

The background of the entire cover is a light beige, textured surface. It is covered with numerous hand-drawn yellow arrows and swirls of varying sizes and directions, creating a sense of movement and complexity. The arrows are drawn with a thick, expressive line, and some swirls are more intricate, resembling spiral patterns.

♦ ANDREW PETIPRIN ♦

TRUTH MATTERS

KNOWING GOD AND YOURSELF

Truth Matters

Knowing God and Yourself

Andrew Petiprin



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	v
1. "I Believe in God"	1
2. The Main Character	9
3. The Impossible Union	28
4. The <i>Kerygma</i>	46
5. The Fire Within	65
6. Are You Being Saved?	84
7. Guaranteed Grace	101
8. The Life of the World to Come	121
9. Amen	142
Endnotes	150

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Finally, this book originated in various teachings and sermons I offered to my former parishioners at St. Mary of the Angels in Orlando, Florida. Although I was their priest, they showed me what the truth of the gospel looked like and why it mattered. My gratitude to them knows no bounds.

1

“I Believe in God”



Everything changed in 2001. For those of us who remember that fateful day, the terrorist attacks of September 11 taught us that things were not what they seemed. We suddenly realized that four airplanes, two skyscrapers, a government building, and a patch of Pennsylvania farmland could be battlefields. For a brief period, many people—and especially people in the United States—felt a deep sense of disconnection from everything they had been raised to believe was secure. A few even dared to look into their own hearts and households to face a void that only something bigger than themselves, bigger than nations, and bigger than the world could explain. As the Anglican theologian Rowan Williams noted about his own experience in New York on the day the World Trade Center fell:

God always has to be rediscovered. Which means God always has to be heard or seen where there aren't yet words for him.¹

When we face personal or national crises, we may find that the god we thought we were relying on (if we thought we were relying on a god at all), is a figment of our own imagination. Williams continues:

Perhaps it's when we try to make God useful in crises . . . that we take the first steps towards the great lie of religion: the god who fits our agenda.²

The crisis of the terrorist attacks of 2001 was looming in the background of my life when, after America's airports opened a few weeks later, I boarded a plane for London. I had won a scholarship to study at Oxford, and I moved abroad just at the moment when my own country seemed in unparalleled tumult. I was in tumult too. And the question before me was whether the god of my crises was, in fact, the true God. This crisis went all the way back to my childhood, to a deep, life-giving Christian worldview steeped in Bible stories, church choirs, youth groups, putting on the "whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:10–18) every morning, and listening to my mother read the *Chronicles of Narnia* at bedtime. All of this had defined who I was, and for my young years it defined what I was doing in the world. But by the time I headed across the Atlantic as a twenty-one-year-old man, I had deep questions about whether any of it was real. Did I worship God, or the god who fit my agenda, and the agendas of my family and community?

I thought I knew better than everyone. This was especially true with religious leaders. If my pastor could not even be trusted to use proper grammar, how could he be trusted to teach me truth? I looked elsewhere for answers for a while. But the faith into which I was baptized as a baby and grew into as a child simply would not go away. But I needed a guarantee. How could I know that God's saving grace was active and real? And then I discovered poetry. Yes, poetry. Philosophy too. And painting, drama, and intellectual pursuits of all sorts. And I discovered that the vast majority of poems, paintings, plays, and other beautiful things throughout history had been done to the glory of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians could be sophisticated and creative because they knew the source of everything worth knowing and admiring. And they had to be humble, because the presence of the living God in their lives took them out of themselves. "Humble yourselves before the Lord," the Bible teaches us, "and he will exalt you" (James 4:10).

In that tumultuous fall of 2001, I was reading one poet in particular: T. S. Eliot. Eliot was an American who had emigrated to England. He was a brilliant young man who had studied at Harvard, Oxford, and the Sorbonne; and as he matured, he discovered that the only answer to the world's problems lay in the same answer that I, too, was beginning to discover. Eliot tried brilliantly to describe the chaos of a post-World War I world in his famous poem "The Waste Land." But there was no way to make sense of it. He came to find another answer—one that does not make false promises of a "war to end all wars," or innovations that claim to render the age-old afflictions powerless. What he found was the gospel

of Jesus Christ, expressed in changeless doctrine that was designed to meet the needs of every age, and of every heart. This is what I was unconsciously looking for when I left for what turned out to be a three-year sojourn in England.

Eliot describes the cyclical quest for truth in his masterful series *The Four Quartets*. The world is full, Eliot tells us, of “hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses; and the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought, and action.”³ Like the journeys of Abraham and Moses, the psalmist, Paul, and Jesus himself, Eliot knew that everything meaningful points toward devotion to the one true and living God. He situates himself and his readers in a place of ceaseless exploration toward our Father, who makes our purpose clear: “You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid.” This is the purpose of life: “to kneel where prayer has been valid.” And to Eliot, prayer “is more than an order of words, the conscious occupation of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.”⁴ Prayer is life. And so it makes all the difference in the world to know just who it is who first gives and then receives back the lives we live. Or to put it another way, to whom am I praying? Truth matters.

As it happened, I had almost no sooner touched down in England than I encountered a place where prayer had been valid for a long, long time. More than five hundred years before terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center and killed more than three thousand people, Christians were praying on the very spot where God had put me in order to rediscover him. I began attending the Holy Eucharist every morning and returning every evening to sit enraptured by a unique English prayer service called Choral Evensong. The place

was Magdalen College Chapel in Oxford, and as far as likely candidates go for places where prayer has been valid, this is as close to the top of the list as it comes. It also looms large in the story of another great twentieth-century Christian hero of mine, C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a contemporary of Eliot's and taught at Magdalen for many years. After his conversion to Christianity in the early 1930s, he prayed every day in the same sacred space where God had led me. I imagined him sitting in the stalls directly across from where I sat each night, only fifty years earlier. There in that historically and faithfully saturated environment, I took seriously for the first time what it meant to love God by loving the teachings he had delivered to Christians like Eliot and Lewis. And those teachings begin with this sentence:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

These are the first words of the formulation of the Christian faith that we now call the Apostles' Creed. The whole thing reads like this, and it is printed this way in my tradition:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The words are printed this way because they are meant to be recited aloud, alongside other people. Truth is not just for private intellectual assent, but public declaration. I said (in fact, I chanted) these words each night at Evensong alongside fellow worshipers when I was in the throes of my spiritual crisis, and I say them every day still. Sometimes the words roll out unconsciously. At other times I am bowled over by a particular line or two. The truth of God in Christ works this way. It is both a reliable workhorse and a derby winner.

From the earliest days of the Church, those baptized into the community professed the Apostles' Creed, and it remains in use today for the same purpose. And what do the words signify? To start, "I believe in God" means that I want more than myself. The "I" that I am sometimes proud of, sometimes ashamed of, and sometimes indifferent toward, wants to belong to the story of the great "I am." To say "I believe" acknowledges the way things are. I have a maker, and so do you. The world and everything in it once was not, and then was. The answer to the questions, "Who is God?" and "Who

am I?" are therefore always intertwined. But this belief is not in a vague power. It is faith in a God who has revealed himself in specific ways, and principally in the Bible. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all there. The life of Christ is there. The Church is there. Forgiveness, resurrection, eternal life, and everything else is there. Most of all we learn, through all the stories of God's revelation to and interaction with our world, how the truth liberates us from our own illusions so that we may know God and ourselves. Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32).

This book champions truth, and asserts that the authentic teachings of the Christian faith are the best means of human flourishing. The Apostles' Creed is a useful lens through which we shall focus on a picture of this faith. In this picture will appear another creed, the Nicene Creed, along with various events in history when doctrine was debated and decided. Doctrine develops, but truth never changes. The purpose of doctrine is to make truth clearer than before, because our lives depend on it. In fact, it is my conviction that orthodox Christian belief is the only balm for our wounds in our inevitable times of distress like September 11; and it is also the joy of our hearts in times of blessing. It keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves but also instills in us an infinite worth given by an all-loving God. It reminds us that there is a place to turn when we fall short.

Truth matters to me because I love God. I have tried and failed to get away from him. I have tried to avoid God and reject God, but I cannot escape his love. I invite you to explore this love with me. But a word of warning: the God of the Bible

and the Church described by Christian doctrine does not fit my agenda, and he will not fit yours. By the end of this book, it is my hope that you will thank God that this is so. I myself am an Anglican, and indeed, an Episcopal priest. But this book is necessarily ecumenical. It is, after all, about transcendent truth enshrined in teachings that predate denominations. It is my hope that Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, as well as many Protestants, will be encouraged to examine their faith more closely—that they will rediscover the truth of God who puts denominational gods to shame. Finally, if this book says anything to seekers after truth with no background in Christianity (or indeed religion!), then I thank God from whom all blessings flow.

Newcomers to the church community need tools to navigate the Christian faith and a guide for connecting doctrine to real life. In a world that's increasingly relative, author Andrew Petiprin helps readers discover unchanging truth based on God's Word. *Truth Matters* shows how core tenants of the Christian faith were affirmed over the centuries by faithful biblical scholars. Petiprin helps readers flourish in their faith by discovering the true answers to age-old questions like, "Who is God?" and "Who am I?"

"An excellent and wide-ranging introduction to the beating heart of the faith."

DAVID ZAHL, Director of Mockingbird Ministries;
editor-in-chief of the Mockingbird blog

"With insight, joy, clarity, wit, and wisdom, Andrew Petiprin guides us through the ancient doctrines that have served Christ's church for centuries and shows how these truths connect to our lives."

JUSTIN S. HOLCOMB, Episcopal priest; seminary professor; and author

"An uncommonly good book for personal reading and group teaching."

EPHRAIM RADNER, Professor of Historical Theology, Wycliffe College, Toronto

"Andrew Petiprin has written a book that shows us, as we reach out for truth, that truth itself is a person who reaches back to us with the hands of Christ."

JAMES MATTHEW WILSON, Author of *The Vision of the Soul*:
Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition

"Through careful theological analysis and personal reflection, Andrew Petiprin has written a book that should be required reading for those seeking to understand the close link between truth and discipleship."

TIMOTHY P. O'MALLEY, Managing Director, McGrath Institute for Church Life;
author of *Bored Again Catholic: How the Mass Could Save Your Life*

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