

Welcome

Have you ever been mistaken for someone else? In 2006, Guy Gowe showed up at the BBC for a job interview. Guy is an accountant. An intern showed up in the lobby, looked at him and said, "Guy?"

Since that was his name, Guy followed the intern. Then someone started putting makeup on him and put him in a chair.

Watch as Guy suddenly finds himself on live TV, being interviewed about a recent Apple court case. You can see the moment he realizes they've got the wrong Guy (literally).

[\[video\]](#)

I love this video for so many reasons. I love the look on Guy's face when he realizes what's happening. He doesn't have time to figure out *why* he's being interviewed about something he's probably only heard about on the news. He just jumps right in. Game face!

How many of us would've been that cool under pressure? Able to offer such coherent responses? Not me. Guy took that case of mistaken identity and rolled with it.

I kept thinking about mistaken identity in getting ready for today because today we're going to be talking about God. And the danger in talking about God is that 'god' is a generic, three letter word. In a pew study conducted last year, 80% of Americans said they believed in God. Of that 80%, only 56% of the total said they believed in God as described in the Bible.

And it gets more complicated, because they asked the people who answered No if they believe in some other force that's not the God described in the Bible and 9 of the 20% answered Yes. Include that with the 23% who claimed to believe in God but not the God described in the Bible and you have about a third of Americans who believe in a God other than the God of the Bible.

Plus, the Pew pollsters didn't explain "God as described in the Bible;" they left it open-ended. I can tell you from personal experience that 'as described in the Bible' is essentially worthless as a descriptor. I know dozens of folks personally who would claim to believe in the God of the Bible but can't accurately list any of God's attributes as described in the Bible, let alone wade into the complicated nuances of theological discussion that ensue.

So when someone tells me they believe in God... well, it doesn't actually tell me very much. Because when it comes to the divine, God's far too often the victim of mistaken identity.

So today, we're going to meet God as described in the Bible. We're going to talk about how we know this God, and how pursuing this God will lay a foundation for the year ahead of us here at Catalyst.

Message

This is the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate that the God who came to us at Christmas is not only for us, but for the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Church Words with Friends". We're going to be exploring some of those words Christians use that can be confusing. Maybe they're words like "Gospel" that are unique to Christianity. Or words like "grace" or "blessed" that pretty much everyone uses, but no one is exactly sure what they're supposed to mean. Our goal is to understand our faith better so that we can be better conversation partners with our friends and neighbors outside the Church.

And since friends are so nice, we're going to do two words each week. By learning these 'church words' together, we'll uncover new dimensions to our faith.

So we're going to start at the beginning, with a couple of words that we've insisted belong together since the early days of our faith.

The first word is "God". I went to a Christian university, and the first day of our philosophy class, our very provocative professor scrawled on the chalkboard, "God does not exist." He pressed us to explain what he meant (and, as you can imagine, all us freshman and sophomore Bible majors were *very* offended by the very notion.

But he wouldn't let us off the hook. He asked us to define God. Imagine that conversation in your head. God is a three letter word that points vaguely at a being more powerful than us. Some think of God as a cosmic Santa Clause, rewarding good and punishing evil. Some think of God as a benevolent force that sends us good vibes. Others imagine God is a cosmic dictator who enforces his will on the universe. For others, God is a force expressed in countless incarnations and avatars.

When someone tells me, "I believe in God," I always have to ask, "Which God?" or "What do you mean by God?" Because the word "God" by itself is generic, nearly useless.

This isn't a new problem. For as long as we've been around, humans have built temples to any number of gods and goddesses. So when the first followers of Jesus first started spreading the good news about his resurrection, they had a problem.

It wasn't just, "Who is this god you're talking about?" Learning about new gods from other places wasn't a big surprise.

Gods in the ancient world were sort of like the difference between Hardees and Carl's, Jr. I grew up in the Midwest, and the restaurant was called Hardees. I remember the first time I came to the South and saw a Carl's, Jr. Same font. Same menu. The only real difference is the name.

Same for the ancient world: call your god Jupiter or Zeus or Marduk or Ra or Ba'al, they were all more-or-less the same. The religions operated more or less the same. Functionally, it was all the same kind of faith.

So the problem that faced those first Christians was how to communicate that Jesus wasn't just another costume for the same old gods. Jesus was something different.

So we came up with a word that pairs with "god", a word that helps us understand who this god is, and how this god is unique, singular, different from all the other gods.

That word is "Trinity".

I know, I know: Trinity is one of those words that instantly makes us roll our eyes back in our heads and check out. It's super-complicated, and difficult to wrap our minds around.

And, in case you didn't know, the concept of the Trinity isn't in the Bible anywhere (we get hints of it, as you'll see, but we didn't hammer out exactly what we meant by saying God is Trinity until the Council of Nicea in 325 - almost 300 years after Jesus' resurrection.)

Why the 300 year gap? Well, basically, it took us about 300 years to figure out exactly what to do with Jesus having been raised from the dead. The resurrection exploded all our categories about God, who God is and how God works. It took us a long time to figure out how Jesus helped us know God more fully.

And what we came up with was Trinity. Trinity is an important word because it teaches us who the God we know in Jesus is, what makes this God different from other gods.

So what does it mean that God is Trinity, and why does it matter so much?

When Jesus said he was God, it raised the possibility that Christianity was polytheistic. There would be the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - all three separate gods who work together, something like the three main deities in Hinduism, or like the other polytheistic faiths of Jesus' day in Greece and Rome.

But Christians knew that couldn't be true because one of the core confessions of God's people going back to Moses was "The Lord is one, and we should worship God alone." So if Jesus *is* God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, then he can't be *another* God.

This is what the gospel writer insists in the opening lines of John, words we heard just a few weeks ago on Christmas Eve:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. -- John 1:1-3

Jesus, the divine Word, is both with and one with God. It's later in John's Gospel Jesus is described as God's "only-begotten Son". That language proved to be really important to the Church as we tried to figure out what to make of Jesus.

Jesus told us he was God *and* God's son. So did that mean God had a kid? (This is how our Muslim friends understand Biblical language about Jesus' sonship, and for them, it's the height of blasphemy to imagine that God procreated.) We reject that idea. God did not create Jesus in any way. The Word *is* God, and the Word is the one *through whom* God creates everything. The Word, Jesus, is not himself created.

That's why, when we were trying to figure out how to talk about Jesus, we put this phrase in the Creed: Jesus is *begotten not made*. This is a bit of metaphorical language here to distinguish between Jesus as God's first creation (which is what our Mormon friends teach) and Jesus *as God*. We say that Jesus is *homoousios*, the same substance as the Father.

I know... our heads are spinning. Here's the short version: All three Persons are one God. What one does, they all do. When one acts, all act. They're not three separate people who form a super team. They're not three different expressions of God - the way I am a husband, a pastor and a friend. They're three Persons, One God.

If your head is hurting a little, that's okay: remember it took the Church 300 years, working all together to formulate this, and we're trying to cover it in 20 minutes.

[Scripture Slide] Here's the important piece: God is one God in three Persons. They are one *and* three. That's how John can write in his first letter what he does. This is where our claim that God is love comes from. Notice that John is concerned primarily with how God's essential, loving nature shapes *us* as those made in God's image:

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Insisting God is love isn't merely a nice, sentimental statement. We're making a profound statement about God's nature and how God interacts with the world. Jesus told us that God's love is fundamentally self-giving. And again, that sounds great. But if God were only one, as our Jewish and Muslim friends believe, then God couldn't express God's fundamental nature alone. Because to give requires a receiver.

That would make creation something God *had* to do. God would *need* creation to be fully Godself. And more, we would have to be God's partners. After all, a gift isn't fully a gift unless it's received. And that

would mean God wasn't free to love us. God would have to love us, and we would *have to* love God for God to be fully God.

A relationship based on need rather than freedom is co-dependent.

But because God is Trinity, God is free to love within the Godhead. All three persons of God can give to and receive from the Others. God is wholly self-sufficient, entirely capable of being God without anyone or anything else.

So God creates for the same reason we just gave gifts at Christmas: because giving is a true joy. It really *is* more blessed to give than to receive. God created us, and the world, so that we could join in God's loving, self-giving life. That's what John goes on to say:

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. -- 1 John 4:7-8

Because God is love, God is the source of love. And we're able to love each other because God loves us. We learn *how to love*, how to give freely, how to relate out of freedom rather than need or lack, by receiving God's love.

For Christians, this is why it matters that Jesus is God. He reveals to us who God really is *by the very life he lived*. Many of you know a few months ago, I had the opportunity to sit down with a couple of our Muslim friends from the Sachse Mosque. One of them was writing a paper for a class on comparative religions, and we spent more time talking about Jesus than anything else. Muslims believe Jesus was human, a prophet like Abraham, Moses and Muhammad.

They wanted to understand the Trinity, what we mean by saying Jesus is the Son of God. And they asked how important it was for Christians that we believed Jesus was God. After all, if we could fudge a little, that'd be a pretty easy bridge to build between us!

But I told them the Trinity is the core confession of Christianity. Because the Trinity helps us distinguish God, the creator of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, from every other god. If Jesus isn't God, then our faith doesn't make any sense, and Jesus' death loses its meaning.

So, who is God? God is Jesus. God is Holy Spirit. God is Father. God is Trinity.

And that's good news for us, because it means that, when we receive God's love for us, we are freed to love each other as well.

Communion + Prayer

[Communion Slide] asdf

1. Asdf
2. Asdf
3. Asdf
4. Asd

Assignment + Blessing

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