

And we know 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, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

1 John 5:20

Jesus is the real deal

Jesus is the one who is 'faithful and true' (Revelation 3:14,19:11), and his moral glory was seen 'fleshed out' in his human life.

- born among the poor,
- spent his life helping the sick and oppressed,
- opposed the hypocrisy of the religious and political leaders,
- got into trouble for being the 'friend of sinners'.

It was Jesus who said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), and by his own death and resurrection he made a way into heaven for all who are serious about going there.

And a Christian is someone who is 'in him who is true'.

...and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. 1 John 5:20

...as he is so also are we in this world. 1 John 4:17

Just as Jesus is 'the faithful and true witness' (Revelation 3:14), so the credibility of our witness is based upon whether we are the real deal. Like it or not, we are witnessing 24/7, like 'a city set on a hill' we Christians cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:24). We are, therefore, to be

...blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, Philippians 2:15

Grace and truth

All of this is a big ask for sinners like us! But when Jesus came 'and dwelt among us', his glory was of one who was 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). Wonderfully, our fallenness can be the occasion of our most powerful witness. In our witness to unbelievers, we as objects of Jesus' grace are to model the repentance, gratitude, humility and faith which God is seeking from all people. A humble, penitent and thankful spirit (rather than a superior, self-righteous and angry spirit) is part of the winsome character that persuades people to examine the state of their own souls before God. Those who are thus winsome will surely win some! They will have credibility as the servants of him who is 'faithful and true'. They will lead people to say, "Truly, this is the real deal!"

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Closing

THE CHRISTIAN CREDIBILITY GAP

Making our Christian walk more like our Christian talk

Spoken beliefs and practised beliefs

There's an old parental saying, "Don't do what I do, do what I say!" Human beings have always had a problem with walking the talk. That is partly because it is much easier to say something than to do it.

However, it is also because we are prone to self-deception in that we have two levels of belief. One is expressed by what we say, and the other by what we do. For example, we may say that we believe in obeying the speed limit, but our driving may reveal that we really believe it is okay to drive above the speed limit. The fact is that our practised beliefs reveal more of our real convictions than our espoused or spoken beliefs.

The credibility gap of the people of God

The people of God in all ages have not been immune to this character flaw, as the following Scriptures reveal.

In Israel

And the Lord said:

"... this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men...Isaiah 29:13

And they come to you (i.e. to Ezekiel, the prophet) as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. Ezekiel 33:31

When Jesus came, the credibility gap was probably his main criticism of the people of God.

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, [3] so practice and observe whatever they tell you— but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. [4] They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. [5] They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, [6] and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues Matthew 23:2-6

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. Matthew 23:27

The word 'hypocrite' comes from a word that means 'an actor's mask'. It refers to someone who puts on a mask and plays a role. It would

seem that when Jesus came, seven hundred years after Isaiah, it was still a case of 'same old same old'.

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

" 'This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me; Mark 7:6

Paul saw the same problem for Israel as the people of God:

But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God [18] and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; [19] and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, [20] an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— [21] you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? [22] You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? [23] You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. [24] For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Romans 2:17-24

Here we see a terrible and sobering truth: it is because of the lack of the credibility of God's people that God's name is discredited among the nations! In Jesus' words, 'They preach but they do not practise'.

In the church

Peter foresaw that this same problem would occur among Christians.

And many will follow (the false prophets and teachers') sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed (i.e. among non-believers). 2 Peter 2:2

Jesus' strongest condemnation was reserved for those who don't practise what they preach. The word 'hypocrites' is used 18 times in the Bible and all but one of these is in the words of Jesus. He warns us earnestly that, as Christians, we will not be immune from self-deception and religious falsity.

How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. Luke 6:42

Of all the books in the New Testament the one I find the least attractive is that of my namesake, James. It almost seems that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was a bit grumpy and annoyed when he wrote this letter. His fellow Christians, without realising it or being concerned, were not walking the talk.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? [15] If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, [16] and one of you says to them, "Go in

peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? [17] So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. James 2:14-17

James points out to us that faith is real and credible, not when it is spoken only, but when it is spoken *and* practised.

[21] Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? [22] You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; [23] and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"— and he was called a friend of God. James 2:21-23

Christians today

Sadly, the modern world is littered with glaring examples of the Christian credibility gap.

- In the 1930s most of the German churches endorsed Hitler and the National Socialists. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his famous book *The Cost of Discipleship* to counter this terrible inconsistency.
- The USA has one of the highest church attendance rates of any nation, and most of its Presidents have been practising Christians. Sadly, the massive military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the terrible abuses and torture committed in the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo have left the Moslem world with the view that Christians today are the same invading militarists that they were during the Crusades of the 12th century.
- Many Christian congregations in Australia come late to worship, and then sing "I love You, Lord, I worship You, I obey You, I give my life to You" Clearly the practised belief does not gel with the spoken belief, and God, who looks on the heart, sees the discrepancy.
- It is so easy for churches to be really looking after themselves, and, mission statements to the contrary, to be really concerned about their finances, buildings and programs, and the ever-present need for 'bums on pews'.
- Just as the Pharisees tithed the herbs in their garden but 'neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness' (Matthew 23:23), so we as believers can observe the easier aspects of the Christian life (like going to church, and putting something in the offering) while overlooking the bigger things that really count (like what we do with all of our money, of the whole of our life.)

In all of these situations Jesus' words ring in our ears: "They preach, but they do not practice".

The true God

There is a link between the biblical words 'true', 'faithful', 'real', 'genuine'. They all come from the same root word. The whole thing about 'the true God' is that He is utterly genuine and true.