



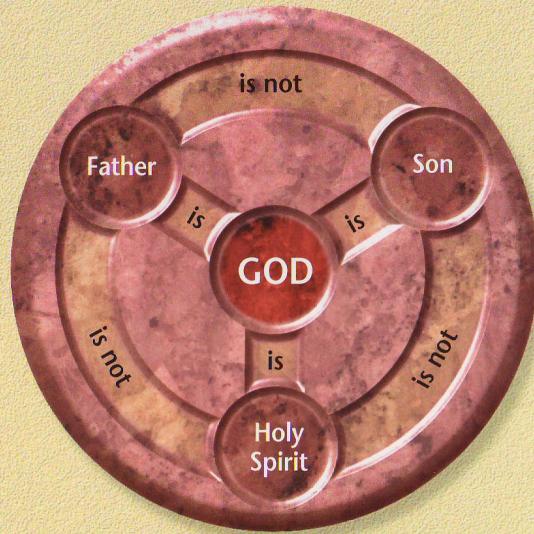
What Christians Believe About the Trinity

In the simplest of terms, Christians believe:

There is only one God, and this one God exists as one essence in three Persons.

The three Persons are

- God the Father
- God the Son (Jesus Christ)
- God the Holy Spirit (also called the Holy Ghost)



Early Christians used this diagram to explain the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God, but they are not three names for the same Person.

The Persons are distinct: The Father is not the Son.

The Son is not the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not the Father.

God is one absolutely perfect divine Being in... three Persons. His *being* is what God *is*, in relation to the universe he created. The three are called Persons because they relate to one another in personal ways.

When Christians talk about believing in one God in three Persons (the Trinity), they do NOT mean:

- 1 God in 3 Gods, or
- 3 Persons in 1 Person, or
- 3 Persons in 3 Gods, or
- 1 Person in 3 Gods

Rather, they mean:

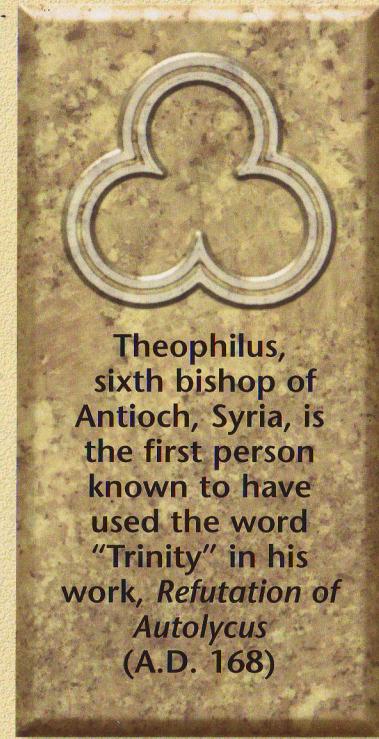
- 1 God in 3 Persons

Therefore,

The Father is God—the first Person of the Trinity.

The Son is God—the second Person of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is God—the third Person of the Trinity. (The title "Holy Ghost" is an older English expression for "Holy Spirit." Each is an acceptable translation of the phrase in the Bible.)



Theophilus, sixth bishop of Antioch, Syria, is the first person known to have used the word "Trinity" in his work, *Refutation of Autolycus* (A.D. 168)

Why do Christians Believe in the Trinity?

The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one God, yet all three Persons are called God.

There is only one God:

- Hear, O Israel: *The LORD our God is one LORD.* (*Deuteronomy 6:4*)
- *Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me.* (*Isaiah 44:6; 45:5a*)

The Father is God:

- *Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* (*1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:4-6*)

The Son is God:

- *The Word was God.* (*John 1:1-5, 14*) Jesus is identified as "the Word."
- *I and the Father are one.* (*John 10:30-33*)
- Jesus' disciple Thomas addressed Jesus as "*My Lord and my God.*" (*John 20:28*)

Jesus did not tell Thomas he was mistaken; instead Jesus accepted these titles. Other people in Scripture, notably Paul and Barnabas (*Acts 14*), refused to accept worship as gods.

The Trinity and the Bible

- But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. (Hebrews 1:6-8)
- Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

Paul, the writer of Philippians, is saying about Jesus what Isaiah 45:23 says about the LORD, and then Paul concludes that Jesus is LORD, that is, the same LORD God of the Old Testament.

See these passages about Jesus' deity: Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:6; John 1:1; John 1:18; John 8:58, 59; John 10:30; Acts 20:28; Romans 9:5 & 10:9-13; Colossians 1:15, 16; Colossians 2:9; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:3, 8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20.

The Holy Spirit is God:

- But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost? ... Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. (Acts 5:3-4)
This verse equates the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost) with God.
- Now the Lord is that Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17)
"The Lord" here refers to "the LORD" in the Old Testament verse (Exodus 34:34) Paul had just quoted in the previous verse (2 Corinthians 3:16).

More than 60 Bible passages mention the three Persons together:

- Matthew 3:16, 17 "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
- Matthew 28:19 "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."
- 2 Corinthians 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all."
- Ephesians 4:4-6 "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."
- Titus 3:4-6 "But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour . . ."

See also John 3:34, 35; John 14:26; John 15:26; John 16:13-15; Romans 14:17, 18; Romans 15:13-17; Romans 15:30; 1 Corinthians 6:11, 17-19; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 1:21, 22; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6; Galatians 2:21-3:2; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 2:18; Ephesians 3:11-17; Ephesians 5:18-20; Colossians 1:6-8; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 4:2, 8; 1 Thessalonians 5:18, 19; 2 Thessalonians 3:5; Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 3:23, 24; 1 John 4:13, 14; and Jude 20, 21.

Misunderstandings About the Trinity

Misunderstanding #1: "The word 'Trinity' does not appear in the Bible; it is a belief made up by Christians in the 4th century."

Truth: It is true that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, but the Trinity is nevertheless a Bible-based belief. The word "incarnation" does not appear in the Bible either, but we use it as a one-word summary of our belief that Jesus was God in the flesh.

The word "Trinity" was used to explain the eternal relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many Bible passages express the Trinity (page 3). False beliefs flourished during the early days of Christianity, and still do. Early Christians constantly defended their beliefs. The following early church leaders and/or writings all defended the doctrine of the Trinity long before A.D. 300:

Approximate Dates:

| | |
|-------------|---|
| A.D. 96 | Clement, the third bishop of Rome |
| A.D. 90-100 | The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles, the "Didache" |
| A.D. 90? | Ignatius, bishop of Antioch |
| A.D. 155 | Justin Martyr, great Christian writer |
| A.D. 168 | Theophilus, the sixth bishop of Antioch |
| A.D. 177 | Athenagoras, theologian |
| A.D. 180 | Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons |
| A.D. 197 | Tertullian, early church leader |
| A.D. 264 | Gregory Thaumaturgus, early church leader |

Misunderstanding #2: "Christians believe there are three Gods."

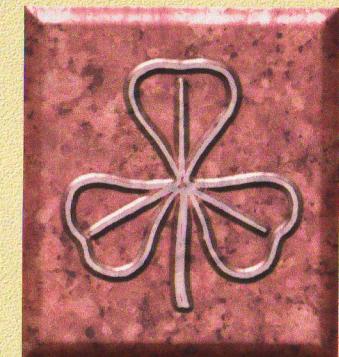
Truth: Christians believe in only one God.

Some people might believe that Christians are polytheists (people who believe in many gods) because Christians refer to the Father as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God. But Christians believe in only one God. The Bible says there is only one God. But it also calls three distinct Persons "God." Over the centuries people have tried to come up with simple explanations for the Trinity. There are limits to every illustration, but some are helpful. For example, it has been said that

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{God is not} & 1 + 1 + 1 = 3 \\ \text{God is} & 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1 \end{array}$$

The Trinity is a profound doctrine that must be accepted by faith. Accepting a doctrine by faith does not exclude reason, but it also means that we cannot always apply the same logic that we use in mathematics. Without the Trinity, the Christian doctrine of salvation cannot stand. Some religious groups that claim to believe in the God of the Bible, but reject the Trinity, have an understanding of salvation that is based on good works.

St. Patrick is believed to have used the shamrock as a way of illustrating the Trinity. He asked, "Is this one leaf or three? If one leaf, why are there three lobes of equal size? If three leaves, why is there just one stem? If you cannot explain so simple a mystery as the shamrock, how can you hope to understand one so profound as the Holy Trinity?" Even though this is an overly simple way to explain the Trinity, some teachers find it helpful.



St. Patrick (A.D. 432) used the shamrock to illustrate the Trinity.

Misunderstandings About the Trinity

Misunderstanding #3: "Jesus is not God."

Truth: Jesus is God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

1. Jesus' own claims

- He forgave sin.** We may forgive sins committed against us, but we cannot forgive sins committed against others. Jesus has the authority to forgive any sin. (Mark 2:5-12; Luke 5:21)
- He accepted worship as God and claimed to deserve the same honor as the Father.** (Matthew 14:33; 28:17, 18; John 5:22, 23; 9:38; 17:5)
- He claimed to be the divine Son of God,** a title the Jews rightly understood to be a claim to equality with God. (John 5:17, 18; John 10:30-33; John 19:7)

2.

| Traits Unique to God | Traits of Jesus |
|---|--|
| Creation is "the work of his hands"—alone (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 102:25; Isaiah 44:24) | Creation is "the work of his hands"—all things created in and through him (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2, 10) |
| "The first and the last" (Isaiah 44:6) | "The first and the last" (Revelation 1:17; 22:13) |
| "Lord of lords" (Deuteronomy 10:17; Psalm 136:3) | "Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 17:14; 19:16) |
| Unchanging and eternal (Psalms 90:2; 102:26, 27; Malachi 3:6) | Unchanging and eternal (John 8:58; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:11, 12; 13:8) |
| Judge of all people (Genesis 18:25; Psalms 94:2; 96:13; 98:9) | Judge of all people (John 5:22; Acts 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1) |
| Only Savior; no other God can save (Isaiah 43:11; 45:21, 22; Hosea 13:4) | Savior of the world; no salvation apart from him (John 4:42; Acts 4:12; Titus 2:13; 1 John 4:14) |
| Redeems from their sins a people for his own possession (Exodus 19:5; Psalm 130:7, 8; Ezekiel 37:23) | Redeems from their sins a people for his own possession (Titus 2:14) |
| Hears and answers prayers of those who call on him (Psalm 86:5-8; Isaiah 55:6, 7; Jeremiah 33:3; Joel 2:32) | Hears and answers prayers of those who call on him (John 14:14; Rom. 10:12, 13; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 12:8, 9) |
| Only God has divine glory (Isaiah 42:8, 48:11) | Jesus has divine glory (John 17:5) |
| Worshipped by angels (Psalm 97:7) | Worshipped by angels (Heb. 1:6) |

Misunderstandings About the Trinity

Misunderstanding #4: "Jesus is a lesser God than the Father."

Truth: Jesus is co-equal with God the Father. People who deny this truth may use the following arguments and verses. (These heresies date back to Arius, A.D. 319.)

Verses wrongly used to teach that Christ was created:

- Colossians 1:15: If Christ is "the firstborn of all creation," was he created?
Answer: "Firstborn" cannot mean that Christ was created, because Paul says that all of creation was made in and for Christ, and that he exists before all creation and holds it together (Col. 1:16, 17). The "firstborn" traditionally was the main heir. In context Paul is saying that Christ, as God's Son, is the main heir of all creation (verses 12-14).
- John 3:16: Does "only begotten Son" mean Jesus had a beginning?
Answer: "Only-begotten" does not mean that Jesus had a beginning; it means that Jesus is God's "unique" Son. In Hebrews 11:17, Isaac is called Abraham's "unique" son, even though Abraham had other children (Gen. 22:2; 25:1-6). Jesus is God's unique Son because only Jesus is fully God and eternally the Father's Son (John 1:1-3, 14-18).
- Proverbs 8:22: Does this mean that Christ ("Wisdom") was "created"?
Answer: This is not a literal description of Christ; it is a personification of wisdom. For example, Christ did not dwell in heaven with someone named Prudence (verse 12); he did not build a house with seven pillars (9:1). This verse says in a poetic way that God used wisdom in creating the world (see Prov. 3:19, 20).

Verses wrongly used to teach that Jesus is inferior to the Father:

- John 14:28: If "the Father is greater than" Jesus, how can Jesus be God?
Answer: In his human life on earth Jesus voluntarily shared our natural limitations in order to save us. After he rose from the dead, Jesus returned to the glory he had with the Father (John 17:5; Philippians 2:9-11). In that restored glory, Jesus was able to send the Holy Spirit and empower his disciples to do even greater works than Jesus did while he was here in the flesh (John 14:12, 26-28).
- 1 Corinthians 15:28: If Jesus is God, why will he be subject to the Father?
Answer: Jesus humbly and voluntarily submits himself to the Father's will for a time (Philippians 2:5-11). But, as the pre-existent and eternal Son, he is co-equal with God the Father.
- Mark 13:32: If Jesus is God, how could he not know when he would return?
Answer: Jesus voluntarily lowered himself to experience the limitations of human life. Paradoxically, Jesus was still God and knew everything (John 16:30). Paradoxes like this (not contradictions) are exactly what we would expect if, as the Bible says, God chose to live as a real human being (John 1:1, 14).

Misunderstandings About the Trinity

Misunderstanding #5: "The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are just different titles for Jesus, or three different ways that God has revealed himself."



The word "Trinity"
was used to
explain the eternal
relationship
between the
Father, the Son,
and the
Holy Spirit.

Truth: The Bible clearly shows that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons.

Some people think that the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts the truth that there is only one God. They argue that Jesus alone is the one true God, and therefore that Jesus is "the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19), and not just the name of the Son.

While it is certainly true that there is only one God, we must allow the Bible to define what this means. And the Bible makes it quite clear that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons:

- The Father sends the Son (Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:14)
- The Father sends the Spirit (John 14:26; Gal. 4:6)
- The Son speaks, not on his own, but on behalf of the Father (John 8:28; 12:49)
- The Spirit speaks, not on his own, but on behalf of Jesus (John 16:13-15)

- The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father (John 3:35; 5:20; 14:31)
- The Father and the Son count as two witnesses (John 5:31-37; 8:16-18)
- The Father and the Son glorify one another (John 17:1,4, 5), and the Spirit glorifies Jesus the Son (John 16:14)
- The Son is an Advocate for us with the Father (1 John 2:1; Greek, *parakletos*); Jesus the Son sent the Holy Spirit, who is another Advocate (John 14:16, 26)
- Jesus Christ is not the Father, but the Son of the Father (2 John 3)

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus is not identifying himself as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is saying that Christian baptism identifies a person as one who believes in the Father, in the Son whom the Father sent to die for our sins, and in the Holy Spirit whom the Father and the Son sent to dwell in our hearts.

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Dates for early church leaders: *The Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church*, edited by E.A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

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Misunderstandings About the Trinity

Misunderstanding #6: "Jesus wasn't really fully God and fully man."

Throughout history many people have balked at the idea that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. They have tried to resolve this paradox by saying that Jesus was a mere man through whom God spoke, or that he was God and merely appeared to be human, or some other "simpler" belief. Admittedly the idea that in Jesus, God became a man, is difficult for us to comprehend. But the Incarnation—the truth that God became flesh—is the ultimate proof that nothing is too hard for God (Genesis 18:14; Luke 1:37). And this truth is clearly taught in the Bible.

The Bible clearly shows that Jesus was fully human:

As a child, he grew physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually (Luke 2:40, 52).

He grew tired; he slept; he sweat; he was hungry and thirsty; he bled and died; his body was buried (Matthew 4:2; 8:24; Luke 22:44; John 4:6, 7; 19:28-42).

After he rose from the dead, he ate and drank with people and let them see his scars and touch his body (Luke 24:39-43; John 20:27-29; Acts 10:41).

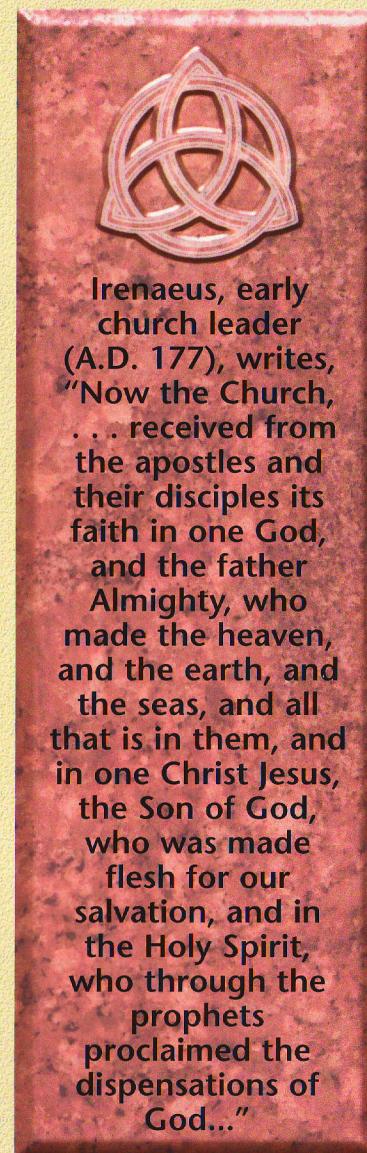
The Bible also clearly shows that Jesus was fully God:

Jesus did on earth what only God can do: he commanded the forces of nature (Matthew 8:23-27; 14:22, 33), forgave sins (Mark 2:1-12); claimed to be superior to the Sabbath law (John 5:17, 18); and gave life to whomever he pleased (John 5:19-23).

Paul said that God purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

Paul also said that the rulers of this world unwittingly crucified the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:8).

All the fullness of God's nature and being resides in Jesus' risen body (Colossians 2:9).



How Early Christians Dealt with These Misunderstandings

Early Christian theologians of the first two centuries wrote many works defending Christianity from several threats:

- Persecution from the Roman Empire. Until the early A.D. 300s, Christianity was illegal and often Christians were viciously persecuted.
- Heresies attacking basic Christian beliefs, especially the deity of Jesus Christ and the nature of God.

The **Apostles' Creed** was one of the earliest statements of faith Christian leaders crafted to clarify basic Christian beliefs. It emphasizes the true humanity—including the physical body—of Jesus, which was the belief the heretics of the time denied.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The **Nicene Creed** was written by church leaders in A.D. 325, and was later expanded somewhat. It was written to defend the church's belief in Christ's full deity and to reject formally the teachings of Arius, a man who claimed that Jesus was a created, inferior deity.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried; on the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son; with the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified; he has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Note: The Greek word from which the word *catholic* is derived means "universal." The "catholic Church" means the ancient church that agreed with the whole of the apostles' teaching, as opposed to false teachers that followed a "secret revelation" or emphasized only one part of the first century apostles' teachings.

The Church and the Creeds

The Athanasian Creed, written about A.D. 400 and named after Athanasius, a great defender of the Trinity, says the three Persons are not three Gods, but only one.

This is what the catholic faith teaches: we worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity. We distinguish among the persons, but we do not divide the substance.

For the Father is a distinct person; the Son is a distinct person; and the Holy Spirit is a distinct person. Still the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have one divinity, equal glory, and coeternal majesty. What the Father is, the Son is, and the Holy Spirit is.

The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, and the Holy Spirit is uncreated. The Father is boundless, the Son is boundless, and the Holy Spirit is boundless. The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Holy Spirit is eternal.

Nevertheless, there are not three eternal beings, but one eternal being. Thus there are not three uncreated beings, nor three boundless beings, but one uncreated being and one boundless being. Likewise, the Father is omnipotent, the Son is omniscient, and the Holy Spirit is omnipotent. Yet there are not three omnipotent beings, but one omnipotent being.

Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. But there are not three gods, but one God. The Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Spirit is Lord. There are not three lords, but one Lord.

For according to Christian truth, we must profess that each of the persons individually is God; and according to Christian religion we are forbidden to say there are three Gods or three Lords.

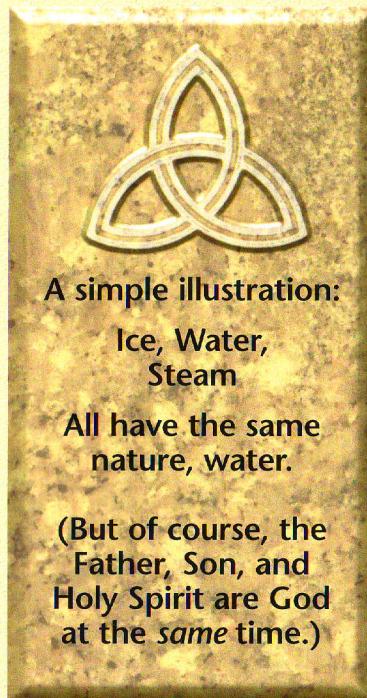
The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.

So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits. And in this Trinity none is afore, nor after another; none is greater, or less than another.

But the whole three persons are co-eternal, and co-equal. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.

The Chalcedonian Creed, written in A.D. 451 by church leaders to defend the faith against false teachings, says that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance (homoousios) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer (theotokos); one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.



Important Bible Verses and References

| Divine Attributes | Father | Son | Holy Spirit |
|---|---|--|--|
| Eternal | X Romans 16:26, 27 | X Revelation 1:17 | X Hebrews 9:14 |
| Creator of all things | X Psalm 100:3 | X Colossians 1:16 | X Psalm 104:30 |
| Omnipresent (capable of being all places at once) | X Jeremiah 23:24 | X Ephesians 1:23 | X Psalm 139:7 |
| Omniscient (knows all things) | X 1 John 3:20 | X John 21:17 | X 1 Cor. 2:10 |
| Wills and acts supernaturally | X Ephesians 1:5 | X Matthew 8:3 | X 1 Cor. 12:11 |
| Gives life | X Genesis 1:11-31 see also John 5:21 | X John 1:4 see also John 5:21 | X Romans 8:10, 11 see also John 3:8 |
| Strengthens believers | X Psalm 138:3 | X Philippians 4:13 | X Ephesians 3:16 |

For Further Reading

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Helpful Websites

- <http://www.watchman.org/subindex.htm>
 Watchman Fellowship, P.O. Box 13340, Arlington, TX 76094, Ph. (800) 769-2824
 Specializes in teaching biblical interpretation and in tracking numerous religious groups that deny the Trinity and other essential Christian doctrines (Scroll down to *Trinity* in this alphabetical list of topics.)
- <http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/>
 Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries (contact: Ron Rhodes), P.O. Box 2526, Frisco, TX 75034
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 (See "Answers to Common Questions.")
- <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/t10.html>
 Apologetics Index (contact: Anton Hein) Online literature explaining a variety of Christian doctrines.
- <http://www.irr.org/mit/trinity1.html>
 Institute for Religious Research (contact: Luke P. Wilson), 1340 Monroe Ave. NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49505 Ph. (616) 451-4562