

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#33 Why are there so many 'Binitarian' Formulations in the NT?

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Today's question: "Why are so many references to God in the NT binitarian (Father and Son) rather than trinitarian (Father, Son and Spirit)? I'm thinking of Paul's greetings, Stephen's vision, Jesus' speeches about unity with the Father, etc. Admittedly the Spirit grows more prominent after Pentecost, but I've wondered about this a lot. I've seen anti-trinitarians use this argument, but though I can explain it away, I'm not sure I can positively account for it. Thoughts?"

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, why are so many references to God in the New Testament Binitarian, Father and Son, rather than Trinitarian, Father, Son and Spirit? I'm thinking of Paul's greetings, Stephen's vision, Jesus' speeches about unity with the Father, etc. Admittedly, the Spirit grows more prominent after Pentecost, but I've wondered about this a lot.

I've seen anti-Trinitarians use this argument, but though I can explain it away, I'm not sure I can positively account for it. Thoughts? It's a very good question and it's an important one to consider because we do indeed see a lot of Binitarian Formulations. The examples that are given, I think, reward closer attention on this front though.

If we look, for instance, at John 17 where Jesus describes his unity with the Father and praise to the Father, he talks, makes statements like, and now, oh Father, glorify me together with yourself with the glory which I had with you before the world was, and things like, and I have declared to them your name and will declare it, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them. Now, what is the glory that he was glorified with before the world was? I believe that should be connected with the Spirit. The Spirit is the glory of God the Father.

The Spirit is also the love of God. The Spirit is the one in whom Father and Son are joined together in the bond of love, in the communion of the Holy Spirit. And the love of Christ being in the disciples, the love of the Father being in the disciples and Christ being in the disciples is by the Holy Spirit.

So the Holy Spirit is here but not overtly present in the way that Christ and the Father are. Now this is worth noticing because the Spirit is not named as often and as prominently as the Father and the Son are. The Spirit works in a different way.

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes, so it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Because they take on the Spirit's characteristics, the Spirit is not prominent in the way that the Son is. The Son is the one who reveals the name of the Father.

The Son is the one who acts in the authority of the Father. The Son is the one sent by the Father. The Spirit is the one sent by the Son.

But there's a movement from Father to Son to Spirit and as the Spirit is sent, it's the Church that is sent in the power of the Spirit. And so the sending of the Spirit and the sending of the Church come together. So when Paul and the other apostles will talk about their ministry, they'll talk about their ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

In the name of Jesus Christ being associated with Christ as sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. And so Christ is the one who's anointed by the Spirit. Christ receives his name as anointed one because he is anointed by the Spirit.

And so the Spirit is present but not in the same way as overtly named in some of these instances. So when we're talking about Christ describing the love with which the Father loved him being in them and him being in the disciples, that I believe is a clear reference to the Spirit if we're paying attention. But yet it's not an overt reference to the Spirit in the sense of an explicit naming of the Spirit.

Likewise when we go to something like Acts 7 with Stephen's speech, the Spirit is clearly there. The people wrestle against and resist the Holy Spirit. But Christ is the one who is sent by the Father.

And yet when he sees the glory of Christ, he describes it, it's described in a way that is

Trinitarian. But he being filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God and said, look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. So what we see at that point is each person of the Trinity is present.

The Spirit is the one who's filling Stephen. Christ, the Son, is the one who's being seen at the right hand of the glory of God. And then the glory of God, the manifestation of God's glory is associated with the Father.

But then that glory is also, I think there's good reason to see that as something that's associated with the Spirit. The Spirit is the glory of God. And so as we put this together, there is a Trinitarian formulation, but there's not the same naming or direct seeing of the Spirit.

The Spirit is not an agent in the same way as the Father and the Son are within this narrative. What we see is the Spirit is the one who fills. His agency is expressed in a different way.

And when we look at this, all the persons of the Trinity are clearly active together, as we'd expect within Orthodox Trinitarian theology. But yet they are differently active. There is a difference in the mode of God's action.

As Father, Son, and Spirit, God acts in three different ways in each act. And now this is not a separation of God into three different parts, but yet it's God being differently active in each particular act of God that is unitary. So when we get to Paul, I think we have another thing to bear in mind that the Spirit is the one who is sent by the Son and the Son is the one who was sent by the Father.

The order of mission is Father to Son to the Church in the Spirit. So when the Apostles or Paul introduces his letters, he's introducing himself as one who has been sent on a mission, as one who is sent by Christ, who was sent by the Father. Now he's acting in the power of the Holy Spirit, but he's not sent by the Spirit in the same way.

He's sent by Christ in the Spirit. So when he's introducing his letters, he introduces them in the name of Christ and who acts in the authority of the Father, who is sent by the Father. And so I think that explains something of the Barnetarian formulation there.

But if you look through Paul's letters, what you'll see is on a number of occasions there are strong Trinitarian formulations. So for instance, if you go to 1 Corinthians chapter 12, you'll see something like, Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Spirit. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.

There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. And so we see Father, Son and

Spirit present there.

Likewise, we see in Ephesians, we have a number of other such examples. And it's one of the things that struck me as we were working through this book in the Theopolis podcast, just how many Trinitarian formulations there are. Now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.

Or later on, for this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you being rooted and grounded in love may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height, to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask and think, according to the power that works in us, to him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Now what you see there is a Trinitarian pattern that introduces it, but then you also see the presence of the Spirit in ways that are less direct.

So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. How is Christ dwelling in their hearts? By the Spirit, I believe. To know the love of Christ which passes all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

What is the fullness of God and the love of Christ that they know within, except the power of the Holy Spirit? Or able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us. Again, I think that can be connected with the Holy Spirit. Likewise we see in the chapter that follows, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, just as there is one Spirit body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all.

And so when we think about this in a Trinitarian way, and don't just think about the persons of the Trinity as utterly symmetrical, and if we think in terms of Trinitarian taxes, if we think in terms of the order of the economy, that the economy of the Trinity in salvation is not just one where the persons of the Trinity are interchangeable parties, but there is an order in God's action and each person is operative within the same operations in a distinguishable and different way, I think that helps us to understand why we see these Bonitarian formulations, because the Father and the Son are the ones who are associated with the commissioning and naming, and the Spirit is the one who fills, who

perfects and brings to realisation what is performed in the name of Christ, who was sent by the Father. When we think about it that way, I think it helps us to understand a bit more of what's going on here, that the Spirit is present, but the Spirit is not present in the same sort of way that we see Christ and the Father present, as those who are explicitly named, as those who are the ones who are directly sending, rather the Spirit is present as the one who is filling, as the one who is completing the mission, as the one in whom the being sent out occurs. When we look at events like Pentecost, it helps us to get a better sense of this as well, I think.

We don't usually have events like the baptism of Christ or Pentecost as well, where the Spirit is more directly seen. For the most part, the agency of the Spirit is presented as a more diffuse thing, and not so much focused upon the named person of Christ who acts as a far more focused agency as he is at God's right hand or as he performs his mission on earth. Rather, the Spirit's ministry is diffuse.

It's something that's expressed throughout the Church, it's something expressed through the words of prophecy, it's something expressed through the filling and glorifying, through the spreading abroad of Christ's love, all these sorts of things which I think lead to binitarian formulations being most appropriate in certain instances. But yet, when the full picture is seen, a trinitarian picture that explains the presence of those binitarian formulations emerges, I believe. I hope that this helps to go some way to understanding this.

There's a lot more that could be said and could be said a lot better than I've said it here, but I hope this gives an initial grasp of some of the issues that are at play here. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you have found these videos helpful, please pass them on to friends and acquaintances, and if you would like to support my videos, you can do so using my Patreon account.

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