

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 100 years before the Unitarians became a significant denomination. 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 Unitarian; many Unitarians were drawn from the 'General Baptists', non-conformists who believed in salvation for all rather than for a chosen few. In the 19th century Unitarians tended to be associated with progressive social and scientific movements.

Modern Baptists follow the line taken by the 'Particular Baptists', many of whom were just as interested in science but who retained a belief in the Trinity. Both sects set up academies, the General Baptists in Whitechapel and the Particular Baptists in Bristol to give a university style education in science to non-conformists who were barred at the time from attending any university in England.

In the 20th century the Particular Baptists' insistence on the idea of the Trinity was vindicated for them by the discovery that light can appear to us in two quite different, and apparently incompatible, ways — as a wave and as a particle. The very idea that the same thing could appear to us in two quite different ways, which Newton, Priestley and the Unitarians had believed was impossible, was shown to apply to light.

Of course, the Trinity appears to us in three quite different ways but, from a scientific standpoint, showing that something can appear in two quite different ways removes the most significant barrier to believing that the same thing can appear in different ways.

So what can we say about the three manifestations of the Trinity?

Much of our understanding of God, the Father, comes directly from His Son, Jesus, but the Greek translators of the Hebrew scriptures 250 years earlier had also conveyed something of the fatherly nature of God's love for us when they chose the Greek word *agape*, or family love, to stand for the love of God in Greek.

Jesus uses many figures of speech to describe the relationship we can have with the Father, of which the story of the prodigal son conveys best the sort of family love God has for us (Lk

10:29–37). Luke follows the teaching of the Lord’s Prayer with a section emphasising that He will always be a good father (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-seeing 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.

Whatever else God is, He is first and foremost our Father, the one who is in the heavens.

The Holy Spirit or Holy Breath, to use a word a little closer to the Greek word *pneuma*, has inspired people down the ages. Breath can be both very weak and very powerful; it can not only knock over something very light but it can also bring back to life someone who is dying.

Science now tells us that gravity is one million, million, million, million, million, million times weaker than the electrical charge in an atom; yet when atoms cluster to form stars and planets it is powerful enough to hold our universe together.

So we should not be surprised that 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 we never thought possible.

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 He came on the early Christians. We, like them, can be filled with the Holy Spirit both with and without a dramatic physical manifestation.

Both the biblical and the scientific accounts of creation agree that light was there at the beginning — light, the very thing that can appear to us in two quite different ways, as a wave and as a particle.

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit was there at the beginning — that God was able to, and did, appear in two quite different ways right from the beginning, sometimes speaking as a Father, sometimes filling people with the Holy Spirit.

But God also chose to appear to us in a third way — as His Son — and to do so in human form. As with the Holy Spirit we are faced with a powerful contrast. If God, the Holy Spirit, can fill an existing human being and enable them to demonstrate God’s power on earth, it is not too big a step to think of God not only taking an existing human being and filling them with His Holy Spirit but also being born as His Son from a human being. That is the easy bit. The really big step is accepting the enormity of what God, His Son, did — that He took on all our sins and suffered a human death, a very painful and distressing human death, on the cross for us so that we could be saved from our sins and have eternal life.

The ‘scientific’ arguments against the Trinity — arguments which 20th century science has shown to be unsupportable — are not the difficulty; the real difficulty is in accepting that our Father 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.

There is no longer any good scientific reason for arguing against the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy 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.

So in the end the idea of the Trinity may be far easier for a 21st century scientist to accept than the idea that we are all sinners and that God in His fatherly love thought us all sufficiently

worth saving that He sent His Son to die a cruel death on the cross to save us. This is a far greater mystery than the mystery of the Trinity.

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