

## Key Stage 4

# Trinity (Beliefs and Teachings)

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Understand** the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- **Understand** why some Protestant Christian churches reject the doctrine of the Trinity.

**Students will be able to answer the question:**

**Why do some Christian churches reject the doctrine of the Trinity?**

### PRIOR LEARNING

This lesson will work best if students have a working knowledge of the Christian Trinitarian God, the three persons of the Trinity and the oneness of God in Christianity.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

### 1: STARTER: THE TRINITY IN BIBLICAL TEXT

#### LESSON CONTENT

Stick 'Father', 'Son' and 'Spirit' in three corners of the room. As students enter give them these texts on small pieces of paper: Matthew 3:13–17, John 10:30, John 14:6–11, Matthew 5:48, John 14:16–17, Philippians 2:5–8. These are found on p. 4, 'Persons of God starter' sheet. Hand out either one between two or one each.

Ask students to stand in the corner which they think corresponds to their person of the Trinity. If the text suggests more than one, students must work out where to position themselves. Give time to discuss positioning.

### 2: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRINITY

#### LESSON CONTENT

- a. Students will learn how the idea of the Trinity was gradually articulated through ecumenical councils by reading and completing 'A Brief History of the Trinity' (p. 5).
- b. Display the Nicene Creed, found on Wikipedia. Where do students think the name 'Nicene' comes from? It refers to the decision made at the Council of Nicaea. Determine how Arius' vision of Jesus and God differed from the majority Nicaean view. Ask students if they think all Christian churches accept the doctrine of the Trinity. Gather answers.

### 3: EDWARD WIGHTMAN

#### LESSON CONTENT

Edward Wightman was the last man to be burnt at the stake for heresy in England (in 1612). Show a woodcut of his execution: [www.patrickcomerford.com/2012/04/remembering-last-heretic-burned-at.html](http://www.patrickcomerford.com/2012/04/remembering-last-heretic-burned-at.html), or the plaque remembering him: [www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/edward-wightman-executed-heresy](http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/edward-wightman-executed-heresy). Read about Wightman on p. 6.

Ask students to highlight in two colours: a) Wightman's own views and b) Anabaptist dissenting views. Ask for suggestions as to why Wightman did not retract his views, even in the face of a horrible death. Ask for suggestions as to why the monarchy and Church would not tolerate dissent of this nature.

## 4: WHY DO SOME CHRISTIAN CHURCHES REJECT THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

### LESSON CONTENT

- a. Hand out 'Protestant Views Against the Trinity' on p. 7. Read in groups.
- b. Give the class these five reasons for rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity: Trinity is not monotheistic, Trinity is not in the Bible, Trinity is developed by Church institutions, belief in doctrine matters less than loving action, doctrine of the Trinity is incoherent. Ask the class to assign one or two reasons for rejecting the doctrine to Wightman, as well as each group or individual on p. 7.
- c. Students copy the 'Protestant Views Against the Trinity' diagram at the bottom of p. 6 into their books and complete the rectangular boxes with reasons for rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Give groups a few minutes to discuss the question: 'Do members of one religion have to believe the same thing?' Listen to answers, ask for reasons to support each.

# Persons of God Starter

<p><b>Philippians 2:5-8</b></p> <p>In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:</p> <p>Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!</p>	<p><b>Matthew 3:13-17</b></p> <p>Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?’</p> <p>Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then John consented.</p> <p>As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’</p>
<p><b>John 14:6-11</b></p> <p>Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.’</p> <p>Philip said, ‘Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.’</p> <p>Jesus answered: ‘Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.’</p>	<p><b>John 14:16-17</b></p> <p>And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.</p> <p><b>John 10:30</b></p> <p>‘I and the Father are one.’</p> <p><b>Matthew 5:48</b></p> <p>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.</p>

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# A Brief History of the Trinity

Read the information below, answer the questions and complete the timeline:

## A Brief History of the Trinity

The concept of the Trinity is not in the Bible. It was first mentioned by Roman Christian writer Tertullian in the second century.

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) established that Jesus is a human manifestation of God. This is the first formal expression of the idea of the ‘incarnation’, a phrase meaning ‘in flesh’ (*carne* = flesh in Latin), describing the belief that Jesus is God in human form. The idea of the Spirit is mentioned at this council but not explored in detail.

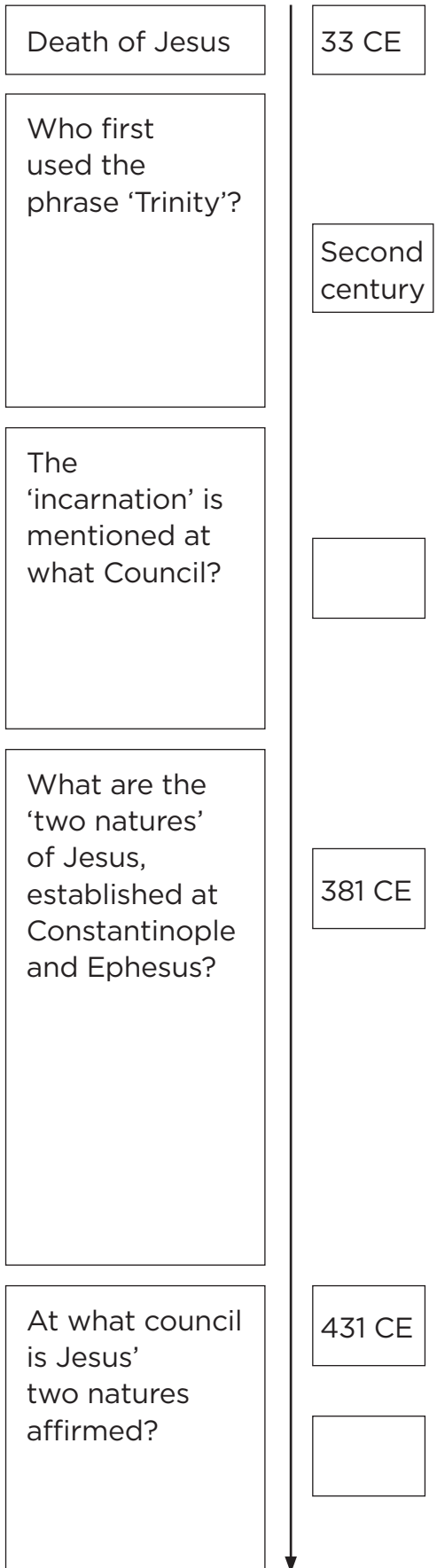
At Nicaea a different way of seeing the Trinity was rejected, called Arianism, after the founder Arius. Arianism proposed that Jesus was not made of the same substance as God, and is therefore not God. Arianism held that Jesus was known as the ‘Son of God’ because he was perfectly good, not because he was of the same nature as God. Arianism in a form still exists today in the Unitarian Church, who may reject doctrines such as the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus.

At two further councils, at Constantinople in 381 and at Ephesus in 431, it was established that Jesus has two natures: he is human and he is divine (part of God).

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the seal was set on a concept of Jesus. This council affirmed that Jesus is all God and all human, or fully God and fully human.

What was the majority view of Jesus at Nicaea?

What was the minority view of Jesus at Nicaea?



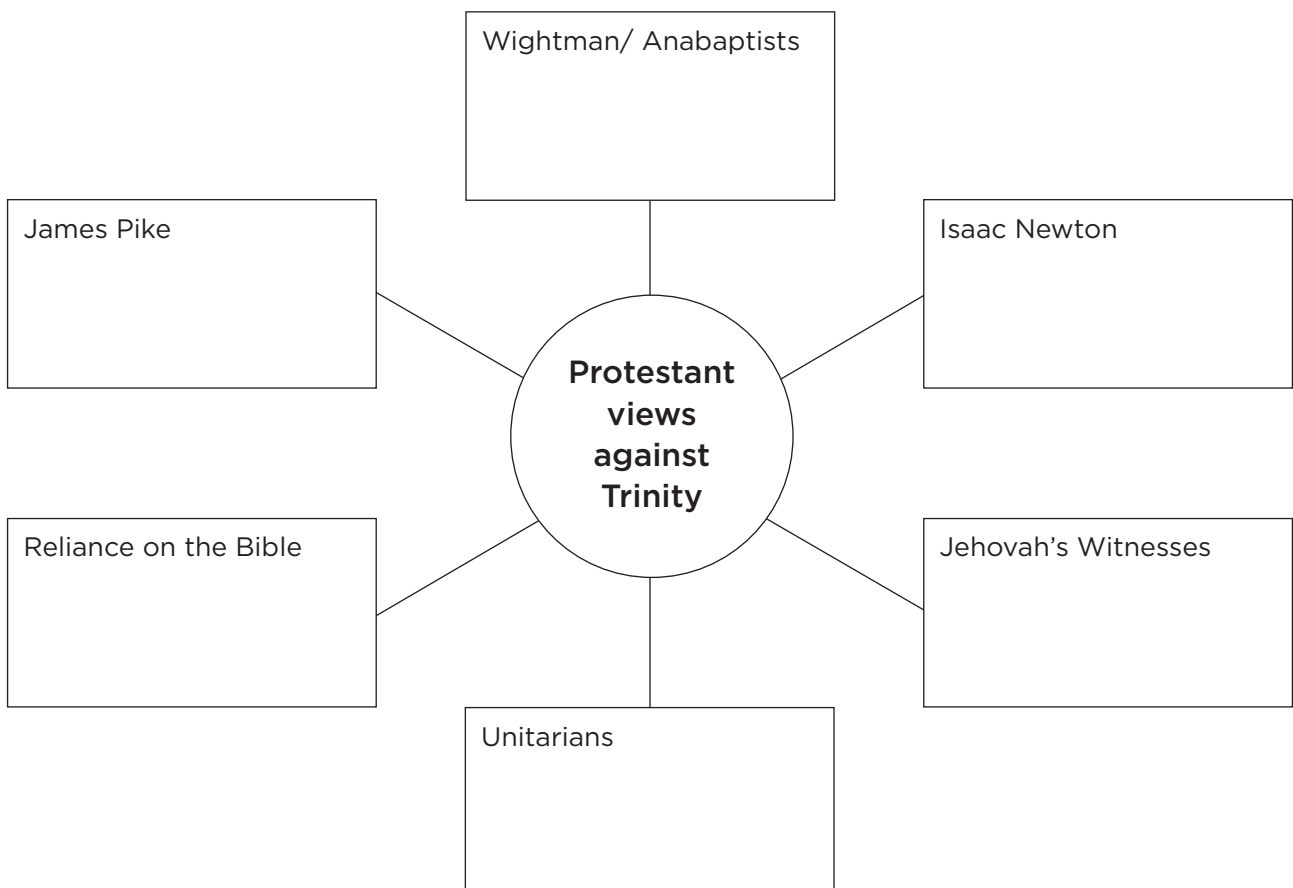
# Edward Wightman

Wightman was a minister in Burton upon Trent’s Anabaptist Church in the late 1500s. The Anabaptists rejected the practice of baptising infants as it was not in the Bible. In the early 1600s Wightman began to openly reject many foundational Church teachings. He totally rejected the notion of the Trinity, arguing that Jesus was a good and brave man, but he was not God, and there was no incarnation.

The Anabaptists argued that each person had an individual relationship with God that no church or government had any rights over. They questioned the idea of the Trinity as it was developed 300 years after Jesus’ death and is not in the

Bible. Moreover it was developed by powerful churchmen at a time when the Church was gaining huge political and military power. The Trinity is seen as an exercise in power rather than a spiritual truth offered by God.

Wightman was forced to have many conversations with Church authorities who tried to persuade him to recant his views. He would not, and eventually James I ordered his execution. As the flames licked around Wightman, he retracted his opinion and was taken down. However, over the next few weeks he would not confirm his acceptance of the Trinity and was finally executed by burning in April 1612.



# Protestant Views Against the Trinity

## Unitarianism

Unitarian Christianity does not accept the doctrine of the Trinity, rejecting the notion that Jesus is God. For Unitarians Jesus is a moral teacher inspired by God and his teachings can lead to salvation, but he himself is not God. This view dates back to the mid-1500s, and developed as part of the Protestant Reformation.

There are Unitarian churches today all over the world. Unitarians claim Trinitarian Christian churches are not strictly speaking monotheistic. Unitarianism maintains a true monotheism in understanding only God as God, and Jesus as a much-revered, God-inspired, human man. Moreover, in the Bible Jesus does not claim to be part of God.

**Reliance on the Bible:** Since Luther argued that individual Christians should seek guidance from the Bible rather than rely on Church tradition, Protestants of all varieties questioned or outright rejected the doctrine of the Trinity as un-biblical.

**Isaac Newton:** The mysteries of religion satisfied some Humanist Christians less, and they demanded more solid evidence in matters of religion. Scholars found that key passages, such as 1 John 5:7–8 ('For there are three that testify: the Spirit,

the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement'), were late additions to the Bible, and therefore not entirely reliable. In 1670 Isaac Newton was one high-profile Christian who abandoned Trinitarian belief.

**Jehovah's Witnesses:** The Jehovah's Witnesses had been founded in the mid-1800s (although they were known as the 'Bible Students' until 1931). They were awaiting the end of the world and God's judgement of humanity. While they waited their mission was to rescue Christians from the falsehoods preached by mainstream churches. Founder Charles Taze Russell rejected 'the unreasonable theory that Jehovah is his own son and our Lord Jesus is his own father' (Ryrie 2017).

**James Pike:** James Pike was an Episcopalian minister (an American form of Anglicanism) who became bishop of California in 1958. He had a popular Sunday morning TV show and from the 1960s used this show to question Christian doctrine, including the reliability of the Trinity. It was not their truth he questioned, as their importance. Pike felt the Church had become lost in abstract belief at the expense of its real work; radical political transformation. He resigned as a bishop in 1966 and left the Church completely in 1969 (Ryrie 2017).

Ryrie, A. (2017), *Protestants: The Faith that Made the Modern World* (London: Viking).

Scripture quotations taken from Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV®

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# Trinity in the Specs

<p><b>AQA</b> <b>Beliefs and teachings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The oneness of God and the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.</li> </ul>	<p><b>WJEC</b> <b>Beliefs and teachings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Trinity, beliefs and teachings about the oneness of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit: John 10:30, John 14:6-11.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Edexcel A &amp; B</b></p> <p>The Trinity: the nature and significance of the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed; the nature and significance of the oneness of God; the nature and significance of each of the persons individually: including reference to Matthew 3:13-17; how this is reflected in Christian worship and belief today.</p>
<p><b>OCR</b> <b>Beliefs and teachings</b></p> <p>The concept of the Trinity as one God, three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.</li> <li>• Issues related to the nature of God.</li> <li>• Different attitudes to God as a Trinity.</li> <li>• Different interpretations and emphases given to sources of wisdom and authority by different Christian denominations.</li> </ul>		<p><b>OCR</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matthew 5:48</li> <li>• John 14:16-17</li> <li>• Philippians 2:5-8</li> <li>• The Apostles’ Creed</li> <li>• The Nicene Creed</li> <li>• Unitarian churches e.g. Christadelphians</li> </ul>