

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## John's Doctrine of the Trinity

*"If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you." (John 14:15-18)*

Although I plan to return to John Chapter one for further study, it is logical at this point to enlarge on John's teachings regarding Jesus' fully deity and thus full equality with the Father. How did John present the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? How did he view the Holy Spirit? Did he consider the Holy Spirit to be nothing more than God's "active force or power," something of a sanctified Star Wars "May the Force be with you"? Did he consider the Holy Spirit to be personal, but less than God—less than fully God and equal with the Father and the Son? To answer this question, we will study two passages from John's writings.

In the passage cited above Jesus is beginning His final farewell message to the disciples on the evening of His betrayal. The final Passover has ended. The first Lord's Supper has been instituted. Jesus shocked all of the disciples by breaking tradition and washing the disciples' feet (John 13). Despite the explanation of many that Jesus was merely performing the duty of a servant in the normal Jewish tradition by washing the disciples' dusty feet, it should be noted that the normal Jewish custom occurred immediately upon a person entering the home, not at the end of the evening after a long evening in the home. After washing the disciples' feet, an act that itself required Jesus' explanation to the disciples. He continued His intimate teaching from John chapters fourteen through sixteen. Throughout this precious teaching, Jesus repeatedly teaches the disciples about the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit. In this passage He introduces the thought and sets the stage for this enlarged teaching.

We must not overlook the primary title that Jesus gives to the Holy Spirit,

"Comforter." The word "Comforter" is the translation of a word that refers to one who "calls alongside himself" others whom he wishes to assist or encourage. During His public ministry, Jesus had served as the disciples' personal "Comforter." Repeatedly He called them to walk and stand alongside Him, to deny self, and to follow Him, even to the extreme measure of taking up their cross (literally, their instrument of capital punishment—the death of self) and following Him. The dominant theme that Jesus will emphasize in John 14-16 is His imminent departure from them. His objective is to remind them that they will not be left as they were before He invaded their lives and called them to follow Him. As He departs from them, He will personally see to it that they will have a replacement "Comforter," one who will be every bit as competent as He had been.

Strong's electronic dictionary of New Testament words contains an expanded section to the printed version of this popular work. It lists words that are considered synonyms in the Greek language, clarifying the distinction between them. When should one word appear, and when should the other similar word appear? What are the subtle distinctions between the words that makes one word uniquely qualified in this context? I have listed Strong's synonyms for the Greek word translated "another" in our study passage. The Greek word that appears in our passage is Strong's number 243, "allos." Notice the specific distinctions of this word compared with its synonym.

243 as compared with 2087 denotes numerical in distinction from qualitative differences; 243 adds ('one besides'), 2087 distinguishes ('one of

two'); every 2087 is an 243 but not every 243 is a 2087; 243 generally denotes simple distinction of individuals, 2087 involves the secondary idea of difference of kind.<sup>1</sup>

Based on this word, as well as the expanded context of Jesus John 14-16 message to the disciples, we may reasonably conclude that there is a numerical distinction between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, but not a qualitative distinction between them. The Holy Spirit is not a different "kind" of being from Jesus. Therefore, if Jesus is fully God, we must conclude that the Holy Spirit is no less fully God than He.

It should be noted by the precise definition that refers to a numerical distinction that John (Actually, Jesus; John merely quotes Jesus' words.) equally rejects any idea that attempts to eliminate the unique doctrine of the Trinity. He rejects modalism (an ancient idea that still exists, teaching that "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" are mere modes of God's revelation of Himself to man, but rejects the unique Persona of each "Person" in the Trinity). He rejects subordinationism (the idea that there is a hierarchy within the Trinity; the Father is supreme, the Son is "second in command," and the Holy Spirit holds the third seat of authority in the hierarchy) by the careful use of the specific word for "another."

The second passage that we shall examine is 1 John 5:7.

*"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." (1 John 5:7)*

Occasionally this verse is referred to as the Johannine comma. If you look up this verse in most modern commentaries, you will find either no reference to it or a lengthy dissertation complaining that it was not included in the "older and better" manuscripts of John's letter. Given the significance of this passage to the Biblical

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<sup>1</sup>James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996), G5806.

doctrine of the Trinity, I will cite at length from John Gill's commentary on First John regarding this question. The details that Gill provides, his multiple historical references, some dating to as early as 200 AD, make this citation invaluable to our study of it, not to mention our legitimate claim to the verse as an authentic part of our New Testament record. The words of First John 5:7 are not necessary for us to prove the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine appears throughout Scripture. However, the clarity of the verse serves to underscore its value to us as a legitimate part of inspired Scripture.

The genuineness of this text has been called in question by some, because it is wanting in the Syriac version, as it also is in the Arabic and Ethiopic versions; and because the old Latin interpreter has it not; and it is not to be found in many Greek manuscripts; nor cited by many of the ancient fathers, even by such who wrote against the Arians, when it might have been of great service to them: to all which it may be replied, that as to the Syriac version, which is the most ancient, and of the greatest consequence, it is but a version, and a defective one.

...As to the old Latin interpreter, it is certain it is to be seen in many Latin manuscripts of an early date, and stands in the Vulgate Latin edition of the London Polyglot Bible: and the Latin translation, which bears the name of Jerom, has it, and who, in an epistle of his to Eustochium, prefixed to his translation of these canonical epistles, complains of the omission of it by unfaithful interpreters. And as to its being wanting in some Greek manuscripts, as the Alexandrian, and others, it need only be said, that it is to be found in many others; it is in an old British copy, and in the Complutensian edition, the compilers of which made use of various copies; and out of sixteen ancient copies of Robert Stephens's, nine of them had it: and yet, after all, certain it is, that it is cited by many of them; by Fulgentius, in the beginning of the "sixth" century, against the Arians,

without any scruple or hesitation; and Jerom, as before observed, has it in his translation made in the latter end of the “fourth” century; and it is cited by Athanasius about the year 350; and before him by Cyprian, in the middle, of the “third” century, about the year 250; and is referred to by Tertullian about, the year 200; and which was within a “hundred” years, or little more, of the writing of the epistle; which may be enough to satisfy anyone of the genuineness of this passage; and besides, there never was any dispute about it till Erasmus left it out in the, first edition of his translation of the New Testament; and yet he himself, upon the credit of the old British copy before mentioned, put it into another edition of his translation.<sup>2</sup>

Gill’s defense of this passage makes his voluminous—and at times somewhat equivocating—style an invaluable resource for our study of Scripture. Notice Gills multiple references to the passage from the ancient church “fathers” that predates the contemporary references to manuscripts and/or manuscript evidence. The earliest citation of the passage that Gill mentions is barely more than a hundred years from the time that John likely wrote the letter late in the first century.

*“There are three...these three are one.”* In two thousand years of Christian scholarship no simpler or clearer statement of the doctrine of the Trinity has ever been made. John does not state in this verse a single truth that he has not already affirmed in his other writings. “Another” of the same kind and quality in our study passage affirms numerical uniqueness; *“There are three....”* *“I and my Father are one”* (John 10:30) affirms the fact; *“...these three are one.”* Factually, this verse merely states in simple and undeniable terms what a multitude of other passages state.

In the context of First John the verse adds to our knowledge of the harmonious interaction of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on

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<sup>2</sup> I have quoted Gills commentary from Ages Software’s electronic collection of John Gill’s writings. Ages Software, Inc. Rio, WI.

our behalf. They “bear record in heaven.” The scroll of heaven with all that it is and all that it will be for God’s chosen people throughout eternity is not written second-hand by them. All of heaven’s record is written by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“I can’t understand this doctrine of the Trinity. How can three be one and one be three?” is often raised as an objection to the doctrine. Our inability to understand God does not limit His eternal being, does it? Can you understand God’s omniscience, His omnipotence, or any of His other essential divine attributes? A doctrine’s affirmation in Scripture affirms its truth, not our ability to understand it.

Why is this verse so significant? Why do I not merely write the same points regarding the Trinity from other passages that affirm the same doctrine that appears here? I offer a simple reason. If God does indeed desire to communicate knowledge of Himself to us in the simplest way possible for our understanding and “fellowship with him,” (Read the first chapter of First John.), then I have no reason to reject one of the simplest and most concise verses in the New Testament that presents this profound truth. If God intends for us to understand Him as fully as is humanly possible, I reasonably should expect Him to do so in the simplest possible language. The simplicity of this verse, not to mention its ancient citations that appear in Gill’s reference, affirms its authenticity. It is altogether in keeping with God’s “social” character to communicate His most intimate nature to us as fully as we can possibly grasp.

In the broad study of the doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament I do not propose that God reveals Himself as one and three at the same time and in the same context. Nor do I deny for a moment the profound mystery of this doctrine.

To those who charge the false “straw man” claim that believing in the Trinity is equivalent to believing in “three gods,” I offer that none of the New Testament writers who taught this doctrine in any way believed in three gods. Far from it, they fiercely and consistently held to a strictly monotheistic view of God. So do I and other historical Trinitarians. How can we simplify this profound truth? Simply stated, *“Three in one, and one in three, and the One in the middle stands for me.”*

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
16434 Woodruff  
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.  
Joseph R. Holder Pastor