

# The Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

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The idea of the Trinity, God in three persons, has troubled some Christians since the early Church. So many Christians were abandoning the idea that in the 6th century the Athanasian Creed (attributed to Athanasius but not written by him) was drawn up to affirm the importance of belief in the Trinity.

In 17th century England Isaac Newton, Lucasian Professor of Natural Philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge, was so troubled by the idea that he became a secret Unitarian. He could not, as a Fellow of Trinity College, declare his beliefs because he would have lost his job.

In the 18th century the chemist, Josiah Priestley, became a Unitarian. Many Unitarians were drawn from the ‘General Baptists,’ those Baptists who believed in salvation for all rather than for a chosen few, and [Dan Taylor](#), who led the New Connection, spent most of his life trying to stem this movement towards Unitarianism among General Baptist congregations.

Modern Baptists follow the line taken by Dan Taylor and other Baptists of his day, that a belief in the Trinity is essential to be considered a Christian.

In the 20th century the idea of the Trinity received unexpected support from the discovery that light can appear to us in two quite different, and apparently incompatible, ways — as a wave and as a particle — something which Newton, Priestley and the Unitarians had believed was impossible.

Of course, the Trinity appears to us in three quite different ways but showing that something can appear in two quite different ways makes it more reasonable to believe that something can appear in many quite different ways.

## So what can we say about the three ways in which the Trinity can appear to us?

Both the biblical and the scientific accounts of creation agree that light — which can appear to us in two quite different ways — was there at the beginning.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit was there at the beginning:

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

At first the writers of the Old Testament use the phrase ‘spirit of God’ but as time goes on they alternate between ‘spirit of God’ and ‘spirit of the Lord’ but they are obviously referring to the same way in which God can appear. It is only in Isaiah 63 that we get the first reference to the ‘Holy Spirit,’ the term which Jesus and the disciples use.

The word for ‘spirit’ is often used in the Bible to refer to the essence or life of someone and so it seems likely that, for the Jews, the Spirit was the essence of God appearing in the world in a variety of ways.

The Bible says that the Spirit came into or was with a great many different people in history, not just Jews like Joseph, Gideon, Jephtha, Sampson and David but also non-Jews like Balaam (Num 23.6;24.2) and Cyrus, the Great, (Ezra 1.1) who freed the Jews from captivity and ruled his empire with respect for all the cultures and religions in it.

Jesus brings two new things to our understanding of the Spirit when He promises that ‘another advocate’ is coming. Firstly, it is coming not on prominent people like leaders or priests but on ordinary people and, secondly, *we* can ask for it whereas in the Old Testament, only God gives it.

In His talk with Nicodemus, Jesus says (Jn 3:5–8):

... Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

In other words, when we ask Jesus into our lives, we are at the same time inviting the Spirit into our lives as we are born again. To put it another way, the relationship which we can have with God as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is a relationship in which God *will* enter into each one of us if we invite Him in.

This does not mean that His Spirit no longer comes upon non-Christians in the same way as His Spirit came upon Cyrus, the Great; indeed, some Christians have told me that He came into their lives when they were not Christians and that, as a result of that experience, they asked Him to come into their lives permanently. We can never know how many non-Christian lives God enters without them ever becoming His followers but we can be sure that God will do this whenever it furthers His purposes.

In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus makes another point. The word for ‘spirit’ can also mean anything from ‘breath’ to a mighty ‘wind.’ ‘Breath’ in this sense can be both very weak and very powerful; it can not only knock over something but also bring back to life someone who is dying.

Luke several times describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on early Christians but only once does he say it came ‘like the sound of a mighty, rushing wind’ (Ac 2:2). The day of Pentecost was different from any other coming of the Holy Spirit and Luke takes great pains to describe how different it was from the other times when it came on the early Christians.

So, the Holy Spirit can come on us so quietly that we may not physically feel His coming and yet affect us so powerfully that we achieve things which we never thought possible.

Paul puts it this way:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22–23).

The presence of the Spirit isn’t indicated just by obvious signs like being able to talk in foreign languages, as the disciples were on the day of Pentecost, but by the more subtle signs of ‘love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.’

Finally, it may be worth emphasising for those who get concerned that two of the three ways in which God appears seem to be male that the Spirit is neither male nor female.

Turning to God, the Father, there is no real concept of God, the Father, until Jesus introduces the idea at the age of twelve when he asks his parents, ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ (Lk 2:49). Many years later, when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus starts the prayer with the word, ‘Father’ (Lk 11:2). In Greek, ‘Our’ comes after ‘Father.’ So the first word of the prayer is, ‘Father.’ Luke puts the story of the prodigal son before this request from the disciples (Lk 10:29–37) and follows it with Jesus emphasising that God will always be a good Father, not giving his children a snake when they ask for a fish, and so on (Lk 11:5–8).

It has become customary among some Christians to stress the greatness of God, His omniscience and omnipotence, but Jesus is clear that God’s purpose in being all-knowing, all-powerful and so on is not to exercise power over us but to be a good father to us — to know our every need, to see our every weakness and to give us His grace to overcome them.

This does present a problem for some people who have been abused by their fathers and find it difficult to have a positive view of father figures; so it may be worth saying that the important point is that a child receives love from at least one person around them, regardless of their gender. The important thing about our relationship with God, the parent, is not his or her gender but the quality of the love which we receive.

He expressed this love for us through His Son. On the one hand, psychology tells us that the best teachers are those who also model the behaviour they teach; Jesus did not just teach people to love their enemies; he went to have a meal with a Pharisee; he didn’t just teach people to be merciful; he went to eat with a tax gatherer. He didn’t just tell the story of the good Samaritan; he healed a Roman centurion’s servant. On the other hand, sacrificing a son was a very powerful message to the Jewish community, brought up on the story of the faithfulness of Abraham who was prepared to sacrifice his only son in obedience to God.

In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus explained the depth of God’s love for the world (Jn 3:16):

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

In Jewish culture it would have been unbelievable for a father to sacrifice his only son, his only way of keeping the family line going, for someone else. Even when God had tested Abraham in this way, He had provided Abraham with a way out through the ram caught in the thicket (Gn 22.13).

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews later picks up this story to demonstrate the centrality of faith in God to our Christian faith (Heb 11:17–19).

However, the idea that God would appear in human form was difficult for the disciples to understand; Philip makes a quite audacious request:

Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.

audacious because God had refused to show His face to Moses when Moses had asked Him to do so. He would only show His retreating back (Ex 33:23). So, for a Jew, Philip was really pushing his luck asking to see the Father when even Moses could not.

Jesus’ quiet reply, ‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me,’ echoes something which Jesus says about the kingdom of God; we are in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of God is in us (Lk 17:21). This tight relationship, Jesus says, is at the heart of everything He can do and everything which God can do through Him.

So the Son is a human model of how we can behave, a crucial illustration of the Father's love and an expression of the type of relationships which bind the Trinity together. A similar type of relationship is available to us if we choose to accept the kingdom of God so that we are in the kingdom and the kingdom is in us.

In the end, there is no longer any good scientific reason for arguing against the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit. Science shows us that the same thing can appear in quite different ways and that the same thing can, at the same time, be both incredibly weak and incredibly powerful.

The real difficulty is not really in the Trinity but in accepting that God loves us so much that He would manifest Himself on earth in human form and submit to such a cruel death for us. Some people don't see themselves as sinners and so cannot make sense of a God who comes to earth to save sinners; some people see themselves as such great sinners that they cannot believe that anyone, particularly not God, would love them so much that He would die for them. Some people do not find the idea of the Spirit dwelling in them easy to accept.

In the end the idea of the Trinity may be far easier for a 21st century scientist to accept than the ideas that we are all sinners, that God thought us all sufficiently worth saving that He sent His Son to die a cruel death on the cross to save us or that we ourselves, however ordinary or insignificant we might think we are, can invite His Spirit to dwell in us. This is a far greater mystery than the mystery of the Trinity.

