

May 30, 2021 | John 3:1-17

TRUE OR FALSE?



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JOHN 3:1-17

Some of you may already know this, but once upon a time, I was a university instructor, at Western, teaching anthropology. One of the things I used to do, which irritated my students to no end, was to have a pop quiz...usually at the end of the class, just to make sure everything was clear in their minds.

So – let this be your warning: there's a pop quiz coming! It's easy, only one question, and a true-false answer at that! I'll even tell you the question now, ahead of time...and it's the most important question you'll ever answer: is your conception of God true or false?

Is your conception of God – the guiding idea you have in your heart and head about God – is it true or false?

Alan Hirsch, a church planter and leader in the missional church movement, wrote that “if your conception of God is radically false, then the more religious you are, the worse it is.” Radical is an interesting word; we normally think it means kind of out there, as far from ordinary or accepted as you can get. But it can also be used to refer to the root or origin of that out-there-ness.

If your conception of God is radically false, rooted in wrong ideas, then your religion is going to be radically false, too...like a tree with bad roots: the trunk will be twisted, the branches going every which way, the leaves a sickly green, the fruit rotting before it's ripe. But if your conception of God is radically true, rooted in the right ideas, then the trunk will be straight and strong, all parts of the tree healthy, the fruit life-giving.

If the root is wrong, the whole tree goes wrong with it. So is our conception of God – the root from which our faith grows – is it radically true, or radically false? We go to church – some of us for most of our lives – and we might even have gone to Sunday school as children. Some of us study the Bible, too, on our own or together. We've listened to countless sermons, watched programs on TV, read books, learned about or even gone on mission trips, reached out into our communities in mission, too. After a lifetime spent in the church, surely we ought to have learned something about God by now...but what have we learned? How can we be sure that our conception of God, the root of our faith and life together, how can we be sure, completely confident, that it's true?

I think that's the question that was keeping Nicodemus awake that night, that got him up out of bed and out the front door, seeking Jesus.

Nicodemus was a well-respected person, a well-educated religious leader among his group of Jews, the pharisees. Pharisees were ultra-religious people, very devout and dedicated to worshipping God and living as God intends his people to live. To be dedicated to God means living holy, and for the pharisees, holiness was attained by keeping all the laws of the Bible and keeping themselves away from things that the law defined as unclean or impure. As far as Nicodemus could see, Jesus did not follow all the old laws to the letter nor did he avoid unclean people, places and things; Jesus healed on the Sabbath, he went to parties, he hung out in taverns and travelled with tax collectors, fishermen and women. And yet, from the incredible things Jesus did, the insightful, transformative way he taught...it was clear the Spirit of God was upon Jesus. So Nicodemus opens the conversation: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

In effect, Nicodemus is asking Jesus: who are you, that you can do these things? In typical Jesus fashion, Jesus does not answer the question that Nicodemus is angling towards. Instead, Jesus answers the question Nicodemus should have asked: do you think that my conceptualisation of God is false? Jesus says, yes. And you've got to start from scratch, Nicodemus, right over from the beginning and be born again, if you want to get it right.

It's awfully hard to hear the words, "you're wrong." Doubly hard, I expect, when it's Jesus saying them. Over the course of their conversation, Jesus is asking Nicodemus to re-examine his long-held ideas about God, acquired over a lifetime of study, teaching and religious leadership. To take the box off the shelf, blow away the dust, open it up and look again. And be ready to toss the contents, too, because what Nicodemus thought was true about God was not.

God's people expected God to save them by sending a messiah, as promised for so long, those promises written down in the books that comprise our Old Testament. Different communities within God's people had different ideas about what the messiah would do and be like; some thought he'd be a warrior, a revolutionary who would liberate them from their oppressors; a political figure, who would be their new king from David's line; even an end-of-the-world messiah whose very coming would be the end of all things.

Jesus...was not as expected.

The disciples were ready to call Jesus the Messiah, a saviour and liberator sent from God; but even they couldn't understand, right up to the very end, that Jesus being the Messiah meant he was going to die. Even they, Jesus' closest followers and friends, struggled to let go of their old ideas of what a saviour should be and do; Peter went so far as to rebuke Jesus, to tell him to stop talking about his suffering and dying as part of Jesus' own destiny.

It wasn't until Pentecost that we finally read that Peter and the disciples really got it, were really born again. Peter delivers his first great sermon about Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah, concluding: "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Let go of the old idea about God to grasp the new; that's what Jesus explained to Nicodemus. Nicodemus' old ideas about God wouldn't let him be part of the new, extraordinary things God in Christ was doing, wouldn't let him be part of the kingdom of God. Let go of the old, and get a fresh, new conceptualisation of God, be born again of water and Spirit and from above, let God's Spirit blow where it will, as it will, and follow him.

This conversation with Nicodemus is one of the few places where Jesus speaks directly about all three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit. I will confess, that we ministers prefer to avoid preaching about the Trinity – it's a challenging concept, with a long history of disagreement and confusion. The Trinity is and must be a mystery beyond our comprehension, and yet, we keep at it, trying to understand. And that's because we want to know God, to be able to understand, at least a little, what God is like. Trinity Sunday is our day to ask ourselves that true-false question: is our conception of God radically true or radically false? The way to answer that question, according to Jesus, is the Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – but to take them backwards.

It's the Spirit's power that allows us to receive Jesus into our hearts and lives; it's Jesus, coming as the Messiah, who reveals the gracious and loving nature of the Father; and it's the Father who intervenes in a world that largely rejects God to save it.

For God so loved the world that, by sending Jesus, God acted powerfully to bring new life. God has no plans to punish or reject the world that rejected him; Jesus did not come into the world to condemn it, but to save it.

God plans only and always for our salvation: to rescue and restore, to heal and to redeem. God is a God of love, whose plans and actions are motivated by that love; now what kind of a tree, do you imagine, would grow from a root like that? One with a strong, straight trunk, a whole canopy of branches, rich green leaves, bushels of life-giving fruit. With a radically true conception of God, the more religious we are, the better it is, for us and for those around us.

Having said all that, though, it's worth filling in the other side of the picture: what might a radically false conceptualisation of God be? It must be the opposite: a God who plans to punish and reject us.

Even though we might say or believe that God loves us, so many of us still carry, deep in our hearts, the idea of a God who condemns, who is angry with us or with the world. Some of the ways we have of talking about Jesus, the Messiah, and why he died on the Cross, are rooted in this angry God idea.

Does this sound familiar? Our sinfulness made God so angry, was so offensive to him, that Jesus came to be crucified – not out of love – but to make God not angry with us so we could be right with him instead. Think about what it does to your conception of God to root God's motive primarily in anger and a compulsion to punish sin, rather than in love and a desire to save. That would be a twisted tree indeed.

But the Trinity prevents these kinds of false ideas about God. Father, Spirit and Son work together in all things, sharing a common purpose. It wouldn't make sense for one person of the Trinity to be angry and eager to destroy while another loves us and steps in to save us and the third seeks to dwell within us, bringing new "born again" life. No, Jesus is very clear when he answers Nicodemus: God so loved the world; and everything else – Messiah, Cross, resurrection, Pentecost – all proceed from that root, that starting point. And what we're being saved from is not first and foremost God's anger at sin, but from sin itself and its consequences in the world and in us. Things like war, interpersonal violence, racism and other injustices, abuse and poverty, greed and pride, the ways we hurt one another, and ourselves and creation...even our inability – or our unwillingness – to love God as we should. Knowing all that, maybe that's why it hasn't been very hard to believe that God could be angry with us, or want to destroy us.

But no; God says, let's show these people how much I love them. And Jesus does.

Jesus was the kind of Messiah we needed, and he went to the Cross as a willing participant in the Triune God's plan to save us. The Triune God – Father, Son and Spirit – has never stopped loving us, and there is nothing God wouldn't do to show us that love.

Remember those extra verses I shared with you from Romans 8 last week: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So do you think you're ready for that pop quiz now?

Is your conception of God radically true, or radically false? It's the most important question you'll ever ponder. Good thing that Jesus showed us how to answer it, during that long ago, late-night conversation with Nicodemus! Thanks be to God. Amen.