

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

1 Corinthians 8:4–6, English Standard Version.

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The incredible gift of Sanctification.

In Philippians, a letter we are sure that Paul did personally write, in Chapter 3, verses 5 and 6, he defines himself as: *“⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”* He makes it very clear that he was, at one time, a dedicated, faithful Jew, and even a zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus. An interesting fact is that Paul never during his life converted to Christianity - because the faith did not exist in a formal sense during his life. He remained a Jew until he died. Paul was a Jew who believed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah predicted by numerous prophecies offered by the Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. So, certainly at least before he encountered the risen Jesus on the Road

to Damascus, he would have followed the daily practices of Jews of the time. One of them was to recite a prayer every day, in the morning and in the evening, a prayer called the “Shema”. It was a profession of the key tenant of the Israelites’ faith: the belief in a single, all-powerful God. It contains versions of verses from Deuteronomy and Numbers, two of the first five Books of the Old Testament, what Jews call the Torah, their most holy collection of writings. The Shema is the Jewish confession of faith, and the name is the initial word of the prayer: “Hear”. This was such an important prayer that it alone, if recited twice a day, could substitute for studying the Torah as a whole. Here is the beginning of the Shema:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.

As an aside, notice that the third line, which is from Deuteronomy, is identical to Jesus’ first of his two great Commandments. But for today, consider the first line: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One*. That says it all, the heart of the faith of the Israelites of the Old Testament: there is only a single God. Jews of the time of Paul, like Jews today, would pray it twice a day.

Now, consider 1 Corinthians, another letter that has been authenticated as written personally by Paul. This is from Chapter 8, verses 4 to 6:

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Paul is responding to questions from the followers of Jesus in Corinth. They are concerned about various Jewish laws and whether they must follow them. Paul is going to tell them that they can eat food sacrificed to idols, but he uses their concern as an opportunity to lay down some basics about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Idols are nothing, as he tells them: *“there is no God but one”*. This verse, from the Torah, is in the Shema. Jews begin their day by proclaiming this, and they end their day by repeating it. Paul has this burned into his heart, his mind, and his soul. As a result, he doesn’t want the Jesus followers in Corinth even remotely believing that pagan idols should be considered as true gods. They are simply artifacts made by humans out of metal, wood, and stone. There is only one God. Notice that he adds, though: *“for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist”*. It is believed that Paul is quite deliberately modifying the Shema. There are Jews in the church in Corinth, and the congregation as a whole is clearly concerned about whether they need to

follow Jewish law, and so many or most of them are likely to be familiar with the Shema. He is making a refinement in traditional Jewish terminology. God is now God the Father, but the word Lord, instead of referring to God, as it does in the Shema, now refers to Jesus Christ. Paul is doing something here that suggests a concept that is not in the Bible and would not be finalized by Christian theologians for hundreds of years: the Trinity. Paul is saying that there is indeed only one God, but Jesus is God. He doesn't address the Holy Spirit in this passage, but he is indeed saying that there are at least two parts to God: God the Father and God the Lord Jesus. He is broaching this concept unique to Christianity that there is only a single God, but God contains multiple parts. To this day, to people outside of Christianity, this remains a confusing and controversial concept.

This is a powerful thing to find in a letter of Paul. He is changing the notion of what it means to be monotheistic. He comes even closer to saying that God can have three parts and still be a single God. This is from Chapter 8 of Romans:

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Notice the following phrases in this passage: *“the Spirit of God dwells in you,”*

“have the Spirit of Christ,” “Christ is in you,” and *“the Spirit of him who raised*

Jesus from the dead dwells in you.” Paul is talking about God dwelling within us, and he also talks about Christ being in us, and the Spirit dwelling in us. Clearly, he comes very close to simply saying that God has three parts, God the Father, God the Son, Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit.

This was revolutionary at the time. As Christianity emerged, and as the notion of the Trinity was formalized, some Jews declared that Christians were polytheists, that we didn’t even meet the basic requirement of the Old Covenant when it came to being people of God. Deuteronomy 6:4 says: *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”* One. Not two or three. Moslems often consider Christians to be polytheists. There is a verse in the Quran that says: *“Surely those who disbelieve (after the clear evidence has come to them) – from among the People of the Book and from among the polytheists – will be in the fire of Hell. They are the worst of creatures.”* Clearly, in the eyes of a Moslem, it’s not good to be a polytheist. Christians have often been thought to be polytheists.

But we embrace the notion of the Trinity, of a God with three aspects: one who is the Creator who made us in his image, another who brought us a personal relationship with God, and a third who lives inside of us and guides and inspires us. But starting from the very birth of our religion, this was revolutionary and risky. If one wanted to start a new Faith and not make too many enemies in doing

so, this was not the way to do it. It's difficult for us today to fully appreciate the courage of people like Paul. It was an early Church father named Tertullian who first used the word "Trinity"; he wrote in Latin and so used the word *Trinitas*. He was born in the 150's A.D., and he explicitly defined, for the first time, the Trinity as consisting of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many early Christians, for the first few centuries, did not accept any notion of a Trinity. Only in 325 A.D. did the Council of Nicaea adopt a formal notion of the Trinity. The word certainly does not appear in the Bible. But the notion is strongly implied in the Bible. It caused tremendous conflict when the young Church was trying to grow.

But we are blessed that the people who believed in this concept, who saw it in Scripture, who identified this as a unique difference between Judaism and Christianity, stood their theological ground. Many people see the key difference between Judaism and Christianity to be seeing Jesus as the true, long-predicted Messiah, the Savior spoken about in many Old Testament prophecies. This is overly simplistic, yes. But we do have a broad notion of who God is. We see God as not just a creator enforcing a moral code and punishing us when we disobey and rewarding us when we do obey. We see God as someone who cares about us as individuals, and not just as an entire people, a culture. Our God cares about each of us and has a relationship with each of us. Our God also lives inside of us.

This is what is so incredibly exciting about being a Christian. We're not just trying to dodge trouble on Earth or earn our way to Heaven. We have a God who helps us live in joy right now. Our God is within us, alive and active.

John Wesley was an Anglican priest who introduced the world to "Methodism". He traveled to the United States and his teachings ultimately led to the founding of various Methodist denominations. Wesley delivered a famous series of sermons during his career, but because he wrote in the 1700's, they can be a bit hard for a modern reader to slog through. So, I will only give you a single, short quote. It's from his sermon called "*Justification by Faith*":

But what is it to be "justified?" What is "justification?" This was the Second thing which I proposed to show. And it is evident, from what has been already observed, that it is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is "sanctification;" which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature. The one implies what God does for us through his Son; the other, what he works in us by his Spirit.

He doesn't mention the Trinity in this quote, and he only gave one sermon fully dedicated to the Trinity – but the notion of three Gods in one appears all through his sermons. And this is what he is talking about in this passage. He is saying that we should carefully distinguish between two things and carefully distinguish between how these two things are achieved in our spiritual lives. The first is "justification", and the second is "sanctification". Justification refers to the way

God guides us from a state of sin to a state of grace, leading us to being righteous in God's eyes. Sanctification refers to a state of being holy, but it is not an isolated event, like becoming justified. Sanctification begins before we are justified, but accelerates once we are justified, and then continues afterwards. Sanctification is the process of becoming a very different person, one who has conformed oneself into God's ways. We are never fully sanctified in this life. Wesley says in this passage that *"The one implies what God does for us through his Son; the other, what he works in us by his Spirit"*. In other words, it is primarily Jesus who brings us justification, through the New Covenant and God's willingness to forgive and make us righteous if we simply fully believe in God, and it is the Holy Spirit living within us who leads us to a state of sanctification throughout our lives. We are all born with the Holy Spirit within us, even before we come to know God. So, Wesley tells us that God is our forgiving creator, Jesus brings us salvation, and the Holy Spirit is who incrementally transforms us into greater and greater states of spiritual perfection.

We are not polytheists, however. God the Father, Jesus the Son and Messiah, and the Holy Spirit are all aspects of one God, and Forgiveness, Salvation, and Sanctification are ways of understanding what it means to have a three-part God. This is a bit unconventional, but another way of looking at it is

that our God performs multiple tasks in our lives, and looking at God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit helps us understand and appreciate more fully the different tasks that each aspect of our God performs.

What I want you to understand is the elegance, the power, and the incredible gift that the Trinity is for us. We have a loving, forgiving, creator God who made us in his image. We have the Son, the Messiah, the Christ, who brought us a New Covenant, one where we are only asked to do two things to become saved, to be forgiven, to spend eternity in the Kingdom of God, and that is to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and to love all people in the same way. And we have the Holy Spirit, who guides us onto the path through the Kingdom, inspires us to live by those two commandments, and gives us something that perhaps most Christians are not even aware of: a brilliant, joyous path, which consists of incremental sanctification and an ever-radiant life on Earth. Think about that today, this week, and for the rest of your temporary life on this planet: you are not just saved. You are not just living in the Kingdom of God. As amazing as those two gifts are, you are also the recipient of a stunningly inspiring life that gets better and better as time goes on. You aren't getting older: you are getting more aligned with God, closer to perfection, to that incredible gift of sanctification. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for making us in your image and granting us unconditional forgiveness, and for the gift of faith. We thank you for your son, who delivered to us the New Covenant, and who gave us justification, and who brought us our personal relationship with you. And we thank you for the incredible gift of Sanctification, delivered by the Holy Spirit living within us. Amen.