

What Does the Word Say?
Session 52: The Trinity and the Deity of Jesus Christ
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Marc Roby: Well, Dr. Spencer, it's a little hard to believe, but this is our 52nd session. We are completing one full year of podcasts.

Dr. Spencer: That is hard to believe. I've enjoyed the year and I hope our listeners have as well. I'm ready to start a second year. But, before we do, I need to clarify something from our last session. In speaking about the I Am statements of Jesus, where I Am is the English translation of ἐγὼ εἰμί (āgō āmē) in the Greek, I said that "the Greek construction ἐγὼ εἰμί is the way the Jews rendered the Hebrew tetragrammaton, Jehovah, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament", which is unintentionally misleading. It sounds like I'm saying that is the way they rendered the tetragrammaton everywhere in that translation, when, in fact, what I had in mind was only the statement in Exodus 3:14 where God first revealed his covenant name to Moses as we discussed in Session 49. Elsewhere in that Greek translation, which is called the Septuagint, the Jews rendered the tetragrammaton as Κύριος (Kurios), the Greek word for Lord.

Marc Roby: But, in any event, the ἐγὼ εἰμί construction *is* used in Exodus 3:14 and the point we were making is completely correct. The Jews who heard Jesus knew he was claiming to be God, which is why they picked up stones to stone him.

Dr. Spencer: That's right.

Marc Roby: Very well. Are we ready to resume our study of the doctrine of the Trinity?

Dr. Spencer: I think we are.

Marc Roby: At the end of our previous session, you said that to establish the doctrine of the Trinity, we must establish three things: First, that God exists in three persons; second, that each person is fully God; and third, that there is one God. And we then looked at John 1:1-2 as an example of a passage where we see a plurality of persons in the godhead; in that case Jesus Christ and God the Father. What do you want to look at next?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at the famous high priestly prayer of Jesus, which is found in John Chapter 17. Jesus is praying to God the Father and in Verse 5 he says, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."¹ This statement makes no sense unless Jesus is a separate person from the Father, so it again shows that they are distinct persons. But it goes further because it also makes it clear that Jesus had an intimate relationship with the Father prior to the creation of the world.

There are many other verses we could cite, but let's look at just one more for now. In Acts Chapter 7 we read about the stoning of Stephen and as he was dying God graciously gave him a vision of heaven.

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Marc Roby: That passage is always moving to read. What an amazing experience that had to be for Stephen, as he is going through this terribly painful ordeal God granted him a vision of heaven itself. He must have been filled with great joy even as he was being stoned.

Dr. Spencer: It's incredible to think about what that must have been like. But my point here is that in Acts 7:55 we are told that "Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." I want us to notice two things about this statement. First of all, Jesus is standing at the right hand of God, which must be God the Father, so the two of them are clearly distinct persons. Also notice that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit, so we have now introduced the third person of the Trinity as well, and it is also clear that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person.

Marc Roby: Of course, there are those who would say the Holy Spirit represents the power of God, or something along those lines, rather than being a real person.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, but that view is incompatible with the totality of the Bible's teaching on the subject. For example, consider Luke Chapter 4 where we are told about Jesus spending 40 days in the desert fasting and being tempted by Satan. When the 40 days are over we read in Verse 14 that "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit". Now, if the Spirit is the power of God, then this verse would mean that Jesus returned in the power of the power, which makes no sense.

Marc Roby: It certainly doesn't. And that is similar to Acts 10:38, where we read that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power".

Dr. Spencer: Right. If the Holy Spirit is the power of God that would be saying that Jesus was anointed with the power and power, which again makes no sense. Wayne Grudem also gives a list of scriptures showing that various activities are ascribed to the Holy Spirit that only make sense if the Holy Spirit is a person.² For example, in Romans 8:26 we are told that "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." Now, first of all, it says "the Spirit himself", which only makes sense if the Spirit is a person. Secondly, he intercedes for us, which is not something a power or cosmic force can do. This verse also does not allow for saying the personal reference to the Holy Spirit is just a metaphorical personification, which has been suggested by some.³

Marc Roby: No, that doesn't work in this verse at all.

Dr. Spencer: It also doesn't work in John 14:26 where we read that Jesus said, "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 232

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 96 (This can be purchased as a combination of his *Systematic Theology* and *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* in one text from Eerdmans, 1996)

Marc Roby: That obviously cannot be a personification. And it is also impossible to reconcile this verse with the idea of the Spirit being the power of God. A power doesn't teach and remind and would not be called a counselor.

Dr. Spencer: You're right, it wouldn't work at all.

Marc Roby: I also find this verse very interesting in the Greek. The word for Spirit is neuter in the Greek, and yet the verse uses the masculine demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος (ekēnos) to refer to the Holy Spirit, which violates the rule of grammar, but makes perfect sense if the Holy Spirit is a person.

Dr. Spencer: That is an interesting point. Finally, let me point out that there are verses in the New Testament that name all three persons of the Trinity in a way that implies that they are equal, and yet separate, persons. For example, in what is commonly called the Great Commission, Jesus commanded us, in Matthew 28:19, to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". That clearly implies that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate persons, and yet equal. It is also interesting that it says, "in the name of", using the singular for name, rather than saying "in the names of" as we might expect. Which is consistent with the fact that these three persons are one and the same God.

Marc Roby: And, of course, there is also the familiar benediction from 2 Corinthians 13:14, where we read, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

Dr. Spencer: That is another good statement. I think we've put forward enough examples to reasonably prove our first point; namely that the Bible teaches that God exists in three persons. So, now we need to go on the second point, which is that each person is fully God.

Marc Roby: I don't think we need to do much to prove the case for God the Father.

Dr. Spencer: No. If someone believes in a personal God at all, then they have to accept that God exists in at least one person, so I don't think we need to do any work at all to make the case that God the Father is God.

Marc Roby: I agree. So, how do you want to make the case for the deity of Jesus Christ?

Dr. Spencer: Let's begin with John 1 again. We looked at it before, but there is more to be said. Verses 1-4 say, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

Marc Roby: We previously noted that the Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Verse 1 should say that "the Word was a god." And we argued that the Greek does not support their position.

Dr. Spencer: That's correct. In fact, if any of our listeners have a serious interest in this issue – perhaps you are thinking about becoming a Jehovah's Witness, or you know someone who is. If that is the case, I strongly recommend that you look at Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.

He discusses a tract put out by the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves where they acknowledge that the Greek grammar in Verse 1 is, by itself, inconclusive and that the context must decide how to translate the verse.⁴ But they then fail to examine the context and simply state as somehow obvious that it should be translated "a god."

Marc Roby: And yet, the first four verses, which you just read, certainly argue against that view. They tell us that all things were made through Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And, just in case we might think that means everything *other* than Jesus himself, it goes on to say that "without him nothing was made that has been made", which is pretty clearly exhaustive. Nothing that has been made, in other words no created being, was made without the work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is clear that he himself cannot be a created being; he is the Creator. In other words, he is God.

We also see his deity in the last verse I read, Verse 4, which begins by saying "In him was life". That cannot be said of any creature. Life is given to creatures, it is not in them inherently. This is in agreement with John 5:26, which we examined in Session 50, where Jesus says that "as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." As we noted at the time, to have life in himself is a clear statement of his independent self-existence; in other words, of his deity.

Marc Roby: That is very clear. And of course, there is more in John 1 as well. We read in Verse 14 that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Dr. Spencer: Yes. This verse clearly says that the glory of the Word, who is Jesus Christ, is "the glory of the One and Only", in other words, God. And Jesus possesses the glory of God precisely because he *is* God.

We can also look at Verse 18 of this chapter, where we read that "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." This speaks of two separate persons, both called God. If you put the sentence in front of you, and I encourage our listeners to do this, and stare at it for a minute, it is absolutely clear. The first clause says that "No one has ever seen God", and uses the standard Greek word for God, θεός (theos). Then the next clause says "but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." It is probably a little hard to get this while listening, but it is clear if you look that "God the One and Only", which again uses θεός in the Greek, is a separate person from God in the first clause, who is the antecedent of the pronoun him when it says "has made him known." Therefore, God has made God known to us. If you now go back to Verse 14 that we read a moment ago, you see that it was the Word, Jesus Christ, who became flesh, who came and dwelt with us and made the Father known. So, we could say simply that God the Son made God the Father known.

⁴ Grudem, op. cit., see the extensive footnote 13 on page 234

Marc Roby: John 1:1-18 really is an amazing passage to read. And if you read it carefully in a good translation it forcefully presents Jesus Christ as God.

Dr. Spencer: I completely agree. But let's move on to another verse. In John Chapter 20 we read about the apostle Thomas, often called doubting Thomas because of this passage. The other apostles tell him about Jesus appearing to them when Thomas was not there and he says, in Verse 25, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." Then, a week later, Jesus appears to them again while Thomas is with them and Jesus tells Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." We then read Thomas' response in John 20:28, "Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" And, rather than rebuking him as you would expect if Jesus were not God, Jesus says to him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Marc Roby: Jesus is saying that we, who have not seen him, will be blessed if we will join with Thomas in believing that he is our Lord *and* our God.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what Jesus is saying. And there is no doubt that John wanted us to get that message from this story because the next two verses, 29 and 30, say, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Marc Roby: That's wonderful. What else would you like to look at?

Dr. Spencer: Another passage that is very compelling is Philippians 2:5-11. The apostle Paul wrote this passage to convince Christians to live humble lives in service of others by using Jesus Christ as our prime example of humble service. He wrote, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Marc Roby: That is a very rich passage.

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly is, and we will not be looking at every aspect of it. But James Boice uses this passage in his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith* to argue for the divinity of Christ and I'd like to summarize his arguments here.⁵ He first examines the phrase that, in our translation, says that Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped". Notice that this verse first says that Jesus had the "very nature" of

⁵ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pp 268-270

God. Boice points out that the Greek word rendered here by “very nature” means that “he possessed inwardly and displayed outwardly the very nature of God himself.”⁶ Secondly, the verse says that Jesus “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”, which means that Jesus did not consider his equality with God to be something he had to hold on to. Boice again points out that the Greek word used for equal here is very strong.

Marc Roby: That verse is quite clear. And I look forward to hearing what else this passage says in our next session, but we are out of time for today. So, let me remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we truly appreciate hearing from you.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 269