

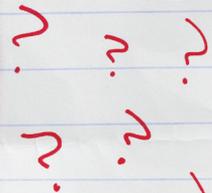
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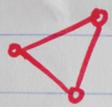
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PHIL TALLON



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How to Use This Book

This book has three main elements:

1. A basic *catechesis* with theological questions and answers, along with Bible verses for memorization. These lay out the most basic elements of Christian theology in plain language.
2. Sixteen *lessons* that comment on the catechesis questions and answers. The lessons explain the central ideas using clear analogies and illustrations and follow immediately after the memory verses.
3. *Notes* for those who want to dive deeper into the key ideas. (The Notes are in the back of the book.)

Anyone can pick up this book and read it on their own. But it is designed so that it can be used to lead groups through the big ideas of the faith. If you are using this in a class setting, such as a new member or confirmation class in church, or as a small-group study, here are some suggestions:

The questions, answers, and Bible verses are intended to be easily memorized so that a class that is working through the material (or an individual on his own) can carry around in their heads the core teachings of the church. Memorization is never easy at first, but it gets easier with practice. Most students and adults do have the ability to memorize these questions, answers, and memory verses (even if they don't realize it). A good practice is to have all people in the class recite the questions,



answers, and the memory verses at the beginning of the class.

The lessons are short, so that anyone can read through them quickly. Teachers leading students through the material should have everyone read the lessons ahead of time and begin to think through the ideas so they will be ready for discussion. There are also fun, illustrated videos of the text, which are available through Seedbed's website. When a class gathers together, I would suggest showing the videos and then breaking into groups to discuss, then gather together again to talk about the key ideas and make sure everyone understands them.

The notes (indicated by this symbol: ) provide more in-depth discussion of the ideas at play. Teachers who are leading students or adults through the material should read these sections so that they have a better sense of what's going on behind the scenes: specifically how the church has worked to faithfully articulate what the Bible teaches in a way that holds everything together rationally. **There are also teachers' guides (available online at seedbed.com/absolutebasics) to provide discussion questions, activities, lesson plans, and other resources.** There are references throughout the notes to books that provide helpful additional reading. If teachers only want to pick up an additional book or two for background reading, I recommend *Thirty Questions: A Short Catechism of the Christian Faith* by Timothy Tennent, or (for a much deeper dive) *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* by Thomas Oden.

Catechesis Questions and Memory Verses

Q1. Who is God?

A. God is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons in one God. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Q2. What is God like?

A. God is perfect in power, knowledge, and in His holy love.
(Psalm 147:5)

Q3. What did God make?

A. God spoke everything into being, by His own free choice, and it was very good. (Hebrews 11:3)

Q4. Why is there evil?

A. God gave us free will to obey and we did not. (Romans 5:12)

Q5. Who is Jesus Christ?

A. The eternally begotten Son of God and the Son of Mary. Fully divine. Fully human. (John 1:14)

Q6. Why did the Son of God become human?

A. Because God loves us and wants to make us true children of God.
(Galatians 4:4-5)

Q7. What is salvation?

A. Through Jesus' sacrificial death and victorious resurrection, we are reconciled with God and rescued from destruction.

(1 Timothy 2:5-6)

Q8. What is required for salvation?

A. We must repent and believe in Jesus Christ. (Mark 1:15)

Q9. What are the benefits of salvation?

A. We are pardoned by God, made part of God's family again, and given resurrection life and power. (Romans 5:1)

Q10. What happens when we live out our salvation in Christ?

A. God continues to work in us to make us holy and blameless.

(Colossians 1:22)

Q11. Who is the Holy Spirit?

A. The eternal Spirit of God, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. (John 14:26)

Q12. What does the Holy Spirit do?

A. The Spirit leads us to repentance, gives us new life, and empowers us to follow Jesus. (Titus 3:5-6)

Q13. What is the church?

A. The church is the community of all true believers, who are Christ's body in the world, continuing the work of the apostles.

(Ephesians 4:4-5)

Q14. What are the church's sacraments?

A. Baptism is the holy covenant by which we join the church, and Holy Communion is the church's ongoing act of thanksgiving. Both are means of participating in Jesus' death and resurrection.

(Matthew 28:19-20)

Q15. What is the world's great hope?

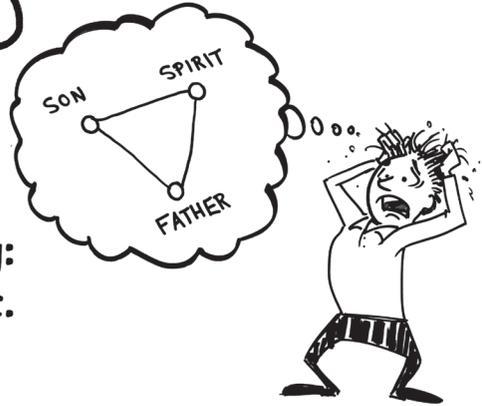
A. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again to redeem all things and reign as King forever. (Revelation 22:20)

Q16. What is our future?

A. Like Jesus, we will be raised from the dead, either to worship God forever or to be forever separated from Him. (1 Corinthians 6:14)

Unit 1 • Question 1:

WHO IS GOD?



A: God is the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons in one God.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. —2 Corinthians 13:14

The Trinity is one of the most important theological ideas ever. But it gives people panic attacks when they think about it. This lesson will give you the very basics you need to understand what the Trinity is, and why it matters so much.

The basic idea behind the Trinity is this: God is three things, but also still one thing. ✨

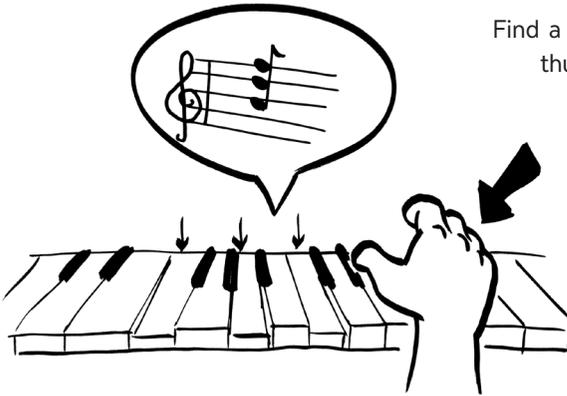
God is three persons who have existed for all eternity, are equally powerful, wise, and good, and who have always depended on each other.

THE **3** PERSONS
of the TRINITY
HAVE ALWAYS
EXISTED

There's the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, existing in perfect harmony as one God.

How can this be? How can you have three things that exist perfectly together?

Here's the thing, if you can understand a tiny bit about how music works, you can understand the basics of the Trinity.



Find a piano. Pick any white key, put your thumb on it. Then skip a white key and put your index finger on the next one. Then skip one more and put your middle finger on the next white key. Now press down your thumb, then index finger, then middle finger. Boom. There's a harmonic chord. Three distinct sounds all existing in a perfect harmony. ✂

Three things that are also one thing. The threeness and the oneness work together perfectly.

This gives us a picture (or rather a sound) of what God is like. There is one God (like the one chord) with three persons (like the three notes) all existing in perfect harmony forever.

Now, unlike the chord we just played, which came into being then ceased to exist, the three persons of the Trinity have always existed. And they've always existed in the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Father has always been the Father of the Son. (You can't be a father without a son.) The Son has always been Son to the Father. And they have always been unified by the love of the Spirit. ✂

What this means is that the most basic fact about all reality is loving relationship. Before there was a world, there was a family: the family of the triune God.

So when you get down to the very bottom of things—to the root of all reality—there's love.

Question 1: Who is God?

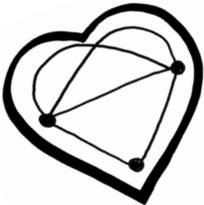
C. S. Lewis makes this interesting point in *Mere Christianity*,

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that “God is love.” But, they seem not to notice that the words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love. ✱



The fact that God is perfectly loving requires that God is relational. And the opposite is true as well. The fact that God is relational requires that God is perfectly loving. Here’s why. If God is triune we know that God is love, because you can’t have three people existing for all eternity in harmonious relationship if they aren’t perfectly loving.

Imagine existing for all eternity with your brothers and sisters, or even your friends. Eventually you would get in some fights. But the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit don’t fight. Because God is perfectly loving.



We know God is love because God is a *Trinity*.

We know God is a Trinity because God is *love*.

So the Trinity is this perfect, loving relationship that’s always existed. One God in three persons.

And because the Trinity is one God, the persons work together in everything they do.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus said we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The entire Trinity is at work in saving us, so we must name the whole Trinity as we’re made part of Christ’s body through baptism. ✱

And it’s not just baptism, all throughout the story of Jesus we see all three persons at work. There’s a pattern here.

Unit 1: Doctrine of God

The Father is the source of everything and He sends the Son into the world in the power of the Spirit.

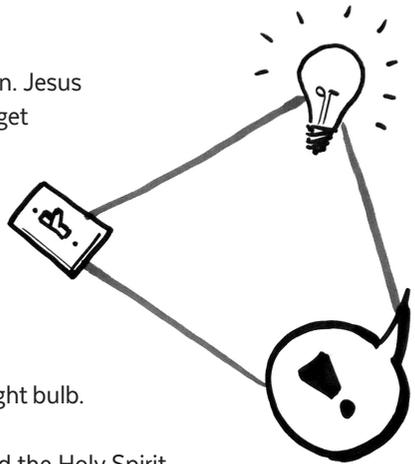
- » We see this in Jesus' birth. By the Holy Spirit, the Son of God is born into the world (Luke 1:35).
- » We see this in Jesus' baptism. The Son carries out the mission of the Father in the power of the Spirit (Luke 3:21-23).
- » We see this in Jesus' blessing of His disciples when He ascends. When the Son goes back to the Father He sends the Spirit to empower us (John 15:26).

Did you detect the pattern? Here it is again.

The Father is the source and goal of our salvation. Jesus is the way. And the Holy Spirit is the power to get there. ✖

Imagine it like this:

- » The Father is the one who says, "Let there be light."
- » The Son goes and flips on the light switch.
- » The Spirit is the electricity that powers the light bulb.



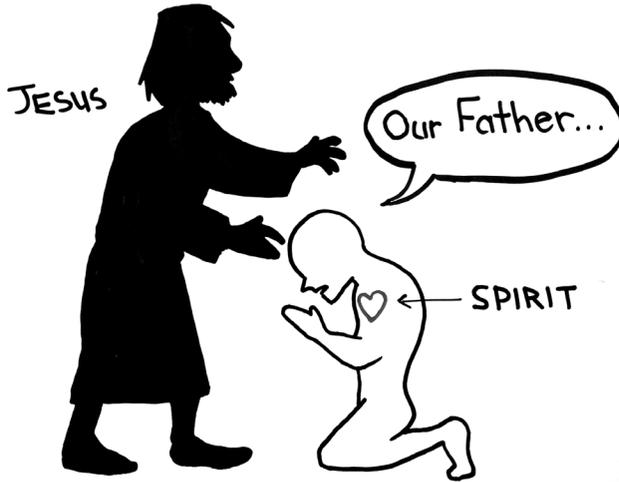
The Father is the source. The Son is the way. And the Holy Spirit is the power.

Another way of thinking about this is to imagine yourself kneeling to pray the Lord's Prayer. We are praying the prayer Jesus taught us. Now imagine Jesus is standing beside you. We begin by praying, "Our Father." Jesus is helping us to have right relationship with the Father. Now imagine that it's the Holy Spirit inside you who is giving you the power to pray the prayer Jesus taught us.

The Son beside you. The Father above you. The Spirit inside you. All working to give us a right relationship with God.

The Father is the source. The Son is the way. And the Holy Spirit is the power.

Question 1: Who is God?



All this might seem a bit mysterious and complicated. But the nice thing is that once you start looking for the Trinity, you see it everywhere. For instance, the very words of the Apostle's Creed are shaped by the Trinity. We begin with the Father (the source), move to the Son (the way), and end with the Spirit and the Spirit's area of work (empowering the church). ✠

The Father above you. Jesus beside you. The Spirit inside you. There you go. There's the Trinity.

Unit 1 • Question 2:

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

A: God is perfect in power, knowledge, and in His holy love.

Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. —Psalm 147:5

As we've just discussed, God is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Three persons in one God. They are distinct in their personhood but united in their nature. Nature is maybe a bit of a hard word, so let me explain. Nature here means the “kind of thing” something is.

- » Ice cream's nature is to be a frozen milk product.
- » A giraffe's nature is to be a long-necked, even-toed ungulate mammal.
- » A triangle's nature is to be a closed figure with three sides and three angles.

So what's God's nature? What kind of thing is God?

The best way to speak about God's nature is to say that God is, in every way, a perfect kind of thing. God's nature is whatever is best.

NOTES

UNIT 1 / QUESTION 1: WHO IS GOD?

 There are a number of places where the church has clarified the right way to speak about God's Trinitarian being. One example is the Athanasian Creed. Another is the statement produced by the Eleventh Council of Toledo, which met in AD 675. This council offered an official explanation of the Trinity, which has been deeply formative for Western theology. The Council of Toledo says this on the Trinity:

Nor can it properly be said that in the one God there is the Trinity; rather, the one God *is* the Trinity. In the relative names of the persons, the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both. While they are called three persons in view of their relations, we believe in one nature or substance. Although we profess three persons, we do not profess three substances, but one substance and three persons [emphasis mine]. (Cited in Alister McGrath, ed. *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed. [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011], 176.)

 Jeremy Begbie's work brought this musical analogy to my attention.

 The notion that God has always been Father, Son, and Spirit challenges our thinking a bit because any of us who are parents *come to be* parents at some point in our lives. We weren't always someone's parent (though we were always someone's child). But God is different in this way.

Gregory of Nazianzus, an eastern bishop, recognized this challenge a long time ago (way back in the fourth century). In answer to the question, "Can anyone be a 'father' without beginning to be one?" Gregory offered this response:

Yes, [there can be a father who did not begin to be one, so long as it is] one who did not begin his existence. What begins to exist begins to be a

father. *He* [God the Father] did not later begin to be Father—he did not begin at all. He is “Father” in the true sense, because he is not a son as well. Just as the Son is “Son” in the true sense, because he is not a father as well. In our case, the word “father” cannot be truly appropriate, because we must be fathers *and* sons—the terms carry equal weight. We also stem from a pair [father and mother], not a single being, making us be divided and become human beings gradually, and maybe not even human beings of the kind we are intended to be. (Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 29,” in *On God and Christ* [Crestwood, NJ: St Vladimir’s, 2002], 72–73.)

In addressing the difference between God the Father and human fathers, Gregory cleverly flipped the challenge on its head. It is not that God the Father isn’t really a true father because He doesn’t begin to be a father at some point, but rather it is we human fathers who aren’t “true fathers” because we are also just as truly sons. The Father is a *pure* father. The Son is a *pure* son. And they have always been like this. Human parenthood is just a dim reflection of what God is in the truest form.

Because God is eternal, our brains strain to think about how this relationship of Father and Son has always been so. C. S. Lewis gave the analogy of two books, one of which has always been sitting on the other. The bottom book “causes” the top book to be in the position that it is, but not in a way that created things have causes in time.

In time, causes and effects often follow in chronological succession. Lewis gave this example, “you eat the cucumber first and have the indigestion afterwards.” But, as Lewis goes on to say, “it is not so with all causes and results” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001], 172).

Lewis extended the metaphor of the two books to make his point,

I asked you just now to imagine those two books, and probably most of you did. That is, you made an act of imagination and as a result you had a mental picture. Quite obviously your act of imagining was the cause and the mental picture the result. But that does not mean that you first did the imagining and then got the picture. The moment you did it, the picture was there. Your will was keeping the picture before you all the time. Yet

that act of will and the picture began at exactly the same moment and ended at the same moment. If there were a Being who had always existed and had always been imagining one thing, his act would always have been producing a mental picture; but the picture would be just as eternal as the act. . . . In the same way we must think of the Son always, so to speak, streaming forth from the Father, like light from a lamp, or heat from a fire, or thoughts from a mind. He is the self-expression . . .



Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 174.



Baptism is the sacrament that gives us grace for a new life in Christ. And if the whole Trinity is *named* in our salvation, so the Trinity must be at *work* in our salvation.



For more on this, read Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1992), book 1, chapter 5.



One of the oldest creeds of the church, the Apostle's Creed, is affirmed by Christians everywhere. Though the creed nowhere uses the term "Trinity," it affirms the Trinity in its very structure, and tells the story of Scripture in a very simple, accessible way:

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only *Son*, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the *Holy Spirit*, the holy catholic [or universal] church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

A helpful way of thinking about the structure of the creed is well said by Luke Timothy Johnson: "The creed does not propose a philosophy of life but tells a

story with characters and a plot. It is a story about God and the world, about God's investment in humans and their future" (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* [New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003], 58).

The story of the world told by the creeds is about the Trinity creating and redeeming us. The Father creates, the Son redeems us through His incarnation, death, and resurrection, and the Spirit empowers us to be the body of Christ.

If we had to map the creed onto a shape, it would be the shape of a "V." The movement of God through creation and incarnation is downward, ending at the lowest point (Jesus' death), from there God brings us back up with Jesus with resurrection power and joy through the Spirit, back to the Father.

The truest story we can tell about the world is the story of the Trinity's activity in the world.

UNIT 1 / QUESTION 2: WHAT IS GOD LIKE?



One helpful idea for thinking about how we speak of a perfect being was discussed by Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century Catholic theologian and priest. Aquinas argued that when we use human words to speak about God, we cannot do so in a way that implies they are used in exactly the same way (*Summa Theologica* 1a.13). The word "wise" means the same thing when we say "Solomon is wise" and "God is wise." But the way that we use the word "wise" is different.

When we use human words to speak about God, we use them "analogously." An analogy uses a word from its usual situation to apply to a different situation: for instance, when I say that the sandpaper is "rough," and also that my trip to the driver's license office was "rough." The word means the same thing, but it is used in a different way. In the first case, I mean that it is unpleasant and irritating to the touch. In the second, I mean that it was a generally unpleasant and irritating experience. Describing the trip to get my driver's license renewed as "rough" stretches the meaning of the word out of its usual usage to helpfully describe a different kind of experience.

Like a tattoo, the fundamental truths of the faith are supposed to be permanently etched into us. However, a lifetime of learning, loving, and living the Scriptures requires that at some point, we really begin to understand where they come from and what they mean.

The Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith is a visual introduction to the core beliefs of the Christian faith. While it assumes no background knowledge of the Scriptures or church teachings, this sixteen-week study is stocked with rich explanation and engaging videos that bring catechesis to life for people of all ages, backgrounds, and stops along their spiritual journey. Like all books, it is possible to read this one alone, but it is designed specifically to be studied in community—to lead small and large groups through the big ideas of the faith. The memory verses, catechism, text, and videos in each lesson work together seamlessly to provide a clear, compelling introduction to Christian belief.

In working through this study, you'll be binding the truth about God on your head, hands, and house through Scripture memorization and by learning the answers to important questions about God. Obeying Jesus takes a lifetime of learning. As you enter this study, let God's grace shape and change you. This is what it means to be a disciple.

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