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# HOW DID WE GET TO... THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

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## Discussion Guide

For many people, the doctrine of the Trinity is confusing. Why would people in the early church come to the conclusion that God was one and that God was three? Why proclaim something so strange and hard to understand? In this video, we explore why this doctrine developed. Sarah argues that the theologians in the fourth century who developed the Trinitarian language many Christians still use did so because they thought that language aligned with what was revealed about God and salvation in the Bible.

### Note on Doctrine and Salvation

When discussing both the Trinity and Christology, Sarah says that the early Christians were trying to figure out what had to be true of God and of Jesus given their understanding of salvation. She occasionally says things like “the early church decided that X had to be true of Jesus in order to salvation to be possible.” That is different from saying that early Christian thought that everyone had to believe or say X in order to be saved. In the Trinitarian and Christological debates, the larger question was what had to be true of God in order for God to be the kind of God who saves. Whether people had to believe or accept that understanding in order to experience salvation was (and is) a separate question. In other words, the focus was on how God had to be for salvation to be possible, not on what humans had to believe in order to experience that salvation.

### Note on Language:

You may notice in this video that Sarah uses the gendered language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” when talking about the persons of the Trinity. Today, some people reject that gendered language or use a variety of names to talk about the three persons. Because she is describing how the historical doctrine developed, Sarah chose to use the gendered language used at the time. That choice, however, is not the only one she could have made (and could have been the wrong one). As you think about the doctrine of the Trinity, it is good to think about how the language we use for

God affects how we view God and humanity. You might also think about when (or if) it is appropriate to use the language people in the past did and when we should update or change it.

Questions for Discussion (you might find it helpful to read these questions before you watch the video):

1. How have you thought about or been taught to think about the doctrine of the Trinity? What in the video aligned with what you have thought or been taught? What was new or different?
2. Sarah argues that one reason early Christians developed the doctrine was because of biblical language about God. Does that explanation make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. Sarah also argues that early Christians developed the doctrine because of how they understood salvation. How does the understanding of salvation outlined in the video align with how you have understood salvation? Whatever your understanding of salvation, does the explanation that many early Christians believed trinitarian doctrine described how God had to be in order for salvation to be possible make sense?
4. Sarah suggests that one way of thinking about the doctrine of the Trinity is that it tells us that God is not just loving, but that God is love because God is eternally relationship. What do you think of that? Does that change how you think about God or about the doctrine of the Trinity?
5. If God is eternally relationship, what does that mean for how we should live?
6. As noted above, Sarah uses the traditional language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout the video because it was the language used during the debates she discusses. What do you think of that explanation for using the gendered language she does? What does that language do for your understanding of God? Do you think it is possible to use that language without making it seem like God is male? Are there ways you have seen that language changed or supplemented?

Key Ideas (you can watch for these in the video and revisit them afterwards in your discussion):

1. Biblical language about God, Jesus, and the Spirit was open to interpretation, particularly around the question of the relationship among Jesus (who early Christians understood to be “the Son of God” in some sense), the Spirit, and God the Father.
2. The earliest Christians used the language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” but did not work out how the persons “fit” together.
3. In the third century (200s) theologians began to discuss the relationship among God, Jesus/the Son, and the Spirit in more systematic ways. Two models for thinking about the relationship were “modalism” (the persons are modes of the one God and they appear at

different times) and subordinationism (the Son and Spirit are subordinate to the truly transcendent God).

4. In the fourth century (300s), a subordinationist theologian named Arius argued that the Son was created. This assertion led to the Council of Nicaea (325) declaring that the Father and Son were of “one substance” (homoousios) and that the Son was not created.
5. After Nicaea, Christians continued to debate the relationship between Father and Son. Some believed Nicaea’s formulation was right (the homoousians); some believed the Son and Father were equal but were concerned that Nicaea’s formulation was modalist (the homoiousians; people who believed that the Son was like or “homoi,” the Father in essence); some continued to believe that the Son was like, but not equal to, the Father (homoians; like, but not in essence).
6. At the end of the fourth century, another council (Constantinople in 381) declared that the Father and Son were homoousios (of the same essence) and that the Spirit was also to be worshiped and glorified. They could come to this agreement because a set of theologians had articulated a way of understanding what was the same in the Godhead (essence or ousia) and what was distinct (hypostasis).
7. Aside from thinking that the doctrine of the Trinity best aligned with the Bible, theologians like Athanasius argued for it because they believed the shared essence of the persons of the Godhead were necessary for salvation (which these theologians understood to be about bringing people into communion and likeness with God, or what we call deification).

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## Video Outline

### I. Introduction

A. Nicene Creed on the Son: “the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made.

1. Trinitarian language is confusing. God is one, but God is three. Jesus is God, but not the same as the Father.

B. In this video, we are going to explore how and why early Christians developed the Nicene Creed and how and why early Christians developed the language that has come to be associated with the doctrine of the Trinity.

C. Thesis: Many Christians decided that trinitarian language best accorded with all that the Bible said about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit and with how salvation worked.

D. What about the Emperor?: Politics played a role in the development of trinitarian theology, but is not the whole story.

### II. The Bible

A. Four things Christians had to reconcile in their authoritative texts:

1. Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish monotheism.

a) Deuteronomy: The Lord your God is one.

b) 10 Commandments: no other Gods

2. New Testament and calls to worship Jesus.

3. New Testament and differentiation between Father, Son, and Spirit.

4. New Testament and differences on whether Son is eternal or first-born.

B. Summary: Early Christians had biblical language that asserted monotheism, commanded the worship of one God plus the worship of Jesus, said that Jesus was one with God, indicated that Jesus was different from the Father, and identified the Holy Spirit, which was somehow the presence of the Father and/or Jesus but not identical with either.

### III. Third Century Developments

- A. Before 200s, Christians made little attempt to systematize language.
- B. One catalyst for systematizing language: Sabellius. Sabellius suggested what came to be known as modalism.
  - 1. Modalism: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “modes” in which God appears.
  - 2. Strengths:
    - a) Protected monotheism.
    - b) Easy to explain.
  - 3. Weaknesses:
    - a) Could not account for biblical language indicating that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all co-exist or for language suggesting distinctions among Father, Son, and Spirit.
- C. Major Third Century Thinker: Origen.
  - 1. Origen held that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were distinct and eternally in relationships (so Son is eternal).
  - 2. Origen also held that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are gradations of divinity.
    - a) According to Origen, the Son mediates radically transcendent God to the finite world.

### IV. Fourth Century: Arian Controversy and Thereafter

- 1. The original “Arian” debate
- 2. Occurred between 318 and 322 in Alexandria, Egypt.
- 3. The bishop of Alexandria, Alexander taught—like Origen—that the Son was eternally generated.
- 4. Arius, a teacher in Alexandria, disagreed and argued that “there was a time when the Son was not.”
  - a) Arius believed that the Son created by the will of God.
  - b) Arius’s reasons for his teaching:
    - (1) He believed it was impossible that the immutable or unchangeable God could become incarnate in the human and, thus subject to change.
    - (2) He knew that Bible had passages that suggested that the Son was created/not eternal.

B. Council of Nicaea (325)

1. Called by Emperor Constantine to settle the Trinitarian debate.
2. The council decided against Arius by rejecting the claim that there was a time when the Son was not (Nicaea said that the Son was eternal).
  - a) The council further declared that the Son and the Father were homoousios. Homo=same, ousia=substance or essence. Homoousios=same substance or essence. They then put their beliefs in a statement.
3. The Council of Nicaea is not the end of the story (nor the only council responsible for what we today call “the Nicene Creed”).

C. Three Post-Nicaea Camps

1. Homoousians: people who thought Nicaea was right, particularly in describing the Father and Son as homoousios or of the same substance or essence.
2. Homoiousians: people concerned that Nicaea was modalist (remember that modalists believed that the one God appeared in different modes) because “homoousios” erased distinction; this group preferred “like substance or essence” (homoiousios; homoi=like; ousia=substance) and believed Son was eternal.
  - a) Yes, the difference between homoousios and homoiousios is one “i”
  - b) Homoousians wanted to say “same substance” to protect the equality of the Father and Son; homoiousians wanted to say “like substance” to protect the distinction between the Father and Son.
3. Homoians: people held to a subordinationist position (like Arius), declaring that the Son was created and/or was a subordinate divinity to the Father. They held that the Son like Father but not in essence. (Homoi=like, but not ousia so not like substance).
  - a) Supported by Constantius (another emperor).

D. Cappadocian breakthrough in the late fourth century (Cappadocians were a group of theologians).

1. Homoousians and homoiousians were able to come together over new ways of understanding contested language (these new ways of understanding the language came from the Cappadocian thinkers).
  - a) Homoousios, the Cappadocians said, refers to equality and shared essence.
  - b) They used another term, hypostasis, to refer to the “unique manner of subsistence” and to note distinction between the Father and the Son.

c) According to the Cappadocians, God was one ousia (homoousia) with three hypostases. This formulation seemed, to many, to preserve both equality and distinction. (In Latin, una substantia, tres personae became the preferred language; one substance, three persons).

E. Holy Spirit

1. The Holy Spirit was not much discussed at Nicaea. Whether the Holy Spirit was also of equal divinity with the Father and Son was debated in the late fourth century.

a) Some people who accepted the Son as equal with the Father did not accept the Spirit as such because they did not think the Bible said that the Spirit was equal.

2. At the Council of Constantinople (381), the equal status of the Spirit was affirmed.

F. Council of Constantinople (381) affirmed that:

1. The Son and Father are homoousious or of the same substance.

2. The Son is begotten, not made.

a) The Holy Spirit is, like the Father and Son, worshiped and glorified.

3. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were distinct and distinguished among the three persons by declaring that the Son is begotten of the Father while the Spirit proceeds.

V. Trinitarian Theology and Salvation

A. Why did the majority of the church come to reject subordinationist positions (the Arians and homoians) and accept the language of same substance and three persons?

1. Because of biblical language and how early theologians understood salvation.

B. Salvation and the Word according to Athanasius (a pro-Nicene, anti-Arian thinker). His understanding of creation, sin, and salvation were deeply tied to his Trinitarian theology. He said that:

1. God created out of nothing.

2. Everything else relies for existence on God.

3. Apart from God, everything that is not God falls into non-existence, both physically and spiritually.

4. Humans needed be restored to the full communion we had with God so we are not lost to sin and death.

5. In the incarnation, Word takes on flesh and, in so doing, restores to human flesh the possibility of communion with God.

6. By being joined to God through Christ, we become like God, which is called deification. Salvation or deification entails becoming more loving and kind and enjoying eternal life since, in God through Christ, we are not subject to eternal decay.

7. All of the above led to Athanasius's problem with Arius: If what is incarnate in Christ is a creature, Christ cannot restore us to communion with God.

C. Salvation and the Holy Spirit according to Gregory of Nyssa (a Cappadocian), who argued for the full divinity of the Spirit, also on salvific grounds. He said that:

1. After the life and death of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was God's presence with us, particularly through baptism and communion. If what was present through those was not fully God, then, again, we are not experiencing God and, if we are not experiencing full God, we are not saved.

D. Summary: for the theologians of Nicaea and Constantinople, salvation was participation in the life of God. If the Holy Spirit, which brings people into the body of Christ, and Christ himself were not fully God, then Christians were not participating in the life of God and were, thus, still in sin, death, and decay.

## VI. Conclusion

A. Trinitarian language was not meant to explain how the Trinity works.

B. So, why bother? One possible reason:

1. Trinity says more than that God is loving. God is love, an eternal relationship.



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## Glossary

**Athanasius:** pro-Nicaea theologian who argued that Arian or subordinationist theology could not adequately account for salvation.

**Arius:** early fourth-century theologian who argued that the Son was created. His teaching was condemned at Nicaea in 325 although Arian or subordinationist teachings continued.

**Constantinople:** council in 325 that reaffirmed that Father and Son were homoousios and declared that Holy Spirit was to be worshiped and glorified.

**Deification:** to be made like God. Athanasius, among others, understood salvation as deification, becoming more and more like God (although not in essence).

**Homoousios:** same substance or same essence. The term used for Father and Son at Nicaea and reaffirmed at Constantinople. Some theologians worried that using this term erased distinction in the Godhead and tended toward modalism.

**Homoiousios:** like substance or like essence. The term used for Father and Son by some theologians who accepted the co-eternity of the Son, but wanted to emphasize distinction in order to avoid modalism.

**Homoian:** like. The term used for Father and Son by subordinationist who did not think the Son and the Father shared an essence.

**Modalism:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were modes or masks in which the one God appeared.

**Nicaea:** council in 325 that declared the Father and Son homoousios.

**Origen:** third-century theologian who taught that the Father and Son were co-eternal, but also argued that the Father, Son, and Spirit were gradations of divinity.

**Sabellius:** proponent of modalism, the teaching that the Father, Son, and Spirit were modes that the one God appeared in.