

MARK D. ROBERTS

FOREWORD BY RICK WARREN

DARE TO BE
TRUE

LIVING *in the* FREEDOM *of* COMPLETE HONESTY



Mar k D. Roberts

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Living *in the* Freedom of Complete Honesty



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The author has made every effort to ensure the truthfulness of the stories and anecdotes in this book. In a few instances, names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the persons involved.

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For e w o r d

In describing the death of truth in his day, Isaiah lamented, “Truth stumbles in the public square, and honesty finds no place there” (Isaiah 59:14, TEV). Sadly, Isaiah could be talking about our culture today. All around us truth has been sidelined in favor of tolerance or political correctness. People are afraid to speak the truth, and many even express doubts that there is such a thing as “truth.” “What may be truth for you,” they say, “may not be truth for me.” I have even heard followers of Jesus make that absurd assertion.

In an age of moral relativism and ethical ambiguity, I cannot think of a more needed corrective than the one given in this book. Mark Roberts has written a tract for our times, a brilliant explanation of the essential importance of truth in every area of our lives. His goal for us is the same as *The Living Bible’s* paraphrase of Ephesians 4:15: “We will lovingly follow the truth at all times—speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly—and so become more and more in every way like Christ who is the Head of his body, the Church.” It takes truth to transform us, and spiritual growth is the process of replacing the lies in our lives with truth. That’s why Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17, NIV).

When you get to chapter 6, “Truthful Community,” you will find that it’s worth the price of this book. Cultivating real community takes honesty, which is lacking in most relationships. You have to care enough to lovingly speak the truth to others, even when you would rather gloss over a problem or ignore an issue. While it is much easier to remain silent when those around us are harming themselves or others with a sinful pattern, it is not the loving thing to do. Most people have no one in their lives who loves them enough to tell them the truth, so they continue in self-destructive ways.

Often we know what needs to be said to someone, but our fears prevent us from saying anything. Many Christian fellowships have been sabotaged by fear: No one had the courage to speak up while a member’s life fell apart. That’s why we desperately need this book. It shows us how to be *people of the truth*.

It is my passionate prayer that God will use this book to save thousands of relationships, marriages, small groups, and churches from the destructive damage of dishonesty. If you want to move beyond superficial relationships and develop real fellowship with other believers, study this book with others, then put the principles into practice, because there is no community without candor! May God bless you.

—RICK WARREN, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*
and *The Purpose-Driven Church*

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As always, I thank God for my dear family, Linda, Nathan, and Kara. Your support, patience, and love keep me going. You’re the best!

Finally, I want to acknowledge my parents, who taught me in word and deed what honesty was all about. This book is dedicated to my mother in gratitude for her tireless efforts to help me become a truthful person.

Do You Dare?

The Challenge and Promise of Truthfulness

Yes, it's like, I know I'm lying, but it's just gonna make my life so much easier."¹ So confessed the popular young actress Tara Reid, star of such cinematic classics as *Josie and the Pussycats*, in a magazine interview. The context for the interview? Reid's pending testimony in the assault trial of a close friend accused of ramming her car into a group of sixteen people.

It's easy to condemn Tara Reid's readiness to lie. We could smugly conclude that it's typical of pampered celebrities to shove ethics aside for the sake of self-interest. But we must at least admire the ironic truthfulness of Reid's confession. Most liars just lie. They don't announce it in advance.

The esteemed accountants of Arthur Andersen, for example, didn't warn Enron stockholders to run for cover because company losses were about to be disguised as financial gains. There was no cautionary announcement, just financial reports that deceived thousands of people, including many who staked their retirement investments on the trustworthiness of Arthur Andersen's word. If Tara Reid had been an accountant rather than an actress, at least she might have tipped off the credulous investors in advance of Enron's collapse.

The Life of Complete Honesty

Before we look down our noses at pampered starlets and greedy corporate execs, we might first check to see if our own noses are growing like Pinocchio's. Though we prefer to think of ourselves as honest people, many of us have

honed the skill of deception, often without realizing it. No matter what we *believe* about lying, our actions at times adhere to the unspoken credo that lying does in fact make life easier.

Well, you might be thinking, *narcissistic actresses might live by that credo, but not me!* Really? What do you say when your husband asks if his suit still fits? The objective truth is, “Sure, if you don’t mind a ring of fat hanging pendulously over your belt!” But how do you actually answer his question?

Or let’s say your wife greets you at the door with “How do you like my new hairstyle?” As soon as you see her, your mind becomes a television screen showing Wile E. Coyote with his finger in an electrical outlet, every hair standing at shocked attention. As you pull the plug on your mental picture, how do you answer your wife’s question?

Here’s a tougher one. What words flow from your lips when you eagerly open a birthday gift from your young child, only to feast your eyes on the ugliest necktie or cheesiest piece of costume jewelry known to modern civilization?

It could be argued that a lack of complete honesty in these situations is harmless, even kind. What good purpose is served by hurting your loved ones with the unvarnished truth? This is an astute question, especially given the hurt that is caused by the tactless comments of people who spout out whatever enters their minds. Sometimes they even defend their rudeness by claiming that they are simply being honest. That’s not what I mean by “complete honesty.”

A life of complete honesty is one that is filled with truth, so much so that there is no room left for falsehood. Being fully honest has nothing to do with brazen frankness that brutalizes others. Instead, it is an all-encompassing integration of thoughts, words, and actions, so that outward expressions follow truly from what’s in your heart. Complete honesty means speaking the truth while at the same time living by the truth of love’s preeminence. (In a later chapter we’ll take a close look at situations in which forthright speech could bruise another’s feelings.)

For most of us, the struggle of truthful living is not that we’re tempted to be too honest, but rather, not honest enough. We’re attracted to words and actions that promise ease, comfort, and convenience. If these goals are achieved through

some minor truth twisting, then it's easy to justify the use of a strategic half-truth. And once it's justified, we're on the road to a lifestyle of deception.

Here's a common situation that invites deception. You've been under a lot of pressure at work. Your boss has been hassling you about missing deadlines and not staying on top of your accounts. You've been working extra hours and doing everything you can to prove that you can handle the job. Suddenly you realize that you were supposed to be at an important meeting with a key account ten minutes ago. What do you say when you show up late? Do you blame the traffic that you knew in advance would slow you down? Do you mention the phone call that you easily could have terminated sooner if you had only chosen to do so? Do you play fast and loose with the facts, hoping your client will see you as a victim of circumstances and not as simply irresponsible? Or do you honestly acknowledge that you failed to take the steps necessary to arrive on time, hoping that your boss won't reprimand you for once again making an important client wait? How often, in the daily course of events, do you truthfully take responsibility for things that might put you in a bad light?

We all face tough challenges like this on a regular basis. For example, what should I have said a few years ago when my six-year-old son asked innocently, "Dad, what *did* President Clinton lie about?" That was as good a time as any to join the former president in truth twisting, don't you think? Or what should a man from my church have said when asked by his perennially cranky boss, "So how do you like working in my department?" A truthful "I hate it" wouldn't have contributed to job security.

Ironically, Tara Reid was telling the truth. Sometimes lying *does* make things easier.

The Pervasiveness of Lying

People throughout our society follow the convenience-over-truthfulness credo. We all can point to infamous—and blatant—examples of lying. The president of the United States stares into the television camera and lies about his extra-marital affair. The chair of the U.S. Olympic Committee resigns because of

falsehoods in her résumé. The rest of us don't capture headlines, but we also bend the truth to the point of breaking, often without recognizing it.

A recent study of 2.6 million job applicants found that 44 percent of all résumés contain not just minor exaggerations, but outright lies.² In a survey of teenagers, 92 percent admitted to lying to their parents in the last year. Seventy-eight percent lied to their teachers. And these are just the ones who recognized the lie and admitted their dishonesty.³ Dr. Robert Burton, writing on the prevalence of duplicity in the medical profession, commented, "Lying is everywhere; it is as intrinsic to daily life as any search for truth."⁴

A study conducted by Professor Robert Feldman of the University of Massachusetts found lying to be more common than anticipated. In his study, pairs of strangers were put together for ten minutes and instructed to carry on a conversation. They were unaware that their conversations were being videotaped. Afterward, as the participants viewed the tape, they were asked to indicate anything they had said that was not true. Sixty percent admitted to telling at least one lie. The average person lied more than twice—and this was during only ten minutes of casual chitchat!

Feldman concluded, "People tell a considerable number of lies in everyday conversation. It was a very surprising result. We didn't expect lying to be such a common part of daily life." The participants also were shocked by their own deceptive behavior. "When they were watching themselves on videotape, people found [that they had lied] much more than they thought they had," Feldman observed.⁵

If you and I had participated in this study, we might well have had the same sort of eye-opening experience. At least *I* might have. When I began writing this book, I started to scrutinize my own behavior. I was amazed—you might even say horrified—by how often I was tempted to lie and by how often I *did* lie before I could stop myself. For instance, seeing an old friend, I said, "Oh, it's good to see you. I've been thinking about you so much recently." In truth, I had thought about this friend for only a fleeting moment a few days before our chance meeting. But "so much" was more than an exaggeration. It was a lie that slipped out before I could catch it.

I know I'm not the only one who does this. I preached a series of sermons on truth to my congregation. Over the course of four months, members of my church examined their own conversations. Many shared how stunned they were to discover that they often compromised the truth. Some were led to confront deeply embedded habits of deception. I hasten to add that these folk are committed, mature Christians. But some found it all too easy to say things such as "I've been praying for you" when they really hadn't been. Others discovered that their excuses for declining an unwanted invitation left truth in the dust. "I'm sorry, I have another engagement" sounded so much better than "I really prefer not to have dinner with you." Some people had become so accustomed to truth twisting that they didn't even recognize the tendency until they shone the piercing light of Scripture upon their lives.

Lying pervades our society and sometimes even our own lives. If during the next few days you pay close attention to your interactions with others, odds are that you also will find yourself struggling to be fully honest. Even if you're not tempted to tell baldfaced lies, you may find yourself engaging in the widespread—and widely accepted—practice of spin.

Snared by Spin

Bill Press, former host of CNN's *Crossfire* and author of the book *Spin This! All the Ways We Don't Tell the Truth*, refers to our era as "the Age of Spin." What is spin? Press explains:

There is no good definition of spin. It's easier to say what it's not than what it is: It's not the truth. Neither is it a lie. Spin lies somewhere in between: almost telling the truth, but not quite; bending the truth to make things look as good—or as bad—as possible; painting things in the best possible—or worst possible—light.⁶

As a major league pitcher puts spin on a curve ball to confuse a batter, so the verbal spinner twists the truth to keep the listener off balance. Spin

involves saying things that are true in some sense, but not speaking the full truth that ought to be spoken. It can lead to out-and-out lying, though it is usually more subtle and therefore potentially more pernicious. When we spin the facts, we can excuse our lack of truthfulness or even congratulate ourselves on our cleverness.

We may never see a clearer demonstration of spin than what goes on in the quadrennial presidential debates. One candidate rolls out an impressive list of “indisputable” facts upon which to base grandiose claims about his presidential qualifications. Then the other candidate presents an equally impressive collection of facts that contradict everything the previous speaker just claimed. The first candidate then appears to commend his opponent while at the same time implying that he is a rank liar. Returning the favor, the second candidate lectures the first on the evils of making personal accusations and claims the moral high ground, while at the same time insinuating that his opponent is a lying scoundrel. And so it goes for ninety minutes.

The spin factor of the debates themselves is nothing compared with the postdebate commentary. Immediately after the candidates conclude, their spin doctors start performing radical surgery on reality. Their message: “Our candidate had a commanding grasp of the issues, far better than anyone expected and obviously way ahead of his opponent.” This message is spun with ebullience no matter how the candidate performed. The one who stumbled over his words will be praised as “thoughtful rather than hasty and superficial, like his opponent.” The one who exaggerated his record will be lauded as “a bold visionary, just the opposite of his unimaginative adversary.” If a candidate were to spend the entire debate drooling all over his shirt, his campaign director would exult afterward, “America is ready for a *real* person in the White House, a person we can relate to. We’re tired of someone with a dry mouth and all the answers. We want a president who is genuine enough to let the world see him drool.”

Whether or not we’re in the midst of an election year, we can’t escape spin. Advertisers spin their products. Coaches spin their losses. Students spin their

low grades. Spouses spin their marital messes. Corporate executives spin their bottom lines. Employees spin their mistakes.

Maybe you think you're immune. And *maybe* you are. But most of us, when we examine our behavior, find that we can spin with the best of them.

For example, when my high-school friend Mike first received his driver's license, his mother allowed him to use her car but forbade him to drive on the freeway. Of course, Mike and I were convinced that we knew better than his mother. We were teenagers, after all. So we bravely challenged the Southern California freeways. Knowing that his mother might question us about Mike's driving, however, we crafted a brilliant spin on our behavior.

Sure enough, after one of our illicit road trips, Mike's mom asked him bluntly, "Mike, did you drive on the freeway today?"

Without hesitation and with a hurt tone in his voice, Mike answered, "Mom, I know the rules. Of course I drove on the surface streets." As he spoke, I nodded fervently. (Mike *did* know the rules and we *had* driven on the surface streets—on our way to the freeway.) The combination of Mike's earnest testimony and my bobbing head duped Mike's mom, who apologized for questioning his integrity.

Mike and I didn't tell an outright lie, but we did fabricate a deceptive half-truth. This was spin, pure and simple, because we intended to mislead, while failing to confess the truth that deserved to be spoken. Mike and I were spin doctors in training—and Mike avoided losing his driving privileges.

Have you ever put a spin on the truth for the sake of self-promotion or self-protection, and, in the process, failed to say what you really should have said? Let me encourage you to put down this book and take a few minutes to scrutinize your recent behavior. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you remember. Did you promise to pray for someone, knowing that you'd probably forget your vow ten minutes after making it? Did you choose your words too carefully in explaining a situation at work so you could avoid taking the blame for something you messed up? Did you mislead a friend, an employee, your boss, your spouse, or maybe even yourself? Think about it.

The Wages of Spin

If everybody spins, then maybe we shouldn't lose sleep over it. After all, a little finessing of the facts does seem to make life easier.

Although some of the spin that surrounds us appears to be innocuous (we all know that a certain brand of shampoo doesn't really send women into ecstasy), I'm convinced that the wages of spin are insidious. Consider the implications of what Mike and I told his mother. Although she never discovered our deception, if she had she would have trusted us far less (and rightly so), both for our disobedience and for our dishonesty. Spin breeds suspicion. It *damages trust* and therefore *undermines healthy relationships*.⁷

This sorry result of spin plagues our nation. According to a recent poll, the vast majority of Americans don't trust the government. Eighty percent of respondents agreed: "Government leaders tell us what they think will get them elected, not what they really believe."⁸ Consider your own response to the presidential debates every four years. Do you really believe what the candidates are saying? Do you fully trust even your favorite candidate?

The private sector is not immune. According to one analyst of American business practices, "The proliferation of spin is like a top out of control. The more people spin, the worse the situation becomes through erosion of trust and breeding of skepticism."⁹ Widespread cynicism is also directed toward the news media and even the church. For months my heart would break as every day the headlines announced new allegations leveled against the Catholic clergy. But accusations of molesting children were only part of the problem. The scandal was multiplied tenfold by the deceptions employed by church officials to protect the offending priests. According to a recent Gallup poll, trust in the church has hit a record low.¹⁰ And if we Protestants think we're free from such problems, we're fooling ourselves. I can't tell you how many times I've spoken with people who are new to my church, only to hear of their disillusionment with the church in general because of the deceptions they've experienced. When clergy across the denominational spectrum misuse sex, money, or power, we often resort to lying in order to cover up our abuses.

Both spin and its turbocharged cousin, unabashed lying, pummel our most precious relationships. As a pastor I've seen husbands and wives assault their marriages through deception. A husband invests some retirement savings in a risky business venture without consulting his wife. When she inquires about oddities in their financial statements, he covers his actions with a veneer of half-truths. But when his wife discovers what is really happening, she wonders if she'll ever be able to trust her husband again. Or a man discovers that all the time his wife was "sending e-mail to her friends," she was, in fact, conducting an online affair with a stranger she met in a chat room. Marriages are shredded by the jagged edges of deceit.

Similar devastation is visited upon parent-child relationships. I've seen dozens of teenagers squander their parents' trust by lying. When the school's vice principal calls home to inquire about a student's multiple absences, the parents discover they have been duped. Trust crumbles and familial love is stretched to the limit.

But parents can also be the source of deception. As I began working on this book, I discovered some distressing things about myself. For example, when I have the freedom to spend an evening at home, I often escape to my study, where I focus on preparing sermons or writing. Somewhere around 8 P.M. my eight-year-old daughter, Kara, will interrupt me with a simple request. "Daddy, can you come tuck me in now?" My response is usually something like, "Sure, just a minute." But, I'm ashamed to admit, that minute is sometimes more like ten minutes, or twenty, or even more. There have been times when I was so wrapped up in my work that I completely forgot my promise to come in "just a minute."

Even though I wasn't intending to lie, my failure to be truthful could damage my relationship with my daughter. Over time Kara could easily begin to wonder, "When Daddy says something, can I believe him? Can I trust him?"

Our failure to be truthful injures not only our dearest human relationships but also our most priceless relationship of all, our relationship with God. Since God is the Source of all truth, embracing falsehood means we turn our backs on God.

The Rewards of Truthfulness

Once we tally up the negative costs of deceit, including loss of trust, growing cynicism, and shattered relationships, we'll be inclined to leave dishonesty in the dust. Then, if we calculate the riches earned by truthful living, we'll begin to feel the powerful attraction of being truthful.

Just as deceit breeds doubt and disease in our relationships, truth generates trust and health. If we are truthful, we will earn the trust of those who mean the most to us, and this trust will lead to sound relationships. Mutual truthfulness invites you to let down your guard and be yourself. Although speaking openly sometimes incites momentary conflict, when it is done in love, it almost always produces deeper community. Truthfulness breaks through the superficiality that limits intimacy and personal growth.

Living in complete honesty affects not just our relationships but also our personal well-being. Lies, even so-called white lies, weaken our moral fortitude. As ethicist Sissela Bok observes in her classic study of lying, "After the first lies...others can come more easily. Psychological barriers wear down; lies seem more necessary, less reprehensible; the ability to make moral distinctions can coarsen."¹¹ Conversely, habitual truthfulness strengthens our moral resolve. Honesty in relatively insignificant matters prepares us to tell the truth when much more is at stake. And in practicing the habit of truthfulness, we experience in dramatic ways the rich rewards of consistently living the truth.

Truthfulness also leads to personal freedom. Some of us feel the heavy burden of our own deceit. We hate it and yearn to unload it. Even those who have become so used to falsehood that they no longer sense its oppression are nevertheless imprisoned by it. Subsequent lies are called into service to prop up the first one. And who has enough memory cells to keep track of what was said to whom? Keeping it all straight is exhausting. Truthful living, in contrast, offers freedom from guilt, denial, and stunted personal growth. It means we don't have to waste energy pretending to be someone we're not. In a passage from the gospel of John, Jesus makes a stirring promise, "You are truly my disciples if you

keep obeying my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). We can enjoy freedom by knowing and doing the truth. It’s the very real freedom that comes from living authentically, without ever feeling the need to hide.

Truth, then, enhances the level of trust in our most important relationships. It brings the riches of personal freedom to our daily lives. But the rewards don’t end there. Perhaps the most precious result of truthful living is deeper intimacy with our truthful God. It includes confronting parts of ourselves that we’d much rather avoid, thus leading to reconciliation with God. When we reject deception and speak the truth instead, we honor the God who calls us to truthfulness and honesty. Our obedience pleases God, and we sense his joy and pleasure in us. But, even more profoundly, when we live truthfully, we imitate God. We become more like what God intended us to be as human beings created in his image. We live life more fully and more freely.

Dare to Be True

So, you may be thinking, I’m convinced. Truthful living, here I come! Your intentions are laudable, but aren’t you forgetting something? Remember the ironic wisdom of Tara Reid: Lying is often so much easier. In a spin-drenched world where deception is a given, truthful living is not only difficult, it’s costly. And sometimes it’s excruciating.

The challenge of truthfulness isn’t new, however. Four centuries before Tara Reid touted the benefits of lying, the English poet George Herbert wrote,

Lie not; but let thy heart be true to God,
 Thy mouth to it, thy actions to them both:
 Cowards tell lies, and those that fear the rod;
 The stormy working soul spits lies and froth.
 Dare to be true. Nothing can need a lie:
 A fault, which needs it most, grows two thereby.¹²

Even in seventeenth-century Britain, truthfulness required not just dedication, but daring; not just conviction, but courage. Cowards, unwilling to tackle the challenge of honesty, told lies. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Strangely, George Herbert agrees with Tara Reid's basic premise, but he disagrees with her conclusion. Yes, lying is easier, Herbert acknowledges, but telling the truth is better, even if it's harder. "Dare to be true," he urges us. Don't sell out to the easy deceitfulness of this world, but choose instead the truthfulness of God.

In his wisdom Herbert counsels us not merely to tell the truth, but to *be true*. It's a matter not just of words, but of our entire being. Truthfulness begins when our hearts are "true to God." Ultimately, it must govern both our mouths and our actions. This kind of pervasive truthfulness requires commitment and, indeed, courage.

Truthfulness also depends upon a transforming encounter with God, the Author of truth. Try as we may, we will have neither the daring nor the desire to be true unless God first transforms our hearts. Ultimately, our penchant for falsehood flows from the sinfulness of our souls. But the good news is this: God is in the heart-renovating business. The Truthful One who desires "honesty from the heart" will teach us to be wise in our "inmost being" (Psalm 51:6). God will answer if we cry out to him:

Teach me your ways, O LORD,
that I may live according to your truth!
Grant me purity of heart,
that I may honor you. (Psalm 86:11)

Daring to be true must begin with God. Before we start trying to tell the truth, let alone daring to live in complete honesty, we must face God, the Truthful Trinity. If we are willing to approach God on his own terms, we will come to a deeper understanding of the truth and how to let it fill our lives. Moreover, we will discover a God who will cheer us on in our efforts to live truthfully.

As a being created in the image of God, you were made for truthful living. You will be your true self, you will live the fullest life, you will find the peace that your heart seeks only when you reject the lie and choose the truth. No matter how much you have been tainted by deception, the deepest part of your being yearns for truth, to know God in truth, and to live in truth each day. The road to truth may be tortuous and less traveled, but it is the only road that will bring you to your true home.

May this book be a map to guide you there!

The Truthful Trinity

The Truth You Can Trust

Once served on a committee that helped prepare people for pastoral ministry. When church members sensed God's calling, we would help them clarify that calling and prepare for the rigors of seminary education. Among the pastors and lay leaders on the committee, one member had singularly impressive academic credentials. Dr. Robert Adams was the chair of the philosophy department at UCLA, one of the most highly touted philosophy departments in the world. Though a brilliant philosopher, Dr. Adams was also a kind Christian man who always encouraged ministerial candidates and never flaunted his brilliance.

One day our committee met with a young man barely out of college. Ted was bursting with enthusiasm but lacking in experience. He had earned only average grades in college, while pursuing a narrow course of studies. The committee was concerned that Ted would be overwhelmed by the demands of seminary. Because he was young and his education was limited, we hoped to persuade him to take a few college classes in the humanities before moving on to graduate school.

Dr. Adams volunteered to handle this rather delicate assignment. He began graciously, complimenting Ted on his obvious commitment to Christ. Then Dr. Adams moved to the issue of Ted's educational background.

"We're a little concerned," he began, "with the narrowness of your academic record. Usually we like to see a broader range of subjects in a candidate's transcript."

"I don't understand," Ted objected. "There's nothing wrong with my record."

Gently, Dr. Adams continued. "We're not saying there's anything wrong with what you have accomplished. But we would like you to consider taking a few more classes, especially in the humanities, before you go to seminary."

"The humanities!" Ted groaned. "Are you talking about marshmallow classes like philosophy and stuff?"

"Well," replied the distinguished professor of philosophy, "yes, I was thinking about classes like 'philosophy and stuff.' But, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I would characterize them as 'marshmallow' classes."

Rather flippantly, Ted responded, "Oh, I never thought those things mattered. That's why I didn't study them."

Talk about an awkward moment. My stomach was in a knot, but Dr. Adams took the conversation in stride. While the dignified professor remained gracious, I wanted to shout to Ted: "You numskull! Do you have any idea what you're talking about or with whom you're talking?" I wish I could have been part of the conversation when somebody finally told Ted what Dr. Adams did for a living. (That conversation did take place, and a penitent Ted did indeed take a few college classes before entering seminary.)

Although I was ready to put Ted in a headlock because of his presumptuousness, now I must acknowledge a bit of my own presumptuousness in writing a book on truth. *This* is no marshmallow topic! It's one of the most profound and controversial subjects of all. In fact, you might want to ask me the same question I was itching to ask Ted: "Do you have *any* idea what you're talking about?"

I don't claim to be an expert, but over the years I've gained some familiarity with this complex subject. As an undergraduate I majored in philosophy, taking a number of courses that dealt with the nature of truth. My professors argued that truth is simply a human construct, that there is no absolute truth apart from human perception and language. They never reached a consensus on the nature of truth, and philosophers still debate the issue. So, yes, I am aware that I'm tackling a complex and contentious subject. Unlike Ted, however, I am approaching this conversation well aware of my limitations.

But there's an even more compelling reason for humility in such a discussion. When we talk about truth in any absolute sense, we can't help but confront the very nature of God. In fact, God is present in our conversation both as a subject and as an active participant. When we talk about truth, we're standing on holy ground. Even as Ted should have been humble in the presence of a renowned philosopher, so should we remember our place when discussing truth in the presence of the One who is the Truth.

Truth and the Nature of God

Truth is a bigger issue than any of us can fathom. It's nothing less than an essential aspect of God's nature. Because God is Truth, there is no truth apart from God. When we read the Bible, we can't help but confront the fact that God and truth are inseparable. There is a necessary interrelationship between the two.

Before diving into a practical discussion of truth and its implications for daily life, we must examine the Source of truth. If we were to jump ahead without first exploring the interrelationship between God and truth, we would miss the most important aspect of truthful living. As you encounter God, who reveals himself as the Truthful Trinity, you will find that your motivation to become a person of truth grows geometrically. The more clearly you see God, the more you will yearn to be like him.

The Old Testament God of Truth

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God and truth hang together like twins connected at the hip. To separate them would be to damage both. Notice, for example, the words Moses used to celebrate God's greatness: "He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a *God of truth* and without iniquity, just and right is he" (Deuteronomy 32:4, KJV). Similarly, David cries out, "[R]edeem me, O LORD, the God of truth" (Psalm 31:5, NIV). It follows from God's truthful nature that his "words are truth" (2 Samuel 7:28). What God declares is accurate. What he promises will occur. It makes sense that God is completely honest, having no partnership with falsehood.

Consider the words of God himself, spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

I did not speak in secret,
 in a land of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
 “Seek me in chaos.”
I the LORD speak the truth,
 I declare what is right. (Isaiah 45:19, NRSV)

This striking text speaks as incisively today as it did centuries ago. Our post-modern world resembles a land of darkness where people stumble without the light of God. Rejecting divine revelation, many walk in chaos and confusion. How desperately we need to hear not only that God is truth but also that he has revealed himself to us in a way we can understand. We can be set free from the intellectual, moral, and spiritual chaos that typifies our culture because we can know the God of truth.

The Truthful Trinity in the New Testament

The New Testament maintains and builds upon the Old Testament notion of God’s truthfulness. Whoever accepts the testimony of Jesus must acknowledge that “God is true” (John 3:33). But truthfulness relates not only to God the Father. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NRSV). Jesus himself boldly stated, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). As the Word of God, Jesus embodies divine truth, revealing all that is necessary for eternal life. Indeed, he becomes the way through which we receive eternal life.

Yet the New Testament expands still more our understanding of truth. The truthfulness of God pervades the character not only of the Father and the Son but also of the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity. To his disciples Jesus explained, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not be presenting his own ideas; he will be telling you what he has heard” (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit has been sent by Jesus from his heavenly Father

to deliver the truth of God.¹ Thus, in the New Testament we meet the Truthful Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit personify truth, speak the truth, and work together to draw us into a truthful relationship with the triune God.

A Call to Humility

If you regularly pursue theological inquiry, you might be thinking this is all old hat. But if you're like most people I know, you're feeling a bit flummoxed. Though you believe that God is triune, you find discussions of the Trinity to be perplexing and, frankly, humbling.

Stay with that feeling! There is perhaps no sentiment more appropriate than humility as we stand before the God of truth. The mystery of the Trinity reminds us that, although we know God truly, we are not the masters of truth. God is the sole Master. Therefore, as we dare to be true in daily living, we must do so with humble hearts.

My friend Jeff is a theologically trained, intellectually gifted Christian who cares deeply about the truth. He can also set new records for arrogance when he's talking about it. In theological conversations Jeff sometimes dispenses his version of the truth as if he were God giving the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. When others disagree with him, they are simply wrong. No further discussion is needed. Every now and then I have asked Jeff, "So, do you think there's even a *tiny* possibility that you might be wrong?" He begrudgingly allows for that possibility, as long as it's a microscopic possibility.

Truth tyrants like Jeff alienate Christians and secularists alike. They forget that "God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favor to the humble" (James 4:6). Moreover, they forget the One who is the Source and Lord of all truth. How can we strut about proudly as masters of the truth when we must rely so utterly on God's gracious revelation if we are to know the truth at all? We need sincere gratitude for the truth, not smug ownership of it.

Christians have full access to the God of truth, but that doesn't mean we've cornered the market on this commodity. Scripture frequently reminds us that our knowledge of God is imperfect. The psalmist announced, "How great is

our Lord! His power is absolute! His understanding is beyond comprehension!" (Psalm 147:5). When Job repeatedly demanded an accounting from the Lord for his suffering, God finally spoke: "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much" (Job 38:2-4). Then God continued for four chapters to remind Job of just how little he knew about God's nature and power.

Yes, Christians have the privilege of knowing God and his truth. But we also must acknowledge that divine truth transcends our limited experience, language, and knowledge. Though we can know many true things about God, we cannot *fully* know the infinite, holy, perfect God of truth this side of heaven.

As I call for humility in the face of truth, I find myself in ironic agreement with postmodernism. During the era of modernism, humans were so optimistic about the power of the mind that we sought to master the truth through human reason and the scientific method. Postmodern thinkers see things differently. They have realized that, no matter how hard we try, no matter how advanced our technology, we will *never* be able to claim full mastery of truth. As Christians we agree with this conclusion, recognizing that God alone is the Master of truth and that his truth always transcends our understanding.

Yet this does not mean, as some postmodernists claim, that we can never know absolute truth with confidence. We believe that God, the Truthful Trinity, stands outside of human perception and that truth, therefore, is absolute, transcending human limitations. Moreover, we understand that God made us with the capacity to grasp transcendent truth, however incompletely. God has revealed ultimate truth in a manner we can fathom through Jesus Christ, through Scripture, and through the truth-teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

But this raises another question: Can we trust God's revelation? Or, even more pointedly, can we trust God? These questions bring us back to Scripture, to a consideration of the nature of truth.

Truth That Earns Our Trust

Throughout the Bible, truth is not some abstract intellectual ideal. Rather, it is a down-to-earth relational reality. Think of the way different Bible translations render the Hebrew word for *truth* as it relates to God. Where the original language states, literally, “God of truth,” translators vary between “God of truth” and “faithful God.”² This variation accurately captures the complexity of the Hebrew word *’emet*, which means both “truth” and “faithfulness.”³ It either describes a situation where a statement mirrors reality, or it describes a person who acts faithfully.⁴ This latter sense of *’emet* frequently expresses God’s own reliability, as in Exodus 34:6: “I am the LORD, I am the LORD, the merciful and gracious God. I am slow to anger and rich in unfailing love and *faithfulness*.” In this context, *’emet* is God’s utter steadfastness in relationship with his people. Thus, when the Old Testament speaks of God’s truthfulness, both his accuracy in speech and his steadfastness in relationship are signified.

The underlying sense of the Hebrew word *’emet* is “reliability” or “firmness.” A statement is true if it is solid enough to support belief. People are faithful if they can be counted on. In both cases, *’emet* merits trust. If people speak truly and act faithfully, then you can put your weight upon them, so to speak. That’s the reliability and firmness of truth in the dynamic of a relationship.

Throughout the Old Testament God reveals himself as one who can be trusted in word and deed. Because God is truthful, he doesn’t lie and he is also utterly reliable. We can trust him completely.

Although New Testament writers use the Greek vocabulary for truth, the Old Testament notion of truth as faithfulness hovers nearby. Jesus explained that the “Spirit of truth...will guide you into all truth” and is therefore trustworthy (John 16:13). Because God “cannot lie,” we can have “confidence” in his promise of eternal life (Titus 1:2). In the book of Revelation, the risen Christ identifies himself as “the Amen—the faithful and true witness” (3:14). Therefore, we can place our trust in God, who is both full of truth and a reliable guide to truth.

In traditional weddings a century ago, grooms and brides said to each other,

“I pledge thee my troth.” The word *troth* is closely related to the word *truth*. Both stem from the Old English term *trēowth*. Troth is good faith or fidelity. By pledging his troth to his bride, the groom claimed to tell the truth as he made his vows. But even more, he was promising to be faithful to her “as long as we both shall live.” He was saying, “I can be trusted. You can count on me.”

According to Scripture, the God of *'emet* is both truth-full and troth-full. God speaks accurately, without lying. God also acts faithfully, without failing. Thus we can believe what God reveals, and we can put full confidence in what he promises. We can trust his word, and we can trust him with our very lives.

Trusting the God of Truth

When I think of trusting the God of truth, I immediately picture Ron and Erin Hesse. They are mission partners of my church, serving in Indonesia with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Ron and Erin are so committed to the truth of God that they have devoted their lives to translating the Bible into Tehit, a language into which Scripture has never before been translated.

But Ron and Erin's commitment to God's truth is inseparable from their trust in the God of truth. Leaving behind the comforts of America, they moved to a small rural village in Indonesia to live among the Tehit people. There they are raising four children in spite of dangers most of us would consider unacceptable. The plentiful poisonous snakes of the jungle have now been joined by transplanted Al Qaeda terrorists. But the Hesses remain surprisingly calm—they are not naive about the risks they face, but they are also utterly confident in God's faithfulness. Ron and Erin, who have dedicated their lives to translating God's *'emet*, have confidence that the God of *'emet* is completely trustworthy.

The Hesses' example challenges me because, frankly, I often struggle to trust God. For some strange reason I seem to think I can do a better job of running the universe than God can. When situations don't work out as I want them to, I wonder if God is faithful. I worry about what will happen to my life, my family, and my church. But then, by grace, I'm drawn once again to the Scriptures. I'm reminded that God's faithfulness is great, that his mercies are new

every morning, that his unfailing love never ends (see Lamentations 3:22-23). I remember how utterly reliable God has been in my life. Not that he's done everything according to my plans, to be sure. But I see once again that God's ways are best, even if I can't fully fathom them. With the apostle Paul my heart proclaims, "Oh, what a wonderful God we have! How great are his riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his methods!" (Romans 11:33).

Living in Light of the Truthful Trinity

We have already seen that the nature of God as the Truthful Trinity instills both humility and trust within us. Before I draw this chapter to a close, I want to consider three additional practical implications of God's absolute truth and his truthful nature.

1. *It's all right to contradict the world's assumptions about truth.* It's commonplace these days to hear that there is no such thing as absolute truth. The more we hear this, the more uncomfortable we might become regarding our own convictions. We may even feel the need to apologize for adhering to the idea of absolute truth. But we need to recognize two things: First, where truth is involved, apologies are never needed; and, second, we should fully expect that our stand on truth will differ from the world's view.

If you were to audit the average college philosophy course, you would hear truth described as a lofty ideal we can never attain, as a figment of the human imagination, or as an accident of human language. Increasingly, truth is reduced to a cultural construct, something relative to and limited by one particular culture. As a white male American Christian from Southern California, for example, I have my version of truth. Those from other cultures have their distinct versions. No view of truth should be considered more or less valid because truth itself is relative. There is no "higher truth" that transcends human culture and creativity.

This view of truth can be quite upsetting. During my undergraduate studies in philosophy, I often wondered why my brilliant professors conceived of

truth in terms so contradictory to my own. Sometimes my wonder turned to worry. Was there really transcendent truth as I'd always thought, or had I been dead wrong?

Given what we see about truth in the Scriptures, we need not be distressed when secular views differ widely from our own. When people discuss truth as if God were either nonexistent or nonessential, their conclusions will have little in common with the insights derived from Scripture. Remove God from the truth equation, and your solution will necessarily be relative, transient, and unreliable.

I'm not suggesting that we should never study secular philosophy, however. As disciples of Jesus we have been set apart by God to be his representatives in the world.⁵ If we seek to communicate with the people to whom we have been sent, then we must learn their language, just as Ron and Erin Hesse have learned the language of the Tehit people. In particular, we must grapple with other views of truth. But we should not be troubled when we discover that our ideas are fundamentally out of sync with those of our nonbelieving neighbor. A profound difference between Christian and secular views of truth is exactly what we should expect.

2. *Since God is Truth, all truth is of God.* As a college freshman I took my first university-level class in the Bible. The professor was a wise, articulate scholar whose knowledge of the New Testament impressed me, just as many of his opinions distressed me. He contradicted assumptions I had made about the New Testament, and he backed up his views with persuasive evidence. Though he didn't deny traditional faith in Christ, he was skeptical about the extent to which such faith could be based on Scripture. By the end of the term, I found myself doubting the truthfulness of the Bible. I hesitated to examine my doubts too closely, however, because I was afraid that serious inquiry would further undermine my faith.

I'm not the first Christian to have had such an experience, and I'm not the last. Most of us encounter ideas that contradict the fundamental tenets of our faith. When this happens, some Christians begin to worry that serious study undercuts serious faith. They discourage intellectual investigation, preferring

what they call “simple faith.” Out of fear, they stop seeking truth and instead bury their heads in the sand of rigid ideology or misty-eyed sentimentality.

I can understand this reaction because I have sometimes wanted to keep my own intellect safely disengaged. During that college Bible course I began to wonder if I should dispense with the academic study of the Bible. Yet I realized I would never be satisfied if I suspected my faith was intellectually untenable. Still, I feared that my quest for historical truth would chip away at my belief.

Then God provided help in the form of Dr. John Stott. A highly respected Christian thinker and expert in the New Testament, Dr. Stott visited Harvard in the latter part of my freshman year. A friend hosted an informal dessert gathering and invited me to attend. Here was my chance to talk with someone who could understand my dilemma.

When another student finished a conversation, I finally had my chance. “Dr. Stott,” I said, “I’m taking a New Testament class, and much of what I’m being taught contradicts what I believe about the Bible. I’m beginning to wonder if it’s unwise to study Scripture in an academic way. I’d like to take more classes in New Testament, yet I’m afraid that what I learn will undermine my faith. What do you think I should do?”

“I can understand your conflict and your fear,” Dr. Stott began, “because I’ve felt them myself. Many of the popular theories in New Testament scholarship do challenge orthodox Christianity.”

“But,” he continued, “you don’t have to be afraid. Let me tell you something that will give you confidence as you study: All truth is God’s truth. There isn’t anything true about the Bible that God doesn’t already know. You don’t have to fear that if you dig too deeply you’ll undermine genuine Christian faith. You may indeed discover that some of your beliefs aren’t correct. In fact, I hope you do make this discovery many times over. That’s what happens when you live under biblical authority. But you never have to be afraid of seeking the genuine truth because all truth is God’s truth.”

With John Stott’s encouragement, I began a lifelong journey of seeking the truth about Scripture. I did indeed take more New Testament classes, ultimately earning a Ph.D. in this field. I came to see that much of what I was

being taught in that introductory course reflected the skeptical, antisupernaturalistic assumptions of my professor, not the data of the New Testament itself.

Yet, throughout my years at Harvard, I also learned a great deal from that professor. Although we often differed on essential matters, he showed me that I did not have all the truth. I had so much to learn, even from one who thought quite differently from me.

Because *all* truth is God's truth, there is much truth to be found outside orthodox Christian theology. Sometimes well-intentioned believers feel compelled to reject any knowledge that cannot be derived from Scripture. They argue that there can be no truth outside of Christian doctrine, that all other religions and philosophies are completely false. Yet this argument fails to do justice to the breadth of divine truth. Such an orthodox theologian as John Calvin once wrote,

Therefore, in reading profane authors, the admirable light of truth displayed in them should remind us, that the human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator. If we reflect that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we will be careful, as we would avoid offering insult to him, not to reject or condemn truth wherever it appears. In despising the gifts, we insult the Giver.⁶

Even "profane authors," secular philosophies, and religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition can affirm genuine truth. We can learn from these, knowing that wherever genuine truth appears—whether in science or philosophy or religion—it still finds its ultimate source in God.

We need the freedom of knowing that all truth is God's truth, since we live in a multicultural world that bombards us with multifaceted truths. When I was in elementary school, religious diversity meant that there were Methodists and Catholics in my class. Last year, in my son's second-grade class, there were Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews, not to mention Methodists, Catholics, and students who claimed to have no religious affiliation at all. So how do we

bear witness to the truth of God in such a diverse world? How do we respond to the religious convictions of others?

One popular approach is to claim that Christianity is completely true and everything else is completely false. This narrow perspective overlooks the fact that we share a large body of truth with Jews, some of which also shows up in Muslim theology. But if all truth is God's truth, then we can affirm genuine truth in religious traditions independent from our own. For example, we can agree with Buddhists that suffering pervades human experience. Yet we disagree over the primary cause of suffering: for Buddhists it is desire; for Christians it is sin.

Practically speaking, we can and should listen sensitively to the religious beliefs and experiences of others. We might even learn something. For instance, although I reject Islamic theology, I have been challenged by the commitment of Muslim people to pray regularly throughout the day. We can be genuinely open to the religious beliefs of others without condoning popular misconceptions, such as the notion that all religions offer equally valid paths to God. As Christians we continue to believe that Jesus is the Truth in a unique way, even if this can seem uncharitable. Truthful religious dialogue must include our faithful yet humble presentation of our Christian convictions, even when they contradict the views of others. Yet if we listen respectfully, if we affirm what is true in the beliefs of others, if we seek to find genuine common ground, and if we listen and speak with humility, then others will listen to us and be drawn to the God of truth who has revealed himself in Jesus. We can be completely honest about our faith without being rude or arrogant.

3. *The Truth seeks us before we seek the truth.* Though we tend to think of truth as an impersonal abstraction, it is, in fact, profoundly personal. Truth inheres in God, in each person of the Trinity. It is revealed in divine words and deeds and, most of all, in the person of Jesus.

Since truth is personal, it cannot be mastered through expertise or mere intellectual exercise. Truth is to be found, not through dispassionate deliberation, but through a personal relationship with the God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. Certainly, intellectual investigation can help us understand truth

more deeply, so long as our thinking is tethered to personal fellowship with the living God. But intellect alone will never enable us to know the truth.

On the other hand, in saying that we know truth in a personal way, I am not reducing it to mere subjectivity. The truth exists on its own and in its own authority outside of our subjective experience. But sometimes Christians reduce the pursuit of truth to the rationalistic study of theology and doctrine. No matter how valuable this approach may be, it is inadequate. When we seek the truth, we are seeking not a body of knowledge or the authoritative final word, but the living God.

Yet God does more than simply make himself known to those who seek him. God is, in fact, the first seeker. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God said, "I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock" (Ezekiel 34:11-12). In three different parables, Jesus illustrated God's predisposition to pursue those who don't yet know him.⁷ If truth were impersonal, it would make little sense to speak of it as seeking us. But because truth is inseparable from God, and because God seeks us, we can rejoice in the fact that, even before we seek truth, Truth seeks us. In this sense, truth and relationship are inseparable.

Jesus developed this point in conversation with a woman from Samaria. "True worshipers," he said, "will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for anyone who will worship him that way" (John 4:23). In order to find people who will worship him in spirit and truth, God has revealed himself definitively through Jesus, the Son of God. And since Jesus is no longer with us in person, both God the Father and God the Son have sent God the Spirit to be with us. The Spirit of truth will teach us everything and, most important, will help us know Jesus as the Truth.

Therefore, if you seek to know the truth, you must first recognize that the Truth is seeking you. You will find truth not ultimately through philosophical investigation or religious pilgrimages, but through intimate fellowship with the Triune God. The good news is that the God of truth desires to have this kind of fellowship with you.⁸

Although this fellowship takes many forms, including prayer, Bible study,

and service in the church and the world, Jesus emphasized worship as one of its essential dimensions. When we worship in the power of the Spirit, and when the content of our worship reflects the truth of God's revelation, then God finds us as "true worshipers" (John 4:23). We worship in the fullness of *'emet*, with truth-full words and with troth-full hearts. Moreover, through genuine worship we grow in the knowledge of God, knowledge steeped in the truth of revelation, knowledge that is deeply personal and intimate.

We know God as the Truthful Trinity, the Master of all truth, and the One who calls us to imitate his truthfulness. We turn to this essential calling in the next chapter.