ONE GOD, THREE PERSONS

The Trinity Made Simple, and How Other Views of God Compare



One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, explained in plain words from the Bible

ANDREW DOMINGUEZ

TRINFINITY Enterprises

One God, Three Persons

The Trinity Made Simple, and How Other Views of God Compare

Andrew Dominguez

One God, Three Persons: The Trinity Made Simple, and How Other Views of God Compare

Copyright 2026 by Andrew Dominguez.

I own the copyright to everything in this book. I freely allow anyone to read, copy, print, quote, share, and teach from it, and to hand out or post copies, at no cost, as long as the text is not changed and this notice stays with it.

Publishing this book, meaning releasing it as an edition of your own in print or electronic form, whether sold or given away, requires my written permission first. Requests go to andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

The full text can be read, printed and downloaded free at trinfinityenterprises.com.

Scripture quotations are taken from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB), with familiar English forms of personal names, copyright 2026 Andrew Dominguez. The complete SLB is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.

Independently published.

Trinfinity Enterprises, Dayton, Nevada.

This book offers Bible teaching and pastoral encouragement. It is not a substitute for professional counseling or medical care. If you or someone else is in danger, call 911.

A note before you begin. This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

Contents

Before You Begin....1

Part One: Who God Is

Chapter 1: Who Is God?....5
Chapter 2: There Is One God....9
Chapter 3: The Father Is God, and the Son Is God....13
Chapter 4: The Holy Spirit Is God....19
Chapter 5: Three Who Are Not the Same....23
Chapter 6: One What, Three Whos....28
Chapter 7: The Trinity in the Old Testament....32
Chapter 8: How the Church Put It Into Words....36
Chapter 9: Why Every Picture Breaks....40

Part Two: Other Views of God

Chapter 10: Modalism and Oneness: One Person in Three Roles....44
Chapter 11: Arianism and Jehovah's Witnesses: A Created Son....48
Chapter 12: Adoptionism: A Man Promoted to Be God's Son....53
Chapter 13: Unitarianism: God Is One Person, and Jesus Is a Man....56
Chapter 14: Tritheism: Three Gods....60
Chapter 15: The Latter-day Saint View: Three Separate Beings....63
Chapter 16: Partialism: Three Parts of God....67
Chapter 17: Polytheism: Many Gods....69
Chapter 18: Other Views of God....73

Part Three: Living With the Triune God

Chapter 19: The Hard Questions....78
Chapter 20: Why the Trinity Matters....83
A Closing Word: Know Him....87
Appendix A: All the Views at a Glance....88
Appendix B: Talking With a Friend Who Sees God Differently....89
Appendix C: The Nicene Creed....91
Appendix D: Words to Know....92
Appendix E: Scripture Index....93
About This Book....95

Before You Begin

> *Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*
>
> Matthew 28:19 (SLB)

Who is God? That is the biggest question there is. Every religion answers it. Every person answers it too, even the one who says, "I don't know," or, "I don't think about it." What you believe about God shapes what you believe about everything else: where you came from, what is wrong with the world, how it gets fixed, and what happens when you die.

I have led Bible studies for years and translated the Steadfast Literal Bible. Many believers feel intimidated by big words about the Trinity, and others get confused when someone at the door offers a different view of Jesus. I wrote this book to explain what Scripture teaches about the Father, Son and Spirit in plain language.

Christians answer the question with a word that is not found anywhere in the Bible: the Trinity. That word names what the Bible teaches from cover to cover. There is one God. That one God exists eternally as three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, yet there are not three gods but one.

I use that same definition in The Road Home, and I will use it all through this book. If you remember nothing else from these pages, remember that.

Why I Wrote This Book

A lot of people love Jesus and could not explain the Trinity if their life depended on it. Picture this. Somebody knocks on the door with a magazine and a Bible, and they have verses ready. They ask, "If Jesus is God, who was He praying to?" or, "Where is the word Trinity in the Bible?" and the Christian standing in the doorway does not know what to say.

Then there are people who were raised in churches that teach something different about God, and who were told all their lives that Christians who believe in the Trinity worship three gods. When they finally hear what the Trinity actually means, many of them are surprised to learn that it is not what they were told.

Both of those problems have the same fix. We need to know what the Bible says about God, say it in plain words, and understand the other views well enough to describe them fairly. That is what this book does.

Who This Book Is For

I wrote this book first for the believer who wants to understand what they already believe. You don't need a seminary degree. You don't need to know Greek or Hebrew. I will explain every term as we go, and there is a list of words to know in the back.

I also wrote it for the seeker who wants to know what Christians mean when they talk about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And I wrote it for the person who has a friend, a neighbor, a coworker, or a family member who holds another view of God, and who wants to talk with them kindly and honestly.

If you belong to one of the groups I describe in Part Two, you are welcome here too. I have tried hard to describe what you believe the way you would describe it. Where I quote your teachers, I tell you where the quote comes from so you can check it. I would ask you to do me the same courtesy: read what the Trinity actually is in Part One before you decide what you think of it.

How the Book Is Laid Out

The book has three parts.

Part One: Who God Is lays out what the Bible teaches about God, one simple step at a time. There is one God. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. The three are not the same Person. Then we put those pieces together, look at what the Old Testament shows us, see how the early church put it into words, and look at why the popular pictures of the Trinity all break down somewhere.

Part Two: Other Views of God takes the other answers people give, one chapter each. Some of them are old ideas that the early church faced. Some of them are taught by large groups today. For each one, I explain what it teaches, where it came from, what verses its followers use, what the Bible says, and where it differs from what Christians have always believed.

Part Three: Living With the Triune God answers the hard questions people ask most and shows why the Trinity matters for everyday faith: for prayer, for salvation, for love, and for worship.

At the back you will find a chart of every view side by side, a short guide for talking with a friend who sees God differently, the Nicene Creed, a list of words to know, and an index of the Bible verses used in the book.

Every chapter ends with **Study Questions** for personal reflection or group discussion.

One Simple Idea

Here is the whole book in one sentence: God is one What and three Whos.

“What” is the question you ask about a thing’s nature. What is it? It is a rock. It is a dog. It is a man. “Who” is the question you ask about a person. Who is it? It is Bob. It is my mum. It is Jesus.

When we ask, “What is God?” the answer is one: one divine being, one God. When we ask, “Who is God?” the answer is three: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One What, three Whos. That is not a contradiction, because one and three are answering two different questions. We will spend Chapter 6 on that idea, and it will come back again and again.

A Few Notes Before We Start

Scripture quotations in this book come from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). Words set in bold italics inside a quotation are words added in English to make the sentence read clearly. When I don’t quote a

passage, I give the reference so you can read it for yourself, and I hope you will. Don't take my word for anything in this book. Open your Bible and check it, the way the Bereans did in Acts 17:11.

I capitalize the pronouns that refer to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (He, Him, His, You, Your) as a sign of reverence. Inside a Scripture quotation, I leave the capitals exactly as the translation prints them. Inside quotations from other writers, I leave their words exactly as they wrote them.

When I describe what another group believes, I use its own published statements wherever I can, and I tell you where they come from. Groups change their wording over the years, and members do not always agree with every official statement. If you find a place where I have it wrong, I want to know.

I will not call any group by an insulting name, and I will not guess at any person's heart. Only God knows who belongs to Him. But I will tell you plainly where a view differs from the Bible and from what Christians have always believed. Love tells the truth. A doctor who will not tell you what is wrong with you is not being kind.

Part One: Who God Is

Chapter 1: Who Is God?

> *And this is the eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You sent.*
>
> John 17:3 (SLB)

When Jesus prayed the night before He died, He said that eternal life is knowing God. Not knowing about God. Knowing Him. And you can't know someone if you have the wrong idea of who they are.

My wife and I have been married 36 years. We are one in purpose and family, yet we are two different people. Every human comparison falls short of God, but this one shows that unity does not erase distinction. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God, and each Person is distinct.

Think about it this way. Suppose a friend tells you, "I know your wife really well." Then he describes her as six feet tall with red hair and a love for country music, and your wife is five foot two, dark haired, and can't stand country music. Your friend doesn't know your wife. He knows someone else, or someone he made up. He might be sincere. He might even be a nice guy. But he has the wrong person.

That is why this subject matters. The question is not just a puzzle for scholars. It is the question of whether the God we pray to is the God who is really there.

We Can Only Know What God Shows Us

How can anyone know what God is like? We can't climb up to heaven and look. We can't put God under a microscope. If God is real, the only way we can know Him is if He tells us about Himself. The Bible calls that revelation, God making Himself known.

God shows some things about Himself to everyone through what He has made.

> *For His invisible **things**, from **the** creation of **the** world, being understood by the things made, are clearly seen, both His eternal power and divinity, for them to be without excuse*
> (Romans 1:20)

Look at the stars, the mountains, or a newborn baby, and you can see that someone powerful and wise made all of this. But creation can't tell you God's name. It can't tell you that He loves you, or how a sinner can be made right with Him, or that He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For that, God had to speak. He spoke through the prophets in the Old Testament, and then He spoke in the most personal way possible, by sending His Son.

> *In many portions and in many ways God, having spoken long ago to the fathers in the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in a Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the ages* (Hebrews 1:1-2)

So when we ask who God is, we go to the Bible. Not to what feels right to us. Not to what makes the most sense to a human mind. Not to what a church leader or a prophet came up with later. To what God Himself has said.

That is the test I will use in every chapter. Every view of God gets measured against the Bible, including the view I hold.

Why Christians Talk About the Trinity

You might ask, "If the word Trinity isn't in the Bible, why do Christians use it?" It's simple. It is a short way to sum up a lot of things the Bible says.

The word Bible isn't in the Bible either. Neither is the word "incarnation," which means God the Son becoming a man. We use short words all the time to name big ideas the Bible teaches. The question is never whether the word is in the Bible. The question is whether the idea is.

When you read the Bible from start to finish, you find five things said over and over:

1. There is only one God.
2. The Father is God.
3. The Son, Jesus Christ, is God.
4. The Holy Spirit is God.
5. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not the same Person. They talk to each other, love each other, send each other, and know each other.

The Trinity is simply the name for holding all five of those together without throwing any of them out. That is all it is. It is not a fancy idea added to the Bible. It is what you get when you refuse to ignore any of the verses.

And here is the key to Part Two of this book. Every other view of God I know of comes from keeping some of those five statements and dropping one or more of the others. Modalism keeps one God and drops the fifth statement: it says the three are just one Person in three roles. Arianism keeps one God and drops the third statement: Jesus becomes a created being. Tritheism and polytheism drop the first: they end up with more than one god. We will see this pattern over and over.

Some Words We Need

Before we go further, let me define a few words. I promise to keep this short.

God is the eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of everything that exists. He has no beginning and no end, and He depends on nothing.

Being or **nature** is what something is. Your nature is human. A horse's nature is horse. God's nature is divine. When Christians say God is one being, they mean there is only one divine nature, one God.

Person is a "who," someone who can think, speak, love, choose, and relate to others. You are a person. Your dog may be wonderful, but it is not a person in this sense. When Christians say God is three Persons, they mean there are three "Whos" who each have the one divine nature.

Deity means being God. When I say the deity of Christ, I mean that Jesus is God.

Distinct means you can tell them apart. The Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. They are distinct. But distinct does not mean separate. They are never apart from each other and never divided.

Monotheism means belief in one God. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are all monotheistic. Christians are monotheists. We do not believe in three gods, and anyone who tells you we do has been told wrong.

A Word of Humility

I want to say something up front. The Trinity is not something any of us can fully understand. I can't, and neither could the greatest teachers in church history. If you finish this book still saying, "I can't get my head all the way around it," good. You are in good company.

But not fully understanding something is different from not understanding it at all. I don't fully understand how my car's computer works, but I know how to drive it, and I know it is not a horse. We can know what the Bible says about God clearly, even when we can't explain every detail of how it works.

As I said in The Road Home, if we could fit God completely inside our heads, He would be too small to save us. A God we could fully figure out would be a God we made up. The real God is bigger than we are. That should humble us, and it should also make us glad.

> *For My thoughts **are** not your thoughts, and your ways **are** not My ways, declares the LORD. For **as** the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:8-9)

What This Is Not About

This book is about who God is. It is not about which church has the best music, or whether you should go to a big church or a small one. Good Bible-believing Christians disagree about many things, like baptism, end-times details, and church government. Those things matter, but Christians can disagree on them and still be brothers and sisters.

Who God is sits on a different level. It is the foundation the rest is built on. That is why Christians all over the world, Baptist and Methodist, Pentecostal and Presbyterian, Catholic and Orthodox, who disagree about a hundred other things, agree on this one. They all confess the same Trinity, and most of them say it in the same words, the words of the Nicene Creed. You will find it in the back of this book.

Let's Start Where the Bible Starts

The Bible doesn't start with three. It starts with one. Before it ever shows us the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it pounds one truth into Israel's head: there is one God, and only one. That is where we go next.

Study Questions

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have explained the Trinity to a friend? What would you have said?
2. Why does it matter that we know God as He really is, and not just "a" God?

3. Read Hebrews 1:1-2. What are the two ways God has spoken? Why is the second one so important?

4. Look again at the five statements in this chapter. Which one do you find hardest to understand? Which one do you think people most often leave out?

5. What is the difference between “distinct” and “separate”? Can you think of an everyday example?

Chapter 2: There Is One God

> *Hear, Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD **is** one.*
>
> Deuteronomy 6:4 (SLB)

Every morning and every evening, faithful Jewish people for thousands of years have said the words above. They call it the Shema, from the first Hebrew word, shema, which means "hear." Jesus Himself called it the first and greatest commandment.

> *And Jesus answered him, "**The** first of all the commandments **is**: 'Hear, Israel: **the** Lord our God, **the** Lord is one; and you shall love **the** Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' This **is the** first commandment."*
> (Mark 12:29-30)

If you want to understand the Trinity, you have to start here. The Trinity is not a step away from the Shema. It is a deeper look at the God the Shema is talking about. Christians say the Shema too. We believe it with everything in us. There is one God.

A World Full of Gods

To see why this was such a big deal, you have to picture the world Israel lived in. Every nation around them had many gods. Egypt had a sun god, a river god, gods with the heads of animals, and a Pharaoh who was treated as a god himself. Canaan had Baal, the storm god, and Asherah, his partner. Babylon had Marduk and a whole family of gods who fought and schemed against each other. Gods had territories. If you moved to a new land, you might start worshiping that land's god.

Into that world God spoke to Israel and said, in effect, "Those are not gods at all. I alone am God."

> *I **am** the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves. There shall not be for you other gods before My face.* (Exodus 20:2-3)

The first commandment was not "Put Me at the top of the list." It was "There is no list." The gods of the nations were nothing, wood and stone and imagination.

The Prophets Say It Again and Again

Israel struggled with this for centuries. They kept slipping back into worshiping the gods of their neighbors. So God sent prophet after prophet to drive it home. Isaiah may say it more clearly than anyone.

> *You **are** My witnesses, declares the LORD, and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I **am** He. Before Me no god was formed, and after Me **there** will be none.* (Isaiah 43:10)

> *Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of armies: I **am** first and I **am** last, and besides Me **there is** no God.* (Isaiah 44:6)

> *I **am** the LORD, and **there is** none else; besides Me **there is** no God. I will gird you, and you have not known Me* (Isaiah 45:5)
>
> *Remember former things from long ago, for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me* (Isaiah 46:9)

Notice what these verses say and what they don't say. They don't say God is the greatest of the gods. They say there is no other God at all. "Before Me no god was formed, and after Me there will be none." There was no god before Him, and there will never be one after Him. Nobody is going to become a god later on, either. Keep that verse in mind when we get to Chapter 15.

The New Testament Says the Same Thing

Some people think the New Testament changes this, that Christians took the one God of Israel and turned Him into three. The apostles would have been shocked to hear it. They were Jewish men who said the Shema every day, and they never stopped.

> *Therefore concerning the eating of the idol sacrifices, we know that an idol **is** nothing in **the** world, and that **there is** no other God except one. For even if indeed there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on the earth, as there are many gods and many lords, yet to us **there is** one God, the Father, from whom **are** all things, and we for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom **are** all things, and we through Him.* (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)
>
> *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder.* (James 2:19)
>
> *For **there is** one God, and one mediator of God and men, **the** man Christ Jesus* (1 Timothy 2:5)

Paul says there are "so-called gods" in heaven and on earth, many gods and many lords that people worship. But "to us there is one God." James says believing God is one is good, and even the demons believe it. The New Testament is every bit as monotheistic as the Old.

Look closely at 1 Corinthians 8:6, because we will come back to it. Paul takes the Shema, "the LORD our God, the LORD is one," and he puts the Father and Jesus both inside it. One God, the Father. One Lord, Jesus Christ. The word "Lord" in the Shema is the word Paul uses for Jesus. He is not adding a second God next to the first. He is saying that Jesus belongs inside the one God of Israel. We will see more of this in Chapter 3.

What Kind of One?

Now here is a question worth asking. When the Bible says God is one, what kind of one does it mean?

There is more than one kind of one. One brick is one. One family is one. One team is one. One rope made of three strands is one. These are all real kinds of oneness. The Shema tells us God is one, but by itself it does not tell us what His oneness looks like on the inside.

Some Christians have pointed out that the Hebrew word in Deuteronomy 6:4, *echad*, is the same word used in Genesis 2:24, where a man and his wife become "one flesh." They say this shows that God's oneness can include more than one person. I want to be honest with you here. That argument is often

pushed further than it can go. *Echad* is the ordinary Hebrew word for "one." It is used for one day, one man, one stone. By itself, the word does not prove that God is more than one Person, and it does not prove that He is only one Person either. It just says one.

So the Shema settles the main thing: there is only one God. To learn what His oneness is like on the inside, we have to keep reading. And as we keep reading, the Bible shows us something no one expected. The one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What About "Elohim"?

Here is another one you will hear. The most common Hebrew word for God in the Old Testament is *Elohim*. It has a plural ending, like adding "-s" to a word in English. Some people say this proves that God is more than one Person. Others say it proves Israel once believed in many gods.

Neither is right. When *Elohim* means the one true God, the verbs that go with it are almost always singular. In Genesis 1:1, "God created" uses a singular verb. Hebrew sometimes uses a plural form to show greatness or fullness, the way we might say someone has "the heavens" or "the waters" without meaning more than one sky or one sea. So *Elohim* doesn't prove the Trinity. But it doesn't prove polytheism either. It fits a God who is great beyond measure, and it leaves room for what the rest of the Bible shows us.

What God Is Like

While we are here, let me list a few things the Bible says about the one God. They will matter later, because some views of God get these wrong too.

God is eternal. He never had a beginning, and He will never have an end (Psalm 90:2).

> *Before **the** mountains were born, and You brought forth the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You **are** God.* (Psalm 90:2)

God does not change. He is not growing, learning, or becoming something He wasn't before (Malachi 3:6).

God is not a man. He did not start out as one of us and work His way up (Numbers 23:19; Hosea 11:9).

> *God **is** not a man, that He should lie, and a son of mankind, that He should relent. Has He said, and will He not do **it**? And has He spoken, and will He not establish it?* (Numbers 23:19)

God is spirit. He does not have a body made of flesh and bone (John 4:24). That is why it was so amazing when God the Son took on a human body. He added something He never had before.

God is the Creator of everything else. There are only two kinds of things in all of reality: God, and everything God made. There is no third category. Nothing is half God. Angels are created. People are created. The universe is created. God alone is uncreated.

That last point is going to matter a great deal, so let me say it as plainly as I can. When we ask about Jesus, the question is simple: which side of that line is He on? Is He on the Creator side, or the creature side?

There is no in-between. If Jesus is the Creator, He is God. If He is a creature, however great, He is not God. Hold on to that. We will need it in Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 11.

Why This Matters

You will hear people say, “Christians believe in three gods.” Some Muslims say it. Some Jewish people say it. Some Jehovah’s Witnesses and Latter-day Saints say it too, for different reasons. If you remember only one thing from this chapter, remember this: no Christian creed has ever said there are three gods. Christians have always said the opposite. The Athanasian Creed, which goes back about fifteen hundred years, puts it bluntly. After saying the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, it says they are “not three Gods” but “one God.”

If someone believes in three gods, they have left Christianity, not explained it.

Study Questions

1. Read Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Why do you think God made this the first thing Israel needed to know?
2. What were some of the “gods” of the nations around Israel? What are some of the “gods” people serve today, even if they don’t call them gods?
3. In 1 Corinthians 8:6, how does Paul use the Shema? What does that tell you about how the apostles saw Jesus?
4. Why is it important to be honest about what the word echad can and can’t prove?
5. There are only two kinds of things: God and everything God made. Why does that matter when we ask who Jesus is?

Chapter 3: The Father Is God, and the Son Is God

> *In **the** beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*
>
> John 1:1 (SLB)

Nobody argues about the first half of this chapter's title. Every group in this book agrees that the Father is God. Jesus prayed to Him as "the only true God" (John 17:3). Paul opens almost every letter with "God our Father." The Father is the One Jesus taught us to pray to: "Our Father who is in the heavens" (Matthew 6:9).

So I won't spend long proving that the Father is God. Let me say one thing about Him, and then we will spend the rest of the chapter on the Son, because that is where the arguments start.

The Father Has Always Been a Father

Here is something worth thinking about. God did not become a Father when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Jesus spoke of the glory He had with the Father "before the world was" (John 17:5) and said the Father loved Him "before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

> *And now You, Father, glorify Me with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.* (John 17:5)

A father needs a son to be a father. If the Father has always been the Father, then the Son has always been there too. There was never a time when God was alone and lonely, waiting for someone to love. From all eternity, the Father has loved the Son. Hold on to that, because it is one of the most beautiful things about the Trinity, and we will come back to it in Chapter 20.

The Son Is God: What John Says

Now to the big question. Is Jesus God?

The Gospel of John opens with the clearest answer in the whole Bible. Let's go through it one phrase at a time.

"In the beginning was the Word." John calls Jesus "the Word" (Greek *logos*). A word is how we make our thoughts known. Jesus is how God makes Himself known. And notice the verb: in the beginning the Word *was*. When the beginning began, the Word was already there. He did not come into being at the beginning. He already existed.

"And the Word was with God." The Word is not the same Person as the One He was with. You can't be "with" yourself. Here we see two distinct Persons.

"And the Word was God." Not "a god." Not "like God." The Word was God, sharing God's own nature.

Then verse 3 seals it.

> *All things came into being through Him, and without Him not even one **thing** came into being that has come into being.* (John 1:3)

Remember the line from Chapter 2? There are only two kinds of things: God and everything God made. John says *everything* that came into being came into being through the Word. Not one thing came into being without Him. So the Word can't be one of the things that came into being. If He were, He would have had to make Himself. The Word is on the Creator side of the line.

Then comes the most amazing verse of all.

> *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of an only begotten from **the** Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:14)

The eternal Word, who was with God and was God, became a real human being. He did not stop being God. He added a human nature to the divine nature He always had. That is what Christians call the incarnation, God the Son taking on flesh.

Jesus Used God's Own Name

When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses asked Him His name. God answered with words that are hard to put into English.

> *And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* (Exodus 3:14)

"I AM" is the root of God's personal name in Hebrew, the name printed in most English Bibles as "the LORD" in capital letters. It means the One who simply is, who depends on nothing and was never created.

Now listen to Jesus in John 8. The religious leaders were arguing with Him about Abraham, who lived about two thousand years earlier.

> *Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham came into being, I am." Therefore they took up stones that they might cast **them** at Him; but Jesus was hidden and went out of the temple, passing through the midst of them, and so He was passing by.* (John 8:58-59)

Notice what Jesus did not say. He did not say, "Before Abraham was, I was." That would only mean He was very old. He said, "Before Abraham came into being, I am." Abraham came into being. Jesus simply is. And the crowd knew exactly what He meant. They picked up stones to kill Him, because the law said that was the penalty for blasphemy, for a man claiming to be God.

That happened more than once.

> *I and the Father are one." Therefore the Jews again took up stones so that they might stone Him. Jesus answered them, "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. Because of which work of them do you stone Me?" The Jews answered Him, saying, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a man, make Yourself God.*
> (John 10:30-33)

Some people say Jesus never claimed to be God. The people who heard Him in person didn't think so. They understood Him perfectly well. Their problem wasn't that they misunderstood Him. Their problem was that they didn't believe Him.

Others Called Him God

Jesus' followers called Him God too, and He accepted it.

> *And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus says to him, "Because you have seen Me, Thomas, you have believed. Blessed **are** those who have not seen and have believed."* (John 20:28-29)

Thomas was a Jewish man who had said the Shema all his life. When he saw the risen Jesus, he fell down and said, "My Lord and my God!" If Thomas was wrong, Jesus would have corrected him on the spot, the way Peter corrected Cornelius for bowing to him (Acts 10:25-26) and the way the angel corrected John (Revelation 19:10). Jesus didn't correct Thomas. He blessed everyone who would come to believe the same thing.

The apostles kept saying it in their letters.

> *awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:13)

> *whose **are** the fathers, and from whom **is** the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed to the ages. Amen.* (Romans 9:5)

> *But to the Son: "Your throne, O God, **is** to the age of the age; a scepter of uprightness **is** the scepter of Your kingdom."* (Hebrews 1:8)

In Hebrews 1:8, God the Father Himself speaks to the Son and calls Him God. The writer is quoting Psalm 45, and he applies it straight to Jesus. Peter calls Jesus "our God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1). John ends his first letter by saying of Jesus Christ, "This is the true God and the eternal life" (1 John 5:20).

Isaiah saw it coming seven hundred years before Bethlehem.

> *For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us; and the dominion is on His shoulder; and **one** has called His name Wonder, Counselor, Mighty God, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace.* (Isaiah 9:6)

A child born. A son given. And His name is "Mighty God." Isaiah uses the same title, "Mighty God," for the LORD Himself in the very next chapter (Isaiah 10:21).

Jesus Did What Only God Does

Titles are important, but actions speak loudly too. Jesus did things that only God can do.

He forgave sins. When Jesus told a paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven, the religious teachers knew exactly what that meant.

> *Now Jesus, having seen their faith, says to the paralytic, "Child, your sins have been forgiven you." Now some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this* ***man*** *speak blasphemies thus? Who is able to forgive sins except One, God?"* (Mark 2:5-7)

They were right about one thing. Only God can forgive sins against God. If I punch you in the nose and my neighbor says, "Don't worry, I forgive him," that would be silly. Only the one who was wronged can forgive. All sin is against God, so only God can forgive it. Jesus forgave sin as if He were the One offended, because He was.

He created and holds everything together.

> *because in Him all things were created, the* ***things*** *in the heavens and the* ***things*** *on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.* (Colossians 1:16-17)

He received worship. The Bible is clear that only God may be worshiped. Yet the disciples worshiped Jesus (Matthew 14:33; 28:9, 17), and the Father commands the angels to worship Him.

> *And when He again brings the Firstborn into the world, He says, "And let all* ***the*** *angels of God worship Him."* (Hebrews 1:6)

In Revelation 5, every creature in heaven and on earth worships "to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb" together, with the same blessing, honor, glory, and might. You don't give the same worship to God and to a creature. That would be idolatry.

He will judge the world. Jesus said the Father has given all judgment to the Son, "so that all may honor the Son even as they honor the Father" (John 5:22-23). Honor the Son just as you honor the Father. Not a little less. The same.

He takes God's titles. In Isaiah 44:6, the LORD says, "I am first and I am last, and besides Me there is no God." In Revelation, Jesus says the same thing about Himself.

> *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last."*
> (Revelation 22:13)

There can't be two "Firsts." If the LORD is the First and the Last, and Jesus is the First and the Last, then Jesus is the LORD.

Every Knee Will Bow

Let me show you one more, because I think it is one of the strongest of all. In Isaiah 45, God says something that only God could say.

> *By Myself I have sworn; righteousness has gone out from My mouth, a word, and it will not return, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear.* (Isaiah 45:23)

To Me, says the LORD, every knee will bow. Now listen to Paul.

> *Therefore God also highly exalted Him and granted to Him a name, the **one** above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of **those** in heaven and **those** on earth and **those** under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ **is** Lord, to **the** glory of God **the** Father.* (Philippians 2:9-11)

Paul takes a verse about the LORD, the one God of Israel who will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8), and applies it to Jesus. Every knee will bow to Jesus. And notice that this brings glory to the Father. Honoring the Son as God doesn't steal anything from the Father. It is what the Father wants.

Fully God and Fully Man

Now, here is where people get tangled up. If Jesus is God, why did He get tired? Why did He pray? Why did He say the Father was greater than He was? Why did He die?

The answer is that Jesus is not only God. He is also truly man. When the Son became flesh, He took on a real human nature with a real human body, a real human mind, and a real human will. He grew up (Luke 2:52). He got hungry and thirsty. He wept. He was tempted in every way, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He died a real death.

> *who, existing in **the** form of God, did not consider being equal with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, having taken **the** form of a slave, having come to be in **the** likeness of men; and having been found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself, having become obedient as far as death, even death of a cross.* (Philippians 2:6-8)

Paul says Christ existed "in the form of God" and was equal with God, yet He "emptied Himself" by taking on the form of a slave and being made like us. He did not empty Himself of being God. You can't stop being what you are. He emptied Himself by taking on something lower, by laying aside His rights and His glory for a time and becoming a servant.

So when you read about Jesus, you will see Him do things only God can do, and you will see Him do things only a man can do. Both are true, because He is both. He is one Person with two natures, fully God and fully man. That is not a contradiction. It is the miracle of Christmas. We will look at the hard verses one by one in Chapter 19.

Why It Matters That Jesus Is God

This is not just a debate. Your salvation hangs on it.

Only God can save. "I, I am the LORD, and besides Me there is no Savior" (Isaiah 43:11). If Jesus is not God, then He can't be our Savior. A creature, even the highest angel, could never pay for the sins of the world. Only an infinite God could pay an infinite debt for the sins of the whole world.

And only a man could die in the place of men. That is why the Son became a man. He had to be one of us to stand in our place, and He had to be God to make that payment count.

When you look at the cross, you are not looking at God punishing some third party. You are looking at God Himself, in the Person of His Son, taking the punishment on Himself. That is love. That is grace.

Study Questions

1. Read John 1:1-3. What does each phrase tell us about who the Word is?
2. Why did the crowd pick up stones in John 8:58-59 and John 10:30-33? What does that show about what Jesus claimed?
3. Thomas called Jesus “My Lord and my God.” What did Jesus say in response? What does that tell you?
4. Which of the things Jesus did, like forgiving sins, receiving worship, or creating, stands out most to you? Why?
5. Why does it matter for your salvation that Jesus is both fully God and fully man?

Chapter 4: The Holy Spirit Is God

> *And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, so that He may remain with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world is not able to receive, because it does not see Him nor know Him; but you know Him, because He remains with you and will be in you.*
>
> John 14:16-17 (SLB)

The Holy Spirit is the Person of the Trinity people know the least about. Some think of Him as a feeling, the warm sense you get in a good worship service. Some think of Him as a kind of power, like electricity, that God sends out to get things done. Some people call Him "it."

The Bible says something very different. The Holy Spirit is not an "it." He is a "He." He is a Person, and He is God. This chapter shows both of those things from Scripture.

Translating the New Testament for the SLB, I saw how consistently Scripture speaks of the Spirit teaching, guiding and being grieved. A force cannot be grieved. Only a Person can (Ephesians 4:30). Knowing the Holy Spirit is God changes how we pray and walk with Him.

Why People Get Confused About the Spirit

Let me be fair about why this is harder for people. The Father speaks from heaven. The Son walked the earth in a body, and we have His words in red letters in some Bibles. But the Spirit works quietly. Jesus said the Spirit would not speak "from Himself" but would point to Jesus (John 16:13-14). The Spirit is like a floodlight on a church building at night. You don't look at the light. You look at what the light shows you. The Spirit's job is to shine the light on Jesus.

On top of that, the word for spirit in Hebrew (*ruach*) and in Greek (*pneuma*) can also mean "wind" or "breath." Jesus used that picture in John 3:8. Wind is invisible and powerful, and you see what it does more than you see it. That is a good picture of how the Spirit works, but it is only a picture. The Bible goes much further than wind.

The Holy Spirit Is a Person

How do you tell a person from a force? A person can think, feel, choose, speak, and relate to others. A force can't do any of those things. Electricity doesn't have opinions. Gravity doesn't get its feelings hurt. Look at what the Bible says the Holy Spirit does.

He thinks and knows.

> *But God revealed **them** to us through His Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the things of the man except the spirit of the man which **is** in him? So also no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.*
> (1 Corinthians 2:10-11)

The Spirit searches the depths of God and knows the things of God. Only a mind can search and know.

He feels.

> *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for **the** day of redemption.* (Ephesians 4:30)

You can't grieve a force. You can only grieve someone who loves you. Isaiah said the same thing about Israel in the wilderness: "they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit" (Isaiah 63:10).

He chooses. Paul says the Spirit gives spiritual gifts "to each individually as He wills" (1 Corinthians 12:11). A force doesn't will anything. It just does what it does.

He speaks.

> *And as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart now for Me both Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."* (Acts 13:2)

Notice the words. The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart now for Me ... for the work to which I have called them." "Me" and "I." The Spirit speaks in the first person, as someone who calls people to work for Him.

He teaches, guides, and testifies. Jesus said the Spirit would teach the disciples all things and remind them of everything He had said (John 14:26), guide them into all the truth (John 16:13), and testify about Him (John 15:26).

He prays for us.

> *And likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses; for what we should pray as is necessary, we do not know, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with inexpressible groanings.* (Romans 8:26)

He can be lied to and resisted. Peter told Ananias he had lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). Stephen told the council they always resisted the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). You can't lie to electricity.

"Another Helper"

When Jesus told His disciples that He was going away, He promised them the Spirit. Listen to how He described Him.

> *And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, so that He may remain with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world is not able to receive, because it does not see Him nor know Him; but you know Him, because He remains with you and will be in you.* (John 14:16-17)

The word "Helper" is the Greek word *parakletos*, someone called alongside to help, like an advocate, a counselor, or a friend who stands up for you. And the word "another" is the Greek word *allos*, which means another of the same kind. In other words, Jesus was saying, "I have been your Helper. Now I am sending you another Helper, just like Me." Jesus was a Person. The Helper He sends is a Person too.

And Jesus kept calling the Spirit "He." In John 14 through 16, John calls the Spirit the Helper, a masculine word, and keeps using the masculine word for "He" again and again when talking about the Spirit (for example, John 16:13-14). The Spirit is not an it. He is a He.

The Holy Spirit Is God

Being a Person is one thing. Angels are persons. You are a person. The next question is whether the Spirit is God. The Bible says yes.

Lying to the Spirit is lying to God.

> *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart **for** you to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back **some** of the proceeds of the land? While it remained, did it not remain yours? And having been sold, was it not in your own authority? Why **is it** that you put this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."* (Acts 5:3-4)

Peter says in verse 3 that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit. In verse 4 he says Ananias lied to God. He uses the two as the same thing. To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God, because the Holy Spirit is God.

The Spirit is everywhere. Only God is everywhere at once.

> *Where shall I go from Your Spirit? And where shall I flee from Your presence?* (Psalm 139:7)

The Spirit is eternal. Hebrews calls Him "the eternal Spirit" (Hebrews 9:14). Only God is eternal.

The Spirit knows everything about God. We saw it in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11. No creature could know the depths of God. Only God knows God completely.

The Spirit gives life and was at work in creation. In Genesis 1:2, "the Spirit of God" was moving over the waters at the very beginning. Job said, "The Spirit of God has made me" (Job 33:4).

Believers are the temple of God because the Spirit lives in them.

> *Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and **that** the Spirit of God dwells in you?*
> (1 Corinthians 3:16)

What makes a temple a temple? God lives there. Paul says you are God's temple because the Spirit of God lives in you. The Spirit's presence is God's presence.

The Spirit is named right alongside the Father and the Son. Jesus told His followers to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). You would never baptize people in the name of God and a creature. Paul ended 2 Corinthians with a blessing from all three, "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Corinthians 13:14). We will look closely at those verses in the next chapter.

Isn't "Holy Spirit" Just Another Way of Saying God's Power?

Some people will say, "The Bible talks about the Spirit like a thing. He is poured out (Acts 2:17). People are filled with Him (Acts 2:4). That sounds like water, not a person."

That is a fair question. Here is the answer. The Bible also uses pictures like that for Jesus. We are told to "put on" Christ like clothing (Romans 13:14). Jesus called Himself bread (John 6:35) and a door (John 10:9). Nobody thinks Jesus is a garment, a loaf of bread, or a door. Those are pictures of what He does for us. In the same way, "poured out" and "filled" are pictures of how fully the Spirit comes to live in God's people. They don't cancel all the plain statements that He thinks, speaks, chooses, teaches, and grieves.

And the Bible never mixes up the Spirit and His power. Luke says Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14). If the Spirit were just God's power, that would mean "in the power of the power." The Spirit has power. He is not the same as His power, any more than you are the same as your strength.

The Spirit in the Life of Jesus

Here is something that helps us see the Spirit as a Person. Look at how He worked in the life of Jesus.

The Spirit came upon Mary, so that the child born to her would be holy (Luke 1:35). The Spirit came down on Jesus at His baptism (Matthew 3:16). Then Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," was "led in the Spirit into the wilderness" (Luke 4:1). He began His ministry in Nazareth by reading, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me" (Luke 4:18). Peter later said that God anointed Jesus "with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38). Jesus offered Himself on the cross "through the eternal Spirit" (Hebrews 9:14). And the Spirit was at work in raising Him from the dead (Romans 8:11).

Jesus, the eternal Son, chose to live His human life in step with the Holy Spirit. That doesn't make Jesus less than God. It shows us how the Persons of the Trinity work together, and it shows us the kind of life the Spirit wants to live out in us too.

What This Means for You

If the Holy Spirit were only a force, then the best you could hope for is to learn how to use Him, the way you use a tool. Many people treat Him that way. They want the power without the Person.

But the Holy Spirit is not something you use. He is Someone you know, love, and obey. He lives in every believer (Romans 8:9). He comforts you when you grieve. He helps you pray when you don't know what to say. He reminds you of what Jesus said. He convicts you when you sin, not to shame you but to bring you home. He produces His fruit in you: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

That means you can talk to Him. You can thank Him. You can grieve Him, which should make you careful, and you can walk with Him, which should make you glad.

Study Questions

1. Before reading this chapter, did you think of the Holy Spirit more as a "He" or an "it"? Why?
2. List three things the Holy Spirit does that only a person can do. Which one means the most to you?
3. Read Acts 5:3-4. How does Peter show that the Holy Spirit is God?

4. Jesus called the Spirit “another Helper.” What does that tell you about the Spirit, and about Jesus?

5. What is the difference between wanting the Spirit’s power and wanting to know the Spirit Himself?

Chapter 5: Three Who Are Not the Same

> *And having been baptized, Jesus immediately went up from the water; and look, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon Him. And look, a voice out of the heavens, saying, "This is My Son, the beloved, in whom I was well pleased."*
>
> Matthew 3:16-17 (SLB)

So far we have seen four things. There is one God. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. If we stopped there, someone might say, "Then the Father, the Son, and the Spirit must be three names for the same Person, like one man who is called Dad at home, Coach on the ball field, and Mister Smith at work."

That is the fifth statement, and it is the one people most often leave out. The Bible shows us over and over that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not the same Person. They are three distinct Persons. They relate to each other. They speak to each other. They love each other. They send each other. This chapter shows how.

All Three at the Jordan River

Look at the verse at the top of this chapter. It is one of the clearest pictures of the Trinity in the whole Bible.

Jesus, the Son, is standing in the Jordan River, being baptized by John. The Spirit of God comes down from heaven like a dove and rests on Him. The Father speaks from heaven: "This is My Son, the beloved, in whom I was well pleased."

Three Persons are present at the same time and in the same moment. The Son is in the water. The Spirit is coming down. The Father is speaking from above. This is not one Person changing masks. It is not one Person playing three parts one after another. All three are there at once, each doing something different.

And notice what the Father says. He doesn't say, "This is Me." He says, "This is My Son." He speaks about the Son as someone other than Himself, whom He loves.

Luke tells the same story and says the Spirit came down "in a bodily form as a dove" (Luke 3:22), and the voice spoke straight to Jesus: "You are My Son, the beloved; in You I was well pleased." You talk to someone else. You don't talk to yourself that way.

The Son Talks to the Father

All through the Gospels, Jesus prays to the Father. Some of those prayers are long, like John 17. Some are short, like the cry in the garden.

> *And He was saying, "Abba, Father, all things **are** possible for You; take this cup away from Me. But not what I want, but what You **want**."* (Mark 14:36)

“Not what I want, but what You want.” There are two wills here, the will of the Son in His human nature and the will of the Father, and the Son puts His will under the Father’s. If the Father and the Son were the same Person, this prayer would make no sense at all. Who would He be talking to? Whose will would He be giving in to?

Now listen to John 17:5 again: “And now You, Father, glorify Me with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” The Son was “with” the Father before creation, sharing glory with Him. That is two Persons, together, before anything was made.

The Father and the Son Are Two Witnesses

Jesus once made an argument that only works if He and the Father are two different Persons.

> *And also in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. I am the **One** testifying concerning Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies concerning Me.* (John 8:17-18)

Under the law of Moses, you needed two witnesses to prove something in court (Deuteronomy 19:15). In effect, Jesus says, “I am one witness, and My Father is the other.” If He and the Father were the same Person, He would only have one witness, and His argument would fall apart. He counts Himself and the Father as two.

Sending and Being Sent

The Bible talks over and over about one Person sending another.

The Father sends the Son. “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4). Jesus said, “I have come down out of heaven, not that I may do My own will, but the will of the One who sent Me” (John 6:38).

The Father and the Son send the Spirit.

> *But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes forth from the Father, He will testify concerning Me.* (John 15:26)

Read that verse slowly. The Son (“I”) will send the Helper (the Spirit), from the Father, and the Spirit will testify about the Son. In one verse, all three Persons are named, and each one is doing something different. The Son sends. The Spirit goes forth from the Father. The Spirit testifies about the Son.

Paul puts the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit side by side.

> *But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under law, so that He might redeem those under law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”* (Galatians 4:4-6)

God sent His Son to redeem us. Then God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. And the Spirit cries out, “Abba! Father!” (“Abba” is an Aramaic word for father, the warm, close word a child uses.) The Son came to make us children of God. The Spirit came to make us feel like it.

"Another Helper"

We saw this in the last chapter, but it fits here too. Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper" (John 14:16). Three Persons are in that sentence. The Son asks. The Father gives. The Spirit is the Helper given. And the Spirit is "another" Helper, not the same Person as Jesus.

Three Names, One Name

Before Jesus went back to heaven, He gave His followers their marching orders.

> *Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19)

Look closely at the wording. Jesus doesn't say "in the names" (plural), as if there were three gods. He says "in the name" (singular). One name. But then He names three: "of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The word "and" with "the" in front of each one keeps them distinct. One name. Three Persons. That one verse holds the Trinity in a nutshell.

In Chapter 10 we will look at why some people baptize only "in the name of Jesus" and what Acts 2:38 means. For now, just notice that Jesus Himself named all three.

The Apostles Bless in Three Names

The apostles talked this way without even stopping to explain it. It was simply how they thought about God.

> *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* ***be*** *with you all. Amen.* (2 Corinthians 13:14)

> *according to* ***the*** *foreknowledge of God* ***the*** *Father, in sanctification of* ***the*** *Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of* ***the*** *blood of Jesus Christ: may grace and peace be multiplied to you.* (1 Peter 1:2)

> *For through Him we both have the access by one Spirit to the Father.* (Ephesians 2:18)

In Ephesians 2:18, look at the little words. We have access "through" the Son, "by" the Spirit, "to" the Father. That is how prayer works. We come to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. Each Person has a part, and it is the same God the whole way through.

Paul does the same thing when he talks about spiritual gifts.

> *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, and the same Lord; and there are varieties of workings, but it is the same God who works all things in all.* (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

Same Spirit. Same Lord. Same God. Paul can't talk about the church without naming all three.

What About 1 John 5:7?

There is one more verse you should know about, because your SLB includes it and many people ask about it.

> *For there are three who testify in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.* (1 John 5:7)

That sounds like the Trinity in one verse, and it is true. But I want to be honest with you. Most of the oldest Greek copies of 1 John do not include the words about the three who testify in heaven. The SLB follows the older printed Greek text that has them, and most modern Bibles leave them out or put them in a note. Bible-believing scholars have discussed this for centuries.

Here is the good news. The Trinity does not depend on this verse at all. Everything in this book so far, and everything after it, stands without 1 John 5:7. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are named together in Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14, 1 Peter 1:2, and many other places that no one questions. So I quote 1 John 5:7 here, but I don't build the case on it, and I would encourage you not to either. If you use it with a Jehovah's Witness or a Unitarian friend, it will likely be the first verse they challenge, and then the conversation is about Greek manuscripts instead of about Jesus.

Distinct, but Never Separate

I want to be careful here, because people can go too far the other way. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct Persons. But they are never separate, never divided, and never at odds. They don't have three different plans. They never compete. They are one God, with one nature, one power, one glory, and one purpose.

Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). In Greek, the word "one" there is *hen*, which is the neuter form of the word. If Jesus had meant "one Person," John would have used the masculine form, *heis*. Instead the word means "one thing." The Father and the Son are one in being, one God, but they are not one Person. Jesus said "I and the Father," which is two, and "are," which is plural. Then He said "one." Two Persons, one God, in one short verse.

Jesus also said, "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). That is true, because the Son shows us exactly what the Father is like (Hebrews 1:3). It is not because the Son is the Father. If you have seen my son, you can tell a lot about me. Jesus goes further than that, because He shares the Father's very nature. But He still says "the Father," not "Me."

Christians have a phrase for this: the Persons are distinct, not divided. Think of it as two guardrails on a mountain road. One guardrail keeps you from saying the three are just one Person (that is the ditch of modalism, Chapter 10). The other guardrail keeps you from saying they are three separate gods (that is the ditch of tritheism, Chapter 14). The road runs between them: one God, three Persons.

Study Questions

1. Read Matthew 3:16-17. Where is each Person of the Trinity, and what is each one doing?

2. Why does Jesus' prayer in Mark 14:36 only make sense if the Father and the Son are distinct?

3. In Matthew 28:19, what is the point of saying "the name" (singular) and then naming three?

4. Read Ephesians 2:18. What part does each Person play when you pray?

5. What is the difference between "distinct" and "divided"? Why do we need both guardrails?

Chapter 6: One What, Three Whos

> *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit **be** with you all. Amen.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 13:14 (SLB)

We have walked through the five statements one at a time. Now it is time to put them together. This is the chapter I would want a brand-new believer to read twice.

The Five Statements

Here they are again, with one or two key verses for each.

Statement	Key verses
1. There is one God.	Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 45:5; 1 Corinthians 8:4
2. The Father is God.	John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6
3. The Son is God.	John 1:1; John 20:28; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8
4. The Holy Spirit is God.	Acts 5:3-4; 1 Corinthians 3:16
5. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct Persons.	Matthew 3:16-17; John 15:26; Matthew 28:19

Every one of those statements is taught in the Bible. Not one of them is an idea that came along later. The question is how they fit together.

The Christian answer is the Trinity: one God who exists eternally as three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, yet there are not three gods but one.

One What, Three Whos

Here is the simplest way I know to say it. God is one What and three Whos.

When you ask, “What is God?” there is one answer. There is one divine being, one divine nature, one God. Everything that makes God God (being eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, holy, and loving) belongs to that one nature.

When you ask, “Who is God?” there are three answers. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. Three Whos, three Persons, who each fully have that one divine nature.

Now, you might ask, “Isn’t that just a word trick? How can one be three?” It’s not a trick, because the one and the three are not answering the same question. It would be a contradiction to say God is one being and three beings. It would be a contradiction to say God is one Person and three Persons. Christians have never said either of those things. We say God is one being and three Persons. One What. Three Whos.

Think of it this way. With every human being I know, one What goes with one Who. One human nature, one person. You are one human being, and you are one person. So we naturally assume that must be true

of God too. But God is not a creature. He doesn't have to fit our pattern. The Bible shows us that in God, one What goes with three Whos. That is unlike anything else in creation, which is exactly what we should expect when we learn about the Creator.

Each Person Is Fully God

Here is something people often miss. The Father is not one-third of God. The Son is not one-third of God. The Spirit is not one-third of God. Each one is fully God, all the way. Paul says that in Christ "dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily" (Colossians 2:9). Not a third of it. All of it.

So when you pray to the Father, you are praying to God, all of God. When you worship Jesus, you are worshiping God, all of God. When the Holy Spirit lives in you, God Himself lives in you. Not a piece. Not a part. God.

That is why the pie picture, where each Person is a slice, doesn't work. We will see that in Chapter 9.

What Makes Them Distinct?

If all three share the one nature fully, what makes the Father the Father and the Son the Son? The Bible's answer is the way they relate to each other.

The Father is the Father of the Son. The Son is the Son of the Father. The Spirit goes forth from the Father (John 15:26) and is sent by the Son (John 16:7). Those relationships are real, and they are eternal. The Father has always been the Father. The Son has always been the Son. The Spirit has always been the Spirit. They didn't take turns and they didn't change roles.

The old creeds use the word "begotten" for the Son's relationship to the Father. Your SLB keeps that word in John 3:16, "the only begotten," and I'm glad it does. "Begotten" doesn't mean "created," and it doesn't mean the Son had a beginning. A man begets a son, and his son is the same kind of thing he is, a human being. A man makes a birdhouse, and the birdhouse is a different kind of thing. When the Bible calls Jesus the only begotten Son, it is saying He shares the Father's own nature. He is not something the Father made. The Nicene Creed says it best: "begotten, not made."

They Work Together in Everything

Because the three share one nature, they always work together. Whatever God does, all three Persons do, each in His own way.

Creation. The Father created all things (1 Corinthians 8:6). He did it through the Son (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). The Spirit was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2).

The incarnation. The Father sent the Son (Galatians 4:4). The Son took on flesh (John 1:14). The Spirit came upon Mary, so that the child would be holy (Luke 1:35).

The resurrection. God the Father raised Jesus (Acts 2:24). Jesus said He would raise Himself: "Destroy this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). And the Spirit is "the Spirit of the One who

raised Jesus out of the dead" (Romans 8:11). All three were at work on Easter morning, as I mentioned in my study of John.

Salvation. This is where it gets personal. Paul lays out salvation in Ephesians 1, and he does it in three parts. The Father chose us and planned our adoption (Ephesians 1:3-6). The Son redeemed us through His blood (Ephesians 1:7-12). The Spirit sealed us as a guarantee of what is coming (Ephesians 1:13-14). Each section ends with "to the praise of His glory." One salvation, planned by the Father, bought by the Son, and applied by the Spirit. Paul says the same thing in a few words to Titus.

> *But when the kindness and the love for mankind of God our Savior appeared, not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy He saved us, through **the** washing of regeneration and renewal of **the** Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior* (Titus 3:4-6)

God our Savior saved us. He did it by the renewal of the Holy Spirit. He poured out that Spirit through Jesus Christ our Savior. Three Persons, one salvation, and notice that both the Father and the Son are called "our Savior" in the same breath.

What the Trinity Is Not

Sometimes the best way to understand something is to know what it is not. Here are the five big mistakes, which we will look at one by one in Part Two.

The Trinity is **not one Person wearing three masks**. That is modalism. It drops the fifth statement.

The Trinity is **not one true God with two lesser beings under Him**. That is Arianism. It drops the third and fourth statements.

The Trinity is **not three gods working as a team**. That is tritheism. It drops the first statement.

The Trinity is **not three parts that add up to one God**. That is partialism. It gets the fullness of each Person wrong.

The Trinity is **not a man who was promoted to be God's Son**. That is adoptionism. It gets the eternity of the Son wrong.

Each of those views is simpler than the Trinity. That is why they keep coming back. But simple and true are not the same thing. Each one has to leave out something the Bible says.

An Old Saying

About fifteen hundred years ago, Christians wrote a statement of faith called the Athanasian Creed. It is named after Athanasius, a hero of the faith we will meet in Chapter 8, though he did not write it himself. In the Book of Common Prayer wording, it says the Christian faith is "That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons : nor dividing the Substance."

“Neither confounding the Persons” means not mixing them up into one. “Nor dividing the Substance” means not splitting God into three. Those are the same two guardrails we saw in Chapter 5. Christians have been saying the same thing, in almost the same words, for a very long time.

A Short Summary You Can Remember

If someone asks you what the Trinity is, here is a short answer you can give in thirty seconds.

“Christians believe there is only one God. The Bible shows that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and that they are three distinct Persons who talk to each other and love each other. So we say God is one being in three Persons. One What, three Whos. We don’t believe in three gods, and we don’t believe one Person plays three roles. It’s beyond what we can fully understand, but it’s what the Bible teaches.”

That’s it. You don’t have to have every answer. You just have to say what the Bible says.

Study Questions

1. In your own words, what is the difference between asking “What is God?” and “Who is God?”
2. Why is it not a contradiction to say God is one being and three Persons?
3. What does “begotten, not made” mean? Why does it matter?
4. Read Ephesians 1:3-14. What does each Person of the Trinity do in our salvation?
5. Practice the thirty-second summary with someone this week. What part was hardest to say?

Chapter 7: The Trinity in the Old Testament

> *Draw near to Me; listen to this: from **the** beginning I have not spoken in secret; from the time it came to be, I **was** there. And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and His Spirit.*
>
> Isaiah 48:16 (SLB)

If the Trinity is true, you might expect it to be spelled out on page one of Genesis. It isn't. The Old Testament spends most of its energy teaching one thing: there is one God. Israel needed that lesson first, and they needed it badly, living in a world full of idols.

But once you have read the New Testament and come back to the Old, you start to notice things. Doors left open. Hints that the one God is more than a single Person. The Old Testament doesn't hand us the Trinity, but it prepares us for it. An old saying puts it well: the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed.

I want to be careful and honest in this chapter. Some of these passages are stronger than others. Some Christians have pushed weak arguments too hard, and that doesn't help anybody. I will tell you which ones I think are strong and which ones are only hints.

I ran technical training programs, and you never put a new trainee on complex troubleshooting on day one. You teach the foundation first. God taught Israel first that He is the one true God, in a world full of idols, before He revealed the Father, Son and Spirit clearly. God reveals truth step by step.

"Let Us"

The very first chapter of the Bible has God speaking in a surprising way.

> *And God said, "Let Us make mankind in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the flying things of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every moving thing that moves on the earth."*
> (Genesis 1:26)

"Let Us make mankind in Our image." Who is God talking to?

Jewish teachers over the centuries have given a few answers. Some say God was speaking to the angels. But the next verse says God created man "in His image" (Genesis 1:27), and the Bible never says we are made in the image of angels, or that angels helped create anything. Some say it is a "plural of majesty," the way a king might say "We are not amused." But that way of speaking is not clearly found in Hebrew in the time of Moses. Some say God was talking to Himself, the way you might say, "Let's see, what should I do next?"

Here is my honest view. "Let Us" by itself doesn't prove the Trinity. But it fits the Trinity perfectly, and it is hard to explain any other way. When we get to John 1 and Colossians 1 and learn that the Son was with the Father at creation and that all things were made through Him, "Let Us make" makes complete sense.

God uses the same "Us" language at Babel (Genesis 11:7) and when Isaiah sees the Lord on His throne: "Whom will I send, and who will go for Us?" (Isaiah 6:8).

And here is something worth noticing in Isaiah 6. John tells us that when Isaiah saw the Lord's glory in that vision, he saw the glory of Jesus (John 12:41). And Paul, quoting the words the Lord spoke in that same chapter, says it was the Holy Spirit speaking (Acts 28:25-26). The angels cried, "Holy, holy, holy." The church has long seen in that threefold "holy" a hint of the three Persons. I would call that a hint and nothing more. But it is a beautiful hint.

The Angel of the LORD

This one is much stronger. Over and over in the Old Testament, someone called "the angel of the LORD" shows up. And every time, something strange happens. The angel speaks as if He is the LORD Himself, and people who meet Him say they have seen God.

Hagar met Him in the wilderness. Afterward, she "called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing'" (Genesis 16:13).

At the burning bush, the text says "the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire" (Exodus 3:2). Two verses later, "God called to him from the midst of the bush." Then He says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). The angel of the LORD is the LORD.

After Abraham was willing to offer Isaac, the angel of the LORD called from heaven and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD" (Genesis 22:15-16). An ordinary angel would never swear by himself as the LORD.

Samson's father, Manoah, met the angel and afterward said, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God" (Judges 13:22).

And yet this angel is also distinct from the LORD. He is sent by the LORD. God says of Him, "My name is in him" (Exodus 23:21).

So here is someone who is the LORD, and who is also sent by the LORD. Who could that be? The Old Testament doesn't say. But when we read in John 1:18 that "No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known," a lot of Christians, all the way back to the early church, have concluded that the angel of the LORD was God the Son, appearing before He was born in Bethlehem. I think that is very likely. (The word "angel" just means "messenger." It tells you what someone is doing, not what kind of being He is.)

The LORD and the LORD

Here are a few verses where two Persons seem to be called "the LORD" or "God" side by side.

> *And the LORD rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of the heavens.* (Genesis 19:24)

The LORD on earth rained down fire from the LORD in heaven. In the chapter before, the LORD had appeared to Abraham and talked with him face to face (Genesis 18). It is an odd verse, and I would not build a doctrine on it alone, but it is hard to read it without seeing two.

> *Your throne, God, **is** forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness **is** the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You **with** the oil of joy above Your companions.* (Psalm 45:6-7)

This one is clear. The psalm speaks to a King and calls Him "God." Then it says, "God, Your God, has anointed You." So God has a God who anoints Him. Hebrews 1:8-9 quotes this psalm and says the Father speaks these words to the Son.

> *The LORD declares to my Lord, "Sit at My right **hand** until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."* (Psalm 110:1)

David says, "The LORD declares to my Lord." David's Lord is someone greater than David, sitting at God's right hand. Jesus asked the religious leaders about this verse: if the Messiah is David's son, how can David call Him "Lord" (Matthew 22:41-45)? They had no answer. The only answer is that the Messiah is more than David's son. He is David's Lord. This is the Old Testament verse the New Testament quotes more than any other.

A Son Who Is Mighty God

We saw Isaiah 9:6 in Chapter 3. A child will be born, a son given, and His name will be "Mighty God." Isaiah 7:14 says His name will be "Immanuel," which Matthew tells us means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Micah says the ruler who comes from Bethlehem has "goings out ... from of old, from the days of antiquity" (Micah 5:2). Jeremiah says the righteous Branch from David will be called "The LORD Our Righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6).

Psalm 2 has the LORD saying to His anointed King, "You are My Son," and then telling the nations, "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry" and "How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!" (Psalm 2:7, 12). In the Old Testament, you only take refuge in God.

And Proverbs 30:4 asks a question that has always fascinated me: "Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know!" The writer asks the name of the Creator, and then the name of His Son.

The Spirit of the LORD

The Holy Spirit appears in the Old Testament from the very first page, hovering over the waters at creation (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit came on judges, kings, and prophets. And in a few places, the Spirit is spoken of as Someone, not just something. Isaiah says Israel "rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit" (Isaiah 63:10).

Now look at the verse at the top of this chapter, Isaiah 48:16: "And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and His Spirit." Who is speaking? In verse 12 the speaker says, "I am He; I am first; indeed, I am last," and in verse

13, “My hand founded the earth.” That is God speaking. And He says the Lord GOD has sent Him, along with His Spirit. In one verse we have the Lord GOD, the One who is sent, and the Spirit.

Isaiah 61:1 is another one. “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me, because the LORD has anointed Me.” Jesus read that verse in the synagogue in Nazareth and said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21). The Spirit, the Lord GOD, and the Anointed One, the Messiah, all in one sentence.

What About Echad?

I mentioned this in Chapter 2, but let me come back to it, because you will hear it. Some Christians say the Hebrew word *echad* (“one”) in Deuteronomy 6:4 always means a “compound unity,” like a cluster of grapes, and that this proves the Trinity. Others, especially Jewish teachers, say there is another Hebrew word, *yachid*, that means “only one,” and that this would have been used if God were a plurality. Both arguments go too far.

Echad is the normal word for “one” in Hebrew. Sometimes it describes a unity of more than one, like “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Usually it just means one. *Yachid* means “only” or “unique,” and it is used, for example, of Isaac as Abraham’s only son (Genesis 22:2). Neither word settles the question. The Shema tells us that God is one. It doesn’t tell us what His oneness looks like inside. For that we need the rest of the Bible.

I tell you this because if you use a weak argument with a thoughtful Jewish friend, you will lose the argument and maybe the friendship too. Stick with the strong passages. There are plenty of them.

Why the Old Testament Doesn’t Say More

You might wonder why God didn’t just spell it out for Israel. I think the answer is simple. Israel was surrounded by nations with many gods. If God had said, “I am three Persons,” before Israel understood that He is one, they would have heard it as “three gods,” and they would have gone right back to idolatry. So God taught them first, and for a long time, that He alone is God.

Then, when the time was right, the Father sent the Son and poured out the Spirit. The disciples didn’t learn the Trinity from a lecture. They learned it by walking with Jesus, watching Him, hearing Him pray to the Father, seeing Him raised from the dead, and then having the Holy Spirit come to live inside them at Pentecost. The Old Testament prepared the house. The New Testament turned on the lights.

Study Questions

1. Read Genesis 1:26-27. What are the different ways people have explained “Let Us”? Which do you find most convincing, and why?
2. Read Exodus 3:2-6. How does the angel of the LORD speak? What does that suggest about who He was?
3. In Psalm 110:1, who are the two “Lords”? How did Jesus use this verse?
4. Why is it wise to be honest about the limits of the echad argument?
5. Why do you think God taught Israel that He is one long before He revealed the Father, Son, and Spirit clearly?

Chapter 8: How the Church Put It Into Words

> *Beloved, while making all diligence to write to you concerning our common salvation, I had necessity to write to you, exhorting* ***you*** *to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.*
>
> Jude 1:3 (SLB)

The early Christians believed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit long before they had a neat way to say it. They baptized in the threefold name. They worshiped Jesus. They prayed in the Spirit. They said the Shema. The belief came first. The careful words came later, mostly because people started teaching things that were wrong, and the church had to say clearly what the Bible meant.

That is how it usually works. Nobody writes a rule against something until somebody does it. This chapter is a short, plain history of how that happened. I will give you names and dates, but I won't bury you in them.

The Word "Trinity"

You will hear people say, "The Trinity was invented in A.D. 325 by the Roman emperor Constantine." That is not true, and it is easy to show.

Around A.D. 180, a Christian teacher named Theophilus, a bishop in Antioch, wrote a book called *To Autolycus* defending the faith to a pagan friend. In it he used the Greek word *trias*, meaning "triad" or "three," for God, His Word, and His Wisdom (Book 2, chapter 15). That is the earliest use of the word we know of, about a hundred and forty-five years before Constantine's council.

Around A.D. 213, Tertullian, a lawyer turned Christian writer in North Africa, wrote a book against a man named Praxeas. Tertullian used the Latin word *trinitas*, which gives us the English word Trinity. He also used the word *persona*, "person," for the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. He said God is one in substance and three in persons, which is very close to how Christians still say it. That was more than a hundred years before Nicaea.

So the word came from Christians in the second and third centuries, trying to sum up what the apostles taught. The emperor didn't make it up.

The First Problem: One Person in Three Masks

In the late 100s and early 200s, some teachers in Rome and Asia Minor began saying that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were just three names for one Person. A man named Noetus taught it. So did Praxeas, the man Tertullian wrote against. The best known was Sabellius, who taught in Rome around A.D. 215. Because of him, the view is often called Sabellianism. It is also called modalism, because it says God shows up in different "modes," and patripassianism (from Latin for "the Father suffered"), because it means the Father Himself suffered on the cross.

These men loved the truth that God is one. They wanted to protect it. But they did it by throwing out the fifth statement, that the three are distinct.

Tertullian answered Praxeas with a famous line. He said the man had done two jobs for the devil in Rome: "he put to flight the Paraclete, and he crucified the Father." In other words, Praxeas's view drove out the Holy Spirit as a real Person and put the Father on the cross. The church rejected modalism. We will look at it, and at its modern form, in Chapter 10.

The Big Problem: Was the Son Created?

The fight that shaped the creeds the most came about a hundred years later. Around A.D. 318, a popular preacher in Alexandria, Egypt, named Arius began teaching that the Son was not eternal. He said God the Father created the Son first, before anything else, and then made everything else through Him. The Son was the highest and greatest of all created beings, but He was still a creature. His teaching was summed up in a short Greek saying that means "there was when He was not."

Arius had a gift for spreading his ideas. He wrote songs for sailors and travelers to sing, so his teaching spread up and down the Mediterranean. Before long, the church in the eastern half of the Roman Empire was badly divided.

Arius, like Sabellius, was trying to protect the oneness of God. But he did it by throwing out the third statement. Jesus became something less than God. We will look at Arianism, and its modern form, in Chapter 11.

The Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325

The emperor Constantine had become a Christian (or at least a supporter of Christians) and wanted peace in his empire. So in A.D. 325 he called church leaders together in the city of Nicaea, in what is now Turkey. About three hundred bishops came. Many of them had scars from the persecutions that had ended only a few years earlier. Some were missing eyes or had crippled hands from being tortured for their faith. These were not men who would change what they believed to please an emperor.

Constantine called the meeting. He did not decide the outcome. The bishops argued from Scripture, and nearly all of them agreed that Arius was wrong. They wrote a creed that said the Son is "begotten, not made," and "of one substance with the Father." The Greek word for "of one substance" is *homoousios*. It means the Son is the same "What" as the Father, fully God. The creed ended with a warning against anyone who said, "There was a time when he was not."

Athanasius Against the World

Nicaea did not end the fight. After the council, Arius's followers kept working, and for about fifty years their view gained ground again. Several emperors favored them. At times it looked like most of the church's leaders had gone their way.

One man refused to give in. Athanasius had been at Nicaea as a young assistant to his bishop, and later he became bishop of Alexandria himself. He was exiled five times by four different emperors. He spent years

hiding, once in the Egyptian desert and once, the story goes, in his father's tomb. People began saying it was "Athanasius against the world" (*Athanasius contra mundum* in Latin).

Athanasius kept coming back to one simple point. Only God can save us. If Jesus is a creature, then a creature saved us, and we are worshiping a creature, which is idolatry. In his short book *On the Incarnation*, he explained that the Word became man so that we could be brought back to God. A created Savior can't do that.

He was right, and the church came around.

The Council of Constantinople, A.D. 381

In A.D. 381, another council met, this time in Constantinople. By then the question of the Holy Spirit had come up too. Some people said that the Son was God but the Spirit was a created being or a force. Three church leaders from the region of Cappadocia (in modern Turkey), Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, had written carefully about the Spirit as fully God and a distinct Person.

The council took the creed from Nicaea and expanded the part about the Holy Spirit. It said the Spirit is "the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets." That is the creed most Christians call the Nicene Creed today. You will find it, in full, in the back of this book.

Two Natures in One Person, A.D. 451

One more council is worth knowing. The Council of Chalcedon, in A.D. 451, didn't deal with the Trinity as much as with the question of how Jesus can be both God and man. It said that Jesus is one Person with two natures, fully God and fully man, without mixing the two and without splitting Him into two people. That is what we saw in Chapter 3, and it is the key to the hard verses in Chapter 19.

"And the Son"

There is one more thing I should mention, so you won't be surprised by it. If you say the Nicene Creed in a Roman Catholic or most Protestant churches, you will probably say the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." If you visit an Eastern Orthodox church, they will say the Spirit "proceeds from the Father," without "and the Son."

The words "and the Son" (in Latin, *filioque*) were added to the creed in the West, starting in Spain at a council in Toledo in A.D. 589, and they were accepted in Rome centuries later. The Eastern churches objected, partly because of what the words mean and partly because the West changed a shared creed without asking them. It became one of the issues in the split between the Eastern and Western churches in 1054.

Both sides believe in the Trinity. Both believe the Father, Son, and Spirit are one God. This is a disagreement about how the Spirit relates to the Father and the Son within the Trinity. The Bible says the Spirit "goes forth from the Father" (John 15:26), and it also calls Him "the Spirit of His Son"

(Galatians 4:6) and says the Son sends Him (John 16:7). I won't take a side on it in this book. Good Christians have disagreed on it for a thousand years.

Did the Councils Invent the Trinity?

Here is the bottom line. The councils didn't invent anything. They were like referees blowing a whistle. When someone said the Son was a creature, they said, "No, the Bible says He is God." When someone said the Father and the Son were the same Person, they said, "No, the Bible shows they are distinct." The creeds put fences around what the Bible already said.

The creeds are not Scripture. Only the Bible is God's Word, and the creeds are only as good as they are faithful to it. But when nearly every branch of the Christian church for seventeen hundred years has said the same thing about God, in the same words, and has drawn those words straight from Scripture, it is worth paying attention.

Study Questions

1. What is the earliest use of the word "Trinity" (or "triad") that we know of? Why does that matter when someone says Constantine invented it?
2. What did Sabellius and Arius each get wrong? What were they each trying to protect?
3. Why did Athanasius say a created Savior could not save us?
4. What does homoousios mean? Why was that word so important at Nicaea?
5. How should Christians think about the creeds? How do they relate to the Bible?

Chapter 9: Why Every Picture Breaks

"And to whom will you liken Me, that I should be equal?" says the Holy One.

Isaiah 40:25 (SLB)

Every Sunday school teacher has tried it. You hold up an egg and say, "See? Shell, white, and yolk. Three parts, one egg. That's the Trinity." Or you talk about water: ice, liquid, and steam. Or you hold up a three-leaf clover. The story goes that Saint Patrick used the shamrock to teach the Irish about the Trinity, though there is no record of that until more than a thousand years after he lived.

I understand why we do it. We want to make a hard idea easy. But here is the problem. Every one of those pictures, if you push it, teaches one of the wrong views we will look at in Part Two. That doesn't mean you're a heretic if you have ever used one. It means the pictures are weak, and we need to know where they break.

God asks the question at the top of this chapter Himself: "And to whom will you liken Me, that I should be equal?" The answer is: no one and nothing. God is the Creator, and everything else is a creature. No creature can show us exactly what the Creator is like on the inside.

Water: Ice, Liquid, and Steam

This is probably the most common picture. Water can be ice, liquid, or steam. It's all H2O. Three forms, one substance.

Where does it break? The same water can't be all three at once in the same way. A cup of water turns to ice when you freeze it, and turns to steam when you boil it. It changes from one form to the next. That is exactly what modalism says about God: one Person who shows up as the Father, then as the Son, then as the Spirit. But we saw at the Jordan River that all three were present at the same moment, and that the Father spoke to the Son. Ice doesn't talk to steam.

So the water picture teaches modalism. It is the error of Sabellius in a glass.

The Egg: Shell, White, and Yolk

Three parts, one egg. Where does it break? The shell is not the whole egg. The yolk is not the whole egg. Each is only a part. If you take the yolk out, you have less egg.

That is partialism, the idea that each Person is one-third of God. But the Bible says each Person is fully God. "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily" (Colossians 2:9). Jesus is not one-third of God. The shamrock breaks the same way. Each leaf is one part of the clover.

The Sun: Star, Light, and Heat

Some people say the Father is like the sun, the Son is like the light that comes from it, and the Spirit is like the heat. The early church writers used pictures like this sometimes, and the Nicene Creed itself says the

Son is “Light of Light.” That phrase is good as far as it goes, because light from the sun is the same kind of thing as the sun.

But if you push the picture, it breaks two ways. First, the light and heat are not persons. They are things the sun gives off, like energy. That makes the Spirit an “active force,” which is close to what Jehovah’s Witnesses teach. Second, the light and heat come after the sun and depend on it, and they are less than the sun. That can slide toward Arianism, where the Son is less than the Father and comes after Him. So I would use “Light of Light” the way the creed does, as a phrase, and not as a full picture.

One Man: Father, Son, and Husband

This is the one I hear most often from Oneness believers, and some Trinitarians use it too. “I am a father to my kids, a son to my parents, and a husband to my wife. I’m one man with three roles.” It sounds helpful. But it is pure modalism. One person, three roles.

Here is where it breaks. You can’t be your own father. And when you talk to your wife as a husband, your father-self isn’t over in the corner talking to your son-self. In the Bible, the Father speaks to the Son, the Son prays to the Father, and the Father sends the Spirit. That only makes sense if they are three real Persons, not three hats one man wears.

Three Men on a Team

Some people go the other way and say the Trinity is like three people on a team, or three men in a company, or a family of three. That at least gets the three Persons right. But it gets the one God wrong. Three men are three human beings, three separate “Whats.” That is tritheism, three gods. The Bible says there is one God.

A Triangle

A triangle has three corners and is one shape. It’s simple and clean, which is why you see it on church signs and in old paintings. It’s probably the least harmful picture, as long as you remember it is a symbol, not an explanation. The corners of a triangle aren’t persons. And each corner is not the whole triangle. If you treat it as more than a symbol, it slides toward partialism.

So Can We Ever Use Pictures?

Yes, as long as we know what they are. A picture can show you one thing that is true. Water can show that the same substance can exist in more than one way. A triangle can show that three and one can go together in a single thing. Light from light can show that the Son is the same kind of thing as the Father.

But no picture shows the whole truth, and every picture, pushed far enough, teaches something false. So here is my rule: use a picture to make one small point, then say plainly where it breaks. Never let a picture be the explanation. The explanation is what the Bible says: one God, three Persons, each fully God, distinct but never divided.

The Best Picture Is Jesus

Here is something to think about. God did give us a picture of Himself. Paul says the Son "is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). Hebrews says He is "the exact representation of His substance" (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus said, "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

If you want to know what God is like, don't look at an egg. Look at Jesus. Watch Him pray to His Father. Watch the Spirit come down on Him. Watch Him wash His disciples' feet, forgive a thief on a cross, and rise from the dead. In Jesus, you see the love of the Father, and by the Spirit, you are drawn into that love. That is the best picture of the Trinity there is.

The Limits of Our Minds

I'll end the chapter, and Part One, with this. When you have read everything the Bible says about God and you still can't fully get your head around it, that is not a failure. That is worship.

Paul spent eleven chapters of Romans explaining the gospel, and then he stopped and said this:

> *O depth of riches and of wisdom and of knowledge of God! How unsearchable **are** His judgments and untraceable His ways! For who has known **the** mind of **the** Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him, and it will be repaid to him? For from Him and through Him and to Him **are** all things. To Him **be** the glory to the ages. Amen.*
> (Romans 11:33-36)

Paul didn't say, "Well, I've explained God now." He said, "How unsearchable!" When you get to the edge of what you can understand about God, don't be frustrated. Bow down. You have found Someone bigger than you are, and that is good news.

Study Questions

1. Which picture of the Trinity have you heard most often? Where does it break?
2. Why does the water picture teach modalism? Why does the egg teach partialism?
3. Read Isaiah 40:25. What is God telling us about comparing Him to anything?
4. If pictures can mislead, how can you still use one wisely when you teach a child?
5. Read Romans 11:33-36. How should not fully understanding God lead us to worship rather than doubt?

Part Two: Other Views of God

Chapter 10: Modalism and Oneness: One Person in Three Roles

> *Father, those whom You have given Me, I desire that where I am, they also may be with Me, so that they may see My glory which You gave Me; because You loved Me before **the** foundation of **the** world.*
>
> John 17:24 (SLB)

We start Part Two with the view that comes closest to the Trinity, and in some ways is the hardest to see the problem with. Modalism agrees that there is one God. It agrees that Jesus is fully God. It agrees that the Holy Spirit is God. Where it parts ways is the fifth statement. It says the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three Persons, but one Person who shows Himself in three ways.

What It Teaches

Modalism says God is one Person. That one Person revealed Himself as the Father in creation and in the Old Testament, as the Son when He came in the flesh, and as the Holy Spirit when He came to live in believers. The words Father, Son, and Spirit are titles, roles, or modes of the one God, the way one man can be called Dad, Coach, and Mister Smith.

In its oldest form, some modalists said God was the Father first, then became the Son, then became the Spirit, one after another. Most modern Oneness believers say it a little differently. They say Jesus is the one God, and that "Father" refers to His divine nature and "Son" refers to His human nature. When Jesus prayed, they say, His human nature was praying to His divine nature, or the man Jesus was praying to the Spirit of God who dwelt in Him.

Where It Came From

As we saw in Chapter 8, modalism was taught in the early 200s by Noetus, Praxeas, and Sabellius. The church rejected it then.

It came back in the early twentieth century. In 1913, at a large Pentecostal camp meeting at Arroyo Seco, near Los Angeles, a preacher named R. E. McAlister gave a message on baptism. He pointed out that in the book of Acts, people were baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38) or "into the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16; 19:5), and never in the words of Matthew 28:19. Some who heard him began to teach that the one name of Matthew 28:19 is Jesus, and that Jesus Himself is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Over the next few years, some began to rebaptize believers in Jesus' name only.

In 1916, the Assemblies of God adopted a statement of faith affirming the Trinity, and many Oneness ministers left. Several Oneness groups formed over the next decades. The largest in the United States today is the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI), formed in 1945. There are many other Oneness churches around the world, often called Apostolic or Jesus' Name churches.

In Their Own Words

Here is how the UPCI's Articles of Faith describe God. "We believe in the one ever-living, eternal God: infinite in power, holy in nature, attributes and purpose." It goes on to say that this one God "has revealed Himself as Father; through His Son, in redemption; and as the Holy Spirit, by emanation." Its statement on baptism calls for "baptism in water by immersion in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."

I want to be fair here. Oneness believers love Jesus. They worship Him as God, which Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, do not. Many of them are devoted, prayerful people who know their Bibles well. My disagreement with them is about what the Bible teaches, not about whether they are sincere.

The Verses They Use

Here are the main passages Oneness teachers point to. They deserve an honest look.

Deuteronomy 6:4. "The LORD is one." As we saw in Chapter 2, Trinitarians believe this with all their hearts. The question is what kind of oneness it means.

Colossians 2:9. "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily." Oneness believers say this means all of God is in Jesus, so there can be no other Person. Trinitarians agree that the fullness of God's nature is in Jesus. This verse says Jesus is fully God. It doesn't say He is the Father.

Isaiah 9:6. The child born to us will be called "Father of Eternity." Oneness believers say this proves the Son is the Father. But this is a Hebrew way of speaking about character, not a statement that the Messiah is the Person of God the Father. In Hebrew, "father of" often means "the source of" or "the one marked by." Isaiah calls the Messiah a father to His people forever, the way a good king was called a father to his nation (compare Isaiah 22:21, where a royal official is called "a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem"). The verse is about how the Messiah cares for His people, not about the Persons of the Trinity.

John 10:30. "I and the Father are one." We saw in Chapter 5 that the Greek word "one" here is neuter, "one thing," and the verb "are" is plural. "I and the Father" names two. This verse is one of the best verses for the Trinity, not against it.

John 14:9. "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father." Jesus reveals the Father perfectly, because He shares the Father's nature (Hebrews 1:3). But read the very next verses. Jesus says, "I am in the Father and the Father is in Me," and "The declarations which I speak to you I do not speak from Myself; but the Father who remains in Me, He does the works" (John 14:10). Then He says He will ask the Father to send another Helper (John 14:16). He talks about the Father as Someone else, over and over, in the same passage.

Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38. Oneness believers say "the name" in Matthew 28:19 is Jesus, and that the apostles obeyed this by baptizing in Jesus' name in Acts. Trinitarians answer that "in the name of" in Acts means "by the authority of" Jesus, the way a policeman says "Stop in the name of the law." Luke was telling us whose baptism this was, Christian baptism into Christ, not giving us a formula to say. Meanwhile, Jesus Himself named all three. The Didache, a short Christian manual written very early

(many scholars date it to the late first or early second century), tells believers to baptize "into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Didache 7:1).

Good Christians differ on what words should be said at a baptism. Some churches say both. I don't think the words are the issue. The issue is who God is.

What the Bible Says

The problem with modalism is the mountain of passages that show the Father, the Son, and the Spirit relating to each other as distinct Persons. We went through them in Chapter 5. Here are a few that are especially hard for the Oneness view.

The Son was with the Father before creation. "Father, glorify Me with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (John 17:5). "You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). If the Son is only the human nature of Jesus, which began in Bethlehem, then who had glory with the Father before the world was? Who did the Father love before creation?

The Son created the world. "All things came into being through Him" (John 1:3). "Through whom also He made the ages" (Hebrews 1:2). The Son didn't come into being at Bethlehem. The Son made the world.

The Father sent the Son. "God sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4). You can't send yourself in the way the Bible describes. The Son came "down out of heaven" to do "the will of the One who sent Me" (John 6:38).

Two witnesses. "I am the One testifying concerning Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies concerning Me" (John 8:18). If they are one Person, there is only one witness.

Jesus is our advocate with the Father. "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1). An advocate is a lawyer who pleads your case before a judge. He is not the judge. Jesus pleads for us before the Father.

The Father and the Son are worshiped together. In Revelation 5, the One on the throne holds a scroll, and the Lamb comes and takes it from His hand (Revelation 5:7). Then every creature worships "to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb" (Revelation 5:13). One hands the scroll; the other takes it.

The Jordan River. The Father speaks, the Son stands in the water, and the Spirit comes down. Oneness believers sometimes say God can be in more than one place at a time, which is true. But the Father didn't say, "This is Me in the flesh." He said, "This is My Son, the beloved." Love is something one Person has for another.

Why It Matters

You might ask, "If Oneness believers say Jesus is fully God, why does this matter so much?"

It matters for several reasons.

First, it matters for **love**. The Bible says "God is love" (1 John 4:8). If God is one Person alone, then before He made anything, He had no one to love. Love would be something God started doing after creation. But

if the Father has loved the Son from all eternity, in the fellowship of the Spirit, then love isn't something God does. It is who He is.

Second, it matters for **the cross**. At the cross, the Son offered Himself "through the eternal Spirit" to God (Hebrews 9:14). The Son cried out to the Father. The Father accepted the Son's sacrifice and raised Him from the dead. If they are one Person, the cross becomes a kind of play with one actor.

Third, it matters for **prayer**. Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, in His name, by the Spirit. If they are one Person, then when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, "Not what I want, but what You want," He was talking to Himself. I can't believe that. I don't think you can either, if you read the Gospels with fresh eyes.

And fourth, it matters because the church has always confessed it. When the church rejected Sabellius, it wasn't splitting hairs. It was protecting the God who is really there.

How to Talk With a Oneness Friend

If you have a friend or family member in a Oneness church, here are a few things I would keep in mind.

Start with what you agree on. You both believe there is one God. You both believe Jesus is fully God. You both believe the Holy Spirit is God. That is a lot.

Then ask questions instead of making speeches. "Who was the Son talking to in John 17:5, before the world was?" "In Mark 14:36, whose will was Jesus giving in to?" "Who was the Father talking about when He said, 'This is My Son'?" Then listen.

Be careful not to say Trinitarians believe in three gods, and correct anyone who says that about you. Many Oneness believers were taught that the Trinity means three gods. Showing them what the Trinity really is can clear away a lot of confusion.

And don't fight over the baptism formula first. Talk about who God is. The rest follows from that.

Study Questions

1. What does modalism agree with in the Trinity? Where does it part ways?
2. How would you explain John 10:30 to a friend who thinks it proves Jesus is the Father?
3. Read John 17:5 and 17:24. Why are these verses hard to fit with the Oneness view?
4. How does the Trinity help us understand the statement "God is love"?
5. If you know someone in a Oneness church, what is one thing you agree on that you could start a conversation with?

Chapter 11: Arianism and Jehovah's Witnesses: A Created Son

> *And: "You, Lord, in **the** beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are **the** works of Your hands. They will perish, but You remain; and they all will grow old like a garment, and like a robe You will roll them up, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not fail."*
>
> Hebrews 1:10-12 (SLB)

If modalism goes wrong on the fifth statement, Arianism goes wrong on the third. It says the Son is not God in the same sense the Father is. He is the first and greatest thing God ever made, but He is still something God made. And because the Son is a creature, the Holy Spirit is usually not seen as God either.

What It Teaches

Arianism teaches that God the Father alone is the one true God, eternal and without beginning. At some point before the world was made, God created the Son. The Son was God's first creation, and God then made everything else through Him. The Son is far above us, and far above the angels, but He is not equal with the Father. He had a beginning. As Arius's teaching was summed up, "there was when He was not."

The Holy Spirit, in most forms of this view, is not a Person at all. He is God's power or influence.

Where It Came From

We met Arius in Chapter 8. He taught in Alexandria around A.D. 318, the Council of Nicaea rejected his view in 325, and after a long fight the church rejected it again at Constantinople in 381. Arianism hung on for several more centuries among some of the Germanic tribes, like the Goths, who had been reached by Arian missionaries. Then it faded.

Its best-known modern form began in the 1870s, when Charles Taze Russell started a Bible study group in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Russell's movement taught that the Trinity was unbiblical and that Jesus was a created being. After Russell died, Joseph Rutherford led the group, and in 1931 it took the name Jehovah's Witnesses. Today the Witnesses report more than eight million active members around the world. Their teaching is published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, and they use their own Bible translation, the New World Translation.

Jehovah's Witnesses are not exactly the same as ancient Arians. For example, they teach that before Jesus was born as a man, He was Michael the archangel. But on the main question, whether the Son is a creature, they stand with Arius.

In Their Own Words

The Witnesses' brochure *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* says, "Jesus, even in his prehuman existence, is also separate and distinct, a created being, subordinate to God." It also says, "Jehovah God alone is Almighty," and that "Jesus was created by God as the beginning of God's invisible creations."

On the Holy Spirit, their website says, "The holy spirit is God's power in action, his active force," and under a heading it states, "The holy spirit is not a person."

I want to say a word about Jehovah's Witnesses as people. Most Christians know them as the folks who knock on doors on Saturday mornings. Whatever you think about their teaching, they are willing to do something most of us are not: go door to door, get turned away, and come back the next week. They are usually polite, they know the verses they use well, and many of them are kind, moral, family-centered people. They deserve to be treated with courtesy, and they deserve a real answer.

The Verses They Use

Here are the main passages Jehovah's Witnesses use to show that Jesus was created. Let's look at each one honestly.

Colossians 1:15, "the firstborn of all creation." They say "firstborn" means Jesus was the first thing created. But in the Bible, "firstborn" often means the one with the rank and rights of the firstborn, the heir, the one in first place. God says of King David, "I also will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" (Psalm 89:27). David was the youngest of Jesse's eight sons, not the oldest. God calls Ephraim His firstborn (Jeremiah 31:9), though Manasseh was born first. "Firstborn" is about rank, not birth order.

And look at the very next verse. Paul explains why He is the firstborn of all creation: "because in Him all things were created" (Colossians 1:16). He is the heir and Lord of creation because He made it. Paul goes on: "all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things." The New World Translation adds the word "other" here, so that it reads "all other things." There is no word for "other" in the Greek. It was added to fit the idea that the Son is one of the created things.

Revelation 3:14, "the Beginning of the creation of God." The Greek word for "beginning" is *arche*. It can mean the first in a series, but it often means the source, origin, or ruler of something. (Our English words "architect" and "archbishop" come from it.) In Revelation itself, God the Father calls Himself "the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 21:6), and nobody thinks that means the Father was created. Jesus is the source and ruler of God's creation.

Proverbs 8:22, "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way." This is Wisdom speaking. Arius used it, and so do the Witnesses, to say the Son was created first. But Proverbs 8 is a poem where wisdom is pictured as a woman calling out in the streets (Proverbs 8:1). Paul does call Christ "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24), and the poem gives a beautiful picture of Him. But you can't build a doctrine of how Christ came to exist on a poem about wisdom. And think about it: there was never a time when God was without wisdom. If the verse means God "got" wisdom at some point, then before that He was foolish. No one believes that.

John 14:28, "My Father is greater than I." This is a real verse, and we will look at it closely in Chapter 19. The short answer is that the Son, having become a man and taken the role of a servant, was lower than the Father in position while He was on earth. "Greater" is about position, not nature. A president is greater than a citizen in position, but not in being. They are both human.

Mark 13:32, the Son does not know the day or hour. Again, a real verse, and we will look at it in Chapter 19. Jesus spoke there from His human nature, which grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52).

John 17:3, "You, the only true God." Jesus calls the Father "the only true God." The Witnesses say that leaves Jesus out. But in the same sentence Jesus puts Himself right alongside the Father as the One we must know to have eternal life. And John, who wrote this verse, also wrote that Jesus "is the true God and the eternal life" (1 John 5:20). John saw no contradiction, because the Son is not a second God. He shares the one true God's nature.

"A God"

The New World Translation reads John 1:1 this way: "the Word was a god." That's the verse the Witnesses most often have to defend, so let me explain.

In Greek, the last phrase of John 1:1 is *theos en ho logos*, word for word, "God was the Word." The word *theos* ("God") here doesn't have the Greek article (the word for "the") in front of it. The Witnesses say that means "a god."

But Greek doesn't work like English. Greek has no word for "a." And *theos* without the article is used all over the New Testament for the one true God, including in John 1 itself (John 1:6, 12, 13, and 18). John left off the article here, most scholars agree, to tell us what kind of being the Word is. He is not saying the Word is the same Person as the Father ("the God" he was with). He is saying the Word has the same nature as God. The Word is fully God.

And here is the bigger problem. If the Word is "a god," then there are two gods: the God the Word was with, and the Word, a lesser god. That is polytheism, and it runs straight into Isaiah 43:10: "Before Me no god was formed, and after Me there will be none." The Witnesses would say the Word is a "mighty god" but not "Almighty God." But Isaiah calls the LORD Himself "the Mighty God" (Isaiah 10:21), the same title he gives the child in Isaiah 9:6. Either Jesus is the one God, or the Bible has two.

What the Bible Says

Beyond answering the verses they use, here are some of the strongest passages showing that the Son is not a creature.

The Son made everything that was made. "All things came into being through Him, and without Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:3). If the Son were created, He would have had to create Himself.

God made the world alone. "I am the LORD, who makes everything, who stretches out the heavens alone, who spreads out the earth by Myself" (Isaiah 44:24). God says He made everything alone, by

Himself. Yet the New Testament says it was all made through the Son. That only fits if the Son is not someone other than God, but God Himself.

The Father calls the Son Creator and Lord. Look at the verse at the top of this chapter. Hebrews 1:10-12 quotes Psalm 102, a psalm addressed to the LORD, and says God speaks these words to the Son: "You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth." The Father calls the Son "Lord" and says He laid the foundation of the earth.

The Son is above every angel. Hebrews 1 spends a whole chapter showing that the Son is not an angel. "To which of the angels did He ever say, 'You are My Son'?" (Hebrews 1:5). The answer is: none. And God commands the angels to worship the Son (Hebrews 1:6). Michael the archangel would not even pronounce judgment on the devil on his own authority, but said, "May the Lord rebuke you!" (Jude 1:9). That is not how Jesus spoke. He cast out demons with a word.

The Son receives worship. The Bible is clear: "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him alone you shall serve" (Matthew 4:10). Angels refuse worship (Revelation 19:10). Yet the disciples worshiped Jesus (Matthew 14:33; 28:9, 17), the man born blind worshiped Him (John 9:38), and in heaven the Lamb receives the same worship as the One on the throne (Revelation 5:13). The New World Translation usually renders the Greek word for worship, *proskuneo*, as "do obeisance" when it is given to Jesus. But it is the same word Jesus used in Matthew 4:10 for the worship that belongs to God alone.

Jesus is the First and the Last. The LORD says, "I am first and I am last, and besides Me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6). Jesus says, "I am the First and the Last" (Revelation 1:17). There is only room for one First.

And the Holy Spirit

We covered the Spirit in Chapter 4. Here I'll just say this. The Witnesses say the Spirit is God's "active force." But a force can't be lied to (Acts 5:3), grieved (Ephesians 4:30), or say, "Set apart now for Me ... for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). And Luke tells us Jesus went "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14). If the Spirit were only power, that would be "in the power of the power."

Why It Matters

Athanasius saw it clearly seventeen hundred years ago. If the Son is a creature, then a creature saved us. But the Bible says only God can save (Isaiah 43:11). If the Son is a creature, then worshiping Him is idolatry. And if the Son is a creature, then when the Father sent Him to die, He sent someone else, not Himself. The cross becomes God sending His best servant to die, not God giving Himself for us.

John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, the only begotten." That is not God sending a creature. That is the Father giving the Son He has loved from all eternity, the Son who shares His very nature. That is how much God loves you.

When They Knock on Your Door

Here are a few things that can help.

Be kind. Offer them water on a hot day. They are people, not projects.

Ask them to read John 1:1-3 with you, slowly, in their own Bible. Ask, “If everything that came into being came into being through the Word, can the Word be something that came into being?”

Ask about worship. “Hebrews 1:6 says the angels are told to worship the Son. Who may be worshiped?”

Show them Isaiah 44:24. “God says He made everything alone. Colossians says it was all made through the Son. How do you put those together?”

Don’t try to win in one visit. Plant a seed. Pray for them after they leave. God is the One who opens eyes.

Study Questions

1. What does Arianism say about the Son? What does it say about the Holy Spirit?
2. How would you explain “firstborn of all creation” in Colossians 1:15? What do Psalm 89:27 and Colossians 1:16 add?
3. Why does “the Word was a god” create a bigger problem than it solves?
4. Read Isaiah 44:24 and John 1:3 together. How do they show the Son is not a creature?
5. Why did Athanasius say it matters for our salvation that Jesus is fully God?

Chapter 12: Adoptionism: A Man Promoted to Be God's Son

> *I came forth from the Father and have come into the world; again, I leave the world and go to the Father.*
>
> John 16:28 (SLB)

Adoptionism is an old view, and you won't find many churches today that teach it by that name. But its main idea shows up more often than you might think, especially in college religion classes and in some popular books about the "historical Jesus." So it is worth knowing what it is.

What It Teaches

Adoptionism says Jesus was born an ordinary man. He was a very good man, maybe the best man who ever lived, and God was so pleased with Him that at some point God adopted Him as His Son. Some adoptionists said this happened at His baptism, when the Spirit came down on Him and the voice from heaven said, "You are My Son." Others said it happened at His resurrection. Either way, Jesus became the Son of God. He didn't start out as the Son of God, and He didn't exist before He was born.

In this view, the "Christ" or the "Spirit" or the "power of God" came upon the man Jesus for a time, the way the Spirit came upon prophets in the Old Testament. Jesus was a man filled with God, but He was not God.

Where It Came From

One early group, often called the Ebionites, was a sect of Jewish believers in the second century who kept the law of Moses and taught that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, a prophet chosen by God. Early Christian writers like Irenaeus wrote about them.

Around A.D. 190, a leather merchant from Byzantium named Theodotus taught in Rome that Jesus was a mere man on whom the Spirit came at His baptism. The church historian Eusebius tells us that Victor, the bishop of Rome, put him out of the church for it. About eighty years later, Paul of Samosata, the bishop of Antioch, taught something similar. Church councils removed him from office around A.D. 268.

The church rejected adoptionism for the same reason it later rejected Arius. It made Jesus less than God.

The Verses It Uses

The baptism of Jesus. "You are My Son, the beloved, in whom I was well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Adoptionists say this was the moment Jesus became God's Son. But the Father said, "You are My Son," not "You are now My Son." He was announcing who Jesus already was, at the start of His public ministry. And Luke had already told us, before Jesus was even born, that He would be called the Son of God because of how He was conceived (Luke 1:35).

Romans 1:4. Paul says Jesus "was declared Son of God in power ... by the resurrection of the dead." Adoptionists read that as "became." But the word is "declared." The resurrection didn't make Jesus the Son of God. It showed the world, with power, that He was. Notice that verse 3 calls Him "His Son" before it ever mentions His birth.

Acts 2:36. "God has made Him both Lord and Christ." Peter is talking about Jesus being raised and seated at God's right hand as King. Jesus took up His throne as the risen Messiah. That is about His work and His reign, not about when He became the Son.

Acts 13:33. Paul applies Psalm 2:7, "You are My Son; today I have begotten You," to the resurrection. Again, the resurrection is the public crowning of the King. In the ancient world, a king was often called the "son" of God on the day he took the throne. The verse is about Jesus' installation as the risen King, not about when He started to exist.

What the Bible Says

The Bible's answer to adoptionism is simple. The Son existed before He was born.

He came down from heaven. "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world" (John 16:28). "No one has gone up into heaven except the One who came down out of heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13). "What then if you see the Son of Man ascending where He was before?" (John 6:62). You can't come down from somewhere you never were.

He was before John the Baptist. John was born about six months before Jesus. Yet John said, "The One coming after me has come to be ahead of me, because He was before me" (John 1:15).

He was rich and became poor. "For your sake He became poor, being rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). When was Jesus rich? Not in Nazareth. He was rich in heaven, before He came.

He existed in the form of God and emptied Himself. Philippians 2:6-7 says Christ existed in the form of God, and then took the form of a slave. That is a downward move, from heaven to earth, not an upward move from earth to heaven.

He made the world. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him" (John 1:10). A man born in Bethlehem didn't make the world. The eternal Son did.

God sent His Son. "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4). The Son was the Son before He was sent. You don't send someone who doesn't exist yet.

Where You Will Hear It Today

You probably won't meet anyone who calls himself an adoptionist. But you will hear the idea. Some popular books and college courses teach that the earliest followers of Jesus saw Him as a man whom God exalted, and that the idea of Jesus as God came along much later. Some modern groups teach that Jesus became God's Son at His baptism. And many people who like Jesus but aren't Christians say He was a good man who was so close to God that people later called Him divine.

The answer is the same as it was in the second century. The earliest Christian writings we have, the letters of Paul written within about twenty to thirty years of the cross, already speak of the Son as existing before He was born and taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:6-7), and of all things being created through Him (1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16). The first Christians didn't slowly promote Jesus to God. They worshiped Him from the beginning.

Why It Matters

Adoptionism turns the gospel upside down. The gospel says God came down to us. Adoptionism says a man worked his way up to God. That is the difference between grace and works.

If Jesus earned His place as God's Son by being good, then the message to us is, "Be good enough, and God might adopt you too." But that is not the gospel. The gospel is that the eternal Son of God came down from heaven, became one of us, lived the perfect life we could not live, died the death we deserved, and rose again, so that we could be adopted as God's children by grace, through faith. We are the ones who are adopted (Galatians 4:5). He is the Son by nature.

And here is something beautiful. The adoption we receive only works because Jesus is the eternal Son. Paul says God sent His Son "so that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:5). The natural Son came so that the rest of us could become sons and daughters. If He were adopted too, He would need a Savior Himself.

Study Questions

1. What does adoptionism say happened at Jesus' baptism? How does the wording of Mark 1:11 answer that?
2. What is the difference between "declared" and "became" in Romans 1:4?
3. Read John 16:28 and 2 Corinthians 8:9. What do these verses tell us about where Jesus was before Bethlehem?
4. Why does adoptionism turn the gospel upside down?
5. What does it mean to you that you are adopted, but Jesus is the Son by nature?

Chapter 13: Unitarianism: God Is One Person, and Jesus Is a Man

> *Therefore because of this the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal to God.*
>
> John 5:18 (SLB)

Unitarianism is the simplest answer of all to the question "Who is God?" It says God is one Person, the Father, and only the Father. Jesus is a man, a real and very special man, but not God. The Holy Spirit is not a Person. He is God's power or presence.

The name comes from the word "unity," and it was chosen on purpose, as the opposite of "Trinity." In a way, Unitarianism is what you get when you take adoptionism and Arianism and follow them all the way down. Arius said the Son was a great heavenly being created before the world. Unitarians say the Son didn't exist at all until He was conceived in Mary.

What It Teaches

Unitarians believe the Father alone is God. Most Christian Unitarians believe Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died for sins, rose from the dead, and will return as King. Some do not believe all of those things. But all of them agree that Jesus did not exist before He was conceived. He is the Son of God because God was His Father in the virgin birth, not because He is eternally the Son. He is fully a man and only a man, the greatest man and God's chosen Messiah.

Where It Came From

After the Reformation in the 1500s, when people began reading the Bible for themselves again, some went further than the Reformers. A Spanish doctor named Michael Servetus wrote a book in 1531 called *On the Errors of the Trinity*. In 1553, he was arrested in Geneva and burned at the stake for heresy. I want to say clearly that this was wrong. Christians have no business killing people for what they believe. You can't burn a man into the truth. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (John 18:11).

An Italian named Faustus Socinus led a movement in Poland in the late 1500s that taught Jesus was only a man. His followers, called Socinians, published the Racovian Catechism in 1605. In Transylvania (part of modern Romania), Francis David led a Unitarian church that still exists today.

In England and America, Unitarian ideas spread in the 1700s and 1800s. King's Chapel in Boston took the Trinity out of its prayer book in 1785. In 1819, a Boston minister named William Ellery Channing preached a famous sermon called "Unitarian Christianity," and the American Unitarian Association was formed in 1825. Several of America's founders, including Thomas Jefferson, held Unitarian views.

Today there are two very different kinds of groups that use the name.

The first is the **Unitarian Universalist Association**, formed in 1961 when the American Unitarians merged with the Universalists. Today it is not really a Christian group. It welcomes people of any religion or none and has no required beliefs about God at all. Many members would not call themselves Christians.

The second is a group of smaller churches that hold to the Bible as God's Word but teach that God is one Person. These include the **Christadelphians**, founded by a doctor named John Thomas in the mid-1800s, and people who call themselves **Biblical Unitarians**. These believers take the Bible seriously, and many of them know it very well. This chapter is mostly about them.

The Verses They Use

1 Timothy 2:5. "For there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus." Unitarians say Paul plainly calls Jesus a man and distinguishes Him from the one God. Trinitarians agree completely that Jesus is a man. He is still a man today, raised in a glorified body. That is exactly why He can be our mediator. A mediator stands between two sides and represents both. Jesus represents God to us because He is God, and He represents us to God because He is truly man. If He were only a man, He could only represent one side.

John 17:3 and 1 Corinthians 8:6. Unitarians point out that Jesus called the Father "the only true God," and Paul said "to us there is one God, the Father." We have looked at both of these. In John 17:3, Jesus puts knowing Himself right next to knowing the Father as the way to eternal life. And in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul puts Jesus inside the Shema itself: one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Shema's "Lord" is the LORD. Paul gives that name to Jesus.

Acts 2:22. Peter calls Jesus "a man attested to you by God by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did through Him." Yes. Peter was preaching to a crowd that had seen Jesus as a man, and he started where they were. But by the end of the same sermon he says that Jesus has poured out the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33), which only God can do, and calls on them to be baptized in His name (Acts 2:38). And Peter later calls Him "our God and our Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1).

Numbers 23:19. "God is not a man." Unitarians say that if Jesus is a man, He can't be God. That is a fair question, and the answer is the incarnation. God is not a man by nature. He didn't start out as one, and He is not limited like one. But the eternal Son took on a human nature in addition to His divine nature. "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Numbers 23:19 is about God's nature: He doesn't lie or change His mind like men do. It doesn't forbid God from becoming a man to save us.

Jesus' own words about His Father. Jesus spoke of "My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God" (John 20:17). Unitarians say that shows Jesus had a God, so He couldn't be God. As a man, Jesus worshiped, prayed, and obeyed. That is part of being truly human. But notice how He says it. Not "our Father," as if He and Mary Magdalene had the same relationship to God. "My Father and your Father." His Sonship is different from ours.

What the Bible Says

Most of the answer to Unitarianism is in Chapters 3 and 12. Jesus existed before He was born, created the world, came down from heaven, was worshiped, forgave sins, and was called God by the apostles. Let me add three more things.

The people who heard Him understood Him to claim equality with God. Look at the verse at the top of this chapter. The religious leaders sought to kill Him "because He ... was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal to God" (John 5:18). They understood "Son of God," in Jesus' mouth, to mean equal with God. At His trial, when Jesus said He would be seated at God's right hand and come on the clouds of heaven, the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has blasphemed!" (Matthew 26:64-65). A man claiming to be the Messiah was not blasphemy. A man claiming to share God's throne was.

The New Testament takes Old Testament verses about the LORD and applies them to Jesus. We saw it with Isaiah 45:23 and Philippians 2:10-11, Psalm 102 and Hebrews 1:10, and Isaiah 6 and John 12:41. Joel 2:32 says "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will escape." Paul quotes that verse in Romans 10:13, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," and in the verses just before it, the Lord he means is Jesus (Romans 10:9-12). No Jewish apostle would ever do that for a mere man.

The first Christians prayed to Jesus. Stephen, as he was being stoned, said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Paul describes Christians as "all those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place" (1 Corinthians 1:2). You don't pray to a man who has died. You pray to God.

Why It Matters

I want to be gentle and clear at the same time. Many Biblical Unitarians love Jesus, and they want to be faithful to the Bible. I respect that. But here is why the question matters so much.

If Jesus is only a man, then the love of God at the cross is the love of a Father who sent someone else to die, not the love of a God who came Himself. If Jesus is only a man, then we are told to honor a man "even as" we honor the Father (John 5:23), which no man deserves. And if Jesus is only a man, then the One who will judge the world, who knows every heart, who is with us "all the days, until the consummation of the age" (Matthew 28:20), is a creature with the powers of God. That is not simpler than the Trinity. It is harder.

John wrote his Gospel "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). He also opened that Gospel by saying the Word was God. For John, believing in the Son meant believing in Someone who was with God and was God from the beginning.

Study Questions

1. How is Unitarianism different from Arianism? How is it similar?
2. What are the two very different groups that use the name "Unitarian" today?
3. Read 1 Timothy 2:5. Why does Jesus' being both God and man make Him the perfect mediator?

4. Read John 5:18 and Matthew 26:63-65. How did the people who heard Jesus understand His claims?

5. What do you think about the execution of Servetus? How should Christians respond to people who disagree with them about God?

Chapter 14: Tritheism: Three Gods

> *Do not be in dread, and do not be frightened. Did I not make you hear from then, and declare **it**? And you **are** My witnesses. Is there a God besides Me? And **there is** no Rock; I do not know **one**.*
>
> Isaiah 44:8 (SLB)

Tritheism is the mistake on the other side of the road. Modalism keeps God one and loses the three Persons. Tritheism keeps the three Persons and loses the one God. It says the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three separate gods who are united in purpose, like three men who agree on everything.

What It Teaches

Tritheism says there are three divine beings. Each has his own separate nature, his own mind, and his own existence. They are one only in the sense that they agree and work together, the way a good team or a happy family is "one." In this view, "God" is not the name of one being. It is a word for a group or a class, like "humanity." Three gods, one team.

Where It Came From

Hardly anyone has ever taught tritheism openly, and no major church has ever held it. In the sixth century, a Christian philosopher in Alexandria named John Philoponus wrote about the Trinity in a way that sounded like three separate divine beings, and he was condemned for it after his death. That is about as close as church history comes to a tritheist teacher.

So why give it a chapter? For three reasons.

First, it is what many Muslims, Jewish people, and others think Christians believe. When someone says, "You Christians worship three gods," they are accusing us of tritheism. We need to be able to say clearly that we don't.

Second, some Christians slide into it without meaning to. If you picture the Trinity as three men sitting on three thrones, or think of the Father, Son, and Spirit as three separate gods who decided to work together, you have drifted into tritheism, even if you'd never call it that. Some popular "social" pictures of the Trinity, which compare God to a committee or a family, can lean this way if they are pushed too far.

Third, it is close to what the Latter-day Saints teach, which we will look at in the next chapter.

A Word About "Social" Pictures

In the last fifty years or so, some Christian writers have described the Trinity as a kind of perfect community or family, and they use that to teach about love, marriage, and the church. There is truth in that. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit really do love each other, and we will see in Chapter 20 that this matters for how we live.

But if you push the picture too far, the three Persons start to sound like three separate people with three separate minds, who get together and agree. That is where it slides into tritheism. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit don't have three wills that happen to line up. They share one divine nature, one power, and one will as God. (In His human nature, Jesus also had a human will, which He placed under the Father's will in Gethsemane. That is part of being truly human, as we saw in Chapter 5.)

So use the family picture carefully. God is not a family of three gods. He is one God who is, in Himself, a fellowship of love.

What the Bible Says

The Bible's answer to tritheism is everything we saw in Chapter 2. There is one God. Not one team of gods. One God.

> *Do not be in dread, and do not be frightened. Did I not make you hear from then, and declare **it**? And you **are** My witnesses. Is there a God besides Me? And **there is** no Rock; I do not know **one**.* (Isaiah 44:8)

"Is there a God besides Me? And there is no Rock; I do not know one." God Himself says He doesn't know of any other God. If the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were three separate gods, then each of them would know about the other two. But God says He knows of none.

The Bible doesn't describe the Father, Son, and Spirit as three beings who happen to agree. It says they share one name (Matthew 28:19), one glory (Isaiah 42:8; John 17:5), and one nature (John 10:30; Colossians 2:9). The Son is "the exact representation of His substance" (Hebrews 1:3), not a separate being with a separate substance.

And the Bible says the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father (John 14:10-11; 17:21). Three separate gods could stand side by side. They could not be in each other. The early church had a Greek word for this, *perichoresis*, which means something like "mutual indwelling." Each Person is fully in the others. You can't pull them apart.

Where the Line Is

Here is how to tell the Trinity from tritheism.

Tritheism says there are three Whats and three Whos: three divine beings, three persons. The Trinity says there is one What and three Whos: one divine being, three Persons.

Tritheism says the three are one because they agree. The Trinity says the three are one because they are one God. They agree, of course. But their oneness is deeper than agreement. It is oneness of being.

If you're ever not sure whether a picture of the Trinity has slid into tritheism, ask yourself one question: "Does this picture have three gods in it?" If the answer is yes, throw it out.

Why It Matters

Tritheism matters because it breaks the first commandment. “There shall not be for you other gods before My face” (Exodus 20:3). It also makes it impossible to say, with the Shema and with Jesus Himself, that “the Lord is one” (Mark 12:29).

And it matters for how we talk to others. When a Muslim friend says Christians worship three gods, the right answer is not to get defensive. The right answer is, “If I believed that, I’d be wrong too. Here is what we actually believe.” Then explain one What and three Whos.

Study Questions

1. How is tritheism the “opposite ditch” from modalism?
2. Read Isaiah 44:8. What does God say about whether there are any other gods?
3. What is the difference between being one in agreement and being one in being?
4. What does the word perichoresis mean? How does John 14:10-11 show it?
5. If a friend says, “Christians worship three gods,” how would you answer?

Chapter 15: The Latter-day Saint View: Three Separate Beings

> *Before **the** mountains were born, and You brought forth the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You **are** God.*
>
> Psalm 90:2 (SLB)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often called the Mormon church, is one of the fastest-growing religious groups of the last two centuries, with more than seventeen million members around the world. The church asks that its members be called Latter-day Saints rather than Mormons, so that is what I will call them here.

Latter-day Saints use many of the same words Christians use. They speak of God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. They talk about grace, the atonement, and the resurrection. But when you look closely at what those words mean in their teaching, the picture of God is very different from the Trinity, and very different from every other view in this book.

What It Teaches

Here is the first of the church's Articles of Faith, written by Joseph Smith: "We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost."

Any Christian could say that sentence. But Latter-day Saints do not believe these three are one God in being. They speak of the three as the "Godhead," three separate and distinct beings who are one in purpose. Their scripture, the Doctrine and Covenants, says, "The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit" (Doctrine and Covenants 130:22).

Latter-day Saint teaching also says that all people lived before they were born, as spirit children of Heavenly Father, and that Jesus was the firstborn of those spirit children. It teaches that faithful people may one day become like God, a teaching they call exaltation.

The church's own website has an article called "Becoming Like God" that quotes a well-known saying from Lorenzo Snow, the church's fifth president: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be." The article adds, "Little has been revealed about the first half of this couplet, and consequently little is taught." So the official teaching is careful about the idea that God was once a man. But the second half, that people may become like God, is central to Latter-day Saint belief.

Where It Came From

Joseph Smith founded the church in New York in 1830. He said that as a boy, around 1820, he saw God the Father and Jesus Christ as two separate personages in a grove of trees near his home. He later published the Book of Mormon and other writings that the church accepts as scripture alongside the Bible.

Smith's teaching about God developed over time. The Book of Mormon, published in 1830, often speaks of God in ways that sound close to traditional Christian teaching. His later teachings, especially in the early 1840s near the end of his life, described the Father as an exalted man with a body and spoke of humans being able to become gods.

After Smith was killed in 1844, most of his followers went west with Brigham Young to Utah. That group is the church headquartered in Salt Lake City today.

In Fairness

I want to be fair to Latter-day Saints. Many of them are among the kindest, most generous, and most hard-working people you will ever meet. They put a high value on family, honesty, and service. Their young people often give two years of their lives to missionary work. Latter-day Saints sincerely love the Jesus they believe in.

They also usually don't like being told they aren't Christians, and I understand why. They believe in Jesus Christ. It's in the name of their church. So let me be careful about what I'm saying. I'm not saying anything about any individual's heart. I'm saying that the Latter-day Saint teaching about who God is differs at the root from what the Bible teaches and from what Christians have always believed. The church itself agrees there is a real difference. Joseph Smith's own account of his first vision says he was told "that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" (Joseph Smith - History 1:19). We just disagree about who is right.

The Verses They Use

Genesis 1:26-27. We are made "in the image of God." Latter-day Saints often take this to mean God has a body like ours. But the image of God is about our likeness to Him as persons who can know, love, reason, and rule over creation (Genesis 1:26 goes right on to say "let them have dominion"). Jesus said, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). God doesn't have a body by nature. The Son took a body when He became a man.

Acts 7:55-56. Stephen saw "Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Latter-day Saints say this shows two separate beings. Trinitarians agree that the Father and the Son are two distinct Persons. And the Son, since His incarnation, does have a glorified human body. The verse doesn't say the Father has a body, and "right hand" is a picture of honor and power, the way we say a trusted helper is someone's "right-hand man."

John 17:21. Jesus prayed that believers "may be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You." Latter-day Saints say this shows the Godhead is one only in purpose, like believers. But notice what Jesus says. The Father is *in* the Son and the Son is *in* the Father. That is not how two separate beings relate. Believers are one with each other by being "in Us" (John 17:21), in God. Our unity is a reflection of God's, not the same thing.

Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34. "I said, you are gods." Latter-day Saints sometimes use this to support the idea that people can become gods. But read the psalm. God is judging unjust human rulers, and He calls them "gods" because they held the office of judging for Him. Then, in the very next verse, He says,

"Nevertheless, like mankind you will die" (Psalm 82:7). It is a rebuke, not a promise. Jesus used the verse to show the religious leaders that even the Scriptures called human judges "gods," so they had no reason to call it blasphemy when He, whom the Father sent, called Himself God's Son (John 10:34-36).

Romans 8:17, 2 Peter 1:4, and 1 John 3:2. Believers are "heirs indeed of God," "partakers of the divine nature," and "we will be like Him." These are wonderful promises, and every Christian believes them. We will share in God's life, be made holy, be raised with glorified bodies, and reign with Christ. But being like Christ in holiness and glory is not the same as becoming a god. A child can be "like" his father without becoming his father. Peter says we escape corruption and share in God's goodness. He never says we become what God is.

What the Bible Says

The biggest problem with the Latter-day Saint view is not about the Trinity at first. It is about the first statement: there is one God. The Bible says God is the only God there has ever been or ever will be.

> *You **are** My witnesses, declares the LORD, and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I **am** He. Before Me no god was formed, and after Me **there** will be none.* (Isaiah 43:10)

> *For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He **is** the God), who formed the earth and made it (He established it; He did not create it **as** formlessness; He formed it to be dwelt in): I **am** the LORD, and **there is** none else.* (Isaiah 45:18)

"Before Me no god was formed, and after Me there will be none." There was no god before Him, so God could not have had a God above Him who made Him a god. There will be no god after Him, so no person will ever become a god.

And the Bible says God has always been God.

> *Before **the** mountains were born, and You brought forth the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You **are** God.* (Psalm 90:2)

"From everlasting to everlasting, You are God." Not a man who became God. God from everlasting. God doesn't change (Malachi 3:6). He is "not a man" (Numbers 23:19). "I am God and not man" (Hosea 11:9).

The Bible also says God is not limited to one place like a body would be. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he said, "Look, the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27).

And here is a hard truth from the very beginning of the Bible. The first lie ever told to a human being was, "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). The serpent offered Eve the chance to become what God is. That desire has been at the root of human sin ever since. The gospel doesn't promise that we will become gods. It promises something better: that we will be children of God forever, living in His presence, sharing His love (John 1:12; Revelation 21:3).

How It Compares With the Trinity

It may help to put the two side by side.

Question	The Trinity	Latter-day Saint teaching
How many Gods are there?	One	Three separate divine beings in the Godhead
Has God always been God?	Yes, from everlasting	The church says little has been revealed about God once being as man is now
Does the Father have a body?	No. God is spirit. The Son took a body at the incarnation.	Yes, of flesh and bones
How are the three one?	One in being, three Persons	Three separate beings, one in purpose
Can people become gods?	No. We become God's children and are made like Christ in holiness.	Faithful people may become like God (exaltation)

Talking With a Latter-day Saint Friend

If you have Latter-day Saint neighbors, coworkers, or family, here are a few thoughts.

Define your words. When you say "God," "Jesus," "grace," or "Son of God," you may mean very different things. Ask, "When you say God the Father, what do you mean?" and then explain what you mean.

Go to Isaiah 43:10, 44:6, and 45:5. Ask, "If there were no gods before the LORD, how could He have had a Father God?"

Talk about grace. Many Latter-day Saints work very hard to be worthy. Share the freedom of being saved "by grace ... through faith, and this is not from yourselves; the gift is of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

And be a friend. Latter-day Saints are used to being argued with. Being loved is more rare, and it opens doors that arguments don't.

Study Questions

1. What does the Latter-day Saint term "Godhead" mean? How is it different from the Trinity?
2. Read Isaiah 43:10 and Psalm 90:2. What do these verses say about whether God was ever anything other than God?
3. How would you explain Psalm 82:6 in its context?
4. What is the difference between being made like Christ and becoming a god? Why does that difference matter?
5. If you have a Latter-day Saint friend, what is one question you could ask them about how they understand God?

Chapter 16: Partialism: Three Parts of God

> *for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily*
>
> Colossians 2:9 (SLB)

Partialism isn't the name of a church or a movement. As far as I know, nobody has ever started a group to teach it. It is a mistake people fall into without knowing it, usually because of the pictures they were taught as children. That is exactly why it is worth a short chapter.

What It Teaches

Partialism says the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three parts or pieces of God. Each one is a third. Put them together, and you have the whole God. Like a pie cut into three slices, or the three parts of an egg, or the three leaves of a clover.

It sounds harmless. It even sounds like it keeps everything in balance: one God, three parts. But it gets something very important wrong.

Where It Shows Up

You will hear it in the egg and shamrock pictures we looked at in Chapter 9. You will hear it when someone says, "Jesus is part of God." You will hear it in prayers where people seem to think they need to talk to all three Persons separately, or the "whole God" won't hear them. Sincere believers sometimes say things like, "The Father is the head part, Jesus is the human part, and the Spirit is the part that lives in us." They mean well. But that's partialism.

What the Bible Says

The Bible says each Person is fully God. Not a part. All of God.

> *for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily* (Colossians 2:9)

"All the fullness of the Deity" dwells in Christ. Not a third of it. All of it. Jesus is not a slice of God. He is God.

The same is true of the Father. Jesus called Him "the only true God" (John 17:3). He is not one-third of the true God. And the same is true of the Spirit. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God (Acts 5:3-4), not to a piece of God.

God also can't be divided into parts at all. Parts are for things that are made of something, like a car made of an engine, wheels, and a frame. Take a part away, and you have less of a car. But God is not made of anything. He is not built out of pieces. Theologians call this God's simplicity, which doesn't mean God is simple to understand. It means He isn't put together from parts. Whatever God is, He is all the way through.

Why the Math Doesn't Work

People sometimes say the Trinity is bad math: "1 + 1 + 1 = 3, not 1." Partialism tries to fix that by saying it is really 1/3 + 1/3 + 1/3 = 1. But that is the wrong picture. The Trinity isn't addition at all.

If you want math, here is a better picture, though like all pictures it has limits: 1 x 1 x 1 = 1. Each Person is fully God, and together they are not more God. They are one God. The Father is not "more God" when you add the Son. The Son is not "less God" without the Father. Each one is the whole divine nature, and there is only one divine nature.

I'll be honest. That is beyond what my mind can picture. But it is what the Bible says, and I would rather believe what God has said than a picture I can understand.

Why It Matters

It matters because if Jesus is only part of God, then when you look at Jesus, you only see part of God. But Jesus said, "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In Jesus, you see all that God is. You see the full heart of God toward you.

And it matters for prayer. You don't have to pray to three parts to reach the whole God. When you pray to the Father, in the name of Jesus, by the Spirit, you are praying to the one God, all of Him. And He hears you.

Study Questions

1. Have you ever heard someone describe the Trinity as three parts of God? Where?
2. Read Colossians 2:9. How does this verse answer partialism?
3. What does it mean that God is not made of parts?
4. Why is "1 x 1 x 1 = 1" a better picture than "1/3 + 1/3 + 1/3 = 1"? Where does even that picture fall short?
5. How does knowing that each Person is fully God change the way you pray?

Chapter 17: Polytheism: Many Gods

> *For they themselves report concerning us what sort of entrance we had to you, and how you turned to God from the idols to serve a living and true God*
>
> 1 Thessalonians 1:9 (SLB)

Polytheism is the belief in many gods. It is probably the oldest and most common answer to the question "Who is God?" in all of human history. For most of history, most people on earth have believed in many gods. Israel's neighbors did. The Greeks and Romans did. Many people still do today.

This is the view the Bible fights against from Genesis to Revelation. It may seem far from the Trinity, but it isn't as far as you think. Several of the views we have looked at, if you follow them all the way out, end up with more than one god.

What It Teaches

Polytheism teaches that there are many divine beings. Usually each one has its own area: the sun, the sea, war, love, the harvest, a certain city or nation. The gods often have families, rivalries, and personalities a lot like ours, only bigger. People worship the gods who can help them with what they need. A farmer prays to the rain god. A soldier prays to the god of war. A woman who wants a child prays to the goddess of fertility.

There are a few related ideas worth knowing.

Henotheism is worshiping one god while believing other gods exist. A tribe or nation might say, "We serve our god, and they serve theirs."

Monolatry is close to that: worshiping only one god, but not denying that others are real.

Some people say Israel started out this way and only later came to believe in one God. But the Bible says from the beginning that the LORD made the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1), and that the gods of the nations are not gods at all.

Where It Shows Up

In the Old Testament, Israel was surrounded by polytheism. Egypt had dozens of gods. When God sent the ten plagues, He said, "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (Exodus 12:12). The Nile turned to blood. The sun went dark. Each plague showed that Egypt's gods were powerless before the LORD.

In Canaan, Baal was the storm god. On Mount Carmel, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to call down fire from heaven. They shouted and cut themselves all day, and nothing happened. Then Elijah prayed once, and fire fell. The people fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, He is the God! The LORD, He is the God!" (1 Kings 18:39).

In the New Testament, the apostles preached in the Greek and Roman world, full of temples to Zeus, Hermes, Artemis, and many others. In Lystra, after Paul healed a man, the crowd thought Paul and Barnabas were gods come down to earth and tried to offer sacrifices to them (Acts 14:11-13). Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and ran into the crowd, shouting that they were only men, and called the people to "turn from these futile things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all the things in them" (Acts 14:15).

Today, polytheism is found in parts of Hinduism, in Shinto in Japan, in traditional tribal religions around the world, and in modern pagan movements in the West.

What About the Hindu "Trinity"?

You may hear someone say that Hinduism has a trinity too: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer, sometimes called the Trimurti ("three forms"). People sometimes say Christianity just borrowed the idea.

That isn't so. First, the Trimurti is a much smaller idea in Hinduism than the Trinity is in Christianity. Most Hindus worship Vishnu or Shiva or one of many other gods and goddesses, not the three as a group. Second, the Trimurti describes three gods, or three forms of an impersonal ultimate reality, not three Persons who share one divine nature. And the Christian teaching about the Father, Son, and Spirit comes straight from the New Testament, written by Jewish men who would have been horrified at the idea of borrowing from pagan religion. The two ideas look a little alike only because both have the number three.

What the Bible Says

The Bible says the gods of the nations are not gods at all.

> *For all the gods of the peoples **are** worthless idols, and the LORD made the heavens.* (Psalm 96:5)

> *Their idols **are** silver and gold, the work of the hands of man. They have a mouth, and they do not speak; they have eyes, and they do not see; they have ears, and they do not hear; they have a nose, and they do not smell; their hands, and they do not feel; their feet, and they do not walk; they do not make a sound with their throat. Like them will be those who make them, everyone who trusts in them.* (Psalm 115:4-8)

That last line is worth reading twice. "Like them will be those who make them." People become like what they worship. If you worship something blind, deaf, and dead, you become blind, deaf, and dead on the inside.

The Bible also says something sobering. Behind the idols, there is something real, but it isn't God.

> *What then do I say? That an idol is anything, or that an idol sacrifice is anything? But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers with the demons.* (1 Corinthians 10:19-20)

The idol itself is nothing, a piece of wood or stone. But when people worship false gods, evil spirits are glad to take that worship. That is why idolatry is never harmless.

And the Bible says plainly what all idolatry really is. It is worshiping something God made instead of the God who made it.

> *who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creation rather than the **One** who created **it**, who is blessed to the ages. Amen.* (Romans 1:25)

Angels Are Not Gods Either

The Bible does say there are real spiritual beings besides God. There are angels, who serve God, and there are fallen angels, or demons, who rebelled against Him. Some people ask, "Isn't that a kind of polytheism?"

No. Angels and demons are creatures. God made them, just as He made us (Colossians 1:16 says the Son created "thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities" in the heavens). They are powerful, but they are not on the Creator's side of the line. They can't create, they are not everywhere, and they don't know everything. Good angels refuse to be worshiped. When John fell down to worship an angel, the angel said, "See that you do not! I am a fellow slave of yours ... Worship God!" (Revelation 19:10).

So the Bible's world is full of spiritual beings, but it has only one God. That is very different from polytheism, where the gods are many and divine. In the Bible, the only One who deserves worship is the Creator.

The Idols We Don't Call Gods

Most people reading this book don't have a statue of Zeus in the living room. But the Bible says there are other kinds of idols. Paul says greed "is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). He says some people's "god is the belly" (Philippians 3:19). Jesus said, "You are not able to serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24).

An idol is anything you look to for what only God can give: security, worth, comfort, meaning, or hope. Money, success, pleasure, a relationship, your children, your reputation, your political side, even your church. Any good thing can become a god when you love it more than God.

So polytheism isn't just an ancient problem. Many of us are practical polytheists. We say we believe in one God, but we serve a lot of others on the side. John ended his first letter with this simple warning: "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

How This Connects to the Trinity

Here is why this chapter belongs in a book about the Trinity. The Trinity is not polytheism. But some views of God slide toward it.

If Jesus is "a god," a lesser divine being next to the one true God, as the New World Translation reads John 1:1, then there are two gods. If the Father, Son, and Spirit are three separate divine beings, as tritheism and Latter-day Saint teaching say, then there are three gods. If people can become gods, there are many gods.

The Trinity is the only view in this book that keeps Jesus fully God, keeps God one, and keeps the Father, the Son, and the Spirit distinct. That is why it matters so much. It is the only answer that lets you worship Jesus without worshiping a second god.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think polytheism has been so common in human history?
2. Read 1 Kings 18:20-39. What does the contest on Mount Carmel show about the gods of the nations?
3. Read Psalm 115:4-8. What does it mean that “like them will be those who make them”?
4. What are some “idols we don’t call gods” in our culture? In your own life?
5. How do some views of Jesus slide toward polytheism? Why does the Trinity avoid that?

Chapter 18: Other Views of God

*In **the** beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

Genesis 1:1 (SLB)

The views we have looked at so far in Part Two all start with the God of the Bible and then get something about Him wrong. This chapter is different. It looks at views of God that come from other directions: that God is everything, that God made the world and walked away, and the views of the two other great religions that believe in one God, Judaism and Islam.

I'll keep each one short. Whole books have been written on every one of these. My goal is just to help you understand them well enough to see how they compare with what Christians believe, and to talk with a friend who holds one of them.

Pantheism: Everything Is God

What it teaches. The word comes from Greek *pan* ("all") and *theos* ("God"). Pantheism says that God and the universe are the same thing. Everything is God, and God is everything. The trees, the stars, you, and me are all part of one divine reality. In many forms of pantheism, God is not a Person at all. He is more like a force or an ocean that everything is part of.

Where it shows up. One major school of Hindu thought (called Advaita Vedanta) teaches that the only true reality is Brahman, and that everything else, including our sense of being separate persons, is a kind of illusion. Many New Age teachings say something similar: "You are God; you just haven't realized it yet." Popular movies and books sometimes talk about a "force" that flows through all living things.

What the Bible says. The very first verse of the Bible draws a line between God and the world: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Creator is not the creation. The world had a beginning. God did not. The world will wear out like a garment, but God endures (Psalm 102:25-27). Paul says the root of all idolatry is when people "worshiped and served the creation rather than the One who created it" (Romans 1:25). Pantheism is the purest form of that mistake.

Pantheism also has no room for sin or a Savior. If everything is God, then evil is God too, and there is nothing to be saved from but ignorance. The Bible says the problem is not that we have forgotten we are God. The problem is that we are not God, and we have rebelled against Him.

Panentheism is a cousin of pantheism. The name means "all in God." It says the world is part of God, but God is also more than the world, the way your body is part of you but you are more than your body. Some modern theologians hold this view. It still blurs the line between Creator and creation that the Bible draws so clearly.

Deism: The Clockmaker God

What it teaches. Deism says that God created the world, set up its laws, and then stepped back and let it run on its own, like a clockmaker who winds a clock and walks away. God doesn't do miracles, doesn't answer prayer, doesn't speak through prophets, and didn't become a man. Deists believed you could know God through reason and nature alone, without the Bible.

Where it shows up. Deism was popular among educated people in Europe and America in the 1700s. The writer Thomas Paine argued for it in *The Age of Reason* (1794-1807). Some of America's founders were influenced by it. Today, many people who say "I believe in a higher power" but don't think God has anything to do with their daily lives are practical deists, whether they use the word or not.

What the Bible says. The God of the Bible is not a distant clockmaker. He holds all things together moment by moment through His Son (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). He feeds the birds (Matthew 6:26). Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from Him, and He numbers the hairs on your head (Matthew 10:29-30). He spoke through the prophets, and then He came Himself.

The Trinity is the opposite of deism. The Father sent the Son into the world. The Son became one of us. The Spirit lives inside every believer. God is not far away. He has come as close as close can be.

Judaism: One God, Not Three Persons

What it teaches. Judaism is the faith of Israel, the faith of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Christians and Jewish people share the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. We share the Shema. We share the belief that God is one, the Creator, holy and good, who chose Israel and gave His law.

Jewish teaching says God is one in the strictest sense: one Person, with no division of any kind. In the 1100s, the great Jewish teacher Moses Maimonides wrote thirteen principles of Jewish faith. The second is that God is one, with a oneness unlike any other. Most Jewish people today believe the Trinity goes against the Shema, and that Jesus was a Jewish teacher, but not the Messiah and not God.

What Christians say. I want to be especially careful and respectful here. Jesus was Jewish. So were His mother, all twelve apostles, and nearly every writer of the New Testament. Jesus said "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Paul said the Messiah came from Israel "according to the flesh," and in the same breath called Him "God blessed to the ages" (Romans 9:5). Paul loved his people deeply and prayed for them (Romans 10:1). The church has a long and ugly history of mistreating Jewish people. That was a great sin, and Christians should say so plainly.

The disagreement is not whether God is one. We agree He is. The disagreement is about Jesus. Christians believe Jesus is the Messiah the Hebrew Scriptures promised: the son given who is called "Mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6), the Lord at God's right hand (Psalm 110:1), the One pierced for our sins (Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 12:10). We believe the Trinity is not a departure from the God of Israel, but the full revealing of Him.

If you have a Jewish friend, don't start with the Trinity. Start with the Hebrew Scriptures you share, and with Jesus. Read Isaiah 53 together. Ask who it is about. And use the strong passages from Chapter 7, not the weak ones.

Islam: God Is One, and Jesus Is a Prophet

What it teaches. Islam began in Arabia in the 600s A.D. with Muhammad, whom Muslims believe was the last and greatest prophet. Muslims believe in one God (Allah is the Arabic word for God), who is all-powerful, merciful, and will judge the world. The central belief of Islam is *tawhid*, the absolute oneness of God. The worst sin in Islam is *shirk*, which means joining partners with God, treating anything or anyone as equal with Him.

Muslims honor Jesus (Isa in Arabic) as a great prophet. The Quran says He was born of the virgin Mary, did miracles, and is the Messiah. But it says He was only a man and a prophet, not God and not God's Son. Most Muslims also believe Jesus was not crucified, but that God took Him up to heaven alive.

The Quran speaks directly against the Trinity. In Marmaduke Pickthall's 1930 English translation, Surah 4:171 says, "So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three' - Cease! (it is) better for you!" and goes on, "Allah is only One God." Surah 5:73 says, "They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; when there is no God save the One God."

Here is something important. In Surah 5:116, the Quran pictures God asking Jesus whether He told people to take Him and His mother as two gods besides God. Many readers take this to mean that the Quran understood the Christian Trinity as God, Mary, and Jesus. Whatever was meant, that is not the Trinity, and no Christian creed has ever said it was. Christians would join Muslims in rejecting a "trinity" of God, Mary, and Jesus. And Christians agree with the Quran that it would be wrong to say God is "the third of three," if that means one god among three.

What Christians say. When you talk with a Muslim friend, you are talking with someone who takes God's oneness very seriously. So do we. Start there. Then explain what the Trinity actually is. Not three gods. Not God, Mary, and Jesus. One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One What, three Whos.

Then talk about Jesus. Ask your friend to read the Gospels with you. Look at what Jesus said and did: forgiving sins, receiving worship, calling Himself "I am." Talk about the cross, where God showed His love by sending His Son (1 John 4:9-10). Many Muslims have never read the Gospels for themselves.

And be patient. For a Muslim, believing in the Trinity can feel like the worst sin there is. Respect that, and let the Holy Spirit do His work.

What All These Views Have in Common

Every view in this chapter has something true in it. Pantheism is right that God is present everywhere. Deism is right that God is the Creator and the source of the world's order. Judaism is right that God is one and that He spoke through Moses and the prophets. Islam is right that God is one and that Jesus was a prophet born of a virgin.

But each one is missing what Christians believe is the center of everything: God has made Himself known in His Son.

> *Jesus says to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6)

The Trinity is not something we figured out. It is what God showed us when the Father sent the Son and poured out the Spirit. If you want to know God, you have to know Him the way He has shown Himself.

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between pantheism and the Bible's view of God and creation? Why does Genesis 1:1 matter so much here?
2. How does the Trinity answer deism?
3. What do Christians and Jewish people agree on about God? Where do we differ?
4. Why is it important to know that the Quran's description in Surah 5:116 is not what Christians believe the Trinity to be?
5. If you have a friend from one of these backgrounds, what would be a good first step in talking with them about God?

Part Three: Living With the Triune God

Chapter 19: The Hard Questions

> *but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and **be** ready always for a defense to everyone who asks you an account concerning the hope in you, with gentleness and fear*
>
> 1 Peter 3:15 (SLB)

Peter tells us to be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about our hope, and to do it "with gentleness and fear." This chapter takes the questions people ask most about the Trinity and answers them as simply as I can. Many of these come from friends in the groups we looked at in Part Two. They are fair questions, and they deserve straight answers.

One key unlocks most of them, so let me give it to you first. Jesus is one Person with two natures. He is fully God, and He is fully man. Some things in the Gospels are true of Him because He is God. Other things are true of Him because He is man. When you read a verse that seems to make Jesus less than God, ask, "Is this speaking of Him as a man, or of His role as the Son sent by the Father?" Most of the time, that settles it.

When Pastor Jimmy Carter led me to Christ as a boy, I could not have explained the Trinity. I knew I was a sinner and I trusted Jesus to save me. Studying Scripture since then has deepened what I understand about my Savior. We are saved by trusting the true Jesus of Scripture, not by passing a theology exam.

"If Jesus Is God, Who Was He Praying To?"

He was praying to His Father. The Father and the Son are two distinct Persons, as we saw in Chapter 5. When the Son prays to the Father, He is not talking to Himself. He is talking to Someone else, Someone He has loved from all eternity.

And as a man, Jesus needed to pray. A real human being depends on God, trusts God, and talks to God. Jesus lived the perfect human life, and the perfect human life is a life of prayer. Hebrews says, "in the days of His flesh, having offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears" (Hebrews 5:7).

This question is only a problem if you believe God is one Person. If the Father and the Son are distinct, it is the most natural thing in the world for the Son to pray to the Father.

"If Jesus Is God, Who Was Running the Universe When He Was a Baby?"

I love this question, because it shows people really thinking. The answer is that God the Son never stopped being God when He became a man. He added a human nature. He didn't give up His divine nature.

So while the baby Jesus was lying in the manger, the eternal Son was still upholding "all things by the word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3). "In Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). He didn't put the universe on hold for thirty-three years.

How can one Person be a helpless baby and the Lord of the universe at the same time? I don't fully know. But that is exactly the wonder of the incarnation. And remember, the Father and the Spirit didn't become a baby. Only the Son did. The Trinity was not "out of the office."

"Why Did Jesus Say the Father Is Greater Than He Is?"

> *You heard that I said to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I said, 'I am going to the Father,' because My Father is greater than I.* (John 14:28)

"Greater" here is about position and role, not about nature. Think of a company. The president is greater than the vice president in position. But they are both human beings. One isn't more human than the other.

When the Son became a man, He took "the form of a slave" (Philippians 2:7). He came to do the Father's will. In that role, as the Son sent into the world and living as a servant, the Father was greater than He was. That doesn't mean the Son was less God. In fact, Jesus was about to go back to the Father and to the glory He had before the world was (John 17:5). That's why He told the disciples to rejoice.

And notice something. It would be strange for an angel or a man to say, "My Father is greater than I." Of course He is! Nobody needs to be told that God is greater than a creature. It only makes sense to say it if, in another way, the Son is equal to the Father.

"Why Doesn't the Son Know the Day or the Hour?"

> *But concerning that day and the hour no one knows, not even the angels who **are** in heaven, nor the Son, except the Father.* (Mark 13:32)

This is one of the hardest verses, and I want to be honest about it. The best answer, given by Christians since the early church, is that Jesus was speaking as a man. In His human nature, Jesus grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52). As a man, He did not know everything. He lived by faith and by what the Father showed Him.

In His divine nature, Jesus knew all things. The disciples said, "Now we know that You know all things" (John 16:30), and Peter said, "Lord, You know all things" (John 21:17). Jesus knew what was in every person's heart (John 2:24-25).

Some Christians also say that the Son, in His role as the one sent, chose not to use His divine knowledge on this question, because revealing the timing was not part of the work the Father gave Him. Jesus told His disciples after the resurrection, "It is not yours to know times or seasons which the Father has set by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). Either way, the verse shows the real humanity of Jesus, which every Trinitarian believes.

“Doesn’t 1 Corinthians 15:28 Say the Son Will Be Under the Father?”

> *And when all things have been put in subjection to Him, then the Son Himself also will be put in subjection to the **One** who put all things in subjection to Him, so that God may be all things in all.* (1 Corinthians 15:28)

Yes, and it means just what it says. At the end, when Christ has defeated every enemy, including death, He will hand the kingdom over to the Father, and the Son will be subject to the Father.

But again, this is about role, not nature. A son can be subject to his father and still be fully human, just like his father. Jesus, as the risen man and Messiah, carried out the mission the Father gave Him, and at the end He presents the finished work to the Father. The Son is not less God for obeying. Obedience doesn’t make you less than the one you obey. Jesus obeyed His parents in Nazareth (Luke 2:51), and He was certainly not less than Joseph.

“If Jesus Had a God, How Can He Be God?”

Jesus said, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (John 20:17). Paul speaks of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:6). How can God have a God?

As a man, Jesus worshiped and served God, as every man should. The Son took on a real human nature, and that human nature relates to God the way every human being should, with worship and obedience. So the Father is the God of Jesus as a man. And at the same time, the Father calls the Son “God” (Hebrews 1:8). Both are true.

“Is the Holy Spirit a Force or a Person?”

We covered this in Chapter 4. The short answer is: a Person. He thinks (1 Corinthians 2:10-11), feels grief (Ephesians 4:30), chooses (1 Corinthians 12:11), speaks (Acts 13:2), teaches (John 14:26), and prays for us (Romans 8:26). A force can do none of those things. He has power, but He is not the same as His power (Luke 4:14).

“Did God Die on the Cross?”

This one needs care. God, in His divine nature, can’t die. God is eternal and has life in Himself. But the Son of God, who is God, truly died in His human nature. Because Jesus is one Person, what happened to His human nature happened to Him. So Christians can say, as Paul did, that God purchased the church “through His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

And the Father did not die on the cross. The Son did. That is one reason modalism has trouble here. If the Father and the Son are the same Person, the Father died. Tertullian said that Praxeas had “crucified the Father.” The Bible says the Son died, and the Father raised Him (Acts 2:24).

“When Jesus Cried, ‘My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?’ Was the Trinity Broken?”

> *And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” That is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* (Matthew 27:46)

No. The Trinity can’t be broken. God can’t stop being God. But at the cross, the Son, as our substitute, bore the full weight of God’s judgment against our sin. He felt the darkness and the abandonment that sin deserves. And He was quoting the first line of Psalm 22, a psalm that begins in agony and ends in victory.

Even on the cross, the Trinity was at work together. The Son “through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God” (Hebrews 9:14). The Father was the One receiving the sacrifice. Paul says “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The cross was not the Trinity falling apart. It was the Trinity rescuing us.

“Why Did Jesus Say, ‘No One Is Good Except God’?”

A rich young man called Jesus “Good Teacher,” and Jesus answered, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One, God” (Mark 10:18). Some people say Jesus was denying He was God.

Read it again. Jesus didn’t say, “I’m not good,” or, “I’m not God.” He asked the man to think about what he was saying. If only God is good, and you’re calling Me good, what are you saying about Me? The man had come to Jesus as a teacher. Jesus was pointing him to who He really was.

“Isn’t Jesus Really Michael the Archangel?”

Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that Jesus, before He was born, was Michael the archangel. They point to 1 Thessalonians 4:16, which says the Lord will come “with the voice of an archangel.” But that verse says the Lord comes with an archangel’s voice, the way it also says He comes with “the trumpet of God.” Nobody thinks Jesus is a trumpet. It describes what will be heard, not who Jesus is.

The Bible says Michael is “one of the chief princes” (Daniel 10:13). One of several. Jesus is not one of anything. He is the only begotten Son. And Hebrews 1 spends a whole chapter showing that the Son is far above every angel. God never said to any angel, “You are My Son” (Hebrews 1:5). God commands all the angels to worship the Son (Hebrews 1:6). And Hebrews 2:5 says God did not put the world to come under angels. He put it under His Son. If Jesus were an angel, the whole argument of Hebrews 1 and 2 would fall apart.

“Didn’t Christians Borrow the Trinity From Pagan Religions?”

You will find books and websites that say the Trinity was copied from pagan “triads,” groups of three gods in Egypt, Babylon, or India. That claim doesn’t hold up.

First, the pagan triads are three separate gods, usually a father god, a mother goddess, and a son, like Osiris, Isis, and Horus in Egypt. That is polytheism, not the Trinity. Christians reject it just as firmly as Jewish people and Muslims do.

Second, the people who taught the Trinity first were Jewish men like Matthew, John, Paul, and Peter, who would rather have died than borrow from pagan religion. Many of them did die rather than worship the emperor as a god. They learned about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit from Jesus Himself, and from the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost.

And third, finding the number three in other religions proves nothing. Lots of things come in threes. What matters is whether the Bible teaches one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. It does.

"Isn't the Trinity a Contradiction?"

No. A contradiction is saying something is true and not true at the same time and in the same way. "God is one being and three beings" would be a contradiction. "God is one Person and three Persons" would be a contradiction. The Trinity says neither. It says God is one being and three Persons. One What. Three Whos. That is a mystery, but it is not a contradiction.

A mystery is something we can know is true without being able to fully explain it. The Bible is full of them: how God can be everywhere at once, how He can know the future, how He can create from nothing. The Trinity is one more. It is beyond reason, but it is not against reason.

"Do I Have to Understand the Trinity to Be Saved?"

No. The thief on the cross was saved without ever hearing the word Trinity (Luke 23:42-43). A child can be saved. A new believer can be saved before they could explain any of this book. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by passing a test on theology.

But we do have to trust the right Jesus. Paul warned the Corinthians about people who preached "another Jesus" (2 Corinthians 11:4). The Jesus who saves is the Jesus of the Bible: the eternal Son of God who became a man, died for our sins, and rose again. You don't have to explain the Trinity. But as you grow, you will find that the Jesus you trust is God the Son, sent by the Father, and that the Spirit who lives in you is God too.

Study Questions

1. What is the "one key" that unlocks most of the hard questions about Jesus? How would you explain it to a friend?
2. Which of these questions have you been asked, or wondered about yourself? Which answer helped you most?
3. Read John 14:28. Why does it actually make more sense for Jesus to say this if He is equal with the Father in another way?
4. What is the difference between a mystery and a contradiction?
5. Why don't you have to understand the Trinity to be saved? Why is it still important to trust the right Jesus?

Chapter 20: Why the Trinity Matters

> *Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and will make a dwelling place with him."*
>
> John 14:23 (SLB)

Some people hear all this and think, "That's interesting, but what does it have to do with Monday morning?" It's a fair question. If the Trinity were only a puzzle for theologians, you could skip it and get on with your life.

But the Trinity is not a puzzle. It is who God is. And who God is changes everything about how you pray, how you are saved, how you love, and how you worship. Here are some of the ways.

God Is Love, All the Way Down

The Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Not just that God loves, but that He is love. Love is part of who He is.

Think about what that means. Love needs someone to love. If God were only one Person, then before He created anything, who did He love? He would have had to wait until He made angels or people. Love would be something God started doing, not something He always was. He would need us in order to be loving.

But God doesn't need us. From all eternity, before there was a world, the Father loved the Son. "You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand" (John 3:35). And the Spirit is the One by whom that love is "poured out in our hearts" (Romans 5:5).

So God didn't create you because He was lonely. He created you because His love overflows. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit have shared perfect love forever, and God made you so you could be brought into it.

Listen to how Jesus ended His prayer the night before He died.

> *and I made Your name known to them, and will make **it** known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.* (John 17:26)

"So that the love with which You loved Me may be in them." The same love the Father has for the Son. That is the love God has for you, if you belong to Christ. Only the Trinity makes that possible.

Only God Can Save, and God Came Himself

We saw this in Chapters 3 and 11. Only God can save (Isaiah 43:11). If Jesus were a creature, a creature saved you. If the Spirit were a force, a force made you new.

But the Trinity means your salvation is God's work from start to finish. The Father planned it and sent His Son. The Son came, lived, died, and rose again. The Spirit gave you new life and lives in you now. Every part of your salvation is God Himself, working for you.

> *But when the kindness and the love for mankind of God our Savior appeared, not by works which we did in righteousness, but according to His mercy He saved us, through* ***the*** *washing of regeneration and renewal of* ***the*** *Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior* (Titus 3:4-6)

And at the cross, God didn't send someone else to suffer. The Son, who is God, gave Himself. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). His own love. That only works if Christ is God.

How You Pray

The Trinity shapes every prayer you pray, whether you know it or not.

Jesus taught us to pray to "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9). He told us to ask "in My name" (John 16:23). And Paul says the Spirit helps us pray when we don't know what to say (Romans 8:26). So Christian prayer has a shape. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit.

> *For through Him we both have the access by one Spirit to the Father.* (Ephesians 2:18)

That means you never pray alone. When you kneel by your bed, or pray in your truck on the way to work, the Spirit inside you is helping you, the Son at the Father's right hand is praying for you (Hebrews 7:25), and the Father is listening as a Father listens to His child. You are invited into a conversation that has been going on for all eternity.

Can you pray to Jesus? Yes. Stephen did (Acts 7:59). Can you pray to the Holy Spirit? Yes, He is God, and many great hymns do. Can you just pray, "God"? Of course. God isn't checking your grammar. But the normal pattern of the New Testament is to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, and knowing that can make your prayers richer.

You Are Adopted Into a Family

The Trinity is a family. The Father and the Son, in the fellowship of the Spirit. And the good news is that God has made room in that family for you.

> *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery again to fear, but you received* ***the*** *Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, also heirs: heirs indeed of God, and fellow heirs of Christ, if indeed we suffer with* ***Him*** *so that we may also be glorified with* ***Him****.* (Romans 8:15-17)

The Son is the Son by nature. We become sons and daughters by adoption. The Spirit is the One who makes it real in our hearts, so that we can cry out to God the way Jesus did: "Abba, Father." Fellow heirs with Christ. That is who you are, if you belong to Him.

Unity Without Sameness

The Trinity also shows us how God's people are supposed to live together. Jesus prayed that His followers would "be one, even as We are one" (John 17:22).

In God, there is perfect unity and real difference. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Spirit, but they are one. In the church, there should be real unity and real difference too. Paul says the church is "one body" with many members (1 Corinthians 12:12). You don't have to become a copy of everyone else to belong. And you can't go off on your own and say you don't need the others.

Marriage reflects this too. In Genesis 2:24, a man and his wife "become one flesh." Two people, one union. Not the same, but one. Families, churches, and friendships all work best when they look a little more like the God who made them: different persons, joined in love, each one for the others.

Baptized Into the Name

In The Road Home, I wrote about baptism as the first step of obedience after a person trusts Christ. It doesn't save you. It shows the world whose you are. And Jesus told us exactly whose name we are baptized into.

> *Therefore, having gone, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19)

When a new believer goes down into the water, they are not just joining a church. They are being marked with the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father has adopted them. The Son has washed them by His blood. The Spirit has given them new life. Baptism is a picture of the whole Trinity at work in one person's salvation.

Paul says the same thing to the Corinthians, many of whom had lived terrible lives before they came to Christ.

> *And such were some **of you**; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.* (1 Corinthians 6:11)

Washed, sanctified, and justified "in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." Every believer can look back at their baptism and say, "That is who I belong to. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

And if you have trusted Christ but have never been baptized, I would encourage you to talk with your pastor about it. It is a simple step, and it is one Jesus asked every one of His followers to take.

Worship

Finally, the Trinity leads to worship.

In the last book of the Bible, every creature in heaven and on earth worships together "to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb" (Revelation 5:13). The redeemed cry out, "The salvation is to our God, to

the One sitting on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:10). And John sees it all while he is "in the Spirit" (Revelation 4:2).

Christians have sung to the Trinity for centuries. One of the best-known hymns, "Holy, Holy, Holy," written by Reginald Heber in the 1800s, ends its first and last verses with "God in three Persons, blessed Trinity." Many churches sing a short song called the Doxology, which ends, "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

When you understand who God is, you don't just know more. You want to worship more. You see a God who is far bigger than you, and far closer than you ever dreamed.

A Prayer

I'll end this chapter with a prayer. If it says what is in your heart, pray it with me.

> *Father, thank You for loving me before I ever knew You. Thank You for sending Your Son. Lord Jesus, thank You for coming down to us, for living the life I could not live, for dying in my place, and for rising again. Holy Spirit, thank You for living in me, for helping me pray, and for making me a child of God. Please help me not forget who You are. Help me to know You, love You, and worship You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.*

Study Questions

1. Why does it matter that God has always been love, even before He created anything?
2. Read Titus 3:4-6. What does each Person of the Trinity do in your salvation?
3. How does knowing the Trinity change the way you think about prayer?
4. What can the Trinity teach us about unity in the church and in marriage?
5. Which truth from this book has helped you most to worship God? Why?

A Closing Word: Know Him

> *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* ***be*** *with you all. Amen.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 13:14 (SLB)

We started this book with the biggest question there is: Who is God? I hope you can answer it now, in plain words. There is one God. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. They are not the same Person. One What, three Whos.

But I don't want you to close this book with only the right answer in your head. Jesus said eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3). Not knowing the right definition. Knowing Him.

The Father wants to be known as your Father. The Son came down from heaven so that you could know the Father through Him. The Spirit lives in every believer so that God is not just Someone you study, but Someone who lives with you. "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and will make a dwelling place with him" (John 14:23). We. The Father and the Son, by the Spirit, making their home with you.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ, that is where to start. You don't need to understand everything in this book. You need to turn from your sin and trust Jesus, who died for you and rose again. My book *The Road Home* walks through that step by step, and it is free on my website.

If you already belong to Christ, then go and worship. Pray to your Father, through His Son, by His Spirit. Read your Bible, and watch for the Father, the Son, and the Spirit on every page. And when someone knocks on your door with a different answer, or a friend at work says Christians believe in three gods, be ready to give an answer, with gentleness and fear.

Paul ended his second letter to the Corinthians with the blessing at the top of this page. It is my prayer for you too. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Appendix A: All the Views at a Glance

This chart puts every view in this book side by side. The four questions match the five statements in Chapter 1. The Trinity is the only view that answers "yes" to all four.

View	One God only?	Is the Son fully God?	Is the Spirit God and a Person?	Are the three distinct Persons?
Trinity (historic Christian faith)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Modalism and Oneness (Ch. 10)	Yes	Yes	Yes, as a mode of the one God	No, one Person in three roles
Arianism and Jehovah's Witnesses (Ch. 11)	Yes, the Father alone	No, the first created being	No, God's active force	Not as divine Persons
Adoptionism (Ch. 12)	Yes	No, a man adopted as Son	Usually no	No
Unitarianism (Ch. 13)	Yes, the Father alone	No, a man only	No, God's power or presence	No
Tritheism (Ch. 14)	No, three gods	Yes, a separate god	Yes, a separate god	Yes, but as three beings
Latter-day Saint view (Ch. 15)	No, three separate beings in the Godhead	A separate divine being	A separate personage of Spirit	Yes, but as three beings
Partialism (Ch. 16)	Yes	Only part of God	Only part of God	Yes, as parts
Polytheism (Ch. 17)	No, many gods	Not addressed	Not addressed	Not addressed
Pantheism (Ch. 18)	Everything is God	Not addressed	Not addressed	No
Deism (Ch. 18)	Yes, a distant God	No	No	No
Judaism (Ch. 18)	Yes, one Person	No	No, God's Spirit is not a separate Person	No
Islam (Ch. 18)	Yes, one Person	No, a prophet	No	No

Groups and members do not always fit neatly into a chart. These rows describe each group's main published teaching, as explained in its chapter.

Appendix B: Talking With a Friend Who Sees God Differently

These are simple steps for a conversation with anyone who holds a different view of God, whether a neighbor at the door, a coworker, or a family member.

Before You Talk

Pray. Ask God to give you love for the person and wisdom for the conversation. You can't argue anyone into the kingdom. The Holy Spirit is the One who opens hearts.

Remember they are a person, not a project. Be a friend first. Many people in other groups have been argued with, mocked, or slammed in the face with a door. Kindness surprises people.

During the Conversation

Listen first. Ask, "What do you believe about God? About Jesus?" and really listen. You may find they don't believe exactly what you expected.

Define your words. The same words can mean very different things. "Son of God," "God," "Jesus," "grace," and "saved" can each mean something different in different groups. Ask, "When you say that, what do you mean?" Then explain what you mean.

Start with what you agree on. With a Oneness friend, you agree Jesus is fully God. With a Jehovah's Witness, you agree the Bible is God's Word and that God's name matters. With a Muslim or a Jewish friend, you agree there is one God. Start there.

Correct the misunderstanding about the Trinity. Many people think the Trinity means three gods, or one Person in three roles, or God, Mary, and Jesus. Say clearly, "That's not what we believe either." Then explain: one God, three Persons. One What, three Whos.

Go to the Bible together. Read the passages slowly, in context, in their Bible if they prefer. Ask questions rather than making speeches.

Use a few strong passages, not many weak ones. It's better to look at three verses carefully than to fire off thirty.

Key Passages by Question

Is there one God? Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

Is Jesus God? John 1:1-3; 8:58; 20:28; Colossians 1:16-17; 2:9; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:6, 8, 10-12; Isaiah 9:6.

Did the Son exist before Bethlehem? John 1:1-3; 6:38; 8:58; 16:28; 17:5; Philippians 2:6-7; 2 Corinthians 8:9.

Is the Spirit God and a Person? Acts 5:3-4; 13:2; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; 12:11; Ephesians 4:30; John 14:16-17, 26; 16:13-14.

Are the three distinct? Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19; John 14:16; 15:26; 17:5, 24; Galatians 4:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14.

Has God always been God? Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 43:10; Malachi 3:6; Numbers 23:19.

After You Talk

Don't try to win in one visit. Plant a seed. Leave the door open for the next conversation.

Keep the friendship. The relationship may matter more in the long run than anything you said.

Keep praying. "A slave of the Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle toward all, able to teach, patient when wronged, in meekness disciplining those who oppose, if perhaps God may give them repentance to the full knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

Appendix C: The Nicene Creed

This is the creed of the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381), which built on the creed of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). It is called the Nicene Creed, and it is confessed by Christians in nearly every branch of the church. The translation is by Philip Schaff, from *The Creeds of Christendom* (1877), without the later Western words "and the Son" (see Chapter 8). The wording, capitals, and older English are Schaff's.

> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (aeons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.
>
> And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.
>
> In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

A few older words explained: "Holy Ghost" is an older English name for the Holy Spirit. "Quick" means living, so "the quick and the dead" means the living and the dead. "Catholic" here means universal, the whole church everywhere, not one denomination. "Of one substance" means the same divine nature (Greek *homoousios*, Chapter 8).

Appendix D: Words to Know

- **Adoptionism:** The view that Jesus was born a mere man and was adopted as God's Son at His baptism or resurrection (Chapter 12).
- **Arianism:** The view, taught by Arius around A.D. 318, that the Son was the first and highest created being, not eternal God (Chapters 8 and 11).
- **Begotten:** The Son's eternal relationship to the Father. It means He shares the Father's nature, not that He was created. "Begotten, not made" (Chapter 6).
- **Being or nature:** What something is. God is one being, with one divine nature (Chapters 1 and 6).
- **Deism:** The view that God made the world and then left it to run on its own (Chapter 18).
- **Deity:** Being God. "The deity of Christ" means Jesus is God (Chapter 1).
- **Distinct:** Able to be told apart. The Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct but never separate or divided (Chapters 1 and 5).
- **Echad:** The Hebrew word for "one" in Deuteronomy 6:4 (Chapters 2 and 7).
- **Filioque:** Latin for "and the Son," words added to the Nicene Creed in the Western church about the Spirit's procession (Chapter 8).
- **Godhead:** An older English word for the divine nature. Latter-day Saints use it for three separate divine beings (Chapter 15).
- **Homoousios:** Greek for "of one substance," the Nicene Creed's word for the Son sharing the Father's nature (Chapter 8).
- **Incarnation:** God the Son taking on a human nature and becoming a man, without ceasing to be God (Chapter 3).
- **Modalism:** The view that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one Person in three roles or modes. Also called Sabellianism (Chapters 8 and 10).
- **Monotheism:** Belief in one God (Chapter 1).
- **Oneness Pentecostalism:** The modern form of modalism, teaching that Jesus is the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit (Chapter 10).
- **Pantheism:** The view that everything is God (Chapter 18).
- **Paraclete (parakletos):** Greek for "one called alongside to help," Jesus' name for the Holy Spirit, translated "Helper" (Chapter 4).
- **Partialism:** The mistake of thinking each Person is one-third of God (Chapter 16).
- **Perichoresis:** A Greek word for the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit in each other (Chapter 14).
- **Person:** A "who," someone who thinks, loves, chooses, and relates to others. God is three Persons (Chapters 1 and 6).
- **Polytheism:** Belief in many gods (Chapter 17).
- **Shema:** Deuteronomy 6:4-5, from the Hebrew word for "hear" (Chapter 2).
- **Tritheism:** The view that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three separate gods (Chapter 14).
- **Trinity:** The Bible's teaching that there is one God who exists eternally as three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each is fully God, yet there are not three gods but one (Chapter 6).
- **Unitarianism:** The view that God is one Person, the Father only, and that Jesus is a man only (Chapter 13).

Appendix E: Scripture Index

This index lists the Bible passages quoted or cited in this book. The numbers after each passage are chapter numbers. “Intro” is Before You Begin, and “Back” is the closing word and the appendices.

- **Genesis:** 1:1 (2, 17, 18); 1:2 (4, 6, 7); 1:26 (7, 15); 1:26-27 (7, 15); 1:27 (7); 2:24 (2, 7, 20); 3:5 (15); 11:7 (7); 16:13 (7); 19:24 (7); 22:2 (7); 22:15-16 (7)
- **Exodus:** 3:2 (7); 3:2-6 (7); 3:6 (7); 3:14 (3); 12:12 (17); 20:2-3 (2); 20:3 (14); 23:21 (7)
- **Numbers:** 23:19 (2, 13, 15, Back)
- **Deuteronomy:** 6:4 (2, 6, 7, 10, Back); 6:4-5 (2, Back); 19:15 (5)
- **Judges:** 13:22 (7)
- **1 Kings:** 8:27 (15); 18:20-39 (17); 18:39 (17)
- **Job:** 33:4 (4)
- **Psalm:** 2:7 (7, 12); 2:12 (7); 45:6-7 (7); 82:6 (15); 82:7 (15); 89:27 (11); 90:2 (2, 15, Back); 96:5 (17); 102:25-27 (18); 110:1 (7, 18); 115:4-8 (17); 139:7 (4)
- **Proverbs:** 8:1 (11); 8:22 (11); 30:4 (7)
- **Isaiah:** 6:8 (7); 7:14 (7); 9:6 (3, 7, 10, 11, 18, Back); 10:21 (3, 11); 22:21 (10); 40:25 (9); 42:8 (3, 14); 43:10 (2, 11, 15, Back); 43:11 (3, 11, 20); 44:6 (2, 3, 11, 15, Back); 44:8 (14); 44:24 (11); 45:5 (2, 6, 15, Back); 45:18 (15); 45:23 (3, 13); 46:9 (2); 48:16 (7); 53:5 (18); 55:8-9 (1); 61:1 (7); 63:10 (4, 7)
- **Jeremiah:** 23:6 (7); 31:9 (11)
- **Daniel:** 10:13 (19)
- **Hosea:** 11:9 (2, 15)
- **Joel:** 2:32 (13)
- **Micah:** 5:2 (7)
- **Zechariah:** 12:10 (18)
- **Malachi:** 3:6 (2, 15, Back)
- **Matthew:** 1:23 (7); 3:16 (4); 3:16-17 (5, 6, Back); 4:10 (11); 6:9 (3, 20); 6:24 (17); 6:26 (18); 10:29-30 (18); 14:33 (3, 11); 22:41-45 (7); 26:63-65 (13); 26:64-65 (13); 27:46 (19); 28:9 (3, 11); 28:17 (3, 11); 28:19 (Intro, 4, 5, 6, 10, 14, 20, Back); 28:20 (13)
- **Mark:** 1:11 (12); 2:5-7 (3); 10:18 (19); 12:29 (14); 12:29-30 (2); 13:32 (11, 19); 14:36 (5, 10)
- **Luke:** 1:35 (4, 6, 12); 2:51 (19); 2:52 (3, 11, 19); 3:22 (5); 4:1 (4); 4:14 (4, 11, 19); 4:18 (4); 4:21 (7); 23:42-43 (19)
- **John:** 1:1 (3, 6, 11, 17); 1:1-3 (3, 11, Back); 1:3 (3, 6, 10, 11); 1:6 (11); 1:10 (12); 1:12 (11, 15); 1:13 (11); 1:14 (3, 6, 13); 1:15 (12); 1:18 (7); 2:19 (6); 2:24-25 (19); 3:8 (4); 3:13 (12); 3:16 (6, 11); 3:35 (20); 4:22 (18); 4:24 (2, 15); 5:18 (13); 5:22-23 (3); 5:23 (13); 6:35 (4); 6:38 (5, 10, Back); 6:62 (12); 8:17-18 (5); 8:18 (10); 8:58 (Back); 8:58-59 (3); 9:38 (11); 10:9 (4); 10:30 (5, 10, 14); 10:30-33 (3); 10:34 (15); 10:34-36 (15); 12:41 (7, 13); 14:6 (18); 14:9 (5, 9, 10, 16); 14:10 (10); 14:10-11 (14); 14:16 (5, 10, Back); 14:16-17 (4, Back); 14:23 (20, Back); 14:26 (4, 19, Back); 14:28 (11, 19); 15:26 (4, 5, 6, 8, Back); 16:7 (6, 8); 16:13 (4); 16:13-14 (4, Back); 16:23 (20); 16:28 (12, Back); 16:30 (19); 17:3 (1, 3, 6, 11, 13, 16, Back); 17:5 (3, 5, 10, 14, 19, Back); 17:21 (14, 15); 17:22 (20); 17:24 (3, 10, 20, Back); 17:26 (20); 18:11 (13); 20:17 (13, 19); 20:28 (6, Back); 20:28-29 (3); 20:31 (13); 21:17 (19)
- **Acts:** 1:7 (19); 2:4 (4); 2:17 (4); 2:22 (13); 2:24 (6, 19); 2:33 (13); 2:36 (12); 2:38 (5, 10, 13); 5:3 (4, 11); 5:3-4 (4, 6, 16, Back); 7:51 (4); 7:55-56 (15); 7:59 (13, 20); 8:16 (10); 10:25-26 (3); 10:38 (4); 13:2 (4, 11, 19, Back); 13:33 (12); 14:11-13 (17); 14:15 (17); 17:11 (Intro); 19:5 (10); 20:28 (19); 28:25-26 (7)

- **Romans:** 1:4 (12); 1:20 (1); 1:25 (17, 18); 5:5 (20); 5:8 (20); 8:9 (4); 8:11 (4, 6); 8:15-17 (20); 8:17 (15); 8:26 (4, 19, 20); 9:5 (3, 18); 10:1 (18); 10:9-12 (13); 10:13 (13); 11:33-36 (9); 13:14 (4); 15:6 (19)
- **1 Corinthians:** 1:2 (13); 1:24 (11); 2:10-11 (4, 19, Back); 3:16 (4, 6); 6:11 (20); 8:4 (6); 8:4-6 (2, Back); 8:6 (2, 6, 12, 13); 10:19-20 (17); 12:4-6 (5); 12:11 (4, 19, Back); 12:12 (20); 15:28 (19)
- **2 Corinthians:** 5:19 (19); 8:9 (12, Back); 11:4 (19); 13:14 (4, 5, 6, Back)
- **Galatians:** 4:4 (5, 6, 10, 12); 4:4-6 (5, Back); 4:5 (12); 4:6 (8); 5:22-23 (4)
- **Ephesians:** 1:3-14 (6); 1:3-6 (6); 1:7-12 (6); 1:13-14 (6); 2:8 (15); 2:18 (5, 20); 4:30 (4, 11, 19, Back)
- **Philippians:** 2:6-7 (12, Back); 2:6-8 (3); 2:7 (19); 2:9-11 (3); 2:10-11 (13); 3:19 (17)
- **Colossians:** 1:15 (9, 11); 1:16 (6, 11, 12, 17); 1:16-17 (3, Back); 1:17 (18, 19); 2:9 (6, 9, 10, 14, 16, Back); 3:5 (17)
- **1 Thessalonians:** 1:9 (17); 4:16 (19)
- **1 Timothy:** 2:5 (2, 13)
- **2 Timothy:** 2:24-25 (Back)
- **Titus:** 2:13 (3, 6, Back); 3:4-6 (6, 20)
- **Hebrews:** 1:1-2 (1); 1:2 (10); 1:3 (5, 9, 10, 14, 18, 19); 1:5 (11, 19); 1:6 (3, 11, 19, Back); 1:8 (3, 6, 19, Back); 1:8-9 (7); 1:10 (13); 1:10-12 (11, Back); 2:5 (19); 4:15 (3); 5:7 (19); 7:25 (20); 9:14 (4, 10, 19)
- **James:** 2:19 (2)
- **1 Peter:** 1:2 (5); 3:15 (19)
- **2 Peter: 1:1 (3, 13); 1:4 (15)**
- **1 John:** 2:1 (10); 3:2 (15); 4:8 (10, 20); 4:9-10 (18); 4:16 (20); 5:7 (5); 5:20 (3, 11); 5:21 (17)
- **Jude:** 1:3 (8); 1:9 (11)
- **Revelation:** 1:17 (11); 3:14 (11); 4:2 (20); 5:7 (10); 5:13 (10, 11, 20); 7:10 (20); 19:10 (3, 11, 17); 21:3 (15); 21:6 (11); 22:13 (3)

About This Book

One God, Three Persons explains what Christians believe about God in plain words, and compares it fairly with the other answers people give.

Part One builds the teaching of the Trinity one simple step at a time, straight from Scripture: there is one God; the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God; and the three are distinct Persons. Put together, God is one What and three Whos. Part One also shows the hints of the Trinity in the Old Testament, tells how the early church put it into words at Nicaea and Constantinople, and explains why every popular picture of the Trinity breaks down somewhere.

Part Two explains, one chapter each, modalism and Oneness teaching, Arianism and Jehovah's Witnesses, adoptionism, Unitarianism, tritheism, the Latter-day Saint view, partialism, polytheism, and other views of God, including pantheism, deism, Judaism, and Islam. Each view is described fairly, from its own published statements where possible, and compared with what the Bible says.

Part Three answers the hard questions people ask most and shows why the Trinity matters for love, salvation, prayer, family, and worship.

Every chapter ends with study questions for personal reading or a small group. At the back are a chart of every view, a guide for talking with a friend who sees God differently, the Nicene Creed, a list of words to know, and a Scripture index.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.