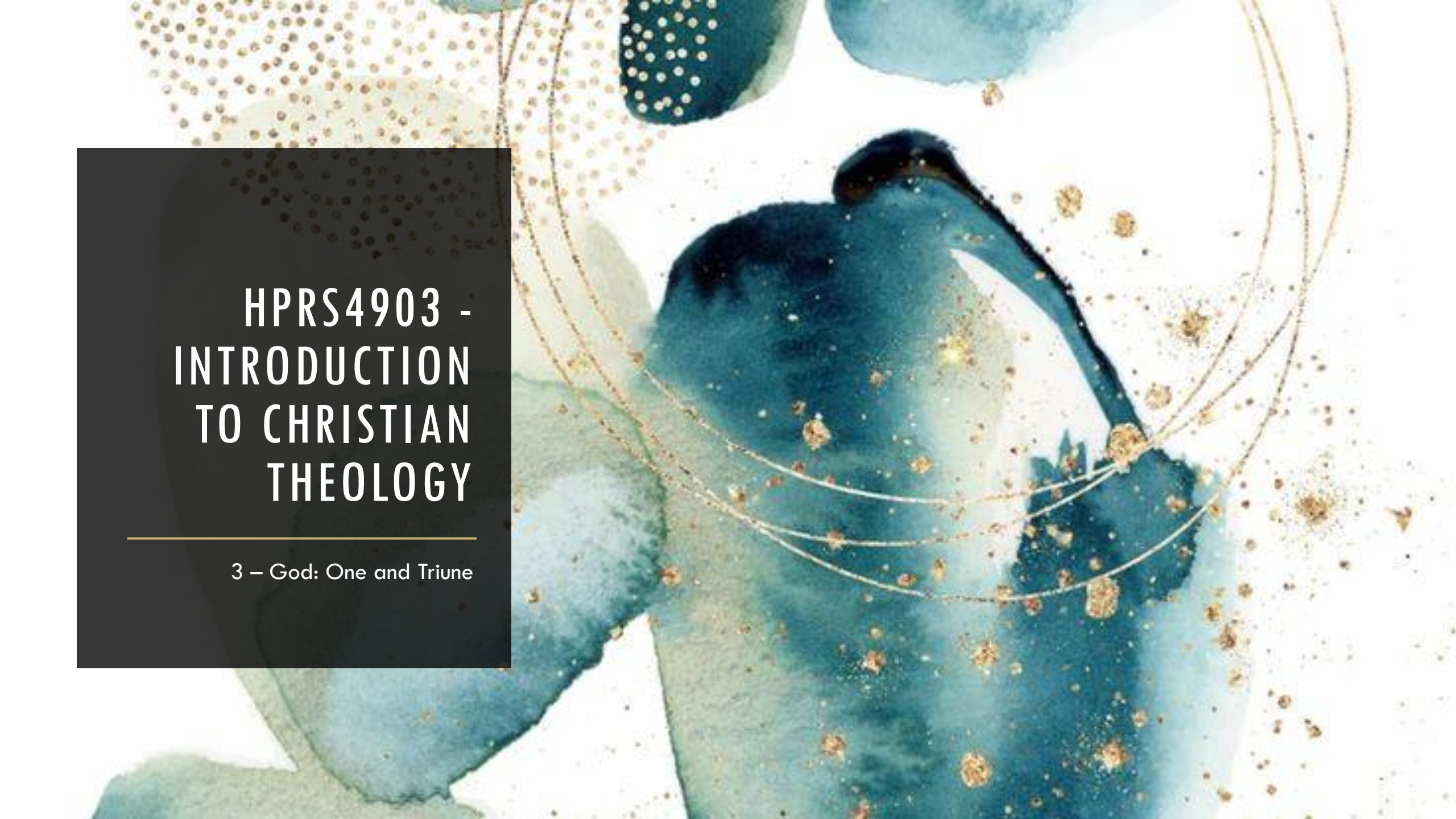




HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

3 – God: One and Triune

The background is an abstract watercolor painting. It features large, soft-edged washes of light blue and pale green. Overlaid on these are intricate patterns of fine gold dots and thin, curved gold lines, resembling a celestial map or a microscopic view. A dark, semi-transparent rectangular box is positioned in the center, containing the text 'WHAT IS GOD?'.

WHAT IS GOD?



WHAT IS GOD?

Like last week, we begin with one of the key beliefs that Christian theology inherited from Israel and Judaism: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4).

Christianity is uncompromisingly monotheistic. It does not worship many gods, nor does it imagine the divine as a set of competing powers.

At the same time, Christians confess Jesus Christ as Lord and speak of the Holy Spirit as divine.

From the earliest centuries, this created a tension at the heart of Christian belief: how can God be one, and yet be known as Father, Son, and Spirit?

WHAT IS GOD?

The doctrine of the Trinity is the Church's attempt to answer that question faithfully.

While well known as a tricky piece of Christian thinking, it is not a speculative puzzle but instead it arises from the lived experience of Christian worship and proclamation.

Christians prayed to God as Father, confessed Jesus as Lord, and experienced the Spirit's transforming power. They did so while remaining committed to the oneness of God. Trinitarian doctrine emerges as a way of holding these convictions together without collapsing into either polytheism, or abstraction.



WHAT IS GOD?

To understand the Trinity, however, we must first explore the wider framework in which Christians have traditionally spoken about God.

This framework is known as *classical theism* – something you may have come across in previous study before.

Classical theism refers to a family of claims about God's nature developed through dialogue between biblical faith and Greek philosophical reflection, especially in thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas. It seeks to articulate what must be true of God if God is truly the creator of all that exists.



WHAT IS GOD?

Classical theism begins from the conviction that God is not merely the greatest being among others.

God is not one object within the universe, even the most powerful one.

Rather, God is the source of all being – the ground upon which everything that exists depends.

Whereas creatures exist contingently and finitely, God exists necessarily and fully.

God does not derive existence from anything else.

God just *is*.



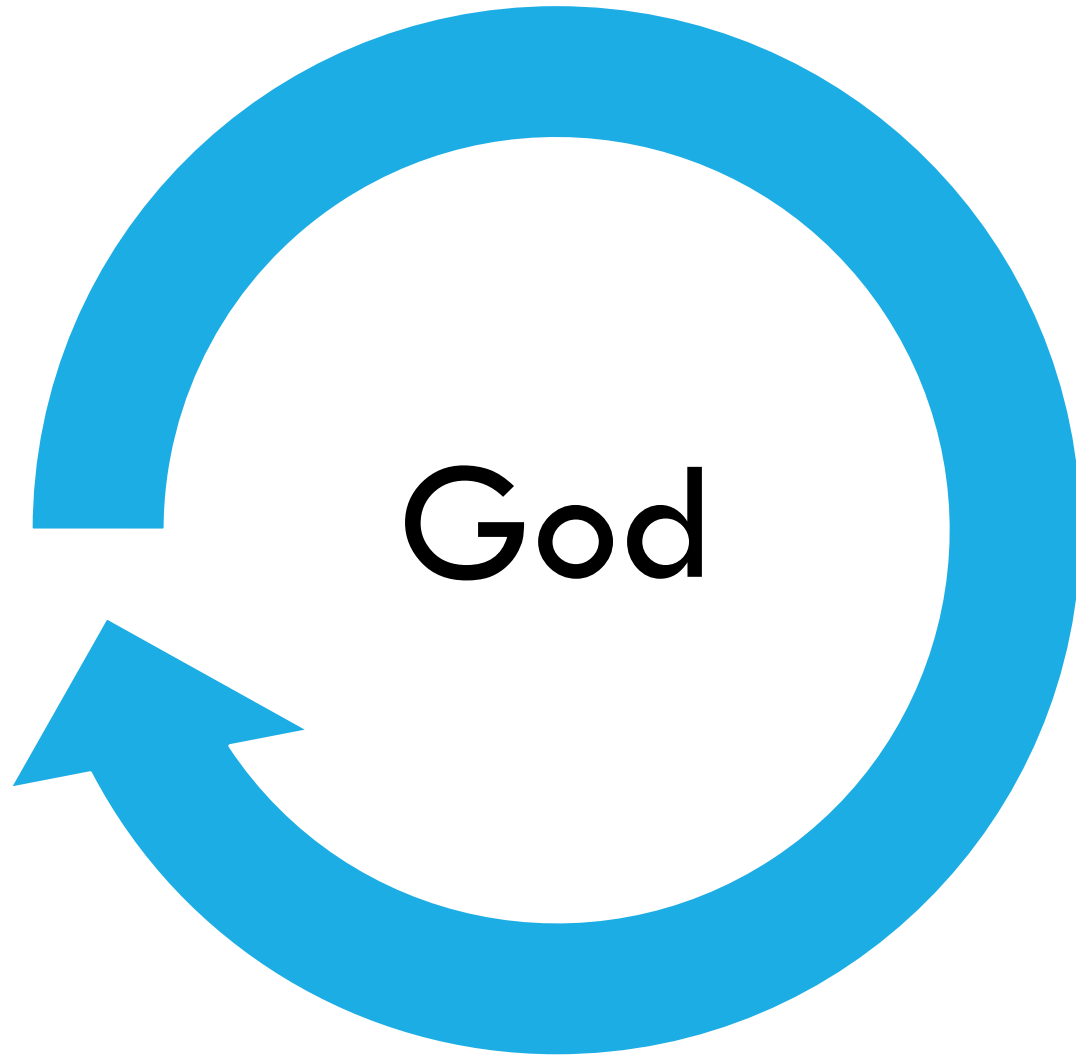
WHAT IS GOD?

This conviction draws on philosophical traditions stretching back to Plato and Aristotle. They argued that changeable, dependent things require an ultimate, unchanging source.

Christian theologians adapted this insight to biblical faith: the God who creates and sustains the world cannot be subject to decay, limitation, or dependency. God must be radically different from everything that is made.

From this vision flows the traditional divine attributes: omnipotence, eternity, and simplicity. These are not arbitrary characteristics but logical consequences of affirming God as creator of all.





- Simplicity
- Omnipotence
- Eternality



THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

Omnipotence means that God is “all-powerful.”

Yet classical theology carefully qualifies what this means. God’s power is not the ability to do absolutely anything imaginable, including logical contradictions. God cannot make a square circle or cease to be God. Such “limits” are not weaknesses but expressions of coherence.

As Thomas Aquinas explains, “God can do all things that are possible absolutely,” meaning all that can truly be done.



THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

The deeper meaning of omnipotence lies in God's relation to creation. If God is the source of all being, then everything that exists depends at every moment on God's sustaining power. Creation is not merely an event in the past; it is an ongoing act. Omnipotence is therefore not brute force but creative generosity. God's power is the power to give existence, to sustain, and to bring life out of nothing.

Biblically, God's power is often revealed not in domination but in liberation. God delivers Israel from slavery. God raises Jesus from death. Divine power is oriented toward life and faithfulness, not arbitrary control. This challenges popular images of omnipotence as sheer coercion. God's power is the power of faithful love.

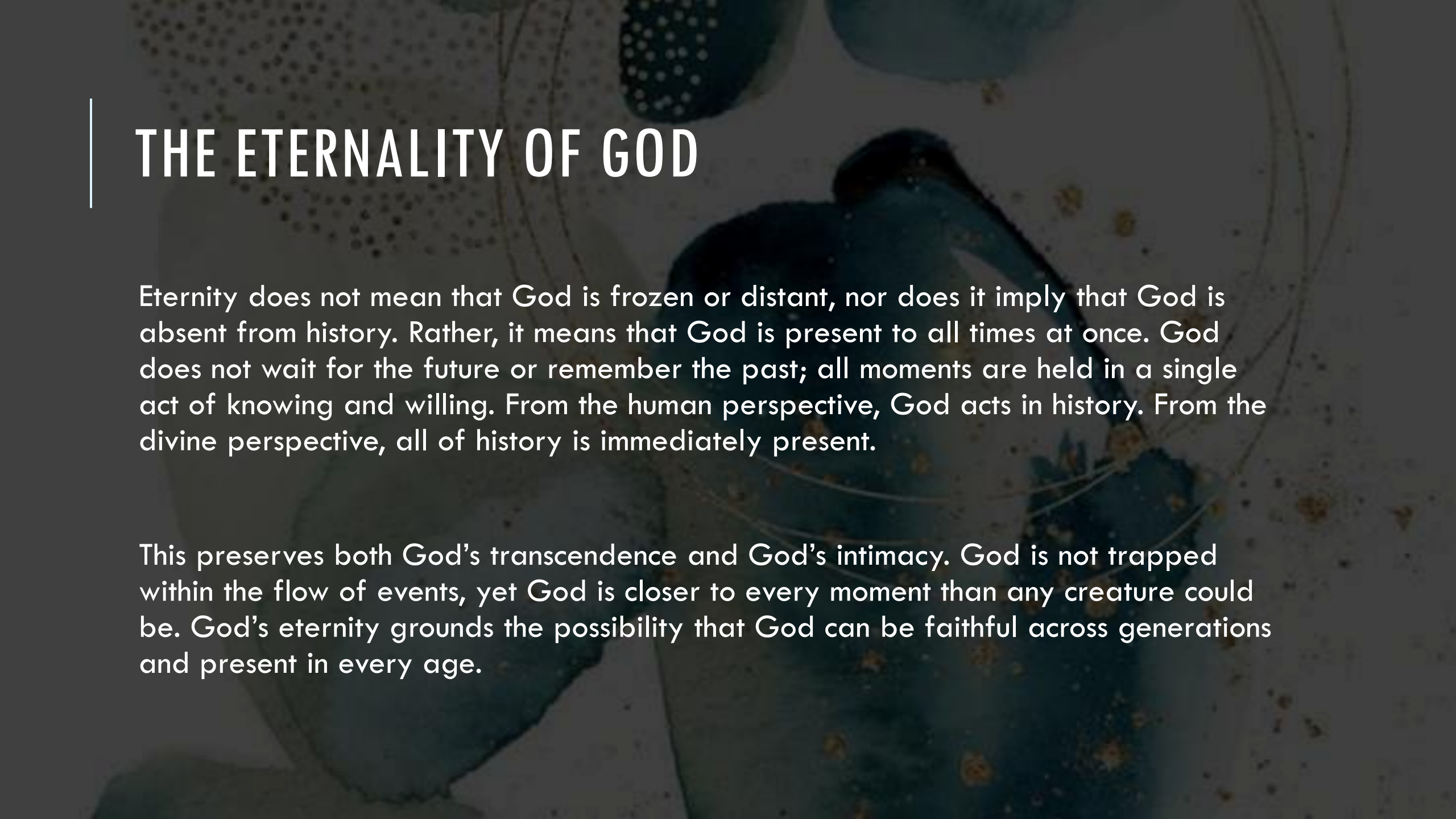


THE ETERNITY OF GOD

Eternity follows naturally from this understanding. Creatures exist in time: they begin, change, and end. God, as the source of time itself, cannot be bound by it.

Classical theology therefore describes God as eternal—not merely as living forever, but as existing beyond temporal succession.

Augustine reflects in his *Confessions*: “Your years do not come and go... Today does not yield to tomorrow.”



THE ETERNITY OF GOD

Eternity does not mean that God is frozen or distant, nor does it imply that God is absent from history. Rather, it means that God is present to all times at once. God does not wait for the future or remember the past; all moments are held in a single act of knowing and willing. From the human perspective, God acts in history. From the divine perspective, all of history is immediately present.

This preserves both God's transcendence and God's intimacy. God is not trapped within the flow of events, yet God is closer to every moment than any creature could be. God's eternity grounds the possibility that God can be faithful across generations and present in every age.



THE SIMPLICITY OF GOD

Simplicity is perhaps the most difficult attribute to grasp. It does not mean that God is easy to understand. It means that God is not composed of parts.

Creatures are made up of components—body and soul, form and matter, potentiality and actuality. God, by contrast, is not assembled. *God is* what God has.

God does not possess power, wisdom, or goodness as attributes added onto a core; *God is* power, wisdom, and goodness.



THE SIMPLICITY OF GOD

The doctrine of simplicity protects divine unity and independence. If God were composed of parts, those parts would be more fundamental than God. God would depend on something else.

Simplicity ensures that God is not contingent and explains why divine attributes cannot be separated. God's power is God's goodness; God's wisdom is God's love.

These are not different components but different ways of describing the same infinite reality.



HOW CAN WE SPEAK ABOUT WHAT GOD IS?

HOW CAN WE SPEAK ABOUT WHAT GOD IS?

These claims, however, raise an immediate problem: How can we speak meaningfully about such a God?

Human language arises from experience of finite things. We know what “power,” “goodness,” and “love” mean in human contexts. But God is not simply a larger version of a creature.

This is the classic problem of God-talk. If we speak of God in exactly the same way we speak of creatures, we reduce God to a finite object.



HOW CAN WE SPEAK ABOUT WHAT GOD IS?

Christian tradition navigates this tension through what we call *analogical language*.

We speak neither univocally (in exactly the same sense) nor equivocally (in completely different senses), but analogically.

When we say “God is good,” we do not mean that God’s goodness is identical to human goodness, nor do we mean something wholly unrelated. Rather, human goodness is a finite participation in divine goodness.



Univocity

**In exactly the
same sense**

Equivocity

**In a completely
different sense**

HOW CAN WE SPEAK ABOUT WHAT GOD IS?

Aquinas illustrates this with the analogy of health. Food is “healthy,” and a person is “healthy,” but in different ways. The word does not mean the same thing, yet it is not unrelated.

Similarly, when we attribute perfections to God, we affirm them while denying their limitations.

God is powerful—but not by means of muscles or tools.

God is wise—but not by learning over time.



HOW CAN WE SPEAK ABOUT WHAT GOD IS?

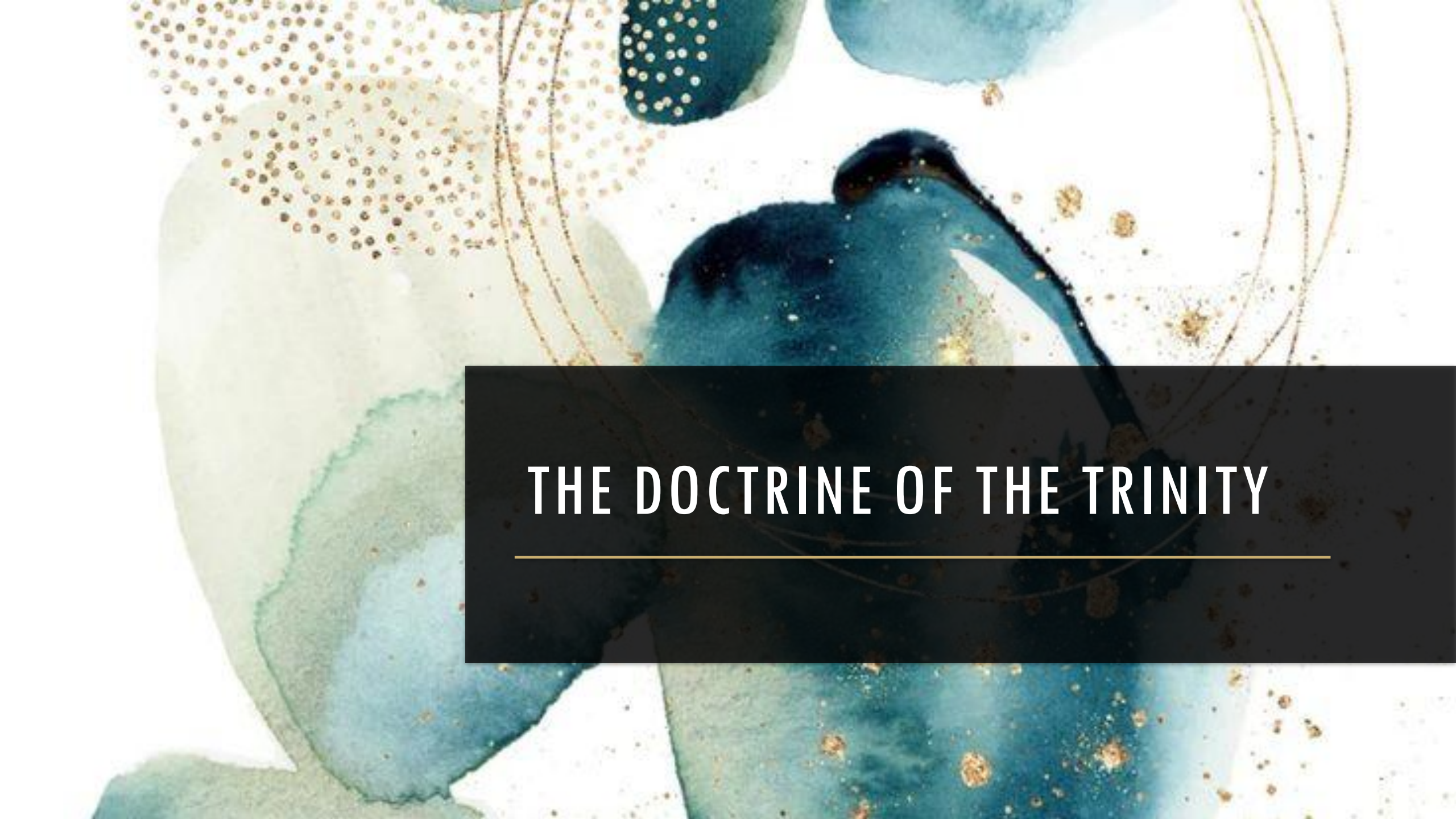
Alongside analogy, Christian theology employs what is called *apophatic* or negative language.

We say what God is *not*: not finite, not changeable, not dependent. This discipline reminds us that God always exceeds our concepts.

As Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “Every concept formed by the mind is an idol of God.”

Theology proceeds by affirming what must be true of God while acknowledging that our grasp is partial. We truly know God, but we never comprehend God.





THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY



THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

At this point, classical theism might appear quite abstract. Yet it is precisely this vision that made the Christian doctrine of the Trinity both possible and necessary.

If God were merely one being among others, then speaking of Father, Son, and Spirit would threaten monotheism.

But if God is infinite, simple, and the source of all being, then divine life can be richer than our human categories.



THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The earliest Christians encountered God in three inseparable ways: as the God of Israel; as the God revealed in Jesus Christ; and as the Spirit who empowered and transformed the Church.

They prayed to God as Father, confessed Jesus as Lord, and experienced the Spirit's presence.

The question was not whether these experiences were real, the question was how to speak about them without abandoning the oneness of God.



THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

This tension led to intense debates in the first four centuries. Some argued that Jesus was a uniquely exalted creature - Arianism. Others claimed that Father, Son, and Spirit were merely different roles played by a single divine person - Modalism.

Both approaches failed: the first compromised worship of Christ; the second erased the relational language of Scripture.



THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The most famous controversy involved Arius, who taught that the Son was created and therefore not fully divine.

Against this, the Council of Nicaea (325) confessed that the Son is *homoousios* – “of the same being” – with the Father. The Son is not a creature but truly God. Later councils clarified that the Spirit is also divine.

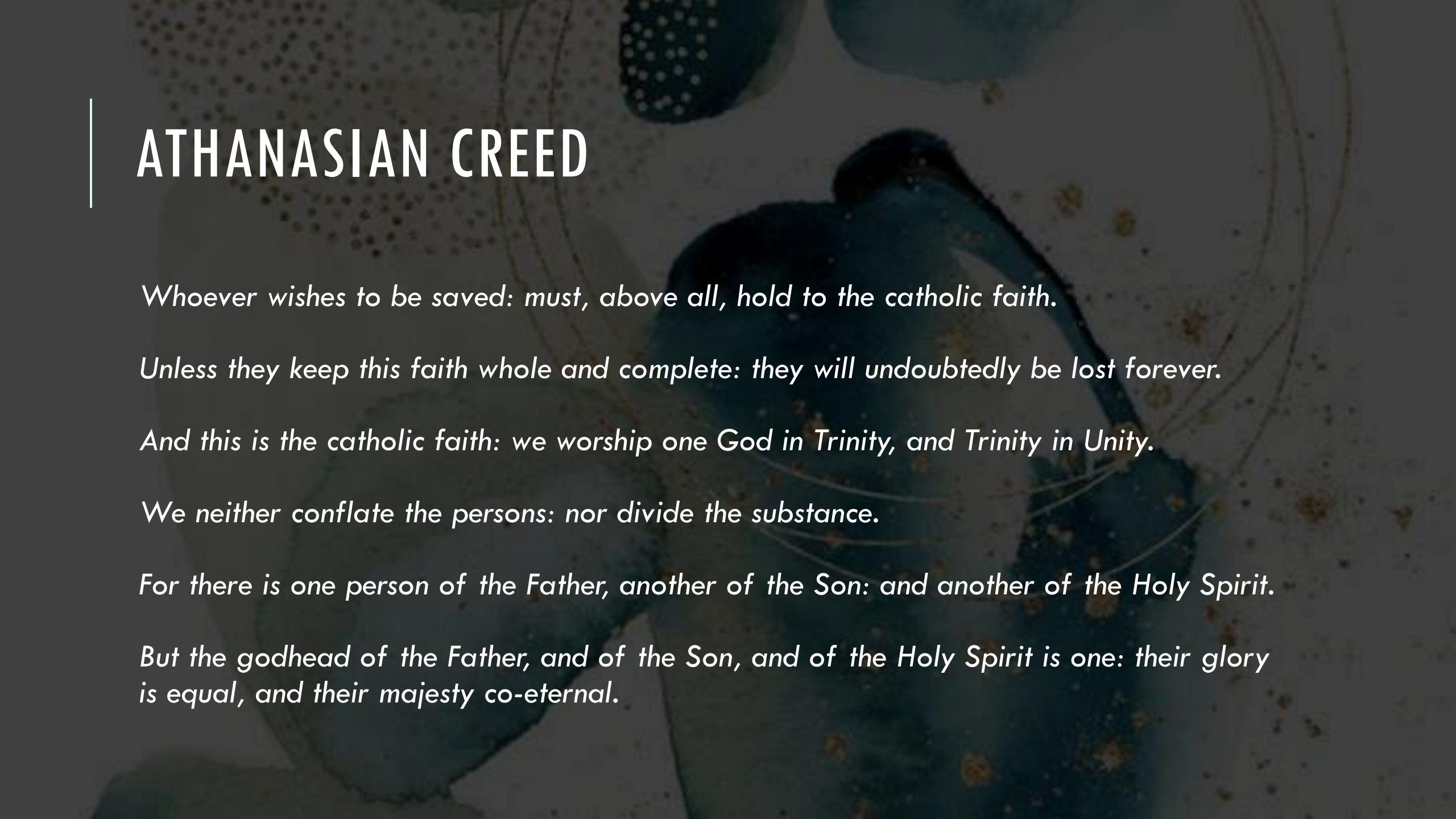


THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The resulting doctrine affirms that God is one in *being* (*ousia*) and three in *persons* (*hypostases*).

God is not one person wearing three masks, nor three gods cooperating. God is one divine reality existing eternally as Father, Son, and Spirit. These are not parts of God. They are relations within the one divine life.

This is important, because it claims that God's oneness is not solitary but relational and that God's very being is communion.



ATHANASIAN CREED

Whoever wishes to be saved: must, above all, hold to the catholic faith.

Unless they keep this faith whole and complete: they will undoubtedly be lost forever.

And this is the catholic faith: we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.

We neither conflate the persons: nor divide the substance.

For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Spirit.

But the godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is one: their glory is equal, and their majesty co-eternal.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The Trinity also arises from the gospel itself. Christians believe that in Jesus Christ, God does not merely send a messenger but comes personally.

“The Word became flesh” (John 1:14).

In Christ, God enters human history and our Salvation is participation in divine life.

This has profound implications.

If God is eternally relational, then love is not something God begins to do. It is what God *is*. Creation and redemption flow from God’s own life.



THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

In conclusion, Christian theology speaks of God as one and triune because it seeks to remain faithful to both biblical monotheism and the lived experience of salvation in Christ and the Spirit. Classical theism provides the conceptual framework: that God is the source of all being, omnipotent, eternal, and simple. Yet this God is not an abstract principle. God is living communion.

Within this disciplined speech, the doctrine of the Trinity emerges not as a riddle but as a confession: the one God is eternally Father, Son, and Spirit. God's unity is not loneliness; it is love.





READINGS

Athanasius, On the Incarnation, §§1–4

Augustine, De Trinitate, Book I (excerpt)