

Trinitarian Glossary*

Adoptionism. An early theological approach to Jesus which held that he was a man “adopted” by God and endowed with special spiritual powers and status.

Arianism. A view held by Arius, a 4th century theologian who denied the full deity of Christ and argued that Christ was a created being. His view, which sparked the controversy leading to the Council of Nicaea, is summed up in the phrase, “there was when Christ was not.”

Athanasius. The most prominent defender and advocate for the Nicene understanding of Christ’s deity during the controversies of the 4th century.

Christ. A title meaning “anointed one”, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah*.

Christology. The branch of theology focusing on the person and work of Christ. It seeks among other things to understand how Christ’s divine and human nature coexist in one person.

Constantine the Great (272-337). The first Roman Emperor to openly promote & support Christianity. A political concern for unity prompted him to convene the Council of Nicaea (325).

Ecumenical Councils. Broadly representative councils of the 4th and 5th centuries that focused on the nature of God. The essential concern of each can be succinctly stated as...**Council of Nicaea** (325): “oneness of God”; the **Council of Constantinople** (381): the “Threeness of God”; the **Council of Ephesus** (431): the “oneness of Christ”; the **Council of Chalcedon** (451): the “twoness of Christ.”

Docetism. An early heresy that held that Jesus only “appeared” to have a human body but in reality he was a completely spiritual being with only an appearance of humanity.

God. The generic term for God in the Bible (Hbr - *Elohim* (El); Grk - *theos*; Lat – *Deus*).

Henotheism. The belief that many gods exist but one god is worshipped exclusively or as the main focus of a particular community.

Incarnation. Literally refers to the “in-fleshness” of God in the person of Jesus.

Logos. A common Greek word for “word” that also has a philosophical meaning of “reason”. In the New Testament it is used for the pre-incarnate Son of God.

Lord. A generic title of respect that takes on special importance when used for deity (Hbr – *Adonai*; Grk – *Kurios*; Lat – *Dominus*).

Modalism. An early heresy that maintained the unity of God by arguing that the three members of the godhead are just three modes of divine operation. Sometimes referred to by opponents as “Patripassians” because they claimed that the Father (*patri*) suffered (*passio*) on the cross when he was in the mode of being the Son.

Monotheism. The belief that there is only one God and this God made all things.

Nicene Creed. Classic statement of the doctrine of the Trinity which brings together the conclusions of the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). See Dr. Powell’s handout.

Pantheism. The belief that universe and god are identical. One version of this concept is called panentheism, which holds that the god force flows through the entire universe.

Person (*hypostasis*). A Greek term used in the debates over the Trinity to distinguish members of the Godhead.

Polytheism. The belief in the existence of many gods.

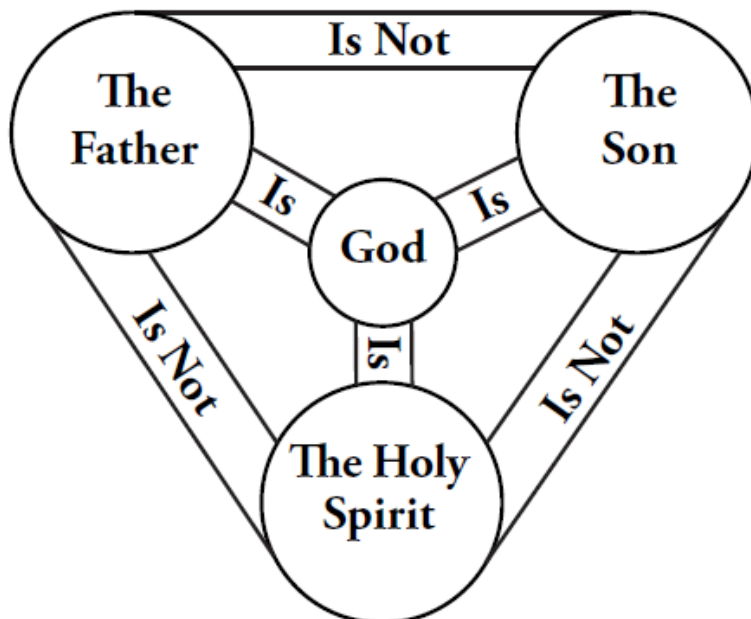
Substance (*ousia*). A Greek term used in the debates over the Trinity to describe the underlying essence, or substance, of deity. The Nicene Creed uses the phrase “same substance” (*homoousios*) to refer to the Son’s status as true God. See Dr. Powell’s handout.

Trinitarianism. The historic understanding of the Christian church that holds there is only one God, that God is three distinct persons, and that each person is fully God. This view was affirmed by the Council of Nicaea (325) and subsequent ecumenical councils. See chart below.

Tritheism. The belief that there are three Gods.

Unitarianism. The belief that there is only one God, and Christ and the Holy Spirit are not true God but a great man and God’s presence, respectively.

Yahweh. The personal name of the God revealed to Israel (Exodus 3), expressed in many English translations as LORD.



*This glossary is an adaptation of material presented during a Bible class on the theological terminology of the Trinity at the Keizer Church of Christ.