

## From Acorn to Oak

*Who is God, and what is he like? Part 2: Does everyone worship the same God?*

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Bill and Sam were having lunch together and digressed from their business to the subject of religion. “Well the way I see it,” said Bill, “we all worship the same God anyway, so what’s all the fuss?” Sam, a Christian, had been looking forward to an opportunity to talk with Bill about God’s plan of salvation in Christ, but he wasn’t expecting this opener. If you were Sam, what would you have said?

I’ve often wondered how people could believe this idea that everyone worships the same God, for nothing could be farther from the truth. Perhaps they’re just repeating what they’ve heard some others say and haven’t thought about it carefully. Or they may have begun with the correct understanding that there is only one true God, as the Bible teaches, but since so many other religions call their deity God, they think it must be the same one. “After all,” some like to say, “even the Arabic New Testament translates the word ‘God’ as ‘Allah,’ so the Muslims must believe in the same God we do.” And didn’t Shakespeare say through the lips of Juliet, “What’s in a name? that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet...”? While that may be true for some things, it is never true of God.

Why was God so displeased when many and eventually most Israelites worshiped the Canaanite god, Baal? Because Baal was the exact opposite of God, and his worshipers wound up engaging in evil of the most vile sort! In so doing they rendered themselves unfit for his presence and service, unable to accomplish the mission to which he had called them. It is clear that God never thought that he and Baal or any other man-made god had anything in common. Nowhere in the Old or New Testaments does God indicate in any way that he considers himself worshiped when people call on the name of a false god. (2 Kings 17:7-23; Jeremiah 2:5-8) Just the opposite!

Consider the issue from God’s point of view. When people call him by that name but think of him in ways that contradict his character, and ascribe to him attributes he does not have, does he consider their expressions as relating to and worshiping him? Would you agree, if someone said he or she knew you and described you as having characteristics that were the opposite of yours and even repulsive to you? God said that those who worshiped the false gods had rejected him, clearly indicating that he and the gods of humankind are not the same and that he does not look upon them as believing in him. (Deuteronomy 32:15-21, 39) Jesus said, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord...’ Then I will say to them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.’” (Matthew 7:22-23)

Certainly the official teaching of the world’s main religions contradicts such a concept that everyone believes in the same deity. Bill must never have read the Qur’an which emphatically denies and strongly opposes the Bible’s revelation of God as being Triune. (E.g., Sura 4:171 ff; 5:71-73; 10:68) “Allah,” even if it translates “God Almighty” in the

Arabic New Testament, is **not** to Muslims a Trinity. No Qur'an-abiding Muslim would agree that Allah is the Triune God who has disclosed himself as such in the Bible. As one former Muslim observed, "Islam has the same problem Christianity has with respect to ignorance of the literature. While we lament the increasing illiteracy with regard to the Bible and theology among Christians, many Muslims exhibit similar apathy, being Muslims in name only." Yet, those Muslims who do take their religion seriously, who study the Qur'an and the other literature they consider sacred, do not believe in or worship the same God who has revealed himself in the Bible.

The Qur'an is very clear that Muslims do not worship the same God as Christians or adherents of other religions the Qur'an calls unbelievers. "Say: 'Unbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, nor will you ever worship what I worship. You have your own religion, and I have mine.'" (Sura 109:1, 6)

The Bible has warned us that people would reject Christ and those of us who believe in him. In 1 Corinthians 1:23-24 Paul said that "Jesus Christ is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." That doesn't sound like everybody believes the same thing. Only those who give superficial thought to the parts of Christianity they like will say that everyone worships the same God.

Further, consider what Jesus said concerning Jews who had believed him. In John 8:31-47 the Lord not only more than implies they are not Abraham's children (vss. 39-40) but that they also do not belong to God (v. 47). He also says that God is not their Father, as they claim, but that they belong to their father, the devil. (8:42-44) The Jews protested, "The only Father we have is God himself." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, ... He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." (8:42-47; cf. 1 John 2:23) Jesus thus indicates that the god of these Jews "who had believed him" (v. 31) was not the God who has revealed himself in the Old Testament and who was revealing himself through Jesus the Christ.

In John 15:23-25, Jesus reveals that those who hate him hate his Father. If they hate two of the three Persons of the triune God, they are not worshipping him. Therefore, it follows that they are not worshipping the God we worship. By definition the word, worship, in the Greek of the New Testament (*proskunountas* > *proskuneo*) means to do reverence or homage by prostration, adore, bow oneself in adoration. Those who hate Jesus do not do this to him or to his Father, whom we worship.

In the next chapter John quotes Jesus saying, "All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God [for example, Jews in the first century as in Acts 7 and Muslims today. See the Qur'an, Sura 4:86-91 and other

literature of Islam.]. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.” (John 16:1-3) Again, since they have not known the Father or him, they are not worshipping the same God.

In John 10:30 Jesus tells the Jews that he and the Father are one. That they knew he was not just talking about being one in agreement is seen in the very next verses where they picked up stones to kill him, because he “claim[ed] to be God.” (v 33; cf 5:18)

Look carefully at verses 54 and 55, where Jesus says, “My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him.” The nonbelieving Jews claim they are worshipping the true God, but Jesus says they don’t know him (the Triune God) and that they are lying (v. 55), so it is not actually the true God they are worshipping, for earlier Jesus said (vss. 42-47) “If God were your Father [clearly indicating that he is not], you would love me...You belong to your father, the devil...you do not belong to God.” Rejecting the God Jesus is revealing, they chose the devil-inspired concept they have fashioned in their minds.

We must take into account the demonic influence that is always in the Bible portrayed as drawing people away from God and obedience to him. Regarding nonbelievers, Paul writes “the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:20-21) Paul rhetorically asks in 2 Corinthians 6:15, “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial,” a Hebrew term that refers to Satan. In 1 Thessalonians 4:5 Paul refers to “the heathen who do not know God” (cf Galatians 4:8). The Greek word translated “heathen” is *ethne*, Gentiles, non-Jews, which would later include Muslims.

Here we have texts that reveal that unbelievers are worshipping gods they claim are truly God but aren’t God. For example, Jews and Muslims claim and may even think they are worshipping the true God, but there is no place in the Bible that indicates that the Jews and others who reject the revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments are actually worshipping the triune God. Here is another example, contrary to popular thinking today, where perception does *not* equal reality.

### **Helping People Understand**

Jesus and Paul in these texts provide help for Sam and the rest of us who are called to proclaim the Triune God and his plan of salvation: that beside Jesus Christ “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12 TNIV) Always remember what Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

The Lord also said those who do not believe are unable to hear what he says. (John 8:43) That is, without the new birth, which the Holy Spirit provides, saving faith does not emerge. (John 3:3-7; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Ephesians 2:8-10) Therefore, we should be

patient, gentle, and respectful of Bill and those like him and pray for the Holy Spirit to give them the new nature, the new birth, to help them understand.

Also, especially in this postmodern age, we need to be clear about our language. When people use words like Allah, we need to ask what they mean by such terms. What an Arab Christian means when he or she uses the word Allah is completely different from what a Muslim means. The former understands Allah to be the Triune God, the only true God, as taught in the Bible, and that God he or she proclaims.

As much as we need to affirm the truths of the Bible to which we are called to witness, we need to earn the right to be heard; our witness, in deed as well as in word, must be with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Further, that witness must be in the love (Greek, *agape*) Christ commanded (John 13:34-35), which the Apostle Paul defined as being “patient and kind; not arrogant or rude...” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) As vital as is right doctrine, without this special love we will neither attract people to Christ nor to the triune God he revealed.

Further, we’re in it for the long haul. For most people track record is the key to discerning genuineness and authenticity. Does this love hold up over time? Is it consistent through all circumstances? Eventually, we’ll likely be asked where that love comes from and have the opportunity to “give account of the hope that is within us” in Christ and with the Holy Spirit’s help speak to receptive hearts and minds of the one true God who has sent us.