

The Trinity: Five Studies

By Allen Hamlin Jr

A Companion Resource to

Designed for Relationship: Learning to Love God With All We Are

By T.J. MacLeslie

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Introduction

At the heart of the Christian faith is a journey of understanding who God is and who we are, so that we might walk in intimate relationship with Him. Author T.J. MacLeslie's newest book, *Designed for Relationship: Learning to Love God With All We Are*, is a helpful guide to take us forward both in knowing God and understanding ourselves.

One of the dominant themes in the first part of MacLeslie's book is the theological truth and implications of the Trinity—the reality that God is One, but three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In an effort to encourage readers to explore the Bible for themselves, this series of five studies provides a framework for examining the Scriptures, launching out from the texts and ideas that MacLeslie surfaces in his book.

While many believers may affirm the notion of the Trinity, few of us have taken the time to really explore the Scriptures to understand how God has revealed Himself to us in this way. We hope that this set of studies will provide an opportunity for Christians of all stripes—from the newest of converts to the longest-standing church-goer—to see our majestic, amazing God with fresh eyes and to feel within ourselves the calling He has placed in each of us as He has designed us for relationship with Himself.

Each of the five studies will likely take between 20 minutes and 1 hour to complete, and they can be done either individually or in a group. The topics covered are:

Part I: Only One God

Part II: The Person of the Father

Part III: The Person of the Son

Part IV: The Person of the Holy Spirit

Part V: Revealing the Trinity in Our Community

These studies may be completed while reading MacLeslie's book, providing additional opportunity for reflection on many of the points raised in the first part of his book, or they may be completed before reading his book, to lay a thorough foundation of understanding God as you prepare to embark upon a journey of understanding how He has designed you, or you may have already read *Designed for Relationship* and are now interested in searching the Scriptures for yourself to validate the ideas that MacLeslie has offered. In each case, we believe this set of Bible study materials will be valuable.

Another set of five studies focusing on the Five Circles model of humanity which MacLeslie develops in the second part of his book will be available soon. Check back on the book's website www.dfrbook.com for an announcement of their availability.

Be blessed as you journey forward in meeting God through His Word!

Allen Hamlin Jr, May 2013

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THE TRINITY

PART I: ONLY ONE GOD

The word 'Trinity' doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible. It was first coined in the 2nd or 3rd century AD by the early Christian church in order to describe their growing experience and clarity of who God is.

Just because the word 'Trinity' isn't in the Bible doesn't mean that this belief isn't biblical. However, because it's not found simply in a single verse, we need to gather testimony from the whole of Scriptures to fill out our understanding of the nature of God.

The belief that there is only one God (rather than many gods) is known as 'monotheism.'

The concept of The Trinity has often been considered one of the most significant and distinctive elements of the Christian faith. The idea that there is One God, yet three Persons, is paralleled in no other world religion, from the strict monotheism of Islam to the plurality of gods in Hinduism.

While many Christians may have heard the word "Trinity," we don't usually spend the time to explore how this understanding of God is developed in the Bible. As T.J. MacLeslie reminds us, "The Trinity is an often-neglected core truth about God."

Over the next five studies, we'll examine the truth of the Trinity from the Word of God. To do so, we'll look broadly across the Scriptures in our effort to draw together an accurate understanding of who God is and what He is like.

The idea that there is One God who exists in three Persons means that we need to look at four elements: (1) that there is indeed only one God, (2) that the Father is God and distinct, (3) that the Son is God and distinct, and (4) that the Holy Spirit is God and distinct. If we can see each of these truths in the Bible, then we will agree that the doctrine of the Trinity is the right way to understand the nature of God. Each of these elements will form the basis of one study within this series. A fifth study will bring us back to the idea of the Trinity as a whole. We begin here with exploring the truth that there is only one God.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Judaism—both ancient and modern—is often said to be 'strictly monotheistic,' meaning that their beliefs hold very clearly to the idea that there is only one God. As such, the Bible's Old Testament, which is also the sacred text for Judaism, is an excellent place for us to explore the idea that there is only one God. While Christians are also strictly monotheistic, because of our doctrine of the Trinity, it is sometimes difficult for others to see how it is that we indeed only believe in one God (and not three).

Deut 6:4 is known as the 'Shema,' which comes from the Hebrew word for 'listen' or 'hear.' This verse is recited as part of daily prayers within Judaism.

*In his book **Designed for Relationship**, T.J. MacLeslie expands this notion of relating to God with every aspect of our being.*

See also 1 Kings 8:59-61, where King Solomon instructs the people that there is only one God, and outlines how they should respond to Him.

'YHWH' is a representation for the name of God in Hebrew (from Exodus 3:14). It is often represented by 'LORD' in many modern English translations of the Bible. Since it is the personal name for the one true God, it is sometimes convenient to write YHWH to distinguish Him from other gods (idols).

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-6.

What does Deut 6:4 tell us about the nature of God?

And what does this passage tell us about how we should respond to this God?

This passage was so central that Jesus quoted from it as well, and it was the one thing that His questioners would agree on. See Mark 12:28-34.

Apart from Moses' instructions to the people about the nature of God, we also find God Himself stating very clearly that there is no other God.

Read Isaiah 43:10-13 and 44:6-8.

What characteristics of God's nature and activity do we learn about in these passages?

Imagine for a moment if there were indeed other gods beside God (YHWH). How would life be different if we had to live under this multiplicity of gods? What security do we encounter under the truth that there is only one God?

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Even after Jesus Christ—who is fully God—came to the earth, we still have clear statements in the New Testament that there is only one God. Jesus, by His own words, was not a second god who was newly arriving on the scene; He still affirmed that there is only one God. And the other New Testament writers agree.

Read John 10:30-38.

What was Jesus' claim which the Jews opposed?

How did Jesus defend His claim?

Jesus' unity with the Father can also be seen in John 14:9-11.

Read 1 Timothy 1:15-17 and 2:3-6.

Taken together, how do these verses reinforce the idea that there is only one God, and what do they add to our understanding about who God is?

James 2:19 reminds us of Deut 6:4, but shows us that simply believing that there is only one God is not enough for right faith.

COMING UP...

Having looked at some of the Bible's testimony about the truth that there is only one God, we will next look at the person of the Father. He, as a Person, is often equated with the term 'God' in a stronger way than Jesus and the Holy Spirit are. We will look at how the Bible shows that there is a plurality of Persons within the Trinity, and that the Father is one of those distinct Persons.

THE TRINITY

PART II: THE PERSON OF THE FATHER

The three foundational Creeds of Christianity—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed—are all structured around the idea of the Trinity, highlighting its centrality to our faith.

*T.J. MacLeslie, in **Designed for Relationship**, points out, “Before man was even created, there was relationship.... Before humans existed, God was already in an eternally existent community with Himself.”*

See Deuteronomy 13:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 8:4-7 for some references to the beliefs in many gods during both Old and New Testament times.

In the previous study, we looked at the Bible’s discussion of the fact that there is only one God. As we progress through our exploration of the Trinity, it is crucial that we hold onto that truth. In this study, we will explore the truth that within that unity (one God) there are three Persons. This sounds like a contradiction, but is at the center of the mystery of God’s being. He is One. He is Three. We’ll also look here at the First Person of the Trinity, the Father.

PLURALITY

The Bible confirms that God is One, an idea that would have been very familiar to the monotheistic Jews. But then it pushes our paradigm a bit further, and indicates that God’s oneness isn’t the end of the story.

As you **read Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7, and Isaiah 6:8**, make note of how God talks about Himself.

If the plurality of God is so significant, why does He refer to Himself this way in just 4 verses? Well, many cultures—from the earliest recorded history, straight on through to the 1st century AD when the New Testament was written—were *polytheistic*, believing in many gods. In the midst of such cultures, as God (YHWH) set out to make Himself and His people distinct from all others, do you think it would have been most important for Him to emphasize His unity or His plurality? What danger would there be if God always referred to Himself as “Us”? What if He never did?

While none of these verses clearly states that God is Three-in-One, they lay the foundation for a more complex understanding of God, permitting the idea that God is Himself a divine community, several different Persons (a plurality) interacting together.

Baptism is an ancient symbol of identifying oneself with a group. As you **read Ephesians 4:4-6** and **Matthew 28:19**, take note of the idea of baptism.

According to Paul, how many baptisms are there? And according to Jesus, whose name(s) are we identifying ourselves with in baptism?

How often do we let ourselves get away with simply saying, "Yes, I believe in God." Many people, following many different religions, would make the same reply. See James 2:19.

How can we demonstrate the uniqueness of our Christian faith in our response to the question, "Do you believe in God?"

Here we see that, as Christians, our faith is not just in "God," but specifically in the God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is tied to God's central work of salvation, and here we also see the Trinity revealed.

Read Ephesians 1:2-14 and **1 Peter 1:1-12**. As we read about our salvation from sin, which opens the way for us to have a relationship with God, how does the Bible present God's role and activity?

Where do we see the unity of God in these passages?

Where do we see the plurality of God in these passages?

From the very beginning of Jesus' own ministry, we see the presence of the Trinity. See Mark 1:9-11.

Role of the Father >

Role of the Son >

Role of the Spirit >

The word 'Godhead' is sometimes used to refer to the Trinity instead of just saying 'God' because 'God' is often used specifically to refer to the First Person of the Trinity, God the Father. 'Godhead' helps us to keep in mind that there is an overarching concept that unites the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as all being divine. T.J. MacLeslie sets a good pattern for us: "When I say 'God,' I mean the 'Community of Divine Persons that is the Godhead.'"

One commentator says that indications of the Trinity can be found in virtually every book of the New Testament. So far in our series, we've looked at Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, 1 Peter, 1 John—and we've only just begun!

THE PERSON OF THE FATHER

Having looked at the plurality within the Trinity, and beginning to see the distinctions (and cooperation) among the three Persons of the Godhead, let's look a little more specifically at the Person of the Father.

Look for the various roles of the Father as you **read Matthew 24:36, Luke 24:49, & John 8:18, 12:49-50.**

What activities of the Father are described here?

Let's consider the distinctiveness of the Person of the Father in His relationship to the Son and the Spirit.

Read Matthew 26:39, John 5:19-23, 14:23-26, Romans 8:26-27, & 1 John 2:1.

Does it sound like Jesus & the Father, and the Spirit & the Father, are the same Persons, or different people that have an intimate relationship with one another?

COMING UP...

After establishing that God is both One (in the first study) and a Plurality (above), we will continue our examination of each Person of the Trinity by looking at the Second Person (the Son) and the Third Person (the Holy Spirit) in the next two studies.

THE TRINITY

PART III: THE PERSON OF THE SON

Some people have said that the central question that concerns Christianity is what you do with Jesus. Was He just a teacher? A prophet? The messiah? God?

Understanding Jesus is critical for our faith, and also challenging. Just as the Trinity is difficult to explain, so too the reality that Jesus is true God and true man is mysterious as well. In this study, we'll assume the truth that Jesus was a real man, and we'll focus our attentions on His divinity and His relationships with the other two Persons of the Trinity (the Father and the Holy Spirit).

DIVINITY

We'll first look at the divine nature of Jesus Christ, expecting that, if Jesus is God, He should have some certain God-like qualities, doing and saying things as only God could do. Select at least two of the passages listed under each of the qualities highlighted below and comment on what they reveal about the nature of Jesus.

While Jesus may not have made many direct claims about being God, take note of the reactions of His hearers in these passages; did they understand Him as claiming to be God?

*We also find many other figures in the New Testament very clearly identifying Jesus as God:
John 20:28, Acts 7:59,
Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13,
2 Peter 1:1,16-18.*

Power & Authority

Matthew 28:18, John 10:17-33, Acts 10:38-42, & Colossians 1:13-20

Forgive Sins & Heal

Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26 & Mark 2:3-12

Eternal Existence

John 1:1, 8:53-59, Hebrews 13:8, & Revelation 22:13,16

Heavenly Dwelling with the Father

John 13:3, 8:39-42, & 16:28-30

DIVINE COMMUNITY

Recall our exploration in the first study: there is only one God. Then the second study looked at the Person of the Father as God. So, if there is only one God and the Father is God, then in addition to outlining Jesus' personal characteristics (as we did in the section above), we can further explore His divinity by examining His relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Read John 1:14-18, 5:18-23, 14:1-11.

How do these passages describe Jesus' relationship to the Father? Consider:

How is Jesus' unity with the Father expressed?

What roles, activity, or power do they have in common?

How is Jesus depicted as being different from the Father?

Some people agree that Jesus is God, but they say that He is the *same* Person as the Father rather than a Second Person of the Godhead, just God taking different forms at different times or when doing different things.

In addition to the passages above and in the previous section, consider the times that Jesus prays to the Father (e.g. Matthew 27:46, Mark 14:36, Luke 23:46, John 11:41-42). Does it seem more sensible to claim that the Father and the Son are the same Person, or that they are two People who are in intimate relationship with one another?

You may have noticed how many references in this study come from the Gospel of John. This Gospel especially has a lot to say about who Jesus is in relation to the Father and the Spirit. For this reason, many new Christians are encouraged to begin by reading John, so that they can get to know who Jesus truly is.

Some say that Jesus was really just a very special man, not unlike some other Bible characters such as Abraham or Moses. Or instead, perhaps He was a special heavenly being, like an angel. Read Hebrews 3:5-6 & 1:1-13 to explore how both of these thoughts are addressed in the Bible.

Next, let us also consider how the Second Person of the Trinity relates to the Holy Spirit as well.

Read John 15:26 & 16:7.

What is the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit?

Do they appear to be the same Person or different?

*T.J. MacLeslie, in
**Designed for
Relationship**, shares
with us his own
compelling journey of
discovering the Person
of Jesus:
“I started my journey by
rejecting Christianity.
However, to be
intellectually honest
with myself, I felt I had
to include an
investigation of the
person of Christ if only
so that I could
permanently exclude
Him. In the end, I was
arrested by the picture
of Jesus Christ
portrayed in the
Gospels. I could not fail
to see that He was truly
the Son of God and
worthy of my
allegiance.”*

We saw above (Colossians 1) that Jesus Christ is first and preeminent in all things. Does the Holy Spirit seem to be something ‘less’ or inferior to Christ?

We read above that the Son sends the Holy Spirit to follow after Him and be active. **Read Luke 1:30-35 & 1 Peter 1:10-12**; how was the Holy Spirit also active *before* the incarnation of Jesus Christ on earth?

In this study, we have seen that Jesus has divine characteristics and also that He has special relationships with the other two Persons of the Trinity, the Father and the Holy Spirit. We have also seen that Jesus is not simply the same Person as the Father or the Spirit, but that they are all in intimate relationship with one another.

COMING UP...

We have seen that there is one God, that the Father is God, and that the Son (Jesus Christ) is also God, and we have examined some of the relationships within the Trinity. Next, we will examine the Person of the Holy Spirit, and in the fifth and final study we look again at the Trinity as a whole and the implications for us in our life and faith.

THE TRINITY

PART IV: THE PERSON OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

While exploring the Second Person of the Trinity, we looked at many passages from John. Similarly, we find in the Book of Acts many passages that reveal to us the Person of the Holy Spirit. “We read the Acts afresh and found we were reading, not the acts of the apostles, but the acts of the Holy Ghost.” (Rees Howells, Intercessor by Norman Grubb)

Some people know the Holy Spirit as “the Holy Ghost”; in this sense, “ghost” is just an older translation of the word that most modern English Bibles write as “spirit.” It was never intended to indicate that the Holy Spirit is something spooky or evil. Along with modern usage, we here prefer to use “Holy Spirit” when speaking of Him.

Look also at Revelation 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22 for other instances of the Holy Spirit speaking.

The Person of the Holy Spirit is perhaps the most misunderstood of the members of the Trinity. The Father is easily equated with common notions of a divine being. Jesus came to earth as a man who walked and talked with people. But what—or who—is the Holy Spirit?

When some people consider the Holy Spirit, they think of something like “The Force,” from the science fiction film *Star Wars*—a nameless, cosmic energy that is not well understood but is powerful and can be manipulated to achieve astounding effects.

But such a view completely misses the Holy Spirit as a *Person*, as a member of the divine community that is the Trinity. T.J. MacLeslie, in *Designed for Relationship*, says succinctly, “God is not a force, but a unity of persons. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each personalities with emotions, will, intellect, etc. Together, They are the one true God.”

PERSONHOOD

Let’s begin by examining some of the Scripture passages which demonstrate personal characteristics of the Holy Spirit: emotions, communication, and individuality.

A person has interactions and relationships with other people, including emotional bonds and conversation.

Read Isaiah 63:10-14, Ephesians 4:29-32, Acts 5:3-9 & 15:24-29 and observe how our actions impact the Spirit. What feelings do we see in the Third Person of the Trinity?

There are many Bible references that reveal the Father and the Son speaking to people. But there are also references when it is specifically stated that the Holy Spirit is communicating and relating as well. **Read Ezekiel 11:5-10, Acts 16:6-10 & 20:22-23, and 2 Peter 1:19-21.** What kinds of things does the Spirit say?

Some early disciples even struggled with the idea of the Holy Spirit. See Acts 19:2-6.

Also recall the verses that we looked at in the second study of this series concerning the work of the Trinity in salvation (Eph 1:2-14 and 1 Peter 1:1-12), and you may additionally explore John 3:5-8, Titus 3:5-6 & Hebrews 10:15-18.

The Nicene Creed states, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life." What does this mean as a role of the Holy Spirit?

While we may have a tendency to ignore the Holy Spirit, or to consider Him as a lesser member of the Trinity because we struggle with getting to know Him, the Bible demonstrates the individuality of the Holy Spirit as a profound and serious truth.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:3 & Luke 12:10-12 and comment on the distinctions described between the Holy Spirit and the other two members of the Trinity.

ROLES

We've seen above that that Holy Spirit is involved in speaking *to* people and also *through* people (in prophecy). Let's consider some of the other things that the Holy Spirit does in order to help us further get to know who He is.

Read John 14:16-17, 15:26, 16:7-15 and make a list of the various things that the Holy Spirit does. While doing so, can you think of any verses that describe the Father and/or the Son doing similar things?

Along with the roles described in the Gospel of John above, the work of the Holy Spirit in giving spiritual gifts is perhaps one of His most recognized spheres of influence (e.g. 1 Cor 12:4-13, Heb 2:4). But there are other things that He does which we may overlook. Consider the works of the Holy Spirit as you **read each of the following: 2 Timothy 1:14, Romans 15:16, Acts 5:32, Acts 13:2-4, Acts 20:28, Isaiah 34:16.** Are any of these works surprising to you?

PRAYER & JOY

Clearly, the Holy Spirit is involved in many ways with people, relating to us with words and displaying His emotions. Two of the most impactful spheres of ministry that I see the Holy Spirit present in are prayer and the impartation of joy.

Consider the idea of prayer as you **read Jude 1:20, Romans 8:26-27, & Ephesians 6:18**. How is the Holy Spirit to be involved in our prayer life?

Some Bible teachers say, “We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit.” What does this idea mean to you? Do you agree? How might this perspective change the way you pray?

In your own experience, how does knowing the Holy Spirit impact your approach to prayer or the way you pray?

*Consider also
2 Corinthians 6:4-10
& Galatians 5:22-25.*

We looked above at the emotions of the Holy Spirit, and it’s neat to see that the Spirit Himself also impacts the state of our hearts. **Read Acts 13:52, Romans 14:16-18 & 15:13, and 1 Thessalonians 1:6** and examine the link between the Holy Spirit’s activity and our joy.

COMING UP...

We have seen that God is One and that He is Three—the individual Persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We have seen that the reality of the Trinity is demonstrated widely across the Scriptures. In our next and final study, we explore the question of: So What? What impact does this truth about the nature of God have on us? How does the reality of the Trinity impact our experience of life?

THE TRINITY

PART V: REVEALING THE TRINITY IN OUR COMMUNITY

*“Because you are sons,
God has sent forth the
Spirit of His Son into
our hearts, crying,
‘Abba! Father!’”
(Galatians 4:6)*

*It’s been said that
theology books attempt
to explain the Trinity,
but the New Testament
calls people to
experience the Trinity.
As you reflect on the
New Testament passages
we’ve explored in this
series, what focus do
you see in the Bible’s
revelation of the
Trinity?*

Having explored the reality of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—over the last four studies, in this final study let us build from this biblical foundation to consider the question of personal application: what difference does the truth of the Trinity make for my life and the practice of my faith?

COMMUNITY

T.J. MacLeslie, in *Designed for Relationship*, writes, “The Trinitarian nature of God means that God is inherently community, inherently relational.”

Individually, we are made in God’s image (Gen 1:26), and corporately, we are the Body of Christ (Rom 12:5). We have a role of representing who God is. How can we represent this idea of a divine community in...

Our Worship? >

In our Service to Others? >

In our Conversations with Non-Christians? >

What dangers do you see if we over-emphasize our personal, individual relationships with God and overlook our communal, corporate relationship?

COOPERATION

Despite being three Persons, the Trinity rules together in an incredible way, without competing wills, in-fighting, or power-plays.

How should this model of cooperation impact our own methods of leadership?

The idea of ‘submission’ often has a negative sense in modern culture. How does our observation of the interaction between the Father and the Son especially help us to redefine our ideas about submitting to one another?

Imagine an outsider who is trying to understand God by watching groups of Christians that you are a part of—like your church service, small group, Bible study, missions/service project, or committee meetings. What ideas would he/she get about the nature of God by viewing us in these circumstances? Consider both good, right notions about God, and also inaccurate views they might gain from our behavior.

Christian Group Setting >

Good/Right Notions of God Displayed >

Inaccurate Views of God Communicated >

“The most distinctive characteristic of the persons of the triune family is their selfless love for one another. Each esteems and defers to the other in a way that makes the original family of the trinity a model for the Christian family of believers in the church.”
(Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary)

“God is, by definition, always relating. Behind everything that exists is an eternal, divine community. God is not a force, but a unity of persons. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are each personalities with emotions, will, intellect, etc. Together, They are the one true God. They have eternally existed in intimate communion with one another.”
(T.J. MacLeslie,
Designed for Relationship)

UNITY & DIVERSITY

The Trinity is three different Persons, but one God—perhaps the ultimate example of unity and diversity.

*“Every activity originates from the **Father**, proceeds through the **Son**, and is brought to perfection in the **Holy Spirit**.”*
(Gregory of Nyssa)

In what ways do you and your church exemplify the characteristic of unity? In what areas is there difficulty demonstrating unity with other members of the Body of Christ, either within your congregation, denomination, or the wider Christian community?

What challenges are there to valuing diversity within one another? Where do we struggle with appreciating different roles that people have within our church community?

What’s one way that your time working through this study on the Trinity will impact your life, faith, or practice as you continue on in your Christian journey?

CONCLUSION

There is indeed difficulty and mystery in understanding God as Trinity, but that doesn’t mitigate the truth and necessity of this doctrine. Just because we can’t fully fathom it, doesn’t mean we can’t say anything at all about the nature of God. And it certainly doesn’t mean that we can’t express and live out what we *do* understand. We are Christians, we believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as a result we should live our lives and faith in community and cooperation, expressing our unity and diversity as we corporately and individually love God with all we are.

*“The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit**, be with you all.”*
(2 Corinthians 13:4)