Ad Fontes, Week Nine: Where the Older Text Says More

Chapter 8: Christological Reinforcement

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Nine

For three weeks, the older manuscripts took words away from the King James. This week the picture changes. At John 1:18 the older Greek speaks of Christ's deity more boldly than the late text behind the King James. At 1 Timothy 3:16 it speaks less explicitly, and we can literally see, in the manuscripts, the pen strokes that changed the text. At Acts 20:28 the older Greek and the King James agree on the harder reading, and that shared reading carries a high confession of Christ. Same tools as before, with a different shape. And the lesson under all three: we do not choose readings to protect a doctrine. We follow the evidence, and here the evidence confesses Christ.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: John 1:18 and 1 Timothy 3:16
10 to 25	John 1:18: the only God at the Father's side
25 to 40	1 Timothy 3:16: two pen strokes
40 to 52	Acts 20:28: the church of God and his own blood
52 to 62	The deity of Christ stands on wide ground
62 to 66	What this does to a popular claim
66 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: John 1:18 and 1 Timothy 3:16

Last week you compared these two verses in a King James and a modern Bible.

Verse	KJV	NET	BSB
John 1:18	"the only begotten **Son**, which is in the bosom of the Father"	"The only one, **himself God**, who is in closest fellowship with the Father"	"the one and only **Son**, who is **Himself God** and is at the Father's side"
1 Timothy 3:16	"**God** was manifest in the flesh"	"**He** was revealed in the flesh"	"**He** appeared in the flesh"

- Which reading in each pair says more about who Jesus is?
- Did the answer surprise you? Many people assume modern Bibles always "say less." This week tests that assumption.
- Notice the BSB at John 1:18. Its footnote says the Greek it follows reads "the only begotten God," and that the Byzantine text and the TR read "the only begotten Son." Its running text carries both words.

2. John 1:18: the only God at the Father's side

The variant is one Greek word. The late text reads *monogenēs huios*, "only Son." The older text reads *monogenēs theos*, "only God," or "the unique one, himself God." (*Monogenēs* means "one of a kind"; "only begotten" comes from the Latin.)

External evidence

"Only God"	"Only Son"
P66 and **P75**, the two oldest copies of John (about AD 200)	**Codex Alexandrinus** (400s) and the later supplement of Codex Washingtonianus
Sinaiticus and **Vaticanus** (300s)	Families 1 and 13 and the great majority of later Greek manuscripts
Codex Ephraemi (first hand), Codex Regius, minuscule 33	The Old Latin and the Vulgate
The Syriac Peshitta; the older Coptic, Sahidic and parts of the Bohairic	The Curetonian and Harklean Syriac
Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Didymus, Cyril of Alexandria	Early Greek writers such as Hippolytus and Alexander of Alexandria, some citations in Irenaeus and Clement, and the Latin fathers

This one is contested, not one-sided. Both readings are old. The "Son" reading was known to Greek writers of the third century and spread widely in Latin and Syriac. The "God" reading has the oldest Greek manuscripts and the Coptic. Weighed rather than counted, the oldest evidence reads "God." The UBS editors rate it a B.

Internal evidence

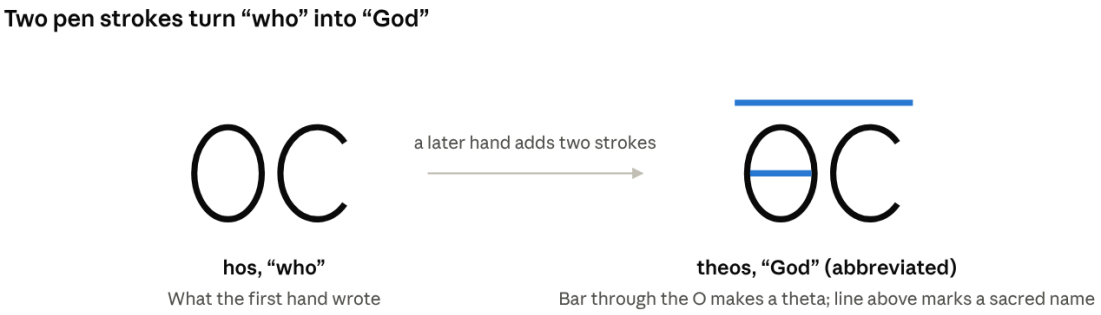
- **The harder reading is "God."** "Only Son" is John's familiar phrase: John 3:16, 3:18, 1 John 4:9. A copyist who met the unusual "only God" would easily write the familiar "only Son." No one would change the familiar phrase into the startling one. This is Mark 1:2 all over again.
- **"God" completes the prologue.** It opens, "the Word was God" (1:1). It closes: no one has ever seen God, but the only one who is himself God has made him known. The two ends match.

What it gives us

The late reading says the Son reveals the Father. The older reading says more: the One who reveals the unseen Father is himself God, distinct from the Father yet God. That is the shape the church would later name the Trinity, laid down in the first chapter of John.

3. 1 Timothy 3:16: two pen strokes

Remember the *nomina sacra* from Week Three? Copyists shortened "God" (*theos*) to two letters, theta and sigma (ΘC), with a line on top. The word "who" (*hos*) is also two letters: omicron and sigma (OC). The only difference is two small strokes.



1 Timothy 3:16: how "who" became "God"

You can see it happen

In Codex Sinaiticus the original scribe wrote OC, "who." Centuries later a corrector added the strokes to make it "God," and the high-resolution images at codexsinaiticus.org show his marks on top of the first hand. Codex Ephraemi shows the same kind of correction, and so, probably, does Codex Alexandrinus. The manuscripts record their own editing.

"Who"	"God"	"Which"
Sinaiticus and Ephraemi (first hands), Codices Augiensis and Boernerianus, minuscule 33, some Coptic and the Gothic, the Syriac Peshitta	Later correctors of those same manuscripts, and the great majority of later Greek manuscripts; the Textus Receptus and King James	Codex Claromontanus (first hand), the Old Latin, and the Vulgate ("quod"), agreeing with the neuter "mystery"

Codex Alexandrinus is hard to read at this spot, and scholars have argued both ways. The UBS editors rate “who” an A. Notice that the earliest hands and the earliest versions agree on a relative pronoun (“who” or “which”), not “God.”

Why “who” is original

- **It is the harder reading.** “Who” is grammatically rough. It has no clear antecedent, since “mystery” is neuter. “God” makes a tidy, powerful sentence. Correctors fix the rough into the tidy, never the reverse.
- **It fits a hymn.** The six balanced lines (flesh and Spirit, angels and nations, world and glory) read like an early Christian hymn. Paul opens quoted hymns with “who” elsewhere too: Philippians 2:6 and Colossians 1:15.

What it means

This one is different from John 1:18. Here the older reading is the less explicit one, and honesty requires us to follow it anyway. It does not say “God” outright. It opens a hymn that confesses Christ: revealed in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, taken up in glory. His deity is assumed by the whole hymn, but not named in this line. And Paul names it plainly elsewhere, as we will see in section 5.

4. Acts 20:28: the church of God and his own blood

Paul tells the Ephesian elders, “Be shepherds of the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood” (BSB). The KJV reads “to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Our English Bibles agree on “church of God,” because the Greek behind the King James and the Greek behind modern Bibles both read it. The manuscripts underneath those printed editions do not agree.

“Church of God”	“Church of the Lord”	“Church of the Lord and God”
Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (300s), minuscules 614, 1175, 1505, the Vulgate, the Syriac; the Textus Receptus and King James	P74 (600s), Alexandrinus, Ephraemi (first hand), Codex Bezae, E, Ψ, 33, 1739, the Coptic	Most later Byzantine manuscripts

The external evidence for “God” and for “Lord” is close to even. The third reading simply glues the other two together, which is what copyists do when they cannot decide. Here the King James follows the older reading against the majority of manuscripts. The decision rests on internal evidence, and the internal evidence carries the case. The UBS editors rate “church of God” a B.

Why “God” is original

Read it with “God”: the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. God’s blood? That is startling. Blood belongs to Christ’s human nature. A copyist who stumbled at that would change

“God” to “Lord,” a title of Christ, and the difficulty disappears. No copyist would take the easy “Lord” and make it the startling “God.” The harder reading again.

A Lutheran way of speaking

We have a name for this. It is the *communicatio idiomatum*, the communication of attributes. Because Christ is one Person, true God and true man, what belongs to either nature can be said of the whole Person. The blood is his human blood, yet the Person who shed it is God. So Scripture can say God obtained the church with his own blood, just as it says they “crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). The Formula of Concord takes up exactly this way of speaking in Article VIII, on the Person of Christ (Solid Declaration VIII).

A note on the NET and the BSB. Westcott and Hort suggested that the last words could be read as “the blood of his own,” meaning his own Son, and the NET follows them in its text: “the blood of his own Son.” The BSB keeps “His own blood” in its text and gives the other rendering in a footnote: “Or with the blood of His own Son.” That is a question of translating the Greek, not of which Greek is original. Either way, the text reads “church of God.”

5. The deity of Christ stands on wide ground

These three readings strengthen the witness to Christ’s deity. They do not hold it up by themselves. Look up a few from each column and read them aloud.

The manuscripts agree, and the meaning is plain	The manuscripts agree; the meaning turns on grammar
“the Word was God” (John 1:1)	“our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13)
“before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58)	“Christ, who is God over all, forever worthy of praise!” (Romans 9:5)
“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)	“our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1)
Philippians 2:5 to 11	
“in Christ all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9)	
Hebrews 1:1 to 3	
The Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 1:8 of God; 22:13 of Christ)	

In the right-hand column there is no textual question at all. The question is how to read the Greek grammar, or where to put a comma. The BSB, ESV, and NET all read all three as calling Jesus God.

This is the ground Nicaea, Chalcedon, and Article III of the Augsburg Confession stand on. The three readings we studied today belong to that witness. They add to it. They are not its foundation.

6. What this does to a popular claim

You may hear that modern Bibles, or the scholars behind them, water down the deity of Christ. Today's three verses show that the real picture is more interesting than that claim.

Verse	The older text	The later text
John 1:18	"the only one, himself God"	"the only begotten Son"
1 Timothy 3:16	"who" (a hymn to Christ)	"God"
Acts 20:28	"church of God… his own blood" (also the TR and KJV)	"church of the Lord and God" (Byzantine)

At John 1:18 the older text is bolder about Christ's deity. At 1 Timothy 3:16 the later text is more explicit, but only because a corrector added strokes we can still see. At Acts 20:28 the older text and the King James share the harder reading, and the Byzantine majority smooths it. In every case the change runs the way copyists always change things: from the unusual to the familiar, from the rough to the smooth. That is not a conspiracy in either direction. It is the ordinary habit of copyists, and it is why we follow the older, harder reading even when it cuts against what we would prefer.

Bart Ehrman argues that early orthodox copyists sometimes changed the text to make Christ look more divine. At 1 Timothy 3:16 the later corrector did exactly that kind of thing, and we should say so plainly. The doctrine does not suffer, since Christ is called God on undisputed ground (John 1:1; 20:28). And at John 1:18 the oldest manuscripts, copied before the great creeds, already speak of Christ as God in the boldest terms.

Hear the other side

Defenders of the Textus Receptus and the Majority Text keep the later readings at John 1:18 and 1 Timothy 3:16. At Acts 20:28 they part ways: the Majority Text editions (Hodges and Farstad, Robinson and Pierpont) print "the Lord and God," while the Textus Receptus, and so the King James, reads "church of God" with the modern critical text. Their case rests on evidence: "Son" is John's usual phrase and was known to Greek writers of the third century, and "God" at 1 Timothy 3:16 is cited by Greek fathers of the late fourth century. John Burgon defended it at length in 1883, and Maurice Robinson and Wilbur Pickering defend the Byzantine readings today. Their strongest point is about providence: the Byzantine text is what the church actually copied and read for a thousand years, so it deserves a presumption. That argument has real weight and deserves respect. But preservation, as our Lutheran fathers taught it, runs through the whole stream of witnesses, the oldest ones included, and it does not tell us by itself which reading is original. Evidence and method do that work. We will hear the Majority Text position in full in Chapter 13.

For discussion

1. Before today, did you assume modern Bibles always "say less" about Jesus? Where did that idea come from?

2. At 1 Timothy 3:16 we follow the reading that says less. Why is it important that we follow the evidence even then?
3. “God obtained the church with his own blood.” How does the teaching that Christ is one Person help us speak this way?
4. Which verse from section 5 would you point a doubting friend to first, and why?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Monogenēs. Greek, “one of a kind, unique.” Traditionally translated “only begotten.”

***Monogenēs theos* / *monogenēs huios*.** “Only God” and “only Son,” the two readings at John 1:18.

Corrector. A later hand who altered a manuscript after it was first copied. Scholars label the layers: first hand, first corrector, and so on.

Conflation. A reading made by joining two earlier readings, like “the Lord and God” at Acts 20:28.

***Communicatio idiomatum*.** Latin, “communication of attributes.” Because Christ is one Person, what belongs to either nature may be said of the whole Person.

Christology. The church’s teaching about the Person of Christ.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 9, “What Did Jesus Actually Say.” It is a long chapter, so start early.

Do this one thing. Put a King James beside a modern Bible at three sayings of Jesus, and note what differs and what the footnotes say:

- Matthew 6:13, the end of the Lord’s Prayer
- Luke 23:34, “Father, forgive them”
- Matthew 5:22, being angry with a brother

Also. Read John 1:1 to 18 twice, once in each Bible, and listen for how verse 18 closes the prologue.

Bring. Your Bible, your notes, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. We pray “For thine is the kingdom” every Sunday. What would it mean to you if Jesus did not teach those words?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for an apostolic witness that names the Son as the only God at the Father’s side, revealed in our flesh, who obtained the church with his own blood. Thanks be to God that the manuscripts, read with care, give us that witness in full strength. And thanks be to God for the Person those texts confess: true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary, who is our Lord.

“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.” John 1:18 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.