The Amazing Abuse of Simple Language to Undermine Jesus' Creed.

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One God Conf. in TX, June 2009

Introduction

Very few sermons are preached on the doctrine of the Trinity. As long as a congregant is willing to say "Jesus is God," he is probably in good standing with other church members. But a significant and growing minority over the world are troubled by the proposition "Jesus is God." It sounds odd, not only because Jesus, who knew who he was, never said "I am God." (*Ego eimi o theos*). "I am the Almighty (*pantokrator*)."[1] Not once did he say, "I am the Lord Your God." Since the God of the Bible *did* say "I am Yahweh, and I am the Lord God," Jesus could have said this, but he did not.

What he did say, and what the NT repeats over and over again is this: Jesus is the **Lord Messiah** (Luke 2:11 introduces him), the Son of God (Luke 1:35 defines this). Believing that, will put us in God's favor. Jesus of course said that as Son of God he did not know the day of his coming (Mark 13:32). The statement "I am God" would have been heard in his environment as "I am Yahweh," the God of Israel.

When charged by hostile Jews with claiming an outrageous (to them) status as unique agent for God, Jesus tried to allay the suspicions of his enemies, by pointing out that he was powerless without the One God as His sponsor, the One who empowered and authorized him. The idea that Jesus *was* YHVH would have been rightly rejected as impossible, given Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and given what the Hebrew Bible said about God and the Messiah, God's Son, whom the One God was one day going to bring into existence *as the descendant of David*. (II Sam 7:14-16; Ps 2:7).

Everyone knew that GOD Himself cannot *come into* existence! He could however have a uniquely-begotten Son who would reflect Him perfectly.

Ordinary readers of the Scripture did not need to be taught that God has no beginning. Therefore if the Son of God, the Messiah was prophesied to be **begotten** (Ps. 2:7, cited of the birth of Jesus in Acts 13:33 (not KJV); Heb. 1:5-7, he is disqualified from *being* the unbegotten God**.** Begetting tells us he would be *coming into existence*. He could not possibly *be* God, the God of Israel, whose personal name was Yahweh. Yahweh was never begotten, but the Son of God was. The Son of God was to be the Son of David as well (II Sam. 7:14-16), and one could not be an unbegotten second eternal God.

Rightly did Dr. Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary say: "To be Son of God in the Bible one has to be a being who is *not* God" (*Ex Auditu*, 1991, in his article — a must read — "Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of a Contemporary Orthodoxy").

People in NT times were able to reason from basic facts. The Scriptures taught them that Yahweh was alone. There was no one like Him, no God before or after Him. He was exclusive and there was only one of His class. He was unrivalled, the sole unaccompanied Creator (Isa 44:24). The numeral one (*echad* in Hebrew) provided an impenetrable, extra hedge against any confusion and *echad*, a numeral, counted up *how many* He was. "The Lord our God is one [not two or three!] Yahweh." Jesus quoted that very proposition in Mark 12:29, stressing its enormous importance. One Yahweh could not be two. One (*echad*) means "**a single one,**" and Yahweh was described by every form of the language available to express the idea that He was a *single* Divine Person. He was said to be the Father of Israel. "Do we not all have one Father, do we not all have one God" (Malachi 2:10). In this very satisfying and easy Hebrew parallelism, as it is called, the One God is the same as the One Father. In the Greek Scripture God is the Father as (o) theos about 1317 times.

[1]Rev. 1:8 is no exception, since the Almighty is the Father here as everywhere else, carefully distinguished from Jesus in this context. The Father in Revelation is the One who was and is and is to come. This is the divine name in Greek, taken from the YHVH of Ex. 3:14, "I will be what I will be." In Greek "o Ohn," the existing One.

Then What Happened: the Obfuscation of Simple Language

Into this very health-giving and calming, unifying proposition about the one single uncreated God, there entered a flood of confusion and complexity. This happened after the time of the New Testament.

By the mid-second century things were heading in a very new and confusing direction. Later, from the time of the church councils, the concept of God was anything but simple. It required a learned use of special language even to express the idea of who God is. He was declared after centuries of lamentable controversy, excommunication and argument to be a God who **exists as one *Essence*, but three equal Persons.** This is the caption to which one commits oneself if one attends almost every church. "God is one Essence existing in three Persons." That is plainly *not* what Jesus believed. If one is attracted to the teaching of Jesus and his marvelously lucid and life-changing instruction, one is able to see that "The Lord our God is one Lord" does not agree with "Our God is one Essence in three Persons."[2]

(It is worth noting in passing that the later creedal language "one *ousia* and three *hypostases*" was a not a constant factor in the development of the Trinity before its expression at Nicea in 325 AD. Earlier, *Ousia* and *Hypostasis* meant the same thing.)

Compare Mark 12:29, Jesus creed, with the conciliar creeds and the difference is surely obvious.

It is matter of setting the two definitions together and deciding (and teaching our children) which statement sounds like and therefore represents Jesus. Which statement wins Jesus' approval now and later, when as believers we are assessed for our loyalty to the Messiah?

So if someone says "I believe Jesus is God" or "I believe Jesus is Yahweh," we may gently respond by saying that on the basis of our common language, "if Jesus is God and we know the Father is God, that makes two Gods. If Jesus is Yahweh and the Father is Yahweh that makes two Yahweh's " This is certain as the nose on our faces. "This is a dog and that is a dog," pointing to two distinct animals, makes two dogs.

Are we really convinced that the Bible was given us as an absolutely inscrutable language problem? The fact is that we human beings have made the simple (and I think beautiful and restful) into a nightmare of complexity. Ask you friends to explain how God is One and Three at the same time. Can he do it? Or will he refer you question to an expert?

The Unnecessary Struggle of Scholars

The finest evangelical scholars of our day are candid enough to admit that they do not understand it. Millard Erickson in his defense of the Trinity[3] says that the very best logicians have not been able to explain "in what sense God is one and in what other sense He is Three" (p. 258). Erickson admits that one has to garble ordinary language to get the Trinitarian idea over. "Thus I have sometimes said of the Trinity, 'He are three,' or 'they is one.' For we have here a being whose nature falls outside our usual understanding of persons" (p. 270). Is this not an admission of the failure of the whole enterprise and a call, a cri de coeur, for a return to the drawing-board? What a wonderful thing it would be for Moslems and Jews everywhere to be reassured that Christians really do believe one means one! President Obama could use a truth like that.

Yes, there are vast areas of understanding which are beyond us. But is it true that *how many God is* is meant to remain unclear? "Falls outside our notion of person." But note carefully that God's own graciously given description of Himself in Scripture positively does *not* fall outside our usual understanding of persons and personal pronouns! God has chosen to reveal Himself, or rather all that we need for a good relationship with Him, and in New Testament times with his Son, in clear language. It is one of humanity's great disasters that churches, following cherished tradition, have obscured the identity of God by overlaying the biblical simplicity with a haze and fog of unintelligible jargon. I propose that confusion occurs when we do not accept the meaning of a singular personal pronoun. Or that we try to turn "one" into "three." It won't work and it has not worked. Unity has eluded us.

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[2]David Cooper, Ph. D, proposed that the *Shema* be translated: "The Lord our Gods is the Lord, a unity." Note the dropping of the word "one."

[3]*God in Three Persons*, Baker Books, 1995.

We would urge our readers to obtain (second hand?) Michael Durrant's *Theology and Intelligibility*[4]. His conclusion is that "no intelligible account can be offered of the Trinitarian formula and hence of the doctrine of the Trinity" (p. 195)

I mean this kindly and with respect, but for a sample of unintelligibility, despite noble struggle, to which Durrant refers, one may consult James White's *Forgotten Trinity*.[5] Trinitarians will sometimes say that the Trinity cannot be *comprehended* (but only apprehended), and so unintelligibility is to be expected. Dr. White is honest when he admits that orthodox language is somehow inadequate to define how many and who God is. God is said to be One Being consisting as three coequal and coeternal Persons. (p. 26). White admits to his own struggle: "We struggle to express ourselves clearly here, for how does one describe the Being of God" (p. 169). The problem is that White offers two non-compatible definitions. God, he says *is* one Being. Then he speaks of "the Being of God," "God's being," "His essence," which is a *quality* of God. So *is* God an Essence or does He *possess* a certain Essence or quality. It is not clear in White's book. White insists that we must never confuse Being with Person. Other writers drift into "personal Being" as the right expression. Can you explain the difference between "Being" and "Personal Being" as descriptions of God? Isn't a personal being a person?[6]

Dr. White says that the God of the Bible is one "What," not a "Who." Do readers of the Bible really find in its pages a Being who is a "what," and not a "who"? Does the masculine pronoun HE used of God over and over and over again in Scripture, mean that God is a "What"? The problem is that **White uses language in a way quite foreign to the Bible's much easier description of the identity of God**. And quite foreign to the simple laws of communication by which we all make sense to each other, without the slightest difficulty.

Can you explain on the basis of the Bible or your own use of words the difference between "person" and "being"? Did you learn this from your mother, or from school? Later White tells us: "Don't think of 'begotten' in *human* terms, but in divine terms. (p. 172). But the Bible does not say that "begotten" does not mean "begotten," and that someone begotten has no beginning! This would be equivalent to saying; "Don't think of black as black, but as yellow." You see, a whole vocabulary of "non-normal language" has to be imported, before one can discuss these abstruse issues about who God and Jesus are.

I propose that when it comes to defining who God is, the Bible does not keep using non-normal language. It uses words like "one" and "I" and "Me" and "Thou" and "He" multiple thousands of times.

We are supposed to know that a singular personal pronoun means a single person (there is a single exception in Jud 1:2 which no one misunderstands. There the tribe speaks as an "I" using the word Judah. But it is sheer desperation to call in that one verse to justify avoiding the plain and constant use of the singular pronoun for the one, single God.

Dr. White ends in contradiction. Here is how he tries to convince Jehovah's Witnesses of the Trinity: "So I press on: 'I assume you agree with me that there is only one true God, Yahweh… I believe the name Yahweh refers to the very divine Being, the eternal God, **who** created everything [note that White's 'one What' is now a 'Who']" (p. 132). White has thus defined the Triune God, the Being, the What as Yahweh. Now he goes on: "We can agree, I assume, that the Father is identified as Yahweh. But I believe that the Bible identifies Jesus as Yahweh, as well, and the spirit is the spirit of Yahweh [or does he mean *is* Yahweh?] Each of these three *persons* share the one divine name, Yahweh."

So now we are asked to believe that the one Essence, Being, the "one What" is Yahweh, and at the same time Jesus is identified as Yahweh, and the spirit also.

Here James White has run into a clear contradiction. Yahweh is the name of the one "What" and also the name of the three persons. So one Yahweh = three Yahweh's. That cannot be. 3 X's cannot be 1 X.

The ground fallacy of the Trinitarian argument is that the Trinity *identifies* Jesus with Yahweh, making two and later three Yahweh's. Yes, Jesus does things which Yahweh does, because his Father,

[4]pub. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973

[5]Bethany House Pub., 1998.

[6]A rather similar re-writing of language takes place when a Christadelphian defines "air" in "prince of the power of the air," as "political air."

Yahweh has authorized this. But the Son of God is begotten, and this means "has a beginning," and God (Yahweh) has no beginning. The Son of God died and was tempted and fell asleep, but God does not do these things. The Son of God was limited in his knowledge and said so (Mark 13:32). The marvel of Jesus is the amazing thing that the One God has done with His own unique Son and especially what He has now done to authorize the first immortalized man to exercise "all power and authority" (Matt. 28). Jesus is the great model of the "glory of man," man at his ultimate peak, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters.

If we identify Jesus as Yahweh we are committing ourselves to belief in two who are Yahweh's and this is two Yahwehs, one too many. The Lord God of the Bible, who is always a WHO and never a WHAT "is one Yahweh [LORD]" Mark 12:29. That is easy to understand. The Greek reads, following the LXX "The Lord our God is one Lord."

At the most basic level, it ought not to be hard to understand that the first person singular pronoun "I" does not mean the first person plural "we." Just do the math and count up how many YHVH's there are in the statement "I am Yahweh, and there is none other than I."

Who authorized a non-normal, specialized vocabulary, church-speak, as a prerequisite for understanding the Bible? I maintain that God has revealed Himself using human language in Scripture (Thank God He has!). It is a cop-out to say that the Bible's human, yet inspired language is *inadequate*. It is all we have. God speaks in Scripture, and not once said that He is an "Essence" or a "What." The Bible should not be charged with inadequacy.

There are thousands of examples of the various words for God in the Bible. Not once is God called an Essence (*ousia* in Greek). The word "God" never means a Triune Being. White says that the word God "can refer to all three persons at once," but he offers no example (p. 71).

In desperation some have resorted to a very easily detected language muddle. They have alleged that the Hebrew word for "One" is really "compound one." The fact that *no standard Lexicon of the Biblical Hebrew language ever heard of this idea* does not deter them one moment. How would they know? They can't look it up for themselves in a Hebrew lexicon.

So they rely on someone else. A zealous reader of out Focus on the Kingdom magazine, who is determined to believe in the Triune God, writes to inform us that Jimmy Swaggart ministries, PO Box 262550, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70826 has told him that "one" may mean "more than one," ie "compound one."

It is hard to respond respectfully (as we should) to this sort of assertion. Would Jimmy Swaggart claim to be any sort of expert in this field? I doubt it. He does not claim to define English words. He knows that Websters do much better at that. The equivalent for Biblical Hebrew is the Brown, Driver and Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament,* or other equally good ones available on good Bible software. The facts of the language can be examined easily in English, by looking up all the 970 appearances of the word "one" (*echad*) and seeing what they mean. It is as much a falsehood to state that *echad* means more than "one single…." as it is to say that "I" means "We." "Abraham was one single (*echad*) person," Ezekiel wrote (Ezek. 33:24). Moses in the Shema said the God is "one single Lord." That is not so hard. "One" in English in Hebrew means "one and not two" (see examples of this in Ecc. 4:6, 7, 11, 12) Jesus said "the Lord our God is one Lord" (Mark 12:29). What are you hearing there? "three Lords"? or "One Essence in three Persons"? The language of Jesus is refreshingly straightforward and comforting. He often spoke of a child-like approach being the one he treasures most in his people.

Here are some more helpful examples. These will enable you to inspect the word "one" (*echad*)[7]

> One place (Gen. 1:9), one man (Gen. 42:13), one law (Ex. 12:49) one side (Ex 25:12) one ewe lamb (Lev. 14:10), one of his brethren (Lev. 25:48), one rod (Num. 17:3), one soul (Num. 31:28), one of those cities (Deut. 4:42), one way (Deut. 28:7) one ephah (I Sam 1:24) one went out into the field (I Kings 4:39). One shepherd (Ezek 37:24), one basket (Jer. 24:2). One thing (Ps. 27:4), two are better than one (Ecc. 4:9), for one day or for two (Ezra 10:13) Abraham was only one person (Ezek 33:24), a unique day Zech 14:7.

So we invite any reader to show from a standard Lexicon of Hebrew that "one" means more than one. Now of course "one" *can* describe a *compound noun*. You can have "one family." But think carefully.

[7]I am indebted for this list to Lindsey Killian and Dr. Emily Palik.

What does the word “one” mean here? Your twelve year old will be insulted by the question! “One family” means just that. Not two families! Not three families. “One zebra” does not prove that “one” means “black and white.” On no account can the numerical adjective “one” be made to mean more than one. “One flesh” still means one flesh and not two fleshes.

I am sure readers are finding their way into the subject by now. “The Lord our God is *one Lord*, says the NT (Mark 12:29), reporting Jesus own precious words. Is that clear? One Lord does not mean three Lords, or two Lords. Well did a very learned and wellknown scholar bewail the fact that the Trinity is really a contradiction in terms. “It is a contradiction, indeed, and not merely a verbal contradiction, but an incompatibility in the human ideas conveyed. We can scarcely make a nearer approach to an exact enunciation of it [defining God], than of saying that one thing is two things” (J. H Newman, in Sadler, *Gloria Patri*, p. 39).

That God is a single (*echad*) Divine Person is said over and over again. The repetition is impressive. We all know that a pronoun stands for a noun, and single personal pronouns tell us that we are dealing with a single person. God has chosen to reveal Himself not only as “one Lord,” “One Father,” but as “I,” and “Me,” and “He” and “Him.” Those words do not confuse us. We use them all the time with no possibility of being misunderstood. So with God. He reveals Himself (note Himself, as a singular personal pronoun) thousands and thousands of times as one, single Divine Person.

But with our fatal tendency as humans to spoil a marvelous and unifying, health giving, truth, we appear to prefer torturing our brains with the impossible idea that God is *both Three and One at the same time*. No Bible verse (out of 31,000) has the word “three” next to God. The Bible writers and Jesus whose teaching is recorded for us had never heard of a Triune God, except perhaps as a pagan concept to be rejected. Yes, of course the Father, and Son and holy spirit are quite often mentioned together, but in such verses, we never read the Three make up the One God. (I John 5:7 in the KJV is not part of the original as is now publicly known to all).

We invite readers to examine all points of view. By all means read what others have to say. But don’t necessarily accept a “favorite” ministry as the last word on Hebrew words. They may just be passing on what they have heard, but have not verified.

I wrote to an author who relied on someone he viewed as an expert. He claimed that “one” in Hebrew means more than one. I gently suggested that his concept about “one” was mistaken. He replied: “Following our recent correspondence I have taken theological and academic advice, and it seems clear that my comments on the Hebrew word *echad* are inaccurate, I am grateful to you for pointing this out and assure you that in future printing of the book the paragraph will be replaced” with other arguments.

The God of Jesus is the God of Israel and of the Bible. Ask any Jew about his God and he will shrink from the notion that God is more than one supreme Lord. Are Jews, and their rabbis, and rabbi Jesus to be rejected as not understanding the word “one.” It is a fascinating issue to search out. And while you are at it, why not write to the *MacArthur Study Bible* editors and ask them why they (inadvertently) misreported what the Bible actually says in Ps. 110:1. Will anyone accept the challenge to ask them a question? On Mark 12:36 they say “The Lord said to my Lord”: “The first word for Lord is Yahweh, which is God’s covenant name. ***The second word for Lord is a different word which the Jews used as a title for God***…. Jesus was proclaiming [by quoting this verse] the Messiah’s deity.”

That second word is positively and definitely not the word Jews used for God! Ask any Jew. He will tell you The second “lord” in Ps. 110:1 is the Hebrew word *adoni* (“adonee”) and in every one [not two!] of its 195 occurrences means a lord who is *not* God, but a human or occasionally angelic superior.

Note the contradiction. The *Study Bible* asserts what is not true. The second “Lord” they say is the word for God. It is not. It is the word which never means the supreme One God. The lesson is that believers are supposed to be alert and on the watch, not just believing everything they read from “favorite” teachers. The famous Spurgeon, and many others, misreported that second lord, calling him ADONAI.

Will anyone report back on what the *Study Bible* might say? But don’t let them fob you off with a non-answer about Hebrew vowel points. The vowel points are part of our received text and we have fortunately complete certainty that there is no corruption of the text quoted by Jesus (Ps. 110:1, cited in

the gospels). The Hebrew word "adoni" means my lord, not Lord God. It is never the title of Deity. The Greek version of the OT and the New Testament inspired in Greek renders the word "adoni" perfectly as "my lord."

I trust our readers will now see that as they bow in prayer, the universe is constituted like this: There is one God, the Father, and no one else but Him, and there is one Lord *Messiah* (Christ) Jesus. He is not God but the Son of God. And within five minutes you can find out what "Son of God" means for Jesus, and how he acquired that title. Luke 1:35 is the key. "For this reason he will be called the Son of God." The reason: God became His father by biological miracle in Mary.

So unpopular is that truth to some, that they dared to say that Mary had sex with a Roman soldier. Such is the contempt of the unconverted mind when confronted with truth. May we all remain believers. Jesus is the Son of God, the second Adam Jesus was created, begotten in the womb of the Jewess Mary. Luke 1:35 gives us the perfect explanation of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God

If you get involved in an instructive discussion about Yahweh and who He is, here is a possible way to approach the question. How many Yahwehs are there? Is there just one Yahweh, or if Jesus is Yahweh, does that make two, and if you add the Holy Spirit does that make three? So is the One Yahweh (Mark 12:29) really three Yahwehs? That sounds like 3X's make 1 X. Logicians call that logical nonsense. The word YHVH needs to be given a clear definition so that we worship God "in spirit and truth." The singular personal pronoun might just be the evidence which resolves the issue and relieves us forever of the tiring arguments which persist about who and how many the Supreme God is.

And for any of us who in former days talked about Elohim (used of the One God) as a "collective noun," and "two Gods in the God-family," I recommend the sinner's prayer of repentance! The Seventh-Day Adventists at the highest level went into print recently with this "*Echad* is an inherently plural word."[8] And don't forget how Augustine[9] rewrote the Bible in John 17:3. He said, it really reads: "That they may know you *and Jesus Christ whom you sent* as the only true God."

The world and three of its major religions are crying out for clarity on the meaning of "I" and "One." There is lots of work to be done, and what are we doing to help? Open minds, one by one. The whole world is destined to acknowedge the God of Jesus, of Israel and of the Bible as "our Father," sole Creator of all things (Zech. 14:9).

Our two books on this subject *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* (1998) and *Jesus was not a Trinitarian* are available at 800 347 4261 or from Amazon, etc. Also a booklet "Who is Jesus?" (in various languages)

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[8]*The Trinity*, Whidden, Moon and Reeve, Review and Herald, 2002, p. 76.
[9]*Homilies on John*