

Trinitarian images are everywhere in our liturgy. There are many Christian groups who reject the Trinity today. Pentecostal churches (Church of God, independent Pentecostals); Jehovah's Witness; LDS and others actively don't believe in a Trinity of "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." For Trinitarian churches, like the Episcopal Church, the Trinity is a lens to understand the nature of our relationship to God and God's inherent relatedness. On page 2, I will look at some history of the theological idea of the Trinity.

MY GOAL TODAY IS TO GIVE YOU A REASON TO CARE ABOUT THE TRINITY  
**OR** TO KNOW WHY YOU DON'T CARE.

### **The Bible does NOT explicitly focus on the Trinity**

Tangential references are all over. The beginning of Genesis uses a royal "we" to talk about God making stuff: *Let us make humans in our image* (Genesis 1:26). The most explicit verse is at the end of Matthew. *Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* 1<sup>st</sup> John is a mix of explicit and implicit: *For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.* It's not straight shot from the Bible to a trinitarian worldview as you might think.

The church in history has invested heavily in the Trinity. With each generation and era, we have made some crazy steps. The famous reformer Martin Luther said of human nature (which could be applied to the church), "Human nature is a drunk peasant. Lift him onto the saddle on one side (*of a horse*), over he topples on the other side." Trinitarian theological history is equally floppy. Hopefully, each time we fall off the horse today, we get back on and grab the reigns aiming for more love and 'relatedness' in the world.

**Heresy** below are some historical "heresies" around the Trinity.

**Sabellianism** The Trinity is expressed in different "modes." Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct, but rather different faces of God. For example -- I am priest to the church, a husband to my wife, and father to my kids. *I have heard more than one Episcopalian sermon lean this way.*

**Partialism** Puzzle pieces. Father, Son and Holy Spirit together are components of the one God. It's a variation on modalism. *Not super popular.*

**Tritheism** Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct Gods. *This is how Islam sometimes characterizes Christianity.*

**Arianism** The preexistent Christ was the best of God's creation but not fully divine. The Arian controversy was huge by the 4<sup>th</sup> Century both politically and theologically. In part, the Nicene Creed was an answer to Arianism. Some Arian-leaning Christians converted to Islam once Islam began (7<sup>th</sup> Century). *Jehovah's Witnesses are also a modern bearer of this theology.*

**Don't** think Hitler and Aryan nation. Different ideas. Hitler was a prolific cultural thief who built a Third Reich mythology on many disparate histories (The first Reich was the Roman Empire). For example, he co-opted the swastika from the Indian

subcontinent. He blended and mixed things to the point of unintelligibility, but Arianism and Aryanism are different.

**Ebionitism** Purely human Jesus: but he was a great preacher and miracle worker. *An early school of thought during the rise of Christianity, but not much is known about their history.*

**Adoptionism** Jesus was born human and “adopted” as divine. This happened at baptism or at his resurrection. *Not popular either, but it does show up in some streams of Mormon thought.*

**Docetism** Jesus only appeared human. He was an all-powerful God wearing a skin suit. Some versions taught that Jesus’ divinity left him, with only a shell of skin and bones on the cross. Modern versions of this are the Christ myth theory. Jesus is an amazing metaphor. He might not have even existed, but embodies an important myth that is shared across cultures. *A modern, skeptical Docetism would argue that Christ, Krishna, Mithra are but one archetypal myth.*

**Diagram** From the diagram on this page, you will see that I did not cover the whole map. In essence, Trinitarian conversations revolve a lot around the character of Jesus: Who is he? How is he related to God?

This diagram gives you a picture of attempts to nail Jell-O to a tree. St. John of the Wilderness, an Episcopal Church in Minnesota, put a lot of theological education and history on their website that gives you a taste of this [complicated history](#). If you want to know more of a particular idea, google the name and fall into a rabbit hole.

I believe that the mystery of God’s ‘relatedness’ doesn’t settle onto easy solutions. The real mystery is how **we** live in relationship with others and God.

My understanding of the Trinity is simplistic. “God loves God.”

Jesus loves the Father, the Father loves Jesus, The Spirit loves Jesus, etc. So, in good Episcopalian style, when you ask me to define the Trinity, I will clutch my chest and intone that, “It’s a mystery.”

May the Trinity be a mystery to be discovered in day-to-day life while loving people. We can model the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are deeply in love with each other.

**Todd**

