

Have you ever taken the kids to a Build-a-Bear Workshop? At the mall or online you can shop for a designer stuffed animal.

Here's the process... *You pick out a furry friend... a bear, a dog, a bunny. You pre-record the sounds you want your stuffed animal to make. You add packing to get the right squeeze-ability. Then you put a heart inside, stitch it up, brush its fur, and give it a name. Next, you pick out clothes, and accessorize your bear. Finally, you take your new best friend home in a carrying case.* As the Build-a-Bear website says it's a *pawsitively* fun experience...

Let me suggest this is also how religion in America seems to work. It's the Build-a-Faith workshop. You walk into the religion store and pick out a god – fill its mouth with teachings that tickle your ears – pack it with principles that accentuate your lifestyle – stitch it and brush it with half-hearted compliance – then dress it in non-offensive accessories. Then you carry your friend home and live happily-ever-after... *UNLESS there's a true God – and He's given a reliable revelation of His will – and He holds us accountable for truth – and sends us to heaven or hell...*

Imagine, getting home with your little, squeezable build-a-bear – only to walk into the backyard and be greeted by a real live, 700 pound, man-eating grizzly! Suddenly, your stuffed teddy bear is not a lot of help. And the time and effort you've spent building it seems pretty foolish.

I'm afraid that same day is coming for many, many people. They've created in their imagination a furry, little stuffed deity. They've adopted a concept of god that'll be no help at all when they meet the real One.

Most modern Americans develop their religion by cut and paste. They grab ideas about God from movies, celebrity sound bytes, shows on the History Channel, conversations with friends – then they import these notions into their faith. Their theology becomes a blend of fact and fiction.

Recently Oprah Winfrey held a webinar to promote the teachings of Eckhard Tolle – a heretical New Age pied piper. Let me quote Oprah... "God isn't something to believe, God is. And God is a feeling experience, not a believing experience. If God for you is still about a belief, then it's not truly God." Hey, the Bible states, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." And faith is *proper belief*. Oprah Winfrey is sending folks to hell. And she influences 15 million Americans every single day.

I hope none of you are as deceived as Oprah, but I dare say many of you are not as clear as you need to be when it comes to your theology. This is why for the next fourteen weeks I'm going to define the **Essentials** of a biblical faith. *What do Christians really believe and why does it matter...*

Each week we'll begin with a doctrinal statement that we'll first define; then at the end of our study we'll repeat it out-loud and all-together. Here's our first...We believe in one, true God - eternal and self-existent- separate from creation and sovereign over creation - all-powerful and all-knowing. God exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. And He wants us to join Him, in living and enjoying a Trinitarian life.

Let's begin in Isaiah 45:5. The prophet declares the words of God... "I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, that they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.

God is emphatic, “there is no God besides Me.” Christians believe and the Bible teaches in numerous places there is only one God. Psalm 86:10 sings to the God of the Bible, “You alone are God.” In John 17:3 Jesus said eternal life comes from “the only true God...” And Paul wrote to his protégé in 1Timothy 2:5, “There is one God...”

Yet in Acts 17, Paul paid a visit to the city of Athens – and “his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.” The Athenians were worshippers who bowed to many different gods.

And what was true in Athens - was true in Canaan and Babel in the Old Testament – and is true today in cities and villages all over the world... *People observe various religions and worship a myriad of deities. So what about these other gods? Are billions of people wrong?*

Notice our text, God seems to anticipate this question. He says in verse 6, “That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides Me.” God wants us to know He’s not just the true God in Israel, but wherever the sun rises, east to west, He is *the only* God.

Of course, some would say the world’s various gods are just different names for the same God. *This is nonsensical.* If that’s your belief you’re revealing your ignorance of world religions and the gods they worship.

Taoism, Shintoism, Paganism, and Mormonism are polytheistic – they believe in multiple gods. Hindus can have as many as 330 million gods. *Whereas, the Bible teaches that the true God is one God – not many.*

Other religions are pantheistic. Zen Buddhism and New Age thought teach that God is an impersonal life force. All is God and God is in all. *In contrast, the Bible’s God is a person that’s separate from nature.*

Deism was the religion of Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. It says God wound up the world; then walked away. He’s an absentee landlord. *But this flies in the face of what the Bible teaches us about God. He’s **Sustainer** as well as **Creator**. He remains deeply involved in His world.*

Here’s the crux – the world’s gods are contradictory and incompatible with the God of the Bible. It’s illogical to assume all gods are one God.

So how do we account for all the different gods and religions? Here are two possibilities...

First, false gods are a figment of sinful man’s imagination. Psalm 135 says men tend to make idols in their own image. Verse 18 tells us, “Those who make them are like them...”

God made man in *His* own image, but rather than rise up and choose to be like God - man chooses to worship gods in His own fallen image. Man prefers gods he can control and who’ll permit him do as he pleases.

This is why our notion of God is the greatest determiner of our future. No one rises above his understanding of God. You become like the God you serve... Worship money and you’ll be a greedy person. Covet power and you’ll become abusive. Seek fame and you’ll end up self-centered. Live for the one true God and you’ll end up a reflection of His glory.

This is why I say, nothing is more vital than *our concept of God*.

But there’s another source for the world’s false gods... Today, whole continents lie in spiritual darkness - blinded to God’s light - and I believe the false religions that dominate their cultures are *demonically inspired*. Satan’s desire from the beginning has been to steal worship from God. What better way to achieve his goal than to disguise himself as a god?

In Deuteronomy 32:17 when Israel chased after false gods and made offerings to idols, it

was said, “They sacrificed to demons, not to God...” In the New Testament, 1Corinthians 10:20-21 Paul points out that if a man worships at the altar of an idol he actually interacts with a demon. This has some provocative implications. Do Muslims worship a real, spiritual entity named “Allah?” I’m sure they do, but Allah is a demon.

When a Hindu burns incense to Vishnu - or a Mormon prays to a god who was once a man on another planet – or a radical environmentalist pays homage to Gaia, the Mother Earth – or an Indian medicine man evokes the Great Spirit – they’re really consorting with demons.

People around the world have heavy, spiritual, supernatural encounters, but often the power behind these experiences is demonic. 2Thessalonians 2:9 notes “the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders.” 2Corinthians 11:14 tells us Satan often appears as “an angel of light.”

Many times in the Bible “*spirit*” is a synonym for “*angel*.” There are the angels who worship and serve the one, true God. But there are also fallen angels in league with Satan who collaborate to deceive human beings. If you’re *just spiritual* be careful lest you open yourself up to demons. People today pride themselves in being *spiritual* - but not *Christian*. This is the attitude that sets a person up for demonic deception.

Let’s go back to Isaiah 45 and read again verse 6-7, “I am the LORD, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.” These verses infer a few more truths about the one God. He’s eternal - self-existent - separate from creation – and sovereign over creation.

God is **eternal**. Isaiah quotes Him “I form the light and create darkness.” God was there, at the dawn of time - at the outset of matter and energy.

Years ago my kids would ask, “Dad, how old is God?” They assumed He was very old. That God was like Father Time – one step from rigor mortis. But I’d say, “God is forever old AND forever young.” The Psalms tell us, God is “from everlasting to everlasting.” Think of Him with the wisdom of age and the vigor of youth. He has always been - and will always be.

In fact, God is not just part of time – a person with a lot of time – He exists outside of time. God isn’t bound to the timeline. Often He invades time, and interacts with His creation, but the true God resides in eternity. This is how God sees the end from the beginning... how the Bible can refer to Jesus as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” - and how Paul can say that to God when Jesus died, we died with Him.

God is eternal, but He’s also **self-existent**. In Isaiah 45 He calls Himself, “*I am* the LORD...” or “Yahweh” in the Hebrew – it’s from the verb “to be.” God’s servant, Moses, was from Egypt, a land of many gods, but when God revealed Himself from a burning bush on Mount Sinai, He said to Moses, “I am Who I am... has sent you.” God is the great “I am.”

This is an awesome name. In taking this name God is claiming to be the ultimate reality - the only truly self-sufficient One. Ask me for a favor – *and though I’m here to serve*, I have needs of my own... I sleep and I eat. But when you pray to God you’re praying to someone who’s totally self-staining. God needs nada. Sandy is “the great I ain’t.” Maybe “the I wish.” Only God calls Himself the “I am.” Admit it or not – we all depend on God. No matter how wealthy or powerful we are, we need God for the air we breathe - and for our next breath. Our very lives are on loan.

Notice again in Isaiah 45 God says “I form... and create...” God speaks of Himself as the Creator, and **separates Himself from His creation**.

This is the important distinction between the biblical truth about God and the pagan philosophy taking over American and western culture today. In a sense there are two

worldviews. Call them *One-ism* and *Two-ism*. They represent totally different approaches to life...

One-ism teaches that all is in God and God is in all. Everything is one. One-ism is a single circle, and everything gets place inside that circle. There are no distinctions between man and animals, male and female... Even the distinction between the Creator and creation is abolished.

In Two-ism God is outside the circle – there's creation and Creator. But in One-ism everything is equal - on the same level - in the same circle... *God and nature, deity and humanity, man and animals, male and female, good and evil* – everything exists in the circle of life.

This was the message promoted in the Disney movie, "The Lion King." Remember Elton John's theme song - it was entitled, "Circle of Life." Star Wars theology says both good and evil are just two sides to one force. "May the force be with you..." may not be a good idea. Good and evil are in one circle.

Understand the theology of One-ism... There is no One outside the circle. God is within. No need to blow the bugle, there is NO cavalry! There is no Savior in One-ism. The only Savior is your self. Humans look for the spark of divinity within. You no longer pray - you meditate. God is not outside the circle poised to rescue us – He's within. In One-ism meditation replaces prayer – therapy replaces truth. As in the earlier quote from Oprah, "*Feeling replaces believing.*"

The goal of One-ism is ultimately one religion – no right or wrong when it comes to ideas about God, or morals, or sexuality. In One-ism there's no truth or lie, light or darkness. Exclusivity is the one intolerable. This is why the truth-claims of Christianity are an attack on One-ism.

Obviously the Bible teaches Two-ism. God stands outside the circle of life as **sovereign over creation**. God is Judge. He has ultimate authority. The God of the Bible is **all-powerful** and **all-knowing**. He does as He pleases – whenever He pleases. As He declares in Isaiah 45:7, "I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things." Inside the circle God loses His authority, but from outside God rules the roost.

I'll talk more about these implications in a couple of weeks. But for now understand the trend in pop culture is One-ism. Christianity is Two-ism. God is separate from creation – and because He's separate He's not a prisoner of the mess we've made. From outside, God can come to our rescue, and save us from the sin and death we've invited into our circle.

The Christian God is the one God – eternal - self-existent - separate from creation - sovereign over creation - all-powerful - and all-knowing... But here's the deep mystery in the nature of the God of the Bible that sets Him apart from the other two monotheistic religions - Judaism and Islam. Though God is one God in essence and substance – this one, true God exists in three distinct persons – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. We call this doctrine the "Trinity" or the "tri-unity of God."

Let me say at the start, the Trinity is a biblical mystery the human intellect can never fully dissect. It's not *illogical*. It *supersedes logic*. The Christian belief in the Trinity is derived not from *reason*, but from *revelation*. We believe in the Trinity because the Bible tells us so. I like Augustine's famous quote, "Try to explain the Trinity, and you'll lose your mind. Yet try to explain it away - and you'll lose your soul."

Here's what we discover about God when we study the Scriptures... *There is just one God, yet three different persons claim to be Him.*

Throughout the Bible the Father says that He is God. This is undisputed. The fatherhood of

God is taught throughout the Bible – in the OT and NT.

The Bible is also clear that the Son is God. In John 10:30, Jesus said, “I and My Father are one.” John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word (Jesus) and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In John 8:58 Jesus declared, “Before Abraham was, I am.” He claimed to be the great “I am.”

Certainly, the NT Church worshipped Jesus as God. Thomas fell before the risen Christ, and cried, “My Lord and my God.” Romans 9:5, calls Him “the eternally blessed God.” Colossians 2:9 says all of God was in Jesus.

Make no mistake about it, His enemies and followers alike knew Jesus’ claim to deity. Jesus was executed because He said He was God.

The Father is God. Jesus is God. And also the Holy Spirit is God. Note, the Bible never speaks of the Holy Spirit as “it” – an impersonal force like the god of pantheism. The Spirit is always a “He” – a person.

In Acts 5 Peter comments that Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit. Yet later in the chapter, he tells them, “You have not lied to men but to God.” Obviously, Peter understood the Holy Spirit to be God.

In the Bible there’s one God - but three persons claim to be God – thus, the doctrine of the Trinity. And it’s not just taught in the NT... also the OT.

Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God...” The Hebrew word for God is “Elohim” – a plural of “El.” From verse 1 God is seen as a plurality. This gets repeated when God creates man. He says, “Let us make man in our image and... our likeness.” “*Us*” and “*our*” are *plural* pronouns.

Deuteronomy 6:4 is Judaism’s famous declaration of monotheism. It’s called “the Great Shema.” “The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” The Hebrew word translated “one” is the word “*echad*” – which refers to a compound, divisible unity. My fist is *echad* – one first, but five fingers. In contrast the Hebrew word “*yachid*” speaks of an absolute, indivisible unity. God could’ve used “*yachid*” - but He didn’t. “The LORD is *echad*.”

Over the centuries there were Jews who read the OT carefully and recognized the Bible’s references to the plurality of the one God. The Zohar was a medieval book of Jewish mysticism. And the Zohar saw in the Shema, God’s name mentioned three times. “The **LORD** our **God**, the **LORD** is one...” The Zohar states, “These three are one...” The book talks about “the threefold Divine manifestations.”

Another Jewish document, “The Targum of Neophiti” written in the 2nd century BC, prior to Jesus, contained a reading of Genesis 1:27, man’s creation. The Targum reads, “The Word of the Lord created the man...” Sounds like John 1:1, the Word is Jesus. “The Word was with God and was God.” When God said, “Let *us* make man” some Jews saw a plurality.

I love Isaiah 61. This is the passage Jesus chose to read when He visited His hometown of Nazareth and preached in the synagogue. Verse 1, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me...” Here’s the Trinity. God the Spirit, God the Father, God the Son all mentioned together.

Though over the centuries rabbinical Judaism rejected the notion of the Trinity, but Jews who carefully read the OT knew about God’s plurality.

St. Augustine spent nineteen years studying the doctrine of the Trinity. One day he was walking by the seashore when he saw a boy filling a bucket with seawater - then pouring the water into a hole in the sand. He asked the boy, “*Why?*” The kid said, “I’m pouring the Mediterranean Ocean into this hole.” Augustine laughed, “Son, it’s impossible. The sea is far

too vast, and your hole is far too small.”

That’s when it hit him... This is what Augustine had been doing with the Triune God. Like the sea, his subject was too vast. And like the hole, his mind was too small.

When I think of the Trinity I think of a quote from Vernon Grounds, “If we could understand the nature of our Creator, He would be a two-bit deity...” Be glad you don’t serve a “two-bit deity.” If Sandy Adams knew all there was to know about God - He wouldn’t be a God worthy of our worship. God *baffles me to humble me...* Blaise Pascal once said, “I love God because I know Him. I adore Him because I cannot comprehend Him.”

Yet despite the marvel of the Trinity, various heretics have attacked it by going to extremes - either *denying God’s unity* or *God’s diversity*.

The most common assault on the Trinity is called “modalism” - it attacks *God’s diversity*. Modalism teaches that God plays three roles or modes. At times He’s the Father, or Son, or Spirit – but never all three at once.

Of course, modalism gets easily refuted... *at the baptism of Jesus...* The Father spoke from heaven, the Son stood in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. It was a picture of the diversity in the Trinity. All three persons of the Godhead were present at once.

Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses try to deny the Trinity by going to the opposite extreme - they attack the *unity of the Trinity*. They deny that Jesus and the Spirit are God in the same way that the Father is God. Christians believe Jesus is God, who became a man. Mormons teach Jesus is a man who became a god... *just like you can become gods*.

Don’t be fuzzy here. God is both *unity* and *diversity* – one yet three. If you love a Mormon or a JW tell them the truth. They’re being deceived.

At times Christians get criticized for our many doctrinal disagreements. But here’s where all branches of historic Christianity agree. Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox – all Christians – affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. St. Caesarius from the 6th century wrote, “The faith of all Christians rests on the Trinity.” That is as true in the Church today as it was in 500 AD.

Here’s today’s challenge. God doesn’t just want us to believe in the Trinity, as Christians we’re called by God to live a Trinitarian lifestyle. God created us in His image. We’re to reflect Trinitarian qualities. Here are five to emulate - praise, love, submission, transparency, community.

First, to be Trinitarian is to be committed to **praise**. In the Bible the Spirit is always bringing glory to the Son - the Son always praises the Father, and the Father always speaks words of affirmation to the Son. Hebrews 1:12 says Jesus comes to Church and joins us in our praise. Uplifting communication is always taking place among the Godhead.

The first way for us to be Trinitarian is to communicate encouragement. *Praise God - lift up each other - affirm our spouse - shower our kids with approval. When we offer encouragement we are living a Trinitarian life.*

A second quality of a Trinitarian lifestyle is **love**. 1John 4:8 states, “God is love.” Yet for love to be meaningful it has to have an object. Love is *relational*, not academic. Without an object there is no love. And from eternity the Father, Son, and Spirit have loved each other. Humans weren’t created so God would have someone to love. God has always dwelt in perfect love. *Only a Trinitarian God can fuel us with love.*

Love is certainly not the defining characteristic of the other two monotheistic religions. *Islam* is full of hate and violence toward its opponents - *Judaism* is full of legalism and self-

righteousness. The Islamic God is aloof. Islam refers to Allah by 99 names, but never “*Father*.” Allah is a judge, not a dad. He watches people, weighing out bad deeds from good deeds. There is no mercy and little love in Islam. Only the Triune, Christian God can produce followers who love.

Third, a Trinitarian life is marked by **submission**. Since before time began the members of the Trinity have lived and worked in holy harmony. Father, Son, and Spirit are equal, yet they each have specific roles to play. The Father leads - the Son obeys the Father – the Spirit testifies of the Son. And at no time does the Son begrudge the Father’s authority, nor does the Spirit demand a cut of the glory reserved for the Son. Each member of the Trinity lives in humility and submission.

When husbands submit to God, and wives submit to their husbands... When children obey their parents and employees cooperate at work... When pastors follow God and church members support their pastors... When kids respect teachers and citizens obey the authorities, we’re living a Trinitarian lifestyle. We are honoring God and reflecting His image.

Fourth, Trinitarian life is **transparent** life. There’re no secrets among the Trinity. There’s full disclosure. There’s an openness and honesty. And when we *admit our weaknesses to each other*, and *confess our sins*, and *request each other’s help* - we’re also living a Trinitarian life.

Finally, a Trinitarian lifestyle values and participates in **community**. From eternity past to eternity future God has existed in community. This is why it’s sheer arrogance for us to live our lives in isolation - on our own.

When you think of the Trinity imagine a soldier returning to his family after a long separation - or ballplayers who put their egos aside for the good of the team – or a concert where the musicians are in a groove... There’s power, beauty, creativity in community. The Trinity is the prime example. Here’s the question... *If you’re not in some kind of fellowship with other Christians how you can’t be following a Trinitarian God?*

As believers in the God of the Bible we praise, love, submit, confess and fellowship - this is the Trinitarian life we’re called to as Christians.

Early Greek believers had a name for this kind of life. They called it “perichoresis.” In the middle you’ll spot an English word, “*choreograph*.” The idea is “to dance or flow around.” The early Christians talked about “the dance of God.” When your life is all about *praise, love, submission, confession, fellowship* we join in the swirl of God’s joy. Life is a dance.

Let me wrap it up by quoting Kevin Miller, “The Trinity has no jealousy, no politics, no power plays... The reason we can’t find good analogies for the Trinity is we live in such broken relationships that it’s hard to imagine a Community in which there’s constant joy and creativity and each Person pouring himself out for the others. It might sound crazy, but I believe it’s theologically accurate to say, “**God is a party and you are invited.**”

Come to the party! Come to the Triune God – and join in His dance.

Here is our first essential... We believe in one, true God - eternal and self-existent - separate from creation and sovereign over creation - all-powerful and all-knowing. God exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. And He wants us to join Him, in living and enjoying a Trinitarian life.