

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 17: He is true and faithful!

Rev. Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

While going through my e-mail not long ago, I discovered this one: “Uncover The TRUTH About ANYONE! Find out the TRUTH about your friends, family, neighbors, employees, even your boss with this amazing new Cyber-Detective software! Do background checks, get criminal records, and locate missing family members, all in the privacy of your own home!”

Though I chose to not make this purchase, it does illustrate a great concern of individuals and organizations. Identity theft is now the fastest growing crime in the United States, and advancing rapidly, with perpetrators constantly engaging in a wide range of activities that are designed to steal your identity, and with it your money, including but not limited to fraud, lies, counterfeit graphics and other forms of communication, none of which are true. With so many competing truth claims today, many of them contradictory, the questions of what is true, whether truth can be known, and who is telling the truth are often raised.

In fact, such questions are not new; Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38) Ever since sin entered the world through Adam and Eve’s disobedience these questions have surfaced in people’s hearts and minds, even regarding God.

God is True.

God is revealed as true in 2 Chronicles 15:3, where the Hebrew word is *’emet*, which means firm, solid, valid, and binding, therefore true, and comes from the verb, *’aman*, meaning support or confirm. Appearing frequently throughout the Old Testament, it is used over 100 times in Genesis alone, and when referring to God signifies primarily his trustworthiness and reliability. “O Sovereign LORD, you are God! Your words are trustworthy,…” (2 Samuel 7: 28)

The Old Testament reveals God as being truthful not just for a period of time but forever. “But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. (Jeremiah 10:10) The Psalmist declares that the LORD, the God of Jacob, is “the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever.” (146:6)

Since God is true, his ordinances and ways are also true. (Psalm 18:30; 19:9. See also 2 Samuel 22:31 for the same concept, “As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless.” Cf. Hosea 14:9 His ways are upright.)

As we’ll see in a later unit on the subject of God’s ownership of all creation, since God is the owner of the cosmos he can do whatever he wants with his creation. That’s perfectly logical. It follows and makes sense that God has the right to establish the standard for judging what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. Thus, God is the source of all truth. What he says goes. Obviously we need to appeal to a higher authority

to ascertain truth, since most people in our society believe that all truth is relative; therefore, we cannot look on the horizontal level to find ultimate truth. Since so many believe that no person's opinion is the standard to which we can appeal a disagreement as to what is true, we can't look to another human for adjudication of a disagreement about what is true, especially when we include the Biblical reality that every human is sinful with a spiritually and morally corrupt mind and heart. (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:23)

When I say that God is the source of all truth, I mean not only spiritual and moral truth but also scientific truth. All truth flows from him, including scientific truth. It is no accident that science arose in the West. The cosmology which has been shaped by the Biblical worldview has provided the fertile ground from which the seeds of modern science have sprouted and flourished. To not go too far off subject, suffice it to say for now that science requires a worldview where the cosmos is understood to be stable with mathematical principles that can be observed and measured and predictions can be made that benefit humankind, and in so doing bring glory to God and reveal some key aspects of his character. The worldview of Eastern and other pagan religions does not offer such a prerequisite understanding of the universe; hence, science as we know it not only arose in the West, but the first scientists were devout Christians and believers in the Bible as the Word of God, e.g., Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and many others.

God in the New Testament is revealed as *alēthēs*, true, truthful, trustworthy, righteous, honest, real, genuine, reliable, certain with forcefulness. See Ephesians 4:21. God is also declared to be true (KJV, faithful in NIV, NASB, NRSV) in 2 Corinthians 1:18, but the word there is *pistos*, trustworthy, faithful, dependable, sure, true.

As in the Old Testament, since God is true, all his ways are also true and righteous, just. (Revelation 3:14 (combining both *alēthēs* and *pistos*.16:7) In the apostle John's vision of the church triumphant in heaven he saw them singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb (Jesus): "Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!" (Revelation 15:3 NRSV) In John's vision he also sees the martyrs in heaven saying, "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments." (Revelation 16:7) We should also see in this text that the martyrs, those killed in God's service, were not angry at him and did not accuse him of any fault; they praised him!

Christ Jesus, the Second Person of the triune God, and the Father are linked in their being true. "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." (1 John 5:20)

Many other New Testament texts testify to the truthfulness of God. "Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true." (John 3:33 NRSV) See also John 1:9; 7:28; 17:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:9. Note also Ephesians 4:21-24, where we read that in accord with the truth that is in Jesus we are to clothe ourselves in the new self, "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." Our new being is to be like God, who is said to be true righteousness, justice, as well as holiness.

Truthfulness characterizes all aspects of God's very being. There is no deceit in him at all. Thus, his revelation is true, both in his Word and in its expression through his only begotten Son. The triune God is also trustworthy in his relationships with people.

He is the true God over against all other things that have been put forward as gods, including all idols, which are conduits to the demons (1 Corinthians 10:20), the followers of Satan, and Satan, himself. Though disguising himself as an angel of light and influencing his followers to do so as well (2 Corinthians 11:13-16), Satan tries to usurp God and cause others to do so (Genesis 3:5), leads people astray into false religion (John 8:31-47), and is the one who Jesus called the father of lies (John 8:44).

God knows things as they are in reality. With our limited perspective, we see in part. (1 Corinthians 13:12) We also see what seems to be true; yet, as with many subjects further information corrects previous misunderstandings. Not so with God; he sees everything as it is. (John 16:30)

Someone might say, "Well then, how do you know all this you're saying about God is true?" That is a good question, and we invite people to ask it; it's one we all must be able to answer, for ourselves as well as for others. (1 Peter 3:15) The basis of the answer is the trustworthiness of the Bible as God's Word, and the reasons we believe that statement to be true we considered in the five-part prolegomena to this series. Nevertheless, for now we can say that sufficient evidence exists, as you can read or review in the prolegomena, for people seeking the truth to conclude that the Bible is the authentic Word of God. In addition to the prolegomena where I've responded to this question, one of the many good resources to consult on this subject is the book, *Know Why You Believe*, by Paul Little.

Many today in what has been called the postmodern age deny the teaching of the Bible. They say an objective truth that is universally valid and for all time either does not exist, or if it does exist is unknowable. They opt for a view of truth that takes on one of the forms of relativity that has been advanced. Thus, certain traditional appeals to logic are not initially as productive as with those more grounded in modernism with its commitment to a scientific worldview.

It may help some to reflect with them further about the philosophy of postmodernism. Begin with an appreciation of the postmodernist observation of the flaws of modernism which spawned a host of views that all posit the premise that only that which can be observed by one or more of the senses or measured is real or true. Contemporary research in the natural sciences shows the probability of forces operating beyond the senses.

Yet the postmodernist-offered cure is as bad or worse than the modernist-disease it attempts to treat. As you discuss with your postmodernist challenger the logical extension of his or her premise lift up the following: first, as he or she will agree with a slight wink, the postmodern assertion that "all truth is relative" is an oxymoron. It attempts to particularize a universal. Expect a qualified admission with that wink and a

smile that that is the only truth which can be considered universal. While not agreeing to disregard that flaw now proceed to expose the next logical flaw. Ask the postmodernist if he or she is comfortable with the logical extension of the philosophy of relativism which leads to the conclusion that, as adherents say, “You can believe in X, and I can believe in non-X and that’s OK; we’re both right!” Be sure in your discussion to point out that such a position violates the law of non-contradiction in the philosophy of logic. One cannot logically believe that a concept and its contradiction can both be true at the same time. The logical extension of such thinking together with their proclivity to redefine terms at will in defiance of an established standard is ultimately to arrive at absurdity and the breakdown of human thought and communication.

With the help of the Holy Spirit you may be able to help people see the futility and fruitlessness of such secular thought with a philosophical argument. However, many if not most may be reluctant to give up what they’ve come to rely on as they try to make sense of what they perceive. We also must keep in mind that it is not enough, philosophically or theologically, to destroy a system of thought; we must have a better system to offer for replacing the inadequate one. Providentially we do, but they may at first and for some time resist a theology or a theological argument.

Yet both the modernist and postmodernist are interested in Jesus. Ask them to tell you if they know about Jesus and, if so, what do they think about him? (Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” is still the key question to ask people today and always. [Matthew 16:13]) In the ensuing discussion be sure to point out that, Jesus, who was born through the virgin, Mary, and whose legal father was Joseph, later said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John 14:6) He did not say he was a truth, part of the truth, knew the truth, or pointed to the truth. He simply revealed that he is the truth. Further, he added that “for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (John 18:37)

Christ is the basis of all truth. The second person of the Trinity, “is the image of the invisible God...all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:15-17) He is the standard, the benchmark, to determine the truth. Whenever we wonder what is true or right about a certain matter, we can and should look to Jesus’ life and teachings.

The standard of Jesus Christ is also the way we tell who is true. Many false prophets exist in the world today, and some are in churches. Jesus told us this phenomenon would occur.

¹⁵ “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?

¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the

fire.

²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'

²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7:15-23 NIV; See also Matthew 24:23-25.)

In order to discern who is a true believer in and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, ask the person to tell you what he or she thinks about Jesus. "Tell me about Jesus; who do you think he is?" Then compare and/or contrast what the person says by what God's Word says Jesus is, and you'll have your answer.

The person should include in his or her answer to your question that *Jesus is the Second Person of the triune God, the only begotten Son of God* (John 3:16), *of one substance with the Father* (John 10:30), and that *he died* (Matthew 27:50-66) and *physically rose from the dead* (Luke 24:36-53), that *he ascended into heaven* (Acts 1:11), that *Jesus is Lord over all*, (Romans 10:9) and that *he is coming again* (John 21:22-23; Matthew 24:30-31; 25:31-46; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). We will look more closely at what the Bible says about Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, in the third section of our "From Acorn to Oak" series.

As we go about our daily lives as Christ's witnesses, let us keep the focus on him. We'll have many opportunities to do so and thus lift up the true meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and enrich many people's lives now and forever in the process.

God is Faithful.

As we saw above God's truthfulness and faithfulness are linked. The word translated faithful in the Hebrew of the Old Testament is *'āman* and means to endure, to be steadfast, dependable, and trustworthy. It is the basis of the word Amen. "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands." (Deuteronomy 7:9) In the New Testament Greek, the word faithfulness is derived from the verb *peithō* meaning to believe and its noun form *pistis* meaning faith, trust, faithfulness, reliability, solemn promise, oath, proof, pledge.

Since God is always true, he does what he says he'll do; he keeps all his promises. Therefore, this characteristic of God is also called his faithfulness, which theologian Louis Berkhof said is "the ground of His people's confidence, the foundation of their hope, and the cause of their rejoicing." (*Manual of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 69-70) Wow! Talk about the Bible and historic Christian theology being practical! What great comfort this reality pertaining to God gives his people at all times, and especially during times of oppressive difficulty and pain in life.

As an attribute of God's being, his faithfulness is also eternal. (Psalm 146:6) He won't demonstrate faithfulness one day and then sometime in the future forget his covenantal commitment. We read in Psalm 100:5 that God's faithfulness continues throughout all generations.

The Bible reveals many facets of God's faithfulness. As we've just seen, the Scriptures disclose that God faithfully keeps his covenant of love through all generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. (Deuteronomy 7:9) Further, "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4) "The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made." (Psalm 145:13c) God is "...the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD, who remains faithful forever." (Psalm 146:6) See also Isaiah 49:7; Zechariah 8:8; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 4:2, 17; 1 Thessalonians 5:24.

As we studied earlier in this series, God calls his people to holy living, and he expects us to function accordingly even though doing so is a huge and growing challenge in the cultures of the world today, including in the United States—indeed every day between the fall of Adam and Eve and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Again, talk about how practical Biblical theology is! As you daily work with the Holy Spirit at being holy, consider carefully this text: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) "[T]he Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one." (2 Thessalonians 3:3)

On the church calendar each year at Advent we celebrate God's truth, his faithfulness in keeping his promises, as we rejoice in the birth of his Son, whom he promised to send for our salvation at the time of Adam and Eve's tragic disobedience, which corrupted themselves and all human nature, issuing in sin and sins that make all of us unfit for fellowship with God who is most holy. Yet because of his love, he implemented his design for our salvation through his Son, the promised Messiah. (Isaiah 9, 11) As Adam and Eve's disobedience unleashed the sin and evil that corrupted human nature, it went far beyond human nature and corrupted and devastated the whole world such that all creation is decaying and groaning. (Romans 8:21-22) These cosmic effects of sin and evil will be destroyed when Christ returns, and only when he returns, and completes God's plan of salvation culminating in the new heaven and new earth. (Revelation 21-22) Though we are called to do all we can to improve the present conditions throughout the world, such as by better education, correcting government, more wholesome entertainment, and bringing evil doers to justice, the destruction of evil and the righting of all wrongs will only take place when Jesus returns and the final judgment occurs. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Does that sound good? Can we count on that promise taking place? We're so used to sinful human beings making promises all the time, and then too many if not most times failing to keep those promises, that when someone promises something, we say to

ourselves, and maybe others, “Yeah, right! Well we’ll see. I’m not going to hold my breath.” In fact, when someone does keep a promise, don’t you find yourself a bit, though pleasantly, surprised?

BUT NOT SO WITH GOD. We can have absolute assurance that God will fulfill all his promises which are still coming, e.g., his constant presence and help for any need we have; the second coming of Jesus; the righting of all wrongs; and the elimination of all evil, death, crying and pain in the new heaven and the new earth. (Revelation 21:3,4) We can count on Jesus’ returning to bring to fulfillment his kingdom which he inaugurated at his first coming (Luke 17:21).

God’s faithfulness is the ground of our hope. Our hope is made certain in God’s track record of the faithful keeping of his promises throughout history, e.g., with Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets of God, Mary and Joseph, Jesus, Paul, the apostles, and countless believers in and followers of Jesus Christ through the centuries, including with me. God has never forsaken or abandoned me even during the most difficult challenges I’ve faced in my life...as he promised. (E.g., Deuteronomy 31:6; 1 Kings 6:13; Nehemiah 9:19, 31; Psalm 37:28; 94:14; Isaiah 41:17; Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20)

There has never been a time when I’ve felt abandoned or forsaken by God. Never! Not even when I had the most difficult experience of my life, when my precious wife of 48½ years, Carol, was diagnosed with a debilitating disease that caused her death five years later. I saw countless evidences of God’s faithful, loving, caring, and supporting hand in our lives as I became her primary caregiver throughout those remaining years we had together, during her death, and I continue to see these evidences of God’s constant and countless blessings in all the time of my grieving since her passing. Indeed, God’s gracious, faithful, reliable, and all-sufficient help is the only reason I am able to survive and to function well between now and the time I am able to be together with Carol again, next time forever, and by God’s grace, with the rest of our family and all of God’s other people, in his eternal service and presence!

Other benefits for us

Since God is true, we can have a relationship with him, and it can be profound and lasting. Careful research in the field of psychology demonstrates that basic trust (which is grounded in truth and trustworthiness) is the essential basis for a relationship.

Joy emerges in our hearts as we consider and act on the ever-present help of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, whom the Father and the Son have sent to be with us. (John 14:16; 15:26) One of the functions of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called “the Spirit of truth,” is to guide us into all truth. (John 16:13)

We never have to worry about someone disproving a key article of the Christian faith. We need not fear there will be some scientific discovery that undermines the Bible. To the contrary, science that follows established criteria for empirical research consistently

produces findings that illustrate the Bible's record. All truth is God's truth as the old saying states.

When we walk daily with the Lord, in obedience to his Word, maturing in Christ-likeness, and remain faithful to the Lord, we will see his faithfulness to us. (Deuteronomy 7:9; 1 Samuel 2:9; 2 Samuel 22:26; Psalm 18:25; 25:10) He has not promised to bless those who depart from him, are unfaithful, and unrighteousness. "The word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does." (Psalm 33:4) "For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off..." (Psalm 37:28) "Let those who love the LORD hate evil, for he guards the lives of his faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked." (Psalm 97:10) "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast." (Hebrews 3:6) "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23) "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise." (Hebrews 11:11) "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4:19) "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) "Jesus Christ...is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." (Revelation 1:5) Jesus, speaking to the church in Smyrna, said, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution....Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." (Revelation 2:10) "This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus." (Revelation 14:12)

In one of the statements of the theme of the Book of Revelation, the heavily persecuted church under the Roman Emperor, Domitian, and the church of all ages, finds much comfort. "They [the evil governments together with the false prophets] will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." (Revelation 17:14)

The linking of God's truth and faithfulness is seen in Revelation 3:14 and in 19:11 where in the latter verse the apostle John writes, "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war." In this passage, the great comfort for the church in the theme of the Book of Revelation is again seen. The rider is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the color white, typically a symbol of purity and victory, here symbolizes his victory over the forces of evil in the final battle of Armageddon. Purity and victory of course go hand in hand, for the Lord empowers his righteous people who remain true, faithful, and obedient in him. May your joy be increased knowing that the promises associated with Jesus' coming, which are yet to be fulfilled, will surely occur when God, who is true and trustworthy, sees that the time is right.

For Further Reflection and Discussion

1. Identify at least one way today you can see evidence of God's truth and faithfulness in your life.
2. What benefits of God's being true and faithful can you mention to others?
3. How can we determine whether something someone is telling us is true?
4. What comfort can you have, and what is the basis of the comfort you can assure others they can have, that will enable you and them to overcome worry, anxiety, and loneliness?
5. How would you, each member of your family, and your Bible study group answer the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15) Conclude by reciting The Apostles' Creed and/or reading The Nicene Creed.