

When Faith Hurts: Recognising Spiritual Abuse – Part 1

The Spark That Lit The Flame

One of the contentious sparks that finally lit the flame we now know as the [Reformation](#) was the idea that the common person didn't need priests to mediate between them and God. At the time, the Church (the catholic Church – still the only established Church in the West) taught that grace was dispensed through the sacraments, which could only be administered by ordained clergy. Access to God was mediated through the priesthood, creating a system where spiritual life was filtered through human hands.

John Wycliffe (c 1328-1384), often called the Morning Star of the Reformation, had become outraged by what he considered the moral and political corruption among the priesthood and the spiritual abuse of the laity – the ordinary members of the church. He believed that the priests had elevated themselves so far above the laity so as to create a false barrier between God and people.

Protesting against the commonly accepted practices of the time, he contended that:

- Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Believers don't need a priest to confess sins, access God's grace, or receive salvation. Christ alone is sufficient.
- The Bible is the final and highest authority in matters of faith and practice, over and above church tradition or clerical interpretation – **sola scriptura**. I've written about traditions elsewhere so you can read more about that [here](#).

Sola scriptura – Latin for 'Scripture alone' doesn't mean that

traditions or rituals lack value or don't play a meaningful role in the life of faith, it simply means they don't supersede or replace the authority of Scripture – and where they conflict with it, Scripture always takes precedence.

John Wycliffe was not the first to make such an assertion regarding the sufficiency of Jesus or the primacy of Scripture. More than a thousand years earlier, Paul the Apostle took the Galatian church to task over their departing of the faith for what he called *a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all*.

Paul [warned against doctrines](#) that add human effort or tradition to Christ's finished work, emphasising that true faith is rooted in grace, not in adherence to rituals or human-imposed standards (Galatians 3:5-6, Ephesians 2:8). *The work of Christ is sufficient*, he reminded the Galatians.

He would no doubt have agreed with John Wycliffe, who – over 1,300 years later – maintained that any system *prioritising performance over grace, claiming exclusive access to truth, or defining salvation as a list of correct beliefs rather than trust in Christ*, not only distorts the gospel but also sows the seeds for communities rife with spiritual abuse.

What Is Spiritual Abuse?

Spiritual abuse is when a person or system uses God, Scripture, or religious authority to control, manipulate, shame, or harm others. It distorts faith into a tool of domination rather than love and freedom.

The tragedy of spiritual abuse is that it often masquerades as faithfulness, couched in biblical language. Words like *'truth'*, *'spiritual concern'*, or *'loving correction'* are often employed, with the catchphrase *truth spoken in love* used as a cover for conversations that contain cloaked judgment, spiritual superiority, or subtle control.

While this phrase – *truth spoken in love* – does come from the Bible, when Paul uses it, he is encouraging believers to grow in maturity, shown in the way they demonstrate love (Ephesians 4:15), not as it's often twisted to mean:

"I'm telling you you're deceived... but in love."

"I'm about to say something that's actually quite harsh... but only because I'm loving."

"I'm cutting you off... because I love you."

Spiritually Abusive Systems Replicate Themselves

Spiritually abusive people harm other people. However, spiritually abusive *systems* don't just harm individuals – they also *replicate themselves*.

In environments where fear, control, and rigid doctrine are normalised as "*truth*," people begin to internalise those patterns, often believing they are acting faithfully.

Over time, they adopt the same language, the same tactics, the same narrow lens – not out of malice, but because the culture has shaped them to see spiritual pressure as love, and manipulation as discipleship.

In this way, spiritually abusive cultures inevitably produce spiritually abusive people, many of whom genuinely believe they're helping others when they are, in fact, passing on the very harm they once received.

Of course, it's important to recognise that not every disagreement or correction is abusive. Sometimes, truth really does need to be spoken in love – with humility, gentleness, and a genuine desire for someone's good.

The difference lies in the posture of the heart and the impact

of the words: is the goal to restore, or to control? To build up, or to tear down? To *win*, or to *win to Christ*?

The Cure For Spiritual Abuse

And this leads us to the cure for spiritual abuse, which is, I believe, a Jesus-centric mindset. While sound theology matters – I’m the first to advocate for deep, serious, personal and corporate engagement with Scripture, a robust and living theology will spring from *understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus*, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of ‘theological beliefs’.

Like a concentric circle spreading outward, Jesus himself is the core from which every part of the Christian life flows. He is not just the centrepiece of our theology, but the source and shape of our entire faith – the origin of our love, the measure of our truth, the heartbeat of our worship. *He is our life*.

When Jesus is at the centre, everything else falls into place: doctrine aligns with grace, leadership reflects humility, spiritual communities become places that are safe, and mercy and judgment kiss one another.

But when something else takes the centre – a system, a doctrine, a leader, a fear – the circles become distorted, and what flows outward can easily become controlling or harmful.

Spiritual health begins not with getting all the answers right, but with keeping Jesus – who will lead us in all truth – at the core.

How Do I Know If I’m Being Spiritually Abusive?

Most people who perpetuate spiritual abuse don’t *think* they’re

being abusive. They believe they're protecting truth, upholding righteousness, or caring for souls. But underneath that often sits pride, fear, or a deeply ingrained belief that control equals faithfulness.

How can we tell the difference? How do we know if we've slipped from '*contending earnestly for the faith*' to controlling others in the name of faith, or defending doctrine at the cost of love?

1. We frame disagreement as deception.

We view disagreement with someone over theology as them *leaving the faith, being deceived or falling away*. For us, unity might look like uniformity, yet they are not the same thing. The Bible speaks of a universal, visible and invisible Church that is wildly diverse in how its members look, think or worship. Yet, within all this difference, its people are deeply connected in love and purpose, through mutual respect and, as touched on above, through the core central faith in Jesus Christ.

Uniformity, on the other hand, silences diversity in the name of truth and is often about control and fear of difference or 'mess', preferring the idea of enforcing group-think at all costs.

2. We speak with absolutes, black and whites, and hyper-literals.

We see the landscape of the Bible as black and white without nuance or the possibility of alternative interpretations to ours. Passages are applied absolutely and literally, often without consideration for context or in the light of grace.

People will try to say the Bible is black and white on every subject but it's not, not by half. There's plenty of grey, and bold, glorious colour too. There's space for openness and conversation and listening and learning and for seeing things

from different angles. While there are significant core doctrines that its not possible to differ on and still be called *Christian* (for example, the virgin birth or the resurrection of Jesus), there are plenty of second and third-tier theological positions that are fascinating to discuss, interesting to pull apart, and which definitely, absolutely do not define *whether someone is saved or not*. *Eschatology* – theology that deals with *the end times* – is one such topic.

3. We equate someone's worth or standing before God with their beliefs or behaviour

We treat people differently, depending on whether their theology aligns with ours. Rather than seeing every person in the image of God, we may consciously or unconsciously categorise them as '*in*' or '*out*', '*friend*' or '*foe*', and, as is common in some closed conservative communities, kindness, closeness, or blessing may be withheld – *shunning* – from those who we deem to have gone astray. We view this withdrawing as a *sad but necessary discipline*.

4. We think we are always right.

We may feel the need to constantly correct others, believing that our interpretation of Scripture isn't just valid but that it's the *only* valid one. When someone doesn't share our interpretation, we may consider them to be lacking understanding, spiritually shallow, or simply deceived, rather than considering that we could, in fact, be wrong.

Assuming our interpretation is the only valid one shuts down meaningful dialogue and puts us in the place of ultimate authority—where only God belongs. It leaves no room for learning, growth, or the Spirit's work in others. This mindset *turns faith into arrogance, not conviction*, and risks dividing the body of Christ over pride rather than truth.

How Do I Know If A Spiritual Community Is Spiritually Abusive?

The signs and red flags of a spiritually abusive community are the same as those you'd see in an individual – only magnified and reinforced through groupthink, tradition, or fear. Over time, they become woven into [the fabric of the culture itself](#), forming an entrenched and often intractable environment that is difficult to shift or challenge.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is a **certainty over humility** that defines the culture. Opposing or dissenting views or doubts are discouraged and questioning the status quo is seen as disobedience.

There is **control disguised as care**. Spiritually abusive communities often blur or erase healthy boundaries, becoming overly involved in members' personal lives.

Scripture is misused, not only taken out of context, but applied selectively, as and when it suits the agenda of those in control. The Bible becomes less a story of redemption and more a tool for behaviour management. In these settings, Scripture is no longer a living word that points people to Jesus – it becomes *a system of proof-texts* used to maintain power.

In Spiritually abusive communities, **acceptance depends on total agreement or compliance**, with any wrestling with faith or theology discouraged, dismissed, or defined as rebellion, weakness, or a lack of spiritual maturity. Doubt isn't treated as part of the journey – it's treated as a threat to the group's stability. As a result, people learn to suppress questions, keep quiet about struggles, and conform outwardly just to stay connected.

In spiritually abusive communities, there is often a **hyper-focus on *behaving* rather than *becoming***. The church, in

reality, is a messy but vital gathering of flawed, sinning humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God – asking questions, voicing doubts, stumbling forward in faith. When behaviour modification becomes the primary marker of spiritual maturity, it produces only superficially ‘good’ people who learn to hide their deepest fears and darkest sins.

Yet the church must be the place where those hidden things can be brought into the light – not met with shame, but healed with grace, love, and truth that restores rather than condemns.

How Do I Know If I’m Being or Have Been Spiritually Abused?

Whether in a community or relationship, the signs of spiritual abuse are often subtle.

You might feel confused, fearful, or disconnected from God – as though you need permission to be close to Him. You might suppress questions to stay accepted. You might feel like your worth depends on performance or belief alignment. You might experience distancing and withdrawal upon asking uncomfortable questions or sharing truly where you’re at.

These are warning signs. Spiritual abuse isn’t always overt – sometimes it whispers insidiously, hidden in invisible codes and unspoken expectations.

The spirit of the Reformation was that *Christ alone is sufficient* – the one mediator between God and humanity. We are made right with God through Jesus Christ, not through traditions, systems, sacramentally dispensed grace, or the mediation of others.

At its core, spiritual abuse distorts the relationship a person has with God. It inserts human authority where there should be direct access, making people feel as though they

need permission, mediation, or perfect obedience to be accepted by Him. Instead of creating space where people can personally draw close to God, spiritual abuse places leaders, systems, or expectations in the way – creating unnecessary barriers to genuine, intimate relationship with God and laying ‘burdens on people which are too heavy to bear’.

If this resonates with you – if you’ve felt the weight of silence, shame, or misplaced authority in the name of faith – know that healing is possible. In Part 2, I’ll explore what that looks like: how Christ heals what systems distort, and how to rebuild a faith rooted in freedom, not fear.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” – 2 Corinthians 3:17, NIV

What Should I Do If I’m In A Spiritually Abusive Community?

Leave.

Systemic spiritual abuse is dangerous, deceptive, and, ultimately, destructive. These environments distort your view of God, damage your sense of self, and normalise control under the guise of faith. Even if you don’t feel personally harmed, staying means you risk becoming complicit – reinforcing harmful systems, silencing questions, and modelling that this version of “faith” is acceptable for the next generation.

You don’t have to stay in a place just because it calls itself ‘*the faith*’, ‘*the truth*’, or ‘*the way*’. There’s only one way, truth and life, and his name is Jesus. Leaving a toxic or spiritually abusive system is not leaving Jesus. *In fact, it may be the most faithful thing you can do.*

You might have doubts about taking such an extreme course of action and wonder, can a spiritually abusive system be *rehabilitated* or should it be *burnt to the ground*?

It depends. Reform is possible, but rare and unlikely. More often than not, if the roots are rotten, the system needs to die, not just be repainted.

When power is centralised and unquestionable, when protecting the institution matters more than healing the people, when spiritual control is baked deep into the DNA, *then it's time to light the match.*

In Part 2, I'll explore what recovery from spiritual abuse looks like – how faith can heal, how trust can be slowly rebuilt, and what it takes to reimagine church through the lens of grace.

I'll also touch on what it might mean for a healthy person to remain within a broken system, and the bare minimum that would need to be in place for that to be a wise choice moving forward. Look for 'When Faith Heals | Recovering From Spiritual Abuse – Part 2' coming soon.

An Argument For The Trinity

If you're an orthodox Christian, already familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity, you might like to head somewhere else right now. This article will probably be, as they say, preaching to the converted.

But if that's not you, and the idea of the Trinity is new, challenging, confronting, downright heretical, or, as far as you're concerned, completely unbiblical...just hear me out.

I grew up being told all these things about the Trinity. I can confidently say now that not only do I believe I was misinformed about what the doctrine endeavours to articulate, I was also misinformed about the historical background and context of this doctrine, what the early church taught

regarding the nature of Jesus, and what scripture itself teaches.

Several things resulted in a massive shift in my perspective, understanding, and belief of this doctrine, which I'd like to share in this article and which I hope will be helpful to anyone wrestling with this topic. It's not necessarily everyone's conversation of choice, but it's come up several times with different individuals in the past few months, and so now seemed like the right time to share some thoughts on this one.

The Context Of The Council Of Nicea

In the spring of 325AD, a council of Christian bishops convened in the city of Nicaea (now known as the town of İznik, in modern-day Turkey). They met to deliberate over a theological dispute that had arisen concerning the nature of Jesus, his origins, and his relationship to God the Father.

Known as the Arian controversy – named for the presbyter and priest (Arius) to whom the controversy is attributed – the gathering was not so much an argument about whether Jesus *was God*, but rather, a dispute over whether Jesus *was eternal*; and therefore *without beginning*, or whether he had been created *before time* and was therefore subordinate to the Father.

This is an important distinction: the Council was not arguing over whether '*Jesus was God*' (God the Son), as I had always been taught. This was a dispute over whether he had always existed (and was therefore of *the same substance* as the Father) or whether he had been begotten/created (and was therefore *similar but not the same as* God the Father).

"Arian theology holds that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who was begotten by God the Father with the difference that the Son of God did not always exist but was begotten/made before time by God the Father; therefore, Jesus was not coeternal

with God the Father, but nonetheless Jesus began to exist outside time."

This was an ontological argument. Who was Jesus before he was Jesus, did he *always exist* before time or was he *created* before time? Was the Son *equal* with the Father or *subordinate*? Was he *the same as* or *different* from the Father?

What Did The Early Church Teach?

The reason the Arian theology was so controversial is because it was *a change to the status quo*. The early church taught and believed in the divinity of the Son, and that his nature was the same essence and substance as God the Father. They believed that Jesus, as the Word of God, was eternal, was from God Himself, and therefore was of the same substance as God.

"According to its [Arianism's] opponents, especially the bishop [St. Athanasius](#), Arius' teaching reduced the Son to a demigod, reintroduced polytheism (since worship of the Son was not abandoned), and undermined the Christian concept of redemption, since only he who was truly God could be deemed to have reconciled humanity to the Godhead." | [Britannica](#)

We have not just the writings of well-known apostles like Paul and Peter and John, but also those who came after them – extra-biblical sources – who taught about Christ as the Word of God, the virgin birth, and the incarnation. Names such as Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Polycarp, and Irenaeus, many of whom were contemporaries and disciples of the apostles, wrote and taught extensively on this subject. You can read, for example, Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians (written some time between 107–110 CE) [here](#).

It is an egregious misrepresentation to say that the divinity of Christ was invented in the fourth century; what is actually true is that the accepted understanding of *the nature of Christ* was being challenged. The intention of the Council of

Nicene was, therefore, to define, in written form, what the church *already believed and taught regarding Jesus*, binding Christendom together in unity across different traditions and practices.

The Nicene Creed used the same three-fold structure as the more simple and earlier creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed, which had touched very little on this topic, and, because of this particular controversy, went into more depth and detail in relation to Christology – that is, the nature and origin of Jesus Christ.

Is 'Trinity' In The Bible?

The early church fathers taught and believed in the divinity of Jesus, his existence before time, and his incarnation as the Word-Made-Flesh. But perhaps they had deviated significantly in doctrine in the first few years of the church's existence?

This is often one of the criticisms leveled at the Trinity from those who reject it, a two-fold dismissal if you like; firstly, that the word 'trinity' isn't mentioned in the Bible and, secondly, that its 'official introduction' in the fourth century (a claim shown to be a misrepresentation, at best) was 'the great apostasy' the church had been warned about (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3).

It's suggested that as early as AD98, only a generation on from the incredible outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), the church had veered wildly off-course and into heresy, even with the Holy Spirit as guide and teacher, the very recent reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the powerful witness of those who had walked with him, many of whom were still alive.

Honestly? I find that extremely unlikely.

I trust not only the teaching of the apostles themselves, who

were radically transformed by their experience of the resurrection, but also the work of the Holy Spirit, active and powerful, in growing the church and supporting the new believers in their faith. It just doesn't seem credible to me that something so important, so vital, so life-changing could be corrupted and derailed so early on.

Certainly, the church began to face challenges as time went on, particularly as the apostolic age drew to a close. It experienced great periods of persecution, followed finally by a shift in fortune in the form of open favour from Rome's pagan Emperor, Constantine, the emperor of the Nicene Creed. Yet it was during the early years of persecution and struggle that we find the orthodox doctrines being taught and written about, not formulated later under, as is sometimes asserted, pagan influences.

You can research any of the early church fathers and their teaching for yourself. Ignatius, for example, an early Christian writer and later Patriarch of Antioch, wrote many letters which serve as examples of early Christian theology. He, along with Polycarp, another apostolic father, are traditionally held to be disciples of John of the Revelation, and demonstrated their 'trinitarian' consciousness in their writings.

Just as the word 'omnipotence' isn't found in the Bible, and yet we understand the concept of God's supremacy and power to be taught throughout scripture, so, too, you won't find the word 'trinity', and yet the concept of One God, revealed to us in three distinct persons, completely unified with each other, can be found throughout the New Testament.

Here are several biblical passages which teach this concept regarding the Christology of Jesus. Take some time to read through them for yourself: John 1:1-5, John 1:1-5, John 5:17-18; John 10:33-38, Hebrews 1:1-4, Colossians 1:18-20, Colossians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 8:6, Philippians 2:6-11, John

17:5, 2 Corinthians 8:9, John 8:58.

While the word 'trinity' is not explicitly used in the New Testament letters and epistles, the *concept* of the trinity was certainly expressed by biblical authors and was the understanding of the early church, as can be seen by the extensive writings of the early church fathers. It was this understanding that the Nicene Creed attempted to articulate and document in 325AD.

God Is 'One' So The Trinity – 'Three Gods' – Can't Be Right. Can It?

One of the huge misconceptions that non-Trinitarians hold to is the belief that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches there are three gods. In reality, the Trinitarian doctrine actually affirms biblical monotheism and rejects the heresy of 'three gods' (polytheism).

The Bible teaches that God is One, but not in the numerical sense that is often used by non-Trinitarians. God is One in the sense that there is no other. He, alone, is the singular God in all the universe.

The ancient Jewish prayer – known as the Shema – recites this truth *"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength"*.

The meaning of this famous prayer is that the people of Israel were to learn to listen and love God fully, above all else, with all their hearts. The Shema wasn't making a statement about God's essence but rather His preeminence. It wasn't intended to function as a negation of the idea of the Trinity but as a statement of allegiance to the only true God, particularly relevant for a people who had been steeped in polytheism for generations.

"This prayer has been one of the most influential traditions in Jewish history, functioning both as the Jewish pledge of allegiance and a hymn of praise." | The Bible Project

Interestingly, Jesus quotes the Shema on two occasions in the synoptic gospels, in Matthews 22 and Mark 12. In Matthew, he follows up immediately with questions about the origins and paternity of the Messiah, the Messiah's relationship to the great king of Israel, David, and the title given to the Messiah of 'Lord'; an interesting progression of thought from Jesus, and one which had the effect of reducing his audience to silence.

Isn't The Trinity Doctrine 'Catholic'?

If, by 'catholic', you mean 'universal', then yes. For the first fifteen hundred years of the church's history, there was only one, 'universal' church and early creeds will often refer to the church in this way. The church's official position in relation to the nature of Christ had been documented in the Nicene Creed in 325AD and it remains the official, orthodox, (accepted) doctrinal position.

However, I suspect what is actually being asked is, *"isn't the Trinity doctrine part of the Roman Catholic Church?"* (ie 'a Catholic thing') and the short answer is no. The Trinity isn't only specific to the Roman Catholic Church. All three branches of Christianity (Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism) subscribe to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Even after the Protestant Reformation swept through Europe, beginning with the nailing of Martin Luther's 95 Theses to the castle church in Wittenberg, the resultant split between the Catholic Church and its Protestant offspring largely revolved around the idea that people should be independent in their relationship with God, taking personal responsibility for their faith and referring directly to the Bible for guidance, instead of priests or popes. The Reformation rejected the

doctrine of papal supremacy, among other things, and arrived at different views on ecclesiastical polity, apostolic succession, and the nature of salvation, however disagreement on the Trinity was not one of the areas of argument.

That being said, there are a few exceptions; some further religious movements arose out of the Protestant movement which rejected the doctrine of the Trinity; these branches of Christianity are known as 'Unitarian' but are [Socinian](#) rather than Arian in theology.

What Does It Mean To Be God?

The Bible gives us many descriptions of Who and What 'God' is, endeavouring to help us understand the concept of God, as best we can, from our limited human experience.

The Bible teaches that God is the Creator of all things, the source of all life, sovereign over all, powerful, and perfect. Without beginning and without end, He is eternal, holy, clothed in light, glorious as the sun. Yet He is also tender, loving, forgiving, as compassionate as any mother to her children, and as protective as any father defending His family.

We are created in His image, bearing many of His attributes, yet because of the fall, bound by mortality and constrained by sin. The fall in Eden resulted in brokenness in our relationship with God, creating an impenetrable barrier that we couldn't cross (Exodus 33:18-23). As the popular worship song, 'Jesus, My Living Hope' laments, *"How great the chasm that lay between us, how high the mountain I could not climb."*

Until Jesus came, no one had ever seen God face to face. Yet as Timothy writes (1 Timothy 3:16), the invisible God was made visible in Jesus, *"this is, without question, the great mystery of our faith; God was revealed in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, proclaimed among the nations,*

believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

If we could not come to God (and we couldn't – see below: 'God Does The Saving'), then God would come to us.

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.” | [John 1:14](#)

John, writer of the fourth gospel, offers a more insightful perspective, opening with the otherworldly prologue regarding Jesus and his origins; specifically, the identification of Jesus as the Word, who was with God and was God in the beginning.

Through Jesus, he says, all things have been brought into being; he is the light and life of humanity, who became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory – face-to-face at last – as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

God came to us, wrapped in the perishable, temporary covering [of flesh and bone](#), the full intensity and glory hidden within Jesus. We have a hint of what that glory was like in Luke 9:29-32, where the veil was lifted momentarily and his appearance was altered, an event the Bible calls 'the transfiguration'.

Jesus himself declared that only he could reveal God fully, in his words, “no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27b) and that “the person who has seen him [Jesus] has seen the Father.” (John 14:8-9).

The gospel of John offers more: seven 'signs' culminating in the resurrection of Lazarus (proof of Jesus' power over even death itself), and seven 'I am' discourses, culminating in the

declaration by Thomas concerning Jesus as “my Lord and my God”. The first instance, in John 8:58, leaves no doubt that Jesus’ claimed to be God incarnate, because the Jews were infuriated by his reply and took up stones to kill him.

“John’s “high Christology” depicts Jesus as divine and preexistent, defends him against Jewish claims that he was “making himself equal to God”, and talks openly about his divine role and echoing Yahweh’s “I Am that I Am” with seven “I Am” declarations of his own.” | Stephen L Harris, Understanding the Bible

Jesus was fully God; the invisible God made visible in a way that we could draw near to, touch, walk with, and eat with. Yet Jesus didn’t count his equality with God as something to be held onto, but rather something to be set down, for our sakes, and did so ‘by becoming a man like other men’ (Philippians 2:7-9, Weymouth NT).

Nothing Is Impossible With God

Those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity often do so on the basis that it’s impossible; how could God become human or how could God die? And who was ‘left in heaven’ if God came to earth? (yet another misunderstanding about who was sent and who was the sender: “And we have seen and testify that *the Father* has sent *His Son* to be the Savior of the world.”)

Yet we also accept many other impossibilities in scripture: that life can be created from nothing, that sickness can be completely healed, that water and wind can be controlled, that time can be stopped, that water can be turned into wine, that bread and fish can be multiplied, that death itself can be overcome and vanquished.

Nothing, literally, nothing is impossible with God and if we learn anything from scripture, it’s that we should be ready to entertain any possibility and expect any outcome. Though we

might not always understand how something could be possible, that shouldn't stop us from believing that it could. Our cry should always be, 'Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief.'

God is Spirit. He is not limited by shape, force, boundaries or time. The same, however, cannot be said of humanity. We are limited; by time, by physicality, by mortality, by sin. There are things we simply cannot do.

What shifted in my perspective in this particular area was the realisation that without the doctrine of the Trinity, the concept of redemption becomes humanly impossible.

While Jesus had to be truly human – atonement was required on behalf of humanity and only a human could make this restitution (and I've [written about Jesus' humanity elsewhere](#)) – if he had been *only human*, it would have been impossible for him to have overcome sin.

Limited in the same way that we are, even with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, he couldn't have lived a perfect, sinless life and, therefore, successfully 'made atonement' for sin, or have overthrown the greatest enemy, death itself.

This was the entire point of the giving of the Old Covenant; it was intended that humanity should realise through their failure to keep the Law, despite even the best of intentions, their complete inability to atone for or redeem themselves and restore their relationship with God.

Humanity was in an awful bind, a catch-22 situation of epic proportions: atonement must be made by a human...but no human perfect enough or powerful enough existed to make such an atonement. That is the very definition of humanly impossible.

"But behold", God says, "I will make a way in the desert. I am about to do something new. Prepare the way of the Lord..." While impossible with humanity, nothing was impossible with God.

The Word Who was in the beginning, Who called life into being, Who is the source of life and light of humanity stepped in the very creation He had made in order to save and redeem it. The Word – truly God – became human, He became the representative of us all and in his human body, the war against sin and death would be waged and won.

What was impossible for us became possible with God. Jesus Christ – truly human and truly God; the One and Only Begotten Son of the Father had come to save the world and reconcile us back to God.

God Does The Saving

It seems to me that once you start paying attention, you realise the Bible is telling the same story over and over again, but just in different ways, and it can perhaps be summarised in one simple sentence: “God Does The Saving.”

“Praise the Lord, who carries our burdens day after day; he is the God who saves us. Our God is a God who saves; he is the Lord, our Lord, who rescues us from death.” | Psalm 68:19-20

At every turn, humanity’s inability to overthrow the curse of Eden is demonstrated, as chapter after chapter of the Bible lays out the moral bankruptcy of the human race. Humans were unable to wage war against sin and win, or to overthrow death. The separation that had resulted from the fall in Eden couldn’t be healed just by human power, it needed divine intervention.

It would be God, and it was always going to be God, who would do the saving.

I think this raises another significant point, and one which is worth spending some time on: the difference between a grace-framed salvation theology and a works-framed salvation

theology.

Grace tells us that God saves because of Who He is, not because of who we are. We are *saved by grace through faith* – and this is not of ourselves – it is a gift of God. Human endeavour played no part in the work of saving or redeeming humanity back to God. (Ephesians 2:4-10). And this ‘work of saving’ took place long before we ever turned to God, even, as Romans comments, “*while we were still sinners.*”

Jesus showed us the kind of human we were intended to be, and the kind of holy life we were purposed for, an exact representation of the divine. He didn’t achieve this through grit, sheer willpower, or determined asceticism, but because he *was also truly God*. Nothing of his life should convince us that we can ever be like him, *by our own resolve, strength, or determination* or that by doing good we are *contributing to our salvation*.

Even the most steadfast, committed, faithful Christian does not add anything to the victory won by Jesus and it is only the work of *Christ-in-us* that we are able to become more like God (our works, however, *do* prove our faith is real – and I’ve written [more about that here](#)).

Irenaeus, an early church father, puts it like this: “*For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.*”

I think the problem with making Jesus human *and only human* is that we are making the work of salvation a human endeavour. We are in danger of seeing Jesus’ life as a model for good behaviour (that will somehow make us right with God), and we are framing our Christian life as an exercise of our own determination and willpower which will enable us to overcome. Unspoken but implicit in this theology is the idea that “if you try hard enough, *you too* can overcome like Jesus”.

But it is only in *Christ* that we are more than conquerors; we are graciously invited into his victory, and it is only because, in Christ, *who was divine*, God raising us up to partake in the divine nature (*theosis*) becomes possible.

In Conclusion (And Not To Be Considered Exhaustive!)

If you've been wrestling with this topic, the best place to start is always, of course, with scripture. And the best way to start is by asking questions.

I would suggest you take some time to read through the New Testament letters and gospels and notice what the writers are telling you about Jesus. If the idea of 'the Trinity' is new or challenging for you, simply set that aside for now; you're not seeking to prove or disprove the doctrine, only to hear what scripture has to say. Begin the exercise with a willing mind, an open heart, and a prayer for God to reveal Himself.

Read about church history, particularly the first 300 years, for yourself, and seek out the writings of the early church fathers (pre-Nicene era). Is the language used or are the concepts described by them compatible with scripture? Or do they introduce ideas thoroughly at odds with the Bible?

Familiarise yourself with the background and context of the Council of Nicea. What was the reason they gathered? Does this reshape your understanding of the creed and provide better explanation to the language used within it? Are the conclusions of the Council (irrespective of their 'wordiness') consistent with your journey through scripture and history?

Consider the reason for Jesus' coming: why was he sent and what did he accomplish? Jesus himself told us when only just a young boy that "he must be about His Father's business" (Luke 2:49). What was "this business"? Of particular relevance to these questions is Jesus' discourse in John 8:12-58.

Don't try to arrive at a resolution or conclusion in a single moment and allow yourself the freedom to acknowledge that there are things you may not know or understand now, or ever. Our hope rests not in our complete comprehension but in our posture of trust in the One who saves.

And finally, I would respectfully encourage you to consider this: our theology – what we think about God – is important. How can we begin to know and understand ourselves and our place in this expansive creation if we have no sense of the One who made us and the purpose for which we've been made?

However, a robust and living theology will spring from understanding and experiencing who God is and what He has done for us, in Jesus, not simply by giving agreement to a statement or creed of 'theological beliefs'.

To know God is to know Jesus, whom He sent ([John 17:3](#)), and, therefore, the true starting point of our theology as Christians is looking to Jesus and, fundamentally, to God, in Jesus, crucified. It is in this that we see the extent to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue and redeem us.

Although deeply theological in its language, I believe the Trinity doctrine boldly endeavours to affirm and clarify this reality, underscoring the deep commitment of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to rescuing, redeeming and restoring creation.