A Christian worldview teaches there is absolute truth, where God is right about everything, and He reveals the truth that man needs to know in His Word. Relativists will condemn Christians who believe in right and wrong as narrow-minded and bigoted. They say, “You should not see things as right and wrong. It is **wrong** to do this.”

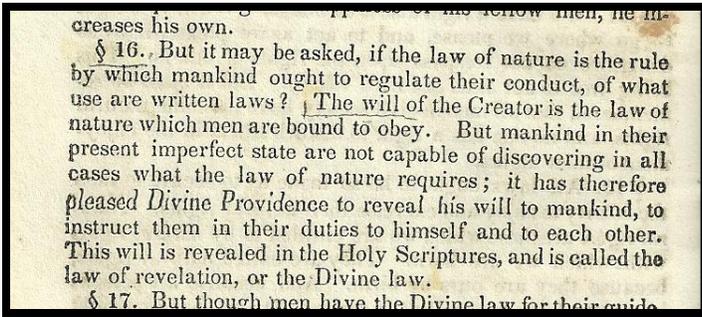
What they are really saying is that they do not want to face the reality of the Creator God — Who is the source of all right and wrong — and His standard of righteous living. They want to live life on their own terms. Hence, their theology, or worldview, follows their morality.

A pagan view of truth has captured the thinking of most of the world. Relativism is the dominant view of Americans today, even those Americans who claim to be Christians, as revealed in a poll conducted by the Barna Group in the spring of 2002. In a survey of adults and teenagers, people were asked if they believed that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging, or that moral truth is relative; 64% of adults said truth is relative to the person and situation. Among teenagers, 83% said moral truth is relative; only 6% said it is absolute. Among born-again Christians 32% of adults and 9% of teens expressed a belief in absolute truth. The number one answer as to what people believe is the basis for moral decisions was doing whatever feels right (believed by 31% of adults and 38% of teens).

Early Americans, who were mostly Christians, held to the Christian idea of truth. Their laws and constitutions reflected that worldview. They believed fixed law applies to everyone and is always true. God reveals His law in nature (the laws of nature) and by special revelation in the Bible (the laws of nature’s God). The phrase Jefferson used in the Declaration of Independence — “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” — had a well established meaning.³

An early civics textbook, *First Lessons in Civil Government* (1846) by Andrew Young, reveals the Founders’ Biblical view of law:

The will of the Creator is the law of nature which men are bound to obey. But mankind in their present imperfect state are not capable of discovering in all cases what the law of nature requires; it has therefore pleased Divine Providence to reveal his will to mankind, to instruct them in their duties to himself and to each other. This will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and is called the law of revelation, or the Divine law.⁴



Young's textbook, *First Lessons of Civil Government* (1846) presents a Biblical view of law.

dictator, can declare anyone to be an outlaw. Tyrants have done this throughout history, and tens of millions of people have been killed under this worldview.

The Christian view of law proclaims that all men have God-given inalienable rights, and the Bible states what those rights are. No man can take them away. All men are subject to God's higher law, rulers as well as common people. No man is above the law, nor is man the source of law. Hence, the rule of law originated in the western Christian world where the Christian idea of law prevailed. This Christian view of law produced the unique nature of American constitutionalism and law.⁶

[To learn all seven ideas that made America a success, order *The American Dream* from providencefoundation.com]

¹ Noah Webster, "Introduction," *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, New York: S. Converse, 1828, reprinted in facsimile edition by Foundation for American Christian Education, 1980.

² To learn all seven ideas see Stephen McDowell, *The American Dream, Jamestown and the Planting of the American Christian Republic*, Charlottesville, Vir.: Providence Foundation, 2007.

³ See Stephen McDowell, *Building Godly Nations*, chapter 11, "The Changing Nature of Law in America," Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 2004, pp. 183 ff.

⁴ Andrew W. Young, *First Lessons in Civil Government*, Auburn, N.Y.: H. And J.C. Iverson, 1846, p. 16.

⁵ Thomas Paine, "Declaration of Rights," *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, Collected and edited by Daniel Conway, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, Vol.3, p. 129-130.

⁶ See McDowell, *Building Godly Nations*, Chapter 7, "The Influence of the Bible on the Development of American Constitutionalism."

This is in great contrast to the secular or socialist view of law, as revealed in the French Declaration of Rights (1794): "the Law . . . is the expression of the general will. . . . [T]he rights of man rests on the national sovereignty. This sovereignty . . . resides essentially in the whole people."⁵ To the humanist, man is the source of law, of right and wrong. But if whatever man declares to be lawful is the standard for society, then everyone's fundamental rights are threatened, for a majority, or ruling