

## Module Overview

## Leader's Guide

- This module continues from Module F5 – A short foray into theology (A).

### Aim of this module

Having become more aware of what theology is and some of the major areas of Christian theology, in this session we will consider culture as a formative factor in theology, consider the place of Scripture and the Church in theology, and lastly focus on a distinctive emphasis in Christian theology – God as Trinity.

### Participant outcomes

When you have completed the work for this module you will be able to describe how our experience as a member of a particular cultural group influences our theology. You will also be able to discuss the central place of Scripture in theology and the role the Church plays in developing theology. Thirdly, you will be able to begin to discuss the key Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

### Leader's role

Please provide a relaxed, friendly and open environment with brief breaks if and where appropriate.

### Resources

For this session you will need some newsprint sheets or a whiteboard or an overhead projector and transparencies.

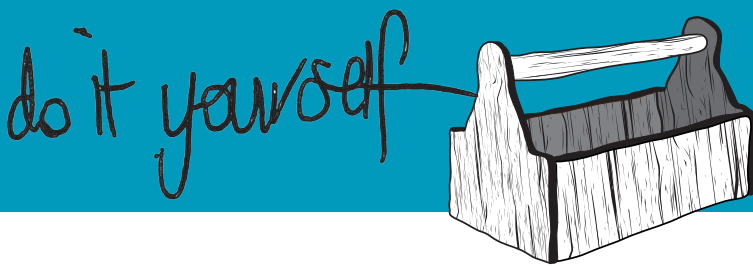
Each participant will also need:

- Photocopies of the handouts
- Individual highlighters or pens
- A Bible (NRSV preferred)
- Several hymn books familiar to the group. (A full music edition will often have a fuller index, eg with scripture references topic indexes as well as 'first lines'.)
- An exercise book to use as a journal

### Session Outline

**90 mins**

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|---|---------|
| 1. Introduction                                 | 5 min.  |
| 2. Recognising your experience                  | 15 min. |
| 3. Sharing in plenary                           | 10 min. |
| 4. Australian culture (F6.H1)                   | 20 min. |
| 5. The Scriptures and the Church (F6.H2, F6.H3) | 20 min. |
| 6. The Trinity (F6.H4)                          | 15 min. |
| 7. Close  | 5 min.  |



## 1. Introduction

Remind the participants of the discussion in the last session and the key points from that session including theology as faith seeking understanding and seeking to address the everyday questions and challenges of humanity (5 min.)

## 2. Recognising your experience

Tell the group: *In small groups of 3 or 4 make a list of the background and context that together influence how you approach theology such as:*

- *What communities or cultures are you from?*
- *Were you brought up in the church; or have you only been associated with the church for a few years in adulthood?*
- *Are you from a sceptical family who is very dubious about the status or process of theology? ... and so on.* (15 min.)

## 3. Sharing in plenary

In plenary share some of the general observations from the smaller groups. (10 min.)

## 4. Australian culture

Invite participants to now reflect on this question quietly for a minute, perhaps taking brief notes if that will assist: "How does our culture in 21st century Australia help and/or impede us in talking about God?"

In the plenary, read out loud the observations about our culture in Australia in F6.H1. Ask two people to volunteer to share a one sentence comment on what was read. (10 min.)

In plenary, take one brief comment from each of the small groups. (5 min)

## 5. The Scriptures and the Church

Tell the group: *Our knowledge of God is also found in:*

- *The Scriptures (the Hebrew (Old) and New*

*Testaments) in which we hear of God's activities with the people of Israel and God's coming in Jesus Christ.*

- *The Church - through times in history as well as in our own context and time.*

Ask half the small groups to consider F6.H2 and half F6.H3. In small groups, read the Handout (10 min.) and bring back to the plenary a short summary of what it says (10 min.)

Tell the group: *In summary, God was revealed in God's words and actions in the history of Israel and its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Then, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a written record and interpretation was made of this original revelation. Finally comes the Church's words and actions. The church continues to discern, corporately, where God is at work and participates in God's mission in the world.*

## 6. The Trinity

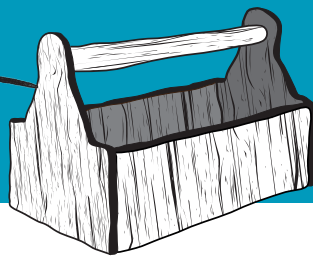
Tell the group: *The Trinity (or perhaps better, our understanding of God as Triune) is the particular Christian formulation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Invite four participants to read a paragraph each of F6.H4. Invite comments. Ask people if there are any fresh thoughts in this reading. While it is difficult to get our minds round God as one yet three, remind people that this is not intended as an exercise in logic or mathematics. The doctrine of the Trinity is a summary or formulation of what we find in Scripture and experience – God is revealed as Creator, in the history of Israel and Father of Jesus Christ. God is seen most clearly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God is present to us now as Holy Spirit.

## 7. Close

Invite people to note down any further questions they have in their journal for later reflection.

Close with prayer as appropriate, naming some points of the discussion for this session.



## Handout #1 21st Century Australian Culture

We live in a culture in which questions of spirituality are increasingly common. People seek a spiritual connection in a myriad of ways; through celebrating national days, such as Anzac Day; or through exploring the rituals and philosophy of New Age religions; through the increasing interest in Eastern spirituality, and, in other cases, exploring the Christian church.

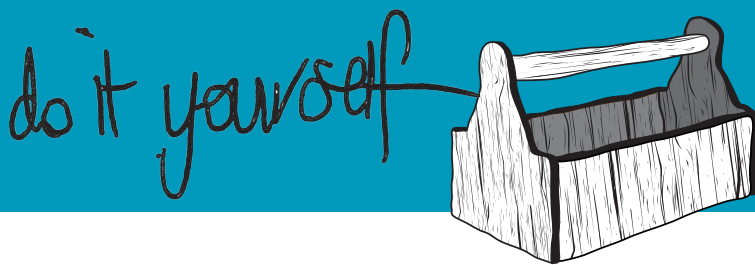
Because our culture puts great emphasis on the individual and his/her fulfilment, many of our approaches to spirituality are individualistic in character and are really about "me". What tends to happen when we ask general questions about who God is (or is there a God?), is that we form answers in terms of "me" and my limitations, abilities and needs. "I" becomes the reference point. So, God becomes everything that we are not: omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (everywhere), and omnipotent (all powerful). To put it in everyday language, God might be seen as the fixer of things, the granter of wishes, the "extra" to be pulled in when science fails to answer our conundrums, or our deepest yearnings. Sometimes this can sound like God's a version of the tooth fairy or magician.

Other ways people think about God come from their sheer wonder at the miraculousness, beauty and multiplicity of creation. There must be a maker or creator of all this! An analysis of the world around us and of our own lives points to the fact that there is a God. Such an analysis gives us evidence of God's eternity, wisdom, power and goodness. It furnishes us with at least a foundation upon which we can discover the answer to disturbing questions - Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? How should I live?

Such approaches do not tend to usher in an understanding or encounter with a personal or compassionate God.

In small groups discuss one or more of the following questions. Be prepared to bring some thoughts back to the larger group:

1. What evidence can you see in the communities around you, of interest in God, if any?
2. What do you find most compelling about other people's general understandings of God?
3. What do you find unhelpful in the above approaches to thinking about God? (10 min.)



## Handout #2 The Scriptures

Scripturally, to know God does not mean to know about God, but to experience God, to have a personal relationship with God. We don't believe in these scriptures; we believe in the life-giving reality of which they speak. The Bible makes present to us here and now the self-revelation of God that happened back there and then. In this sense, a secondary sense, the Bible is not only a witness to who God is; the Bible also reveals God to us.

God reveals Godself most obviously in the person of Jesus Christ. We go to the Scriptures to see the history of God's words and actions centred on Jesus Christ.

"I am the way, the truth and the life," Jesus said. From the outset, God is personal; God is made known in a person; God is not an "it". In continuity with God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, we believe that Christ is the fulfilment of God's revelation (but not the replacement for God's revelation to the people of Israel).

God comes to us also in the history of Israel - as we hear in the words of the prophets. God acts indirectly in Israel's history. Through the Hebrew Scriptures we learn of God as a loving creator (Genesis. 1), who creates order out of chaos and provides his creation with everything it needs. This is a God who is faithful to his people (the Israelites) come what may, liberating them from slavery (Exodus) and always bringing prophets to speak the truth to them.

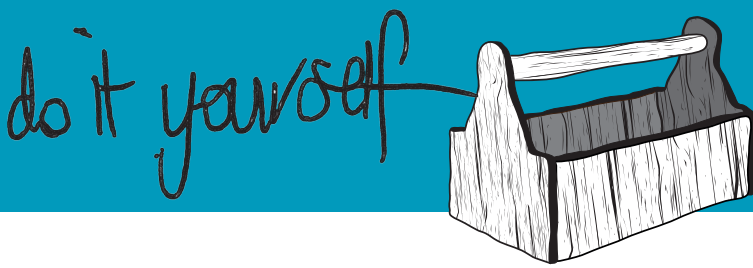
### God in Scriptures

Consider some of the following passages and summarise what we may know of God from them:

- Exodus 6:1-8
- John 1:18
- 1 John 4:12;
- John 1:18.

Or choose one of the parables of the kingdom in Matthew, Mark or Luke. (eg. Matthew 13: 24ff, Mark 4:26ff, Luke 13:18-21.)

What can we say about God from these Bible passages?



## Handout #3 The Church

God reveals Godself also in the Christian community and in our everyday lives. God is found in our human encounters with others who are also grappling with the mystery of God. We take a long view of this so we consider the insights of Christians over the past 2,000 years. (You will have noticed that one of the quotes in Handout F6.H1 dates back to St Anselm who lived approximately AD 1033-1109.)

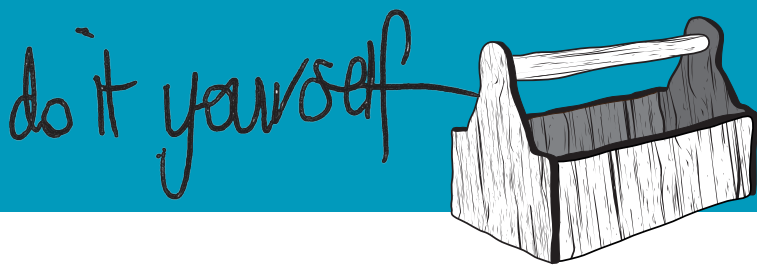
God is found in our hearing of preaching and in our participation in the sacraments. It is not the preacher who speaks God's Word; but through his or her meditations (and those of our hearts) we (hopefully!) hear the word of God. God is found here enlightening, calling, renewing, challenging, guiding, forgiving.

One of the ways the church is described is as "the body of Christ". Its mission or purpose is described in a variety of ways. For example, it is to continue Christ's work in the world. As we know, though, the church is often an "all too human" body, guilty of self-interest and power politics. Yet Christians still believe in this organisation and, for all its failings, believe God acts and speaks through it.

### God in hymns

Think of a favourite hymn or prayer which describes God most helpfully to you. How does it do this?

Is Christ at work only in the church, among those who know him? For help in answering this question, look up Eph. 1:16-23 and Col. 1:15-20.



## Handout #4 The Trinity

Over 2000 years the Christian church has developed Creeds (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed) and Statements of Faith (contemporary expressions of belief). These serve to help us talk about God and to understand God. They are important because they provide parameters around what we say about God; they don't say what God is, as no formulation can do that, but they indicate what we can't say about God. In this way, creeds hold onto the mystery while guiding our hearts and minds. In this section, then, we move from discussing "Where do we find God?" to "Who is God?"

The Trinity, God as Father, Son and Spirit, is an understanding of the Christian God that is explicit or implicit in all creeds in the church. The doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the Bible (although note Matt. 28:19 and 2 Cor. 13:13), but it is the way the church over 2000 years has come to sum up the Scriptural witness to God and the people's experience of this life-giving God who is present and at work in three ways. God is one in three. God is personal and relational. God is three "persons" in community who are integrally related; God is therefore dynamic, affected by his people. The Trinity is, if you like, the Christian summary of an understanding of God.

It is important to note that all our language about God is "analogical" or "metaphorical". What we say about God, including the language of the Trinity, uses language and images that are human. Therefore these images and language are limited. When we use the pronoun "he" it does not mean God is male. Similarly, when we take note of the rich heritage of female imagery (Is 42:14; 66:13; and the Hebrew word for Spirit being female) and refer to God in more feminine terms, we are not saying God is female. All such descriptions are metaphorical. They are the best our human minds can grasp, and help us to the personal dimensions of the divine mystery.

The language of the Trinity has remained important for the church for three main reasons. Firstly, it is the language of the Bible. Secondly, it is language that has been embedded in the worship, thought and life of the church for centuries, so therefore is not easily dismissed. Thirdly, it is language that indicates the relationships that exist in the inner life of God, and therefore it is language that communicates the personal and relational nature of God.

### Three persons in unity

Turn to John chapter 17 and select some key verses describing the relationship between Jesus and God. Is there a unity or distinction? Compare them with John 10:30 and John 14:9ff.

As well as God being present as Father and in the Son, God is also present as Holy Spirit. Consider John 14:15-17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:11; 1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Cor. 3:17. How does the description of the Spirit vary through these passages?