

The Trinity Seminar
Knowing the One True God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
by
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Lesson #1 : Understanding the Trinity from the Gospel of John

Lesson #2: John's Prologue part 1

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Lesson #1 : Understanding the Trinity from the Gospel of John

"I myself like to think of the doctrine of the Trinity as the ultimate ground of theological knowledge of God, the basic grammar of theology..."
T.F. Torrance

"The whole Christian faith consists chiefly in the knowledge of the Trinity."
Thomas Aquinas

"The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian."
Karl Barth

"The Trinity is not the awkward appendix to Christian theology; it is the source, the center and the goal of all Christian theology."
Michale Reeves

For many Christians, the term *Trinity* can feel distant from the realities of everyday life and very possibly their faith. It is seen as a mysterious religious term that is only discussed in seminaries or theology books rather than by everyday disciples. As a result, believers may affirm the *Trinity* confessionally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet rarely reflect on how this truth shapes their understanding of God's being, His love, their redemptive inheritance, or their union with the life of God. This lack of understanding causes the Trinity to be largely ignored while respected theologians of the past century found it to be the cornerstone of our faith.

It seems that if the Trinity is acknowledged at all, it is often categorized as just another attribute of God like omniscience, omnipresence, or immutability. But while these attributes speak of what God can do, the *Trinity* is actually an ontological reality articulating Who God is. And while it is obviously important to know His economic actions, it is all the more important to know His immanent identity. But all too often, in the midst of a Church culture mostly concerned with self-help pragmatism, there is a stunning neglect of what some consider to be the most important revelation about the God of Christianity. In fact, discipleship without a focus on the Trinity is like a car without an engine. It may look like it can go somewhere on the outside, but the truth is that it is powerless to move.

It cannot be overstated that knowing the *Trinity* is essential for the Christian life because it tells us who God truly is and how He relates to us. The "Christian God" is a *Trinity*. Christians believe God is one yet exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a relationship of perfect love into which we are invited. This means our faith is not just about following rules or assimilating a culture. It is actually about sharing in a living relationship with God the Father who loves us, the Son who saves us, and the Spirit who lives within and transforms us. And these practical personal benefits actually bring us into the ultimate reality which is—experiencing the very love and life that the Father, Son, and Spirit have with one another.

This seminar is broken up into 10 sessions that will attempt to develop an understanding of the *Trinity* as an essential biblical concept in knowing God. Using the gospel of John as a primary source, each lesson will empower the students to understand the importance of the *Trinity* and how vital it is to their worship, community, and overall lives as disciples. The lessons will progressively move from the biblical proclamation of who Christ is, to the theological crises caused by the incarnation and self-proclamation of Jesus, to the historic articulation of the *Trinity*, and then to our inclusion in this reality. After each lesson, there is a set of questions to promote further reflection as well as space for personal articulation of what was just learned.

Though we will refer to other scriptures, the majority will come from the book of John. This gospel is the epicenter of the theological earthquake which was caused by the unveiling of the deity of Jesus Christ along with His unique and dynamic relationship with the Father and Spirit. Although unsigned, like the other gospels, the Gospel of John has traditionally been attributed to the Apostle John, who was one of the twelve disciples and part of Jesus' inner circle. Early church testimony seems to affirm that the Gospel was written by this apostle. And none more boldly than Irenaeus (AD 130-202), who claims to have received this tradition from Polycarp, who actually knew the apostle John (source: Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History, book V, chapter 20). However, some scholars and critics have questioned the authenticity or historical reliability of the Gospel of John because of its highly theological style and its strong emphasis on the divinity of Jesus, concepts which they believe have a later historic date. But conservative scholars point to the Gospel's detailed knowledge of first-century Jewish customs, Jerusalem's geography, and intimate conversations with Jesus as evidence that it was written by someone with firsthand experience rather than a later anonymous author. Though it is widely attested to have been written as late as 90-100 AD, it is still acknowledged to be of first-century origins and written by the last living apostle—John.

Compared to the more narrative-focused presentation of the Synoptic Gospels, which are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John often speaks in deeper symbolic and reflective language. But rather than contradicting the other Gospels, John complements them by offering a more theological perspective on the same Jesus whom the early church worshiped and proclaimed. John includes a large amount of material not found in the others. Instead of frequent parables, John features extended theological dialogues and symbolic "signs," along with Jesus' well-known 7 "I am" statements. The Gospel opens not with Jesus' birth or baptism, but with a profound theological prologue, which the next two lessons will cover, declaring Him to be the eternal Word (Logos), emphasizing His divine identity from the very beginning.

Another key distinction is John's theological focus. Rather than centering primarily on the Kingdom of God, John highlights the identity of Jesus as the Son who is in intimate unity with the Father. The narrative is carefully structured around a series of 7 signs and personal encounters, such as those with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, each pointing to who Jesus truly is. The purpose of the Gospel is made explicit: "*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*" (John 20:31). As a result, John's

Gospel reads more like a theological testimony than a simple chronological account, offering a deeper meditation on the personal identity of Jesus and His mission.

The gospel of John is a unique and glorious gift that requires deep reflection. It takes the believer beyond a historic recording of the actions of Christ into a deeply spiritual view of the person of Christ. And that personhood involves the joining of humanity and divinity in the Messiah, making it paramount in our discussion of God as Trinity. John's intent is to make theological points within actual stories rooted in history. But the former is his primary passion. This is why there are fewer stories in his gospel. John chose these select stories in order to strategically make specific theological statements about Christ. This is also why there are so many chapters dedicated to the passion and resurrection of Christ. In a manner of speaking, John is primarily concerned with WHO Jesus is, not WHEN Jesus was.

As can be seen in this short lesson, the gospel of John is a profound book that makes radical claims about Jesus Christ. These are so radical that many scholars have stumbled at the offense of what is written, coming up with claims of a post-apostolic date of writing and author. But the best evidence available contradicts this, causing the reader to have to wrestle with the stunning claims of which we will cover in the following sessions. If they be true, though, you will see what a glorious gift this gospel is in our understanding of who the Christian God is and what the Christian life is like.

Lesson #1 Questions:

1. Why is Trinity considered to be more than an attribute of God?
2. What is meant by the term the synoptic gospels?
3. What is the primary theme of the Synoptics?
4. Who wrote the gospel of John and when?
5. What is the primary theme of John?

In your own words, explain why John is a unique gospel.