

# Basic Christianity

## Week Two

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### Who is God?

#### Importance of the question.

The more we understand about a person's motivations, interests, personality, strengths--in short, who they are-- the more able we are to deepen in our relationship with them. Understanding God's nature is crucial in developing an intimate trust relationship with him.

Relating to God personally involves raising certain questions:

- Can he meet my needs?
- What is his will for my life?
- Where do I stand with God when I fail?

These are the kind of issues that are on the back burner of every Christians' life. We need to have some deep personal confidence about who God is if we are to move ahead spiritually.

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#### Common misconceptions.

There are a few ways people tend to view God in our culture. We should be aware of these views in part because when we share our faith, others will process what we're saying in terms of their preconceptions of God. Ex: . Second, we take these concepts of God into our Christian faith more than we may realize. Ex:

- *"Cosmic energy" view.* This is certainly on the rise. Think about the popularity of American Indian spirituality and Eastern religion. That's more and more the social consensus. Disney's Pocahontas is a good example. The idea here is that God is an energy force, much like gravity or electricity. That power is both in the universe and in each one of us. So the idea is to discover the "god within," and to harness the power to better our lives.
  - New Age spirituality

So getting in touch with god is really just getting better in touch with yourself.

- *"Senile old man" image.* Jovial and forgetful. God doesn't take anything too seriously--so neither should we. We should show him reverence, but we shouldn't think that he has much to do with our lives. That's why it's okay to visit him on Sunday morning, then live your own life for the rest of the week. It's kind of like visiting grandpa in the old folks home.

For people who hold this view, Christianity is more about ceremonies and rituals than the substantive claims of the Gospel, or knowing Christ personally. Most people brought up in the church think this way.

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- *Cosmic policeman.* Cosmic kill-joy. God is more or less like a military drill sergeant or a junior high school principal. Remember Billy Joel's song where he says, "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun. . ." Maybe its the inference from the fact that most religious people are really uptight to the idea that God must also be really uptight. How about Ned Flanders, the fundamentalist neighbors of the Simpsons?

I think that many non-Christians have in their minds that they'll start thinking about God late in life, because for now, they want to really enjoy life.

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## The Trinity

Perhaps the hardest thing to grasp about God is the biblical doctrine of the trinity. Let's start with the definition:

- *"God exists as one essence in three distinct persons"*
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This does not mean, as Moslems claim, that we believe in three Gods. Nor does it mean that we believe in one God who changes forms from time to time, like Clark Kent transforms himself into superman.

While we can never fully explain the trinity, we can describe it in various ways. I have always found the image of water helpful. The same substance, H<sub>2</sub>O exists in three distinct forms: solid, liquid and gas.

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## Three features of the trinity.

The Bible never uses the word "trinity." This is a doctrine that we arrive at by seeing what the Bible tells us about God. The fact that the Bible doesn't use the word trinity, doesn't mean that it's just a man made, nonessential doctrine. For example, the Bible never states that reincarnation is false. Yet, that is the unmistakable inference from passages like Hebrews 9:27. We arrive at the doctrine of the trinity by harmonizing the many passages that talk about God.

1. God is a Unity. "Hear oh Israel, the Lord God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4). See also 1 Corinthians 8:4. This is *monotheism*, the belief that there is one God.
2. God is a Plurality. Three distinct persons constitute God. The most common name for God in the Old Testament is "Elohim," which is a plural form for God. Note in Genesis 1:26,27 that it says, "Let us make man in Our image. . .male and female he created them. . ." This shows the unity and diversity of God in human nature. Both equally human, but distinct and complimentary to each other.
  - *The Father is God.* Ephesians 4:6
  - *The Son is God.* John 10:30, 8:58(Jesus' words); Hebrews 1:1-3, 8a (testimony of the Old Testament); Colossians 1:16, 17 (teaching of the apostles).
  - *Holy Spirit is God.* Acts 5:3,4.
3. *Father, Son and Spirit are equal.* All persons of the trinity are equally God. Yet, there exists an order of authority among them:
  - The Son is subject to the Father (John 4:34)
  - The Holy Spirit *proceeds from* (a term for authority derived from) the Father and Son (John 15:26).

## Importance of the trinity.

The doctrine of the trinity has been the orthodox view of God from the very earliest days of the church. I think there are three compelling reasons to accept it:

1. The Bible teaches that God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Clear distinctions are made between these persons, and deity is ascribed to each.
  2. Without the trinity, Christ would not be God. This is crucial in terms of the adequacy of his sacrifice for our sins. A sinless man could substitute for a sinful man. But what about the sins of all of humanity? Christ, having the eternal nature of God, could die in substitution for all of humanity.
  3. This is sort of a heavy theological reason for the trinity. It explains how God could be both self-existent and personal. Being personal, God has a love relationship with the diversity of his own being (John 17:24). If God were personal but not triune, he would be dependent on creation to satisfy the needs of being personal. In this way, he could not be eternally self-existent.
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### Application

John 17:5,8,11,23. God desires to build the church with the same kind of unity that has eternally existed in the trinity. The basis of our relationships with each other is the unity and diversity which also exists in God. Only in the body of Christ, the church, is there a genuine basis of equality and unity in the context of our great diversity as people. See Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13.

- Illustration of contrast:
    - Army is unity without diversity
    - Democratic party is diversity without unity
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## Attributes of God

Let's talk now about the attributes of God, or what God is like. We'll use theological terms and biblical references to these aspects of God, then we'll draw out the important personal application of each attribute of God to our lives.

- **Infinity.** *God is free of all limitations.* He is not bound by time and space. The only limitation God has is his own character. Thus, while God is infinite, he cannot lie. Infinity also means that all of God's attributes are absolute. He is infinitely powerful, eternally knowing, absolutely righteous, etc.
    - Psalm 90:2. "From everlasting to everlasting, you are God."
    - Psalm 145:3. "Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised; His greatness is unsearchable."
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### Applications:

- God always has what it takes to meet our needs. His infinite mercy means we can never run out of his love for us. 2 Corinthians 12:9, "my grace is sufficient for you."
- Heaven will not be a boring place. We will not be floating around in an angelic state playing a harp. Rather, we will have an eternal opportunity to learn about the nature of God and apply this understand to creative works.

- Christ could pay for all sins.
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- **Sovereign.** *God owns and rules all of creation.* Creation is sustained by God and he is its ultimate authority. Even though God has granted human free will to reject his rulership over our lives, his sovereign plan for humanity will be accomplished. In fact, God uses human rebellion to accomplish his work in the world. God's sovereignty works with his foreknowledge to work out his plan to redeem human kind. No where is this more clear than in the substitutionary death of Christ.
    - Psalm 24:1. "The earth is the Lords, and all that is in it."
    - Colossians 1:16. "For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created by him and for him."
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### **Applications.**

- This gives us a more realistic view of who we are. Only God is the ultimate authority of the universe. When we deviate from God's *design*, we can expect that things will not go well.
  - If all things belong to God, we recognize that we can't be possessive: "What do you have that you have not received?" Recognizing God's sovereignty should enable us to be free with our possessions, recognizing that they are the gift of God. He has allowed us to be his stewards, but all things belong to the Lord.
    - The prideful, self-made man should be humbled by the recognition that God gave us our minds, our place in history and all of the resources at our disposal. In reality, there is no such thing as a "self-made man."
  - Romans 8:28. God's sovereignty is a basis for dealing with anxiety. Even our worst experiences can be used by God for our good.
    - Example: Joseph in Egypt. See Genesis 45:4-8.
    - God can use your past, your failures, etc. Ex: Alcoholics group.
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**Veracity.** *God is truthful and faithful. What God has promised, he will do.* This is a constant theme in the Old Testament. Frequently, it states, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," etc. It is also a crucial teaching of the New Testament. In Ephesians 1:13, we learn that God gives us his Spirit as a "pledge." We are told that "he who began a good work in us will complete it in the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

- 2 Timothy 2:13. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful; for he cannot deny himself."

Hebrews 6:18. "It *is impossible for God to lie.*"

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### **Applications:**

- While our feelings are unstable, God's word can always be counted on. We must root our faith on the facts of God's word. Some days we may not "feel forgiven," "acceptable to God," etc. But the fact is, we are. Our faith deepens when we come to points in our lives where we trust in God's word against our feelings to the contrary. E.g.: Me getting outside of myself to serve others.
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**Immutability.** *God's nature never changes.* His attributes are constant.

- Malachi 3:6. "I the Lord do not change."
  - James 1:17. "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow."
  - Hebrews 13:8. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."
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### ***Applications:***

- Romans 8:35-39. We can always count on God's love. Nothing can separate us from his love. How God relates to us is constant. Even though God disciplines us and there are times when we feel distant from him, it is not because he has changed in any way, but because there may be issues in our lives which God has brought to the surface for us to deal with.
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**Omnipresence.** *God is present at all points in time.* God is not only transcendent (beyond space and time), but also involved in his creation.

- Jeremiah 23:23,24. "Am I a God who is near, declares the Lord, and not a God far off? "Can a man hide himself in hiding places, so I do not see him?" declares the Lord.
  - See also Psalm 139:7-10.
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### ***Applications:***

- What if we really believed this? Prayer would be more a part of our lives. There is no situation in which God is uninvolved or unconcerned. He is with us in our deepest pain. He is always there to provide strength and insight.
  - We tend to compartmentalize our lives into "spiritual" and "secular" pursuits. But God is present in all of our activities. Everything we do can have spiritual implications.
    - "Divine appointments"
  - In our outreach, we must remember God is always involved. Witnessing is never a merely human endeavor. John 16:8, "And he, when he comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment. . ."
  - You can run from God, but you can't hide. Remember the example of Jonah, trying to "flee from the presence of the Lord."
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**Omniscience.** *God knows all things past, present and future.*

- Psalm 39:1-6.
  - Psalm 147:5. "His understanding is infinite."
  - Hebrews 4:13. "There is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do."
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### ***Applications:***

- We can be open with God about our problems and sin, because God already knows. God is not surprised by anything. Nothing we could do would shock him, because before we were created, he knew what we would do with our lives.
- Recognizing God's omniscience show his great love for us. He knew that we would sin and that we

would reject his will for us, but he created us any way. For God, love is not blind.

- God knows us better than we know ourselves. He can lead our lives because he understands human nature better than anyone. This is why the truths of scripture are so live producing.
  - If God is omniscient, he can predict the future. Prophecy depends on this attribute of God.
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**Omnipotence.** *God can do any thing possible.* Two limitations on this definition are, (i) God cannot do the logically impossible; (ii) God cannot violate his own character.

- Matthew 19:26. "With God all things are possible."
  - Genesis 18:14. "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?"
  - Jeremiah 32:17. "Nothing is too difficult for God"
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### **Applications:**

- God can answer our prayers
  - God has the power to transform our lives. We are never too corrupt for God to change us. 2 Corinthians 4:9, "God's power is perfected in weakness."
  - In our spiritual growth, we rely on God' power. Growth is a process of our responding to God's leading, depending on his power to bring about change.
    - John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me, and I in him, he bears much fruit. . ."
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**Moral Perfection (Holiness, Righteousness).** *God's nature is the definition of moral value. God's will is the basis of moral obligation.* Because God is morally perfect, he must judge those who fail to meet his standard. People will receive what God's righteousness demands. Christians have "passed out of judgment and into life" (John 5:24). Therefore, God will discipline us (Hebrews 12:11), but not judge us.

- 1 Timothy 6:5b-6. "He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light. . ."
  - Habakkuk 1:13. "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and you can not look on wickedness with favor."
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### **Applications:**

- God's character is a sure cure for the self righteous. The person who thinks they're pretty good don't know God. They are merely comparing themselves to arbitrary social standards.
  - God's character is the only meaningful, objective basis for morality.
  - God's infinite goodness means that his will for our lives will always be truly in our best interests. So we can trust him to guide and transform our lives.
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Love. All of God's actions flow from his essential love nature. *God's character is the meaning of love. Love is selfless, unselective and redemptive.*

- 1 John 4:8. "God is love."
- 1 John 3:16. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

- 1 John 4:19. "We love because he first loved us."
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***Applications:***

- God's will is that we become increasingly like he is. Galatians 5:22ff show us that the fruit of the Spirit is love. Jesus summarized God's moral requirements as love (Luke 6:31-35).
  - Positive moral plan for our lives. We really need to find in our relationships opportunities to be selfless, unselective and redemptive.