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1 John 5:7–8, The King James Version.

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1 John 5:7–8, The New King James Version.

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And these three are one.

The word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible, and in fact, the notion of three Gods in one is only implied, and not directly stated in the Bible: except for once, in one translation – and I will get back to this. “Trinity” is the English equivalent of the Latin term “Trinitas”, coined by the first major Christian writer to write in Latin. His name was Tertullian and he lived from approximately 155 A.D. to 220 A.D. He is credited with the first use of the term “Trinity” to refer to our God. Notice that he was born in the mid second century. As you infer from this, the word “Trinity”

does not appear anywhere in the Bible. The notion itself, of three Gods in one, and not three Gods who act as one or three separate Gods who can be viewed as one, but literally three Gods that form precisely one God, that was not finalized until the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. It was Constantine the First who presided over this council in the ancient city of Nicaea, now called Iznik, in modern Turkey. The notion was developed as a way of understanding or discussing the relationship between God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. While this is the way that most of us think of the Trinity, as a philosophical explanation of how we can have three Gods but still be monotheistic, it is much deeper than this, and it gets to the heart of just what we are declaring when we tell the world that we are Christians. It also gives us something to call upon, to draw strength from, in dark times. The Trinity gives us a view of creation and of the universe that is radically more upbeat than the beliefs of the many polytheistic faiths that preceded us. To fully appreciate this, though, we need disassemble our superficial understanding of the Trinity and then build it back up again into what the Bible truly says that it is.

Let's start with the Romans, who had a complex system of gods that are thought to be heavily influenced by the Greek system of gods. There were approximately twelve major Roman gods. These were the gods that the early

Christians refused to worship and as a result, were sometimes executed. Here is an interesting fact: the Romans had a thing for – and I won't use the word Trinities – sets of three gods. There were three who were considered especially important and powerful. Sometimes these three are called the "Triad" of Roman gods. They were Jupiter, who protected the Roman Empire, Juno, who cared for women, and Minerva, who was the goddess of wisdom. Remember that Constantine was a Roman Emperor who became a Christian, and the Christians rejected the Roman gods. This is why it was so important in the early Church to differentiate our Trinity from their Triad. It gave the followers of Christ a unique, powerful identity. In truth, Constantine's conversion is very suspect, and he probably used Christianity as a political tool to unite his empire during divisive times, rather than being a true believer. Nevertheless, he helped push aside not just the traditional system of Roman gods, but also deviant teachers of Christianity who were arguing that there is no Trinity, and that in fact, Jesus is not God. Although it was largely politically motivated, we have this council to thank for beginning the long process of Christians coming to grips with the beauty and power of a Trinity God.

Consider the biblical evidence for the Trinity – and again, the term does not appear in the Bible. The notion is revealed gradually throughout the Bible. There is a hint of the Trinity early in Genesis: ²⁶ *Then God said, "Let us make man in our*

image, after our likeness. Notice the plural – *us* and *our*. There are many references to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. In fact, very early in Genesis we read this: *And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.* The prophet Isaiah tells us the following in his oracle, his prediction of what will come to be:

*⁶For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

The New Testament is more explicit about the Trinity. Here is the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus is commissioning his Apostles:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Jesus himself is differentiating between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. People are to be baptized in all three aspects of our God. And indeed, there are separate benefits to us, originating from the three parts of the Trinity.

Consider this from the 8th Chapter of Paul’s 1st letter to the Corinthians:

⁴So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” ⁵For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came

and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Paul is saying that there is no suite of gods, that pagan gods are simply idols made by humans. He says there is only one God. But it is also true that Jesus himself has brought as a great gift. First, as part of God, he of course was part of the process of creation. But second, and very importantly, Jesus brings us an eternal life.

Here is the last verse of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

This is his closing, his blessing to the believers in Corinth. He's telling them that God is the source of the love that has brought us eternal salvation, faith in Jesus brings us the grace of God, and the Holy Spirit is what dwells in us once we believe.

The Gospel of John makes it clear why Jesus is distinct from God the Father:

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

As Christians, we are kept alive as believers for all of eternity through the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. But we have also been given the forgiveness, the regeneration, and the salvation of God directly through God becoming flesh in the form of Jesus Christ. We have so much more than a simple single God.

Here are two important verses telling us about the role of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit. The first is from the Gospel of Matthew. An angel is speaking to Joseph, the husband of Mary:

²³ *“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).*

That is the unique role of Jesus in the Trinity: he is the way in which God came to be with us personally in our daily lives. Now, consider this from the Gospel of Luke, where an angel is now talking to Mary:

³⁵ *And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*

There is something in this verse that is often overlooked. Yes, we are being told that Mary will be the human who serves as the earthly mother of Jesus, the Son of God. But the entire reason this will come about is because the Holy Spirit will come upon Mary and perform a miracle. Just as Mary has the Holy Spirit within her, we have the Holy Spirit within us – and this is truly incredible.

There are many references in the New Testament that indicate that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are distinct. Here is Mathew, from Chapter 3. When John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River, God speaks:

¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

But there is no question that the notion of these three parts of God being a single God, something we call the Trinity, evolved gradually over time. The sad thing is that people became hung up on the semantics of the word Trinity, on the literal, academic definition. We have historically let the defense of this term, the claim that it is truly biblical, overshadow the beauty of the notion. Let's look at our three quotes for today. They come from the King James Bible, the New King James, and the English Standard Version. The three passages are all verses 7 to 8 of Chapter 5 of 1 John. Let me say that the English Standard Version of this passage represents almost all widely used modern translations except the New King James, and the New King James is like the King James specifically because it is indeed a modernization of the English of the King James translation. In short, only the King James and its descendent, the New King James contains a particular verse. Let's look at the three:

First, we look at **1 John 5:7–8**, from the **King James Version**.

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Notice that the King James and the New King James both have this line:

⁷ For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. This part about the Father, the Word (meaning Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit being one is not in the original Greek New Testament manuscripts – and everyone knows it. Somewhere around 1520, before the King James was written, this passage was added to something called the Latin Vulgate, a highly referenced Latin translation of the Bible. Even modern Catholic Bibles, which have been heavily influenced by the Latin Vulgate, do not include this, except perhaps as a footnote. It was done to prop up the formal definition of the Trinity, to erase any doubt that it is indeed stated in the Bible in just the way certain theologians have argued. In 1611, this altered version of the 1st Letter of John was used in the creation of the King James Bible. The verse has stayed there ever since, even though we know it was added long, long after the life of Christ and the writing of the New Testament.

It's a shame that the notion of the Trinity has been turned into a doctrine that has had people focused more on a formal definition and the defense of a rigid notion, than on the subtle but beautiful concept the Bible truly portrays. Our faith should not be a faith of semantics, of definitions, of a dependency on doctrines that is so strong that we feel compelled to add to the Bible. We need our faith to be alive and to be in touch with the real reason we believe in three Gods in one, and not in three separate Gods. We don't see our lives controlled by multiple gods, each with its limited, narrowly scoped powers, and filled the same flaws as humans. The Trinity tells us that yes, God is a complex, mysterious being, but there is indeed only one God, and that God is all powerful. God created everything, created us in his image, and created us and the world we live in simply because God is the source of love. Creation is the ultimate act of love, by giving us a path to eternal joy. God wants us to be in his Kingdom so badly, he gave us the ability to have a personal relationship with him, and he did this by sending his son. What does it mean to be the son of God? We cannot fully comprehend this. But that son of God brought us grace and the ability to always overcome our limitations as mortal beings. God also gave us the Holy Spirit to live within us, to keep us connected to God, to guide us, train us, give us knowledge, and keep us living within the Kingdom. That's our Trinity. It is a mystery, one that we cannot fully grasp while living on this planet.

Our Trinity is our way, our limited human way, of understanding the full breadth of our God and the way our God has chosen to show us love. We should think of the Trinity as the foundation of our faith, a faith that is not only monotheistic, but also rooted in a single God that creates in a way that is infinitely beyond our powers. We don't have three gods that act asynchronously and chaotically, manipulating the world and people in a way that is limited and vain. Yes, it's true that *there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one*. Whoever added that to the Bible had it right. But that person was acting out of a sense of insecurity, of a need to overly defend some formal notion. Here is the absolute truth: *there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and together, they form the fullness of our single, all-powerful, creator God who loves us without limit*. Please pray with me.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. You are one. You are all powerful. We do not fully understand you. But we do fully understand your incredible love for and dedication to us. Amen.