

1 John 5:20

And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, *even* in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. (KJV)

1. Many Trinitarians claim that the final sentence in the verse, “This is the true God,” refers to Jesus Christ, since the closest noun to “This” is “Jesus Christ.” However, since God and Jesus are both referred to in the first sentence of the verse, the final sentence can refer to either one of them. The word “this,” which begins the last sentence, is *houtos*, and a study of it will show that the context, not the closest noun or pronoun, must determine to whom “this” is referring. The Bible provides examples of this, and a good one is in Acts 7:18 and 19 (KJV): “Till another king arose, which knew not Joseph. The same (*houtos*) dealt subtilly with our kindred..., and evil entreated our fathers, so that they cast out their young children, to the end they might not live.” It is clear from this example that “the same” (*houtos*) cannot refer to Joseph, even though Joseph is the closest noun. It refers to the other king earlier in the verse, even though that evil king is not the closest noun.

If it were true that pronouns always referred to the closest noun, serious theological problems would result. An example is Acts 4:10 and 11: “Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, *even* by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This [*houtos*] is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner” (KJV). If “This” in the last sentence refers to the closest noun or pronoun, then the man who was healed is actually the stone rejected by the builders that has become the head of the corner, *i.e.*, the Christ. Of course, that is not true.

An even more troublesome example for those not recognizing that the context, not noun and pronoun placement, is the most vital key in determining proper meaning, is 2 John 1:7: “For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist” (KJV). The structure of this verse closely parallels the structure of the verse we are studying. If one insists that the final phrase of 1 John 5:20 refers to Jesus because he is the closest associated noun, then that same person is going to be forced by his own logic to insist that Jesus Christ is a deceiver and an antichrist, which of course is absurd. Thus we conclude that, although the last phrase of 1 John 5:20 may refer to Jesus Christ, it can just as easily refer to God, who appears in the phrase “Son of *God*” and, via the possessive pronoun “his,” in the phrase “*his* Son Jesus.” To which of the two it refers must be determined from studying the words in the verse and the remoter context.

2. Once it is clear that the last sentence in the verse can refer to *either* Jesus or God, it must be determined which of the two it is describing. The context and remoter context will determine to whom the phrase “true God” applies. The result of that examination is that the phrase “true God” is used four times in the Bible beside here: 2 Chronicles 15:3; Jeremiah 10:10; John 17:3 and 1 Thessalonians 1:9. In all four of these places, the “true

God” refers to the Father and not the Son. Especially relevant is John 17:3, which is Jesus’ prayer to God. In that prayer, Jesus calls God “the only true God.” These examples are made more powerful by the consideration that 1 John is a late epistle, and thus the readers of the Bible were already used to God being called the “true God.” Add to that the fact that John is the writer of both the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, and he would be likely to use the phrase the same way. Thus, there is every reason to believe that the “true God” of 1 John 5:20 is the heavenly Father, and there is no precedent for believing that it refers to the Son.

3. From studying the immediate context, we learn that this very verse mentions “him that is true” two times, and both times it refers to the Father. Since the verse twice refers to the Father as “the one who is true,” that is a strong argument that “the true God” in the last part of the verse is the same being.

4. Not all Trinitarians believe that the last sentence in the verse refers to the Son. A study of commentators on the verse will show that a considerable number of Trinitarian scholars say that this phrase refers to the Father. Norton and Farley each give a list of such scholars.

In his commentary on 1 John, Lenski writes that although the official explanation of the Church is to make the sentence refer to the Son:

This exegesis of the church is now called a mistake by a number of commentators who believe in the full deity of Jesus as it is revealed in Scripture but feel convinced that this *houtos* clause speaks of the Father and not of His Son.”¹

Buzzard, pp. 137 and 138

Farley, pp. 72-75

Norton, pp. 196-199

Racovian Catechism, pp. 78-89

Snedeker, pp. 466-468

Endnotes:

1. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Epistles of Peter, the Three Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude* (Augsburg Pub. House, Minneapolis, MN, 1966), p. 543.

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