

LEADER'S GUIDE



ENLIGHTENMENT

2.0

*A Theological Foundation for
Deconstructing and Reconstructing
the Christian Faith*

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STUDY BREAKDOWN

There are various ways that this study can be broken down. How you break down the study depends on several factors. 1. how many people are there in the group? 2. How long is there in between meeting times? 3. What is your group's theological competence level?

What I have done here is broken the study down with the average person in mind. Roughly 7-15 people with a moderately competent group that meets every two weeks. You can adjust this schedule based on your own needs.

Session Number	Topics	Additional Information
Session 1	Preface, Introduction & Chapter 1.	The Introduction and preface should be required, but you do not have to discuss them in your group.
Session 2	Chapter 2	
Session 3	pp. 41-52	Up until the problem of evil section.
Session 4	pp. 53-60	The problem of evil – The Father.
Session 5	Chapters 4 & 5	Jesus and the Holy Spirit
Session 6	Chapter 6	
Session 7	Chapters 7 & 8	Use chapter 8 for some debriefing.
Session 8	Appendix A (Alternative Debriefing)	This is optional. You may find Appendix A useful to go over with your group. If you choose to use session 8 you may want to include your debriefing after you discuss this appendix.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the wonderful world of deconstruction. Let me begin by thanking you for purchasing UNenlightenment. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. This guide will help you navigate the book and the people you are charged with leading. This guide was written to be a companion for the book, it does not replace the book. The information you will find in this guide is specially designed to help facilitate group discussion and to mitigate conflict. However, you should use the general outline of the book for your study.

Oftentimes, people skip over the preface and introductions to books. The leader should encourage the group to read these portions of the book as they provide important context. Reading these parts of the book will help to mitigate certain questions and concerns later on.

Deconstruction can be a harmful process if not done correctly. It requires individuals to have support and commitment. I would encourage you to have your group verbally agree to stay until the end of the process. If people begin to leave early for whatever reason it could cause irreparable damage. These warnings are not meant to discourage or scare you, but to help you understand the importance of what you are about to do. Trust the process and in the end, you will be thankful you did because you will see a dramatic difference in the spiritual lives of the group.

It is important to have an environment that is honest and safe and where questions are encouraged. Too many times churches fail to provide these important components and

as a result, people don't share or get clarification on things that would help them move forward in their journey.



The leader needs to continually remind themselves of the reason we participate in deconstruction. Deconstruction creates self-sufficient self-confident believers whose faith will be transformed. Deconstruction is more than pruning, it is remodeling. Many times you have to entirely destroy certain parts in order to rebuild something even more fantastic.

It is also important to remember that the leader is not just destroying something, but also rebuilding in its place. This is called reconstruction. That will be a time of great relief and it will be exciting to watch the group begin to grow.

Below are some ideas to help foster growth and facilitate beneficial conversation. Keep in mind that there are NO right answers, there are only wrong perspectives and faulty logic.

PRO TIP

Create important values for the group such as: listening, trying on new ideas, confidentiality, etc.

- ✓ You do not have to require people to read an entire chapter at a time. The content is heavy and it can be daunting to make it through an entire chapter.
- ✓ Let people share what they thought of the chapter or section.
- ✓ Try to give the group some time while meeting to reflect on what they are learning.
- ✓ Have the group commit to being honest with themselves, with God, and with the group.
- ✓ Do everything in your power to prevent people from leaving the group. People will naturally go into their flight or fight when are being challenged. The individual could really experience irreparable damage if they leave before the process is complete. This is why it is important not to have everyone participate in such an experience. It is important to have emotionally mature people who can handle the challenge.

OUR HISTORY

In the introduction to UNenlightenment, I go through briefly and discuss my Christian history. Using the introduction the leader might consider going around and having people share their own history answering questions like:

How did you become a Christian?

Most will probably say they have been a Christian their whole life. These individuals will be harder to deconstruct because they will probably experience the most trauma. It will be hard for them to reconsider deeply held convictions that they have believed their entire life. These individuals will need constant reassurance and patience as the leader brings people through this process.

What has your experience been like? Can you relate to any of the experiences the author shared?

Why should we study theology?

It is important for people to understand that theology is not just an academic exercise, but something that all Christians should participate in. In fact, many of us do theology and don't realize that is what we are doing.

Why are you interested in the process of deconstruction?

CHAPTER ONE: UNENLIGHTENMENT

In this section, we set up the reason why we need to do deconstruction. I have chosen to use the term UNenlightenment because it directly relates to what is necessary in order to get started with the process. Namely, doubt.

Doubt is usually the impetus for why people begin to move away from their faith. Oftentimes these individuals don't know that there are alternatives. It will be important for the leader to let the group know that doubt is okay and it is natural. It is also important

KEEP IN MIND

There are no wrong answers, only incorrect perspectives.

that the leader lets the group know that questions are encouraged and that they should be treated with respect by the rest of the group. The goal of the leader is to facilitate group conversation through these questions.

The leader might ask the group what they think about the question that the other person raised. The leader then can help direct the conversation by asking follow-up questions.

What is UNenlightenment

UNenlightenment is the undoing of our historical presuppositions in order to clear away as much philosophical bias as possible. It is the roadblock that prevents us from ever

achieving real deconstruction. If we don't UNenlighten ourselves then we will be using the same "Modern" methodologies which will bring us right back from where we came from.

Becoming UNapologetic:

One way we become UNenlightened is by getting rid of our modern notion of apologetics. Apologetics is the defense of the faith using objective reasoning. The idea of being UNapologetic is a double entendre. In one sense it means exactly what it says. That is, we are not going to apologize for our beliefs. In the other sense, it is referring to the undoing or unlearning of our modern notions of apologetics.

Some questions that the leader can use to probe deeper into this idea:

- ✓ Do you think we should get rid of apologetics? Why?
- ✓ What are some ways we can be just as effective with apologetics using our life?
- ✓ How should Christians present Christ to non-believers?

Theo-Politicism:

Theo-politicism is a significant problem for the Church, particularly in evangelicalism. In this section, I talk about the lack of differentiation between the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. This is most evident in Christian white nationalism. The idea here is that God has mandated that in order for him to return we must be a nation that is wholly dedicated to his rule of law. In essence, we become a theocratic nation. This is referred to as "Christendom".

The idea of Christendom is so far removed from what Jesus had intended for the Church that it is difficult for one to wrap their head around the logic behind it. This is largely based on a dispensational model of the end times, where the emphasis on the return of Christ is predominant; and that in some way creating Christendom will hasten his return.

Even though it is true that for some Christendom is a means for hastening the return of Christ. For most, it is a means to acquire power over vulnerable people with weak minds.

Below are some questions the leader can use to go deeper:

- ✓ Do you think that many people suffer from “groupthink”?
- ✓ What role does the “echo chamber” play in all of this?
- ✓ How does confusing the kingdom of man with the kingdom of God alter one's identity?

Systematic Theology:

It may be difficult for some to understand the distinction I am making between systematic theology and what I refer to as perspectivism. I want to take a moment to go into some greater detail here to help the leader better articulate this differentiation.

Systematic theology is completely reliant on the worldview known as “Modernism”. Modernism is built upon the premise that absolutes are attainable through careful methodologies. This means that systematic theology is built upon the same premise. Ultimately, theological methodologies are already committing to a faulty presupposition before they have even begun the task of theology.

Furthermore, systematic theology approaches the biblical text as though it is the source of absolute knowledge and thus interprets the text as abstract universal propositions instead of allowing the text to speak on its own behalf.

Conversely, I offer up something called Narrative Perspectivism, which I go into greater detail about in Appendix A. I will go into greater discussion later in the guide.

Doubt:

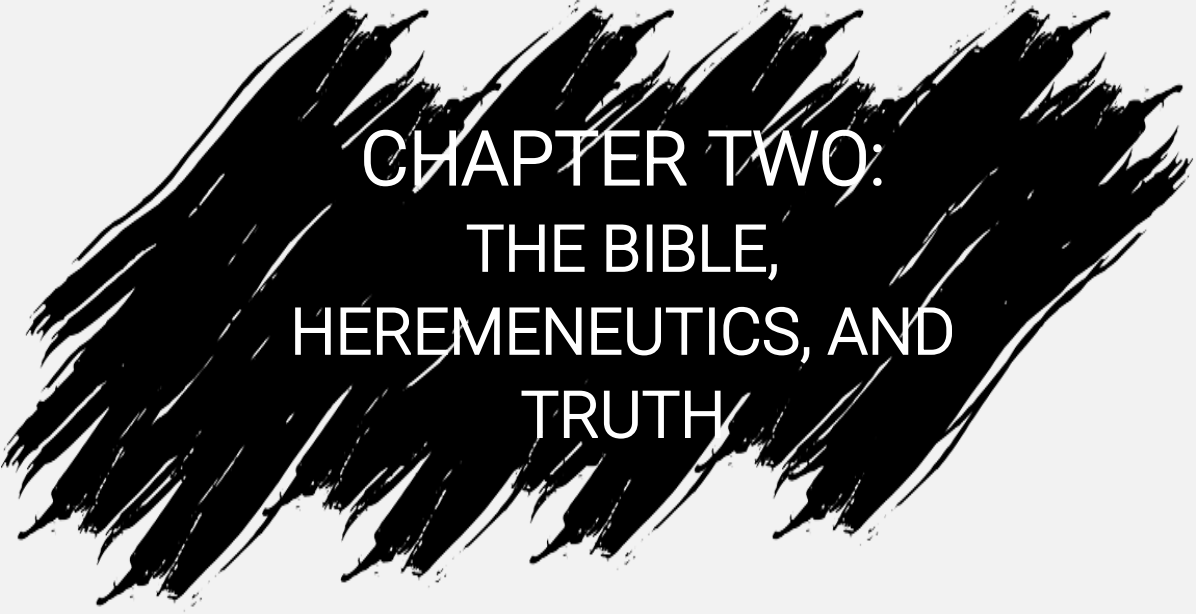
This section of the book should be one of great discussion. You might consider going around the group and first ask if anyone has ever struggled with doubt as it relates to their faith. Following that question by asking how they dealt with that doubt.

Nowhere in the Bible does it state or imply that doubt is sinful. As stated in the book, doubt is a natural psychological function that allows our minds to question the truth of

something we come in contact with. The overall question we want to ask is what do we do with doubt? How do we confront it and resolve it? Doubt should be the starting point to deconstruct the idea that we are questioning. Another way to look at this is through the eyes of critical thinking. We must be critical-thinking Christians. This is the only way that we can properly engage with theology and with those within our culture.

Here are some important follow-up questions you might ask.

- ✓ What doubts are people carrying with them into the group?
- ✓ Have you ever told other Christians or a pastor about your doubts, and if so, how did they react?



CHAPTER TWO: THE BIBLE, HEREMENEUTICS, AND TRUTH

Chapter one deals with the question “why” we deconstruct. Chapter two begins the process of deconstruction. UNenlightenment jumps right into the fire by tackling one of the most significant doctrines of the Christian faith – bibliology. This is going to be the most difficult deconstruction of them all simply because it deals with the foundation of most conservative theologies. You will find that once this doctrine begins to crack, then the whole structure will begin to fall. That is why this deconstruction must be handled with sensitivity and understanding.

During deconstruction, it can feel very unsettling and thoughts such as “is any of it true” will become commonplace. It is important during this process to remind individuals of a single promise that comes with deconstruction. That is the promise of reconstruction. Reassure your group that something better is coming. Remind them that we have to deal with understanding and dealing with these ideas first before we can jump into creating a new belief. Otherwise, people will simply reconstruct ideas the same way they did before.

The Bible:

It is important to know that we are not deconstructing the Bible simply to deconstruct it. Our end goal is to create a belief that allows us to understand the truth of Scripture instead of some manufactured truth. This should provide us with comfort because no one wants to have any belief that is untrue simply because it makes us feel good. No, we want to know what God's will is for our lives, we want to know how we can better know our creator.

The reason we need to confront how we understand the Bible is that it has often been interpreted in the context of our theologies instead of allowing it to speak with its own voice.

Here is an example. A person who is a Calvinist will read the Bible like a Calvinist. That means when they are reading it they are trying to understand it within the context of their Calvinism. That means they are going to read into the text their preconceived ideas or beliefs. This is called an *anachronistic* reading of the Bible. That is reading our own context into the Bible's context and then rendering an interpretation based on that way of reading.

The problem with this approach is that the Bible is not Calvinistic and God is not a Calvinist. So what happens when we come across passages that contradict our doctrines or theological persuasions? We either try to come up with an *alternative* interpretation or ignore it. Our

goal should never be to try and come up with alternative explanations unless those alternatives can help us understand scripture better. Alternative understandings must actually be rooted in the possibility of truth. Otherwise, we are simply inventing theological ideas and concepts that are untrue.

It is important to understand what *literalism* refers to. It has largely been defined incorrectly throughout the years, which has confused people who have used it. It has been

KEEP IN MIND

We want to have an attitude of humility when it comes to our understanding of scripture.

understood as the *plain understanding of a text*. Instead, it should be defined as *the intended meaning of a text*. For example, Mark 13:13 says:

“And you will be hated by everyone because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.”

A plain reading of this text will let you conclude that only those who are hated will be saved. However, this is not *literally* what the author means. Instead, the author is pointing out something very specific. What he means is that some Christians will be hated. Of those Christians who are hated their endurance will be rewarded.

In other words what someone says and what someone means are sometimes two different things. Literalism has to refer to the moment that we are able to capture what the author means by what he says.

A Brief History of the Bible:

The point I am trying to drive home here is that the Bible’s compilation does not have a clear path from the Early Church to us. Its creation was full of debate and there were theological agendas at work as well. Also, most people think that the Bible they hold in their hands is the same one that the Early Church had as well. This is not the case. The modern Bible that we all have is a product of the 1800s.

Biblical Inerrancy:

This will be the hardest pill to swallow. So many people simply believe this, but they don’t understand why they believe this. My goal was to show them what it means to claim that the Bible is inerrant. It is important to also note that if you believe in inerrancy, then you also have to believe that those who assembled the Bible were also under the same inspiration – otherwise, they would not know which books to include and which to reject.

However, even if one concedes to this, the problem is that the books that were originally included are not all of the same books we have today (they are close, but not the same). This would mean that either what we have is not inerrant or the Bible itself is not inerrant. It is important to also distinguish between Inerrant, Authority, and Inspiration.

Inerrant – that the books of the Bible are without error (in the original manuscripts).

Authority – that the Bible is authoritative because it was inspired by God.

Inspiration – that God influenced the writers of the Bible.

The Word of God:

This will be the second hard pill to swallow. However, if one looks carefully at what I am saying, I am not outright denying the fact that the Bible is the Word of God. Instead, I am arguing that the Bible does not become the Word of God until it is infused with the Holy Spirit, meditation, prayer, worship, etc. Otherwise, those who do not believe can also claim to possess the Word of God. However, Scripture was intended for the believer, not the unbeliever. Moreover, although the Bible is not the Word of God in and of itself, it does become the Word of God when combined with the aforementioned attributes.

The main argument circles around the idea that the Bible cannot claim its own authority. There are two reasons for this.

1. Just because someone claims to be authoritative doesn't mean that it is authoritative. I could argue that UNenlightenment is from God. That doesn't make it from God.
2. Books in the New Testament cannot claim their own authority because they had not been compiled yet. Therefore, when it is calling scripture the "Word" it is referring to the Hebrew scriptures.

Propositionalism:

Propositionalism happens for a couple of different reasons. First, it happens because of the “plain” reading of the Bible. See the aforementioned example. Second, it happens because of the nature of systematic theology. That is, the systematic organization of the Bible creates the need to propositionalize in order to provide proof texts for whatever doctrine the theologian is arguing for. Third, chapters and verses make propositionalizing a problem. Chapters and verses take away from the narrative structure of scripture by creating delineations.

Here is an example of propositionalism in action. We will use Revelation 3:20.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

This verse is commonly used when presenting non-Christians with the salvation message. The interpretation often goes that God is standing at the door of your heart. All you have to do is open that door and let him in. However, that is not what this verse means. This verse is not written for non-Christians, but for Christians. It is part of a longer context where the author is telling the Church at Laodicea that they need to get rid of their lukewarm behavior. That if they would just open the doors of their hearts they would find fellowship with Jesus.

However, a propositionalist will pluck a verse like this out of its context thereby creating whatever meaning they choose. Most of the time propositionlists don’t know that they are doing this. But it is a very real problem that many well-meaning Christians do even in academics.

The Nature of Truth:

Propositionalism is part of a larger problem that is related to the nature of truth. Many Christians are taught that truth is black and white. Something either is or is not. But the nature of truth is much more complicated than that. For example, something can be both true and untrue at the same time depending on how it is stated. Consider this real-world example:

Muslims are terrorists.

In one sense this statement is true. Some Muslims are terrorists. Yet, in another sense, this statement is false because not ALL Muslims are terrorists. Technically, this statement is false because it is an inaccurate stereotype, but that doesn't stop people from saying it. It also doesn't stop people from believing it.

This example also demonstrates the role that language plays in ascertaining truth. How something is said will make a difference in the veracity of the claim. Here is a different type of example:

Apples are delicious.

I believe that apples are delicious, but that does not mean that everyone thinks that apples are delicious. In this case, the statement is not written incorrectly. So language doesn't play a role here. It's just an example of how the truth of the statement is determined by who utters it.

Truth also depends on a whole host of other previously accepted truths in order for a particular claim to be labeled true or false. And in some cases that still doesn't help the determination. For example, if I told you that I saw a pink elephant dancing on the highway you probably would not believe me. Why? Because you have already determined the following truths:

- ✓ Elephants are grey.
- ✓ You have never seen any type of elephant other than a grey one.
- ✓ Elephants don't have a dancer's body.
- ✓ Elephants are not domesticated so it could not have come from someone's home.

There might be others, but those are probably the main ones. Now let me ask the question, is it still possible that I saw a pink elephant dancing in the road? There may exist an elephant with a rare condition that has forced its skin color to look pink. Because there are actually pink elephants that exist known as albino elephants. Their skin has a pink hue to it, especially in infancy.

Also, elephants can dance. For hundreds of years, they have performed for circuses and other spectacles doing their own jigs. Just for fun Google: dancing elephants.

Consider the following headline:

A small albino elephant escaped from a local zoo and attempted to cross a local highway this evening. Even though the young elephant attempted to avoid oncoming traffic he still caused several accidents. In the end, the elephant was brought back to the zoo unharmed.

Now, after reading this headline if I came to you and said, you won't believe what I saw. I saw a pink elephant dancing in the street the other day. Now, this wild claim seems plausible. But, why? What changed? Your preconceived ideas changed.

There are many more types of truth that we could mention, but these are helpful for this discussion. Needless to say, there are various things to consider when considering whether or not a claim is true. Truth does not live as much in black and white as it does in the grey areas of life. That means it is important to remain humble and understand that truth is very much a subjective enterprise.

There are also things that get in the way of our perception of truth. Consider the following illustration about a person driving in the fog.

A person is driving on a foggy morning when they encounter a light off in the distance. The person thinks to themselves "that it looks like it might be a street light." However, as

the driver gets closer he notices that it's not a streetlight. The person thinks "I wonder if it is a stranded driver with a flashlight looking for help." But, as the man gets closer he realizes that is not what he sees. The man then realizes what he sees are the headlights of another car.

This story illustrates a few different aspects of how our perception plays a role in determining truth as well. The fog of course acts as the interference that can exist which colors our perspective. In our example, there are three different iterations of where the person feels like they know what they are looking at. But as they get closer and there is less fog in the way of their perception, the person is able to more accurately make out the source of the light.

Stereotypes are a great real-world example of fog that exists, which hinders our ability to ascertain the truth. For example, many people draw conclusions about race, wealth, and worth based on inaccurate stereotypes. Our goal should always be to clear away as much fog as possible in order to ascertain the truth. Reading the Bible or drawing theological conclusions should be no different.

A good question for your group to interact with would be, **can you ever remember a time when you thought something was true and you were shocked to find out it was not? What were the mitigating factors? What was your reaction to the new truth that you discovered?**



CHAPTER THREE: THE DIVINE MIND & THE DIVINE WILL

This chapter will be the most intellectually challenging. It discusses the nature of the Trinity as well as the person of the father. The Trinity is a difficult topic even for the most skilled theologian. You will want to encourage your group along the way that this topic is the most difficult and they should do their best to get through it. I will do my part and try to make this easier for the leader to communicate.

The Trinity:

In the Christian tradition, there is something called the “trinitarian formula”. Any formulation of the Trinity that does not use this formula is considered heretical. If you don’t mind being heretical, then by all means explore beyond. However, I make the case in this chapter that I think the traditional formula is correct. Furthermore, I go through how this formula came into being (namely, through trying to figure out the nature of Jesus).

KEEP IN MIND

You will need to continually remind your group that this is the most difficult section in the entire book.

The formula consists of 1 God, who exists in 3 distinct persons. Sticking to this formula allows Christians to maintain the belief in monotheism while at the same time making sense of the three distinct figures that exist throughout the Bible. In fact, any articulation outside of this formula would not be consistent with monotheism.

You might wonder why monotheism is so important. If Christians/Jews didn't believe in monotheism, then at the very least the God portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures is not the same God alluded to in the New Testament. The reason for this is that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures claimed to be the one and only God. Many passages make this claim, but here is one in particular from Isaiah 44:6.

"This is what the LORD says- Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."

Within the aforementioned formula, one can create whatever analogy they feel communicates how that formula manifests in the real world. My approach was logical. I began with the premise that if humans are created in the image of God, then it must follow that there exist attributes that both God and humans possess together.

The first task was to determine what those attributes were. To answer that question, I asked the following: what human attributes are fundamental to being human? I determined that at our most basic level we are *minds*. The follow-up to that is, what does a mind consist of:

1. **Consciousness** – it has to be aware of itself and the world around it.
2. **Will** – it must have the ability to create meaning.
3. **Otherness** – it must have the ability to connect to other minds and have those minds reflect back to the mind its being.

Keep these three attributes in mind. The next question is what is necessary for God to be God (who also exists as the greatest possible being).

Believing that God has always existed we begin with the premise of his existence. That takes care of Trinity's oneness. If we are created in the image of God, then it makes sense to say that God must be imagined as a mind, just as humans are at their most fundamental level. Now how do we describe its threeness? The next question then is, what attributes must exist for a divine mind at its most fundamental level?

1. **Will** – It must have the ability to create meaning and purpose. (Think of the “father” and his will that must be expressed through the incarnation of Jesus.)
2. **Otherness** – It must have the ability to reflect its “other”. In the case of a divine mind, it would be the “father”. (Think of Jesus reflecting the “will” of the father during his incarnation.)
3. **Consciousness** – It has to know that it exists and what it is. (Think the Holy Spirit)

The final question I asked was, are there any theories that currently exist that allow for this type of analogy? Augustine's model of the Trinity was very similar. He imagined God as a divine mind made up of Will, Memory, and Understanding. I felt like these were close enough to use, but they needed to change because these categories reflect a more pedagogical analogy and not a divine mind per se. This was as simple as substituting otherness and consciousness with memory and understanding.

The Divine Mind's Nature:

Just as we do with the other persons of the Trinity it is necessary to understand the nature of “God”. It can be tempting when talking about the nature of God, to think of God as a fourth person. But God is simply a term to describe the commonality that each person of the Trinity shares.

God's nature must be simple. That means it is irreducible. As such God is also the greatest possible being. This is an important concept for a variety of theological situations – many of which are outlined in UNenlightenment.

Divine simplicity is most important in understanding the oneness of God. In its oneness, God must not have any parts. That means that God's attributes must be identical to its

being and not a part of it. If God's attributes existed as aspects of its divine nature, then there would be additional persons. But only the three persons of the Trinity exist as part of the whole of God.

Threeness

Based on the aforementioned necessities for the personhood of the individual members the Trinity I developed the following analogies.

The Father – The Divine Will. The Divine Will is the architect of the cosmos. He is the one with intention and purpose. He is the person whom Jesus refers to when he addresses him as the father.

Jesus Christ – The Divine Word (the Divine Logos). Jesus is the person responsible for the revelation of God to humanity. He not only reflects the nature of God for humanity but also acts as the reflective source of identity for God.

The Holy Spirit – The Divine Consciousness. The Divine Consciousness is responsible for connecting humanity to God as the conscious link between humanity and the Divine. It also serves as the source of self-consciousness of the Godhead.

The nature of each of these persons of the Trinity will be discussed in greater detail in the forthcoming chapters.

Trinitarian Justice

The idea of trinitarian justice is built upon the premise that the Trinity is first and foremost social. That their personhood necessitates it. Secondly, their primary concern with

humanity is also social. This is based upon the premise that YAHWEH spoke through his prophets to the people of Israel about how to treat the poor, downtrodden, widows, etc. Luke tells us in chapter 4 verses 16-19. Jesus also indicated that this was his priority as well when he made his first Temple appearance and read from the book of Isaiah.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Both the Hebrew scriptures as well as the life of Jesus demonstrates just how important social justice is to God. Ultimately, it is because love is the ultimate outpouring of God's nature toward humanity.

The Problem of Evil

This is perhaps the most practical section of the entire chapter. The problem of evil is not only what prevents many people from being Christian but also dissuades many from staying one. That is why having a proper understanding of this issue is paramount. In this

chapter I articulate the problem; provide traditional responses to the problem; evaluate the responses and finally provide my solutions to the problem.

The first observation I make is establishing the nature of being and determining whether or not bad things happen to humans and have nothing to do with each other because even if there is no God, evil still exists.

Ultimately, I like the Augustine/Plantinga option for understanding the problem of evil in what is referred to as the Free Will Defense. It is certainly not perfect, but it makes the most practical sense.

Questions to consider:

- ✓ Do you think the problem of evil is a problem for the existence of God?
- ✓ Do you think any of the solutions provided by the book help resolve the issue?
- ✓ Do you know anybody who struggles with this issue?



CHAPTER FOUR: JESUS: THE DIVINE WORD

This chapter begins by talking about the uniqueness of Jesus. Jesus was not as unique as most Christians today think. Many people claimed what Jesus claimed during his time. However, there was something about Jesus that stuck in the minds of people who encountered him. Was it his miracles? Was it what he taught? Was it the claims made about him? Whatever it was we are still talking about him and following his teachings 2000 years later.

The Purpose of the Incarnation

Many Christians have been taught that the purpose of the incarnation was to begin the process of salvation (or atonement). In reality, the purpose of the incarnation was to reveal God and do his will.

The idea of equal representation is a newer idea within theology. The purpose of it is to ask the question as to whether or not both men and women can be equally represented through the incarnation. For example, does it matter if Jesus was a man? Ultimately, the section concludes by noting the fact that Jesus being born a male had nothing to do with his purpose as its only purpose was to provide a way for him to accomplish his purpose. In that context, it was being born a male and becoming a Rabbi.

Divine Revelation

Divine revelation is one of the most important aspects of understanding Jesus because it is directly related to his personhood as a member of the Trinity. You might wonder what exactly he is revealing about God. The answer to this is two-fold. The first is to demonstrate God's love for humanity – and through that, that he has not forsaken his people. Secondly, to bring forth the will of God into humanity – which is the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

In the beginning, we noted that many people during Jesus's time claimed to be the Messiah. Our question to that is, why was Jesus different from all of those false claims? How do we know he was any different?

To get at the answers to these questions, we must first ask: Who did Jesus think he was? Who did others think he was?

This question is difficult since all of what we have of Jesus are second-hand accounts. And as such, there is a question of accuracy. However, I think it is safe to assume that although the words of Jesus are not direct quotes, we can rest assured that the spirit of what he was trying to say is still present within the text. I find it helpful to break the conversation down this way:

The Jews

It is important to note that Jesus was not who the Jews thought he was. The Jews were expecting a warrior king in the line of David who would fight the Romans for Jewish independence.

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!

Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

(Zechariah 9:9)

The Disciples

Who did the disciples think Jesus was? You would think living with him for 2 years or so would make the answer to this question easy. Jesus puts this question to the disciples in Matthew 16:13-20, when he asks Peter "...who do you think I am?" Peter declares that he is the Messiah. However, later that would come into doubt when he denies Jesus three times during the flogging. Whether or not the other disciples thought the same as Peter is unclear. For example, if the other disciples truly thought that Jesus was the Messiah, then it seems unlikely that Judas would betray Jesus. This means there was some doubt among the 12 as to who Jesus was.

Jesus

Ironically, the same passage that the Jews used to justify their belief in who the Messiah would be, is the same passage Jesus illustrates when he comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Perhaps even greater than this is in Jesus's parable of the vineyard in Matthew 20. It is here where Jesus claims to be the son of God. You will find it helpful to understand the motif by using the following substitutions.



Based on this parable Jesus is asserting the following:

- ✓ He is the only son of God.
- ✓ He is to be differentiated from the prophets.
- ✓ God's final messenger.
- ✓ The heir to Israel.

Jesus also used the designation, the son of man. This was more frequently used than any other self-designation. This is a reference back to Daniel 7:13-14 where the son of man is described. "Son of man" simply means "human".

It is often said that Jesus never claimed to be God. This is untrue. First, we have already demonstrated the various titles and self-descriptions Jesus used. But let us also consider his response to Pilate when asked: "...are you the King of the Jews?" His response: "I am".

Total Depravity

Your group may find this section a little difficult to understand. Let's flesh this out more here to help you better understand. The basic question under consideration is this, ***if humans are all born with total depravity, then why is Jesus not?*** The traditional response to this question has been that his father was divine. Okay, let's follow this logic.

1. That means that somehow total depravity is transmitted by men and not women.

2. This seems to imply that either women don't have total depravity or they are incapable of transmitting it to their offspring. This alone proves that this doctrine is false, but let's assume that somehow women have it, but don't transmit it.
3. If men are the only way that total depravity can be transmitted, then what is different between God and a man in the procreation process? I'm pretty sure there was no intercourse and no sperm involved. Therefore, it must be one of those two things that transmit total depravity.

Although I think the doctrine doesn't have enough power to even lift off as an argument, if we were to assume the premise to be true then that would mean either intercourse or sperm are what transmit total depravity. Neither can be the case since that would mean sex was a sin. And we know that not to be the case. Therefore, this doctrine cannot be true.

Atonement

UNenlightenment does a good job explaining the various atonement theories and why they are important to the larger theological narrative. What is not present is my atonement theory. I offer it here because it might provide a good alternative as it takes sin seriously without taking it as the primary means for the incarnation.

I refer to my view as the reconciliation perspective of atonement because it looks to the larger metanarrative to ask the question, what did Jesus die for? You might think that such a theory already exists and you would be correct. However, it is considered a sub-theory under Penal Substitution Theory. What I propose is raising it to a higher standard and removing it from PST altogether as the two are completely different.

The logic behind the reconciliation perspective is that it looks to the larger narrative and asks the question, Why does Israel struggle so much to follow God? The answer is found back in the fall narrative.

Reconciliation theory does not focus on the specific act as much as it considers the entire story to understand what is happening. The fall seems more about a story of lostness

than it does sin. In other words, the specific act of “sin” (which should be defined as any act that is a part from the will of God), acts as the catalyst for the lostness of Adam and Eve. Their act is an act that sends them wandering. The rest of the Hebrew Scriptures can be seen as Israel moving farther and farther away from God, to the point where they don’t recognize him anymore.

Therefore, the cross acts as the necessary reconciliation to bring man back to God. Jesus is about revealing the will of God and re-introducing humanity back to God. Jesus acts as the coordinator by providing the path back to the God who was forsaken back in the garden.

End Times

The only addition I would make to this section is to add the question: **would your faith change if there was no rapture?** I wanted to explore this question more in the book but was not able to include it. Moreover, there are a growing number of people who no longer believe in rapture theology. This is not to say that Jesus will not return one day, that is a different question than that of the rapture.

What is the Gospel?

The idea here is really to challenge the traditional idea that the Gospel message is that of sin and separation from God. Instead, the reader is challenged to consider that the gospel is something much more holistic. Since the Gospel was preached before the death and resurrection of Christ, then its content must be different than what is often portrayed by modern-day Christians.



CHAPTER FIVE: THE HOLY SPIRIT: DIVINE CONSCIOUSNESS

The Holy Spirit is the active agent of God. Those who live post-Jesus Christ live in the age of the Holy Spirit. Although the Spirit is vastly important there is much less we have to say about the third person of the Trinity. Part of the reason is that the Spirit (or Divine Consciousness) is quiet. It is internal to the believer and the Church. The father was the predominant character in the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus Christ in the New Testament both of whom made their presence widely known. The Spirit on the other hand is like a whisper of the wind. Its words are faint but come with the same power as the other persons of the Trinity.

Divine Consciousness

The Divine Consciousness (The Holy Spirit) has a vital role within its personhood and for humanity and yet that largely goes underappreciated. As stated in the book the role of the Spirit is to provide self-awareness for the God-head while also being the link between the inner-most being of God and humanity.

The example Jesus set for humanity was “spirit-led”. He demonstrated the power the Spirit of God has. Moreover, we are allowed to use the Spirit in the same manner.

"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Consider asking your group the following questions:

1. In what ways has the Holy Spirit been under-appreciated in the Church?
2. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit gives us the same power as it did for Jesus?
3. Why or why not do you think that people understand this?
4. How does the Holy Spirit manifest itself in your life?
5. Do you think understanding the Holy Spirit as the Divine Consciousness is helpful in understanding its role in the Trinity and the life of the believer?



CHAPTER SIX: CREATION & HUMANITY

There are many important questions to consider when talking about creation. Part of the problem with traditional evangelical theology is that there is too much emphasis on issues that are not that important. That means the goal is to deprogram people in such a way that they can begin to start asking better questions about the texts they encounter. This is a great chapter to begin working on that.

Breakout Session

A great exercise to help your group to see this text differently is to have them read Genesis 1 and 2 like they would read anything else. Don't read it like you would read the Bible, but like any ordinary text. Next, have them write down observations they make about the text. Here are some questions they might consider:

1. Imagine that you are the first human, what would be the first things you would do/think?
2. Imagine you are the first human, look around what are some observations you are making?
3. Knowing how old this text is, what questions do you have about its composition?

It might be necessary to get your group comfortable with the idea of myth. This idea is explored in the chapter, but having them interact about what they think might prove valuable. I have found that very few people are comfortable with the concept. You might challenge them with the question: **How does viewing the creation story as a myth change how you understand its meaning?**

Creation

This may sound surprising, but to my knowledge, I am the first theologian to bring ecological responsibility into the theological conversation about creation. I believe this is an important aspect of being stewards of the creation. The less we take this responsibility seriously the more we are doomed to its deterioration.

The underlying question about creation that I find interesting is: **God could have created everything instantly, but according to Genesis 1 and 2 he went through stages. Why do you think the author of Genesis made this a significant point?**

Humanity

Much of the early chapters of Genesis are set against the backdrop of the Babylonian exile. This means we must keep this in mind when trying to understand the meaning of the text. **Why might the creation of humanity be important in this Babylonian context?**

We are made in the image of God. The importance of this cannot be overstated. There is a lot of theology tied up in this concept from the nature of the Trinity to the persons that make up the Trinity. From the nature of humanity to their differentiation from animals. This means that getting this right is critical. The underlying question for consideration here is: **why do you think humans were created in God's image?**

Another significant subsection relates to equality. Many conservatives use the creation story as a proof text for complementarianism. However, I see the story differently. As

outlined in the chapter, I believe that the story demonstrates equality, not inequality. **Do you think the creation story demonstrates equality or inequality?**

As outlined in the section on the Trinity. The personal identity of the Trinity is closely related to the personal identity of the individual. If we were created in the image of the triune God, then it follows that we have characteristics and attributes that must be similar. I outline what I believe to be the characteristics of the image of God, **what do you think are some characteristics that make our identities similar to God?**

The Fall

The fall is one of the most significant theological doctrines because it acts as the presupposition for many subsequent theological ideas. Ideas like total depravity, atonement, etc., rely heavily upon how we interpret the fall. Up for debate is to what extent sin is the main problem that the story illustrates. Certainly, it plays a major role in the fall because it provided a rationale for why sacrifices were necessary. But does that mean that this is the main teaching of the story? **Ask your group what they think the main teaching of the story is.**

The final section of the chapter deals with free will. Free will is an important philosophical concept in theology because it deals with the extent of our culpability for our own sin. In the reformed tradition, they hold that God is in control of our circumstances. This is also known as *determinism*. Oftentimes the denomination/tradition you are associated with determines your theological heritage. Regardless, what does your group think of free will? Do we have free will, or is determinism at work?



CHAPTER SEVEN: CHURCH, CULTURE & THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Unfortunately, many Christians have left the church. Many feel little motivation to want to attend due to the trauma they have received. For many, the Church is not worth the problems that go along with it. However, I firmly believe the Church still has relevance and it is worth fighting for. In order to understand why it is worth fighting for it is necessary to understand the purpose of the Church. The underlying question to consider is: **what is the purpose of the Church?** The follow-up question is like it: **can you do Church apart from the Church?**

Heaven & Hell

The doctrine of hell has been a staple of evangelical theology. It has been the primary threat lodged against those who do not believe in God to come to saving faith. This is often joked about as “fire insurance”. However, the doctrine has a not-so-definitive history as is often presented.

Most people are surprised to learn that much of the early church did not believe in the view of hell as a place of torment. **Discuss in your group whether or not hell should be a place of eternal punishment or should it be a place of refinement and penance.**

There is an argument to be made that no one deserves eternal torment for acts committed during the limited amount of time they were on earth. That is not justice – even for people like Adolph Hitler. At the same time, it doesn't seem fair that an individual like that would ever be allowed in a place of eternal bliss.

The Role of Women in Church and Society

Surprisingly, this is still an issue in the Church. The SBC was recently in the news for their comments about Beth Moore and her preaching. They did not act too kindly to her – despite her celebrity. She did what any reasonable person would do and left the SBC for another denomination that would appreciate her contribution. The majority of evangelical denominations still do not allow women to occupy the highest levels of church leadership.

In the chapter, a new argument has been laid out to argue that there should be no limitations for women who want to participate in the ministry of Jesus Christ. **Do you think this argument is convincing?**

Sexuality, Abortion & Purity Culture

There is an obsession with sexuality in our culture. For whatever reason, issues related to sexuality and issues related to politics seem to get people riled up the most. Perhaps even worse is that the Church has failed miserably to address these issues within its own churches. Their response has primarily been to create a purity culture that emphasizes celibacy until marriage. In other words, the church believes that suppressing young people's sexual urges is the best way to support this type of culture. **Do you think that this is the best way to address issues of sexuality in the Church? What have been your experiences in purity culture?**

The section on abortion will no doubt be one of the most controversial aspects of the chapter. Evangelicals and Catholics in particular have been very vocal about their opposition to abortion. They reside under the moniker of "pro-life" as a way to humanize

the issue. However, practically speaking the title is a misnomer since it is only applied to a specific circumstance – abortion. In reality, these individuals are not “pro-life” but anti-abortion. The reason is that many of them do not “pro-life” when it comes to other humanitarian issues. **What do you think about the argument presented in this section? What should change as a result of this argument?**

I give an example in the subsequent section about the humanitarian issues that “pro-life” people should be advocating for. However, it seems oftentimes that our political ideologies get in the way of us making decisions that a follower of Christ should be made. Some of these issues are related to racism, immigration, poverty, etc. **Do you think our politics get in the way of us being followers of Christ? How should we view politics in light of our faith?**

Being and the Christian Faith

I end the chapter (and really the book) with a section on what it means to be a Christian. Despite all of the important ideas that we have talked about thus far this is perhaps the most important section of the book. It asks the important question of what it means to be a Christian in today’s world. This question is not as simple as we usually make it out to be. We are called to be transformed into something new, which means that our being in the world must reflect the life of Christ. This is more than just a WWJD moniker, but goes to the idea of Christian existence.

As Christians, we are to make our existence in the being of Christ the most important aspect of our being. Being in the world is NOT a doctrinal posture, but a posture of action. To be like Christ is to experience our humanity in the way it was meant. Being in the world is the meaning of life. **What did this section teach you about being in the world? Is there anything you think you should change about your own posture in this world?**

Closing

I appreciate you purchasing Unenlightenment. This is a project very near and dear to my heart. I hope you found it informative and transformative. May the Lord bless you and your congregation.

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