

A NEW CATECHUMENATE

KNOWING

Study Guide

Session #5 | Trinity

INTRODUCTION

After the resurrection, the disciples of Jesus had to wrestle with one obvious problem: what to make of Jesus Christ. None of the traditional titles applied to him anymore. He simply shattered every one of them. They concluded—and confessed—in the wake of the resurrection that Jesus was Lord, and they worshiped him as God. Little did they know that this act of worship would send them in a direction that would have far-reaching consequences for the Christian movement. This session will explore those consequences.

Christian theology does not start with the abstract but with the concrete. The first Christian theologians were followers of Jesus. They knew him as a friend and teacher first, and as a real human being. Only AFTER the resurrection did they change their mind about his identity. Not that Jesus ceased being human. Far from it! Never once did they concede that ground, reducing him to a phantom or an angel or a god or something of that sort. He continued to be human in their memory, as the stories in the Gospels show so obviously. But they realized he was more, too.

This introduces us to the long process of how the followers of Jesus came to think differently about God. But “think” is not the right word. Yes, they did think about God; but they also prayed to God, worshiped God and obeyed God. Their faith was lived, not simply thought. The God they believed, loved and obeyed was Triune, and the Jesus they proclaimed and followed as Lord was both divine and human.

In this session we will explore the weighty topic of Trinity (the nature of God as Triune) and Christology (the nature of Jesus as divine and human). Don’t let it intimidate you. It is true that the greatest minds in history have written volumes on this subject. It is equally true that hundreds of millions of ordinary Christians living over the past 2000 years have understood and believed that God is one God who exists eternally in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that Jesus Christ is one person who has two natures, divine and human. This is the God they trusted and followed.

There is more at stake here than seems obvious. One of the necessary decisions we must make in life has to do with our view of reality. What is truly real? Is it God, or is it something else—a race or nation or gender, success and wealth and power, or simply the self? Christians believe that God **DEFINES REALITY** because God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit **is** ultimate reality. More about that later.

NOTES

1. A map
2. The Disciples' experience of Jesus
3. Who was Jesus?
4. After the Resurrection
5. Jesus as human, Jesus as fulfillment, and Jesus as Lord!
6. "Revealing God by being God"

7. Key Texts: Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-20, John 14:8-11

8. God coming to earth as a human being! See I Corinthians 1:18-25!

9. Gregory of Nazianzus

10. Two further questions:

a. In light of the incarnation, who is God? Trinity!

b. If Jesus is truly God, how human was he? Christology!

11. The two primary purposes:

a. Restoration of relationship

b. Restoration of image

12. Texts: II Corinthians 5:21; II Corinthians 3:17-18; I John 2:3

BIBLE STUDY: WEEK ONE

The entire New Testament bears witness to the nature of God as One God in three persons, and the nature of Christ as divine and human. We will study a few of the passages that make that explicit. Spend the next two weeks pondering these passages and jotting down some notes. Ask two questions: what do you learn about the nature of God? What do you learn about Jesus Christ as both divine and human?

Day One: Colossians 1:15-20. What do you learn about Jesus in Colossians 1:15-20? Think about the claims made about him: “image of the invisible God,” “in him all things were created,” “all things were created through him and for him,” “he is before all things, and in him all things hold together,” “he is the beginning,” “for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” These are astonishing claims! How could one make such claims of a human being . . . unless that human being were also divine?

Day Two: Philippians 2:5-11. Notice the pattern of descent and ascent in Philippians 2:5-11. Where did Jesus begin (“though in the form of God”)? Why did he choose to become human? What kind of human was he? What happened after his resurrection? What will be the final result?

Day Three: Hebrews 1:1-4, 3:1-6. The book of Hebrews explains the significance of Jesus in light of the Old Testament. Jesus is the fulfillment of the O.T. He is God’s final revelation to humanity. Why final? Because in Jesus God came in person. How do the two texts in Hebrews make that clear?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Christians have used the phrase — “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” — from the very inception of the church. They have spoken it in prayer, during baptism and communion, at weddings, and in benedictions. It states that there is one God who eternally exists as three persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The exercise for this session is to use this phrase throughout the day.

There is a reason for this. Every day we are bombarded with competing claims on our lives, claims that tell us what is real, true and good. In the face of these claims Christians must name and speak reality. Christians confess: “I believe that God defines reality, and I know God through the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. God is one God; God is a Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” God defines reality.

Practice this for the next two weeks:

- Conclude mealtime prayers, ending with, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- Offer a blessing over children before bedtime, ending with, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- Pray in anticipation of the day ahead, ending with, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- Thank God at the end of the day for the day’s blessings and opportunities, ending with, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

In short, train yourself to use this language.

FIRST SMALL GROUP

1. Begin with prayer.
2. Reflect on what you learned and how you applied the content from the last session. Make sure to pray for each other and to support each other.
3. Key question: How can God be one God in three persons? Is this simply impossible to understand? Is that also true in the case of Jesus Christ being both divine and human? Why bother with this? Or is there something necessary about it, necessary in our understanding of God and the Christian faith?
4. What did you learn about God as Trinity in the video or podcast?
5. What did you learn from Colossians, Philippians, and Hebrews? About Jesus? About the Triune God?
6. Share what you learned by praying “in the name of Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” What was that like? Did it feel too robotic? How did it affect you?
7. How might belief in a Triune God affect the way we actually live in the world?
8. Pray.

BIBLE STUDY: WEEK TWO

Continue to ask the same two questions. What do you learn in these texts about the nature of God? About the nature of Jesus Christ?

Day One: Matthew 3:11-17. The Matthew text tells the story of Jesus' baptism. What happens? How do you make sense of the presence of God the Father (the voice from heaven), the Holy Spirit (the dove), and the person of Jesus? No wonder why the Christian movement used the language of Trinity right from the beginning!

Day Two: Luke 7:36-50. Read the Luke text more than once. Try to imagine being there, as if you were one of the invited guests or a household servant, watching the entire scene unfold. What happens? How do the various parties respond to Jesus as the narrative moves forward? How do they respond at the very end? What is so astonishing to them about Jesus? As Jews, they believed that only God has the authority to forgive sins. Yet here is Jesus, forgiving sins!

Day Three: John 1:1-18. The first chapter of John explains the power of the incarnation. God finally spoke through a person. What do you learn about Jesus in this passage? What did he come to do? Try to put all this together. Who is God? Who is Jesus?

SPECIAL PROJECT

You can also envision the Triune God at work in the world around you. One of the secrets of Christian living is to discover that God is *always at work*. As we move through the day we keep trying to see and step into the work he is already doing. God works to create and sustain, God works to redeem, God works to convict and renew, God works to restore justice and show mercy. God works to draw people to himself. We must discern how God is at work and then how we can contribute to it.

At the beginning of the second week try this: in your morning prayers (however short they might be!) ask God for the *eyes to see* what God is already doing in the world (and in your world in particular): among the members of your family and in your friendships, at school and at work, in meetings, in recreation, in shopping, in daily chores. The Triune God is powerful. The Triune God is good. The Triune God recreates and restores. The Triune God works justice. The Triune God reveals himself. Can you see it? Ask God to give you those eyes, and then ask God for the wisdom and power to step into God's work and join it, always "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

SECOND SMALL GROUP

1. Begin with prayer.
2. What did you learn about the nature of God and the nature of Jesus Christ in Matthew, Luke, and John? What are you thinking at this point about how you understand God and Jesus Christ? Can you see how the church arrived at the conclusion that God is One God in Three Persons, that Jesus is both perfectly divine and human?
3. What happened as you tried to see and then step into the work God is already doing in the world? How might that change the way you go about your day? Does it put pressure on you, or does it relieve you of pressure? What did you see? How did it change your perspective?
4. What questions do you have? How can you support each other? Where do you need prayer?
5. Conclude in prayer.