

James Attebury

Christian Theology and Apologetics

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A Response to “The Oneness of God” by David K. Bernard – Part 11: John 1:1

John 1:1 is one of the most important verses in the Bible for the doctrine of God:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

It teaches us that the Word is both distinct from God the Father since the Word was with God, and the Word is God by nature since the Word was God. It is strong evidence for the eternal pre-existence of the Son of God. So how does Bernard get around the force of this verse? He does so by depersonalizing the Word of John 1:

“The Word is not a distinct person from the Father any more than a man and his word are distinct persons. Rather, the Word is the thought, plan, or mind of God and also the expression of God” (140).

“John 1 says the Logos existed as the mind of God from the beginning of time. When the fullness of time was come, God put His plan in action. He put flesh on that plan in the form of the man Jesus Christ” (60).

For Bernard and Oneness Pentecostals, the Word is not the personal Son of God because the Son by definition could never exist as a distinct person from the Father or exist before the incarnation:

“Therefore, the Son did not preexist the Incarnation except as the plan in the mind of God. The Word is eternal; the Son is not” (302).

“This trend toward trinitarianism began by making the Logos (the Word of John 1) a distinct person” (266).

Bernard’s interpretation of the Word of John 1:1 is almost identical to that of adoptionists (<https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2016/08/13/what-is-adoptionism/>), who deny the pre-existence of Jesus Christ as well. They both depersonalize the Word to make him the mind of God rather than his eternal Son. But there are several reasons why we should reject Bernard’s interpretation:

1. The Word is identified as God.

John tells us that “the Word was God.” If the Word was God, then the Word is personal because God is personal. As Michael Burgos puts it, “All that God is, his Word is. . . . Thus, if God is personal, the Word is personal” (“An Exegesis & Synthesis of John 1:1-3,” in *Our God Is Triune: Essays on Biblical Theology*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Our-God-Triune-Biblical-Theology/dp/0692422919>), 126).

2. Jesus Christ is called the Word of God in Revelation 19:13:

“He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.”

Jesus is a person. And because he is personal, the Word of God is personal. Revelation 19:13 is telling us that he is the Word of John 1:1 and he has not ceased to be the Word of God. If Jesus is personal, then the Word is personal.

3. The Word is described as being in personal relationship with God.

John tells us that “the Word was with God.” The preposition “with” implies a relationship between the Word and God. According to John 1:18 the Son was “at the Father’s side.” But if John had wanted to teach that the Word of John 1:1 was impersonal and not a distinct person from the Father, he could have said that the Word was “in God” rather than “with God.”

4. The Word who created all things in John 1:3 is identified as Jesus in John 1:10:

John 1:3: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”

John 1:10: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.”

Since John 1:10 tells us that the very same person who walked among us and was rejected by the world was the same one “through” whom God the Father created the world, that must mean that the Word of John 1:1-3 is Jesus himself. And since Jesus is personal, the Word is personal. John 1:10 is a verse that is completely overlooked by most modalists and adoptionists.

5. The Word is identified as Jesus in John 1:14 who became flesh for us:

John 1:14: “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.”

John claims to have seen the glory of this Word who became flesh. But ideas and plans do not become flesh or become incarnate, only a person could become incarnate. As the parallel passage in Philippians 2 tells us, the one who was in the form of God took upon himself our human form:

Philippians 2:6-7: “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form.”

6. John tells us that the Word was heard, seen, and touched by him in 1 John 1:

1 John 1:1-2: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.”

This Word of life is Jesus whom the Apostle John was with. But ideas and plans in God's mind are not heard, seen, or touched. Persons are heard, seen, and touched. John did not touch an idea or a plan, but he did touch the Son of God who is a person.

7. The parallel passage in Hebrews 1 tells us that the Word is the Son:

Hebrews 1:1-2: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world."

Both the Word and the Son are described as being the one "through whom" God created the world.

But how would Bernard respond to these arguments? He argues that the preposition "with" in John 1:1 does not teach that the Word is in personal relationship with God:

"As explained in chapter 4, the Word is the thought, plan, expression, or mind of God. That is how the Word could be with God and at the same time be God Himself. We should also note that the Greek word *pros*, translated here as 'with,' is translated as 'pertaining to' in Hebrews 2:17 and 5:1. So the Word was with God in the sense of belonging to God and not in the sense of a distinct person besides God" (188-189).

An examination of the Greek text of Hebrews 2:17 and 5:1 shows us that these are not close parallels to John 1:1. While the verses in Hebrews also use the phrase *pros ton theon* "with the God," the syntax is not the same. As Michael Burgos explains the use of *pros* in Hebrews 2:17 and 5:1:

"With regard to the use of the preposition in the aforementioned texts, *pros* is rightly translated 'pertaining to' because it is preceded by the neuter article (*ta*) which functions as an accusative of reference" (*Against Oneness Pentecostalism*, 52).

The preposition *pros* in Hebrews 2:17 and 5:1 is translated as "pertaining to" rather than "with" because it is referring back to the things (*ta*) which pertain to God. The phrase *ta pros* means "the things pertaining to" God and *ta* is a plural definite article. The things relating to God are impersonal and so "pertaining to" is an appropriate translation. But it is inappropriate for John 1:1 because the Word is Jesus Christ who is personal as I have already established.

A closer parallel to John 1:1 is 1 John 1:2 which speaks of "the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us." This verse uses the phrase *pros ton patera* "with the Father" to describe the relationship between the eternal life and the Father. This eternal life is the same as the Word of life of 1 John 1:1 and Jesus is life himself. He is "the life" who leads us to the Father (John 14:6).

Another parallel construction is 1 John 2:1: "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." This is the same phrase used in 1 John 1:2 that is translated "with the Father" (*pros ton patera*) and our advocate Jesus Christ is personal.

The phrase *pros ton theon* or "with the God" is used in Romans 5:1 to describe our peace with God:

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

The words *pros ton theon* are translated as "before God" or in the presence of God in 1 John 3:21:

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”

Another comment from Bernard I need to respond to is where he argues that John 1:1 actually supports his modalistic theology:

“Furthermore, if *God* in John 1:1 means God the Father, then the Word is not a different person, for the verse would then read, ‘The Word was with the Father, and the Word was the Father’” (189).

Once again, Bernard is not looking closely at the Greek text of John. The Greek words translated as “with God” are *pros ton theon*. These words in Greek literally mean “with the God.” But we do not translate them into English this way because that would sound awkward. We do not say “the Word was with the God” but “the Word was with God.” However, by not retaining the word “the” in our translation, it opens the door for the modalistic confusion Bernard is advocating.

The word God in John 1:1b, or the middle portion of this verse which says “the Word was with the God,” is referring to God the Father, but the word God in John 1:1c where it says “and the Word was God” lacks the definite article “the” before it that God in John 1:1b has. Because God in John 1:1b has the definite article before it while God in John 1:1c lacks it, that is John’s way of distinguishing the person of God the Father in 1:1b from the nature of God in 1:1c.

John 1:1c says *kai theos ēn ho logos* which literally means “and God was the Word.” But we do not translate it this way into English because *logos* or Word is the subject of this phrase because it has the definite article “the” or *ho* before it while *theos* or God lacks the definite article before it. So “the Word” is the subject nominative while “God” is the predicative nominative that is predicating or describing something about the Word. The Word qualitatively was God but is distinguished from “the God” with whom he was with in 1:1b.

Now, if John had wanted to teach modalism, he could have done so by saying in John 1:1c that the Word was “the God” rather than “God.” Instead of saying in John 1:1c *kai theos ēn ho logos* (and God was the Word) he could have said *kai ho logos ēn ho theos* (and the Word was the God) by drawing a direct reference to the God of John 1:1b which reads *kai ho logos ēn pros ton theon* (and the Word was with the God). John’s careful language avoids both modalism and subordinationism.

Bernard also believes that the parallel passage in 1 John 1:1-2 supports his position:

“We should also note that 1 John 1:2 does not indicate that the Son was with God in eternity. Rather, it states that eternal life was with the Father. Of course, Jesus Christ manifested eternal life to us. He is the Word of life in verse 1. However, this does not mean that eternal life existed as a distinct person from the Father” (189).

I’m glad that Bernard affirms that Jesus is the Word of life in 1 John 1:1. Bernard said, “He is the Word of life in verse 1.” But if that is so, then he must be the eternal life of 1 John 1:2 who was with the Father and the Word of John 1:1. How could Jesus be the Word of life in 1 John 1:1 but not be the Word in John 1:1? And how could Jesus be the Word of life in 1 John 1:1 but not be the eternal life in 1 John 1:2 who was with the Father? Jesus is “the life” who was manifested to us and he is eternal (John 14:6).

Commentary on John 1:1

The first verse of John is divided up into three parts which are called John 1:1a, 1:1b, and 1:1c. John 1:1a says “In the beginning was the Word,” 1:1b says, “And the Word was with God,” and 1:1c says, “And the Word was God.” These three parts together are the foundation of John’s Gospel, and we have to get

these three parts right in order to properly understand who Jesus is. The first part of John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word" and this statement from John is in contrast to a false teaching known as adoptionism.

The opening words of John's Gospel "In the Beginning" echo the first words of the Bible in Genesis 1:1 which says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." But instead of the saying, "In the beginning God," John says "In the beginning was the Word." John places "the Word" where we would expect "God" to be. So from the very beginning of this Gospel, John is already hinting at the identity of the Word. If the Word was in the beginning, then whenever the beginning began, the Word was already in existence.

Before the universe began, the Word eternally existed. To put it another way, the Word already was in the beginning and therefore he never began to be. God is the one who was, is, and is to come. God is the only one whose existence is not dependent on anything outside himself. As God he is self-existent.

And the verb John chooses to use to describe the Word's existence is important. He says the Word "was." The word "was" is in the imperfect tense and the imperfect tense describes a continuous ongoing action or state of being in the past. The verb "was" in verse 1 used to describe the Word is in contrast to the verb "were made" in verse 3 to describe the creation of all things. The Word is the one who created all things that have been made and therefore he was never made himself.

But why does John choose to describe Jesus as the Word? The obvious answer to that question is because that is who he is. He is the Word. He is the Word speaking from God to us, and speaking to God for us. But I think John also chooses to describe Jesus as the Word because of the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.

These Aramaic translations of the Old Testament are called the Targums. And in the Targum, it often uses the Aramaic word Memra as a substitute for the name of God, Yahweh. And the word "Memra" means "Word." So the Lord Yahweh is often called the Word in these translations. Let me give you some examples:

Targum of Genesis 1:27: "And the Word of the Lord created man in his likeness."

Targum of Genesis 3:8: "And they heard the voice of the Word of the Lord walking in the garden."

Targum of Genesis 15:6: "And Abraham trusted in the Word of the Lord and he counted to him for righteousness."

Targum of Genesis 22:8: "And Abraham said, "The Word of the Lord will prepare for me a lamb."

Targum of Exodus 3:14: "And the Word of the Lord said unto Moses: I am He who said unto the world, Be! and it was: and who in the future shall say to it, Be! and it shall be. And He said: Thus thou shalt say to the children of Israel: I Am hath sent me unto you."

The Jewish Encyclopedia defines the Aramaic word Memra or Word this way:

Memra is "the creative or directive word or speech of God manifesting His power in the world of matter or mind; a term used especially in the Targum as a substitute for 'the Lord' when an anthropomorphic expression is to be avoided."

So this word being used to describe God anthropomorphically makes perfect sense in light of John's teaching that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in John 1:14. God the Word actually became man in the incarnation, not just anthropomorphically. Jesus is the Word of the Lord who is God and who became man for us literally.

In John's Gospel, John 1:1 is not the only verse that teaches the pre-existence of the Son of God. There are many references to Jesus' pre-existence in John's Gospel:

John 1:10: "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him."

John 1:30: "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.'"

John 3:13: "No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

John 3:31: "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all."

John 6:38: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

John 6:62: "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

John 8:23: "He said to them, 'You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.'"

John 8:42: "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.'"

John 13:3: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God."

John 16:27-28: "For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father."

John 17:5: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

The Word was not alone in eternity past. Our God is not a unitarian God because God was never lonely in eternity past. He always had with him his Word and his Spirit.

And the Word existed in the closest possible fellowship with the Father. John affirms the Word's co-existence with the Father from the very beginning. In the beginning the Word was in existence with God. The preposition "with" in this verse describes nearness to something, friendship, intimacy, or fellowship. The Word has eternally been in relationship with God.

And this relationship of being with God implies a distinction between the Word and God. John 1:1 is a call to believe in this Jesus, the Word who was with the Father before the foundation of the world.

And the Word, as to his nature, is God: "the Word was God." I like the way the New English Bible paraphrases this sentence: "What God was, the Word was." Another scholar summarizes the meaning of John this way: John is saying that, "Everything that can be said about God also can be said about the Word." So Jesus is not a lesser god than the Father, but is truly and fully God and one with the Father in nature or being.

Modern-day Arians, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, get around the reference to Jesus being God in this verse by mistranslating it. In the New World Translation of the Bible used by the Jehovah's Witnesses it mistranslates John 1:1 by saying: "The Word was *a god*." So, why do we translate John 1:1 as "the Word was God" rather than "the Word was a god" like the Jehovah's Witnesses do?

Even if you don't know anything about Greek grammar, there is an obvious reason why translating this verse as, "the Word was a god" is an impossible translation. Because if you did that and made the Word a god, that would result in more than one God which is polytheism. If that translation is correct, then Jesus would be a different God from the Father.

But the Bible teaches that there is only one God. Isaiah 44:6 says:

"I am the first and I am the last, besides me, there is no God."

This was one of the observations that Athanasius made about Arianism. He recognized that Arianism leads to polytheism because it makes the Son a lesser and separate divine being from the Father since in their view he does not share the same exact being or nature as the Father:

"If the Word is a creature and a work out of nothing, either He is not True God because He is Himself one of the creatures, or if they name Him God from regard for the Scriptures, they must of necessity say that there are two Gods, one Creator, the other creature, and must serve two Lords" (Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Book 3, Chapter 25, Section 16).

Jesus could never be "a god" because there is only one God. And this one God exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That's what we see in the baptismal formula that Jesus gave us in Matthew 28:19: "Baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Translating this verse as the Jehovah's Witnesses do to mean that "the Word was a god" does not work grammatically because in the Greek text of John 1:1 it literally says, "God was the Word."

But we don't translate it that way in English. We say, "the Word was God" not "God was the Word." And why is that? Because "the Word" is the subject of the clause. And we know that it is the subject because it has the definite article "the" in front of it. By placing the word "the" in front of "Word," John is telling us that it is the subject of the clause. So "the Word" is the subject of this clause even though it comes after "God" in the Greek text.

And in English, word order is more important than in Greek. In English, the subject comes before the predicate. So that's why we translate it as "the Word was God" rather than maintaining the Greek word order of "God was the Word."

And the word "God" is the predicate of this clause because it lacks the definite article. The predicate "God" describes the quality of the Word or what the Word is. To put it another way, the word "God" is predicating something about the Word.

And the word “God” is a pre-verbal predicate. God is placed first in the Greek text for the sake of emphasis because placing a word first in a clause is the way you emphasize something in Greek. John is emphasizing what the Word is by placing God first as the predicate which describes the Word which is the subject.

But if John had wanted to say that the Word was not God as the Arians believe, but only like God, he could have said that by using a different Greek word rather than God. He could have used the word *theios* which means God-like rather than *theos* which means God.

John 1:1 teaches us three great truths:

1. The Word is eternal: He has always existed and was not created.
2. The Word is personal and was with God the Father in eternity past.
3. The Word is God by nature.

The one who died and rose again for us is God incarnate. And therefore, his death on the cross is of infinite value to save us and cover our transgressions. Only a sacrifice of infinite worth could save us from the infinite justice and wrath of God that we deserve for our sins. His death is perfectly sufficient to save us, and we cannot add to his completed work of atonement. Jesus, as God the Son, is worthy of our worship. Jesus is worthy of our prayers. He is worthy of our trust and our salvation.

[Part 12: The Eternal Son of God \(https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/12/27/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-12-the-eternal-son-of-god/\)](https://jamesattebury.wordpress.com/2024/12/27/a-response-to-the-oneness-of-god-by-david-k-bernard-part-12-the-eternal-son-of-god/)

2 thoughts on “A Response to “The Oneness of God” by David K. Bernard – Part 11: John 1:1”

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