Ad Fontes, Week Eight: The Comma Johanneum

Chapter 7: The Comma Johanneum

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Eight

The third of the famous hard cases is the most one-sided of all. The Trinitarian words in the King James at 1 John 5:7 to 8 appear in no Greek manuscript before the 1300s. Yet because the words name the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, questioning them can sound like questioning the Trinity. It is not. Today we settle the text quickly, learn how the words got into the King James, and spend our best time on the rich, secure ground the doctrine of the Trinity actually stands on.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 12	Report back: 1 John 5:7 to 8 side by side
12 to 22	External evidence
22 to 30	Internal evidence: read it both ways
30 to 34	The master question
34 to 46	How it got into the King James
46 to 62	The Trinity is secure: four stations
62 to 66	The famous three, side by side
66 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: 1 John 5:7 to 8 side by side

Translation	1 John 5:7 to 8
KJV	“For there are three that bear record **in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth,** the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.”

Translation	1 John 5:7 to 8
BSB	“For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood—and these three are in agreement.”
NET	“For there are three that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three are in agreement.”

The words in bold are the **Comma Johanneum**. “Comma” here is not a punctuation mark. It is an old word for a short clause, and “Johanneum” means “of John.”

- What did your modern Bible’s footnote say? The BSB’s note at 5:7 gives the longer wording and says it comes from the Textus Receptus and the Greek Orthodox Church’s text.
- Did anyone check a New King James? It prints the longer text and footnotes that other Greek texts lack it.
- Notice what is missing in modern Bibles: no brackets, because there is nothing to bracket. The words are not in the Greek text behind them.

2. External evidence

Greek manuscripts

None of the early Greek Bibles has it: not Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, or Ephraemi. The first Greek manuscript with the Comma in its text is from the 1300s, some thirteen centuries after John wrote.

Greek manuscripts with the Comma	Date
629	1300s
61 (Codex Montfortianus)	About 1520
Codex Ravianus	1500s, essentially a copy of a printed edition
918	1500s
2473	1600s
2318	1700s
88, 110, 221, 429, 636	Only in the margin, added by a later hand

That is the whole list, give or take a copy or two, out of thousands of Greek manuscripts.

Ancient translations

The Syriac Peshitta, the Coptic, the Ethiopic, the Armenian, and the Georgian all lack it. Only the Latin tradition has it, and only part of it.

The Greek church fathers

This is the most telling evidence of all. In the 300s the Greek church fought its great battle over the Trinity. Athanasius, Basil, and the two Gregories gathered every Trinitarian text they could find: Matthew 28:19, Paul's blessings, Jesus' farewell words in John. Not one of them cites the Comma. A verse naming the Father, the Word, and the Spirit and calling them one would have been on every page. It is on none, because it was not in their Bibles.

Where it came from

- **Cyprian** (about 250) wrote that it is written of the Father, Son, and Spirit, "and these three are one." Defenders of the Comma point here. But Cyprian was reading the Spirit, water, and blood of verse 8 as pointing to the Trinity. That is an interpretation of the verse, not a quotation of different words.
- **Priscillian**, a Spanish bishop of the late 300s, gives the first clear citation of the Comma.
- **Latin manuscripts** then show it moving from the margin into the text, and the Vulgate slowly absorbs it over the following centuries.

The Comma began as a Latin comment on verse 8 and slowly became part of the Latin text. Only in the late Middle Ages did it cross back into a few Greek copies.

3. Internal evidence: read it both ways

Try it. One person reads 1 John 5:6 to 9 from a modern Bible. Another reads the same verses from a King James. Then answer: what is John arguing?

Without the Comma

Jesus "came by water and blood" (BSB): his baptism and his cross. The Spirit testifies too. So there are three witnesses on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. The law settles a matter on two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15), and John brings the full three. Then verse 9 lands the point: if we accept human testimony, God's testimony is greater. Tight and clear.

With the Comma

Now a second set of witnesses in heaven is added before the earthly ones. The thought is rich, but it pulls away from John's point. He is talking about testimony given on earth, in history, to Jesus. The Comma is less wrong than off topic. That is just what a comment written in a margin looks like.

Other clues

- **The wording is not John's.** In the few Greek copies that have it, the Comma reads like Greek translated back from Latin, not like John's own Greek.
- **No slip explains its loss.** If John wrote it, how did it vanish from every Greek copy for a thousand years? No repeated words invite an eye-skip here.

- **Adding it is easy to explain.** A devout reader sees Spirit, water, and blood, thinks of Father, Son, and Spirit, writes it in the margin, and a later copyist moves it into the text.

4. The master question

Suppose John wrote it	Suppose John did not write it
Then explain its absence from every Greek copy for 1,300 years, from every early translation outside Latin, and from every Greek father in the Trinity debates. And explain why, when it finally shows up in Greek, it is mostly in late copies or scribbled in margins. No story holds all that together.	A Latin comment on verse 8 arises around the 300s or 400s, moves into the Latin text, travels with the Vulgate, crosses into a few late Greek copies, and reaches print in 1522. Every step can be documented.

The verdict is settled. The UBS committee rated the omission an A, and among textual critics the Comma has effectively no defenders today. Even the leading modern editions of the Byzantine or Majority Text leave it out.

Hear the other side

Some defenders of the Textus Receptus, thoughtful people writing in our own day, still argue for the Comma. They say the Latin preserved a reading lost from every Greek copy in some early disaster; that Cyprian was quoting, not interpreting; and that the Greek church had a motive to drop it. Each deserves an answer. We have no parallel for an authentic Greek reading surviving only in Latin; Cyprian's argument works without a Trinitarian text; and the Latin tradition shows a well-attested habit of adding doctrine, while no pattern of Greek suppression can be found. The position hangs together in outline. It does not survive the evidence in detail. Chapter 13 gives the Majority Text and TR positions a full hearing.

5. How it got into the King James

We met this story briefly in Week Four. Here it is in full.

When	What happened
1516 and 1519	Erasmus prints 1 John 5 without the Comma, because none of his Greek manuscripts has it
1520s	Diego López de Zúñiga, called Stunica, an editor of the Spanish Complutensian Polyglot, accuses Erasmus of attacking the Trinity
Around 1520	Erasmus answers that he can print only what the Greek manuscripts say, and signals that a Greek manuscript with the Comma would change things

When	What happened
About 1520	A Greek manuscript appears: Codex Montfortianus (61), freshly made in England, with the Comma reading like Greek translated from Latin. It is named for a later owner, Thomas Montfort, and is now at Trinity College Dublin
1522	Erasmus adds the Comma to his third edition, and his notes register his doubts
1550s to 1600s	Stephanus, Beza, and the Elzevirs carry it forward in the Textus Receptus
1611	The King James translators render the Greek text they had, Comma included

Scholars today debate how formal Erasmus's "promise" was. The outline stands: the Comma entered the printed Greek text under pressure, on the strength of one new-made manuscript, against the editor's own judgment.

Luther and the Comma

Luther's German New Testament never included the Comma, not in 1522 and not in his revisions through 1545, even though Erasmus had printed it from 1522 on. It was added to printings of Luther's Bible only after his death. Our own Reformer's Bible went without it.

Be fair to everyone

Erasmus was no fool and no heretic: he told us plainly on his own page that he doubted it, and later scholarship proved him right. The King James translators were no deceivers: they faithfully translated the Greek text of their day. Each was responsible to the evidence he had. We are responsible to the evidence we have.

6. The Trinity is secure

This is the heart of the hour. The doctrine of the Trinity is among the best-attested teachings in the New Testament, in text nobody disputes. Four tables, four stations. At each, look up the passages and write one sentence on what they teach.

Station 1: The three named together

- "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19 BSB). One name, three Persons, from the lips of the risen Christ.
- "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:14 BSB; 13:13 in some Bibles). The blessing we hear in the Divine Service.

- 1 Corinthians 12:4 to 6: the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God.

Station 2: The Son is God

- John 1:1 to 18
- Philippians 2:5 to 11
- Colossians 1:15 to 20
- Hebrews 1:1 to 3

Station 3: The Spirit is God

- Acts 5:3 to 4: Ananias lies "to the Holy Spirit," and Peter says, "You have not lied to men, but to God!" (BSB)
- 1 Corinthians 2:10 to 11: the Spirit searches the depths of God.

Station 4: The three at work in our salvation

- Galatians 4:4 to 6
- Ephesians 1:3 to 14
- Titus 3:4 to 6
- 1 Peter 1:1 to 2

The Father sends, the Son redeems, the Spirit dwells in us.

The church's confession never needed it

Witness	Relies on the Comma?
The Didache (about AD 100): baptism in the threefold name	No
Tertullian (about 200) coins the Latin word *trinitas*	No
The Nicene Creed (325 and 381)	No
The Athanasian Creed	No
Augsburg Confession, Article I: one divine essence, three persons	No

Strike the Comma from every Bible on earth, and the doctrine of the Trinity stands exactly where it stood. It was never resting there.

7. The famous three, side by side

We have now walked all three of the great hard cases.

	Mark 16:9 to 20	John 7:53 to 8:11	1 John 5:7 to 8
The evidence	Hardest of the three; serious minority defenders	Clean; a few serious defenders (Robinson, Snapp)	Cleanest; effectively no defenders among textual critics
Tell-tale sign	Four different endings	Absent from every Greek copy of John before about 400	Absent from all Greek until the 1300s
What it touches	Resurrection, commission, Baptism, ascension	A beloved story of mercy	The Trinity
Where that truth stands secure	Matthew 28, Luke 24, Acts 1, 1 Peter 3:21	Luke 7, Luke 15, John 4	Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and many more

Why this should strengthen your confidence

When a late Latin comment slipped into the printed Greek Bible in 1522, the manuscript record itself raised the alarm: across centuries, continents, and languages, in manuscripts, translations, and fathers. If the stream of copies were full of additions we could not detect, we could never have spotted this one. We can, and that is the discipline working.

That is what preservation promises. Not that every printed edition is free of error, but that the apostolic witness is kept in the whole stream of copies, ready to be recovered by faithful work. The Comma is exactly the kind of addition that work is built to find.

From here the book turns a corner. Next week is not a subtraction at all. Chapter 8 looks at three verses about the person of Christ: at John 1:18 the older manuscripts read more strongly than the King James, at 1 Timothy 3:16 less explicitly, and at Acts 20:28 the two agree. Either way, the deity of Christ does not hang on any single variant.

For discussion

1. Why does the silence of Athanasius and the other Greek fathers carry so much weight here?
2. If a friend says, “Modern Bibles took out the verse about the Trinity,” how would you answer in two or three sentences?
3. Erasmus added a verse he doubted to end a controversy. When is it right to give ground under pressure, and when is it not?
4. Which of the three hard cases has been hardest for you personally, and why?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Comma Johanneum. The Trinitarian words in the King James at 1 John 5:7 to 8. “Comma” is an old word for a short clause.

Gloss. A note or comment written in the margin or between the lines of a manuscript.

Interpolation. Words added into a text that were not in the original, often a gloss that migrated into the text.

Codex Montfortianus (61). A Greek manuscript made in England around 1520, the manuscript that brought the Comma to Erasmus. Now at Trinity College Dublin.

Stunica. Diego López de Zúñiga, Spanish scholar and Complutensian editor who pressed Erasmus to include the Comma.

Priscillian. A Spanish bishop of the late 300s, the first writer to cite the Comma clearly.

Trinitas. Latin, “Trinity,” the word coined by Tertullian around AD 200 for what the church already confessed.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 8, “Christological Reinforcement.” It is a long chapter, so start early.

Do this one thing. Put a King James beside a modern translation at John 1:18 and 1 Timothy 3:16. Write down exactly how each describes Christ, and what the footnotes say. Then ask: which reading says more about who Jesus is?

Bring. Your Bible, your notes on the two verses, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. Where did you first learn that God is three Persons in one? Was it a verse, a creed, a hymn, or your Baptism?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the apostolic witness, kept across two thousand years in a record strong enough to let us hear what the apostle wrote, and what he did not. Thanks be to God for a doctrine of the Trinity that needs no Latin gloss to be true: spoken by the risen Christ, blessed over us by the apostle, defined at Nicaea, and confessed every Lord’s Day. And thanks be to God for the name placed on each of us at the font: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” 2 Corinthians 13:14 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.