

# The Trinity: A Glossary

*There is one, and only one, true God whose eternal being has been revealed to us as a tri-unity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three distinct, yet inseparable, Persons possessing one and the same divine nature.*

## **Theological Terms Related to the Trinity:**

One may wonder why there would be an entire vocabulary for the doctrine of the Trinity. The church was Trinitarian before it had a vocabulary for it. False teachings were the occasion for the addition of some terms. Also, terms speed up communication. Rather than having to say an entire paragraph — “You know that idea that so and so had about God being like such and such” — we can use just one word. If the terms seem overly technical with the Greek and Latin words, it is because the people who first started these discussions spoke Greek and Latin.

## **Adoptionism:**

The false teaching that Jesus was only human, but since he was an especially godly man, he was given a promotion, that Jesus was adopted as the Son of God. There are variations of adoptionism. Most commonly he was said to be adopted at his baptism. Or, because of his character and work, Jesus was raised from the dead and adopted into the Trinity. This teaching denies that Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

## **Adumbration:**

Literally, a shadowing-forth or a foreshadowing. This refers to the Old Testament passages which are consistent with a Trinitarian understanding of

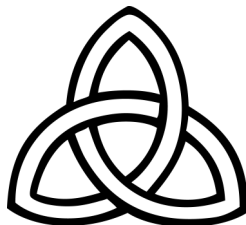
God. It may be difficult *to prove* the Trinity from these passages. However, informed by the New Testament and looking back, we can see how God hinted at his Trinitarian nature. For example, when “God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image’” (Genesis 1:26, KJV).

## **Apollinarianism:**

This is the view that Jesus was human on the outside and God on the inside. That, in his incarnation, Christ took on a human body and soul, but not a human mind or spirit. Instead the eternal Logos took its place. In this way, Apollinarius was trying to protect the sinlessness of Jesus. The problem with this view is that if Christ is not truly human he is not really one with us, and therefore cannot act for us as our Mediator.

## **Arianism:**

A heresy in the early 300’s, named after Arius, who taught that Jesus is only a high created being, but not eternal God — as Arius put it, “There was a time when he was not.” That Jesus was fully human, but not fully divine — and of a different substance than the Father.



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## **Arche:**

Taken from the Greek word, meaning “beginning” or “ruler.” In the New Testament this word is often translated principal-ity. The theological term represents the idea that *the Father is the source* of relationship of the Son and the Spirit within the Trinity.

## **Aseity:**

God is self-existent. He is not dependent on anyone or anything outside himself. He has life in himself. He is the uncreated Creator, without a cause or needing anything outside himself. Even though God is relational, in this sense, he is independent. One way people accidentally deny God’s Aseity is when they say, “God was lonely, so he created us for fellowship with him.” A synonym is *ab-soluteness*: God is absolute in his self-existence.

## **Athanasius:**

Athanasius (c. 296–373). Was the Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, a theologian, and life-long opponent of Arianism. Athanasius stood for the truth that the Son is true God from true God, of one substance with the Father.

## **Athanasian Creed:**

Written in 450, this creed states in part, “We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.” For

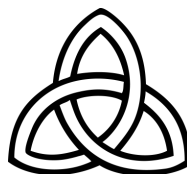
a good portion of church history, people thought that Athanasius had written this creed. Though the attribution is no longer regarded as accurate, the creed is consistent with his teachings.

## **Autotheos:**

The idea that both the Son and the Spirit are each God in and of himself. The word means “God of himself.” To say the Persons of the Trinity are autotheos is to say each possesses all the attributes of the undivided divine essence, including self-existence. That the Father is not the fountain of deity and neither Son nor Spirit derives his existence or deity from the Father. Because, were that to be true, Son and Spirit would be subordinate to the Father, and less than the Father. This term is part of a discussion which takes place among Trinitarians. The terms, *Eternal Generation* and *Procession*, come into play in this discussion.

## **Begotten:**

Fathered by, sired. Jesus is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. The Fathering is eternal and the Sonship is eternal. This is said to be the relation of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father. It is unlike human begetting in that it had no beginning, there isn't a God the Mother, and the begetting isn't physical in nature.



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## **Cappadocian Fathers:**

Cappadocia is a region in what is now Turkey. In the 300's AD, theologians from that region responded to the Arian heresy and formulated the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, which states that God is "three persons in one essence." Leaders included Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

## **Chalcedon:**

This council was held in 451 to address questions concerning the relationship between Christ's humanity and his deity. The council affirmed Jesus Christ as "one person with two natures," divine and human, which united in his incarnation, but are not mixed to form one nature.

## **Christology:**

The study of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

## **Communicatio Idiomatum:**

This refers to an idiom of speech. In Jesus Christ, the union of his divine nature and his human nature function together so completely, that it is proper to refer to something true of one nature as being true of his entire person. One classic example is in 1 Corinthians 2:8, which says that if people had understood who Jesus was, "They would not have crucified the *Lord of glory*." Compare also 1 Timothy 2:5.

## **Coinherence:**

A word used by Tertullian to describe the internal unity of the Triune Persons, living in community and acting in unity.

## **Consubstantial:**

All three Persons of the Trinity are of the same substance or essence. Thus, each Person of the Trinity is truly God.

## **Docetism:**

Docetism was one of the first heresies. The word means "to seem or appear." Its adherents believed in the deity of Jesus, but disbelieved that God, being so exalted in his being – holy and good – could be human. So, Jesus only appeared to be a man.

## **Economic Trinity:**

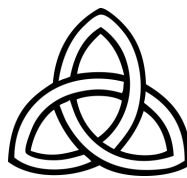
This term is used to describe how the Persons of the Trinity relate outside the Trinity in creation and redemption.

## **Emanation:**

The teaching that the visible, physical world is created indirectly, either through the Son and Spirit or through a chain of beings in a hierarchy which *flows down* from more divine to less divine beings. That the Father did not directly create the world.

## **Essence or Divine Essence:**

Literally "to be." The Divine Essence is the nature of God, shared in common by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Divine Essence is not a fourth aspect of God, like a fourth Person of the Trinity or a fourth reality which the three Persons share in common. Each Person of the Trinity possesses the fullness of the divine essence. Compare: *Substance*



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### **Eternal Generation:**

A term used to describe Jesus as the eternal Son of the eternal Father. This does not mean that the Father somehow created the Son in time, in something like a physical conception or birth. The Son did not have a beginning. Rather, it describes the Son's eternal "from-ness," in relation to the Father. This is a discussion which takes place among Trinitarians, as not all of them believe in this idea.

### **Eutychianism:**

The teaching that Jesus had only one nature. That, in the incarnation, his two natures were mixed together into one. The problem with this idea is that if his divine nature mixed with his human nature, then his human nature is no longer genuinely human, but blended in to comprise something new. If so, he is no longer truly human and cannot therefore function as our substitute.

### **Filiation:**

Filiation refers to the relationship of God the Son to God the Father within the Trinity. Jesus is the eternal Son of the eternal Father.

### **Filioque:**

The word literally means, 'and from the Son' — and the term was used to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father AND THE SON. The term dates back to the 381, but by 1054 it was one of the reasons for the schism between the church in the East and West. The Eastern churches rejected

this. And before we get judgmental, they considered it important to get it right when discussing God. Especially, when taking into consideration some of the minor things over which churches today may divide.

### **Fons Divinitatis (or Fountain of Divinity):**

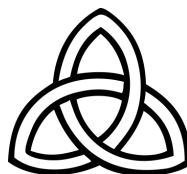
Augustine used this phrase to communicate the Father is the Fons Trinitatis—the fountain or source of the Trinity—from whom both the Son and the Spirit derive.

### **Gloria Patri:**

This is a Latin phrase, meaning, "Glory to the Father" and is the shorthand way of referring to a praise chant used throughout church history and dating too far back to know when it started being used. "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." It is definitively Trinitarian.

### **Glory:**

Sometimes in Scripture, glory is used to describe beauty, splendor, and majesty. However, the word is often used to describe when the invisible attributes of the invisible God are made visible. For example, in the Shekinah Glory and the incarnation of Jesus Christ: "And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14).



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## **God the Father:**

The Father is truly and eternally God. He is the Person of the Trinity who initiates divine activity in creation and redemption — the source, the one who plans, the one who sends. He is eternally the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Believers have experienced the Father as God above us.

God the Father can be differentiated from the term, *The Fatherhood of God*, as the latter term is used in a more metaphorical sense and is often not intended to describe a trinitarian God.

## **God the Son:**

The Son is truly and eternally God. He is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. He dwelt in glory with the Father before the world was. He was with the Father in the beginning. As the Triune God acts in creation and redemption, the Son executes and accomplishes the plan. The Father acts *through* him. Believers have experienced the Son as God with us.

## **God the Holy Spirit:**

The Spirit is truly and eternally God. In divine activity he applies, fulfills, completes. The Spirit is personal, not impersonal — not merely the energy of God or a force. As the Triune God acts in redemption, the Spirit applies, indwells, and empowers. He enables fellowship with the Father and with the Son. Believers experience the Spirit as God within us.

**A Note at this Point:** It is very difficult to define or distinguish Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without speaking of divine activity in creation and redemption — as these are the ways in which the triune God has revealed himself to us.

## **Homoousios:**

This word means, “Of one and the same substance.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same essence. The Persons are not “homoi-ousios” — of similar substance. Nor “hetero-ousios” — of a different substance. Each person is truly, fully, and eternally God.

## **Hypostasis:**

A word used for a “person” of the Trinity. This is a Greek word; literally meaning “to stand under” or “to subsist.” God is three “hypostases” in one “essence.”

## **Hypostatic Union:**

This term refers not to the Trinity, but to the two natures within Christ: His Divine and Human nature. He is both truly Divine and truly human. His Divine nature took humanity into union with himself, yet in a way so as to be one Person — the God-Man.

## **Immanent Trinity:**

The relationships of the Persons to each other within the Trinity. This is the secret, inner life of God. In contrast, the economic

Trinity refers to how the Persons relate to us in creation and redemption. A synonym for the Immanent Trinity is the Ontological Trinity.



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## **Incarnational Sonship Theory:**

A lesser known view that holds that the second Person of the Trinity is eternally God, but not eternally the Son. In this view, Sonship came about in the incarnation.

## **Inseparable Operations:**

Because God is one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit act as one. For example, it was not a case of “nice Jesus” coming to save us from the “wrathful Father.” “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

## **Kenosis:**

From the Greek word for *emptied*, found in Philippians 2:6-7, which describes Christ’s self-emptying in the incarnation. This is a way of saying he refused to exercise his royal rights and prerogatives as God. Kenotic Theology discusses the exact ways in which Jesus emptied himself.

## **Logos:**

The Greek word for *word*, found in John 1, used in reference to Jesus Christ. In the first century this term had philosophical implications and a range of nuances of meaning. These usually revolved around the idea of a divine reason and the underlying principle of the world. John used it to describe God expressing himself, revealing the invisible God. To say the Son came as God’s wisdom in concrete, personified expression.

## **Missions:**

This term is used when speaking of the Father’s sending of the Son and the Fa-

ther’s sending of the Holy Spirit. Thus, there are two missions. The Father sent the Son in the incarnation to accomplish God’s redemptive work. The Father sent the Spirit to apply the saving work of the Son, and to indwell and empower his people.

## **Modalism:**

Also called Sabellianism, this heresy teaches that a one-person God reveals himself in different modes (or ways) at different times. It denies the existence of three Persons. When people try to explain the Trinity by saying, “I am a son, a husband, and a Dad,” they are accidentally espousing Modalism.

## **Monarchy:**

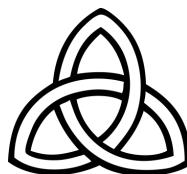
This is a term to which one must listen carefully to see how it is exactly being used. The word means literally, “one origin” or “one rule.”

Among Trinitarian theologians, this term is sometimes used to refer to the Father as the eternal source of the Son and Spirit.

Others in attempting to defend the oneness of God have used the term *Monarchy* for God in such a way as to say that Jesus is not fully God. *Dynamic Monarchianism* teaches that God was with Jesus in a special and powerful way, but that Jesus was not eternal God.

*Modalistic Monarchianism* teaches that there is one God who appears in different ways at different times. At one moment, God is in

Father mode, then in Son mode, then in his Spirit mode, and so on.



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## **Nestorianism:**

A teaching in the 400's that there are two *persons* in Christ and not one. That his human nature and divine nature existed side by side, and were separable. But, since a divine person cannot die in his divine nature, this would mean only the human nature of Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice on the cross.

## **Nicene Creed:**

This is the confession of faith composed at the first Council of Nicaea in 325. The creed reflects the teaching that the Son is of one substance with the Father — that is, equally God. This is in contrast to the teaching of the Arians, who said the Son was created and of a *different substance* from the Father.

The Nicene Creed confesses belief in:

*...one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.*

## **Ontological Trinity:**

This term refers to God, not as we perceive him or based on how he has related to us in Creation and redemption, but as he is, within Himself. Generally, this term is used synonymously with the term, *immanent Trinity*.

## **Opera Ad Extra:**

The activities in which the Triune God acts outside of himself and reveals himself.

## **Opera Ad Intra:**

The inner life of God. The activities within the Trinity, confined to the three Persons.

## **Perichoresis:**

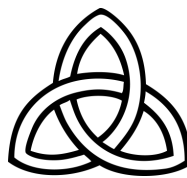
The mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity. As Jesus said in John 14:11: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me." A synonym is *circumincession* — the mutual interpenetration and inhabitation among the Persons of the Triune God.

## **Person:**

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the three Persons of the Trinity. The Trinity does not have "members," like a club one can join. Though *Person* is considered by theologians to be an inadequate word, since it tends to communicate the idea of three separate individuals, it is better than alternate terms which communicate an impersonal God. Augustine said we use this term because it's better than saying nothing at all.

## **Procession:**

A term used to describe how the Holy Spirit is *from* the Father. The Spirit is not *generated*, as he is not a Son. Nor are the Spirit and the Son brothers. The Spirit, being Spirit, is said to be "spirated" (or exhaled). A key discussion has been whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (filioque). Not every Trinitarian believes in the procession of the Spirit. Others would affirm "procession," but caution against it implying derivation or subordination. This is a discussion which takes place among those of Trinitarian belief.



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## **Rahner's Rule:**

Karl Rahner was a Catholic theologian who lived 1904-1984. He wrote on the Trinity and is famous for how he articulated the concept, "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity." Herman Bavinck put it this way: "What God does in history reveals who he is in eternity."

## **Relations:**

This refers to the relations of the Persons of the Trinity one to another in regard to being begotten and procession. The Father is unbegotten. The Father begets the Son. The Father spirates the Spirit. The Spirit proceeds from the Father.

## **Sabellianism:**

Sabellius, in trying to defend the oneness of God, opposed the three-ness of God and any distinctions between the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He taught these were merely different words used at different times for God as he switched from one mode of self-expression to another. His teachings were declared by the church to be heresy, and Sabellius was excommunicated in AD 220. A synonym is modalism.

## **Simplicity, Simple Being:**

God is not a compound or a composite of parts. It would be inaccurate to understand Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be parts, which add up to compose the Trinity.

## **Social Trinitarianism:**

The loving and mutually glorifying way the Persons of the Trinity relate to one another within the one-ness of God. The Trinity is a community of One. Some Trinitarians have warned that an overemphasis on this could lead to Tritheism.

## **Subordination:**

This word is used with differing nuances of meaning, but at the heart of it is the idea that the Persons of the Trinity differ in rank, that the Son is subordinate to the Father, for example. Related terms are the *Eternal Subordination of the Son* and *Subordinationism*.

## **The Eternal Subordination of the Son:**

The belief that the Son obeys the Father before and after his life on earth. As man, Jesus was born under the law and assumed human responsibilities of obedience to the Father. In John 8:29, Jesus said that he always did those things which please the Father." Those who hold to this teaching believe the Son submits to the authority of the Father in eternity past and eternity future.

## **Subordinationism:**

The heresy that because the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father, the Son and Spirit are of lesser rank than the Father and therefore not fully divine.



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**Subsistence:**

In the Godhead, there is but one divine essence, but three subsistences. It's another term for the three Persons.

**Substance:**

What God really is. Divinity itself – eternal and uncaused. The single and indivisible “Godness” of God. Substance is a synonym for the divine essence.

**Taxis:**

Taxis refers to the order of operations within the Trinity as the Triune God acts outside himself in the world to carry out his plan. This taxis is how we came to refer to the Father as the first Person of the Trinity, the Son as the second Person, and the Spirit as the third Person. This term is generally used by those who believe the Father initiates all activity of the Trinity.

**Tertullian:**

Tertullian lived around 160-220 AD and is said to be the first person to use the word Trinity in discussing the nature of God—referring to “One substance in three persons.”

**Trinity:**

There is one, and only one, true God whose eternal being has been revealed to us as a Tri-unity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three distinct yet inseparable Persons possessing one and the same divine nature.

**Tritheism:**

The belief in three gods, not one, each distinct in essence – not one God in three Persons.

**Unitarianism:**

The belief in a one-person, monotheistic god. In this view, the Son and the Spirit must be understood figuratively or as created beings.

