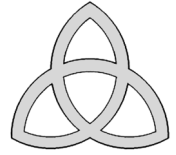


14 In the image of God - What others believe

The doctrine of the trinity - the great divide

The doctrine of the trinity is regarded as the most important teaching of nearly all Christian churches and, so far as they are concerned, is the main difference between themselves and Christadelphians. The Athanasian creed, which is effectively an 'official' definition, begins:



Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

The opening of the Athanasian Creed

It is accepted by Roman Catholic church Anglican churches throughout the world.

The Trinity is the term employed to signify the central doctrine of the Christian religion — the truth that in the unity of the Godhead there are Three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another.

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The development of the teaching

The first thing to be said is that the doctrine of the trinity is not taught in the Bible.

Trinity, in Christian theology, doctrine that God exists as three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who are united in one substance or being. The doctrine is not taught explicitly in the New Testament, where the word God almost invariably refers to the Father; but already Jesus Christ, the Son, is seen as standing in a unique relation to the Father, while the Holy Spirit is also emerging as a distinct divine person.

“Trinity (theology),” © 1994 Funk & Wagnall’s Corporation.

Neither the word Trinity, nor the explicit doctrine as such, appears in the New Testament, nor did Jesus and his followers intend to contradict the Shema in the Old Testament ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord’ (Deuteronomy 6:4)...The doctrine developed gradually over several centuries and through many controversies.

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, (1976), Macropaedia, Vol X, p.126.

The formulation ‘one God in three Persons’ was not solidly established, certainly not fully assimilated into Christian life and its profession of faith, prior to the end of the 4th century. But it is precisely this formulation that has first claim to the title the Trinitarian dogma. Among the Apostolic Fathers, there had been nothing even remotely approaching such a mentality or perspective.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia (1967), Vol XIV, p299

So, the trinity is not taught in the Bible. Instead, it evolved over many years, as can be shown from the three creeds most used in Christendom. Now we will think about how this happened.

The Apostles' Creed

This is among the oldest of creeds, although there are several documents with similar statements dating from the second and third century. It seems unlikely to have been written by the apostles, as was once thought. Nonetheless it fits well with scriptural teaching, and says nothing of the trinity. (In passing, the word 'catholic' means 'universal', and it is not talking about the Roman Catholic church.)

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead and buried: He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; the Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

The Nicene Creed

In 325, the first ecumenical council was convened in Nicaea (a place in Bithynia now known as Izmit, in Turkey) by Constantine I, emperor of Rome, to settle a dispute concerning the nature of Jesus Christ. Of the 1800 bishops in the Roman Empire, 318 attended the council, and there was a prolonged debate. Against the wishes of the majority, the emperor Constantine imposed a decision on the church, and the result is known as the Nicene Creed.



There are many different translations of the creed (it was written in Greek), but it reads something like this.

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made: who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the scriptures, and ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. And I believe one Catholick and Apostolick Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Nicene Creed, 325 AD

Unsurprisingly, a decision imposed by the emperor failed to stifle debate, and there was

a great deal of argument over the next century or so, focussing this time on the holy spirit. The divisions over this issue laid some of the ground for the eventual split between the Roman Catholic church in western Europe and the orthodox churches in the east.

The Athanasian Creed

The Athanasian Creed appears to have been produced by a number of authors in the late 4th century or first half of the 5th century AD, and contains a fully-fledged statement of the doctrine of the trinity.

It is regarded as authoritative by Roman Catholics and Anglicans, although some protestants do not accept it. It is almost entirely devoted to a very complex statement of the doctrine of the trinity. The clauses are not always numbered, but the numbers have been reproduced here because you may find them useful.

1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
2. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
3. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
4. Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.
5. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.
6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.
7. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.
8. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.
9. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
10. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.
11. And yet they are not three eternals but one eternal.
12. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.
13. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty.
14. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.
15. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;
16. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
17. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord;
18. And yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.
19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;
20. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say; There are three Gods or three Lords.

21. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.
22. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.
23. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
24. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.
25. And in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another.
26. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal.
27. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.
28. He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.
29. Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
30. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.
31. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world.
32. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.
33. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.
34. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.
35. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God.
36. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.
37. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;
38. Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead;
39. He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty;
40. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
41. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;
42. and shall give account of their own works.
43. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.
44. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.

The Athanasian Creed

Passages of scripture that are used to support the teaching

There are several passages of scripture that are used in support of the doctrine of the trinity. None of them goes anywhere near the sort of statements that we have read in the Athanasian Creed, but it is worth having a look at some of them. Here is one set of such quotations.

<p>Three eternal, divine Persons?</p> <p>Matthew 28:19</p> <p>Luke 3:21,22</p>	<p>The Father</p> <p>2 Peter 1:17</p>
<p>The Son (Word)</p> <p>John 1:1-3,14</p> <p>John 8:24, 58</p> <p>Colossians 1:15-19</p> <p>Titus 2:13</p>	<p>The Holy Spirit</p> <p>Acts 13:2</p> <p>Acts 10:19,20</p> <p>Hebrews 3:7-11</p> <p>Acts 5:3,4</p> <p>Hebrews 9:14</p>

Some helpful passages



You may like some time to look up these other passages, which help to make clear the relationship between the Lord Jesus and his Father.

Mark 10:18; 13:32; 14:25;

Luke 1:34-35

John 5:19; 7:16; 10:34-36; 12:49; 14:8; 17:1-3; 20:17

Acts 2:36; 3:15; 10:42

Romans 1:7

1 Corinthians 15:24-28

Philippians 2:6-11

1 Timothy 2:5

2 Peter 1:16-18