



**Certificate
In a Box**

Christian Belief

An introduction to the Christian faith.

The Youthworks College Certificate in a Box[®] is a resource that provides teaching materials for teaching theological and biblical study at Certificate level.

Teaching Guide

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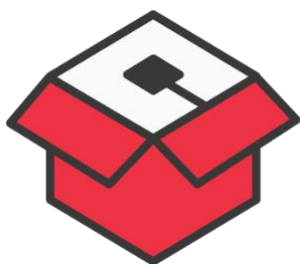
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SAMPLE ONLY



Certificate in a Box

Certificate in a Box is a resource from
Youthworks College.

Youthworks College specialises in theological
and biblical education for effective ministry to
children, young people, and families.



The Youthworks College “Certificate in a Box” is a resource that provides teaching materials for Certificate level theological and biblical study. It is a resource for Christian schools, churches, and other institutions interested in teaching biblical, ministry, and theology units at Certificate level.

What does it include?

Each unit of study includes a **Teaching Guide** covering all the sub-topics in the unit of study. It provides an **Assessment Guide** with suggested assessments and marking rubrics, and **recommended text books** to accompany the unit of study.

How is it designed to be used?

The unit Teaching Guide provides all the information to teach the course. The information in this Teaching Guide is intended to be **distilled to the students by the teacher in classes**. This allows for the accommodation of the content to suit the timeframe and context in which it is being taught.



The flexibility of the “Certificate in a Box” means teachers utilise their own teaching skills to teach the content in the way that is most appropriate for their context. This allows for teachers to use their own Learning Management System (LMS) for distributing and receiving assessments with their students. The assessments provided in the Assessment Guide can be used as they are or adjusted to meet the teaching context.

Further Teaching Resources:

VISUAL UNIT. Bible graphics, charts, and graphs: <https://visualunit.me>

BIBLE PROJECT. Bible videos, overviews, book summaries: <https://bibleproject.com>

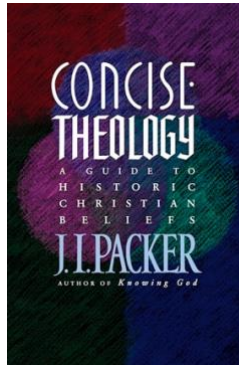
Further material in the Certificate in a Box “Teaching Resources” folder for this unit.

Recommended Text

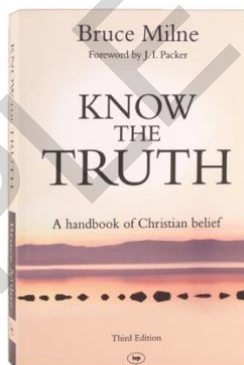
It is suggested students not only learn the content of the teaching guide but also read the recommended textbook alongside the teaching they receive in class during this unit.

The recommended textbook to accompany this unit is:

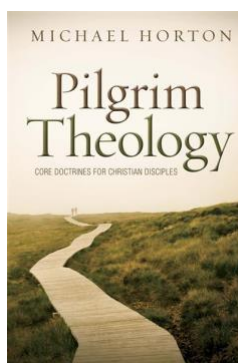
Packer, J. I. (2008). *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*. Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. **(288 pages)**



Milne, B., (2013) *Know the Truth*, 3rd ed. Nottingham, UK: IVP. **(385 Pages)**



Horton, M. (2013). *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples*. United States: Zondervan. **(512 pages)**



Unit Overview

1 Aims

The aim of this unit is to provide an introductory study of the Christian faith, which will give sound knowledge and strengthen faith and commitment to God.

In particular, we will be thinking about:

- The words God says and also considering who he is.
- Humanity's place in creation and the nature of sin.
- The nature and work of Jesus.
- The essence of salvation and how Christians should respond in their daily lives.
- The importance of the church as the gathering of God's people.
- Christian hope and the fulfilment of all that was promised in the Old Testament about eternal life.

2 Learning Outcomes

By the end of the unit, participants should be able to:

- Describe the character and identity of God, the concept and practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- Discuss the sovereignty of God and humanity's place in the created order.
- Consider evil, suffering and the consequences of sin in the context of God's good creation.
- Apply theology as a framework for understanding science, technology, evolution, and work.
- Explain the titles given to Jesus, and their origins, meanings and symbolisms.
- Review the different aspects of salvation, including forgiveness, justification, regeneration, and sanctification.
- Identify the disciplines of the Christian life and apply them in daily life.
- Describe the role of the church and its relationship to Jesus.
- Recognise the different sacraments that Jesus left and their purpose today.
- Appreciate the role of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity and the gifts that he gives us.
- Understand the consummation of the kingdom of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Discuss the consequences of sin and the theories that surround judgement and eternal hell.
- Appreciate the hope that Christians can have in their salvation through the inauguration of Jesus as Christ.
- Apply foundational theological beliefs to the practice of ministry.

Topic 1: Understanding God

1 Topic goals

1. To understand the ways in which God's character and identity are revealed.
2. To explore the concept of the Trinity and to examine the relationship and interplay between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. To understand the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

2 Topic intro



Understanding who God is, is at the centre of Christianity. However, while this may seem like an obvious statement to make, many people get it wrong. Heresies such as 'Jesus is not God', 'Jesus is lesser than God', or perhaps 'the Trinity is three separate gods' have plagued the Christian church for centuries. List some of the sources of evidence that you might use to explore who God is.



More ideas:

Refer to the Seven Major Worldviews handout and conduct some brief research on the key ideas of one or more of these worldviews.

3 Studying Theology

3.1 Beginning Theological Studies

There are two vital sources of insight that should shape the way you carry out ministry. The first is 'theology'. Theology is simply the 'study' or 'knowledge' of God. A sound understanding of God and his gospel shapes ministry practice. Ministry is a response to the gracious ministry of God himself. Our ministry should be aligned with the gospel - God's great project in the world (e.g. Matt 28:18–20).

The second source is your own human observation and insight. You have already had many learning experiences, and God has equipped you to observe people and to understand the way the world works. You should be watching what happens around you and reflecting on it (see Prov 6:6–11). In this, as you become more aware of your gospel need, you will become more reliant on Christ and more effective in serving him.

3.2 Reading Theologically

The most important source for the study of God is the Bible. However, there are also other 'lesser' sources. One group is theological texts: human reflections on thousands of years of walking with God.

The authoritative Christian theological text is the Bible, but in this unit, we not only read sacred Scripture but various *human* reflections on God and his ways. All these human writings are theological texts. These include narrative, (e.g. *The Pilgrim's Progress*), poems (e.g. Dante's 'Inferno'), or even music (e.g. Handel's *Messiah*). Most of our theological texts are recent books, chapters, and articles by other Christians.

4 The Revelation of God:

If we want to develop a relationship with any human being other than ourselves we depend on some sort of revelation. We can discover some things about them just by looking at them, or by looking at something they have done (and that understanding is equally available to anyone able to see). However, what we conclude about someone from mere appearances will be very limited, will often be very different from what someone else may conclude from their observations, and may not be true of the person we are trying to get to know at all.

To develop a relationship further, we need them to offer some special self-revelation – to provide some information about themselves, their background and life history, their likes and dislikes, hopes and fears. Anything someone else reveals to us is an act of grace on their part, since they don't have to tell us anything. As others graciously reveal themselves, and as we respond by revealing ourselves to them, so we grow in personal relationship.

It is the same with our relationship with God... almost. The big difference is that God already knows us completely. For us to know God we depend on his self-revelation. We cannot observe God directly, but we can see the things he has done, the things he has made. That understanding is available to all people everywhere. However, that understanding is limited and can be misconstrued. For a personal relationship with God, we need him to give us a special revelation of himself.

The doctrine of revelation is understood under two headings:

- General Revelation – the revelation of God available to all people at all times in all places; and
- Special Revelation – a revelation of God made to some people, at certain times, in certain places.

4.1 General Revelation

Psalm 19 announces that the heavens, the skies, and the rhythm of all creation declare the glory of God, and the Apostle Paul demonstrates in Romans 1 that the truth of God's invisible qualities are clearly and plainly seen in what he has made. The problem is, human beings are not listening. In fact, people choose to reject this plain truth in favour of worshipping created things rather than the creator.

When human beings look at creation, they should think "we should praise God", but instead, because we are blinded by sin, we think idolatry – that the creation is there to serve us, or we are to serve the creation. It is only once the blindness of sin is removed by the work of the Spirit of God through God's special revelation that we are able to 'hear' the creation singing the praise of God. Because general revelation is limited in a frustrated creation, and distorted by sinful people, we need the gospel to our experience and come to a full and proper knowledge of God. We need God's special revelation of himself.

4.2 Special Revelation

Special revelation refers to God's revelation of himself to particular people at particular times and places. In contrast to the general revelation, God's special revelation contains specific information which enables people to enter into relationship with him.

In the opening to the letter to the Hebrews we get a summary history of God's special revelation:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.

(Heb 1:1-2)

God has revealed himself particularly to the Jewish people ("our ancestors"). This revelation has come "in many and various ways" – through divine acts (such as the Exodus) and in direct speech (such as the call of Jeremiah). These acts of revelation were communicated to God's people by "the prophets", the record of which is contained in the Old Testament.

This great history of revelation reaches its climax in the revelation of God that comes in the Lord Jesus – "a Son". Like the vineyard owner in Jesus' parable (Mark 12:1-8), God's supreme act of special revelation is in the incarnation of the eternal Son.

4.3 Correctly Handling the Word of Truth

The challenge of "correctly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15) has to recognise what the Bible is and treat it accordingly. As a human word and a divine word; we need to pay attention to three important tasks:

- i. What does the Bible say?

The task of exegesis (from Greek for "reading out"), is to understand what the original readers of a passage would have heard the passage to be saying.

- ii. What does the Bible mean?

Hermeneutics is the technical term for the science of interpretation. The task of hermeneutics seeks to understand what the passage will mean for contemporary hearers.

- iii. How can we communicate this message?

Homiletics is the science of preaching. The task of homiletics is to work out how best to communicate the message of Scripture to a particular audience and setting.

4.4 History and Grammar, and Literary Context

In the Bible God has spoken in particular historical contexts through the words of particular historical human beings. Therefore, any interpretation of the Bible must take into account the realities of history and grammar, and literary context. This requires us to understand

both the way the authors have used their words – an understanding of the languages they wrote in and how those languages function (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek), and an understanding of the historical world they inhabited so that we might understand the issues they faced and were responding to.

This method of reading the Bible must consider the style of writing - the literary “genre”. We need to ask the question: What are we reading? E.g. is this a letter (like Romans), a poem (like Song of Songs), or apocalyptic writing (like Revelation)? The genre of a part of the Bible will affect the interpretation just as the interpretation of a cartoon strip is different to the interpretation of a newspaper headline.

The literary context of the particular passage you are reading is important because the parts of the Bible come to us in self-contained books, intended to be read as a whole. So to properly understand Ephesians chapter 2, for example, will require an understanding of what has already been said in chapter 1, and of what is going to be said in chapters 2 to 6. Since the entire Scripture is the result of a single divine mind, Scripture should be interpreted according to the purpose of Scripture as a whole. The pursuit of biblical theology (discovering the unfolding story of God’s dealing with the creation from Genesis to Revelation) is possible despite the vast time difference and cultural background of the many different authors because as well as having multiple human authors the Bible also has one divine author.

5 Being of God and Attributes

In traditional theology, ‘what God is like’ has been answered by discussing God’s names and his attributes.

5.1 Thinking About God

When we think about God and his character, we think about his actions or operations as well as his words. Many topics in theology consider God’s actions: creation, preservation, the work of the Spirit, the work of Christ, God’s plan for salvation, his judgement, the redemption of creation. Each of these reveals God’s character, and in turn God’s actions are understood in the light of his character.

5.2 Who is God?

The basic question that the Bible addresses most directly is the ‘identity’ of God: we naturally ask ‘Who is God?’ Rather than wrestle with questions about God’s existence, the Bible begins by disclosing God’s identity as it builds a doctrine of God. It does this through offering the names, titles, and actions that form God’s identity.

5.3 ‘The name of the Lord’

‘The name of the Lord’ is a common biblical expression. In the Bible names are not merely labels, they reveal something about the person. God’s name reveals something about him. Because he is God he can conceal or reveal his name. If you know God’s name, then he has revealed himself and claimed you as one of his people (Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25; 1 Kgs 18:24, 2 Kgs 5:11; Ps 116:13, 17; Zeph 3:9).

The Old Testament also says that the Lord gives his name to dwell among his people in the temple (Deut 12:5; 1 Kgs 3:2; 5:3, 5; Isa 18:7). The 'name of the Lord' is the reality of his presence (cf. Isa 30:27) and also expresses the difference between God's transcendent reality, which cannot be contained in creation, and God's gracious presence to his people in the creation. God is truly present in the temple, but he is not contained in it.

5.4 God's titles

The Bible offers a range of divine titles. The early theologian Jerome identified ten names for God in the Old Testament, but there seems to be more than that. Here are some of the names used for God in the Bible: God, Lord, Rock, Holy One, Almighty, Mighty One, Most High, Mighty, Righteous One, Jealous, Lord of Hosts, Father, King of Kings/Lord of Lords, Shepherd.

5.5 Metaphors

The Bible also describes God with metaphors, for example, God as judge, king, warrior, father, artist, healer, gardener-vinedresser, mother, and shepherd.

5.6 God's Identity and His Actions

We know God's identity through his actions as well as his names. As we think about God's identity, we need to consider his actions.

- **The true God made everything else.**

The Bible's story begins with creation. God brought all other things into existence (Gen 1; John 1:3; Col 1:16–17). The Bible gives us two implications of this: God deserves all worship, and creation bears its own testimony to God (Rom 1:19–21).

- **The true God is the redeemer and covenant God of Israel**

God's identity becomes clearer in his commitment to save. In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham to be the father of a great people through whom God will bless the whole world (Gen 12:1–3). God's commitment to Abraham and his descendants is the way God undoes the curse of Adam and brings blessing.

When Abraham's family develops, they become the people of Israel. Eventually, God rescues his people, Israel, from Egypt. Before the exodus, God revealed his identity to Moses and connected what he was about to do to his identity (Exod 3:6–15). He said that the exodus would mean that Israel knew him as 'the Lord their God' (Exod 6:7). After the exodus, God is often identified as the one who saved Israel (e.g. Josh 24:5; Judg 6:8; 1 Sam 12:6; Ps 114:1; Mic 6:4).

The exodus helps to establish God's identity as the faithful one and the one who is victorious and powerful (e.g. consider the plagues in Exod 7:5; 8:10; 14:4,18; 15:4–16).

- **God and 'the gods'**

In much of Israel's history, the identity of the Lord must be established against belief in other gods. Idolatry is the worship of images and the worship of other gods. Both are prohibited in the Old Testament. The worship of images distorts the character and majesty of the Lord, while the worship of other gods refuses to recognise the true and living God as uniquely deserving devotion and service (Exod 15:11; Ps 35:10; Ps 113:5; Mic 7:18–20).

- **The God who promises**

As the story continues in the Old Testament, there is a growing tension between God's holiness and his compassion. How can God be faithful to his faithless people? What will happen to the promise of blessing for the world when Israel turns from his blessing? This raises a question about God's identity. Can he be the just Judge and the compassionate Redeemer? As Israel becomes more corrupt, the prophet Habakkuk asks if the Lord is true to his revelation in the exodus. The prophet calls out for rescue, just like the people in Moses' day, but God appears not to do anything; violence and injustice continue (Hab 1:2–4).

The Lord's answer to Habakkuk looks to the future (Hab 2:2–3). He will act as judge, so that the whole of creation is filled with knowledge of his glory 'as the waters cover the sea' (Hab 2:14).

Repeatedly through the Old Testament prophets God promises that he will judge evil, redeem Israel, return blessing and thus the whole world will recognise him and he will be established as the true God of the whole world. In these things promised God reveals his identity.

- **The true God is the God of Jesus Christ**

The New Testament announces the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Testament: salvation has come (e.g. Luke 1:69–73; 2:28–32, 38; 4:18–21). This fulfilment is all about Jesus. He brought the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; Matt 12:28); he is the saviour of God's people (Matt 1:21); he brought God's forgiveness (Matt 9:2) and did God's work (John 5:17) and spoke God's word (John 14:24). Jesus completes God's plans and is the full revelation of God's identity.

God is revealed in his Son Jesus Christ. In Jesus' life and ministry this was glimpsed. In the resurrection it becomes clear. After the resurrection the apostles recognise that Jesus shows the glory of God (John 1:14); he is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:2–3). It is Jesus' path to the cross that shows God's holiness and mercy.

We know who God is in Jesus. Jesus said: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). This has enormous implications for the doctrine of God.

- **The true God is present in his people**

Matthew's gospel begins with Jesus called Immanuel—'God with us' (Matt 1:23) and ends with Jesus saying, as risen and ruling Lord, that he is with us always (Matt 28:20). In Jesus' resurrection, God pours out his Spirit and fulfils his promise to be present (John 14:26ff; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).

God's identity thus also involves his presence by the Spirit as well as his revelation in Jesus. Jesus himself was filled with the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:10, Luke 3:21–22, John 1:33) and he is the one who gives the Spirit to us. Moreover, the Spirit is the presence of Jesus and Father (John 14:18–20; 1 Cor 2:10ff; 2 Cor 3:17).

- **The true God will be all in all**

There is a more complete demonstration of God's identity coming. The day will arrive when God will rule fully in Christ (Eph 1:11; 1 Cor 15:24–28) and his glory will be revealed. Creation and God's people share in that glory (Rom 8:18; Rev 21–22). Through the Son and the Spirit we will know the Father and enjoy blessing with him.

- **The true God is the God of the gospel**

The biblical theology of God can be summed up in a biblical phrase: ‘the gospel’. The gospel announces that God has kept his promises and will redeem and rule his people and world in Christ and by the Spirit. The task of theology is to listen to this Gospel in all its dimensions and understand the true God.

One aspect that stands out is that God is ‘personal’. ‘Personal’ is difficult to define, but we recognise that God is like us in many ways (or we are like him). The true God speaks, acts and relates.

Activity:

Discuss the personal significance of some of the attributes of God.

6 Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The word ‘Trinity’ is not used in the Bible. However, the doctrine of the Trinity is the great summary of God’s identity as revealed in the Bible.

6.1 Biblical Foundations: Is the word ‘Trinity’ unbiblical?

The concept of the Trinity is how the Church speaks about the biblical data concerning God’s identity. This term originated when early theologians examined the Old Testament for clues about God’s self-revelation.

God’s complex unity is certainly evident in the Old Testament. However, Christian theology needs to be anchored in New Testament teaching about who Jesus is and what he says about the Trinity.

Some relevant references are:

- ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). John’s gospel is probably the one that best showcases Jesus’ divinity.
- ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). John’s gospel notes that where the Spirit is, Father and Son will make their home also.

Similarly, before his ascension, Jesus promises that he will be replaced (Acts 1:4). Jesus appears to treat his replacement as equal to himself (John 14:16).

It is from such references that a doctrine of Trinity is drawn from the Bible. The biblical foundation for the Trinity is clear as we answer four questions.

6.2 How many Gods are there?

The Bible’s answer is clear: there is only one true and living God (Deut 6:4; Isa 40:18, 25, 42:8, 44:6, 46:5; 1 Cor 8:6).

Who is Jesus?

Jesus reveals God to us and is God’s image, Word and Son. The New Testament identifies Jesus with God. Topic 3.1 will focus on Jesus and will make a far more detailed case for Jesus’ divinity. Now we simply note major points.

The New Testament writers present Jesus ‘doing what God does’—he forgives (Mark 2:5–10); raises the dead (Mark 5:35ff); gives eternal life (John 5:24ff); shepherds Israel (Mark 6:34); rules (Acts 2:34)

and judges (Acts 17:31). John's gospel records claims Jesus made about himself: that he came from God (John 3:11–13); that he is one with the Father (John 5:19–24, 14:9–11) and that he is 'I am' (John 8:58). Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is given titles that belong to God, such as Lord (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3), bridegroom (Mark 2:19f; 2 Cor 11:2) and 'first and last' (Rev 2:8, 22:13). Jesus is also the object of worship (Rom 9:5, 33; 2 Tim 4:18). Finally, Jesus is even called God directly (Rom 9:5; Heb 1:8; John 1:1–2, 18; Titus 2:13; John 20:28; 2 Pet 1:1; Acts 20:28). This all suggests that not only is Jesus closely associated with God, but that he is God.

Who is the Spirit?

In the Old Testament, the 'Spirit' seems to be another way of speaking of God's power and presence; in both the Old and New Testament the Spirit is referred to as God. In the New Testament, it becomes clear that the Spirit has an existence and personal presence that can be distinguished from the Father and the Son (e.g., the Father sends the Spirit and the Son is filled with the Spirit).

How are the Father, Son, and Spirit related?

If there is one God, but the Son is God and the Spirit is God, and they can be distinguished from the Father, then we must ask: how are these three related?

The Son and Spirit are perfectly united with God (or with the Father). The Father and Son are said to be 'one' (John 10:30; 17:11, 22); the Son and Spirit are presented as unified (2 Cor 3:17, Rom 8:9–10). In John 14:18–23 Jesus says that he and the Father will send the Spirit to believers, and thus the Father and Son will live in them. To have the Spirit is to have the Father and the Son.

6.3 Trinitarian Expressions in the New Testament

As we answer those four questions the doctrine of the Trinity develops. There is only one God, yet Father, Son, and Spirit are each God. They are not simply three different names for God, because although they are perfectly united, they are also in fellowship with one another. Each knows and loves the others, and they speak to one another. However, these distinctions do not mean that there are three Gods; there is only one God.

While the New Testament does not spell out the doctrine of the Trinity, it does present the Father, the Son and the Spirit together, and these texts help to confirm the picture that we see as we answer our four questions.

6.4 A Gospel Confession

The doctrine of the Trinity comes from the Bible, not from speculation. The doctrine comes from the gospel. The various parts of our salvation are the work of the one God who loves us and welcomes us into fellowship. It reveals God as active in salvation. He loves us, he came to die for us, he gives himself to us. If we deny the Trinity, then the gospel becomes incoherent.

6.5 Classic Expressions of the Doctrine of the Trinity

We have now traced the doctrine of the Trinity. What took us a few pages took the Church several centuries to develop (and we are enabled by a path well-trodden by generations of Christians).

Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381)

The councils of Nicea and Constantinople were meetings of the bishops of the churches that were called to deal with the teaching of Arius. Arius claimed that the Son is not God as fully as the Father is. In the copy of the Nicene Creed below, notice the underlined section which affirms that Jesus, the Son, is fully God, and that the Spirit is fully God. The word that was most important in the discussion about Arianism was homoousios, which means 'the same being'. Arians were willing to say that the Son was homoiousios with the Father, that is, of 'like being', but the councils insisted that only homoousios recognises the Son as fully God.

The creed also distinguishes the Son and Spirit from the Father by saying that the Son is 'eternally begotten of the Father' and the Spirit 'proceeds from the Father and the Son'. These phrases do not explain the begetting or proceeding: they are simply paraphrases of biblical words in John 1:18 ('only begotten') and John 15:26 ('goes out from').

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord,
Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God.*

*eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God
from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being [homoousios] with the
Father.*

*Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came
down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate
from the virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he
rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and
is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to
judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*

With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.

He has spoken through the prophets.

*We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one
Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the
dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Nicene Creed

6.6 Terms

It is important to be familiar with some of the terms used in the traditional doctrine of the Trinity.

Substance

The term ‘substance’ (Latin *substantia*) is the same word as ‘being’ in the Nicene Creed. The Greek word is *ousia*. The doctrine of the Trinity states that the Father, Son, and Spirit share one being or substance, that is, they are each the one God.

Person

If there is one God, then what do we call the three? One answer is that we simply use the titles of the Bible— ‘the Father’, ‘the Son’, and ‘the Spirit’. Yet we also need a general term: person (Latin *persona*). This does not mean that the Father, Son, and Spirit are ‘humans’: the term person is used analogically. Most modern ideas of ‘person’ focus on the individual, who is distinct and separate from other individuals. The persons of the Trinity, however, exist in and through one another.

Mutual indwelling

How are three ‘persons’ one single, divine ‘substance’? We can never answer the ‘how’ question. However, we can affirm their unity. Father, Son and Spirit are distinguished from each other, but never divided. Each exists in, through and with the others so that they ‘mutually indwell’ each other. There is no priority to either unity or distinction; rather, God’s unity is unity-in-distinction and the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit exist in their perfect fellowship. John Calvin reflected on this and quoted from another early church Father, Gregory of Nazianus.

‘I cannot think of the unity without being irradiated by the Trinity: I cannot distinguish between the Trinity without being carried up to the unity.’

J. Calvin, 1960, Institutes of the Christian religion, I.xiii.17.

6.7 Failings of Models for the Trinity

At times models of the Trinity have been developed as an aid for understanding. For example:

- Water—steam, liquid, ice: Here, the idea is that all elements are different forms or ‘modes’ of the same thing. Similarly (the model suggests that) the Trinity consists of God in different forms of what is essentially the same thing, existing at the same time.
- Sunlight, power, heat: In this model, God is the power of the sun, Jesus is the light, and the Spirit is the heat. Again, this presents the idea of three elements in one, where each is distinct from the other, but also united.

The danger with models is that relying on them will often turn into a form of heresy. Indeed, these models have strayed into ‘modalism’ (see below).

6.8 The Boundaries of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity excludes several false ideas of God.

Tritheism

Tritheism argues that there are three Gods. However, the doctrine of the Trinity makes it clear that although there are three, they are not three separate gods. Note that whenever one of the persons is treated as too distinct from the others, this risks implicit tritheism.

Unitarianism

Unitarianism is common in people who have some Christian influence. Many Australians would say they believe in a 'God' who is the supreme being and gives some moral order to life, but they do not take seriously Jesus' claim to be God. Even many church members have little real sense of God as triune.

Adoptionism

Adoptionism is the teaching that Jesus becomes God's Son; he is adopted. Some adoptionists think Jesus becomes the Son at his baptism or at his resurrection and ascension. But Scripture states that the Son is fully and eternally God, he is 'eternally begotten'.

Modalism

Modalism blurs the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity. It says that the Father, Son and Spirit are modes in which God expresses himself and are, as it were, masks, which he uses from time to time. In contrast to this, the Bible teaches that the distinctions between Father, Son and Spirit are permanent: they are not modes but three persons who are in personal relationship amongst themselves.

Subordinationism

Subordinationism is the view that the Son and the Spirit are less than the Father. The Bible says that the Son submits to the Father and that the Spirit is sent by the Father, though neither of these statements imply that the Son or the Spirit is less than the Father.

6.9 Contemporary Trinitarian Heresy

Many religious and cultural groups have attempted to solve the complexities of the Trinity and the uniqueness of what Christians believe, often through a simplification of doctrinal issues. However, simplification can fall into heresies.

Jehovah's Witnesses: Jesus is not God

The book of John Chapter 1 states that the Word was God. Jehovah's Witnesses interpret this to mean that the Word was 'a God'. They point out that the word 'Trinity' is not in the Bible and assume from this, that the idea of 'Trinity' is also not in the Bible. Yet we would argue that this made-up word 'Trinity' is a helpful one. It sums up what is in the Bible: God truly revealing himself as one God, Father, Son, and Spirit. Whilst no mere human theological term has authority over us, such terms can help us understand and submit to what does have authority: God as he reveals himself to us in the Bible.

6.10 A Very Practical Doctrine

Because the doctrine of the Trinity summarises what we know about God in the gospel, it has many practical implications. Here we note three important ones.

Worship

The doctrine of the Trinity is the basis for Christian worship because it tells us that by the work of the Son and the Spirit we are included in God's life; through Christ we have access to the Father by the Spirit (Eph 2:18).

Evangelism

When you explain the gospel to someone, you are introducing them to the triune God, and when you explain that God, in Christ, has died and risen to save his people, then you are talking about the Trinity (even if you don't use the words). What's more, as you do evangelism, God the Spirit is at work. We speak the word, but he takes the words he has taught and uses them to bring new life (1 Cor 2:12–16). In evangelism, you partner with the triune God.

Relationships

The doctrine of the Trinity has important implications for our view of relationships. It tells us that God has always been three-in-one in perfect, loving fellowship. This means that personal love and fellowship are at the deepest level of reality.

7 For Discussion

Reflect on or discuss the following questions:

- How would you explain to someone your belief in the Trinity?
- What are the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity on our lives and ministries?