



# Vital Beliefs

finding our place in the story of God

Jim Hampton

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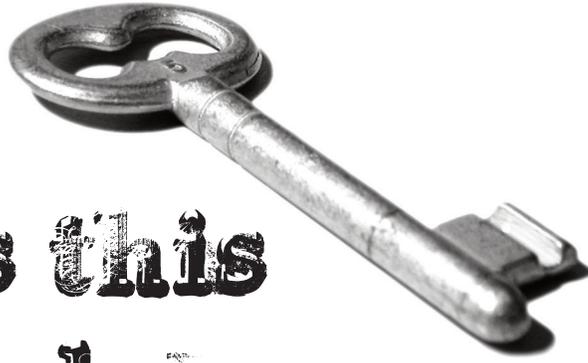
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# why is this curriculum important

## Thoughts from the Author

Welcome! I'm so glad you've picked up this book with the intention of teaching this material. You are to be commended for your interest in helping youth become mature in the faith. You have an adventurous journey ahead of you, one that will be filled with both joy and struggle as you work together to learn these truths. With God's guidance, I know that you will make an incredible impact on your youth.

### **The Reason For This Book**

I had the wonderful privilege of attending my denomination's youth conference. Now, attending a youth conference may not seem like that big of a deal, but it's really the reason I am writing this book. Let me explain.

When I was selected to go to the conference, I had to sign a pledge. This was no ordinary pledge. What I committed to was to take what I learned from the conference and personally teach five other people those truths. As I'm sure many others did, I signed the pledge but really gave no thought to actually following through on it. After all, I was going

to the conference for fun, not for all the "religious stuff." But sometime during that conference God came calling. And, kneeling at an altar, I rededicated my life to Jesus Christ.

Within weeks after I got home, my dad, who had been an associate pastor, accepted a call to become pastor of a church in a different town, and so we changed churches. I was growing in my faith during that time (my senior year in high school), but I had mostly forgotten about the pledge that I had made.

Fast-forward with me three years. I had been actively involved in ministry to others while I was in college and was really enjoying the opportunities to preach at various churches. However, one day as I was home doing some cleaning, I came across the pledge that I had signed in order to attend that youth conference. As I sat there looking at it, God gently reminded me that the promise I had made wasn't just to the denominational officials, but it was a promise to Him. I had made a commitment to disciple five people, and God wanted me to keep it.

## THOUGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

After asking God to forgive me for not being obedient, I immediately set out to fulfil my promise. I gathered five fellow youth together, and we spent a year studying the Scripture, learning what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I don't know that I was any further along spiritually than they were, but I assumed the role of leader. During that year, I had the opportunity to share all that I had learned at the youth conference and was excited as the principles we studied moved from being just the passing of information into the transformation of lives.

After we finished that year, I thought that my commitment to God was completed. But God again spoke to me. He opened my eyes to the number of youth on our campus who needed to be disciplined, people who were either new to the faith or who had been Christians for a while and yet had never learned even the basics of Christianity. Over the summer, I phoned the five members of my original group and asked if each of them would consider leading a group of five youth the next fall over the same things that I had taught them. All five agreed. By the time I graduated, over 100 youth had participated in a group where they were taught the basics of the Christian faith while they were challenged to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

I don't tell this story to brag. The reason I share it is to help you understand where my heart lies. God has given me a special burden for discipling youth and helping them develop a lifelong love relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the purpose of this book.

You see, throughout much of Christendom we are facing a crisis of retaining new converts, especially among young people. We have known for years that the youth years are the prime time for winning people to the Lord. In fact, statistics tell us that 80% of all people who do not accept Christ before the age of 18 never will. Therefore, we

spend a lot of time and energy in helping people see their need for Jesus and helping them to initiate that relationship with Him. Unfortunately, this is often where we leave them. Too often, we mistakenly assume that as long as they read their Bible and pray, that everything will work out. As a result, because these new converts never wrestle with and apply the basics of the faith, we end up with people who fall into one of three categories: 1) they remain "baby Christians" who never grow in their faith; 2) they are easily led astray by false teachings (perhaps joining a cult or other religious group); or 3) they abandon the faith altogether.

In fact, of those youth who do make a decision for Jesus Christ during their youth years, my experience has been that if they are not properly grounded in the basics of the faith, over half abandon their faith before they're 25. That's a scary fact.

For as long as I can remember, I've been told that the Church is always just one generation away from extinction. Commonly this is used to spur people to evangelism, to bring more souls into the fold so that we can keep the Church going. And while I certainly value and practice evangelism, I just have to wonder if we could stave off extinction much better if we would spend as much effort discipling our youths as we do evangelizing them.

At my denomination's assembly in 1997, the delegates there affirmed the creation of a special committee dedicated to the study of how we can best transfer the faith to the next generation. Our denomination has come to the conclusion that if we are to keep our name and heritage alive, it will be because individuals and churches have committed to transferring the Christian faith to the next generation of youth.

In the mid 70's, there was a popular Christian song entitled "Pass It On." In essence, that is what I am encouraging you to do. I want you to pass on the basics of the Christian faith to the next generation. I'm asking you to commit to helping youth

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learn what it means to be authentically Christian. You see, unless you and I are willing to pass on our faith and values to the next generation, who will?

This is why I'm so glad that you have picked up this book. You will have the opportunity through these series of lessons to ensure that the Church *does* go on. You will be able to help your youth not only understand the basics of Christianity but also to establish a firm, unshakable foundation for future growth. Without sounding too melodramatic, I firmly believe that *you* are the most vital link in

ensuring that our faith is passed on to the next generation.

Please know that you have my deepest respect and undying appreciation for your efforts. I know that being a teacher is hard, and being a teacher of youth is sometimes a seemingly impossible job. But you have embarked on a mission that is so important to the future of the Church. And for that we owe you our deepest thanks.

*-Jim Hampton*

# how to use this curriculum



This book is divided into three sections. The first section contains three chapters (you're actually reading the first chapter right now!) that are essential in preparing you for teaching this curriculum. They not only teach you how to use this curriculum, but also why it's important. You'll find an overview of youth culture and a discussion of how the Church (and especially you as a teacher) can best reach your youth with the life-transforming power of the gospel. We've also included a chapter containing suggestions on how to establish a mentor program to run concurrently with the lessons.

The second section of the book contains nine chapters helping to explain the basics of the Christian faith. The chapters deal with the following topics: the Trinity; the Bible; Sin; Salvation; Sanctification; Evil; God's Ultimate Purpose; the Church; and the Sacraments. Each chapter gives you extensive biblical and theological material to assist you in understanding the topic. The material is mostly free of big theological words, and attempts to explain the theological concept in words that you can use with your youth.

Following the biblical and theological background in these chapters is a complete lesson that will help your youths uncover the truths of that chapter's topic. These lessons endeavour to allow the youths to discover as much of the answers as

they can by getting them to discuss real life and exploring what Scripture has to say.

In section three, we explore some possible liturgies that your church could participate in as part of a community confirmation of your youths' faith. If you plan on utilizing these services, then be sure to read that chapter in advance of teaching these lessons.

Even though we've tried to be as simple as possible in our lessons, you will encounter some "big words" throughout this study. Some you'll be familiar with; others might be somewhat new. So that we'll all be on the same page as we journey through these lessons, we've also included a glossary of some of the important theological terminology used throughout this resource.

## **Understanding The Curriculum**

The highest goal of human life is to have a personal relationship with God and to act toward others with Christian love. The process by which we reach this goal can be called Christian formation. Christian formation originates with God and develops only through the power of His grace.

Christian formation occurs in real-life experiences at home, at school, in the workplace, and at play, as well as in youth group or Sunday School meetings. This curriculum is one tool to help young

people apply Christian truth to these life experiences so that they see a vision of who they can become with God's grace.

These three elements—LIFE experience, Christian TRUTH, and future VISION—form the backbone of each lesson in the curriculum.

**LIFE** Youth explore LIFE experiences related to the lesson focus. They are then led to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.

**TRUTH** Youth investigate the topic from a Christian perspective. They discover biblical TRUTH through group interaction and personal reflection.

**VISION** Youth evaluate their LIFE experiences in light of Christian TRUTH. They explore new ways of thinking, believing, and living, and are invited to personally respond.

An approximate length of “teaching time” required for each activity is also provided so you can plan adequately.

Other important aspects of each lesson include:

1. A **Focus Statement** at the beginning of each chapter tells the teacher what the desired outcome is for this lesson.
2. **Why Youth Need This Lesson** describes how the biblical truth applies to the life experiences and developmental needs of your youth.
3. **Resources** provides a listing of what you'll need to teach the lesson, including any handouts (printed at the end of each lesson) that can be duplicated for your youth.
4. Words printed in *bold italic* are for you as a teacher to read or say in your own words.

## Where Do I Start?

By accepting the responsibility of walking your youths through the truths examined by this curriculum, you are accepting an invitation to an exciting journey. This journey will entail a critical commitment to study, preparation, and prayer. You will hopefully encounter times of significant learning--both for you and your youth.

As you contemplate this journey, begin by looking ahead. Begin now to pray for your youth who will accompany you through this experience. Thank God for His promises to remain faithful to your commitment and for His promise of His Spirit's presence as you and your youth explore these truths together.

In a tangible way, you can begin this process by first setting aside time to read through this leader's guide. It's important to gain an overall perspective to this curriculum and its goals before plunging in! Take the time to review each lesson. In particular, look over the “wrap-up” ideas provided in Section 3, as some of these ideas listed there actually happen *before* you start these lessons. You will find that this intentionality will pay big dividends once you actually begin!

# 1



## the Trinity

### one God in Three

#### focus statement

**A proper understanding of and belief in the Trinity is important for living the Christian life.**

#### Why Youth Need This Lesson

Youth have a real interest in the mystery of life. Unfortunately, they are looking in all the wrong places to try and understand this mystery. Witness the recent rise of interest in occultism, the popularity of television shows and movies about vampires and the supernatural, and the number of cults that youth are becoming involved with. Each of these offer a view into the mystery of life, but all come at it from a worldview that is decidedly non-Christian.

The Christian faith incorporates some of the greatest mysteries of all. The concept of the Trinity is one of those mysteries. The musical *The Song of Bernadette* contains this line: “Those who believe need no explanation; for those who do not believe, no explanation will satisfy.” Trying to understand the concept of the Trinity is much the same way. Our God is not an easy one to understand. The fact is, even theologians, those who study God, don’t always understand the concept of the Trinity very well.

Let me state at the beginning of this lesson that when all is said and done, no amount of explanation can ever help us to *fully* understand the Trinity. All

we can do is give our youth some handles with which they can start the process of understanding. But in the end we have to realize this: The Trinity is one of the mysteries of God that we simply *acknowledge* rather than *fully understand*. As J. Kenneth Grider writes, “It has been said that while one may be in danger of losing his soul by denying the doctrine of the Trinity, he is in equal danger of losing his wits if he tries to understand it.”

In fact, not completely understanding is permissible. As Kevin Graham Ford states regarding the youths of this generation, “Emphasize the mystery, awe, and transcendence of God without resorting to intellectual arguments or philosophical apologetics. They [youth] are open to, and fascinated by, mysteries which are beyond scientific exploration. Don’t think you have to apologize for the supernatural, unfathomable nature of our great creator God.”<sup>viii</sup>

#### Biblical and Theological Material

For the nation of Israel, God was one God. The Jewish doctrine of God was definitely not Trinitarianism (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist at the same time as three Persons in one nature).

Their belief was expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4--“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” When the typical Israelite quoted this verse, he thought of God as one person, unipersonal. For them to believe in anything else would be to disregard the first and second commandments that had been given to them through their father, Moses. And even though there were many times in Israel’s history where they would worship other gods, the prophet’s call was always for Israel to turn back to the one true God, YHWH (Yahweh).

There were probably many people throughout Israel’s history who could be called polytheists (people who believe in more than one God). As Israel captured other countries, invariably new customs, beliefs, and even gods would be assimilated into Israel’s worship. But even at the time that they might be worshipping these other gods, they still ultimately believed in God. Each of these gods might have a specific task or responsibility, but they still believed that there was one God who was over all the other gods. In fact, Israel’s worship at times might be better classified as henotheistic (a belief in *many* gods, but a loyalty only to *the* God).

Even though Israel strayed often, she would always come back to the certainty that there was only one God. What had been revealed to the Israelites (as recorded in the Old Testament) was not a clear and distinct revelation of the existence of the Trinity of God. In the Old Testament, God is not seen in relation to a divine Son within His own being, but rather in relation toward His chosen people. Therefore, Israel’s declaration of monotheism was all that they knew.

However, when we come to the New Testament, we find some additional information. Here, the biblical writers assert that Jesus Christ, as well as the Holy Spirit, is divine. Repeatedly in the Gospel of John, we find Jesus saying that He and the Father are one, that the Father is in Him, and

He in the Father (e.g., John 10:30, 38; 13:3; 14:10-11, 20). Jesus comforted His disciples concerning His death with the assurance that He would be spiritually present with them through the Holy Spirit. For John, this was understood in this manner: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one” (1 John 5:7, KJV). The Gospels and other Epistles also have an abundance of references and implications as to underlying unity, or oneness, subsisting between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (e.g. Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 2:18; 1 Peter 1:21-22).

For the Jews, this was a problem. They believed in one God, and yet the Christian Church claimed that God was actually three in number. How could these views ever be reconciled? Or more precisely, *could* they be?

Out of this dilemma, the concept of the Trinity was born. In A.D. 325 the Council of Nicaea (the first ecumenical council of the church) established the notion of the triune nature of God in a creed and recognized it as a doctrine of the Church. The Nicene Creed affirms:

*We believe in one God, the Father,  
the Almighty ...*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son  
of God ...*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver  
of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped  
and glorified.*

In affirming the doctrine of the Trinity, the Church was attempting to do four things: 1) to recognize both the deity and humanity of Christ; 2) to recognize this deity as not only being equal with God, but also being God; 3) to properly define the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to both God and Christ; and 4) to recognize that even though all

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three are the Divine Nature, there is a distinctness between each one.<sup>ix</sup>

The concept of the Trinity has to be understood as an effort to reconcile the revelation of God in Christ and the Spirit with the prior Jewish commitment to monotheism. To do this, some terms had to be introduced to more properly define this relation. The word *substantial* means “that which stands under something to give it meaning.” The word *persona* is defined as “the role that something takes.” By using these terms we can gain a better understanding of the idea of Trinity. All three beings of the Godhead are one by virtue of each possessing the fullness of deity. They are three in the sense of each bringing a self-conscious and determining self. This is not to say that each person was merely an aspect of God or even of three Gods, but each was God, and yet each was distinct as a person from the other Persons. In other words, there is one God in three persons.

Having said that, we must realize that the usual modern understanding of these terms as “person” is misleading. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not “persons” in the modern sense of discrete individuals. The notion of narrative may help us in this regard. To call God “Father” is to remind us that this is the One, according to the gospel story, who created all things and is the “Father in heaven” to whom Jesus prayed. To call Jesus Christ “Son” reminds us that the Trinity includes Him who lived and died on behalf of a lost creation. And to call a member of the Trinity “Spirit” is to acknowledge that God remains with and active in the Church and the creation.<sup>x</sup>

While all three are of equal eternity and fully divine, and all have infinite attributes, the Church has always taught that the Father holds a place of priority in the Trinity. The Son has been said to be the “only begotten” or the “only born” one. He is generated from the Father’s nature (much as light comes from the sun) and not from His will. The

world was made—*created*—out of nothing, but the Son was eternally begotten, from the Father’s nature.<sup>xi</sup>

In the Christian church, the concept of Trinity has caused many problems. Because we do not do a good job of explaining it, we end up with people taking extreme views. In some cases, we have those people who for all practical purposes are *tri-theists*, that is, they believe in three distinct, separate Gods. Others might fall into the trap of *Arianism*, where they believe in one God, but do not believe that Jesus or the Holy Spirit is divine. Some believe in a “modalistic view” of the Trinity. In this view, “the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not exist at the same time as three Persons in one nature (i.e., *Trinitarianism*), but as three successive ways in which the unipersonal God has manifested himself historically: first as Father, then as the Son, then as the Holy Spirit.” In fact, “the three are not persons, but three successive modes or fashions in which the uni-personal God has manifested himself.”<sup>xii</sup>

As you can see, trying to understand the concept of the Trinity is much like trying to nail jelly to a wall. It is a slippery topic to grapple with, and truth be told, is not a concept that most youths will be able to fully understand. But as was mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, whether we can understand it or not is not what matters. What is important is whether we are willing to believe a concept that we do not understand because God and His Word claim that it is true. That’s what faith in the mystery of God is all about.

### to quote

“If humans could understand God, He wouldn’t be God.”

– Howard Culbertson and Dean Nelson,  
*I Believe, Now Tell Me Why*

## resources needed

*Triquetra* handout

## mentor suggestions

1. Be willing to admit your own confusion and struggles about the concept of the Trinity. Help the youth see that there is an element of faith involved. Even though we may not fully understand everything about the Triune God, we can trust God's Word to be true, and rest in His revelation through the Bible.
2. Point out that no one could have thought up a God as complicated as our God. But on the other hand, when He has shown himself to us, He is just the way we knew deep down that He should be.

# teaching the lesson

## LIFE

*Real Life* (10 minutes)

*Lisa was frustrated. As they had sat together in the cafeteria at school, she had been trying to explain what it meant to be a Christian to her best friend Chamique. Unfortunately, Chamique was having a hard time understanding who God is.*

*"Now, tell me again," Chamique said. "You say that you only believe in one God. Yet you also say that you believe that Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is God? Isn't that a contradiction?"*

*Lisa replied, "I know it may seem like we are worshipping three Gods, but we don't. There is only*

*one God. But He chooses to reveal himself to us in different ways."*

*"But how can you say you only believe in one God and yet also claim that God is three people named Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?"*

*"I know it seems confusing," Lisa said, "but you just have to have faith."*

*"I don't know. It seems awfully hard to say I have faith in something that doesn't seem to be logical at all," Chamique stated.*

*Lisa was clearly exasperated by this turn in the conversation. But, she admitted to herself, even though it was difficult explaining the concept of the God being three in one, she still hadn't quite figured out what difference it really made for her own life. Oh well, she thought, maybe somebody else can help Chamique understand this.*

1. *Have you ever felt like Lisa?*
2. *How would you explain the trinity (the concept of God being three separate people yet also being just one) to your friends?*
3. *Do you think it's important to understand the concept of the trinity? Why?*

*Trying to explain to others (whether they are Christians or not) seems impossible. In fact, a prominent scholar once put it this way: "It has been said that while one may be in danger of losing his soul by denying the doctrine of the Trinity, he is in equal danger of losing his wits if he tries to understand it."*

*Let's put your mind at ease right now—I'm not going to cause you to lose your wits! Simply put, no one can fully explain the concept of the Trinity.*

*Yet, it's important for Christians to understand what we can, because this belief in the Trinity is central to our faith. Let's examine what theology and the Bible can tell us about this three-in-one God.*

Theology 101

*The Bible affirms both that God is one and that God is three. It doesn't try to prove that God is both three and one; it simply takes it for granted.*

# TRUTH

*Who Is The Trinity? (20 minutes)*

*The word “Trinity” does not mean three gods who exist together to make up God (referred to as tritheism). Instead, trinity refers to the fact that while there is only one God, that God has three eternal and co-equal Persons. All share the same essence and substance, but each one has a distinct existence. According to the Bible, those three persons are God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Spirit (Holy Spirit).*

*Belief in one God is called monotheism. Atheism is the belief that there is no God. And polytheism is the belief in more than one God. Christians are monotheists, because we do not worship three Gods, but one God in three persons.*

*Confused? Let’s look at a couple of illustrations to see if they can help us better understand this concept.*

*Think about water for a moment. Water can exist in three forms: a solid (ice), a liquid (water), and a gas (steam). Each form looks and acts distinctly different. Yet, regardless of the form it takes, all three are still the same H<sub>2</sub>O molecule.*

*Let’s try one more. Every government has three tasks or functions: making laws, administering the laws, and punishing those who break the laws. In the United States, these three functions are performed by the Congress, the President and his cabinet, and the court system. Although these are three distinct groups, all of them are a part of the one government.*

*In the same way, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each unique, but God is also one entity.*

*Still confused? That’s okay. The concept of the Trinity can be very difficult to understand. Even the wisest pastor cannot fully understand it. But we can start to understand each of the three members of the Trinity. Let’s take a look at them.*

Assign the following scripture verses to various class members, and have them read them aloud. And then discuss as a class what they tell us about the concept of the Trinity: Genesis 1:26; Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 3:16-17; Matthew 28:19-20; John 1:1-18; 14:15-17. (Each member of the trinity is shown to be separate, eternal, and unified.)

Divide your class into three groups. (If your class is small, one person may constitute a group). Assign each group one of the following sets of questions, and have them answer them based on the designated scripture references.

### *Group A—God*

- 1. Read Romans 11:33-36, Psalm 118:29, and Deuteronomy 32:4. What do these verses tell us about God?*
- 2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:19. What does this tell us about God’s plan for humanity?*

### *Group B—Jesus Christ*

- 1. Read Hebrews 1:2-8, and John 1:1-2. List all the phrases that describe Jesus.*
- 2. Read John 3:16. What was the reason Jesus came to earth?*

### *Group C—Holy Spirit*

- 1. Read John 14:15-21. What two names does Jesus give the Holy Spirit? How do those names describe His function? Jesus knew that He was going away. Why was He sending the Holy Spirit?*
- 2. Read the following scriptures and then make a list of who the Holy Spirit is: John 20:21-22; Romans 8:9, 14-16; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.*

After the groups have finished, have them each share their findings with the other groups. Encourage the youths to listen for qualities that are alike

for the three, and ways that they are different. This will give youths an accurate picture of the attributes each person of the Godhead possesses.

## VISION

*Why Should I Care?*

*What difference does it make whether or not you believe in the Trinity? A lot. Each member of the Trinity has one purpose in mind — to free us from our sin and restore our relationship with God (which we will discuss further in chapters 3 and 4). This Triune God has been working since the beginning of time to make a way for all of us to have an intimate relationship with Him. And when this happens, we can finally become the people that God always intended for us to be.*

*The Triquetra (15 minutes)*

*The triquetra (from a Latin word meaning “three-cornered”) is an ancient symbol of the Trinity. It has three interwoven arcs, distinct yet equal and inseparable. It was designed with the intention of symbolizing that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three equal Persons but one God.*

Pass out the *Triquetra* handout and have youth tell what they think the triquetra can teach us about the Trinity. The triquetra appears to give an optical illusion. It shifts from being three separate “leaves” (as in a clover leaf) to being one unified shape.

1. *What are some good ways in which we can gain a better understanding of God?* (Reading the Bible, praying, talking to our pastor or other concerned adults, books (theological dictionaries, for example), etc.)
2. *How would God be different if any of the three members of the trinity were missing?* (Without God the Father there would have been no creation; without Jesus there would be no salvation; without the Holy Spirit

there would be no one to guide us and comfort us. God is God beyond us (God), beside us (Jesus), and in us (Holy Spirit).

Close the class session in prayer with something like this:

*God, I have to tell you that this Trinity thing is really confusing. I'm not sure that I really understand it. But I do trust Your Word, and so I ask you to help me believe in the Trinity. Through your Holy Spirit, give me the wisdom and faith to hold to this important truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

# Triquetra

