

## The Paradox of the Trinity

During her student days at Oxford, my wife sang in a college chapel choir. One Trinity Sunday, at choral evensong, the College Chaplain was preaching. He commenced his sermon by explaining that he was going to approach a very difficult subject; then said words to the effect: “Actually it is very straightforward.

In the words of the hymn – ‘Consubstantial, Co-eternal’. That explains it all – there, I think I have dealt with it!!!”

Needless to say he went on to preach a sermon on the Trinity. He had quoted John Mason Neale’s translation of the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> Century hymn - “*Blessed city, heavenly Salem*”. We are probably more familiar with the hymn starting at verse 2 - “*Christ is made the sure foundation*”. (H&P 485, STF 677)

Laud and honour to the Father,  
 Laud and honour to the Son,  
 Laud and honour to the Spirit,  
 Ever Three, and ever One,  
**Consubstantial, co-eternal,**  
 While unending ages run.

**Consubstantial, co-eternal** – what do those words mean?

Collins Dictionary tells us that **consubstantial** was derived during the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> Century from “Church Latin”:  
*consubstāntiālis*, from Latin COM- + *substantia* SUBSTANCE.

Its meaning therefore is theological, referring to The Trinity:

**regarded as identical in substance or essence, though different in aspect.**

We very often reflect the difference in aspect when we join in the Benediction.

“The GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ”; “the LOVE of God (the Father)”; “the FELLOWSHIP of the Holy Spirit”.

The same dictionary explains co-eternal as **existing together eternally**. The dictionary further tells us that the word was in common usage during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century but after that usage rapidly declined.

The word was hardly used in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – perhaps, only when this hymn was sung?

Is there any simple, if imperfect, illustration that can be used for this identical substance yet different aspect of the Trinity?

I will attempt to give a few possibilities, each one of course having its limitations.

### Venn Diagrams

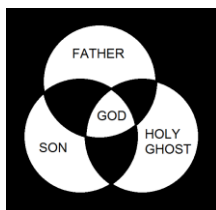
All the way through school (including A level maths) and University I never heard of a Venn Diagram; but within a few years of starting teaching, junior pupils were happily talking about “Set Theory” and drawing Venn Diagrams. It wasn’t a new concept - they were devised by John Venn, an English mathematician, around 1880!! - To aid him in teaching logic.

A stained glass window in Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, celebrates the work of this eminent Fellow of the College.



How can a Venn Diagram illustrate the Trinity?

Three distinct and equivalent circles – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – intersect in the central section which represents the “Three in One”.

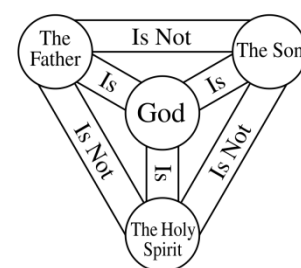


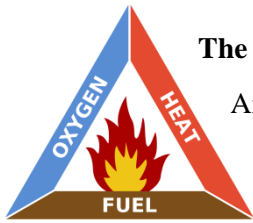
The imperfection in this illustration lies where two circles overlap. There **is** truth, of course, in saying

- (1) the Father and the Son are one;
  - (2) the Holy Spirit comes from the Father;
  - (3) the Holy Spirit is promised and given by the Son;
- but the purpose of the diagram is to illustrate “The Trinity” – the oneness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A better diagram that illustrates the uniqueness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and their unity in the “Godhead” is shown in the form of a triangle rather than three circles.

The separate identity of Father, Son and Spirit is emphasised as well as their unity in “God”.





## The Fire Triangle

Another illustration that might be used to emphasise our personal need of Father, Son and Spirit is the Fire Triangle.

You can have fuel and heat alone but there will be no fire.

It is the same for the other pairs - fuel and oxygen; oxygen and heat.

For fire to take hold you must have all three present - fuel, oxygen and heat.

In my first university summer vacation, I spent 8 weeks in Portsmouth Dockyard Laboratory.

While there I was taken “tanking”! If a ship required welding to be done on an empty fuel tank the Lab. Staff had to provide a “gas free” certificate before any welding torch could be lit.

One story I was told involved a frigate in Portland. The Lab. Staff travelled from Portsmouth; were invited to lunch in the Officers’ Mess, entertained royally, then in the afternoon turned down every fuel tank inspected!

A ship’s officer hit the roof – “I’ve welded on the outside of a full fuel tank” was his comment, to which the quiet reply was “Yes, better that than welding on an empty (*full of gaseous fuel*) tank”. (My addition in italics)

No fire is possible without fuel, oxygen **and** heat. For full Christian lives we need the input of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## Water – illustrating “Three in One”

We are all familiar with water in each of its physical states. There is the solid state – ice, the liquid state – water, and the gaseous state – water vapour. I will not call it steam because we all erroneously refer to those “clouds” coming from the kettle as steam – they are in fact droplets of water, steam that has condensed.

Did you know that there is only one temperature and one pressure where ice, water and water vapour can exist in equilibrium with each other?

This can be illustrated in a Phase Diagram – shown to the right.

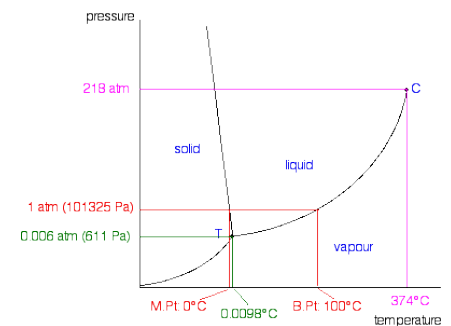
You will notice the familiar figures (in red) – figures for 1 atmosphere pressure.

Ice melts, water freezes at 0 °C.

Water boils, “steam” condenses at 100 °C.

Conditions when all three phases can exist together in equilibrium are not ones with which we are familiar! A pressure of 0.006 atmospheres and a temperature of 0.0098 °C.

This example of “three in one” is called the Triple Point of water.



## Tripod

We are all familiar with the sight of a photographer supporting a camera on a monopod.

Very useful to steady the camera but the photographer cannot let go!

Use of a monopod must involve the operator having ultimate control.

Have you ever seen a photographer using a support with two legs? I haven’t. Again, it would be an unstable arrangement and would need to be held.

We come to three legs, the familiar tripod arrangement. It is stable – able to stand on any ground however uneven.

If we think of each leg representing an element of the Trinity, they come together in the head of the tripod. Father, Son and Spirit are one in God.

What happens if we introduce a fourth leg? Put a chair or table on uneven ground - you know how difficult it is to find a stable position. If you do manage to find a position where all four legs are firmly grounded it is almost certain the chair seat or the table top will not be level!

Reliance on God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit works; introduce a further human element and failure follows.

