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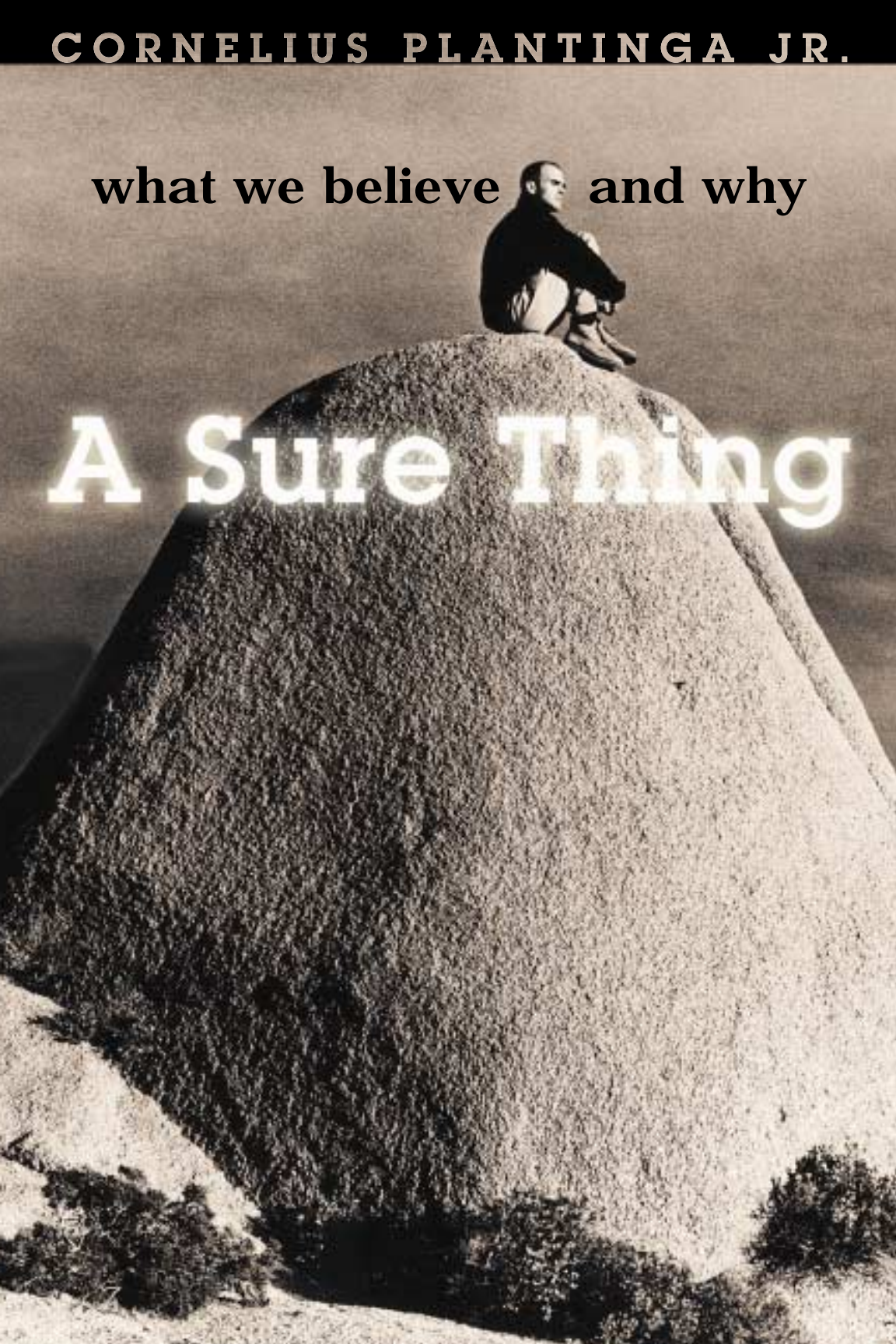
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CORNELIUS PLANTINGA JR.

what we believe and why

A Sure Thing



A Sure Thing

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Acknowledgments

The Education Department is grateful to Dr. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., President of Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, for writing this book. Dr. Plantinga was formerly Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary. He is also the author of two doctrinal studies for adults: *A Place to Stand* and *Beyond Doubt*.

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“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for . . .”

—Hebrews 11:1



Preface

A Sure Thing . . . What We Believe and Why is written especially for Christian teenagers who want to know more about what their church believes and confesses. It is written to help your own faith and hope in God become “a sure thing.”

When you study this book, you will be learning “the language of faith.” By this I mean the words the church uses when it talks about what it believes and what the Bible teaches. These words are the basic ideas of the Christian faith, as taught in Reformed/Presbyterian churches. Knowing these words certainly won’t save you—only the Holy Spirit, working in your heart, can do that. But knowing these words will give you a better understanding of what you believe with your heart, and will help you grow as a Christian.

This book is not hard to use. Notice from the table of contents that it teaches you the words of our faith systematically, beginning with teachings about God and ending with teachings about the last things. Each week features four short selections for you to read at home, either with your family or by yourself, followed by activities that will help you think about what you’ve read. Finally, you may join with other young people from your church to talk about what you’ve learned.

Learning the language of our faith takes some work, but it doesn’t have to be dull; in fact, you’ll find this book interesting and very much related to your daily lives as young Christians. The author is Dr. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., President of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Besides being a teacher, he’s also a father; and when he first wrote this book he tried it out on his two teenagers, just to be sure that what he wrote would be clear and interesting.

God bless you in your learning. May it help you be “sure of what we hope for” as God’s people.

—Harvey A. Smit

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1 God



Week 1

The Attributes of God

Day 1

God Is Mysterious

Scripture

(Jacob) had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. . . . I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. . . ."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

—Selections from Genesis 28:12-17

Teachings

We all believe in our hearts
and confess with our mouths
that there is a single
and simple
spiritual being,
whom we call God—
eternal,
incomprehensible,
invisible,
unchangeable,
infinite,
almighty;
completely wise,
just,
and good,
and the overflowing source
of all good.

—Belgic Confession, Article 1

A great Christian writer once asked us to imagine something. Imagine, he said, that some night when you are home alone you begin to believe that there is a fierce, person-eating tiger in your bedroom. You would be afraid. In fact, if you are normal, you would be terrified because you would be in great danger.

But now imagine something slightly different. You are in a dark house and in a spooky mood. And you begin to believe that there is a corpse in your bedroom. Once more you would be afraid, but in a weird and special way. It is not that you are in much danger. After all, dead bodies do not hurt you; they haunt you and fill you with dread.

The same thing happens to people when they believe that a ghost or a mighty spirit is nearby.

Probably people have felt this way about God from near the beginning of time. Early in the Bible we find evidence of such feelings. At a place he calls "Bethel" Jacob senses that someone from beyond has mysteriously visited him. He feels haunted and afraid. The one who has visited Jacob is so strange, so alien, that Jacob probably feels like fleeing. He feels awe. And the place where he feels it, therefore, seems awesome or awe-ful.

It is hard for us to get this feeling about God. We say God's name so often and worship God so regularly and hear so much about God that he does not seem very awesome. God seems almost like an unseen great-uncle in another country. We get the feeling of awesomeness about God only at certain times and in certain places. If we are alone at night and hear the wind come mysteriously through the trees, we may think of God. If we attend the funeral of someone we love, we may feel the strangeness of death and the mystery of God. Or suppose we step into a large Roman Catholic church. We see statues and smell candles. We sense an atmosphere that is strange and awesome to us. We may feel surrounded by the secret things of God.

A mystery is something puzzling, secret, or unknown to us. We read mystery books, watch mystery movies, and observe mysterious persons.

Multiply this a thousand times in thinking of the mystery of God. Even when we love God and trust that God loves us, we still cannot see God or know everything about him. Even when we cannot imagine the world without God, we are often puzzled by his ways with the world.

Still, God has made himself partly known to us. By speaking and acting God has let us know something of who he is and what he wants. Thus we know that God is good and great and triune. We know that God wants our obedience and trust.

When we say that God is good or great or triune, we are listing some of God's *attributes*. Attributes are things true of someone. When we know some of God's attributes, we can praise and even imitate God. We can partly understand and try to describe God.

I say "try to describe" because God is in some ways indescribable. To say that God is good, for instance, is a little like saying that the Atlantic Ocean is a long swim.

To tell the truth, we will never understand some things about God. That is because God is great beyond all our imagining and holy beyond all our power to think of him. God is terribly and awesomely real. God is indescribably good and great. God is triune.

In all these ways and more God is a mystery.

Prayer

God, help us overcome our fear. Show us who you are and what you want. Show us not only your mystery but also your great love. Amen.

Day 2

God Is Good

Scripture

The Lord is good to all;
 he has compassion on all he has made,
The Lord is righteous in all his ways
 and loving toward all he has made.
My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
 Let every creature praise his holy name
 for ever and ever.

—Psalm 145:9, 17, 21

Teachings

I trust him so much that I do not doubt
 he will provide
 whatever I need
 for body and soul,
and he will turn to my good
 whatever adversity he sends me
 in this sad world.

—Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 26

“**G**ood” is a word so common we use it without thinking. “How do you feel this morning?” your parent asks. “Pretty good,” you reply. Then at school an English composition comes back with your teacher’s comments on it. One of them, in a margin, is “good.” After school you do some work around your house. “Thanks,” says your parent. “Good job.”

A common word—*good*. But there are times when you really mean it. You’ve been out all day hiking, or working, or cross-country skiing. Every muscle aches with pleasant tiredness. Every bone has gone off duty. At night you climb slowly into your bed, squirm deliciously till it nests and cradles you perfectly. You whisper your prayer to God and then let everything in the world fall away into drowsy nothingness. A bed on a tired night can feel so good.

Or suppose you’ve been playing tennis or basketball. It’s an outdoor court, and the drinking fountain hasn’t worked for years. So you wait for a drink till you get home. Water is a common gift for most of us. But when you are really thirsty, when not just your tongue and lips and throat but your whole body craves liquid, then even water can be incredibly good. It’s an overflowing fountain of good.

One more example: you settle into a beanbag with a book. Sometimes you don’t feel like reading, but this time you’ve found a book you can’t

close. You begin to care deeply about the characters. The places and adventures in the book make you feel new things. The whole story moves you outside of yourself in some wonderful way. A good book can be incredibly satisfying.

Goodness is what satisfies us, feeds us, fills us to the brim. That is the way we have been created by God. We have a built-in desire for beds, thirst-quenching liquids, good books, good food, even good people. What's good is whatever God created us to want.

Did you ever notice that the psalms speak of God himself as what we want? Psalm 42 compares God to water. A deer “longs for flowing streams.” The deer wants water as a drink, as a bath, possibly as an escape from hunters. God, says the psalmist, is like a stream. God is like water that quenches, cools, and removes us from danger. We *thirst* for God.

Another psalm (63) compares God to food. God is like a feast for some starving, hunger-crazed person. The person wants as much of God as he or she can get because God is good. We *hunger* for God. We long for God because we belong to him.

Do these sound like strange ideas? Perhaps they are. Perhaps that's because we do not hunger and thirst for God enough. But something we do in church shows our desire for God—and also shows God's way of meeting it. At the Lord's supper mature believers take a piece of bread in hand and lift a cup to their lips. They say, “This is the body of Christ. This is the blood of Christ.” Then they eat and drink. There is no doubt they are eating bread and drinking wine or juice. Still, in some mysterious way believers are also consuming as much of God as they can get. They are satisfying their hunger and thirst for God—because God is so good.

Psalm 145 speaks of God's goodness. The Lord is kind to the poor, just in opposing the wicked. God has open ears for our prayers and open hands to hold out to us good things. The Lord “satisfies the desire of every living thing.” The Lord, in other words, is good.

But, once more, the point of saying this is not just to admire or appreciate. The point is to worship and give thanks. For whatever goods we have—beds, drink, food, good people, even God himself—are a sheer gift. A never-ending gift. God is an overflowing fountain of good.

That is why we want him.

Prayer

Lord God, even when we are not thinking of you we need your goodness. For every good gift, for life itself, thank you, God. Amen.

Day 3

God Is Great

Scripture

Praise the Lord!

For it is good to sing praises to our God. . . .

He determines the number of the stars,
he gives to all of them their names.

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;
his understanding is beyond measure.

The Lord lifts up the downtrodden,
he casts the wicked to the ground.

—Psalm 147:1, 4-6 (RSV)

Teachings

I trust him so much that I do not doubt
he will provide
whatever I need
for body and soul,
and he will turn to my good
whatever adversity he sends me
in this sad world.

He is able to do this because he is almighty God;
he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

—Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 26

My newspaper today featured a front-page picture of a very large fireman bending over a very small girl. The girl had been in a house fire and had breathed in a lot of smoke. By the time she was carried out she wasn't breathing at all. So the fireman knelt at her side, pinched her nostrils shut with his thumb and first finger, placed his mouth over hers, and breathed into her lungs the breath of life.

Sometimes we think of kneeling, stooping, and crawling as signs of weakness. A slave kneels before a master. A person who has gotten old and tired walks stooped over. Someone who is being humiliated in a book or movie crawls in front of his tormentor.

But kneeling or stooping can also show strength, the strength of goodness. The small girl I mentioned above received mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from a strong man. In the same way a person who cares for a tiny pet or who rescues someone younger and smaller or who cares for someone old or sick is showing strength.

Worldly people often get this mixed up. They think of kindness as a weakness. Sometimes they sneer at goodness. But anybody who has ever been picked up by powerful arms or who has *felt* a parent's struggle to nurse a sick or dying person—anybody like that knows that kindness, goodness, and compassion are great strengths.

One of the odd and striking things about God is that his goodness so often shows itself in kneeling, stooping, and bending. Of course, God is great without doing these things. The Bible keeps telling us, for example, of God's powerful deeds in nature. God cracks open great mountains; he shakes the whole earth till it rumbles and splits. He stretches out the heavens and tramples on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8). God possesses unimaginable strength, intelligence, resourcefulness, and power. God is incredibly vast, majestically strong, galactically great. That is part of the reason people fear God.

But our psalm for today tells us that God's greatness includes his stooping, his bending toward us. "Great is our Lord, and abundant in power" (v. 5). Then, in the very next verse, the psalmist writes, "The Lord lifts up the downtrodden."

Some of God's children are downtrodden. People tread on them. Careless people walk all over them. The downtrodden eagerly look for friends, but others tell them to get lost. They need food, but others grab even the little they have. Lacking proper homes and education and parents, these people always seem to have someone's foot in their face. They are like human cigarette butts or crab apples. Other people like to crush or squash them.

God lifts up the downtrodden. It is part of God's *greatness* to do this. God lifts squashed people to their feet, throwing off the wicked who have been walking all over them. God's greatness is the muscle behind his goodness.

God's greatness is awesome. People fear it. But it is also kind. God bends over to feed young ravens, young children, young people. Because God is high, he can lift up and straighten out crushed people.

For all God's downtrodden people, one day in the city of David a Savior is born. A baby is born in a cow shed. God stoops over to place a tiny child in the world.

All of heaven's greatness lies there wailing in the straw. What must we think of that?

Prayer

O God, you are great beyond all of our thinking. You are the almighty one. But you are also our loving Father. Reach down to us and all your children. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Day 4

God Is Triune

Scripture

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

—John 17:20-21

Teachings

Q. Since there is but one God,
why do you speak of three:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

A. Because that is how
God has revealed himself in his Word:
these three distinct persons
are one, true, eternal God.

—Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 25

People often compare things. Some jokes and riddles, for example, depend on comparisons. Suppose someone asks, "When is a frog like a baseball player?" (when it catches flies). For the joke to work, a frog and a baseball player have to be alike in some way. They have to be comparable.

In the fine work of great writers comparisons help make stories interesting to read. In John Steinbeck's story *The Red Pony* a boy named Jody receives a colt as a gift. Steinbeck tells us that the new pony's coat was "rough and thick as an airedale's fur." Later, Jody brushes and curries his pony so that "his coat lay as smooth and gleaming as orange-red lacquer." Finally, Jody wants to train the red pony never to fall on top of him. Why? "He had seen that happen to men before, had seen how they writhed on the ground like squashed bugs, and he was afraid of it." In the author's mind, dog's fur, paint, and bugs are interesting comparisons for horsehair and people.

The Bible is full of comparisons. God is compared to a rock. Jesus is compared to a shepherd. You and I, who are members of the church, are compared to the limbs of a human body.

One of the most mysterious things about God is that God is both one and three. There are three persons in God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But there is still only one God. When Christians say this, they are stating the doctrine of the Trinity. They are saying that God is *triune*.

But what would that be like? What is a good comparison for the triune God?

People have thought about this for centuries. Some have suggested that God is like water. After all, water has three forms—solid, liquid, and vapor—but is still only one substance. Maybe God is like that.

Others have said that God is like a man who has three roles to play. God is like an actor. The President of the U.S., for instance, has to play the role of president. But he may also have to play the role of husband (to his wife) and father (to his children). He is therefore one man with at least three roles. Is God like that?

No. In fact, neither of these comparisons is a very good one. In the first comparison, the three forms of water are actually not very much like persons. None of them can think or love, for example. And in the second comparison, the president, even with three roles to play, is still only one person. God, on the other hand, is three persons.

Suppose we think of a better comparison. Think of three persons in a family. They are very much alike. Birth, blood, and marriage tie them together. The family members may look like each other. Further, they know each other deeply and love each other. They share memories, experiences, hopes, and plans. If anyone or anything (such as a mugger or a tornado) threatens them, they turn to face this threat together. They are three persons, but one family unit.

In a way, God is like that. God is like an extraordinarily close family. The three persons in God are only one divine family or Trinity.

But the Bible gives us the best comparison. In today's passage the Father and Son together are compared to the church. (In other places the Spirit is included.) Does it seem like an odd comparison? The church, after all, contains so many sorts of persons. And some do not seem very much like God.

Still, this is the Bible's comparison. God is three persons, but there is only one God. The church is many persons, but there is only one church. That is, across the world and across the centuries there is only one group of persons who call Jesus their Lord.

God is like the church. Or, better, the church is like God. Do you think the church ought to be even more like God than it is?

Prayer

Triune God, you are greater than anything we can imagine and good to us in more ways than we know. Turn toward us, and let your love come to us, we pray. Amen.

Homework

Vocabulary

Please study the following words and definitions until you know them well enough to explain them on your own.

1. *doctrine*: the church's teachings, based on the Bible, about God and our salvation.
2. *confessions*: organized, carefully written statements of doctrine approved by the church.
3. *Belgic Confession*: the oldest confession of the Reformed church (1561); consists of 37 articles or statements of Reformed doctrine.
4. *Heidelberg Catechism*: a popular confession of the church, used primarily to teach doctrine. This sixteenth-century confession includes 129 questions and answers about the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer.
5. *attributes of God*: God's characteristics or qualities, such as goodness and greatness. God's attributes help us understand, praise, and imitate God.
6. *goodness of God*: an attribute of God; means that God satisfies the needs of all his creatures.
7. *greatness of God*: an attribute of God; means that God is awesome. God's greatness is the muscle behind his goodness.
8. *triune*: being at once a triple and a unit. To say that God is triune is to say that God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) but only one God. That is, God is a *Trinity*.

Questions

Please answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper. Use the readings from each day to help you. *Be sure to bring the completed assignment, along with this textbook, to class.*

Day 1: Write three things that you don't know about God, things that make God "mysterious."

Day 2: Read Psalm 145. Then write down at least half a dozen specific examples the psalm gives of God's goodness.

Day 3: Give an example from Psalm 147 of two quite different ways in which God displays greatness.

Day 4: How is the Trinity like a family? Like a church?

Summary

Talk with your mom or dad about a time when they—or your entire family—felt God's goodness or greatness in a special way. Write a brief version of his or her answer.