

# Problems People have with the "Trinity" Doctrine (Part 1)

The single greatest reason people struggle with the doctrine of the Trinity is **miscommunication**. It is *very* rare that anyone actually argues... about the *real* doctrine.... Most arguments that take place... involve two or more people fighting vigorously over two or more *misrepresentations* of the doctrine... no wonder so many encounters create far more heat than... light.<sup>1</sup>

It's basic for human communication to define whatever terms we use. Yet people often have so much emotional energy invested in a topic they often skip right past the "definitions" stage and charge right into debating "tooth and nails". This is not only true today, but also historically speaking: Many of the early battles over this doctrine had to do with one side using a certain set of terms in one way, and the other using the same terms in a different way. And later on, it was made even more difficult by the fact you had Greek speakers trying to understand what Latin speakers were saying, and vice versa! Today we can look back and realize that early on, both sides were actually saying the same thing using different words. If someone had just sat down and clearly defined the important terms, a lot of arguments could have been avoided.

I can't help but add that even in our own *daily routines*, we often assume those we speak with are using terms the same way we do, then occasionally encounter someone for whom that is not the case resulting in something which both parties either laugh about, one or both apologize for *or* one or both end up continuing to have an incorrect view of whatever the other stated only because of a *misunderstanding* in communication.

When it comes to people asking us whether we affirm or deny the *triune nature* of God, most of the time they leap right past the *formalities* and directly into some kind of *tug-of-war* with passages of Scripture. The result is almost always the same: People are asked to take sides and go away thinking the other is utterly blind. Such frustrating experiences could be minimized if we remember that we cannot assume the other person shares our knowledge or understanding of the specifics of any doctrine under discussion. As tedious as it may seem, we must resist the temptation to bypass the necessary "groundwork" and insist that everyone define what they believe the *Trinity*\* to be, and how we are going to use many of the key terms that must be used in such a discussion. Without this first step, little if anything might be accomplished.

[\*Note: Sometimes I dislike using the term "Trinity" because for many it has come to mean *only* 3 of something. I prefer using the word *Triunity* when speaking with those who may have no background in Christian doctrine. We should understand, however, that

"Trinity" came about as a contraction of the word *Tri-unity*; basically, because it was easier to pronounce. But by using it, we *may* incorrectly imply an emphasis on there being three while minimizing, downplaying or even removing the importance of their *unity*. "Trinity" also became an easy way to refer to the whole doctrine of the Triunity of God without having to use many paragraphs for what is being referred to; assuming of course that those conversing had already agreed on its meaning.]

## Before we Attempt to Define the *Undefinable*

Before we can begin discussing the *triune nature* of God, it is important to point out that we face a real difficulty right at the start: Language itself. Christians have struggled for centuries to express, within the limitations of human language, the unique revelation God makes of His mode of existence. We struggle because language is a finite means of communication. Finite minds are trying to express in words infinite truths. At times we simply cannot "say" what we need to say, to adequately express the grandeur of God.

Humans most often communicate by means of **examples**. When little children start asking the endless series of questions that arise in their minds, we often find ourselves using **analogies** and *examples* in our replies. When asked what a new food tastes like, we compare it to known foods in a child's life. For example, when describing a mango, we might say, "It tastes like a peach with a bit of lemonade," knowing a child has had those two items before. That isn't exactly what it tastes like, but they get the idea. As their "database" of knowledge grows, we can expand our analogies. We never escape this element of our language. When we encounter new thoughts and ideas, it's natural for us to fit them into preexisting categories by comparing them with past experiences or commonly shared facts.

This process works just fine for most things. **But for unique things, it does not!** If something is *truly* unique, it cannot be compared to anything else, at least not without introducing **some element of error**. One might be able to draw a parallel to a certain aspect of the truly unique, but if it's really unique, **the analogy will be limited**, and, if pressed too far, downright erroneous. But since we do not encounter many completely unique things in our lives, we manage to get along just fine without having to deal with them.

The problem is, of course, that **God is completely unique**. He is God, and there is no other. He is totally unlike anything else, and as He frequently reminds us, "'To whom can you compare me? Whom do I resemble?'" says the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25; NET). There is no answer to that question, because to compare God to anything or anyone else in the Universe is, in the final analysis, to deny His uniqueness. Whenever we say, "*God is like...*" we are treading on dangerous ground. Yes, we might be able to illustrate a certain aspect of God's being in this way, but in every instance the analogy, if pushed far enough, is going to break down.

Our language fails us in two other ways as well: **First**, our language is based upon **time**. We speak of the *past*, *present* and *future*. But from God's revelation of Himself in Scripture, we know God is **not** limited by time as we are. Thus, when we speak of Him using human language, we are forced to place misleading limitations upon His being. This often causes real problems for us in discussing His **triune nature**, for we slip into the all-too-human mode of thinking as *time-limited* creatures.

The **second** way in which our language fails us has to do with what we'll call "excess baggage." Words often carry with them "baggage" that has become attached to the meaning of a word. The way we use the word may cause us to conjure up particular mental images every time we hear it. The most glaring example of this is the word "*person*". This word is often used when discussing the Trinity. When we use the word "person," we attach to it all sorts of "baggage" that comes from our own personal experiences. We think of a physical body, an individual, separate from everyone else. We think of a spatial location, physical attributes like height, weight, age — all sorts of things associated with our common use of the word "person."

But if we are going to use this word, **person**, in order to attempt to state something about God, it can be very difficult not to drag along with it the "baggage" that comes from our common use of the term in everyday life. For example, many people, upon hearing the word "person" used of the Father, conjure up an image of a kind, old, *grandfather-figure* who is the "person" of the Father. They often think of "Him" as a separate individual, and in essence, have a limited **and very erroneous view** of the Father, because they're thinking of everything the term "person" (and "Father" \*) means to them in their own lives on earth as human beings! In order to have a right view of God, you must (though it may be difficult for you to do this!) labor to separate such "baggage" from your thinking and use such terms in very specific, limited ways so as to avoid confusion about what God has said about Himself.

(\* As a matter of fact, some people when hearing for the first time that God is called "Father" may have an immediately negative view brought forth in their minds, because their own father was abusive towards them! They may need to first see the love of some *godly man* for his children in order to accept what is written in Scripture of God being like a *father*.)

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<sup>1</sup> White, James R., *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), p. 23. Emphasis on the word "miscommunication" is ours. Most of Part 1 of this work is based on Chapter 2 of White's book; especially his discussions on words having "baggage" and God's uniqueness. (It's difficult to describe the problems people may have with the Trinity, without using many of the same phrases White did in this introductory chapter.)