

"Can I be a Christian and a Presbyterian?"

Session One

"What Can We Say About God?"

Let us begin with this understanding:

1. Whatever we say about God we can say because God has revealed Godself to us.
2. Whatever we say about God is never the final word.

As human beings—flawed and temporal—we cannot fully comprehend, nor can we fully describe God. Even if left to our own best attempts, we would miserably fail to understand, describe, or say anything at all about God.

We rely on **revelation**. There are two types of revelation: general revelation and special revelation.

"General revelation refers to the self-disclosure of God that all people can perceive by contemplation the evidence of God's presence in the world of nature, history, and human life in general. The knowledge of God derived from this revelation is sometimes called the *natural knowledge* of God. The movement is from us to God we seek God." (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 40)

"Special revelation, on the other hand, refers to the unique self-revelation of God through God's word and action (1) in the history of Israel and above all in Jesus Christ, (2) through the Bible, which tells us of the God who came to us in this way, and (3) through the Christian church, which preserves and interprets the biblical witness. The knowledge of God derived from this source is called the *revealed knowledge* of God. The movement of theological reflection here is from God to us; God seeks and finds us." (Ibid.)

1. God comes to us and is revealed to us above all in the man Jesus.
2. God is revealed by God's mighty acts in the history of Israel and in the words of the prophets.
3. God is revealed in the Bible.
4. God is revealed in and through the Christian community, the church.

In our confessions, we made some foundational declarations about God.

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,
The Apostles' Creed

WE BELIEVE in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible;

The Nicene Creed

We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust. Who is eternal, infinite, immeasurable, incomprehensible, omnipotent, invisible; one in substance and yet distinct in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. By whom we confess and believe all things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, to have been created, to be retained in their being, and to be ruled and guided by his inscrutable providence for such end as his eternal wisdom, goodness, and justice have appointed, and to the manifestation of his own glory.

The Scots Confession

In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another.

The Confession of 1967

We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel 46 from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

A Brief Statement of Faith

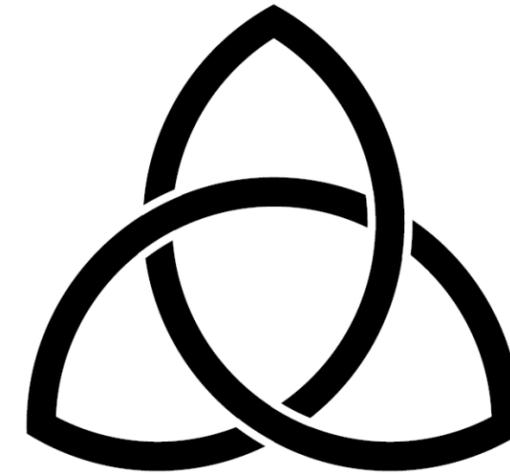
“In Jesus Christ, God came to us in a human being and put God’s stamp of approval on human life.” (Ibid., p. 247). To often, religious people dismiss and disregard the value of human life as “sinful,” “fallen,” and “no good.” The coming among us of Jesus Christ tells us the exact opposite. God saw something so important, and worthy, and valuable in us, that God—as a human—took up the cause of humanity and, once again, proclaimed humanity “very good.”

But, if Jesus’ advent is a celebration of humanity, it also says something about God. “God is not too high and light, too good, too holy, or too proud to ‘come down’ to our level to participate in earthly human life.” (Ibid.) God is not “put off” by anything we have done, or anything we have failed to do, that would keep God from coming among us. God self-humiliation is proof of God’s grace in action—God’s word in action.

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The concept of the Trinity is not found in the Bible. The word “Trinity” is not found in the Old or the New Testament.

The idea of Trinity came up in the early Christian community for a few reasons. First, Christianity was born within Judaism and held a strict monotheistic (one God) view. Second, as Jesus came to be understood as both human and divine, this challenged the monotheistic view. Third, the experience of the Holy Spirit as an enlivening presence and power begged the question of how the Spirit was connected to God and to Jesus.



The “clumsy” doctrine of the Trinity was developed because early Christian thinkers could not come up with a better way to explain the three different ways God is known. That is a very simplified way of putting it. We experience God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer.

The trick of speaking about the Trinity is to remember that all the persons of the Trinity are equal and are all God. They are inter-related and inter-connected. They cannot be separated, nor can they be spoken of in impersonal terms.

But, once again, not unlike God, the Trinity is a mystery. It is our feeble attempt to express something of the God we have experienced for ourselves.

Who Are We?

The overriding truth of the Bible is, not that we are sinners, but that we are human beings created in the image of God. In some Christian traditions, you would think that the Bible is all about sin—that sin is the main theme and central focus of the Christian faith.

As the late Professor Shirley Guthrie remind us, “We must take sin very seriously, but not too seriously.” (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 213) Guthrie goes on to remind us, “Sin distorts, twists, corrupts, and contradicts this truth (that we are created in God’s image), but it does

not change us into something other than what God created us to be. Sin is not stronger than God.” (Ibid.)

At its very core, sin is the self-destructive breaking of relationship with God and with other people.

Sin takes three basic forms.

Sin as disobedience. Disobedience is not only the blatant disregard of God’s commandments and design, it is also the withholding of ourselves from God and neighbor. Doing things without love, or not doing what love requires, is also disobedience.

Sin as sensuality. Sensuality is the satisfying of needs and desires related to our physical nature. Such sin often invites us to abandon our humanity and/or to make idols of something other than God.

Sin as the desire to be good. Sin is the desire to be like God. As Guthrie says, “Our sin is that we are not content to be dependent on God. We want to be self-sufficient and autonomous; be able to do anything we please; unlimited by anyone or anything outside ourselves; with power to exert absolute control over our own lives, over the lives of other people, and over the natural world around us.” (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 218)

Sin is separation from God and from each other. It is a defacing of the image of God in which we were created and in which others were created. It is seeking to replace God with ourselves.

Who is Jesus Christ?

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:

preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed and blessing the children,
healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts, 17 forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
and giving his life for the sins of the world.

God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.

God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.

A Brief Statement of Faith

In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with humankind. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became human and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, humanity, and the world. Therefore, the church calls all people to be reconciled to God and to one another.

In Jesus of Nazareth, true humanity was realized once for all. Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, lived among his own people and shared their needs, temptations, joys, and sorrows. He expressed the love of God in word and deed and became a brother to all kinds of sinful men and women. But his complete obedience led him into conflict with his people. His life and teaching judged their goodness, religious aspirations, and national hopes. Many rejected him and demanded his death. In giving himself freely for them, he took upon himself the judgment under which everyone stands convicted. God raised him from the dead, vindicating him as Messiah and Lord. The victim of sin became victor, and won the victory over sin and death for all.

God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. It is called the sacrifice of a lamb, a shepherd’s life given for his sheep, atonement by a priest; again it is ransom of a slave, payment of debt, vicarious satisfaction of a legal penalty, and victory over the powers of evil. These are expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory in the depths of God’s love for humankind. They reveal the gravity, cost, and sure achievement of God’s reconciling work.

The Confession of 1967

“In this real flesh-and-blood man, Jesus of Nazareth, God was uniquely present in the world. This man was not just a great teacher of profound truths about God and the secret of happy, successful life. He was not just a revolutionary political leader with a vision of a more human and just society. He was not just a great moral hero for us to imitate as best we can. He was not just a very godlike personality, the model of a truly spiritual life. Nor was he just the founder of a religious club later called the church, where religious people with a common interest in him come together to admire him and admire themselves for admiring him. To know this man is not just to know a very great, very good, very wise, very spiritual human being. It is to know *God*. His very name is ‘Jesus,’ which in Hebrew means ‘God helps’ or ‘God saves’ (Matthew 1:21) He is the ‘Christ,’ the ‘Messiah,’ the ‘Anointed One’ of God. He is the ‘Son of God’ (Mark 1:1). His miraculous birth is a sign of the fact that where he comes from, who he is, and what he does cannot be explained in terms of the ordinary process of human life and history. This man comes from God. What *he* says and does is *God’s* word and action. He is ‘Emmanuel,’ God-with-us (Matthew 1:23).” (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 243)

In the days of ancient Israel, when the people would wander from God’s way, prophets were sent to call them back—back to God’s way of living with God and each other. In that same tradition, God in Jesus Christ came among us to call us back to God’s way, to reclaim the image of God in which we were created, to reconcile us to God and to each other, and to restore the nature and purpose God had in creating us in the first place.