

The Trinity: A Short 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:

In the audio segments, we attempted to explain Trinitarian concepts from Scripture and without using much terminology. Here we list a number of the theological terms with a brief explanation of each.

One may wonder why there would be an entire vocabulary for this doctrine. The church was Trinitarian before it had a vocabulary for it. False teachings were the occasion for the addition of some terms. And 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. And if the terms seem overly technical with the Greek and Latin words so often used, 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, and 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:

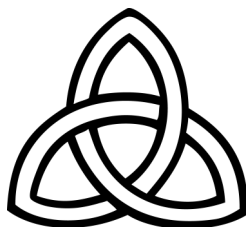
Literally, a foreshadowing. This refers to the Old Testament passages which are consistent with a Trinitarian understanding of God. It may be difficult *to prove* the Trinity from these passages. However, informed by the New Testament and looking back, we can see how God hinted at his Trinitarian nature.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

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 — of a different substance than the Father.

Athanasius:

Athanasius (c. 296–373). Was the Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, a theologian, and life-long opponent of Arianism (the heresy that held that Jesus was God's Son, but only as one of the highest creations of God, but not eternally or fully God). Athanasius stood for the truth that the Son is true God from true God, of one substance with the Father.



Hear It in Audio:

smalltownbaptist.net/audio/trinity/glossary_short.mp3

The Trinity: A Shorter Glossary

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.

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.

Christology:

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

Consubstantial:

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

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.

Eternal Generation:

This is 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 how the Son's “from-ness,” in relation to the Father, is eternal.

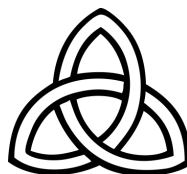
Not all Trinitarians believe in eternal generation. This is a discussion which takes place among Trinitarians.

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 so far back we don't know when it started being used. It says, “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



The Trinity: A Shorter Glossary

describe beauty, splendor, and majesty. The word is often used in Scripture 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).

God the Father:

The Father is fully 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 fully 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 he 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 fully 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.

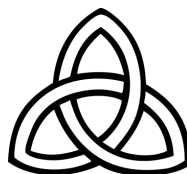
A Note at this Point: It is very difficult to define or distinguish Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without speaking of divine activity in creation and redemption — as these are the ways in which the triune God has revealed himself to us.

Homoousios:

This word means, “Of one and the same substance.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same essence. The Persons are not of a *similar* substance. And they are not 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.”



The Trinity: A Shorter Glossary

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).

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.

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.

Perichoresis:

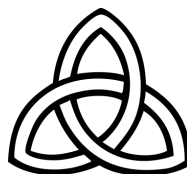
The mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity. As Jesus said in John 14:11: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

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:

This term is 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. This is the Spirit’s relation to the Father. 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 beliefs.



The Trinity: A Shorter Glossary

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.

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. It becomes the heresy of *subordinationism* when it is taken to mean Son or Spirit are of lesser rank than the Father and therefore not fully divine.

Subsistence:

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

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.

