

## WHY 1 JOHN 5.7–8 IS IN THE BIBLE

by G. W. and D. E. Anderson

(6) This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. (7) For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. (8) And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.

In recent months several of the Society's supporters have written asking about the inclusion of 1 John 5.7–8, the so-called *Johannine Comma* (the passage underlined in the above quotation), in the Bible. These supporters have found versions which omit the passage without mention;<sup>1</sup> they have found writers who argue against the inclusion of the passage;<sup>2</sup> they have found preachers who avoid the passage in order to avoid the controversy. These supporters believe the passage rightly belongs in the Scriptures, as does the Society, as did the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>3</sup> and as have Godly men throughout the centuries. Three of these men, whose influential works span three centuries, Matthew Henry, R. L. Dabney and Edward Hills, upheld this passage in their writings. The purpose of this article is to allow these men to address this issue and give their reasons for the inclusion of the *Johannine Comma*.

All around us is scholarly argument against the inclusion of this passage. As John Stott says of verse 7,

The whole of this must be regarded as a gloss, as must the words *in earth* in verse 8... The words do not occur in any Greek MS, version or quotation before the fifteenth century. They first appear in an obscure fourth-century Latin MS and found their way into the AV because Erasmus reluctantly included them in the third edition of his text. They are rightly absent even from the margin of RV and RSV.<sup>4</sup>

Princeton Theological Seminary Greek scholar B. M. Metzger states that

a manuscript of the entire New Testament dating from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century...is the first Greek manuscript discovered which contains the passage relating to the Three Heavenly Witnesses (1 John v.7–8).<sup>5</sup>

In the face of such statements, how can one argue for the inclusion of the passage? But there are ample scholarly reasons for the inclusion of 1 John 5.7–8, and ample scholarly men who have given those reasons. Thus we quote works of three of these men. Much of this information is reproduced verbatim from the writings of

these men and will be technical in nature; however, the reader should be able to follow the main points of the position and will find blessing in these men's comments on the Word of God.

### **TEXTUAL EVIDENCE FOR INCLUSION**

First, it must be stated that Metzger's statement, at first glance, might make one believe that 1 John 5.7–8 does not appear in any writings before 1500. However, MS. 61 was the first Greek manuscript *discovered* which contains the passage. It is not the earliest manuscript containing the passage; it was merely the first manuscript found which contained the passage.<sup>6</sup> Metzger later admits that the *Johannine Comma* also appears in manuscripts from the twelfth century, the fourteenth century and the sixteenth century. "The oldest known citation of the *Comma* is in a fourth-century Latin treatise entitled *Liber apologeticus*."<sup>7</sup>

Edward Hills admits that there is not as much Greek manuscript support for this passage as there is for many other passages in the New Testament. However, there is an abundance of other ancient manuscript evidence in support of the passage. As Hills says, "The first undisputed citations of the *Johannine comma* occur in the writing of two 4th-century Spanish bishops... In the 5th century the *Johannine comma* was quoted by several orthodox African writers to defend the doctrine of the Trinity against the gainsaying of the Vandals, who...were fanatically attached to the Arian heresy." "Evidence for the early existence of the *Johannine comma* is found in the Latin versions and in the writings of the Latin Church Fathers." Among these is Cyprian (c. 250) and Cassiodorus (480–570), as well as an Old Latin manuscript of the 5th or 6th century, and in the *Speculum*, a treatise which contains an Old Latin text. It is also found in the great mass of the later Vulgate manuscripts and in the Clementine edition of the Vulgate.<sup>8</sup>

### **INTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR INCLUSION**

In the seventeenth century the framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith accepted the inclusion of 1 John 5.7–8 and used it to defend the doctrine of the Trinity. Others, believing the passage to be Scripture, have given internal evidence for the inclusion of the passage. This evidence, which comes from the passage itself, has been cited throughout the centuries in defence of the passage and of the Trinity which it supports.

#### **The Eighteenth Century: Matthew Henry**

Matthew Henry (1662–1714), the Welsh Nonconformist Bible commentator, "was a faithful, humble, devout, orthodox minister of the gospel, a loving pastor of souls, and a wise spiritual father. [He was] famous for his *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, now commonly known as *Matthew Henry's Commentaries*...The value of his Commentaries lies not in their critical, but in their practical and devotional emphasis."<sup>9</sup> Henry<sup>10</sup> was not unconcerned about the Greek manuscript

support of 1 John 5 7–8, but regarding it he says, "It is alleged that many old Greek manuscripts have it not. We shall not here enter into the controversy. It should seem that the critics are not agreed what manuscripts have it and what not; nor do they sufficiently inform us of the integrity and value of the manuscripts they peruse... But let the judicious collators of copies manage that business. There are some rational surmises that seem to support the present text and reading."<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Henry gives several 'rational surmises':

(1.) If we [delete] v. 7, [v. 8] looks too like a...repetition of what was included in v. 6... This does not assign near so noble an introduction of these three witnesses as our present reading does.

(2.) It is observed that many copies read that distinctive clause, *upon the earth: There are three that bear record upon the earth*. Now this bears a visible opposition to some witness or witnesses elsewhere, and therefore we are told, by the adversaries of the text, that this clause must be supposed to be omitted in most books that want v. 7. But it should for the same reason be so in all. Take we v. 6... It would not now naturally and properly be added, *For there are three that bear record on earth*, unless we should suppose that the apostle would tell us that all the witnesses are such as are on earth, when yet he would assure us that one is infallibly true, or even truth itself.

(3.) It is observed that there is a variety of reading even in the Greek text...

(4.) The seventh verse is very agreeable to the style and the theology of our apostle... It is most suitable then to the diction and to the gospel of this apostle thus to mention the Holy Ghost as a witness for Jesus Christ. Then,

(5.) It was far more easy for a transcriber, by turning away his eye, or by the obscurity of the copy, it being obliterated or defaced on the top or bottom of a page, or worn away in such materials as the ancients had to write upon, to lose and omit the page, than for an interpolator to devise and insert it. He must be very bold and impudent who could hope to escape detection and shame; and profane too, who durst venture to make an addition to a supposed sacred book. And,

(6.) It can scarcely be supposed that, when the apostle is representing the Christian's faith in overcoming the world, and the foundation it relies upon in adhering to Jesus Christ, and the various testimony that was given to Jesus Christ in the world, he should omit the supreme testimony that attended him, especially when we consider that he meant to infer, as he does (v. 9)... Now in the three witnesses on earth there is neither all the witness of God, nor indeed any witness who is truly and immediately God. The antitrinitarian opposers of the text will deny that either the Spirit, or the water, or the blood, is God himself; but, upon our present reading, here is a noble enumeration of the several witnesses and testimonies supporting the truth of the Lord Jesus and the divinity of his institution. Here is the most excellent abridgment or breviary of the motives to faith in Christ, of the credentials the

Saviour brings with him, and of the evidences of our Christianity, that is to be found, I think, in the book of God, upon which single account, even waiving the doctrine of the divine Trinity, the text is worthy of all acceptance.<sup>12</sup>

“Having these rational grounds on our side,” Henry says, “we proceed.”<sup>13</sup> He then continues with a discussion of the passage itself with its “trinity of heavenly witnesses”,<sup>14</sup> ending this section by stating that “These three witnesses (being more different than the three former) are not so properly said to be *one* as to be *for one*, to be for one and the same purpose and cause, *or to agree in one*, in one and the same thing among themselves, and in the same testimony with those who bear record from heaven.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Nineteenth Century: Robert Lewis Dabney**

In addition, 1 John 5.7–8 is not without witnesses in the nineteenth century. Well known among these is Robert Lewis Dabney. Dabney “was the most conspicuous figure and the leading theological guide of the [American] Southern Presbyterian Church, the most prolific theological writer that Church has as yet produced... As a preacher, as a teacher and as a writer equally he achieved greatness... [He helped] reorganize the historical faith of the Reformed Churches in the face of the theological ferment which marked the earlier years of the Nineteenth Century.”<sup>16</sup> Of the *Johannine Comma* Dabney says, “The often-contested text in 1 John v. 7 also furnishes us a good instance of the value of that internal evidence which the recent critics profess to discard.”<sup>17</sup> “The internal evidence against this excision, then, is in the following strong points:

*First*, if it be made, the masculine article, numeral, and particle...are made to agree directly with three neuters—an insuperable and very bald grammatical difficulty. But if the disputed words are allowed to stand, they agree directly with two masculines and one neuter noun...where, according to a well known rule of syntax, the masculines among the group control the gender over a neuter connected with them...

*Second*, if the excision is made, the eighth verse coming next to the sixth, gives us a very bald and awkward, and apparently meaningless, repetition of the Spirit’s witness twice in immediate succession.

*Third*, if the excision is made, then the proposition at the end of the eighth verse [and these three agree in one], contains an unintelligible reference... “And these three agree to that (aforesaid) One”... What is that aforesaid unity to which these three agree? If the seventh verse is excinded, there is none... Let the seventh verse stand, and all is clear: the three earthly witnesses testify to that aforementioned unity which the Father, Word, and Spirit constitute.”<sup>18</sup>

“There is a coherency in the whole which presents a very, strong internal evidence

for the genuineness of the received text.”<sup>19</sup>

Dabney then reminds his readers of the circumstances under which the apostle John wrote his first epistle. “The purpose of his writing was to warn [the recipients] against seducers (ii.26), whose heresy, long predicted, was now developed, and was characterized by a denial of the proper sonship (ii.26) and incarnation (iv.2) of Jesus Christ.” In response to these heresies, in 5.7 the apostle declares “the unity of the Father, Word, and Spirit, and with the strictest accuracy”. He declares “the proper humanity of Jesus, and the actual shedding and application by the Spirit of that water and blood of whose effusion he was himself eye-witness, and to which he testifies in his gospel so emphatically, in chapter xix. 34,35... Now, when we hear the apostle tell his ‘children,’ in the chapter above cited from his own Epistle, that the two heresies against whose seductions he designed by this writing to guard them were these, the denial of Christ’s sonship to God and the denial of his incarnation, and...we see him in his closing testimony exclude precisely these two errors.” “Is it not hard to believe that he should, under the circumstances, write anything but what the received text ascribes to him? If we let the seventh verse stand, then the whole passage is framed, with apostolic wisdom, to exclude at once both heresies.”<sup>20</sup>

Dabney freely admits that, according to strict Greek manuscript tradition, there is not strong manuscript support for the inclusion of 1 John 5.7. But here “the Latin Church stands opposed to the Greek” church.<sup>21</sup> “There are strong probable grounds to conclude, that the text of the Scriptures current in the East received a mischievous modification at the hands of the famous Origen.”<sup>22</sup> “Those who are best acquainted with the history of Christian opinion know best, that Origen was the great corrupter, and the source, or at least earliest channel, of nearly all the speculative errors which plagued the church in after ages... He disbelieved the full inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, holding that the inspired men apprehended and stated many things obscurely... He expressly denied the consubstantial unity of the Persons and the proper incarnation of the Godhead—the very propositions most clearly asserted in the doctrinal various readings we have under review.”<sup>23</sup>

Let the candid reader choose...in the light of these facts. We think that he will conclude with us that the weight of probability is greatly in favor of this theory, viz., *that the Anti-trinitarians, finding certain codices in which these doctrinal readings had been already lost through the licentious criticism of Origen and his school, industriously diffused them, while they also did what they dared to add to the omissions of similar readings.*<sup>24</sup>

**The Twentieth Century:  
Edward F. Hills**

During the twentieth century more and more Christians have been led into the

belief that the *Johannine Comma* is not properly part of Scripture by its exclusion from, or bracketing in, many of the modern versions of the Scriptures. However, Godly men continue to uphold the inclusion of the passage. Among these is Edward Freer Hills. Hills “was a distinguished Latin and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Yale University. He also earned the B.D. degree from Westminster Theological Seminary and the Th.M. degree from Columbia Theological Seminary,” and the Th.D. in New Testament text criticism from Harvard.<sup>25</sup> Yet in the midst of these textual critical schools Hills maintained a strict conservatism which has placed him among the staunchest supporters of the Textus Receptus.

Hills asserts that the *Comma*, indeed, does not have the Greek manuscript support of many passages of Scripture. Erasmus omitted the *Comma* from the first edition (1516) of his printed Greek New Testament, but restored it in his third edition (1522).<sup>26</sup> Some believe the inclusion to be the result of trickery; “but whatever may have been the immediate cause, still, in the last analysis, it was not trickery which was responsible for the inclusion of the *Johannine comma* in the Textus Receptus but the usage of the Latin-speaking Church. It was this usage which made men feel that this reading ought to be included in the Greek text and eager to keep it there after its inclusion had been accomplished. Back of this usage, we may well believe, was the guiding providence of God.”<sup>27</sup>

As noted, Hills gives ample evidence that the passage was in use well before the 15th century. But there is more evidence for the inclusion of the passage than just this. “On the basis of the external evidence it is at least possible that the *Johannine comma* is a reading that somehow dropped out of the Greek New Testament text but was preserved in the Latin text through the usage of the Latin-speaking Church, and this possibility grows more and more toward probability as we consider the internal evidence.”<sup>28</sup>

In the first place, how did the *Johannine comma* originate if it be not genuine, and how did it come to be interpolated into the Latin New Testament text?... Why does it not contain the usual trinitarian formula, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Why does it exhibit the singular combination, never met with elsewhere, the Father, the *Word*, and the Holy Spirit?

In the second place, the omission of the *Johannine comma* seems to leave the passage incomplete. For it is a common scriptural usage to present solemn truths or warnings in groups of three or four, for example, the repeated *Three things*, *yea four* of Proverbs 30, and the constantly recurring refrain, *for three transgressions and for four*, of the prophet Amos... It is in accord with biblical usage, therefore, to expect that in 1 John 5.7–8 the formula, *there are three that bear witness*, will be repeated at least twice. When the *Johannine comma* is included, the formula is repeated twice. When the *comma* is omitted, the formula is repeated only once, which seems strange.

In the third place, the omission of the *Johannine comma* involves a

grammatical difficulty. The words *spirit*, *water*, and *blood* are neuter in gender, but in 1 John 5:8 they are treated as masculine. If the *Johannine comma* is rejected, it is hard to explain this irregularity. It is usually said that in 1 John 5.8 *the spirit, the water, and the blood* are personalized and that this is the reason for the adoption of the masculine gender. But it is hard to see how such personalization would involve the change from the neuter to the masculine. For in verse 6 the word Spirit plainly refers to the Holy Spirit, the Third *Person* of the Trinity. Surely in this verse the word *Spirit* is “personalized,” and yet the neuter gender is used. Therefore, since personalization did not bring about a change of gender in verse 6, it cannot fairly be pleaded as the reason for such a change in verse 8. If, however, the *Johannine comma* is retained, a reason for placing the neuter nouns *spirit*, *water*, and *blood* in the masculine gender becomes readily apparent. It was due to the influence of the nouns *Father* and *Word*, which are masculine. Thus the hypothesis that the *Johannine comma* is an interpolation is full of difficulties.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusions as we go into the Twenty-first Century**

The view on 1 John 5.7 through the centuries, held by many Godly men, has been that the passage and its testimony of the Trinity by every right must maintain its place in the Scriptures. Thus the Trinitarian Bible Society continues to uphold this passage as inspired by God and profitable for doctrine. As we go into the twenty-first century we maintain the faithful testimony to the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity as found in 1 John 5.7–8 in order that all men may know our Triune God: Father, Word and Holy Ghost.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Included in the English versions which omit the passage without note are the American Standard Version, the New Century Version, the Revised Standard Version, the Good News Bible (which some Bible societies use as the basis for their modern translations into other languages), the Revised English Bible, the Modern Language Bible, the New English Bible and the New Testament in Modern English by Phillips. Additionally, some versions add to the confusion over this passage by renumbering the verses. Among these are the American Standard, the New American Standard Bible and the Revised Standard Version

<sup>2</sup>See the quotation from John Stott in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter II.iii. In the Scripture proofs for the statement of the Trinity, “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost”, 1 John 5.7 is quoted.

<sup>4</sup>J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 180.

<sup>5</sup>MS61 [Bruce M. Metzger, *The Test of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption,*

*and Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 62].

<sup>6</sup>This type of information, which has made its way into the margins of many editions of the Bible, has led to much confusion in our century, and thus confusion among Christians as to the validity of the passage. The Ryrie Study Bible says that “verse 7 should end with the word *witness*. The remainder of v. 7 and part of v 8 are not in any ancient Greek manuscript, only in later Latin manuscripts” (p. 1918). The New International Version claims that vv. 7–8 are from “late manuscripts of the Vulgate” and are “not found in any Greek manuscript before the sixteenth century” (p. 906). The New American Standard Bible says that “a few late [manuscripts] read” the disputed passage (p. 1066). The New Revised Standard Version says that “a few other authorities read (with variations)” the verses (p. 261) The Amplified Version has the disputed words in italics but gives no notation as to why (p. 380). The Scofield Reference Bible states that “it is generally agreed that v. 7 has no real authority, and has been inserted” (p. 1325); the New Scofield Reference Bible reiterates this sentiment. Even the New King James Version indicates that the passage is not worthy of status as Scripture [“NU, M omit the words from *in heaven* (v 7) through *on earth* (v. 8). Only 4 or 5 very late Mss. contain these words in Greek” (p. 1346)].

<sup>7</sup>Metzger lists Greg. 88 from the twelfth century, Tisch. w 110 from the sixteenth century and Greg. 629 from the fourteenth century as containing 1 John 5.7 (Ibid., pp. 101–102).

<sup>8</sup>The Spanish bishops are Priscillian and Idacius Clarus [Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended* (Des Moines, Iowa, USA: The Christian Research Press, 1984), pp. 209–10].

<sup>9</sup>Elgin S. Moyer, *The Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church* (Chicago, IL, USA: Moody Press, 1982), p. 188.

<sup>10</sup>The section in Henry’s commentary on 1, 2 and 3 John was completed posthumously using Henry’s notes and writings.

<sup>11</sup>Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Iowa Falls, Iowa, USA: Riverside Book and Bible House, n.d.), VI.1090–91.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 1091–92.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p 1092.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p, 1094.

<sup>16</sup>R. L Dabney, *Discursions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, biographical sketch by B. B. Warfield, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA, USA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), back book jacket.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p.377.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.378.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.380.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp.379–81.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 381–82.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p 382.

<sup>23</sup>Origen's "opinions on the Trinity veered between Sabellianism and Arianism." (Ibid., pp. 383–84).

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 389.

<sup>25</sup>Hills, back cover.

<sup>26</sup>According to Hills, Erasmus reinserted the passage "on the basis of manuscript 61, which was later supported by the presence of the verse in *Codex Ravianus*, in the margin of 88, and in 629" (Ibid., p. 209).

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 209–10.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 210–12.

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