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LEADER'S GUIDE

STEP

**CORNELIUS
PLANTINGA JR.**

DOWN

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LEADER'S GUIDE

DEEP

**CORNELIUS
PLANTINGA JR**

DOWN

FAITH



Grand Rapids, Michigan

We are grateful to Mr. Bob Rozema for his work writing new content, updating pedagogy, and helping to shape the transformation of *A Sure Thing* into *Deep Down Faith*.

The background sections appearing here were originally written by Dr. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. for *A Sure Thing: What We Believe and Why*.

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HOW TO USE THE STUDY GUIDES

FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Because you've accessed this material for leaders online, we'll assume that you've volunteered—or been drafted—to lead a small group discussion of *Deep Down Faith* by Cornelius Plantinga Jr. If you're using this material for a mentoring program, please see the comments under that heading, below.

Please be aware that only this introduction and the 24 session guides are available online; the *Deep Down Faith* text is available only in print. Each of the persons in your small group should have a copy of the text.

Leaders familiar with *A Sure Thing: What We Believe and Why* will recognize that *Deep Down Faith* is an update of that book and course. Contemporary, age-appropriate examples and questions for reflection have been added to the readings. The rather lengthy teacher's manual of the old course has been streamlined into easy-to-use study guides. Dr. Plantinga's insightful theological backgrounds from the original course are offered intact with each study guide. Read them before each group meeting for a more complete understanding of the doctrinal concepts explained in the devotionals. The backgrounds are intended for leaders, not for group members.

AUDIENCE AND SETTINGS

Deep Down Faith is especially recommended for older high school students and for post-high young adults. You may decide to use

it with younger groups, including those in grades 9-10, and that's fine, as long as you're confident that group members can handle the concepts explained in the devotionals and are committed to deepening their understanding of the Christian faith.

You can use the study guides for a church school class and for small group discussions in church or homes or on campus. The text and study guides can also be used for a mentoring program.

CONTENT AND GOALS

A glance at the contents page of the devotional book shows that the text and study guides systematically cover the basic ideas of the Christian faith, as taught in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition and as based on Scripture and the teachings of the church. In twenty-four weeks and five units, group members learn about God, humanity, salvation, church and kingdom, and the last things.

As you lead your small group, keep these overall goals in mind:

- To gain a better understanding of the “language of faith,” the basic ideas of the Christian faith, as taught in Reformed and Presbyterian churches.
- To realize that what we believe profoundly influences how we should live as Christians.
- To deepen our faith and grow in our personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

RESOURCES: *DEEP DOWN FAITH* (BOOK)

Before leading your first small group session, carefully study the week's devotionals in the printed text. Each week is divided into four readings or devotionals, each of which includes a Scripture passage, a quote from one or more of the teachings of the church, the devotional itself, questions for reflection, and prayer starters.

The devotionals are a careful blend of instruction and inspiration, liberally sprinkled with examples and stories that will appeal to the age group, yet offering clear and compelling explanations of Reformed/ Presbyterian teachings. Notice that many of the readings include definitions of key words of our faith, such as *attributes, triune, covenant, atonement, justification, sanctification*, and many more. In your small group discussion you will want to refer to these definitions from time to time.

Participants should bring their books to the group sessions. You will want to encourage them—with some wit and humor—to read the week's devotionals at home *before* the group meeting. This will save group members the trouble of making up excuses or faking it. It will also save a lot of time during your sessions and make for more informed discussion. However, in the real and busy world of teens, some will likely not make time to read the devotionals for a given week. In that case, stay cool—you can still have a worthwhile meeting.

One way to bring all group members up to speed is to begin your meeting with a brief summary of each reading. You may want to quote a key sentence, review a definition, and say what the reading is about in a

sentence or two. Take no more than five minutes for this.

Another way to handle the “forgot to read the book” issue is to go back and read appropriate parts of a devotional when a discussion question obviously refers to a particular reading.

And, finally, see the list of suggestions for varying the group sessions, below. Several of them will take participants back through the readings in small group settings.

RESOURCES: STUDY GUIDES

Each week you will need to print one study guide for each small group member. Select the session you want and print as many copies of the study guide as you need. Again, the background sections are for you—group members do *not* need copies.

Each study guide has three parts:

- **Get Started** offers a question or activity that gets participants interested in the topic of the session.
- **Get into It** takes group members into readings for the week, using challenging questions, quotes from the readings, Bible study, and more. It's the heart of the session.
- **Get Personal** challenges group members to evaluate what they've learned and to live out their faith at home, at work, in school, or on campus—wherever they are. If you've got a large group, you may want to break into smaller groups of three to five for this important step.

Each study guide offers activities and questions that require 45 minutes to an hour to complete, depending on how talkative your group is. Don't try to cram everything

in—it's always better to discuss a few things thoroughly than many things superficially. And be sure to ask participants for any additional questions they have about the readings.

There are a number of easy ways to vary the above routine—something you should do from time to time, especially if you're using all 24 study guides. Here are a few suggestions you may want to try:

- Have participants work in groups of two to five persons each to make up their own “Get into It” questions, writing their questions on newsprint and then selecting questions the whole group wants to discuss.
- Divide the week's readings among groups of two to five persons each, one reading for each group. Have each group first meet to discuss their reading, then present it to the whole group, reading the Scripture and teachings aloud, summarizing the reading in a few sentences, and discussing the “For Reflection” question or their own questions with the entire group.
- Assign key concepts (such as the definitions) from the readings to groups of two to five persons each, challenging them to figure out a way to creatively present these concepts to the entire group, using a variety of techniques, such as art, skit, bumper stickers, slogans, etc.
- Work through all four readings with the whole group, having group members read the Scripture and teachings aloud; then invite group members to comment on the reading: What did they find helpful? Encouraging? Was there anything that wasn't clear to them? Any lines or thoughts from the reading they found especially interesting? Challenging?

Anything further about the reading they'd like to discuss? How might this reading affect the way they live?

- Allow group members to choose the readings and questions they'd like to explore for the session.
- Take a break as leader and ask for student volunteers to lead a future session.

Bring pens and Bibles to your sessions.

Many of the Bible passages are printed out in the session guides, but participants need to look up their own passages from time to time. Also, some sessions require newsprint and markers for small group work.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MENTORS

If you've been asked to mentor a high school student or young adult, consider using *Deep Down Faith* to read and discuss with him or her. Maybe you're thinking, “Whoa, 24 sessions! That's a whole lot more than we'll ever use.” If working through the entire book together seems too daunting or doesn't fit into your schedule, consider focusing on just a unit or two during your time together. If you want to use just one unit, our suggestion is unit 3, “Our Way Out: God Provides Salvation.” This eight-meeting unit clearly explains the heart of the Christian faith, discussing the incarnation, the atonement, justification, faith, repentance, God's law, and prayer—all in an inviting devotional format that inspires and motivates.

Even if you're using just one unit of study now, the book *Deep Down Faith* will be a wonderful resource for the young person you're mentoring, a book he or she can return to time after time to reflect on the key truths of our faith. And if your mentee is considering professing his or her faith, this book is especially pertinent and helpful.

Prior to meeting with your mentee, ask him or her to read the week's devotionals and, of course, do the same yourself. We suggest that you also read the backgrounds to the devotionals for that week to give you an in-depth understanding of the concepts being taught (the backgrounds precede each set of study questions in this guide).

At your meeting, you may want to begin by simply asking whether there's anything in the devotionals that your mentee found helpful or especially interesting. Keep your books in view as you talk and page through the readings together. You may end up just sharing reactions to the readings for the week, and that's fine.

Use the study guide very selectively, sharing it with your mentee and suggesting a question or two you may want to discuss. Let your mentee point out any questions that he or she would like to talk about. Questions in the "Get Personal" section of the study guide are especially important. Be sure to share your own responses to the "Get Personal" questions. Above all, treat the study guide as a resource, not something you have to "cover" together. You don't want to give the impression that you're conducting a class. Keep things casual.

Always give your mentee an opportunity to ask questions he or she may have, even if those questions are tangential to the ideas presented in the devotionals.

In short, make this a time of learning together, using the book and the study guide as resources, not recipes to be followed exactly.

SPECIAL PROJECT: PHOTO BOOKS

Making a photo book toward the end of your mentoring program (or near the end of

your small group sessions) is a great way to remember together what you've experienced and learned. The activity builds on teens' artistic creativity, along with the fun of using a digital camera and computer. Photo books are offered by numerous vendors online, including Shutterfly, Snapfish, Walgreens, and many others. The books vary in size and cost. An 8" x 8" book of about 24 pages is currently selling for well under \$25. Check your favorite photo sites for frequent discounts.

Start by picking 15-20 key ideas or concepts you have studied to illustrate in the photo book: for example, justification or sanctification or Trinity or the image of God or faith. Then brainstorm images that illustrate the concept (see examples on these pages). Arrange handmade drawings, objects, and persons to photograph and then record the images with a digital camera. Of course, you can also download pictures from the internet or from your personal picture files.

Decide on suitable captions for each image and concept. Captions can be copied from the readings, but encourage some originality here as well.

On one of the pages near the end of the photo book, mentees can write their own short statement of faith and commitment, along with their photo. On the final page, you can write a short note of appreciation to the person(s) you mentored.

Your final step will be to go to an online photo vender and follow their directions for assembling your photo book. You can organize your own pages or (much easier) let the photo service do it for you. Captions can be added to each picture. Chances are the teen(s) you're mentoring (or small group

members you're leading) will be happy to be involved in this process (or take it over completely!).

This idea was contributed by Karla Harris of Cincinnati, Ohio, who mentored two young friends, Laura and Madeline Dykstra. After their study of *A Sure Thing*, they went through the process described above and had a great time doing it. The images on this page are from the photo book they made. Our thanks to Karla, Laura, and Madeline.



Justification is God's acceptance of unacceptable people, including the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of Jesus' righteousness.



Reconciliation is restoring peace and harmony to estranged partners. An arbitrator is needed. Jesus brings reconciliation as a mediator between God and humanity.



An attribute of God is his goodness, which means that God satisfies the needs of all his creatures.



A covenant is an agreement or pact where there are always promises on one side and often obligations on the other.

NEW TO MENTORING?

If you're new to mentoring, here are a few general tips from the mentor's guide to *I Believe: Getting Ready to Confess My Faith* by Jessie Schut (Faith Alive Christian Resources):

- **Hang out.** Invite your partner to hang out with you as you do routine things, such as running errands for an elderly relative, shopping for hobby supplies, or going to garage sales. Your mentee may say more to you in such an informal situation than in a more formal meeting session.
- **Use email or text.** Sending a quick electronic note is a great way to confirm

meeting times, pass on prayer requests, and offer encouragement and affirmation. It may also be a safe way for your partner to reveal questions she's too shy to express in person.

- **Eat together.** Adolescents love to eat. And sharing food is a sign of community. Schedule some meetings over a burger and fries. This is an investment in a relationship.
- **Pray for each other.** Use your partner's picture as a bookmark in your Bible so you'll remember to pray about your relationship. Invite your mentee to share in your life by praying for your needs too.
- **Tell and listen to stories.** Stories are a powerful means to reach other people. Sharing stories about childhood or everyday things helps you and your mentee know and trust each other. Stories about your spiritual journey illustrate what it means to be a Christian.
- **Respect each other.** Show respect for your mentee by asking and thanking rather than ordering; by inviting your mentee's input into meeting plans; by being punctual and reliable; by keeping confidences, and generally by living out the golden rule.
- **Laugh together!** Humor is a great leveler.
- **Be liberal with affirmation.** Affirmation is not just a series of nice things you say. It's an attitude as well.
- **Listen!** Your mentee will be watching to decide whether you are really listening to what she says. First, she'll check your body language. Are you maintaining eye contact? Leaning toward or away? Arms crossed or relaxed? Are you tapping a pencil or showing other signs of

impatience? Then she'll note your tone of voice when you respond. Are you engaged or disinterested? Angry or thoughtful? Curious or dictatorial? Finally, she'll listen to your words. But realize that your words constitute only seven percent of what you're really saying. Good listening means no interruptions; it means asking good questions to clarify what you don't understand, and focusing on your mentee rather than on yourself.

- **Be teachable.** Mentoring is a mutual relationship. Sure, you're sharing your important ideas and thoughts with your mentee; but, in turn, he's doing the same. Be prepared for a joyful journey in which both of you will grow and learn from each other.

After reading all this, you may be wondering whether you're the right person for the job. If so, consider Christopher Columbus:

He didn't know where he was going when he left. He didn't know where he was when he got there. When he got home, he didn't know where he had been. And, the place was never the same after he left.

You and your partner will be embarking on a journey of exploration. You don't know the terrain, but you're going on faith. And neither of you will ever be the same again after the journey is over. God's blessing on you both.

UNIT 1

OUR AWESOME GOD

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

Note: The background sections were written by Dr. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. for *A Sure Thing: What We Believe and Why*.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The word *attributes* comes from the Latin words *tribuere* (“allot” or “assign”) and *ad* (“to” or “toward”). An attribute is therefore literally something we assign to someone or something. It’s an ascription.

In the case of God, however, this is a misleading way to think of attributes. We do not assign or ascribe, say, goodness to God, as though he lacks it till we make the assignment. Nor do we merely suppose God to be good, thus attributing goodness to him without being sure that he actually is good. The truth is that attributes are biblically (and experientially) revealed characteristics of God. Attributes are characteristics actually true of God. So we assign these virtues only after discovering from revelation that they are actual and real descriptions, even self-descriptions of God himself.

Theologians sometimes use the term *attributes* in a technical sense for *essential* properties or characteristics of God. The point is that God doesn’t just happen to be good or great; he couldn’t be anything *but* good and great. It is part of God’s essence to be good and great, part of God’s very “Godness.”

Further, these attributes are, broadly speaking, triune. That is, they are generally true of Father, Son, and Spirit. None of the

three persons is more essentially divine than the others. Here various qualifications have to be made for the incarnate stage or the career of the Son of God (Jesus Christ, though fully divine, does not appear from the biblical record to have been omniscient, for instance). But, in general, whatever is essentially true of any one trinitarian person as divine is also true of the other two persons.

The list of attributes one finds in Article 1 of the Belgic Confession is entirely typical of Christian confessions in general. Reformed Christians have made no particular or distinctive contribution to this area of theology. In fact, the list in the Belgic Confession (and in other Reformed confessions, such as the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647) follows a long medieval tradition of describing God as a spirit, or spiritual being, who is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty, completely wise, and so on. The lists differ from each other here and there, but they are remarkably alike in the attributes they mention.

The biblical sources for the attributes of God mentioned in Article 1 of the Belgic Confession are rich and broad. Consider the following:

God’s oneness

Deuteronomy 6:4 (though probably referring to God the Father)

John 10:30 (a root for the trinitarian oneness of God)

God's spirituality

John 4:24
Acts 17:24, 29

God's eternity

Deuteronomy 33:27
Psalm 90:2
Revelation 1:8

God's incomprehensibility

Psalm 145:3
Isaiah 40:28
Psalm 139:6
Romans 11:33-34

God's invisibility

Colossians 1:15
1 Timothy 1:17
John 1:18

God's immutability

Malachi 3:6
James 1:17
Hebrews 6:17-18

God's infinity

(of time) see eternity, above
(of space) Jeremiah 23:24
Isaiah 66:1
(of knowledge) Psalm 147:5 (see also
wisdom, below)
(of power) see almightiness, below

God's almightiness

Matthew 19:26
Job 26:14
Revelation 19:6

God's perfect wisdom

1 John 3:20
1 Corinthians 1:18
Proverbs 8
Romans 11:33

God's perfect justice

Psalm 112:3
Psalm 119:142
Romans 1:17

God's perfect goodness

Psalm 145:9
Acts 14:17

Probably the biblical love passages ought to be added here, particularly where God's goodness is described as an "overflowing fountain." One of the distinctive features of the New Testament concept of love (*agape* in Greek) is that it seeks to confer value. It is spontaneous, profuse, prodigal, an overflowing fountain of good. (See for example, Romans 5:5, 8:39; 1 John 3:1, 4:16.)

The attributive descriptions of God are not meant to be considered as a purely intellectual or theological exercise. Their point, as in all truly Calvinistic theology, is rather the promotion of *piety*. We do not describe God primarily to satisfy our curiosity. The idea is rather to understand and know God and, therefore, to love, serve, and obey him. Distinguishing God from idols, praising God, and imitating God are all part of this pious agenda.

The doctrine of the Trinity, presented as an attribute in reading 4, is one of the two main dogmas of the universal Christian church (the other is the person of Jesus Christ as simultaneously divine and human). That is, of all the concerns of the Bible and church preaching, of all the doctrines taught in the church and in Christian families, this is one of the two raised to official confessional status in the world church. The key elements of the doctrine were stated at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, especially the idea that the eternal Son of God is just as divine as God the Father. The Nicene Creed (often called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed by scholars) contains this central phrase: the Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is "of the same essence as the Father."

The creed implies by this phrase (and by such other language as “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God”) that Jesus Christ is not merely an additional divine person in heaven—as though Father, Son, and Spirit were miscellaneous deities who had to resolve somehow to get on together. Rather, the Son is “of” or “from” the Father. He is in some extraordinary way derivative from him, though not temporally so. Like human offspring, he shares his Father’s essence. He is fully divine, God from God. This fact makes the family analogy attractive, although in it the Spirit would appear to be only the family’s agent or guest.

The doctrine of the personhood and deity of the Holy Spirit was much slower to develop in the early church and has always been somewhat hazier. The Holy Spirit has not been incarnate and has not figured as centrally as the Son in the church’s concept of salvation. Holy Spirit language and conceptuality have therefore often appeared as a kind of rider to the doctrines of Father and Son.

What is the biblical basis for belief in three fully personal and fully divine beings who together make up only one God?

Briefly, the procedure followed by theologians is this: first, the Bible (especially the New Testament and most especially the highly developed and sophisticated gospel of John) uses personal language for each of the three. No one doubts this with respect to God the Father. Nor, really, with respect to the Son—though here it is important to observe that the New Testament uses such language of the Son of God not only when he is incarnate but also in his preexistent state (e.g., Heb. 1:10; Phil. 2:6, 7; John 17:5, 24). It is the presentation of the Holy

Spirit, as suggested above, that raises the difficulties.

On the one hand, the New Testament uses some impersonal language when referring to the Spirit. Sometimes, for instance, it is literally not *the* Spirit that is referred to but just spirit. Thus, what is promised in Luke 11:13 as a gift is not the Holy Spirit but just “holy spirit.” On the other hand, the New Testament contains many undeniably personal references to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks (Mark 13:11, Acts 21:11), searches (1 Cor. 2:10), bears witness and intercedes (Rom. 8:16, 26), teaches (John 14:26), apportions gifts (1 Cor. 12:11), exercises will (Acts 16:6-7), can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), reflects (Acts 15:28), appoints (Acts 20:28), sends (Acts 13:4), is lied to (Acts 5:3), and so on. The account of the Paraclete (John 14-16) is consistently rich in personal language.

So the reader of the Bible notes that personal claims are made about all three persons. Then theologians and others note that in numerous ways the Bible distinguishes the three. For example, the possessive relation marked by the English word *of* suggests simultaneous relation and distinction: the Son is the Son *of* the Father; the Spirit is the Spirit *of* the Father or Son. When one adds to this the appearance of all three names together in the so-called trinitarian formulas of the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:14), it appears that major New Testament authors believed and taught that there are three personal, divine beings in heaven.

John’s gospel shows the main biblical attempt to deal with the problem raised by this revealed truth. The problem is, of course, that it seems strange to believe in three divine persons and at the same time to

believe that there is only one God. Typically the New Testament reserves the name *God* for the Father—though there are a few important references to the Son of God as God. But John’s gospel shows us the major presentation of a solution to the problem. The solution hinges on using the word *one* in a new way. Given the fact that Jesus Christ is divine and that he spoke of sending “another advocate” (John 14:16), who also seems to be from God’s side of things rather than ours, the notion of “one God” needs new revelation. Accordingly, all throughout John’s gospel Father and Son (and, often, Spirit) are said to have one will (10:18), one work (5:19, 16:14), one word (3:34, 14:26). Mainly, they bring *life* (John’s word for salvation; 20:31). They further know, love, and glory in each other (10:14-15, 17; 14:31; 17:5). All this is summed up in the climactic seventeenth chapter where the Father and Son are “in” each other (a mysterious expression for spiritually interpenetrating oneness) and, simply, “one.” They are not one person, as our Lord’s comparison makes clear. They are one in a way that the church will one day be. They are “organically” or communally one.

What, then, is the mystery of the Trinity? There are two things it is not. First, it is not the question of how one divine person could somehow appear in three roles or modes. That is a Christian heresy called “modalism.” Second, neither is it the pious conclusion sometimes adopted by people who suppose that the doctrine of the Trinity is self-contradictory. They suppose that the doctrine says there are three persons in God, but also only one. That (besides being incoherent) is both unbiblical and uncreedal. The real trinitarian mystery is how three biblically revealed persons can be so radically, gloriously, and inconceivably “in”

each other as to have perfectly harmonious, interwoven, and interpenetrating will, works, word, knowledge, love, and glory.

For now, imperfect as it is, the church is the only plausible analogy we have.

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

GET STARTED

- Some people react negatively when they hear the word *doctrine*. What is your reaction? How would you describe your experiences with the teaching or preaching of doctrine in the past?
- Look back at the definition of “doctrine” (day 4). Do you think doctrine as defined this way is important or not?

GET INTO IT

- Share your response to the “For Reflection” question for day 1: “When have you been particularly aware of God’s awe-fullness? What do you think prompted that experience?”
- Review the definition of “attributes of God” (day 1). In your experience, does getting to know God’s attributes diminish or enhance your sense of God’s mysteriousness?
- Doctrine, to be true, must be based on the Bible. To explore the biblical basis for the doctrine of God’s goodness (see day 2 for a definition of God’s goodness), take turns reading aloud Psalm 145. Each person should read until he or she comes to something in the psalm that shows one way in which God satisfies the needs of his creatures.
- Psalm 147:5-6 describe two aspects of God’s greatness. How would you summarize those two aspects? Compare

your summary with Plantinga’s definition of God’s greatness (day 3).

- Imagine you are explaining the biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity to someone. Which of the following passages would you find most helpful?
 - **The Shema—the Jewish confession of faith, recited daily (Deuteronomy 6:4, NIV)**
Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.
 - **Jesus’ Baptism (Mark 1:9-11, NIV)**
At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”
 - **How Many Gods? (1 Corinthians 8:4, NIV)**
We know that “an idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “there is no God but one.”
 - **Benediction (2 Corinthians 13:14, NIV)**
May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
 - **Unity (Ephesians 4:4-6, NIV)**
There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one

baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

o **Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit (John 14:25-26 NIV)**

“All this I [Jesus] have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

GET PERSONAL

- If God’s goodness means that God satisfies the needs of his creatures, what are some ways in which you have personally experienced God’s goodness?
- In what areas are you still waiting for evidence of God’s goodness?
- God’s greatness includes both God’s power and God’s compassion. Can you recall a time when you saw both those qualities displayed in God?
- Plantinga compares the Trinity with the church and then asks, “Do you think the church ought to be even more like God than it is?” In what ways could (or does) your church serve as an example of the unity and diversity of the Trinity? Try to think of specific examples.