Can You Trust Your Bible?

by

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“...And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that bear witness, the Spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement” (1 John 5:7, 8).

ONE of the thorny textual problems of the New Testament is found in 1 John 5:7, 8. The problem is that the first part of verse 7 is omitted in most translations. The KJV says, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”

I. AN INTERESTING HISTORY

This verse has an interesting history. When the reformation leaders in England began to translate the Bible from Latin to English, few Greek manuscripts were available. An effort was made to provide Greek manuscripts for the English translators, so they would have an original Greek version from which to work instead of the Latin version only.

Erasmus worked on this task. He was the first man to provide an entire Greek New Testament for the translators to use. When he came to this particular verse, he could not find one Greek manuscript with the verse in it. As far as he knew, it was present only in the Latin. When he printed the first edition of his Greek New Testament, therefore, he omitted the verse. Being attacked by critics for his decision, he made this defense: “This verse has been used by our church fathers to defend the doctrine of the trinity. I believe in the doctrine of the trinity, but this verse is not in any Greek manuscript. So it would be unscholarly for me to include it in the Greek New Testament.”

The verse first appeared in the Latin translations in the fifth century. Erasmus promised his critics, “If you can find one Greek manuscript with this verse in it, I will include it in my subsequent editions of the Greek New Testament.” Scholars all over Europe started searching for the verse. Eventually, they found it in an obscure sixteenth century manuscript now known as Manuscript 34, a very late and poor manuscript.

From Erasmus’ later editions, another man, Stephanus, put together a complete Greek New Testament with textual apparatus which was entitled the “Textus Receptus,” a translation put forth as the final word. This was the original Greek New Testament with no variations! Later events proved this was not the case. Many textual variants soon became known.

The “Textus Receptus” was the text used in translating the KJV of the New Testament. Today, even with all the centuries of study and scholarship that have gone by, this verse has only been found in two manuscripts: Manuscripts 34 and 162. It has been found in the margin of one other. Theologians and scholars have been able to identify the origin of this verse: A Spanish heretic preacher named Presilium in A.D. 385 uttered these words in a sermon in Latin on this text. Through that sermon, this verse was picked up, and, by accident or on purpose, became translated into two of the later Latin translations and became part of the Latin Vulgate. Later it was translated from Latin into Greek.

II. A MINOR CONSEQUENCE

Why have I gone to the trouble of discussing this problem? This text is an obvious interpolation. Scholars are confident that it is an insertion. Does this pose a problem regarding our faith? This one verse, in and of itself, is really immate-
rial because what is taught in the verse about the trinity is taught clearly all through the Bible. It does not really affect our faith.

One magazine carried an article several years ago that was entitled “Twenty Thousand Mistakes in Our Bible.” The author tried to show in the article that there were twenty thousand textual variants in our New Testament. That statement, as stated, is true. But it is not true to say there are twenty thousand mistakes in the Bible. In fact, the great majority of these textual variants are variants of minor significance. Sometimes a scribe, in copying, would change a verb to make it agree with the subject of the sentence. Many times, in the copying of a Gospel, the scribe would insert a word or two from Matthew or John. Sometimes, in transcribing the Gospels, two texts would be conflated together. The printing press was not in existence. There were two ways of transcribing a text. In the early stages of transcribing, a man would copy a text onto a blank scroll. In hand copying material, even if it is carefully done, two letters often look alike and either letter makes sense. He, therefore, did not know which letter was right. In the early stages of transcribing, mistakes of this nature were often made.

As the church grew, more and more copies were needed. To make more manuscripts, ten or fifteen scribes sat in one room while one person read the original manuscript. This procedure produced a hearing problem because sometimes two words sounded alike. Sometimes, a man used his memory and made mistakes. Also, words were not always spelled the same, from one person to another.

The great majority of these twenty thousand variants in the Bible have this kind of origin. When you rule out these particular variants, there are not twenty thousand mistakes in your Bible.

III. A TEXTUAL PROBLEM

But there are a few textual problems. How do we deal with these? People have dealt with these in different ways. Sometimes, people throw up their hands and say, “You cannot know what the original text says. So just do not be worried about it.” Other people would go to the other extreme and accept one version as the criterion for all, believing that anything that differs from that version is wrong. But this cannot be the answer.

Some are tempted to accept the translation that is the easiest to explain or the one that most closely agrees with what they want to believe. This is a cop-out. One of the primary rules of textual criticism is that when all else is equal, the most difficult text should be accepted, not the easiest one. The reason for this rule is that a scribe who changed a text would be more likely to change a difficult reading to an easier reading than an easy reading to a harder one.

Some people study a little Greek, a little Hebrew, and a little textual criticism and think they are qualified to pass judgment on what is the best text. The truth of the matter is that, with the exception of some passages in the book of Revelation, there are only four passages in the entire New Testament that have very serious textual problems. None of those four involve our faith. They are: Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53—8:11; the great confession in Acts 8:37; and 1 John 5:7. All the other textual problems involve one word or one phrase which does not involve any doctrine or faith.

For example, Acts 20:28 is a very serious textual problem as far as the grammar is concerned, but no problem as far as the meaning goes. Where some versions say, “The church of the Lord,” some say, “The church of God.” The variation occurs because some texts have the Greek equivalent of the word lord and some have the equivalent of the word God. That kind of problem is not a big difficulty.

The problem with New Testament textual criticism is not a lack of information. Textual criticism is a literary art that applies to all literature, not just to the Bible. The problem with textual criticism is usually a lack of information. But that is not the case with the Bible text. There were 5,357 manuscripts of the New Testament containing enough of the New Testament text to make it possible to determine the text of the New Testament. These are just the Greek manuscripts. In addition to these, there are more than five thousand copies of versions that were translated within a few hundred years after the New Testament was written. These are more important for textual criticism than some modern Greek manuscripts dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth century.
But the important truth for you and me to know is that with all this material and all these textual variants, not one variant in our New Testament that involves our faith is contingent on textual criticism. A few translations are very poor and will lead us astray; but the problem is not with the text but with the translation. I will warn you of at least two translations: Today’s English Bible (Good News for Modern Man) and The Living Bible (The Living Letters). The latter was not intended as a serious translation. The author was paraphrasing his New Testament so his kids could understand it. It is not a serious Bible study tool.

IV. AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

This raises the question: Why do they not leave the Bible alone and quit trying to change it? No serious scholar is trying to change the Bible. They are trying to determine what English words most closely convey what the original writer had in mind. The problem is not that the Bible keeps changing; the problem is that the English language keeps changing. Most of us who are fifty years old or more have within our vocabulary a number of words that were not in Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary when we went to school. There are so many new words, not to mention the grammar and syntax changes through the years.

One writer said that only 1 out of every 1,000 words in our Bible is in doubt. And none of those words are going to affect your faith. As long as you stay with one of the major translations, you will know what God wants you to know. The great problem that we have in our age is not the variety and proliferation of translations that are around; our problem is the lack of knowledge of the Word of God itself. We are just not reading the Bible and meditating on it. God speaks to our hearts through the words of our Bible. He gave us the Bible so we could know His will about His Son Jesus. Basically, you and I would know nothing today about God, heaven, hell, salvation, eternity without the Bible. Study your Bible with confidence. You can trust it. It is the only book you can always trust.

CONCLUSION

The Bible is always right. You may not correctly understand it; you may have to study it deeply; you may struggle with it. But you can trust it. You can have confidence that in it is revealed the will of God. When the Bible says believe in Jesus, repent of your sins, confess your faith, be baptized into Jesus, you can know that is right. When the Bible speaks to you about faithfulness, commitment, and service in your Christian life, you can fulfill those commandments knowing they are right.

We would ask you to trust your Bible, but not in the sense of worshipping it. Your Bible is not God. But it tells you how to worship the God we serve. It tells you to repent of your sins, confess your faith, be baptized, live faithfully, worship God, and give the best of your life to Him.
The Message Is—
I Love You

I want you to visualize a lighthouse on a rocky stretch of Massachusetts coastline. It is a cold, lonely night. You are aboard a ship. The wind and the waves toss your little vessel ever closer to unseen danger. Suddenly, off your starboard side you catch a glimpse of the light from that lighthouse warning you that the treacherous coast is very near. As you watch the flickering light, you become aware that there is a pattern to the flashing signal. It is flashing a message in nautical code. Slowly you discern the message coming from the lighthouse. The message is—"I love you."

I understand that such a lighthouse does exist. Years ago the Coast Guard sought to install new equipment in the lighthouse that would not be able to flash out any kind of message. There was such a protest, however, that the Coast Guard backed off. The old equipment is still intact—still flashing out its message to weary seamen—"I love you."

As I think about that lighthouse sending out its beacon through dark and gloomy nights, I think about the loneliness of God. He, too, sent his light into a dark and gloomy world. That light carried a message. As its very heart that message was—and continues to be—I love you.

A Boy Scout’s Denial

The head of the Unitarian Church has attacked the Boy Scouts of America for denying promotion to a scout who refused to affirm belief in God as a "Supreme Being." Paul Trout, 15, of Shepherdtown, WV, was refused promotion to the rank of Life Scout. William F. Schultz, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, accused the Boy Scout organization of seeking to establish a "religious test for membership." ("Evangelical Newsletter," 1716 Spruce St., Philadelphia PA 19103.)

Illustrations

Listen

"Teach us," prayed the psalmist, "to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). The Hebrew word translated here "to number" means literally "to weigh." If we can learn to give that proper "weight" to the meaning of our days, we too can gain a heart of wisdom that learns God’s lessons in common affairs.

Criticism

"The trouble with most of us," observes Norman Vincent Peale, "is that we would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism."

Marriage

Our public image portrays the church as more concerned with condemning divorce than with sustaining marriage.

Joy Thompson, The Expository Times, Aug.