

# The Trinity—Part Two

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## A Philosophical Defense of the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity cannot be proven by human reason; it is only known because it is revealed by special revelation (in the Bible). However, just because it is beyond reason does not mean that it goes against reason. It is not irrational or contradictory, as many critics believe.

*The Logic of the Trinity.* The philosophical law of non-contradiction informs us that something cannot be both true and false at the same time and in the same sense. This is the fundamental law of all rational thought. And the doctrine of the Trinity does not violate it. This can be shown by stating first of all what the Trinity is not. The Trinity is not the belief that God is three persons and only one person at the same time and in the same sense. That would be a contradiction. Rather, it is the belief that there are three persons in one *nature*. This may be a mystery but it is not a contradiction. That is, it may go beyond reason's ability to comprehend completely, but it does not go against reason's ability to apprehend consistently.

Further, the Trinity is not the belief that there are three natures in one nature or three essences in one essence. That would be a contradiction. Rather, Christians affirm that there are three *persons* in one essence. This is not contradictory because it makes a distinction between person and essence. Or, to put it in terms of the law of non-contradiction, while God is one and many at the same time, he is not one and many in the *same sense*. He is one in the sense of his essence but many in the sense of his persons. So there is no violation of the law of non-contradiction in the doctrine of the Trinity.

*A Model of the Trinity.* By saying God has one essence and three persons it is meant that he has one "What" and three "Whos." The three Whos (persons) each share the same What (essence). So God is a unity of essence with a plurality of persons. Each person is different, yet they share a common nature.

God is one in his substance. The unity is in his essence (what God is), and the plurality is in God's persons (how he relates within himself). This plurality of relationships is both internal and external. Within the Trinity each member relates to the others in certain ways. These are somewhat analogous to human relationships. The Bible's descriptions of *Yahweh* as Father and Jesus as Son says something of how the Son relates to the Father. Also, the Father sends the Spirit as a Messenger, and the Spirit is a Witness of the Son (John 14:26). These descriptions help us understand the functions within the unity of the Godhead. Each is fully God, and each has his own work and interrelational theme with the other two. But it is vital to remember that the three share the same essence, so that they unify as one Being.

*Some Illustrations of the Trinity.* No analogy of the Trinity is perfect, but some are better than others. First, some bad illustrations should be repudiated. The Trinity is *not* like a chain with three links. For these are three separate and separable parts. But God is neither separated nor separable. Neither is God like the same actor playing three different parts in a play. For God is simultaneously three persons, not one person playing three successive roles. Nor is God like the three states of water: solid, liquid, and gaseous. For normally water is not in all three of these states at the same time, but God is always three persons at the same time. Unlike other bad analogies, this one does not imply tritheism. However, it does reflect another heresy known as modalism.

Most erroneous illustration of the Trinity tend to support the charge that trinitarianism is really tritheism, since they contain separable parts. The more helpful analogies retain the unity

of God while they show a simultaneous plurality. There are several that fit this description.

*A Mathematical Illustration.* One aspect of the problem can be expressed in mathematical terms. Critics make a point of computing the mathematical impossibility of believing there is a Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead, without holding that there are three gods. Does not  $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ ? It certainly does if you *add* them, but Christians insist that the triunity of God is more like  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ . God is triune, not triplex. His one essence has multiple centers of personhood. Thus, there is no more mathematical problem in conceiving the Trinity than there is in understanding 1 cubed ( $1^3$ ).

*A Geometric Illustration.* Perhaps the most widely used illustration of the Trinity is the triangle. One triangle has three corners, which are inseparable from, and simultaneous to, one another. In this sense it is a good illustration of the Trinity. Of course, the triangle is finite and God is infinite, so it is not an imperfect illustration.

Another aspect of the Godhead is that Christ is one person (shown as one corner of the triangle), yet he has two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. Some show this aspect graphically by symbolizing Christ's divinity by the corner of the triangle and using another geometric figure, a circle for instance, to illustrate the human nature. At the point of the person of Jesus Christ, the circle is welded onto the triangle, human nature touching, but not mixed with, divine. Human and divine natures exist side-by-side without confusion in the Son. His two natures are conjoined in one person. Or, in Christ there are two *Whats* and one *Who*, whereas, in God there are three *Whos* and one *What*.

*A Moral Illustration.* Augustine suggested an illustration of how God is both three and one at the same time. The Bible informs us that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Love involves a lover, a beloved, and a spirit of love between lover and loved. The Father might be likened to the Lover; the Son to the One loved, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love. Yet love does not exist unless these three are united as one. This illustration has the advantage of being personal, since it involves love, a characteristic that flows only from persons.

*An Anthropological Illustration.* Since humankind is made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), it would seem reasonable that men and women bear some snapshot of the Trinity within their being. One that causes more problems than it solves is to visualize the human being as a "trichotomy" of body, soul, and spirit. Whether the trichotomist position is accurate, this is not a helpful illustration. Body and soul are not an indivisible unity. They can be (and are) separated at death (cf. 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; Rev. 6:9). The nature and persons of the Trinity cannot be separated.

A better illustration based in human nature is the relation between the human *mind*, to its *ideas*, and the expression of these ideas in *words*. There is obviously a unity among all three of these without there being an identity. In this sense, they illustrate the Trinity.

*An Islamic Illustration of Plurality in God.* When talking with Muslims, the best illustration of a plurality is the relation between the Islamic conception of the Qur'an and God. Yusuf K. Ibish in an article entitled, "The Muslim Lives by the Qur'an," cited by Charis Waddy, *The Muslim Mind*, described it this way: The Quran "is an expression of Divine Will. If you want to compare it with anything in Christianity, you must compare it with Christ himself. Christ was the expression of the Divine among men, the revelation of the Divine Will. That is what the Qur'an is."

Orthodox Muslims believe the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated. It is not the same as God but is an expression of God's mind as imperishable as God himself. Surely, there is here a plurality within unity, something that is other than God but is nonetheless one with God in essential characteristics.

(to be continued)