

## Lesson 1

# Prepare to Teach: Who Is God?

### Core Belief

*I believe in God the Father almighty...  
...and in Jesus Christ, his only Son...  
...I believe in the Holy Ghost...*

In addressing God in worship, Christians uniquely name the one they praise as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” As the scope of the Apostles’ Creed reminds us, we cannot tell God’s story without reference to the united saving activity of these three persons. Responding to the question of God’s identity, we most faithfully answer with the name *Trinity*.

Teaching teenagers that when we say “God” we mean “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” seems like another intimidating hurdle in the great relay of faith. How can God be three in one? In the first lesson I ever taught on the Trinity, I devoted the whole hour to the discussion of various analogies for how three persons could be one being. After I used an illustration describing the Trinity as an egg made up of shell, white, and yolk, one of the teens promptly asked if God tastes better scrambled or sunny-side up.

Is the Trinity just some kind of twisted brainteaser that a youth worker can employ to keep teens occupied during the next long van ride? John Wesley urges us in another direction by stating that the Trinity “enters into the very heart of Christianity; it lies at the root of all vital religion.”<sup>1</sup> If, as Wesley teaches us, this doctrine is far more than a mathematical puzzle to solve, how can we guide our young people to a place in which God’s triune nature is the beating heart of our faith and not simply a dispensable appendage?

Theologian Catherine Rigby points a way forward. She emphasizes, “The mystery of the triune God is not that God is mathematically unfathomable. Rather, the mystery is that the unfathomable, omnipotent God is known by us, known to be a friend.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we have located the mystery of the Trinity in the wrong place. The doctrine’s history supports this conclusion.

The church developed Trinitarian doctrine in the midst of conversations about Jesus’s and the Spirit’s relation to God. This wrestling revolved around the question of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 139.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Rigby, “More than a Mystery: The Practical Implications of the Trinity for Ministry with Youth” (paper presented at the annual Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999).

whether the persons acting for our salvation are truly identified with God. What these early Christians discovered to be at stake was not an answer to a puzzling riddle but the church's very relationship with God. If the Father, Son, and Spirit are not all equally God, we encounter significant problems. For example, if Jesus is not God, then we commit idolatry when we pray in Jesus's name or worship him as Lord.

As the early church conversed about the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, many leaders were heavily biased by their Greek cultural environment. For the dominant culture surrounding the church, the nature of deity required any god to be unaffected by human love, pain, and suffering. By casting doubt upon the crucified Son's identification with God, the assumption of divine impassibility elevated the popularity of two inadequate versions of the relationship between the three persons.

One heresy, modalism, held that Father, Son, and Spirit are disposable masks for the real God. At one time God acted in these modes, but he discarded them. The other heresy, subordinationism, elevated the Father to the only God and demoted Jesus and the Spirit to second-class status; ultimately, these demigods stood on our side of the Creator-creature distinction.

Although working from two different directions, these heresies ended up functioning in the same way. For both, God was separable from the divine persons who had been working among us. Meeting Father, Son, and Spirit was not a matter of meeting God. These persons became more like a biohazard suit that enabled God to avoid the contamination of our humanness.

In this theological climate, the church council at Nicea took the definitive step of recognizing God as Trinity by acknowledging Jesus to be "the only begotten Son of God...very God of very God...being of one substance with the Father." Naming God *Trinity* reveals that he needs no biohazard suit to be our friend. Theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna drives this point home by saying, "The doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood, is the affirmation of God's intimate communion with us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

## Student Connection

With growing divorce rates, increasing time spent among peers, rising economic pressures on families, and the steady disintegration of community organizations, teenagers are increasingly isolated from relationships with faithful adults. In contrast to young people from previous generations, who were looking for some cause or belief worth fighting for, many contemporary teens ask the question, *Who will be there for me?* As Erik Erikson, the famous developmental theorist, maintains, fidelity—the ability to be true to someone or something—is the cornerstone of teenage development. Fidelity is the developmental muscle that enables a vibrant faith identity to take root and grow,

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Rigby, 1999.



but it is not an ability we muster up on our own. Fidelity is a gift received from others who are lovingly committed to us.

For teenagers asking, *Will you be there for me?* the doctrine of the Trinity comes as especially good news. The Trinity professes the God who is faithful to the core of his being. God the Father demonstrated his faithfulness to the Son by sending the Spirit to remain with the Son in his death and, three days later, by breathing the Spirit into the Son at the resurrection. Not only is God's very identity one of faithful love; God is there for us in utterly faithful love.

The Father sends his Son into the world by breathing the Spirit into Mary's empty womb, and by the Spirit, he anoints the Son for his mission of bringing life to the world. For young people who are searching for those who will be there, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals that the church bears witness to a God who does not only *act* faithfully on occasion but who *is* faithful. As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this God is unreservedly for us.

In spite of this crucial and potentially transformative convergence of the gospel and our contemporary world, there still seems to be a major disconnect in the church's discipleship process. Many young people are worshiping, studying, and serving in our congregations while still remaining almost completely inarticulate on the triune character of God. One recent study of the faith of teens in the U.S. noticed a version of deism lurking in the faith of many contemporary Christian teens.

Deism is a distorted view of God that suggests that God set everything in motion and retired from his involvement with the creation; at most, this God will get involved if you really need him to fix a problem. This adaptation of the seveneenth-century heresy is popularly expressed in the belief that "God is watching over everything from above." This God stands aloof and removed from his creation and only intervenes in order to keep his subjects happy and comfortable.

One teen described the God of this adapted deism in this way: "It just seems like he's monitoring. He just kind of stays back and watches, like he's watching a play, like he's a producer."<sup>4</sup> This vision of God restricts young people to only the most tenuous connection with God and reduces their lives with God to merely sporadic and thinned-down versions of a potentially holistic and robust way of life. In this situation, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes an even more crucial linchpin in the church's effort to make disciples.

As a youth worker, you are commissioned with the awesome task of witnessing to the God, who by the death and resurrection of his Son and the outpouring of his Spirit, has put himself entirely on the line in order to restore his creation. Naming God *Trinity* is undoubtedly good and challenging news for ourselves and the teens with whom we work. This God holds nothing back in becoming our friend, and he invites us to become wholly devoted to him.

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4 Quotes from Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 164-165.



The flip side of God meeting us as friends is the recognition that God's desire is to shape us in ways that mark and identify us as his friends. Through ordinary, Spirit-filled means, we are invited to join the Son in offering our lives to the Father. In the worshipful life of prayer, Eucharist, baptism, peacemaking, scripture reading, and spiritual friendship, God is fashioning us as those who love him with all our hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves.

May you discover the wonder of the God who *is* our friend, and may your ministry guide young people into the ways that God is making us worthy to be called his friends.

## Messages to Teens and Parents



### Pre-meeting Texts or Tweets to Teens

- o Who is your best friend? What makes a good friend good?
- o How have you grown as a friend of God lately? Come ready to share your experiences.



### Post-meeting Email to Parents

- o The Trinity has become a belief stapled on the fringes of our faith. In addition to the mind-boggling riddle of three persons in one being, we cannot imagine why God's triune nature matters for our discipleship. This week, we explored the reality that worshiping the Trinity identifies God as our friend and reveals his desire to make us friends with him.

# Who Is God?

## Group Lesson

Begin your time together in prayer.

Invite your group to share what they know about the Trinity, if anything. Explain that you are going to learn about the concept of the Trinity today.

## Play the video "Who Is God?"

Go around the group and ask each student to share about one of their elementary school BFFs (best friend forever). Once everyone has shared, invite the group to reflect more deeply on friendship by asking the following questions:

- How has friendship changed as you have gotten older?
- What are some of the virtues that define a true friend?



- What are some of the commitments and activities that are required for cultivating a friendship?
- What is so significant about deep friendships?
- How has a particular friendship helped draw you closer to God?

(Option 2: Show your group a clip from a baptism or read them the rite from the *Manual*. Ask the group to share something that stood out from the ritual, and what it might mean for our relationship with God. If you have any in your group who have already been baptized, request that they share about their experience. Tell the group that baptism is a visible sign of God's grace in their lives, and have them list some ways that God's grace is evident in baptism. After sharing, emphasize that baptism is not only a public declaration of our commitment to God; baptism is also an ordinary way by which God begins the process of reclaiming us as his friends.)

**SAY,** *The idea that God is far off and relatively uninvolved in our world is rising in popularity. From light years away, or maybe even another dimension, God is just watching over everything. In the church, we participate in all of these ordinary ways of growing in friendship with God. We worship God, pray to him, and hear God's story; we serve and befriend others. In all of these activities, we believe that God is befriending us, but how can we be friends with a God who is so distant from us? Over time, the Spirit has revealed to the church that our vision of God needs to change. God is not a distant, solitary overseer; he is a friend. In fact, God models perfect friendship within God's self, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we work through this lesson, we will learn that God doesn't just act friendly on occasion; God's friendship is his way of life, and he invites us to become his friends.*

## Exploring the Faith

Invite a volunteer to read Luke 3:21-22 aloud. As the volunteer reads, tell the students to underline or make a note of where God is at work in this story.

Here are a few ideas from the passage:

3:21 Jesus is praying to the Father

3:21 The Spirit descends on Jesus and anoints him for God's mission

3:22 The Father proclaims Jesus's identity as his Son

As your students list what they found, and you add any they might have missed, ask the group to identify some ways that each person is distinctly involved in God's mission. Then invite the group to name some of the ways that the persons display their unity in God's mission.

Lead into the church's doctrinal teaching by saying something like: *God's story reveals that, in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God acts as a friend toward us, but our Christian*



*tradition also points out that God doesn't just act friendly occasionally. Since God is three persons in one, the Father, Spirit, and Son model perfect friendship.*

## **Historical Teaching of the Church**

(Note: For this section, having a picture of a biohazard suit or a pair of rubber gloves might help teens connect with the point.)

*The Apostles' Creed teaches us that we cannot talk about God befriending us without referring to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Early on in the church, some doubted that God could be our friend. Many early converts from the pagan world could not accept that God would undergo the love, joy, patience, and suffering necessary to be friends with human beings.*

*A common heresy arose that God was not really known in the saving activity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As God, he could not really love or suffer with us; these three persons were just temporary masks that God used in order to pretend. The Father, Son, and Spirit worked like a biohazard suit, enabling God to avoid the contaminating virus of our humanness. Eventually, the church council at Nicea and Constantinople responded by confessing that God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit shared one divine being. In doing so, they affirmed that the shared friendship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is God's nature. To his deepest core, God is friend.*

At this point, draw the group's attention to Rublev's icon of the Trinity. Take some time to explain the nature of icons. Icons are one of God's ordinary ways of opening our eyes to his character; they are like a window into heaven. This icon is taken from the Old Testament story of the three angels who visit Abraham. The story is seen as a hint about who God is as the community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is at the center, the Son is on the left, and the Spirit is on the right. Invite the group to reflect on the unity and distinctiveness of the three persons by asking:

- What are the shared characteristics and actions of the three persons?
- What are the unique characteristics and actions of the three persons? (Give special attention to their hand gestures.)
- How does this friendship compare to that displayed in our scripture passage?

(Guidance for icon: The Father holds his hand in a sign of blessing over the cup, which stands for Jesus's mission of giving his life for the world, as a way of representing his sending of the Son. The Spirit points his hand to the square, which represents the four corners of the world, as a sign that the Son is going into the world in the power and direction of the Spirit. Jesus holds out two fingers, which symbolizes the fully divine becoming also the fully human, as a sign of humble obedience to God's mission.)



## Conversation about the Belief

*Since we worship a God who is not just a distant overseer but the joyful friendship of Father, Son, and, Holy Spirit:*

- In what ways has God befriended us?
- Why does it matter that God does not need some kind of protective suit to be our friend?
- What ordinary means have helped you grow in your friendship with God?
- What difference would it make in your life if you more fully embraced the God whose defining identity and activity is friend-making?

**SAY,** *The doctrine of the Trinity anchors us to the reality that God's befriending of us in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit perfectly reflects who he is. God is the friendship of these three persons. He doesn't need a biohazard suit in order to be in a relationship with us. When, in the power of the Spirit, we stand with the Son in his glorification of the Father, we truly share in the friendship of God.*

## Putting It Together

Invite the group into a time of intercessory prayer by saying:

*As our friend, God is all about conversation. God's nature is the conversation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as those befriended by God, a crucial dimension of our friendship is the conversation of prayer. In prayer, we are shaped as friends with God. By the Spirit, we stand with Jesus as he speaks to the Father. In doing so, we are also shaped as friends with one another. The Spirit teaches us to follow the example of Jesus by standing alongside others who call out to the Father in need, and we lift their names to the Father. How can we pray for each other, and how can we pray for others in our community?"*

(Remind your students to use their student books to continue to practice and explore what you've learned today.)

Read the Apostles' Creed in unison. (Your students can find the Apostles' Creed in their student books.)

I believe in God the Father almighty,

maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;

who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,



born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
he descended into hell;  
the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Ghost,  
the holy church of Jesus Christ,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

