

It all goes back to the prayer Jesus taught us.

When Anglican Christians pray the Daily Office or attend a service of Holy Communion, we join fellow believers of all stripes in saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” When we pray this prayer, we take our place alongside Jesus in his practice of addressing God as Father. And when we address God in this way, we do so with the help of the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is his Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:15-16). This experience — of calling out to God as our Father, in imitation of Jesus our teacher, example, and Lord, in the energy of the Holy Spirit — eventually led some of the earliest leaders and teachers in the Christian Church to confess that God is triune (three-in-one): that he is, as one beloved hymn puts it, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.”

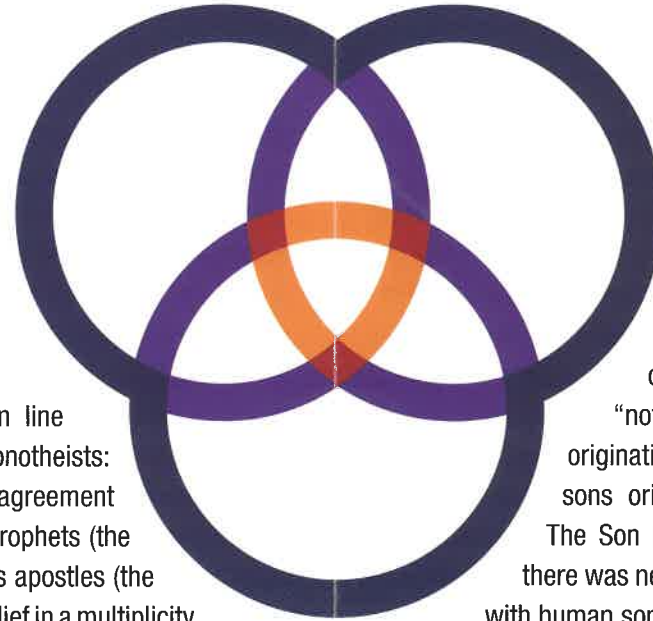
One important outcome of this early Christian confession is another element of our worship, the Nicene Creed, which Anglicans recite week by week in services of Holy Communion. This Creed arose in the fourth century as the early Church gradually clarified its teaching about the nature of God and specifically the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is tied to two specific “ecumenical councils” held in Nicea in 325 and in Constantinople in 381. We should note, in particular, three elements of the Nicene Creed that are basic to confessing God as Trinity.

The first of these elements is in the Creed’s opening line: “We believe in one God.”

Early Christians remained, in line with Jewish conviction, monotheists: there is only one God. And in agreement with the writings of Israel’s prophets (the Old Testament) and of Christ’s apostles (the New Testament), we refuse belief in a multiplicity of gods. “I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god” (Isa. 45:5). “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6).

The second element we should note is how the one God is portrayed as relational.

With regard to Jesus Christ, the Creed describes him as “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father.” “God, the Father Almighty” has always been a Father, for he has always had a Son with whom he is in relationship. Furthermore, this Son is not inferior to the one God, like a creature; he himself is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.” The Son’s relationship to the Father is somehow internal to God: There is only one God, but

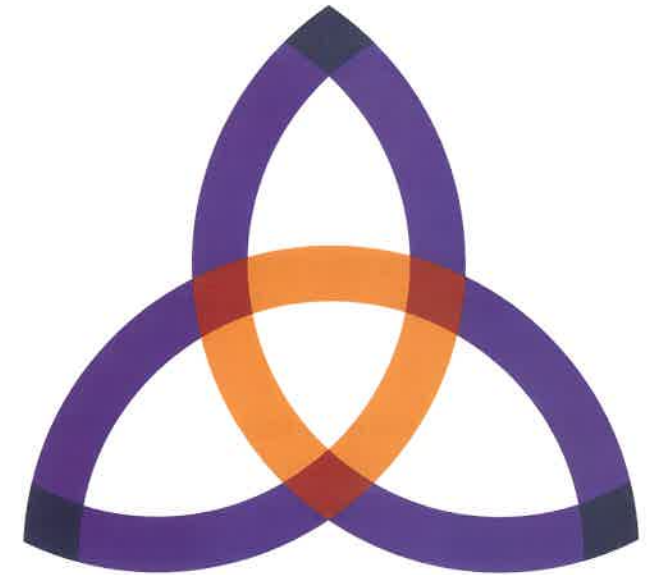


to be the one God is to be both Father and Son. The description of the Son as “begotten” points to the fact that he originates from the Father, but the contrast — he is begotten but “not made” — shows that this origination is not like the way human sons originate from human fathers. The Son of God is eternally begotten: there was never a time (as there always is with human sons) when the Son did not exist with his Father. Putting all this together, the Creed emphasizes that the Son of God shares in everything that God the Father has — he is “true God” just as much as the Father is — even while he remains distinct from the Father and dependent on the Father for everything that he is.

The final part of the Creed says something similar about God’s Spirit: the Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” The Spirit is identified as equally internal to the one God — he is, unlike a mere creature, able to give life — and yet also mysteriously distinct from the Father and Son inasmuch as he is said to “proceed” from them.

Teachers in the early Church reached for analogies to describe this complex theology, while recognizing the limitations of language. Numerous teachers, like St. Athanasius of Alexandria and St. Hilary of Poitiers,

GOD THE TRINITY



**Who is God?
Who are Christians
talking about
when they speak
of the Trinity?**

compared the Trinity to phenomena in the natural world, such as the Sun with its light and heat, or a font giving rise to spring and river (see Heb. 1:3; Wis. 7:25). St. Gregory of Nazianzus taught that just as three persons may be said to share a common humanity, so God, existing as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, may be said to be one in essence. However, Gregory cautioned, God is also unlike three human persons: the unity of the Trinity is unspeakably more wonderful than the notion of a “shared humanity.” St. Augustine reached for a different analogy to describe God’s triunity. Just as a human mind may develop a concept or verbal expression, so Augustine argued that God the Father gives rise to his Word (i.e., the Son; see John 1:1-14). And as the human mind and heart come to love and embrace a developed concept or word, so the Father and Son together “breathe out” the love that is the Holy Spirit. This “psychological analogy,” however, must always be qualified: the Son and the Spirit are not merely internal to the Father.

The third element of the Creed concerns salvation.

The doctrine of the Trinity, in the end, is about the redemption of human beings. “For us and for our salvation,” the Creed says of God the Son, “he came down from heaven.” The Spirit, the Creed also says, is “the giver of life.” It is “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” that we are baptized (Matthew 28:19). The final aim of the doctrine of the Trinity is to assure us that the goodness, mercy, and justice we have experienced through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection,

as well as the joy we have received through the ministry of the Holy Spirit among us, is consistent with how God is in God’s eternal being. To tweak a well-known saying about turtles, it’s eternal love all the way down: God is the eternal communion of Father, Son, and Spirit that reaches out to include us in that same love. In light of this, it is no wonder that the most beloved Anglican blessing is a prayer that this love will sustain us forever: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore” (2 Cor. 13:13).



We are a Christian ministry based primarily in the Episcopal Church, a member of the Anglican Communion. Since 1878 we have published educational resources of various kinds and *The Living Church* magazine.