

How Do We Know What is True?

Under the Hood #5 | July 28, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Steve Howell



Opening

How do we know what is true?

That question has been around for a long time. It was famously posed by Pilate during the crucifixion trial of Jesus (***“What is truth?”*** – **John 18:38**), and it has been asked by philosophers from Plato to Descartes to William James as they debated the nature of truth and the nature of knowing (what is officially called *epistemology*).

But when I ask the question, “How do I know what is true?” I’m much more interested in applying that intellectual test to Bob Geiger rather than Plato.

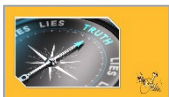


Bob Geiger?

You probably don’t know him, unless you lived in NW Kansas and West Central Nebraska during the 80s and 90s.

[Show [video clip](#) in the background]

Bob was the meteorologist for channel 13 when I was growing up, and in my mind, he was probably the most trusted man on television. He had to be, because it wasn’t his charisma or his good looks! Now, I know that not all weathermen have a good reputation,¹ but Bob did. He spoke with a dispassionate voice as he gestured to the radar and the temperature maps and the cloud cover. There was no hype, just facts. And when Bob Geiger gave a forecast, you listened and trusted him. In farming country, a reliable and accurate forecast was the difference between my dad having a successful day of planting wheat, versus spending the next two days digging his tractor out of the mud!



How do we know what is true? For most of us, that question is about identifying “Bob Geigers” in our world – people and sources that provide *truth* about how to live in our day-to-day lives. Philosophy might be interesting, but you and I live in a real world filled with jobs and families, mortgages and medicines. Practically, we must live and make decisions with the assumption that our knowledge is *true*.

- You eat cereal assuming that ingredient list is true, and that it doesn’t contain any poisonous substances.
- You drive places, assuming the directions you got from your GPS are true, and that they won’t lead you to Michigan when you try to head toward Missouri.

¹ Dr. Paddock from MCC used to call them “Prophets of Baal” LOL

- You stop for gas and coffee at Casey’s, assuming the balance listed in your online banking app is true... (*though wishing, perhaps, that it wasn’t – can I get an AMEN?*)
- You just said AMEN – a word meaning “TRULY” – to some comments from some guy on a stage that you assume is speaking truth and not making up lies.

Practically, we need truthful sources we can trust. Even if we can’t verify *everything* perfectly, we need to have confidence that our view of the world is accurate. We need to have confidence that our view of the spiritual world is accurate, too.

How do we know what is true?



Questionable Sources

The answer to that question is hard, because our world is becoming less trustworthy every day. There are fewer “Bob Geigers” out there to trust! And when you do find them, you can’t be confident that they aren’t generated by AI!

We find ourselves wading through a lot of **questionable sources** as we discover that “true” isn’t as true as we hoped.

Questionable Information

Questionable sources give us questionable information. They make misinformation seem believable, and their lies make it harder and harder to trust facts.

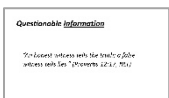
“An honest witness tells the truth; a false witness tells lies.” (Proverbs 12:17, NLT)

The internet once promised to give us access to all the facts on the planet. However, we soon discovered that it also gave us access to all the lies on the planet, too. Online encyclopedias like Wikipedia provided a platform for users to edit and update articles about anything from national histories to soccer stars. The goal was to share real information, but users soon discovered that it was a great place to make stuff up.

I recently read a lengthy article by a British journalist detailing how he and his friends (during their teenage years) had slowly and systematically built up the online reputation of a somewhat obscure soccer player from Honduras. They adjusted his stats, changed the number of goals and assists he had, and invented stories linking him to tryouts for big-name clubs. They even gave him a nickname: the “Honduran Maradona.”² They made fake phone calls pretending to be team doctors or player agents, all in an attempt to get the British press to believe that the player was being signed to a top-level squad.

“By the evening, an editor, who believed he was talking to a journalist, was on the phone. And so, on 28 July 2012, in the back pages of the Olympics Opening

² Diego Maradona was a well-known Argentinian soccer star



Ceremony souvenir edition of the Times, you can find the following fateful words: *“Wigan Athletic have agreed a £2.5 million deal for Alexander López, the Honduras playmaker, from Olympiacos.”* The story was even picked up in Honduras by the local tabloid *Diario Diez*. We laughed; we loved it. We’d done it again.”³

Harmless pranks might not seem like a significant blow to truth, but the resourcefulness of pranksters combined with ever-increasing professional tools in the hands of these amateurs leads to a situation in which “facts” can’t be trusted.

Image and video editing software is becoming more powerful, making it possible to invent so-called “evidence” that is indistinguishable from actual credible sources. That quality level of questionable information can now be produced at an increasingly rapid pace thanks to AI (artificial intelligence), which can generate sketchy content as fast as it can be dreamed up for any topic or issue you can imagine.



Questionable Conclusions

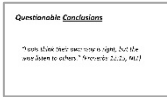
Even if the facts and information were believable (which they aren’t), the *conclusions* drawn by those facts are often suspect. Armchair detectives gather the information they discover about world events and scientific claims, then create conspiracy theories to fit them all together...often in outlandish ways!⁴ You read them online and hear them in coffee shops.

- **The earth is flat, not round!** Despite the settled science on this one, some claim NASA has been trying to fake data from missions and moon landings to make it look like the earth is a sphere when it is clearly a disc!
 - *More and more people believe this each day, including prominent folks like NBA player Kyrie Irving. (I’ve even had pastoral questions about it!)*
- **UFOs are real!** Unexplained Aerial Phenomenon (UAP) is the new term, and UAPs have been observed by many people, including military pilots. Whether the source of the UAPs is extraterrestrial might be up for debate, but something is definitely happening on up in the skies!
 - *Congress even held briefings about UAPs last year and this year, trying to find out what the Pentagon knows (or what it won’t say).*
- **The Trump assassination attempt was preplanned!** Within hours of the shooting in Pennsylvania a couple of weeks ago, individuals and groups were already piecing together evidence to show that it was staged, or that a sniper could not or should not have been able to take the shot.
 - *Twitter (aka “X”) is full of opinions denying any official government position almost as soon as it is posted.*

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/oct/13/the-amazing-trueish-story-of-the-honduran-maradona-alexander-lopez>

⁴ Others include the JFK assassination, government controlling the weather with airplane contrails, COVID vaccines containing microbots, etc.

Ancient wisdom was ready for these conspiracies, even if the specific conspiracies weren't known back then. Proverbs tells us:



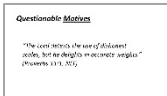
"Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to others."
(Proverbs 12:15, NLT)

I'm not going to wade into any of these conspiracy theories from the pulpit. They are not helpful spiritual discussions. But I will point out that the conclusions drawn on these issues are impossible to verify. If the facts are questionable, so are the conclusions that are drawn from those facts.

Questionable Motives

Underlying all the distrust in facts and conclusions is an awareness that people are swayed by motives other than truth.

We recognize that motives can skew honesty. That's why God must make declarations like this:



"The Lord detests the use of dishonest scales, but he delights in accurate weights." (Proverbs 11:1, NLT)

In modern terms, God might have talked about "shrinkflation" – where products are kept at the same price...but buyers aren't told that there is less in the packaging than there used to be. Whether it's the size of a candy bar, the amount of chips in a bag, or the volume of soda in a can, companies try to get away with dishonesty to gain profit.



The drive to get paid is one motive that can cause people to alter truth, but there are other motivations that create falsehood. People might make shady bargains to get a promotion. People might take performance enhancing drugs to win a championship. People might invent stories to gain popularity.

Where do all these questions leave us?

It leaves us with uncertainty about everything!



George Strait once boasted in a song that he had some: "oceanfront property in Arizona. From my front porch you can see the sea." It was once a fun line to highlight an obvious lie...but now sketchy real estate agents can create a property listing with photos of the house (sea include), realistic maps showing the sightlines to the beach, and fake testimonies from neighbors about the lovely view....all so they could make sketchy profits, and all while conspiracy theorists could make sketchy accusations that the real estate industry is manipulating Arizona's coastal resources for the benefit of "Big Government!"

"True" is hard to recognize!



The Voice of Truth

With so many voices speaking questionable things, it is imperative for us as Christians to listen for the Voice of Truth (John 18:37) ...and I don't mean Bob Geiger!

Unreliable Voices

The New Testament is clear that many unreliable voices try to lead us off course.



False Teachers

Scripture says beware the voice of false teachers.

“Dear friends, I had been eagerly planning to write to you about the salvation we all share. But now I find that I must write about something else, urging you to defend the faith that God has entrusted once for all time to his holy people. I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God’s marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such people was recorded long ago, for they have denied our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” (Jude 3–4, NLT)

These false teachers might bring erroneous views about:

- Jesus and his nature (1 John).
- What actions are appropriate (2 Peter).
- The gospel itself (Galatians)

When those lies start to spread, the church needs to pay attention, remembering the teaching that we received initially and protecting the flock from twisted words.

To be fair, sometimes teachers can share mistakes without being labeled “false teachers.” People like Apollos in the book of Acts were mistaken about doctrine (ex: Acts 18), yet when he was taken aside and the truth was explained to him, he graciously accepted the correction and became a powerful advocate for the true faith. A *correctable* teacher is not a *false* teacher, so be careful not to place that damaging label on God’s people without careful examination first.

Real false teachers, though, do exist. Even when corrected, they hold to falsehood and teach things that run contrary to God’s plan, God’s grace, and God’s Son. Whether these teachers have fallen victim to questionable information, drew questionable conclusions, or had questionable motives, the bottom line is that they intentionally choose to go astray and to convince others to follow.

If we want to know what is true, we can’t listen to their voices!

Satan

And of course, the source of their lies is none other than Satan himself.

Unreliable Voice: Satan
... He who is the devil, the father of lies, who does not believe in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44, NLT)

His voice is *clearly* off limits for believers. Satan is called “the deceiver of the whole world” in Revelation 12:9. And in the Gospel of John, he is called worse:

“... He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44, NLT)

Satan would love nothing more than for you to be misinformed about your faith! Why? Because the stakes are high! Disinformation can push a spiritual agenda that drives us away from God. We must be knowledgeable and discerning about Satan’s presence and tactics to recognize that his messages oppose to what Christianity teaches.

If we want to know what is true, we can’t listen to his voice!

The Voice of Jesus

The Voice of Jesus
... Everyone who is of the truth listens to **my voice.**” (John 18:37, ESV)

You and I don’t need any other voices. We simply need *one voice* when it comes to truth. Jesus says:

*“... Everyone who is of the truth listens to **my voice.**”* (John 18:37, ESV)

We need to listen to his voice (just like we talked about a few weeks ago in the first sermon of our “Under the Hood” series)!

We need to recognize the truth He brings. But please remember that the voice of Jesus doesn’t share truth in the form of facts. He is not communicating scientific info (“Here’s how lithium-ion batteries work”); he is not communicating historical data (“London was founded in 43 AD”). He is sharing spiritual insight.

The Voice of Jesus
... And we have received God’s Spirit (not the world’s spirit), so we can know the wonderful things God has freely given us. When we tell you these things, we do not use words that come from human wisdom. Instead, we speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit’s words to explain spiritual truths.” (1 Corinthians 2:12–13, NLT)

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Spiritual truth is *practical* truth we need in our daily life! It is truth that aligns with reality. It is truth that is consistent with Christ. It is truth that gives us the insights we need to live our life.

At the end of the day, this kind of spiritual truth will tell us it is more important to know how to love our enemies than to determine exactly how they lied to us. This kind of spiritual truth will tell us it is more important to know how to forgive our neighbors than to know how many inches they mowed over the property line. This kind of spiritual truth will tell us it is more important to know how to pursue unity within the church than to know who voted one way or another.

Spiritual truth is going to help us more than any other kind of truth. And God makes spiritual truth available to us!



Practical Ways to Know What is True

How do we know what is true?

A.G. Elrod, an expert in AI ethics and faith, writes,

“It’s hard not to feel small and powerless in the shadow of this growing tower [of unreliable sources]. Yet our role is not to be mere spectators of the world but discerning participants, “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Amid rapid technological advancement, our challenge is to engage with wisdom, ensuring that Christ remains the compass by which we navigate this new terrain.”⁵

How can we **practically** and **biblically** make Christ our compass to navigate the search for truth?

In this series, we’ve been looking at functional ways that we can improve as follower of Christ. We’ve been looking at *specific, real-world* steps we can take to gain practical power in our faith. So, let’s continue with this question!

Let me share **five practical actions** you can take to feel more confident in telling spiritual truth from spiritual lies.



1. **Make a roadmap for Bible studies.**

Studying God’s word is, of course, critical to knowing truth! The more we know what God says, the more we can use it as a guide for our lives.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law!”* (Psalm 119:29, ESV)

But studying can be overwhelming. Where do you start? Deciding on a starting point is hard because of the paradox of choice – the more options we have, the harder it is to make a choice. So, use a roadmap!

Why it Works: With a roadmap, you limit the options and more easily find a path forward to *actually* study instead of just thinking you *should* study.

Tonganoxie Christian Church offers everyone in the church a free subscription to RightNow Media (talk to me for details), and they have a roadmap of studies for the year. Make one choice (Adult, Men’s, Women’s, Youth, or Kids) and then follow the suggestions to be exposed to a variety of topics with study guides and directions. Find it here: <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/roadmaps>.

⁵ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2024/march-web-only/ezekiels-visions-ais-revisions-chatgpt-biblical-interpretat.html>

Or, for an even simpler roadmap, just decide to attend whatever study is offered in one classroom on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights. You don't have to think – you just show up and learn!



2. Set "Save Points" for your Beliefs.

Growing up, video games were hard because if you died on the final level, you had to start all the way back at level one. Today, games include "save points" that players can go back to repeatedly. Rather than starting from level one, these "save points" offer the chance to build on previously settled matters – to start just a few jumps away from the final boss battle instead of having to go through hours of play to get there again.

In your quest for Jesus-based truth, you can set some firm "save points" of belief that you don't have to argue anymore. Study, solve, and settle truth like, *"Jesus died on the cross for my sins, but he rose from the grave on the third day."* In future conversations or amidst future doubts, you can use that as a "save point" to move ahead.

Scriptural Foundation: *"Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits."* (Hebrews 6:1–3, ESV)

Why it Works: Settled facts can provide anchor points for your brain. Rather than retrace every argument, you can build on the truth you already know. Write them down (like in the Apostle's Creed) and remind yourself that you know these essentials!



3. Ask for Bible References.

"Proof texting" is a term that describes picking Bible verses to prove a position you already hold, rather than the other way around. And it *is* possible to find a verse to back up almost anything (for example: I have a verse that validates my enjoyment of hockey. *"Penalties are prepared for mockers, and beatings for the backs of fools."* - Proverbs 19:29, NIV). However, despite the danger of "proof texting" and misapplying Scripture, we know that any spiritual truth needs to have the Bible as its starting point. So, test it!

Scriptural Foundation: *"Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world."* (1 John 4:1, NLT)

Why it Works: All godly truth will align with Scripture! God will not contradict Himself. So, make His Word the starting point for your discussions. Ask for the Scriptural reason for doing or not doing something! Investigate the Biblical support for any truth claim and allow Scripture to be your guide.



4. ***Just say “Jesus!”***

Truth honors Jesus. If a belief denies Him, it’s wrong. End of story.

Scriptural Foundation: *“This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”* (1 John 4:2–3, NIV)

Why it Works: Any philosophy, worldview, or attitude which denies Jesus isn’t worth your time! A *person* who denies Jesus is worth it – God doesn’t want anyone to perish not knowing Him! – but a *system* of belief that denies Him is on the wrong track. You can save yourself a lot of hassle just starting with that piece of information. If it rejects Jesus, you can reject it!



5. ***Stick to the story... on paper.***

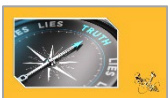
Science and technology are constantly changing. The knowledge we have of the workings of the universe – both on a macro and micro scale – is far superior to what was known during the time of Christ. But spiritual truth doesn’t evolve. The gospel doesn’t change.

So, remind yourself of this unchanging truth by using a physical Bible, with real paper. Write notes on it. Let the corners get dog-eared. Spill some coffee on it.

Scriptural Foundation: *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!”* (Galatians 1:8, NIV)

Why it Works: You can allow the physical record of a long-standing Bible to be a reminder that the words under the coffee stains haven’t changed. The notes you make are reminders of how long you’ve invested in this truth. The corners remind you of how often you’ve come back to it. Digital copies are convenient, but a paper copy has history!

Closing

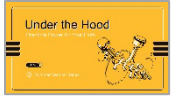


We need to have confidence that our view of the world is accurate. We need to have confidence that our view of the *spiritual world* is accurate.

And that only happens when we pursue truth.

So, choose one or more of these *specific, real-world* actions to help you pursue truth better. Make a habit so that you can know God’s truth more accurately than ever before.

The truth is out there, so let me pray for you as you search for it!



Prayer

Invitation

If we can pray for you as you try to pursue spiritual truth and draw closer to Jesus, we invite you to come forward during our next song. Allow me to pray with you, or to share a prayer request with the congregation.

Please stand and sing...

Prayer Requests

- Carol Dykes (@ LMH, surgery recovery)
- Chris Martin (@ KU Med, transplant recovery)
- The Papa family (community) after the passing of Josiah last week

Notes

Questionable Sources

Questionable Information (Proverbs 12:17)

Questionable Conclusions (Proverbs 12:15)

Questionable Motives (Proverbs 11:1)

The Voice of Truth

Unreliable Voices

False Teachers (Jude 3-4)

Satan (John 8:44)

The Voice of Jesus (John 18:37; 1 Corinthians 2:12-13)

Practical Ways to Know What is True

- 1. Make a roadmap for Bible studies. (Psalm 119:29)*
- 2. Set "Save Points" for your Beliefs. (Hebrews 6:1-3)*
- 3. Ask for Bible References. (1 John 4:1)*
- 4. Just say "Jesus!" (1 John 4:2-3)*
- 5. Stick to the story... on paper. (Galatians 1:8)*

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Which news source do you trust most, and which do you trust least? Why? What kind of bias does each exhibit?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Make a list of practical truths you trust each day (ex: ingredient lists on cereal boxes). Why is it impossible to test and examine each one?
- Why is it more important to test and examine truth about God?
- Read Proverbs 12:15. What role do others play in helping you identify truth? Why should you not evaluate truth only on your own?
- What concerns do you have about disinformation (via online sources, artificial intelligence, or others) in your daily life? How can a strong faith in Jesus help you navigate those areas, even if you remain uncertain about claims others make?
- What is the difference between a teacher that makes a mistake vs. a false teacher? (ex: Acts 18:24-28)
- Who has been a reliable help for you in understanding spiritual truth? What qualifies that person to share accurately about Jesus?
- Which of the five “practical” steps in the sermon notes* are you most likely to use? Why did you choose that answer?
 - * *Answers to the blanks under “Practical Ways to Know What is True”:*
1. Roadmap; 2. Save Points; 3. References; 4: Jesus; 5: Paper.
- Brainstorm three more actions that could improve the way you pursue truth.

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray for discernment and understanding for yourself, as well as for all those who are involved in teaching the men, women, and children of our congregation. Ask God to make His truth clear!