

Thinking Trinitarian

One of the challenges when thinking about the Trinity is trying to describe the truth of something that exceeds our comprehension. There are two dangers:

1. Over-defining what God “is”, and as a result trying to fit God into our understanding.
2. Ignoring the Trinity altogether, and failing to protect ourselves from subtle heresies.

A helpful tool here is to think about “guard rails”. Guard rails do not tell us everything about the road ahead - their purpose is to keep us from driving into a ditch! In the same way, the doctrine of the Trinity does not attempt to explain God exhaustively, but to set clear biblical boundaries that protect us from serious error. Within those boundaries there is mystery, but also safety - we are free to speak where Scripture speaks, and restrained from going where Scripture does not.

Ancient Help from a Church Father

A helpful set of guard rails from St Augustine. In his book “De Trinitate” (c400AD), he describes God as:

- **indivisible in substance** - The Father, Son and Spirit are not “one-third Gods”. Each consists of, and possesses the fullness of the entire Godhead.
- **distinct in identity** - The Father, Son and Spirit can be distinguished by their relationship to each other - it is the Father who **begets**, the Son who is **begotten**, and the Spirit who **proceeds**. The love within the trinity is not “self-love” - it is “agape” love between the persons of the Trinity
- **indivisible in purpose** - The Father, Son, and Spirit do not pursue separate ends. Every external act of God is the act of the one God. We are not saved by one member of the Trinity, but by God Himself, in His fullness. Salvation is one divine action, with one divine purpose
- **distinct in means** - Each member of the Trinity brings about God’s purpose in a unique manner - The Father **sends**, the Son **accomplishes**, and the Spirit **applies**.

We can summarise this in a table:

The Trinity is	One	Three
Who God Is	Substance	Persons
What God Does	Purpose	Means

Putting Augustine into Practice

This framework is helpful to us today because it gives us a clear way to see where and how theological errors go wrong. Most heresies do not deny everything about God; instead, they take one true thing and protect it at the expense of the others. By using Augustine’s guard rails, we can avoid reacting emotionally or vaguely, and instead ask a simple diagnostic question: Which boundary has been crossed? When we do that, the differences between orthodox Christianity and its alternatives become much clearer.

For instance:

- * Pantheism denies everything about the Trinity - substance, identity, purpose and means.
- * Polytheism asserts that there are many Gods of greater or lesser degree. Some even say that humans can become God's over time.
- * Arianism claims that there is only one God, the Father
- * Modalism says that God changes "shape" at different times depending on the situation and need
- * Monarchianism states that only God the Father is King, and therefore greater than the others
- * Partialism describes each part of God as distinct from each other

In our catechism study this week, we will try and fill out the chart below, thinking about how each of the above heresies still exist today, and how they each "break" one or more of Augustine's guard rails. In particular, we're going to try and see how these actually impact our faith and assurance in practical ways. Feel free to put down your thoughts and conclusions, and we can discuss them together:

Modern Heresy	Old Name	One Substance	Distinct Persons	One Purpose	Distinct Means	Practical Impact
Jehovah's Witnesses						
New Age Spirituality						
Latter Day Saints						
Eternal Functional Subordination						
Sunday School (sometimes!)						
Oneness Pentecostalism						