

# Theological Formulation & Heresy in the Early Church

*The early church faced many challenges as they attempted to fully explain the ideas of the Trinity and Jesus' identity. Wading through the philosophical presuppositions of the culture, the theologians of the early church created new ways of expressing who God is while also delineating the boundaries beyond which an idea would turn into heresy.*

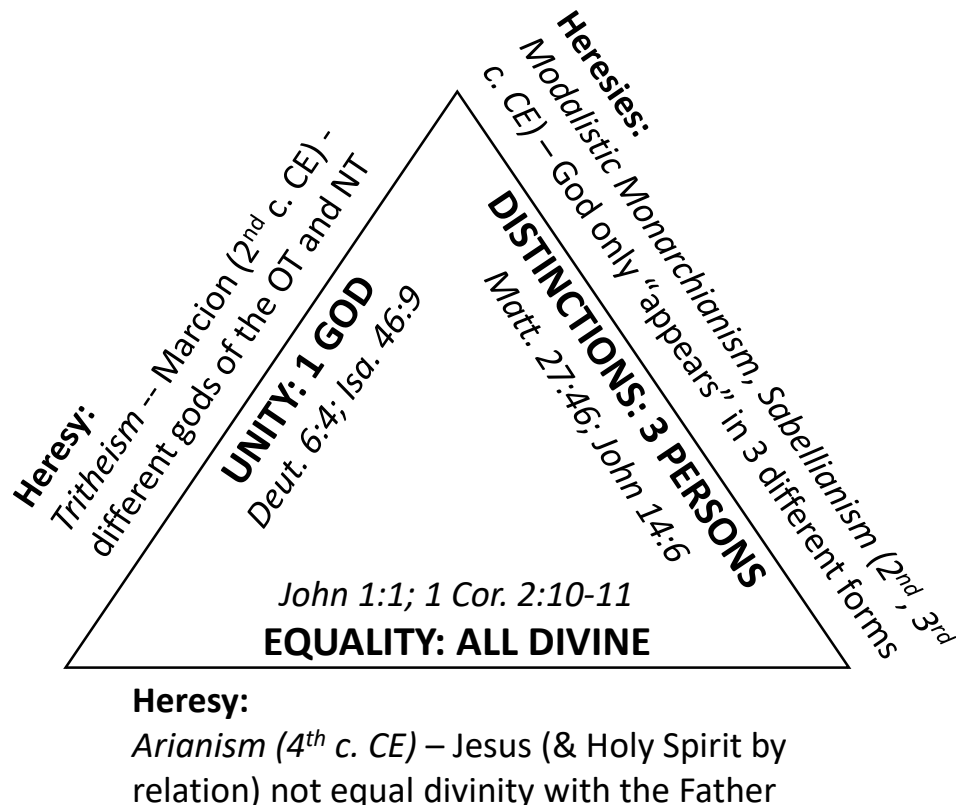
## The Doctrine of the Trinity

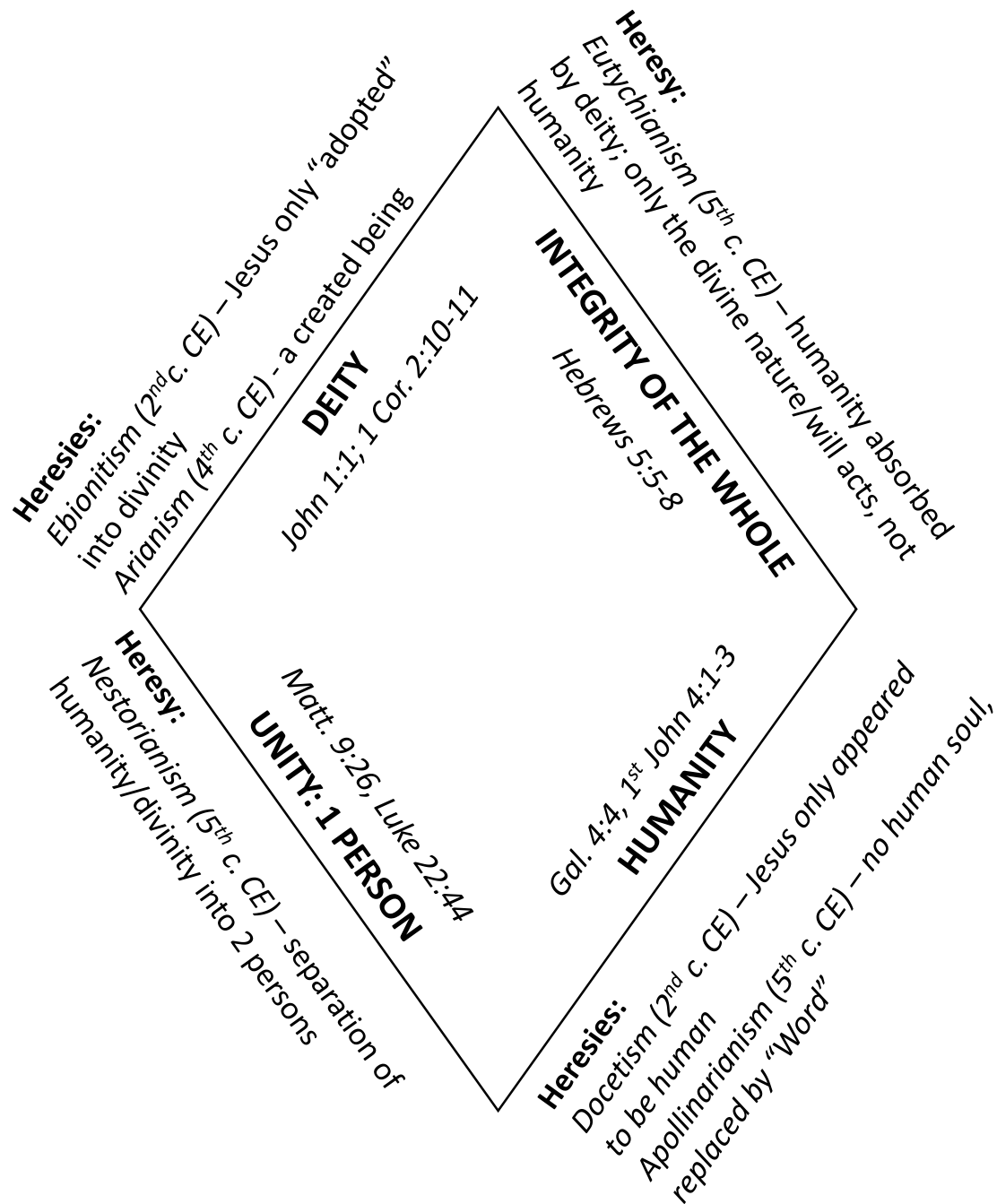
The Western church first began developing the language of the Trinity in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE, following Tertullian's usage of the Latin phrase "***tres personae***" in its defense against the heretic Praxeas who held to no distinctions in the Godhead and declared the Father was crucified on the cross. The Western church's concern revolved around keeping the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as separate entities.

The Eastern church, speaking Greek, also began exploring how to express the doctrine of the Trinity in response to heresy. The Greek term "***ousia***" ("being") was used interchangeably by the Eastern theologians with the term "***hypostaseis***" to describe the unity of the Godhead. The Nicene Creed (325 CE) uses the term "***homo-ousias***" ("of **same** substance") versus the Arian description of the Godhead as ***homo-i-ousias***" ("of **like** substance").

The choice of ***homoousias*** in the Greek language faithfully expressed the unity of the Godhead and, with the rejection of Arianism, the Cappadocian Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, & Basil the Great) linked ***hypostaseis*** with the Latin term ***personae***, creating a way to affirm both the divinity and differentiation of the members of the Trinity. This formulation was then accepted in the West.

Thus, today we speak of the Trinity as "one *ousia*, but three *hypostaseis*" – the Three in One.





# The Doctrine of Christ

The major contours of the doctrine of Christ, called **Christology** in theology, developed over the course of the **first 5 centuries** of the church. Unlike with the Trinity, there wasn't a single crisis like Arianism that spurred a coalescing of the final formulation. Some of the heresies such as **Docetism** and **Ebionitism** appeared early, possibly even in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE! So the process was more akin to “whack-a-mole” – a heresy rose up and the theologians examined and discredited it.

Early in the history of the early church, **publishing letters, books, or statements** by leading theologians was **the normal format for disputing heresy**. This was a major task of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE leaders such as Tertullian and Irenaeus (Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* takes up 5 books!)

As the church moved to a more formal structure in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE, **church councils began to speak authoritatively** on these matters, issuing creeds addressing the theological conflicts at hand. The Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451) all dealt with aspects of Christology. With the cooperation between the political and religious authorities, heretics not willing to sign the new creeds were **removed by church officials from their church office and exiled under the authority of the emperor**.

Although some heresies would continue to rise up (and still do today), **the major work was complete by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> c. CE** and the Council of Constantinople III.