

First John 5:20 reads, “*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*” Concerning this verse the renowned Bible commentator Albert Barnes wrote:

There has been much difference of opinion in regards to this important passage, whether it refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, the immediate antecedent, or to a more remote antecedent --referring to God, as such... Without going into an extended examination of the passage, the following considerations seem to me to make it morally certain that by the phrase *this is the true God*, etc. he did refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. (1.) The grammatical construction favors it. Christ is the immediate antecedent of the pronoun *this*. This would be regarded as the obvious and certain construction so far as the grammar is concerned, unless there were something in the things affirmed which led us to seek some more remote and less obvious antecedent.... There is no instance in the writings of John, in which the appellation *LIFE*, and eternal *LIFE*, is bestowed upon the Father, to designate him as the author of spiritual and eternal life; and as this occurs so frequently in John’s writing as applied to Christ, the laws of exegesis require that both the phrase *the true God*, and *eternal life*, should be applied to him. (Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament, volume one, p. 1497) [Emphasis his.]

This proves that Jesus was not just ‘God in a representative sense’, but “*true God.*”

Response: Barnes is incorrect. Is there something which should lead “us to seek some more remote and less obvious antecedent”? Yes, there is. The verse in question tells us that the “*Son of God... has given us understanding, to know Him who is true....*” To whom does the pronoun *Him* refer in this verse? Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22; and John 1:18; 17:4, 6, 25, 26 show that Jesus came to make the Father known. The laws of exegesis require that we apply *the Father* to the pronoun *Him*.

The rules of grammar allow that a pronoun can be replaced by the noun to which it refers without changing the meaning. Let’s do that with 1 John 5:20, “*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know the Father who is true, and we are in the Father who is true, in the Father’s Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.*”

Through this substitution we can see that the correct antecedent of the phrase “*This is the true God and eternal life*” is the Father. What of his claim that “there is no instance in the writings of John in which the appellation *LIFE*, and eternal *LIFE*, is bestowed upon the Father”? Once again Barnes is incorrect. At John 17:1, 3 Jesus prayed, “*Father... this is eternal LIFE, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*” Clearly, this Bible scholar is in error in his commentary on this verse.