

Study Guide for  
*Christianity: The Essentials*  
Learning from Scripture, the Creeds, and the Fathers

**SESSION FOUR**



A six-session discipleship series for  
**Epiclesis: An Ancient-Future Faith Community**

The contents of this workbook were drawn primarily and in large measure from Christopher Hall's wonderful *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, which we gratefully acknowledge and highly recommend.  
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## Christianity: The Essentials

### *Learning from Scripture, the Creed, and the Fathers*

#### Session Four

The Trinity. Is the Trinity in the Bible?  
What does Scripture say? What we learn from the Fathers:  
Gregory of Nazianzus. What we learn from the creed.

#### ***Introduction... and a deep breath, too.***

The Trinity is one of the bedrock, essential tenets of the Christian faith. While the concept— *the reality*— of the Trinity can be found throughout Scripture, you won't find the actual word there itself. So where to start?

As you begin this particular study, take time to briefly share your basic beliefs about the Trinity. *Why* do you believe it? *Where* does the belief originate?

Now take time to consider the following word from Hilary of Poitiers (a 4th century Church Father who was also called the "Hammer of the Arians" and the "Athanasius of the West"). It may help tie some of what we talked about last week with today's discussion. How, if at all, does this quote help you begin to formulate a picture of the Trinity?

*All existence originates from the Father. In Christ and through Christ, God is the source of everything. In contrast to everything else, He is completely self-existent. He doesn't receive His being from the outside, but possesses it from and in Himself. He is infinite, for nothing can contain Him and He contains everything. He is eternally unrestricted by space, for He can't be limited. He is eternally prior to time, for time is His creation. Imagine what you think might be God's farthest limit, and you will find Him present there. Strain to*





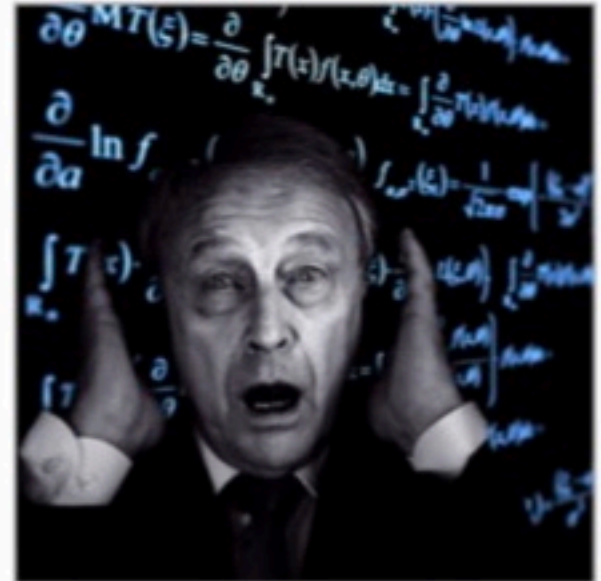
see as far as you can, for there is always a further horizon to strain toward. He owns infinity, just as you own the power to make such efforts to comprehend Him. Words will fail you, but His being will not be restrained. Turn back the pages of history and you will always find Him present. If numbers fail to express the old ages you have penetrated, God's eternity still isn't diminished. Exercise your intellect to comprehend Him as a whole, but He will elude you.... Therefore, since no one knows the Father but the Son, let our thoughts of the Father be one with the thoughts of the Son. He is the only faithful Witness who reveals God to us.

For reference: See 1 Cor. 10:12; Rom 11:36; Col 1:17; John 1:1-2; John 1:14, 18; Exodus 3:14, John 8:58.

***The arithmetic just doesn't add up...***

Believers have been pondering the nature of God since the beginning of the church... *sometimes in the oddest of places:*

The fourth century Church Father Gregory of Nyssa said of his own times, "If you ask for the price of bread [at the shops], you're told the Father is greater and the Son inferior. If you ask 'is the bath ready?', someone answers 'the Son was created from nothing'."



Gregory lived in theologically stormy times and, in some ways, we ought to envy him: too many Christians today are apathetic about our essential tenets— maybe because some seem to make no practical sense. Thomas Jefferson, one well-known figure of the Enlightenment, once said, “When we have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of Trinitarian arithmetic...and gotten back to the pure and simple doctrines [of Jesus], we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples.”

It's hard not to go with Jefferson on this one. The doctrine of the Trinity seems so complicated... so why bother?

In the study for week one, we turned to Hilary of Poitiers who wrote about theology being necessary for preserving *the simple*



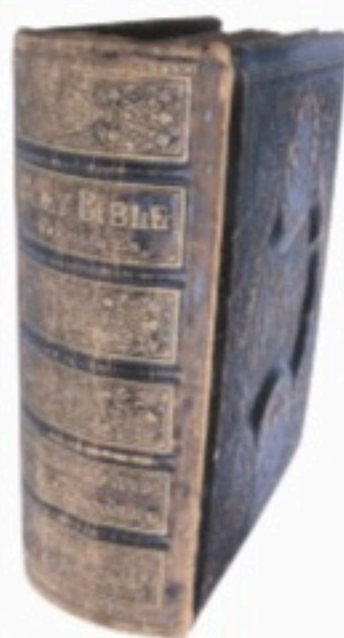
*Gospel:* “People who either accidentally or purposely distort the message of the gospel...undercut the very truths that make a simple proclamation of the gospel possible.”

### ***So can a better understanding of the Trinity help preserve the simplicity of the Gospel?***

A couple of theological questions for you: Should we worship Christ as divine? Should we worship the Holy Spirit? If you say “yes”, then it’s the theology of the Trinity that gets you there.

### ***First, three Bible basics: What does it mean that God is a Trinity?***

It means, in part, that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Stated differently, God is one in essence and three in person. These definitions express three essential truths: (1) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons, (2) each Person is fully God, (3) there is only one God:



*1) The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons.* Though the Bible does speak of the Father as God (Phil 1:2), of Jesus as God (Titus 2:13), and the Holy Spirit as God (Acts 5:3-4) it also indicates that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons. For example, since the Father sent the Son into the world (John 3:16), He cannot be the same person as the Son (John 5:17, 23, 36). Likewise, after the Son returned to the Father (John 16:10), the Holy Spirit was sent into the world (John 14:26, 16:13-15; Acts 2:33).

*2) Each Person is fully God.* The Trinity does not divide God into three parts. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all fully God. For example, the Bible says of Christ that “in Him all the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Jesus openly claimed His equality with the Father (John 5:18); the Holy Spirit was present and active in the Godhead from the beginning (Gen 1:1-2, 26-27); and all three Persons are reflected in Paul’s description of the divine Family (Eph 3:14-17).

*3) There is only one God.* Though each person of the Trinity is distinct and yet fully God, Scripture is clear that there is yet only one God: “There is no other God besides me, a righteous God



and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Is 44:6-8; 45:21-22; Deut 4:35; 6:4-5; 32:39; 1 Sam 2:2; 1 Kgs 8:60; Jer 10:10; Mark 12:28-30; Rom 3:30).

### ***How to make sense of all this? We are not the first Christians to ponder the Trinity...***

From the moment believers first began to consider the Gospel message, questions about the nature of God emerged. They had to, really:

*Here was the challenge of the early church:* How can the Bible's teaching about the nature of God be expressed in an understandable, theological model that *preserved* these two basic roots of Christianity: 1) The oneness of God; and, 2) that Christ is to be worshiped?

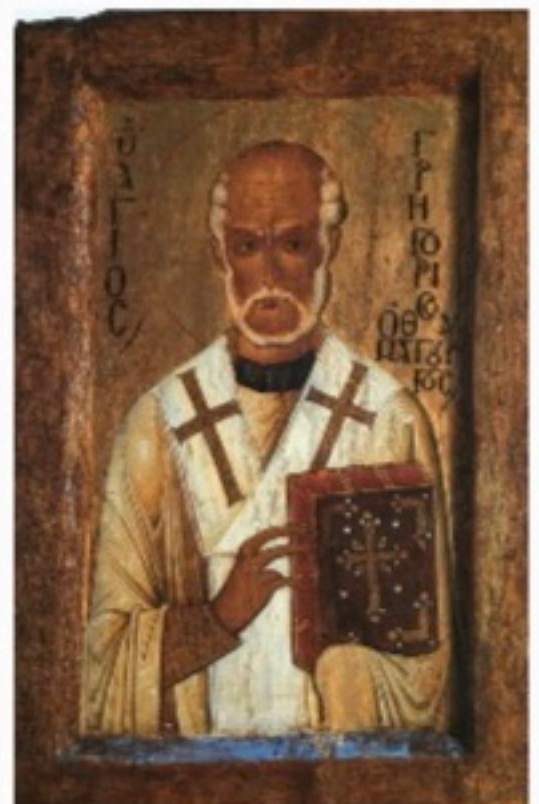


**The Church Fathers developed the doctrine of the Trinity, simply and profoundly, because they believed that a faithful and careful reading of the Bible drove them to do so.**

Christopher Hall writes: "For years Church Fathers and early Christian writers interpreted, described, analyzed and debated the biblical data itself. The final conclusion, framed toward the end of the fourth century, was that God must exist and act as both a unity and a Trinity—a shocking and surprising conclusion for defenders of the Nicene Creed and its opponents."

*Let's turn to Gregory of Nazianzus: b. c.329—d. c.389.*

Gregory was a 4th century Archbishop of Constantinople. He was a classically trained orator and philosopher and is considered the most accomplished rhetorical stylist of the patristic age. He is known as the "Trinitarian Theologian" and his work continues to influence contemporary theologians.





## ***Walking through Gregory's logic...***

First, when considering the Trinity, Gregory warns that any discussion about such a lofty thing must begin with a humble acknowledgment of human reason's inability to conceive and adequately describe God's nature. He once wrote, "It is difficult to conceive God, but to define him in words is an impossibility, and yet more impossible to conceive him."

*So are we left without hope?* Gregory says no: "Both our very eyes and the law of nature" clearly communicate the reality of God's existence and "that he is the efficient and maintaining cause of all things" (Rom 11:36; Col 1:17).


## ***Getting a (human) handle on God...***

There are some basic things we can know about God:


Gregory says that we can know that God doesn't have a body. If He did, how could He be "infinite and limitless"?

If God *had* a body, it would mean that He must be made up of some elements that are more basic and fundamental than he is. Then how could we worship a God who can be "circumscribed" (limited or enclosed)?

But just because God doesn't have a body doesn't mean that He has no essence. We know that God has an essence because we know that He exists.

 Gregory reminds us that in this life we are simply too feeble to view God's nature and essence directly. But this won't always be the case, as Paul also tells us in 1 Cor 13:12 ("then I shall know fully, just as I also have been fully known"): "What God is in nature and essence will be discovered when...our mind and reason shall have mingled with its [divine] like."

## ***What we learn from Gregory about the Trinity...***

 The Father begets the Son, but not in a human manner and not in time. The Son is begotten, but has always been begotten. And the Spirit is emitted and always has been emitted. Thus we have an eternal movement of love grounded in the essence of God himself.





There was never a time when there was not a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit. The Father has always been unbegotten, the Son always begotten, and the Spirit always proceeding from the Father.

Gregory uses the analogy of the sun and its rays to illustrate: Can one imagine the sun as existing apart from the light rays it constantly emits? The rays find their source, their origin, in the sun. Still, the rays and the sun came into existence at the same time. The rays are not “after” the sun. They are part of what it means to be the sun.



The sun analogy breaks down after a while for the Trinity has always existed outside of time, but it helps to illustrate the church’s teaching that the Son and Spirit find their origin in the Father. The Father must beget the Son and generate the Spirit, just as the sun must shed light.



*Here’s Gregory’s bottom line:* “If there was a time when the Father was not, then there was a time when the Son was not. If ever there was a time when the Son was not, then there was a time when the Spirit was not. If the one was from the beginning, then the three were so, too. If you throw down the one, I am bold to assert that you do not set up the other two.”

The only alternative to the Trinitarian model, says Gregory, would be to place the Holy Spirit among the created beings, which is no alternative at all: “If he is not from the beginning, he is in the same rank with myself, even though a little before me; for we are both parted from Godhead by time.”

### ***Finally, what does the Creed teach us about the Trinity?***

Take another stroll through the Nicene Creed (read it together) and talk a bit about what it says about the Trinity.

***We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.***

***We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one***



***Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.***

***We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.***

***We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.***

***We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.***



**Looking ahead:** In our next session: Sin, Grace, and the Human Condition. The question of the means and the purpose of human salvation. What's sin? What is it that Jesus did on and by the cross? Will and choice. What does Scripture say? Learning from Irenaeus. Learning from the Creed.

About the cover art: "Saint Thomas Aquinas" by Bernardino Mei. c. 1660. Oil on canvas. From the Chigi-Saracini Collection, Sienna, Italy. It is featured on the cover of one of the sources for this study, *The Great Theologians...*

### ***Christianity: The Essentials***

This six-session discipleship series has been drawn from several sources in addition to Scripture:

Christopher Hall. *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*. Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002.

Gerald McDermott. *The Great Theologians: A Brief Guide*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.

The Nicene Creed. Wiki article showing several English versions available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_versions\\_of\\_the\\_Nicene\\_Creed\\_in\\_current\\_use](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_versions_of_the_Nicene_Creed_in_current_use)

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