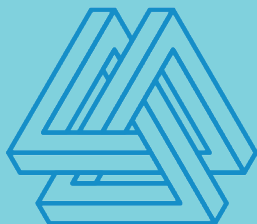
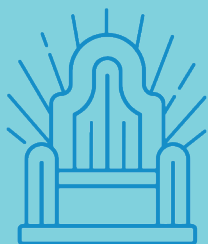
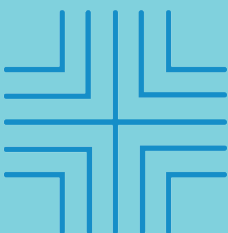
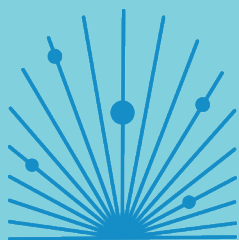


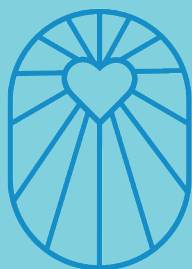
What We Believe and Why We Believe It



FAITH



SIMPLIFIED



AARON ARMSTRONG

Foreword by Trevin Wax

“In *Faith Simplified*, Aaron Armstrong blends clarity with theological depth, offering readers an accessible exploration of foundational Christian truths. With pastoral warmth, he addresses complex topics like the Trinity, the nature of Scripture, and God’s redemptive plan through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Armstrong’s engaging style invites readers—whether new to the faith or long-time believers—to live with greater devotion, confidence, and joy in the gospel.”

Justin S. Holcomb, PhD

Episcopal bishop, seminary professor, and author

“Aaron Armstrong’s *Faith Simplified* is a conversation meant to reach those who are curious, questioning, and committed. Armstrong fulfills his purpose with a *profound* simplicity. His rich theological insight and attention to Scripture provides ballast as he considers some of life’s deepest questions and many of today’s most wily topics. The questions at the end of every chapter engage the reader and provide conversation points for small groups.”

Cas Monaco, PhD

Vice President of Missiology and Gospel Engagement at FamilyLife®

“Aaron writes with good-natured humor and a strong grasp on biblical scholarship and theology. This book is accessible without compromising depth. A great resource for anyone looking to understand the Christian faith.”

Kristel Acevedo

Author and Discipleship Director at Transformation Church

“Aaron Armstrong’s *Faith Simplified* is a masterful invitation into the richness of Christian doctrine. This Christ-saturated book combines theological depth with accessible language, making it an invaluable resource for new believers seeking clarity and mature readers desiring fresh insights. Armstrong stands firmly on the historical convictions of the Christian faith, presenting them in a memorable and transformative way. Readers will walk away from this book not only understanding their faith but inspired to live it out with conviction and joy.”

Jamaal Williams

Lead pastor, Sojourn Church Midtown; president, Harbor Network;
coauthor, *In Church as It Is in Heaven*

FAITH SIMPLIFIED

AARON ARMSTRONG



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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For Emily, Whit, and Rachel, who wrestle with God.

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To **God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit**, thank you for desiring that we know you even as we are already known by you (1 Corinthians 13:12).

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And, of course, my thanks to **you, dear reader**. I am grateful to be allowed to play a small role in what God is doing in your life through this book.

*"Grace be with all who have undying
love for our Lord Jesus Christ."*

EPHESIANS 6:24 CSB

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FOREWORD

Trevin Wax

Whenever I see a book that promises to lay out the basics of Christianity or present the big story of the Bible, I become immediately curious. There are countless ways to tell the “old, old story.” So I begin to wonder: *How is this author going to sum up the Bible? What themes will they choose to emphasize? How will they handle the wide range of Christian interpretation that has taken place over the course of nearly 2,000 years? How will they present the truths of Scripture in a way that speaks to our current cultural moment?*

But the big question that truly makes me lean in is, *How did the author make Christian theology accessible to someone who is just starting out in their exploration?*

How do you simplify the vast, deep waters of Christian teaching without reducing them to something shallow? How do you achieve simplicity without succumbing to reductionism? How do you provide simple speech that isn’t simplistic? That is no small task, especially considering the greatest theologians in history have plumbed the depths of Christian teaching and have never run empty of awe-inducing truths.

When I picked up *Faith Simplified*, I was eager to see how my friend Aaron Armstrong would tackle such an ambitious task. I was pleased with what I found. He's done something special in these pages.

Aaron presents the heart of the Christian faith in a way that's clear, engaging, and—*most importantly*—faithful. He's not interested in watering down concepts or lecturing through a surface-level overview. No, this book digs down to the essential truths of Christianity. But in a way that makes them accessible without being superficial. Aaron doesn't shy away from the complexity of our faith, but he also doesn't let it become a barrier to those just beginning on their journey.

Aaron's approach in *Faith Simplified* is to sit down with you and walk you through the big questions about faith, like *Who is God?*, *Why is there suffering?*, *Why did Jesus come?*, and *What does it mean to be born again?* And he does this in a way that's thoughtful and practical. Aaron seeks to help you through the basics without getting lost in a maze of theological jargon. He is the kind of guide who knows the terrain well but doesn't show off his knowledge. He desires for you to love what he loves. And he wants the Christian faith to make sense for you.

If you are new to the faith, this book is a road map to guide you on your journey. If you've been walking with Jesus for years, this book is a chance to see the surrounding landscape with fresh eyes. And if you're reading as someone who is curious but not quite sure what to make of it all, this book is your invitation to try the untried.

Faith Simplified reminds us that theology isn't only for scholars. It's for everyone. Aaron wants you to engage with these truths, to wrestle with them, and to own them. If theology is the study of God, then Christian theology is about knowing God as he's revealed himself in Christ. The heart of our faith isn't simply a set of theological bullet points or a list of ethical dos and don'ts. It's about a Person. All Christian theology is a response to that pivotal question Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

Christian theology is not some tedious exercise in sorting out irrelevant details. It's an invitation to know more about this Jesus who saved us. He said it himself: Eternal life is knowing God and the One he sent (John 17:3). We want to speak in a way that matches his majesty and to proclaim his excellencies to the world.

So whether you're just now dipping your toes into the Christian faith, or you've been swimming in its waters for years, *Faith Simplified* is a book worth diving into. Aaron has given us a gift—one that will help you to know and love God more deeply. Enjoy the swim.

TRY THE UNTRIED

An Invitation to the Curious, the Questioning, and the Committed

It was a sweltering summer day in 2005. I'd been a Christian for about two months and was still trying to figure out what that meant. Not because I wasn't already learning anything from my pastors' messages or reading my Bible. But because I didn't have any significant preexisting knowledge of Christianity before becoming one, I frequently asked, "Okay, so what does that mean?"¹

That is the mixed blessing of being a blank slate. When everything is new, everything is *new*. Language, concepts, and entire books of the Bible that might be familiar to a more established Christian are fresh to someone experiencing them all for the first time. Depending on your temperament, that freshness can quickly feel overwhelming. You can start to believe you must gain a lifetime's worth of knowledge right away—to know the answers to questions people have spent their entire lives exploring: Who and what is God? How can Jesus be both God and a human being simultaneously? Why do baptism and communion matter? What is heaven supposed to be like—and who will be there?

All of this was brand new to me. So I went to a bookstore. Specifically, a *Christian* bookstore. Now, bookstores are my happy place. I am what a professor I know sometimes refers to as a *promiscuous reader*, meaning I read a lot and I read widely. But in 2005, Christian bookstores were different animals than the indie bookshops and general market big box stores I frequented. The authors, publishers, and topics were all unfamiliar. That sense of not knowing where to start continued to grow.

After looking at different titles, I grabbed a copy of a book by a former pastor from Michigan, one whose messages I heard on occasion. In hindsight, it was a spiritual mid-life crisis in book form. This author spent much time spitballing faux-deep “what if” questions and writing in disjointed

single-

word

paragraphs,

while offering questionable analogies, comparing our beliefs to brick walls and trampolines, and calling important beliefs negotiable.

There were probably better choices.

I tried a few other books, but none of them resonated. Some were too focused on different attitudes—most encouraging men to capture or recapture a wild manly-man spirit. Others seemed more like the authors bragging about how humble they were. But after a few false starts, I found what I was looking for, even though it didn’t directly answer my questions. It was called *Orthodoxy* by G.K. Chesterton.

GOD WANTS US TO USE OUR MINDS

First published in 1908, *Orthodoxy* was the first great Christian book I read as a new believer. In it, Chesterton describes his spiritual journey, which began with a desire to find a philosophy that would comprehensively make sense of *everything* in the world. If he had to develop

it himself, he likely would have. As he began, Chesterton realized that this philosophy, or worldview, he was searching for already existed.

It was called *Christianity*.

Throughout the book, Chesterton expressed his understanding of Christianity as it truly is: an intellectually, emotionally, and practically rigorous worldview that has been left untried by far too many (including many who profess to believe it—but we’ll come back to that).² One that speaks to the deepest needs of the human heart in a way that competing philosophies cannot. With cleverness and care, he developed a compelling argument that Christianity is so powerful and life-changing that “even when watered down [it] is hot enough to boil all modern society to rags.”³

I devoured this book, leaving nary a page unmarked. My mind was on fire as I read each sentence, even if I didn’t understand everything I read on the first go around.⁴ And whatever else you could say about Chesterton’s writing, his passion was evident. He *believed* what he wrote. But more than merely believing what he wrote, Chesterton understood something significant: for Christians to grow, they had to know something of their faith. But satisfying intellectual curiosity wasn’t the point of that knowledge. Our knowledge of our faith must lead to something more profound.

Chesterton wasn’t the only one who understood this, as I learned when I was introduced to C.S. Lewis. Or rather when I was *reintroduced* to him.

CURIOSITY AND COMMITMENT BELONG TOGETHER

For most of my life, I only knew Lewis as the author of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, a book I adored from the first time I read it when I was around age eight. His writing about reflections on the Christian faith and his delight in working his way “through a tough

bit of theology” was entirely unknown to me.⁵ I was completely unaware that he was a Christian at all!

Then, I found *Mere Christianity*. As I began reading it, I discovered a kindred spirit: a man who was simultaneously deeply curious and committed to upholding the core truths of the faith—truths that have defined Christianity from the beginning. A man who, like Chesterton, was captivated by big questions, even bigger ideas, and a God simply too glorious for him to comprehend fully. He saw the value of a deep and rich intellectual life because he knew that “God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other slackers.”⁶ But he, like Chesterton, was not content to see Christianity as a merely intellectual faith, as though the accumulation of knowledge was the pinnacle of godliness. He understood that our faith must affect how we live every day.

Christianity asserts that every individual human being is going to live for ever, and this must be either true or false. Now there are a good many things which would not be worth bothering about if I were going to live only seventy years, but which I had better bother about very seriously if I am going to live for ever. Perhaps my bad temper or my jealousy are gradually getting worse—so gradually that the increase in seventy years will not be very noticeable. But it might be absolute hell in a million years: in fact, if Christianity is true, Hell is the precisely correct technical term for what it would be.⁷

Together, Chesterton and Lewis encouraged me to seek the answers to my big questions about the Christian faith and to live differently because of those answers. But there was another individual still who not only agreed with their encouragement, but amplified it.

KNOWING ABOUT GOD AND KNOWING GOD

I was curious about this book when I saw it on my friend's coffee table. I hadn't heard of the author, J.I. Packer, but that was nothing new at the time. It was the title that intrigued me: *Knowing God*.

"Is it any good?" I asked.

"You should read it," he said. "It will change your life."

That was a bold statement, but let me tell you, dear reader, my friend was not exaggerating. I bought a copy later that week and slowly began working my way through it over the next several weeks. It was a book that demanded that sort of care. In it, I found many chapters devoted to some of the bigger questions I had about essential Christian beliefs—the nature of God, the humanity and deity of Jesus, and so much more. But I also found something more as I read. These were the words of a man who knew much *about* God—but more than that, he was a man who seemed to know *God* intimately. He described knowing God as, in one sense, "dealing with him as he opens up to you, and being dealt with by him as he takes knowledge of you."⁸ It is also "a matter of personal involvement—mind, will and feeling," recognizing that we are invited into a relationship with God that involves the totality of our being.⁹ And it is a matter of grace, a gift from God to us. "*We* do not make friends with *God*; *God* makes friends with *us*, bringing us to know him by making his love known to us" (emphasis Packer's).¹⁰

Chesterton, Lewis, and Packer. These three men helped me develop the skills I needed to know the essential truths of my new faith—to pursue knowledge, to be curious, and to do so out of a heart of devotion to God. To live as a person who delights in and is devoted to the truths that define Christianity.

I want the same for you. So, where do we start? With something called *theology*.

STRAINING OUT CAMELS

At its most basic, theology is what you understand and believe about God. Theology comprises the capital *T* truths of who God is, what he is like, and what he has done and continues to do. That includes how he made the world, everything in it, and intended for it to operate. (Including us too.) But for many people, especially Western Protestant Christians within more experientially oriented traditions, *theology* evokes images of giant tomes and academic ivory towers. Of academics discussing issues that don't seem to matter much to our day-to-day lives, who seem content to strain out gnats while swallowing camels (Matthew 23:24). If that's what theology is, it is best to leave it to the theologians. The rest of us have work to do and people to serve.

I understand that impulse. I've sat in enough rooms with professionally very smart people to know this stereotype has some truth. But the presence of some truth doesn't make something wholly true. Theology is not a purely academic pursuit. It is not something we can set aside, downplay, or ignore. It is not something that hinders our lives as Christians or gets in the way of ministry; it is what undergirds everything.

In the Western world, this is more important to understand than ever. According to ongoing studies from Lifeway Research and Ligonier Ministries, American Protestant Evangelical Christians don't affirm what Christians have historically believed about some fundamental matters.¹¹ Jesus' divinity and eternal nature. The personhood of the Holy Spirit. The scope of sin's effects on the world. The exclusivity of the Christian faith as the path to eternal life.¹² And this problem is not unique to the United States, either. A 2018 study of the state of theology in the UK revealed that many Protestant Christians there may be even *less* Christian in their beliefs than American Protestants.¹³

These matters are not gnats. These are camels.

Which brings us back to Chesterton's problem. For many, it's not

that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It's that they have never tried it. And they haven't tried it because they don't know what is central to that faith.

Christian beliefs shape the Christian heart and the Christian life. That is why we need to know these truths. Our minds, hearts, and actions are all informed and transformed by what we know about God, the universe, and everything else. It is why theology is good news for you and me. It is *practical*, leaving no area of our lives untouched as we all draw on the Bible's teaching to live faithfully day by day.¹⁴

AN INVITATION TO TRY THE UNTRIED

As you engage with this book, dear reader, I don't know from what background you are approaching it. Perhaps you are where I was in my first years as a Christian. You believe, but there's a lot that you don't know that will help shape your faith. Perhaps you're a long-time believer who wants to learn more about the faith that is yours because of Jesus. Or maybe you're reading this book from a more questioning perspective; you're not a Christian at all, or you're a professing Christian who is as confused about our faith as the world is. Or you may be a deeply committed Christian who knows the truths we cling to but seeks a way to help others understand what is unique and special about the faith.

And while some of the material in the following pages may stretch you, you won't find heady academic explanations filled with highly technical jargon. While there is a place and time for technical material, exploring and explaining the deep truths of the faith should not sound like the technobabble on *Star Trek* sounds to most everyone watching—or the way a mechanic sounds to me when trying to explain the maintenance being done on my car. It shouldn't be this way because theology—our beliefs about God, his words, his works, and his promises—is for everyone. Theology is for *you*.

And wherever you're coming from, whatever brought you to the place of reading it, this book is for you too.

Because I'm one of you.

This book isn't the distillation of an advanced seminary degree. It is the fruit of 20 years of ongoing Bible study, reading, and conversations. These are tasks all of us can do, no matter our backgrounds, educations, and interests. They are habits I hope you will practice as you read this book. That is the reason there are so many Bible references throughout these pages, questions at the end of every chapter, and a lot of extra information for you to investigate in the endnotes. I don't want you to read these pages and simply take my word for it. Explore on your own, consider these truths and where they are represented in the Bible, and ideally, talk with others as you do. But most importantly, I hope this book will aid you in discovering, delighting, and ultimately devoting yourself to the truths you find in its pages. These truths that make Christians *Christian*.

ONE, AND ALSO THREE (WHO ARE ONE)

Who (and What) Is God?



Once upon a time, on a frigid February morning in a town-house complex in southwestern Ontario, a man and a woman knocked on my door. They were Jehovah's Witnesses and were on a mission to share literature and what they believed to be a message of hope for anyone who didn't pretend they weren't home or slam the door in their faces. (Yes, Canadians are indeed that rude regarding door-to-door proselytizing.)

I was delighted to speak to these missionaries from another religion. Early in my faith, I decided to engage in conversations like this whenever God brought the opportunity. I wasn't looking to be convinced to convert. I just wanted to have a respectful discussion about the differences in what we believe. So, despite the icy temperatures, I kept the door open as they diligently worked through their script:¹

1. The Bible is full of wisdom and has an important message for the world.

2. The world is falling apart because of immorality, famine, and war, they said, carefully tying in a relevant recent event from the news.
3. The answers to these problems are found in obedience to God's commands in the Bible and a renewed relationship with humanity's Creator through Jesus Christ.

On the surface, these are true statements that few, if any, Christians would disagree with. But surface-level agreement is one thing. Genuine agreement requires something else: a shared foundation.² And to get to this, I asked one question, "Who is Jesus?"

Without missing a beat, the male missionary said, "We believe Jesus is, as he said, 'the way, the truth, and the life,' and no one comes to the Father except through him."

"He gave his perfect human life as a ransom sacrifice, and his death and resurrection make it possible for those exercising faith in him to gain everlasting life," said his teammate.

"Sure, but that doesn't answer my question," I replied.

They paused and looked at each other as if having a telepathic conversation:

Female Missionary: *Where is this guy going with this?*

Male Missionary: *Not sure; let's see how it plays out.*

I continued. "Well, you've said Jesus had a perfect human life, right? So, you believe Jesus was a created being, right?"

"Yes...?"

"Okay, cool. But how can any human being be perfect? Doesn't the Bible say that's impossible?"

The female missionary's eyes widened. She knew where I was going

with my questions—and she would have none of it. “The Trinity isn’t taught in the Bible,” she exclaimed. They quickly left.

Rats, I thought. We hadn’t even gotten to John 1:1 yet.

STARTING AT THE STARTING POINT

So why begin this chapter with a story about Jehovah’s Witnesses? I mean, that would probably make more sense if we were talking about evangelism or looking at Jesus’ nature, right? While it might seem like this is just a cute story, it reveals something important. Even though we have some superficial agreement on the problems of the world, and we use similar language to define the problem, Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses have a profound disagreement about God. The same is true between Christians and Muslims, as well as Jews, Mormons, Buddhists, Hindus, and every other religion and worldview. We disagree on the starting point of our theology.

All theology ultimately centers on God, the One at the center of everything—on who he is, what he has done, and how he requires us to live. So to begin with God means to begin exploring his nature and being—to answer the question of *who* (or what) is God.

If you had asked me this question when I was in my early twenties, I wouldn’t have been able to give you a particularly compelling answer, largely because I didn’t know. But when I became a Christian, I learned that answering this question was *really* important. It is the most important question to be able to answer because what we believe about God himself shapes everything else we believe.

WHO DO CHRISTIANS TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GOD?

Up until about the 1960s, there was at least some semblance of a shared cultural answer in the West. It was an answer that somewhat

resembled the God Christians worship. However, those days have long since passed. You may have atheist friends who might say God is a myth our ancestors devised to help make sense of the world or, more cynically, an idea to maintain control over a population and legislate morality. Perhaps a Muslim coworker would tell you that God is an otherworldly, supreme being who cannot be known or comprehended by human beings. Or maybe a spiritual-but-not-religious classmate would suggest that we all carry the divine in us—in effect, we are all God.

Then, there is what Christians believe.

The Christian understanding of God is unlike any other religion or worldview. Our beliefs about God have led to some of the most beautiful and inspiring teachings in the church's history. But they have also resulted in some of its greatest controversies and errors. This is because what the Bible teaches about God is mysterious and strange, but also the only way God makes sense.

If you had to condense what we believe about God's nature—meaning *what* God is—into three key points, it might look something like this:

1. There is one God, who has eternally existed.
2. This one God is entirely self-sufficient, lacking nothing.
3. This one God eternally exists as three persons who are fully and equally divine, one in essence, or substance, yet distinct from one another.³

While there's much to be said about all three, these points make up the heart of Christians' understanding of God. There is one God, and only one God, who needs for nothing—including relationships—because God is three distinct persons who are all equally and fully that one God.

Yeah, I know; it can all seem overwhelming. It's a lot to take in, especially that last point. So before we go any further, remember this: God wants you to know who he is. He has made it possible for you to understand something of what he is like. But before we can dig into that last point, this very simple explanation of what we call the *Trinity*, we must explore the first two. So, let's answer this question together: Why do Christians believe there is only one God?

THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD

Among those who believe God exists at all today, the idea of there being only one God does not seem particularly mind-blowing. There are no less than three religions that hold to the view there is only one God, a view known as *monotheism*—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This doesn't mean, however, that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God (nor modern Jews, for that matter). We have fundamental disagreements about his nature, so it is wrong to say that we do. But we do agree that there is only one God.

In the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in the times of Moses, Joshua, and David, though, this was a *radical* concept. People were largely polytheistic in their beliefs, meaning that they believed in the existence of, and worshiped, many gods. It was not uncommon for people to have a tribal or household deity that they would primarily worship, while offering sacrifices to another god in the hopes of having a child, and another for a prosperous harvest, and so on.

But humans were not meant to be polytheists. Our worship has always been intended to belong to only one God—the only God who *actually* exists. The biblical authors went to great lengths to depict other gods for what they were: lifeless, useless, and powerless. These handcrafted gods were not worthy of worship but mockery.⁴

Nowhere does the Bible teach that there are many gods, of whom the Lord is but one option to choose from.⁵ Instead, the Bible emphasizes

this truth from beginning to end—there is one God, and only one. For example:

- “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29 NASB).
- “O LORD, there is none like you; there is no God besides you” (1 Chronicles 17:20).
- “I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me” (Isaiah 45:5; and variations: 45:18, 21, 22; 46:9 NKJV).
- “I am the LORD your God and there is no other” (Joel 2:27 NKJV).
- “There is no God but one” (1 Corinthians 8:4).

This one God is not merely any god, though. He is not a stand-in for one of the deities of the Greek and Roman pantheons. He is not born of violence and lust as they were. He has no beginning, and he has no end (Isaiah 44:6; Revelation 1:8; 22:13). The God of Israel, the God of the Bible, is the Maker of heaven and earth, uncreated, and eternally existing as the One who was there *before* the beginning (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 121:2; 146:6).

A COMPLETELY SELF-SUFFICIENT GOD

There is one God, and there is no other. He has always been and always will be. He lacks nothing; he is self-sufficient. He is not “served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives life and breath and everything to everyone” (Acts 17:25). He doesn’t *need* sacrifices from humanity because everything comes from him; it is already his (Psalm 50:9-12; 1 Chronicles 29:14-16). He doesn’t need our worship, even as all humanity is called to worship him

(1 Kings 8:41-43). He doesn't need anything at all from us—not our love, adoration, affection—he needs none of it. And as we'll explore in chapter 2, even though he is extremely relational—revealing his existence, nature, power, and will to the entire universe (Romans 1:20)—he doesn't even need *external* relationships. He doesn't need us, the people he made (Job 22:2). He has all he needs in himself.

A GOD WHO IS THREE PERSONS

But how can that be? How can this one God, who has always existed and will always exist, and is actively relational, be self-sufficient the way the Bible describes? As we read the Old Testament, God drops hints that his nature as One is more complex, or maybe mysterious, than we might think because, even as the Bible speaks of one God, it seems to depict a multiplicity to God. That there is one God, but more than one *person* is God.

Some of this is revealed in language, such as when God speaks singularly and refers to himself plurally. For example, in Genesis 1:26 we read, “God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness.’” Other times it's situational, such as when Joshua “bowed with his face to the ground in homage” before the commander of the Lord's army (Joshua 5:14 CSB). While these examples alone aren't definitive proof, when we consider other events such as God being among the three visitors who were with Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18), the appearance of the Lord to Gideon (Judges 6:22-23), and God's apparent appearance in bodily form to Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), it sparks curiosity enough to make you take notice.⁶

And in the New Testament, what seems curious becomes clear.

The Lord, God the Father

God's deity and personhood are never truly in question at any point in the New Testament writings. In fact, by and large, the New

Testament authors speak of him in precisely the same way as the Old Testament, with one exception: a deepening of relationship.

The New Testament authors, taking their cues from Jesus, began to refer to God not simply as “Lord” and “God,” but also as “Father.” This moniker is used interchangeably with God throughout the Gospels (see Matthew 6:26-33; Mark 11:22-25; Luke 23:46-47). However, “Father” is not the only name used in relationship with God in the New Testament, but those others do not apply to the Father.

The Word, God the Son

Then John’s Gospel opens with a dramatic prologue, set before the beginning of time: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2 CSB). That same Word, John wrote, came to earth and dwelt among his people, revealing the glory of God as his one and only Son (John 1:14).

Who is that “Word”? *Jesus*.

While he is shown to be a human being by the Gospel writers, those same writers take care to demonstrate that Jesus is not simply human. He did (and does) things only God could do—because he was and is God (Philippians 2:5-11). For example:

- Jesus demonstrates the authority to forgive sin (Mark 2:1-12).
- Jesus issues authoritative commands on par with Scripture (Matthew 5:21-48).
- Jesus has power over life and death (John 11).
- Jesus has authority over creation (Matthew 8:23-27).
- Jesus commands angels and demons (Matthew 8:28-34; 13:41).
- Jesus describes himself as equal to God and receives worship *as* God (John 5:39; 20:28).

When Jesus did and said these things, those around him—including those who opposed him—understood. Jesus was “making himself equal to God” (John 5:18 CSB); in other words, Jesus was saying that he *is* God. Equal to the Father, but distinct from him. The Word, God the Son, “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3 CSB).

That is who Jesus is.

But the Bible does not stop with only these two persons; there is not simply God the Father and the Word, Jesus, who is God the Son. There is one other—God the Holy Spirit.

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is, in some ways, the most difficult person of the three to comprehend. If we aren’t reading Scripture carefully, we can incorrectly conclude that the Spirit is a manifestation of God’s power or an impersonal force. A *what* rather than a *who*, if you will. But the Scriptures themselves reject this idea. The Holy Spirit is described as eternal (Hebrews 9:14), having been present at the beginning of creation as the Father spoke the world into existence through the Son (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit is omnipresent (Psalm 139:7-8), all-knowing (1 Corinthians 2:10), and all-powerful (Zechariah 4:6). He is holy, faithful, just, truthful, gracious, and merciful.

The Holy Spirit has personal characteristics. He speaks, teaches, and leads (Luke 12:12; Acts 13:2; Romans 8:14; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11). He counsels and comforts (John 14:26; 15:26). He seals and sanctifies (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; 1 Peter 1:2). He can be grieved, resisted, and insulted (Isaiah 63:10; Acts 7:51; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 10:29). And if that weren’t enough, the Holy Spirit is explicitly called “God” in Acts 5:3-4 and 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (see also 6:19-20). The Scriptures themselves are emphatic: The Holy Spirit is God—fully divine, just as the Father and Son are divine (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14), and their equal in every way. (And, I should add, there’s

a *lot* more to say about who the Holy Spirit is and what he does in our lives, which we'll get to in chapter 19.)

GOD AS SCRIPTURE DESCRIBES HIM

This is God as the Bible describes him: God is one in essence and three in person—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18-20). Each is fully and equally God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, perfectly and eternally united in their essence and will, free from subordination or hierarchy.⁷ But even as they are eternally united in essence and will, they are also distinct from one another. While the Father, Son, and Spirit are God, the Father is not the Son nor the Spirit, the Son is not the Father nor the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father nor the Son (Matthew 11:27; John 10:30; 14:16).

And yes, that is the simplest way to explain it.

This is what Christians refer to as the doctrine of the Trinity. While the word *Trinity* doesn't appear in Scripture, the concept does. But that doesn't mean that it is easy to understand.

THE STUFF (ACCIDENTAL) HERETICS ARE MADE OF

Remember how I said that what the Bible teaches about God's nature is the source of some of our greatest controversies and errors? Well, that's because our attempts to explain the mystery of God's three-and-oneness always fall short, as a laundry list of heresies—teachings that contradict or deny an essential truth of the Christian faith—attests.⁸

One teacher attempted to explain the Persons of the Trinity as *forms* or *modes* of existence, that at certain times God acted in the mode of the Father and at others in the mode of the Son or the Spirit.

This heresy, called *modalism*, is alive and well in our day, as it is part of some churches' doctrinal statements (such as the Oneness Pentecostals), and finds its way into popular songs and books.⁹

Another teacher, Arius, believed Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not coeternal and equal with God the Father. Instead, he taught that both are created beings and subordinate to God the Father. His heresy, *Arianism*, is alive and well in religions such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, which, despite using Christian language, does not align with historic Christian teaching, believing Jesus is a created being and the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force.¹⁰ Some teachings about the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit within otherwise faithful Christian circles also risk being a reframing of this heresy.¹¹

A third common heresy, *tritheism*, teaches that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not one but fully separate divine beings. A form of this is taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormons), another religion that, despite using similar language, does not align with historic Christianity.¹²

This is why we shouldn't try to use analogies to describe the Trinity. They all wind up making us accidental heretics. For example:

- The Trinity is not like water, which exists at different times as gas, liquid, or solid. That's *modalism*.
- The Trinity isn't like a star from which light and heat emanate. That's *Arianism*.
- The Trinity isn't like a family with a mother, father, and child. That's *tritheism*.

While analogies might make for entertaining YouTube videos, they make for terrible theology.¹³ The Trinity is a grand mystery. God's revelation of his nature is incomparable—there is *literally* nothing else like him in all the universe.

A BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY TO BEHOLD

This is probably the most theologically intense piece you're going to read in this entire book. And let's be honest; it's tempting to skip over some of this kind of stuff—to put questions about God's nature in the “I'll-find-out-when-I-get-there” folder, alongside the problem of evil and why American reality TV shows continue to draw audiences. But the Trinity matters because there is no Christianity without it. For that matter, there are no Christians without the Trinity. Everything about how we “do” Christianity depends on it:

We read the Bible through a trinitarian lens and with trinitarian power. The Bible is the revelation of the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit helps us understand and rejoice in this revelation to the glory of the Son and the Father.

We pray with a “trinitarian grain,” as one author put it. Our prayers run “from the Spirit through the Son to the Father.”¹⁴ We're not on our own with our prayers bouncing off our ceilings. The Spirit carries our prayers to Jesus the Son, who intercedes on our behalf with the Father.

We are rescued by and share a gospel that involves every Person of the Trinity. The Father planned for the salvation of sinners incapable of rescuing themselves, loving those who did not first love him (1 John 4:10). The Son accomplished that salvation through his sinless life, death, and resurrection. And the Spirit applies it to “everyone who believes” (John 3:16), anyone who calls upon the name of Jesus to be saved, by breathing new life into dead hearts. And we are commissioned to share this good news in the name and power of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20).

This is only scratching the surface, of course. But when you begin to look at the world through a trinitarian lens, it changes everything. Is it a mystery? Absolutely. But it is a beautiful mystery to behold.

REFLECT, EXPLORE, AND DISCUSS

1. What idea or concept stood out to you as you read this chapter? Why?
2. Read some of the Bible passages that describe the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit referenced in this chapter. How do they help you grasp the truth of God's nature?
3. What new questions do these passages raise?
4. What does looking at the world through a trinitarian lens mean for your life?