When Truths Collide

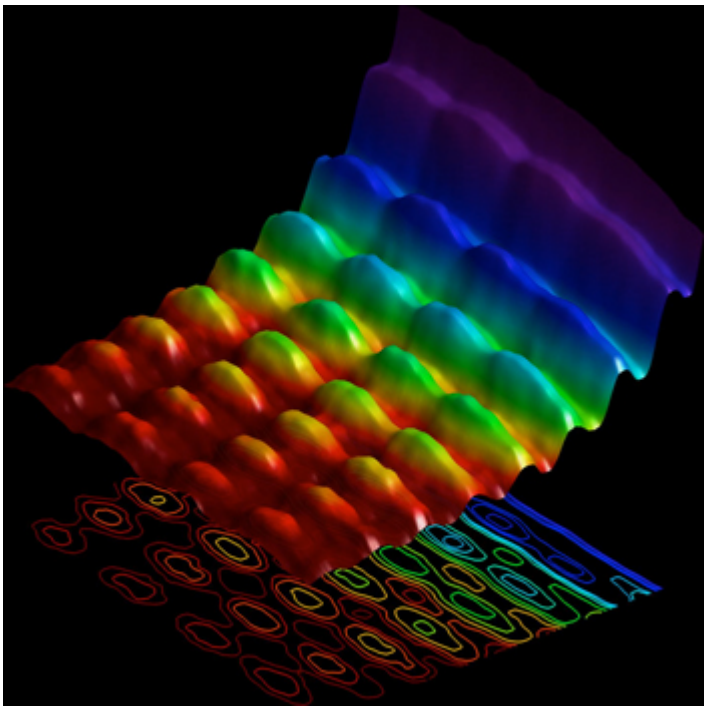
Mike Davies 19 April 2018



One of the great scientific debates of history has centred around the nature of light. Ancient Greek philosophers were divided as to whether it consisted of a stream of particles or travelled in a manner similar to waves in the ocean.

In 1630, Rene Descartes popularised the notion of waves, whilst from 1670 Isaac Newton developed a hypothesis that it traveled essentially as particles. It was Christiaan Huygens, among others, who developed a mathematical model that seemed to prove the wave theory. Further experiments confirmed this theory and so Newton's ideas fell out of favour.

However, by the 1900s things began to change. Max Planck (and then later, Albert Einstein) began to study the strange world of quantum physics[1] and discovered something remarkable –under certain circumstances, light seemed to act in the manner of particles. Indeed, Einstein's Nobel prize in 1921 was not for his work on Relativity, for which he is most famous today, but for his theories about the nature of light and what later became known as photons. Light, he said, can act as a wave and a particle simultaneously! And whilst there is still some debate over this, many scientists accept this seeming paradox as fact.



The first ever photograph of light as both a wave and a particle. Credit: EurekAlert press release – Fabrizio Carbone/EPFL

Paradoxes in Scripture

So what has this got to do with the church? Well, I find a remarkable parallel between this scientific conundrum and our approach to theological debates. When we study theology, we are building on ideas first expressed thousands of years ago and which have been revisited many times since. Ideas have been proposed, revised, discarded and resurrected.

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Often Christians, even learned theologians, see one aspect of a truth and camp there. They reject any arguments that would contradict the conclusion they have reached, even if those arguments are backed by Scripture. Positions tend to become more entrenched as time goes by. Defences are built up against opposing views and proponents of opposing views tend to become more distanced from each other. Eventually, advocates of opposing viewpoints become more extreme and find reasons to reject or even demonise alternative views. This is a serious problem in the church and it is exacerbated by several factors. In the age of social media, such debates often take place over keyboards, often between strangers, where there is no accountability, no idea of a person's credibility, and they happen with no guidance by or submission to those who have been tasked with being guardians of sound doctrine – the elders

of the local church.

Please note that I am not here advocating a compromise on truth. Anything clearly contrary to Scripture must be rejected. We do need to be firm and uncompromising about rejecting heresy and error. However, we need to be very careful about rejecting something as unbiblical just because it seemingly contradicts something we hold dear. The Bible is full of paradoxes (seemingly opposing statements). These are often presented without any explanation of how such ideas can be reconciled but which are both true – just like the nature of light!

Examples of Biblical Paradoxes

We need to have the maturity to hold truths in tension. That is to accept that two seemingly opposite statements can both be true at the same time – and that this makes perfect sense if we just have the full picture and apply context. Here are some examples:

1. God loves sinners (Rom 5:6-8) – God hates sinners (Ps 5:5; Ps 11:5)
2. God has no favourites (Gal 2:6) – God has favourites (Lk 1:28; Is 66:2;
3. No longer will you teach (Heb8:11) – It was He who gave…teachers (Eph 4:11)
4. I have been sanctified (Heb10:10) – I am not yet sanctified (1 Thess 5:23)

A failure to hold such truths in tension is a major cause of unnecessary conflict, imbalances and false doctrine. As Einstein said about light, 'It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.'

> Like good scientists, we must be prepared to let go of our preconceived ideas and follow the evidence where it leads, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable.

So it is with God. Depending on the audience or circumstance, we may need to emphasise one aspect or the other to bring balance. But neither side on its own, no matter how attractive or persuasive to us, fully reveals the nature of the Father and His workings with creation.

Humbly Follow The Evidence

Like good scientists, we must be prepared to let go of our preconceived ideas and follow the evidence where it leads, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable. In our discussions and disagreements, it would help if we act with humility and with a greater desire to reach the truth than to win the argument (even if that means being proved wrong).

This article is the first in a series where we will examine some of the paradoxes of Scripture, so look out for more articles exploring this theme.

[1] Apologies for any mistakes or omissions made in presenting the scientific details in this article – I confess that after much study of articles trying to explain current quantum theory regarding light, I am still as confused as ever!