

Theological Metamorphosis

Part One:

The Trinitarian Past and the Monotheistic
Present and Future of Christian Disciples Church

Part Two:

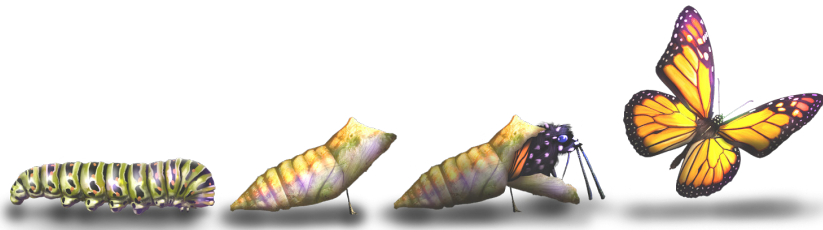
A Reevaluation of the Deity of Christ in John's Gospel

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This is an abridgement of a longer paper written specially for the theological conference. You will be able to download the longer paper (an e-book) from www.christiandc.org around late May 2015, soon after the conference. Or you can get a copy by writing me, Bentley Chan, at biblicalmonotheism@gmail.com.

INTRODUCTION



metamorphosis

Noun (*pl.* metamorphoses)

Zoology (in an insect or amphibian) the process of transformation from an immature form to an adult form in two or more distinct stages.

▪ a change of the form or nature of a thing or person into a completely different one, by natural or supernatural means:

his metamorphosis from presidential candidate to talk-show host

ORIGIN late Middle English: via Latin from Greek *metamorphōsis*, from *metamorphoun*, ‘transform, change shape.’

[New Oxford American Dictionary]

In this paper I discuss the “theological metamorphosis” of Christian Disciples Church (CDC), a church in which I have served as a pastor for two decades. In speaking of this metamorphosis, I am referring to something that took place in 2006 and 2007 when we *en masse* as a whole church spanning three continents, abandoned our longstanding belief in trinitarianism. In so doing, we were moving towards true monotheism or what we have been calling “biblical monotheism,” in which no one but the Father of Jesus Christ is true God. A Bible verse that impelled us in this direction was John 17:3 in which Jesus declares that his Father is “the only true God”.

So whereas for several decades we had been proclaiming God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, we now proclaim the one and only God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

The word *metamorphosis* may be too weak to convey the radicalness of the shift in our faith. For three decades our church had been steadfastly trinitarian, advocating trinitarian dogma not only confessionally but also in our ministry trainings. Eric H.H. Chang, long-time leader of CDC, would later reflect on his trinitarian

days and ruefully describe himself as a “trinitarian of trinitarians”.

Despite our long history of trinitarianism, in the years 2006 and 2007 the very nature of our faith started to change. The change was far more thoroughgoing than, say, a conversion from Calvinism to Arminianism, or from Protestantism to Catholicism, for the reason that the God of biblical monotheism is incompatible with the God of trinitarianism. What changed for us was not just the content of our faith but its very nature; it was not a change that could be described adequately with the metaphor of metamorphosis because a butterfly’s basic nature remains the same whether it is a caterpillar or a cocoon or a monarch.

Yet the word *metamorphosis* accurately describes our journey. We went through a winter of inner stirring as we searched the Scriptures for the truth about God. This was followed by the warmth of spring when we stepped out into the world of biblical monotheism.

Our story is not just about the past but also the present and the future. In recounting our trinitarian past, we are also laying out a future strategy for the cause of biblical monotheism, to proclaim the one true God.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLES CHURCH AND ITS DEPARTURE FROM TRINITARIANISM

Christian Disciples Church (CDC) is a fellowship of Churches united by common history, leadership, and belief. It operates mainly in Asia but has a presence in western countries such as Canada, Australia, and the UK. Its website at www.christiandc.org lists some 25 or 30 churches, but we have a similar number of other groups not listed.

The longtime leader of Christian Disciples Church was Eric H.H. Chang (1934-2013). Our story begins around 1976 or 1977 when Chang was invited to pastor a newly founded church in Montreal, Canada. Initially there was no church called Christian Disciples Church. But over the years, CDC emerged from its early roots and took on a more international presence, especially in Asia. Chang eventually served as CDC's main pastor for more than thirty years until his retirement from leadership several years ago.



Before coming to Montreal, Chang had lived all his years in China and the UK, and for a time in Switzerland. He was born in Shanghai. As a young adult he came to know God in post-liberation China through a series of miracles, as recounted

in his book *How I Have Come to Know God*.¹

In the 1950's he left for the United Kingdom where he would eventually stay two decades. He studied at the

Bible Training Institute (Glasgow) and London Bible College before reading Arts and Divinity at the University of London (King's College and SOAS). In his time in London, he served in a church in London. After completing his studies, he served in a church in Liverpool where he was ordained by Rev. Andrew McBeath.

Why "Christian" and why "Disciples"?

Christian Disciples Church, ever since its inception, has always taught that no one is a Christian who is not a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple of the Lord Jesus is one who accepts the truth (the creedal aspect) of his teaching, and then obeys that teaching in his life.

The predominant NT term for a follower of Jesus is "disciple" (Greek *mathētēs*, 261 times in NT) whereas "Christian" (*christianos*) occurs only three times in the NT (Ac.11:26; 26:28; 1Pet.4:16). Although "disciple" is the main biblical title for one who follows Jesus, we incorporated the title "Christian" into our church name because it similarly means a follower of Christ.

Two books² by Eric Chang, one on total commitment to God and the other on the new life in Christ, are representative of that emphasis. It is seen, for example, in our stand against the materialism that is prevalent in the churches today.

We are not legalistic. Neither do we proclaim a salvation by works but a faith that is seen in works (James 2:14-26) and the "obedience of faith" (Rom.1:5; 16:26).

¹ *How I Have Come to Know God*, Eric H.H. Chang, OM Authentic Books, Andhra Pradesh, India, 2000. This testimony can be read at www.christiandc.org.

² *Totally Committed! The Importance of Commitment in Biblical Teaching*; and *Becoming a New Person: What the Bible Teaches About Regeneration, Renewal, and Christ-Likeness*.

Doctrine and spiritual life cannot be separated

Following Jesus involves right doctrine and right life. By right doctrine, we mean believing exactly what Jesus taught about himself, about his Father, about the Kingdom of God. By right life we mean practicing Jesus' teaching in our lives.

If either aspect is missing, or if the two are separated, the results will be deadly. Doctrine without life is deadly because the letter kills (2Cor.3:6) and knowledge puffs up (1Cor.8:1). But "spirituality" without right doctrine also kills because it often slides into idolatry as in the case of the trinitarian worship of Jesus, despite his declaration that only the Father is true God (Jn.17:3) and that the Lord our God is one Lord (Mk.12:29). Violation of the first commandment is the inevitable consequence of forsaking what Anthony Buzzard so aptly calls "the central creed of Jesus" (the Shema, Dt.6:4, Mk.12:29).

Eric Chang abandons trinitarianism

We fast forward a few decades to around 2005. By now Eric Chang had been a fully committed trinitarian for half a century, having done much to promote trinitarianism in his preaching, in his defense of the deity of Christ, and in his leading many to the divine Christ of trinitarianism. But through a re-study of the Scriptures, he had come to see that his trinitarian view of things such as the deity of Christ could not be sustained from the Scriptures. He then wrote a book, *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism*,³ in which he rejects his former trinitarian faith and looks back at his trinitarian years. He says in the introduction to the book:

I am writing as one who had been a trinitarian from the time I became a Christian at the age of 19—a time which spans over fifty years. During the nearly four decades of serving as pastor, church leader, and teacher of many who have entered the full-time ministry, I taught trinitarian doctrine with great zeal, as those who know me can testify. Trinitarianism was what I drank in with my spiritual milk when I was a spiritual infant. Later, in my Biblical and theological studies, my interest focused on Christ-

ology which I pursued with considerable intensity. My life centered on Jesus Christ. I studied and sought to practice his teaching with utmost devotion.

I was in a practical sense a monotheist, devoted to a monotheism in which Jesus was my Lord and my God. Intense devotion to the Lord Jesus inevitably left little room for either the Father or the Holy Spirit. So, while in theory I believed in there being three persons, in practice there was actually only one person who really mattered: Jesus. I did indeed worship one God, but that one God was Jesus. The one God revealed in the Old Testament, namely, Yahweh, was in practice replaced by the God Jesus Christ, God the Son. A large proportion of Christians function as I did, so they can easily understand what I am saying here.

Why was our church willing to reject trinitarianism *en masse*? Some important lessons.

Christian Disciples Church may be the only multi-congregation church in the past 10 or 15 years to abandon the doctrine of the Trinity *as a whole church*. This is not to confused with the scenario in which a few individuals, after having seen the errors of trinitarianism, decide to leave their own trinitarian church and join a monotheistic one.

So why did a church of almost thirty congregations rooted in trinitarianism go *en masse* in rejecting trinitarianism and even the deity of Christ? The answers to this question may be instructive for other churches grappling with similar issues. Here are my observations:

- Our church even in its trinitarian days never forced anyone to accept or reject trinitarianism as a condition for staying with our church. We did not ask people to sign a membership form or a doctrine assent statement. We never taught or believed that we are the only true church. We promoted trinitarianism, but no one was forced to accept it. A clear example of this is my wife Sylvia who all her life has never been convinced of trinitarianism. She was not a trinitarian when she was ordained in 1996 at our church in Melbourne, Australia. Yet she has been serving in a teaching capacity for many years as a non-trini-

³ *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism*, Eric H.H. Chang, Xlibris, Indiana, 2009. The PDF edition can be downloaded from www.christiandc.org.

tarian. My point is that CDC, even in its trinitarian days, already had people like Sylvia who did not believe in the Trinity, and people like me who were cautious trinitarians because we were fully aware of the weaknesses of trinitarian dogma.

- Years later, when CDC took the step of abandoning trinitarianism, those church members who weren't yet ready to go along with our new stance were given the freedom to stay with our church or to leave the church without being censured by the church. Worldwide, a vast majority chose to stay with us, though the percentage varied from church to church. A small minority chose to leave CDC over the issue of trinitarianism or over the opposition we were facing from outside churches. We took each departure with a heavy heart because every member who left our church is dear to us. Yet against expectations, we have been seeing an increase in the number of people in some of our major church events, including annual camps. The photo below, taken by me, shows a communion service I attended after we had abandoned trinitarianism, with similar encouraging numbers seen in other areas of our church ministry. The lesson that we learned from God is to have the boldness to trust in Him, knowing that we can experience His mercy and protection when we faithfully proclaim the truth about Him.



- Eric Chang's re-evaluation of trinitarianism was given a good measure of credibility because of his longstanding reputation in the church as a careful expositor of Scripture. That reputation is impeccable among his fellow pastors and coworkers.
- Chang did not announce his rejection of trinitarianism in a dogmatic *ex cathedra* manner, but

worked together with his coworkers in a year-long examination of the scriptural evidence for biblical monotheism. It was a Berean exercise that sharpened our understanding of the biblical data. It also assured us that during the investigative process, the Bible was indeed given priority over human opinion.

- Throughout its history, notably in its early history, CDC has been training lay people in biblical exegesis. When I was a layman in Montreal and Toronto a few decades ago, many lay people were already using tools such as *Modern Concordance to the NT*; *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT*; *New Bible Dictionary*; Marshall's *Interlinear Greek-English NT*; Morgenthaler's *Statistics of the Vocabulary of the NT*; Eric Jay's *New Testament Greek*. A few used UBS3, BDB, TDNT, and BAGD before it became BDAG. Some took courses on NT Greek at a local university.

I am mentioning all this because when a church finds itself in a situation of theological upheaval, it is crucial that the lay people, or at least some of them, be equipped to study the Bible for themselves and to assess the biblical merits of a doctrine such as trinitarianism. Moreover, the church leadership gains trust and credibility when it is perceived by the lay people as giving them the freedom (and the means) to study the Bible for themselves.

- Finally and most importantly, the biblical evidence against trinitarianism is strong enough that we are now fully convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be sustained from Scripture. (Even in my trinitarian days, I was keenly aware of the weaknesses of trinitarian dogma.) When the day came for CDC to abandon trinitarianism, we did this in recognition of the biblical basis for our decision. There was an Old Testament aspect to this (a deeper understanding of Yahweh, the one true God) and a New Testament aspect (the realization that Christ's deity is not supported in the Gospel of John).

THE ROAD AHEAD FOR BIBLICAL MONOTHEISM

A theological awakening

A new openness to God's word is sweeping through the world in a way not seen before. It moves with revolutionary power, breaching religious and denominational barriers.

It is summed up in one word, *freedom*, specifically the freedom to read God's word without being swayed by dogmatic traditions. At long last, after two thousand years, that freedom has arrived, thanks to the Internet and other technologies.

But hasn't that kind of freedom always been with us for the past 2,000 years? The answer is "yes" for some, but "no" for the vast majority who have lived in the world, even the Christian world. That is because great and formidable obstacles have for centuries stood in the way of those who hunger and thirst for the pure word of God. These barriers have had to be overcome one by one until the final and greatest barrier was (partially) overcome in the 21st century.

The first barrier was the dire lack of access to the Bible in the centuries before the invention of the printing press. Today more copies of the Bible are produced every month than in the first 1,500 years of church history combined. Constantine's edict of AD331 to produce copies of the Bible for the Roman empire involved the production of only 50 copies. My iPad has 25 Bibles.

The second barrier was general illiteracy. Bart Ehrman points to studies that give a literacy rate of 10-15% in classical Athens and possibly a lower rate in the Roman Empire of the first century. In those days, a person would often be counted as literate if he or she

could write his or her own name. Wikipedia article "Literacy" explains how literacy in Europe increased rapidly in the past four centuries, indicating that general illiteracy was the norm for most of Europe's history.

The third barrier was the non-scholar's lack of access to the original languages of the Bible, even as recently as the 19th century. The expression "lost in translation" reminds us that mistranslation can easily occur between modern languages. The risk of mistranslation is greater when it comes to the Bible, not only because it is translated from ancient languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) but also because the danger of doctrinal bias in Bible translation is very real. The good news is that today we can study the Bible in its original languages if we are willing to invest the time and effort to learn them, and \$200 to buy some language books.

The last and greatest barrier, overcome only partially, is the trinitarian suppression of non-trinitarian doctrine. This barrier was erected at Nicaea where an *anathema* was proclaimed on dissenters, and continues standing to this day. It is seen in tragic episodes of history such as the burning at the stake of Michael Servetus. Even today its long arm is seen in many aspects of the Christian world.

When I was living in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s, the only places where I could conveniently buy Christian books were the Christian bookstores located in the cities of Canada. The problem for me was that the selection of books was limited by the doctrinal leanings of the bookstores and/or their parent organizations. This form of "censorship" was not total, however, because

the stores would still stock books that were liberal, atheistic or anti-Christian. But they would never stock an explicitly *non-trinitarian* Christian book because such a book would be viewed by the church as being more deadly than anti-Christian books. A book may be sound in its biblical exegesis and may uphold the authority of the Bible, yet is viewed as *anathema* for not falling in line with trinitarian dogma. The power to hold back a book for its non-conformity to trinitarian dogma will inevitably shape people's interpretation of the Bible. I know this first-hand. Because the bookstores had no books that deviated from trinitarian dogma, for years I literally equated the Christian faith with trinitarianism.

Another example of trinitarian control of doctrine is seen in the case of the Evangelical Theological Society which, when it was founded in 1949, had only one doctrinal requirement for membership: acceptance of biblical inerrancy. But 41 years later, in 1990, a new requirement was added: acceptance of trinitarianism. But if trinitarianism is really rooted in Scripture as trinitarians say it is, why was it necessary to add the second requirement when the first would have safeguarded the doctrine? Where is the bold confidence in the principle of *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone?

Finally, the supreme example of trinitarian control is the fact that most Bibles are translated with a trinitarian bias. But that is another topic for another day.

The final barrier is being eroded

But things had changed by the year 2009 when I moved back to Canada after being away 21 years. The (formerly) biggest Christian bookstore in Montreal is now a small store that sells greeting cards, mugs, plaques, and a reduced selection of books—much to my dismay because I have always supported physical bookstores.

You can now order Christian books of any theological persuasion from Amazon.com or Barnes & Noble, making it impossible for any church to silence a writer who speaks the truth about God. Every writer now has at his disposal a channel for distributing his works to a global audience. It was through this global system that I got a copy of Anthony Buzzard's excellent "The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound" many years ago when I was stationed on a remote South Pacific island.

Today you can "Google" for Christian resources and monotheistic expositions of God's word which in an earlier era might be suppressed by the forces of dogma. With every passing year, more and more websites and blogs are appearing that uphold biblical monotheism.

Yet despite the ubiquity of the Internet, the great and final barrier—doctrinal control—still stands. In practice, however, it has been neutralized for those who seek the truth, in the sense that for the open-minded there is now a clear channel to the truth of God's word that is free of doctrinal control. The Internet is of course a two-edged sword that can be used for promulgating the truth or for spreading false teaching. But with prayer and God's help (John 7:17; James 1:5), the seeker of the truth is now empowered to discern the truth, and to experience God in a deeper way because of his or her deeper understanding of the only true God.

The future of biblical monotheism

I am hopeful about the future of biblical monotheism in the world, and especially in a country like China. It's not because China has the biggest population in the world (to be surpassed by India by 2028) but ironically because China is the least religious country in the world by one key measure.

According to a 2014 poll by Win/Gallup, China is the least religious country in the world, with 7% of its population calling themselves religious. Here are the percentages for some other countries: India (76%), USA (56%), UK (30%), Canada (40%), Australia (34%), Japan (13%), Korea (44%), Mexico (68%), Malaysia (72%), Pakistan (88%). The highest is Thailand (94%).

I believe that the Chinese people, being less religious, would in general be less swayed by the trinitarian influence of the denominational hegemonies that we see in the western world. This topic is ripe for discussion at our theological conference.

Ultimately the key to the successful promulgation of biblical monotheism will be God's help and the fact that biblical monotheism finds firm support in God's word.

In the remaining chapters, we discuss a few trinitarian issues related to John's Gospel to present the biblical basis for CDC's departure from trinitarianism. Due to space limitations, we can only discuss a few Bible passages or topics.

WHEN PROSKYNEŌ IS USED OF JESUS, DOES IT MEAN DIVINE WORSHIP?

Worshipping Jesus or paying homage to him?

In Matthew 2:11 when the magi visited the infant Jesus, did they “worship” Jesus (ESV) or did they pay him “homage” (NJB)? Here we see two rather different ways of translating the Greek word *proskyneō*.

This word has two principal meanings. Its fundamental meaning is “to kneel before someone” or “to prostrate oneself before someone”; it is a physical expression of paying homage to someone without necessarily attributing deity to that person (e.g. bowing before a Roman officer). But in some contexts, the word can have the additional sense of *worship*. Whereas the first and fundamental meaning does not necessarily involve the attribution of deity, the second may involve divine worship.

When we encounter *proskyneō* in the New Testament, the question of which is its intended meaning can often be resolved by seeing who is the object of the *proskyneō*. If God is the object, then *proskyneō* would by definition involve divine worship (e.g. Mt.4:10, “You shall worship the Lord your God”). But if the object is a human dignitary, then *proskyneō* would mean kneeling or paying homage without the attribution of deity (assuming that no idolatry is involved).

Hence the meaning of *proskyneō* is governed by who is the object of the *proskyneō*, and whether that person is regarded as divine. The mere use of *proskyneō* does not, in itself, confer deity on a person, for an act of kneeling does not necessarily involve divine worship.

In the ancient Near East, kneeling or bowing was a common gesture of reverence and courtesy, and was not in itself understood as divine worship. We see this not only in the New Testament but also in the LXX (the Septuagint or Greek Old Testament). Abraham bowed before the Hittites (Gen.23:12) and David bowed before

Saul (1Sam.24:8; v.9 in LXX). In the LXX of these two verses, *proskyneō* is used. Hence it is erroneous to conclude that Jesus is God solely by the fact that *proskyneō* is used of him.

What does *proskyneō* mean when used of Jesus?

There are 60 instances⁴ of *proskyneō* in the New Testament, of which 17 are used of Jesus (as the object of the *proskyneō* in all 17 instances). Where *proskyneō* is used of Jesus, the ESV would sometimes translate it as “worship” (e.g. the disciples “worshipped” Jesus after he had calmed a storm, Mt.14:33) and sometimes as “kneel” (e.g. the mother of the sons of Zebedee knelt before Jesus, Mt.20:20). ESV, NIV, and NASB exhibit a tendency to render *proskyneō* as “worship” when it is used of Jesus, presupposing his divinity.

But some other Bibles differ from ESV in the way they tend to translate *proskyneō* when it is used of Jesus. Whereas ESV says in Mt.2:11 that the magi “worshipped” Jesus, several other Bibles have “did him homage” (NJB, NAB, NRSV, Darby), or “honored him” (CEB), or “adored him” (Douay-Rheims), or “prostrated themselves in reverence to him” (ITNT⁵). In these cases, a non-trinitarian rendering of Mt.2:11 is preferred by Bibles with trinitarian credentials (e.g. the Catholic *Imprimatur*, or the Catholic seal of approval, for NJB, NAB, and Douay-Rheims).

There are conflicting opinions about the meaning of *proskyneō* for some verses even among *trinitarian* commentaries. Whereas some trinitarian commentaries take Mt.2:11 to mean the worship of Jesus, others offer

⁴ A full list of these 60 verses is given later.

⁵ *Idiomatic Translation of the New Testament* by William G. MacDonald, author of *The Greek Enchiridion*.

alternative interpretations. For Mt.2:11, *Tyndale Commentary* says that “the verb *worship* (*proskyneō*) need mean no more than to pay homage to a human dignitary”. UBS NT Handbooks says, “In the context it may mean either divine worship or homage paid to a king” but goes on to conclude that the latter is the better reading. John Calvin’s commentary says that the magi did not “come to render to Christ such pious worship as is due to the Son of God,” but intended to salute him as “a very eminent King”. *Dr. Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* says that the magi’s statement “does not necessarily mean that they regarded Him as divine” but “may have meant that they wanted to do Him homage”. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says that the magi’s “statement suggests homage paid to royalty rather than the worship of Deity”. All these are trinitarian commentaries.

There are similar disagreements over the meaning of *proskyneō* in a few other verses. Whereas ESV says that the disciples “worshipped” Jesus after he had calmed a storm (Mt.14:33), and that the women at the empty tomb “worshipped” Jesus (Mt.28:9), most of the aforementioned Bibles speak of bowing to Jesus or paying homage to him. For example, for Mt.14:33, NJB has “bowed down before him” and NEB has “fell at his feet”.

Since *proskyneō* can mean either pay homage or worship, which is the intended meaning when the word is used of Jesus? Is it possible for us to arrive at a translation that does not depend on doctrinal presuppositions? Can we break the deadlock in which trinitarians interpret *proskyneō* to mean worshipping Jesus, and non-trinitarians interpret to mean kneeling before Jesus? Compounding the problem is that a verse such as Mt.2:11 (the magi “worshipped” Jesus) has no obvious internal evidence to support the one interpretation over the other. In other words, if you presuppose that the magi worshipped Jesus, then *proskyneō* would mean “worship” to you. But if you believe that the magi paid homage to Jesus, then *proskyneō* would mean “pay homage”. So are there any external and objective factors that can break the deadlock?

Fortunately, we do have a way of breaking the deadlock because there are at least three verifiable facts at our disposal which do not depend on doctrinal presuppositions. None is conclusive by itself, but when the

three are taken together, they guide us to the correct meaning of *proskyneō* when it is used of Jesus.

Fact #1: Worship is not the fundamental sense of *proskyneō* but only a derivative meaning

Two standard Greek-English lexicons, BDAG and Thayer, indicate that the sense of worship is only a secondary or derivative meaning of *proskyneō*. BDAG gives the following glosses (i.e. summary definitions), shown here verbatim and in the same order as in BDAG (the boldface is mine):

- to express in attitude or gesture one’s complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure
- (fall down and) **worship**
- do obeisance to
- prostrate oneself before
- do reverence to
- welcome respectfully

Thayer’s lexicon similarly gives the following definitions of *proskyneō*, listed here verbatim and in the same order as in Thayer (citations omitted, boldface mine):

- to kiss the hand to (towards) one, in token of reverence
- to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence
- kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance, whether in order to express respect or to make supplication
- It is used a. of homage shown to men of superior rank;
- b. of homage rendered to God and the ascended Christ, to heavenly beings, and to demons: absolutely (or to **worship**)

The striking fact is this: In BDAG and Thayer, the words in boldface are the only meanings of *proskyneō* which imply worship! Hence, in both these authoritative lexicons, the idea of worship is given far less prominence than the idea of physical kneeling or paying homage. In fact, only a quarter of the literary citations in BDAG are assigned to the definition “worship,”

indicating that in New Testament, the fundamental meaning of *proskyneō* is not worship but kneeling or paying homage.

Fact #2: *Proskyneō* is almost no longer used of Jesus after his ascension despite its continued use in the New Testament!

The word *proskyneō* occurs 60 times in the New Testament: 29 times in the four gospels, and 31 times after the gospels. Hence the use of *proskyneō* is about evenly divided between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament. This is seen in the table below, which is divided into the same two sections. We immediately see an even balance between the two sections. Note: If *proskyneō* occurs more than once in a verse, the verse is repeated in the table (e.g. John 4:23).

The equal division becomes significant in the light of an astonishing fact: After Jesus ascended into heaven, the word *proskyneō* is no longer used of him (with two exceptions) despite the continued use of *proskyneō* in the New Testament! See the verses in boldface in the table, indicating where *proskyneō* is used of Jesus.

To be specific, *proskyneō* is used of Jesus 17 times in the New Testament: 15 times in the four gospels but only twice after the gospels (Heb.1:6 and Rev.5:14)! See the verses in boldface:

<p>Matthew 2:2; 2:8; 2:11; 4:9; 4:10; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 18:26; 20:20; 28:9; 28:17;</p> <p>Mark 5:6; 15:19;</p> <p>Luke 4:7; 4:8; 24:52;</p> <p>John 4:20; 4:21; 4:22; 4:22; 4:23; 4:23; 4:23; 4:24; 4:24; 9:38; 12:20</p>
<p>Acts 7:43; 8:27; 10:25; 24:11</p> <p>1 Corinthians 14:25</p> <p>Hebrews 1:6; 11:21</p> <p>Revelation 3:9; 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 9:20; 11:1; 11:16; 13:4; 13:4; 13:8; 13:12; 13:15; 14:7; 14:9; 14:11; 15:4; 16:2; 19:4; 19:10; 19:10; 19:20; 20:4; 22:8; 22:9</p>

The first of the two verses after the gospels, Hebrews 1:6 (“Let all God’s angels worship him,” quoting Psalm 97:7 or LXX 96:7), is found in a context that proclaims

Jesus’ superiority over the angels. But even the idea of worship is not entrenched in this verse. New Jerusalem Bible avoids using the word “worship” when it renders Hebrews 1:6 as, “Let all the angels of God pay him homage”; ITNT has “All God’s angels must revere him”.

But the more significant verse for trinitarians is Revelation 5:14 because this is the only verse in the New Testament that comes closest to the worship of Jesus, by the fact that *proskyneō* is used of Jesus together with God who is seated on His throne. The case of Revelation 5:14 is discussed below.

What would account for the sudden drop—indeed, the near total disappearance—in the application of *proskyneō* to Jesus after the gospels (only 2 instances as opposed to 15 in the gospels) despite the continued use of *proskyneō* in the New Testament?

An important clue lies in the fact that the dividing point between the gospels and the rest of the NT is chronologically also the dividing point between the earthly Jesus and the ascended Jesus. Hence *proskyneō* is used of Jesus in his earthly presence and not in his heavenly absence. Moreover, when *proskyneō* is applied to Jesus, it is always in his *physical* presence.

This striking fact suggests that when *proskyneō* is used of Jesus, it means kneeling before Jesus rather than worshipping Jesus. After his ascension, Jesus was no longer physically present on earth, and this would explain why there was no more kneeling to him.

But if we take the trinitarian view that *proskyneō* means the divine worship of Jesus, there would be no obvious reason for the worship to stop after his ascension into heaven. For if Jesus is really God as he is in trinitarianism, then divine worship would still continue even in Jesus’ absence, for an omnipresent God can be worshipped anywhere in the universe. In fact, if Jesus were God, we would expect an increase, not a decrease, in the application of *proskyneō* to Jesus after his ascension, because the risen Jesus is now the exalted Lord who has been given the name above every name.

Chronologically, the very last time (before Heb.1:6 and Rev.5:14) that *proskyneō* is used of Jesus is Luke 24:52, which is precisely at the point of his ascension into heaven! This is not a coincidence. Lk.24:52 is significant for fixing the cutoff point precisely at the demarcation of the earthly Jesus and the ascended Jesus!

Fact #3: The word *proskyneō* is used mainly by John, yet he almost never applies it to Jesus!

Of the 60 occurrences of *proskyneō* in the NT, 35 are found in John's writings versus 25 in the rest of the NT, which makes *proskyneō* a predominantly Johannine word. Yet John applies *proskyneō* to Jesus only twice in all his writings! The two verses are John 9:38 (the formerly blind man bowed before Jesus) and Rev.5:14 (the worship of the Lamb and the One seated on the throne). See the above table under "John" and "Revelation".

Although *proskyneō* is a predominantly Johannine word, John almost never uses it of Jesus, a fact that is surprising given that trinitarians regard John's writings as espousing a high Christology. But there is nothing shocking about this at all, given that it is in John's Gospel that Jesus declares that his Father is the only true God (John 17:3). To the contrary, in the very same Gospel (of John), Jesus exhorts us to worship his Father: "worship the Father" (4:21); "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him" (4:23).

Conclusion

None of these three facts is conclusive by itself, but when they are taken together, they show beyond doubt that *proskyneō*, when used of Jesus, means kneeling to Jesus or paying homage to him, rather than worshipping him as deity. Indeed Jesus exhorts us to worship the One whom he calls, "my Father and your Father" and "my God and your God" (John 20:17).

The special case of Revelation 5:14

The word *proskyneō* occurs 60 times in the New Testament, with 24 of the occurrences (40%) found in the Revelation. That is a high percentage for one book, yet none of the 24 instances of *proskyneō* in Revelation is used of Jesus with the possible exception of Rev.5:14!

The word *proskyneō* fundamentally means "bowing the knee". It can be used in a weak sense (bowing the knee without worship) or in the strong sense (worship). An example of the weak sense is seen in Rev.3:9: "I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you" (NIV). Here the prostration is not an act of divine worship but an expression of submission to believers.

In Revelation, *proskyneō* is never applied to Jesus, neither in the weak sense nor the strong sense, except in Rev.5:14: "And the four living creatures said 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshiped". Here the worship (*proskyneō*) is expressed not to Jesus alone, but also to God who is seated on His throne.

Here is a crucial observation: In the book of Revelation apart from Rev.5:14, *proskyneō* always refers to God and never to Jesus, *without exception*. Hence it is clear that when *proskyneō* is applied to both God and Jesus in the sole verse Rev.5:14, it is God and not Jesus who is the principal reason for the use of *proskyneō*. This is consistent with the fact that in the immediate context of Rev.5:14, the central figure is God who is seated on His throne.

We are reminded of the way the people of Israel bowed before God and before King David (note the words in boldface):

1Chr.29:20 David then addressed the whole assembly: "Now bless Yahweh your God!" And the whole assembly blessed Yahweh, God of their ancestors, **bowing down in homage to Yahweh, and to the king.** (NJB)

In the Hebrew of this verse, YHWH occurs three times. In the LXX of this verse, the word corresponding to "bowing down in homage" is *proskyneō*, the very word used in Rev.5:14. The use of *proskyneō* in 1Chr. 29:20 is crucial because it tells us that the LXX translators did not hesitate to apply *proskyneō* to David when *proskyneō* is also applied to Yahweh! The parallel between 1Chr.29:20 and Rev.5:14 is heightened because Jesus is the prophesied Messiah from the Davidic line. We note that in 1Chr.29:20, the main intended recipient of the worship (*proskyneō*) was not David but Yahweh, by the fact that David said, "Now bless Yahweh your God." Yet that does not rule out David participating with Yahweh as the recipient of the *proskyneō*!

In the Revelation, the central object of worship is not the Lamb but the One who is seated on the throne. The Lamb is not the main occupant of that throne, for it belongs to God, who is mentioned 12 times as being seated upon it. Jesus has his own throne, but it is distinct from God's (Rev.3:21). In John's heavenly visions, no one but God is worshipped above all else, and He is the One who sits on the central throne.

JOHN 1:1

“AND THE WORD WAS GOD”

Many Christians view John 1:1 as the most important verse in the Bible for the support of trinitarianism, though I think John 1:14 is just as important because 1:1 by itself, without 1:14, is not controversial if translated properly, being little more than a statement about the Word who is God. But it is John 1:14 that establishes a connection to Jesus Christ that trinitarians feed back into John 1:1 for a trinitarian reading of that verse.

There is however no denying that John 1:1 is a cornerstone verse on which stands the edifice of trinitarian dogma. It is a verse that, together with a few other verses such John 3:16, Genesis 1:1, and Psalm 23:1, is the most familiar to Christians. And because John 1:1 is so crucial to trinitarianism, let us quote it in English, in Greek, and in English transliteration:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

En archē ēn ho logos, kai ho logos ēn pros ton theon, kai theos ēn ho logos.

I refer to the three clauses by the suffixes a, b, c:

John 1:1a **In the beginning was the Word,**

John 1:1b **and the Word was with God,**

John 1:1c **and the Word was God.**

Six problems with the trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1

Everything looks nice and tidy, but there are six weighty problems with the trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1, some of which are not easily brushed aside:

- First, in the clause “and the Word was with God,” the word “with” is suspect because “with” is not the usual meaning of the Greek preposition *pros*. To the contrary, the prepositions commonly used for expressing “with” are *syn*, *meta*, *para* rather than *pros*. The basic meaning of *pros* is not “with” but “to” or “toward,” a fact which casts doubt on the rendering, “and the Word was *with* God”.
- Second, the problem extends from *pros* to the whole phrase *pros ton theon* (“with God”) in John 1:1b. This phrase occurs 18 times in the New Testament outside John’s Prologue, and in none of these 18 instances does *pros ton theon* mean “to be with God” or “to be in the company of God” as implied in “the Word was with God”. The meaning “with God” was imposed by trinitarians on John 1:1 to imply a second divine person who is “with” God, namely, Jesus Christ who is “with” God the Father.
- Third, it makes no logical sense to say that “the Word was with God” at the same time “the Word was God”. This is not a trivial problem, and it is recognized as such by trinitarians such as F.F. Bruce.
- Fourth, trinitarians require the word “God” to be defined inconsistently within the same verse John

1:1. Interestingly, in the Greek, the two instances of “God” in John 1:1 are separated by just one word *kai* (“and”). Yet trinitarian dogma cannot allow—and does not allow—the first instance of “God” (=God the Father) to mean the same thing as the second instance of “God” (= the Word), or else we will arrive at the modalistic conclusion that God the Father = God = the Word = Jesus Christ. To avoid the error of modalism,⁶ trinitarians require the term “God” to be defined in two different ways *within the same sentence*, namely, by making the second instance of “God” refer not to very God Himself but to God’s essence that is shared by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. So whereas the first “God” in John 1:1 is a real person (God the Father), the second “God” is not a person but an essence, an interpretation that depersonalizes the word “God”.⁷

- Fifth, the trinitarian argument for Christ’s deity in John 1:1 is immediately derailed by the inconvenient fact that Jesus says in John 17:3 that his Father is “the only true God”—a statement that is found in the very same gospel (of John)! In John 17:3, Jesus applies the word “only” to his Father, thereby ruling out Jesus himself as “true God”. So if we insist that Jesus is God, then he certainly cannot be “true God” because Jesus applies that description “only” to his Father. If Jesus is not true God, what kind of God is he? A false God? A secondary God? A derivative God? John 17:3 is so problematic to trinitarianism that many of the 20

⁶ Modalism, also known as Sabellianism, teaches that God is one person who in history has revealed Himself to believers in three modes or forms, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In modalism, these are not three distinct persons but three modes or aspects of the one God. John 17:3 is fatal to modalism.

⁷ As for the significance of “the Word,” we can take it either as identifying God or more likely as a metonym of God that expresses God’s creative power by His word. This is hinted in John 1:2: “He was in the beginning with God”. This is actually a mistranslation because the word “he” in the Greek is *houtos* (“this one”). Hence the literal rendering would be, “This was in the beginning with God,” a sense preserved in KJV (“the same was in the beginning with God”) and in Greek-English interlinears (the one by Marshall and the one by Brown/Comfort render *houtos* in John 1:2 as “this one”). This brings out the Word as a metonym of God, that is, Yahweh.

books in my library which defend trinitarianism avoid mentioning John 17:3 altogether.

- The sixth problem with John 1:1 is related to John 1:14, and is explained in the next chapter.

These are problems in trinitarianism, not in biblical monotheism. The support for the deity of Christ in John 1:1 is surprisingly weak given the reputation of this verse for being the pillar of trinitarianism.

Does the word *pros* really mean “with”?

The basic meaning of *pros* (“to” or “toward”) can be found in all elementary Greek grammars, but also in many intermediate grammars such as *It’s Still Greek to Me* by David Alan Black. In chapter 7 of this book is a helpful list of prepositions and their “principal” meanings (Greek words are transliterated in the following):

amphi	around
ana	up; up, again, back
anti	against; instead
apo	away, off; often intensive
dia	through; often intensive
eis	into
ek	out
en	in; into
epi	upon
kata	against; down; often intensive
meta	with; often denotes change
para	beside; at
peri	around; to excess
pro	before; forth
pros	towards; to
syn	with
huper	over; beyond
hupo	under; denotes submission

I bolded two of the prepositions: “pros” which is prominent in John 1:1, and “en” which is prominent in John 1:14 (as discussed in the next chapter).

Trinitarians render John 1:1b to read “and the Word was with God” despite the fact that “with” is not the usual meaning of the Greek preposition *pros*. There are in fact several other Greek prepositions that are more often used for conveying the idea of “with”: (a) *syn* means together “with” someone or something (cf.

synchronize, sympathy); (b) *meta* means “with” someone or “after” someone (cf. *metaphor*); (c) *para* means “beside” someone or something (cf. *parallel*).

But *pros* is not one of these prepositions. If John had intended to express the idea of “was with God” in John 1:1b, he would have used one of the other three prepositions instead.

This is borne out by the data compiled in *Modern Concordance to the New Testament*, an important Greek-language tool that is useful for its categorizations by classes of meaning. This concordance is praised by Protestant and Catholic scholars alike,⁸ and is valuable for finding out what a Greek word *actually* means in *actual* writing.

In its data under the heading “With” (pp.679-681), *Modern Concordance* gives 164 instances of *meta*, 66 instances of *syn*, 34 instances of *para*, but only 16 instances of *pros*! Hence *pros* seldom carries the meaning “with” even though in the New Testament, *pros* occurs far more frequently than the other three prepositions: *pros* (700 times), *syn* (128 times), *para* (194 times), *meta* (469 times). In fact several of these 16 instances of *pros* do not obviously carry the sense of “with” as we might understand “with” in English.

The following table shows beyond doubt the preponderance of prepositions *meta, syn, para* over *pros* for the meaning “with,” based on the exhaustive data compiled under the heading “With” in *Modern Concordance*. I would like to draw your attention to the very last row in which we immediately see that *pros* seldom means “with” even though it occurs more frequently (700x) than the other three prepositions.

Note the percentages of occurrence: *meta* 35%, *syn* 52%, *para* 18%, *pros* 2%. The extremely low percentage for *pros* (2%) means that *pros* rarely carries the meaning “with”—in fact only 16 times in 700 occurrences, or about once in 44 occurrences! Therefore, *in actual use*, “with” is not the usual meaning of *pros* but only the secondary or even tertiary meaning. Yet it is the lesser

meaning of *pros* that has been conscripted for trinitarian use in John 1:1!

Verses listed in Modern Concordance in which preposition <i>meta, syn, para, or pros</i> means “with”
Meta: 164 occurrences out of 469 (35%)
Matt 1:23; 2:11; 9:11; 9:15; 16:27; 17:17; 26:18; 26:20; 26:29; 26:36; 28:20; Mark 1:13; 1:29; 2:16; 2:19; 3:7; 5:24; 8:10; 8:38; 11:11; 14:14; 14:17; Luke 1:28; 1:58; 1:66; 1:72; 2:51; 5:30; 5:34; 6:17; 7:36; 22:11; 22:15; 22:53; 24:29; 24:30; John 3:2; 3:22; 3:26; 4:27; 6:3; 7:33; 8:29; 9:37; 11:54; 13:33; 14:9; 14:16; 14:30; 16:4; 16:32; 17:12; 18:2; Acts 7:9; 10:38; 11:21; 14:27; 15:4; 18:10; Rom 15:33; 16:20; 16:24; 1Cor 16:23; 2Cor 13:11; 13:13; Gal 6:18; Eph 6:24; Phil 4:9; 4:23; Col 4:18; 1Thess 3:13; 5:28; 2Thess 1:7; 3:16; 3:18; 1Tim 6:21; 2Tim 4:22; Titus 3:15; Phlm 1:25; Heb 13:25; 1John 4:17; 2John 1:2; 1:3; Rev 1:12; 2:16; 3:20; 4:1; 10:8; 21:3; 22:21; Matt 12:30; 17:3; 25:31; 26:23; 26:38; 26:40; 26:51; 26:69; 26:71; Mark 3:14; 4:36; 5:18; 5:37; 14:18; 14:20; 14:33; 14:67; 16:10; Luke 5:29; 11:23; 22:21; 22:28; 22:33; 22:59; John 6:66; 9:40; 11:16; 12:17; 13:8; 13:18; 15:27; 17:24; 18:26; 19:18; Acts 2:28; 7:38; 1John 1:3; 1:6; Rev 3:4; 3:20; 3:21; 14:1; 17:14; 20:4; 20:6; 22:12; Matt 5:25; 12:3; 12:4; 27:54; Mark 1:36; 2:25; 5:40; Luke 6:3; 6:4; John 11:31; 20:24; 20:26; Acts 9:19; 9:39; 20:34; Titus 3:15
Syn: 66 occurrences out of 128 (52%)
Luke 7:6; 24:29; 24:44; John 18:1; 1Cor 15:10; Matt 26:35; 27:38; 27:44; Mark 15:27; 15:32; Luke 8:1; 8:38; 8:51; 9:18; 22:14; 22:56; 23:32; John 12:2; Acts 4:13; Rom 6:8; 8:32; 2Cor 4:14; 13:4; Phil 1:23; Col 2:13; 2:20; 3:3; 3:4; 1Thess 4:14; 4:17; 5:10; 2Pet 1:18; Mark 2:26; Luke 2:13; 5:9; 7:12; 8:45; 9:32; 24:10; 24:24; 24:33; Acts 5:17; 5:21; 13:7; 14:4; 22:9; 22:11; 27:2; Rom 16:14; 16:15; Gal 2:3; Col 2:5
Para: 34 occurrences out of 194 (18%)
Matt 6:1; 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:30; 2:52; 9:47; 11:37; 18:27; 19:7; John 1:39; 4:40; 8:38; 14:17; 14:23; 14:25; 17:5; Rom 2:11; 2:13; 9:14; 1Cor 3:19; 7:24; Gal 3:11; Eph 6:9; 2Thess 1:6; James 1:17; 1:27; 1Pet 2:4; 2:20; 2Pet 3:8
Pros: 16 occurrences out of 700 (2%) - Note especially this row
John 1:1; 1:2; 12:32; 14:3; Rom 4:2; 5:1; 2Cor 5:8; 1Jn 1:2; 2:1; Mt 13:56; Mark 6:3; 9:19; 14:49; 1Th 3:4; 2Th 3:10

The meaning of “pros” as defined in two standard lexicons

The meaning “to be with someone” that trinitarians seek in John 1:1b (“the Word was with God,” implying a second person “with” God) is not the usual meaning of the preposition *pros*. This fact is brought out in the standard BDAG Greek-English lexicon, whose definition of *pros* is divided into three sections corresponding to the three Greek cases that *pros* may take:

1. *pros* + genitive
2. *pros* + dative
3. *pros* + accusative

In John 1:1b (“the Word was with God”), *pros* takes the accusative, so we need only look at the third section of BDAG’s definition. The following is the entire third

⁸ *Modern Concordance* is praised as a “magnificent achievement” by David Noel Freedman, general editor of the *Anchor Bible* series, and well-known expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is also praised as “the best modern language concordance that I have seen” by Raymond Brown, eminent Catholic scholar.

section of BDAG’s definition of *pros* (citations omitted, abbreviations spelled out, Greek transliterated). All italics and boldface are BDAG’s:

3 with accusative, **marker of movement or orientation toward someone/something**

(a) of place, person, or thing **toward, towards, to**, after verbs:

- α. of going
- β. of sending
- γ. of motion generally
- δ. of leading, guiding
- ε. of saying, speaking
- ζ. of asking, praying

(b) of time **near, at, or during (a certain time)**

- α. denoting approach *toward*
- β. of temporal duration *for*

(c) of goal (*aiming*) *at* or (*striving*) *toward*

- α. with conscious purpose *for, for the purpose of, on behalf of*
- β. generally of design, destiny
- γ. of the result that follows a set of circumstances (*so that*)

(d) of relationship (hostile or friendly), **against, for**

- α. hostile *against, with* after verbs of disputing, etc.
- β. friendly *to, toward, with, before*

(e) to indicate a connection by marking a point of reference, **with reference/regard to**

- α. *with reference to*
- β. *as far as ... is concerned, with regard to*
- γ. elliptically *ti pros hēmas*
- δ. *in accordance with*
- ε. expressing purpose

(f) in adverbial expressions

(g) **by, at, near** *pros tina einai be (in company) with someone*

Of the many possible meanings of *pros*+accusative listed here, the one that matches the *trinitarian* reading of John 1:1b (“the Word was with God”) is the very last one (g). In fact this is the meaning that BDAG assigns to

John 1:1. But being in the very last position, definition (g) is not considered by BDAG to be the principal meaning of *pros*. Hence the trinitarian choice of the very last meaning of *pros* for John 1:1b, to the exclusion of many other possible (and more probable) meanings, would be entirely arbitrary unless we have a compelling reason for the choice (conformity to trinitarian dogma is not a valid reason for doing this). And when we look at definitions (a) to (g), an important fact emerges: the dominant sense of *pros*+accusative is not characterized by “with” but by the word “to” or “toward”.

We see something similar in another lexical authority: the Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English lexicon (under *pros*, C-III, 1-5). In this lexicon, a principal meaning of *pros* with the accusative is “in reference to,” in which case “the Word was with God” in John 1:1 would mean that “the Word had reference to God,” that is, the Word referred to God or pointed to God. This is in fact logically consistent with John’s next clause, “and the Word was God,” with these two clauses forming a natural progression. In fact nothing in the massive LSJ lexicon on *pros* supports the trinitarian rendering of John 1:1b (“and the Word was with God”).

The referential use of *pros* is common in the Bible, and is seen in Mark 12:12: “he spoke the parable against them,” which in the Greek is literally, “he spoke the parable with reference to them”. This is confirmed by the *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT* which translates *pros autous* in this verse as “with reference to them”.

The LSJ lexicon, unlike lexicons of biblical and Christian literature, is not primarily interested in providing support for trinitarianism. In fact nothing in this massive lexicon on *pros* (with the accusative) supports the trinitarian rendering of John 1:1b (“and the Word was with God”).⁹

Conclusion: From the lexical data in BDAG and Liddell-Scott-Jones, John 1:1 should read: “In the beginning was the Word (God), and the Word had reference to God (pointed to God¹⁰), and the Word was God.”

⁹ LSJ’s detailed explanation of *pros*+accusative is divided under several headings. The section relevant to John 1:1b is the one under the heading “III. of Relation between two objects”.

¹⁰ By metonymic reference.

Does *pros ton theon* really mean “with God” in John 1:1?

We have looked at the single word *pros*. What about the whole phrase *pros ton theon*? Does it really mean “with God” in John 1:1? We have already seen that *pros* by itself rarely carries the sense of “with,” a fact which casts doubt on the trinitarian rendering, “and the Word was with God”.

To see the real meaning of the whole phrase *pros ton theon* in John 1:1b (“with God”), we can simply see how the trinitarian ESV generally translates it. The phrase *pros ton theon* that we find in John 1:1 occurs 20 times in the NT: twice in John’s Prologue (Jn.1:1,2) and 18 times outside the Prologue.¹¹ In these 18 verses, ESV never translates *pros ton theon* as “with God” with the exception of Romans 5:1 (“we have peace with God,” which does not carry the sense of “with God” that trinitarians seek in John 1:1b). Instead, ESV translates *pros ton theon* as “to God” or “toward God” in 14 of the 18 verses! The same is true of NASB. In other words, where trinitarian doctrine is not an issue, ESV never translates *pros ton theon* in the sense of “with”.

Why do trinitarians impose the meaning “with” on John 1:1?

Why are trinitarians keen to impose the meaning “with” on the word *pros* in John 1:1? The reason is that the trinitarian rendering, “the Word was with God,” would imply another entity that is “with” God at the creation, and they want to imply further that this entity is the preexistent Jesus. What they fail to see is that in order to prove their case from Scripture, three steps would have to be taken.

First, it must be shown that the physical creation in Genesis 1 involved another entity besides God. But anyone who is familiar with the Genesis narrative would know that no one was involved “with God” when He brought creation into being. There is no record of any person, being, or entity besides God who was involved in the creation. There is also no “second deity” (a term used by Philo but which is taken by trinitarians to mean

something that Philo does not mean). Thus, whatever *pros* might mean in John 1:1, it does not mean “with” in any sense that implies another person alongside God.

Second, even if it could be shown that there is an entity that is “with God” in the Genesis creation, it must be further established that this entity is a real person and not just a reification, hypostatization, or personification of something like wisdom in Proverbs 8:30. So whether the Word in John 1:1 is another divine person besides Yahweh would still have to be proved, and as far as Scripture is concerned, that effort would be futile because there is simply no such person. Yahweh expressly declares that He alone is God (Isa.45:5) and that He created the heavens and the earth by Himself (Isa.44:24). Hence, even if we take *pros* in John 1:1 to mean “with God,” that is still not sufficient to prove trinitarianism.

Third, it must be demonstrated that John identifies “the Word” with Jesus, which is something trinitarians have never done. We will discuss this in the next chapter. In fact, trinitarians have not gone beyond the first point, let alone the second and the third.

Trinitarians admit that their understanding of *pros* creates a conflict between John 1:1b and John 1:1c

It will come as a surprise to many that the key word in John 1:1 is not *logos* (Word) or even *theos* (God)—these words are not controversial in themselves—but the tiny word *pros*. That is because the way we understand *pros* in John 1:1b will govern the way we interpret the whole verse.

We have seen from BDAG and Liddell-Scott-Jones that *pros* has a few meanings, but the primary meaning is characterized by “to” or “toward” whereas the secondary meaning is “with”. The former meaning would make John 1:1b say that “the Word had reference to God” or “the Word referred to God” whereas the latter would correspond to the trinitarian rendering, “the Word was with God”.

As we have seen, *Modern Concordance* indicates that at most 16 of the 700 instances of *pros* in the New Testament carry the meaning “with”.

If we have no compelling reason for rejecting the primary meaning of *pros* for John 1:1, then the choice of

¹¹ The 18 instances are Jn.13:3; Acts 4:24; 12:5; 24:16; Rom.5:1; 10:1; 15:17,30; 2Cor.3:4; 13:7; Phil.4:6; 1Thess.1:8,9; Heb.2:17; 5:1; 1Jn.3:21; Rev.12:5; 13:6.

its secondary meaning would be entirely arbitrary. In fact, it is the opposite that is true. We do have a compelling reason for choosing the primary meaning of *pros*: *referential consistency*. We likewise have a compelling reason for rejecting the lesser meaning of *pros*: *referential inconsistency*. To see what this means, let us compare the two possible renderings of John 1:1, with the differences between them shown in boldface:

Primary meaning of *pros*:

- a. In the beginning was the Word,
- b. and the Word **had reference to God**,
- c. and the Word was God.

Secondary meaning of *pros*:

- a. In the beginning was the Word,
- b. and the Word **was with God**,
- c. and the Word was God.

The two renderings are identical except for the words in boldface. The first rendering has the advantage of referential consistency: the term “God” means the same in line #b as in line #c. This is what gives the whole verse its natural flow and progression, with line #b leading naturally to #c. But the second rendering lacks referential consistency because “God” in line #c is forced to mean something different from “God” in line #b; this inconsistency is demanded by trinitarians in order to avoid modalism but also to imply a second person who is “with” God. Many trinitarians are aware of this problem of inconsistency, as anyone who reads their literature on John 1:1 would know. Most trinitarians, however, ignore the problem because it benefits their doctrine to create a second divine person.

The root problem is this: It makes no sense to say that the Word “was with God” at the same time the Word “was God”! When John 1:1 is translated in the trinitarian way as in most Bibles, a logical conflict arises between John 1:1b and 1:1c. The problem is not with John 1:1c (“the Word was God,” which is a valid translation though not the only one), but with John 1:1b (“the Word was with God,” a rendering demanded by trinitarians in order to safeguard trinitarianism).

But the conflict is an artificial one because it is not inherent to John 1:1. The conflict was artificially created because trinitarians force *pros* to take on its lesser rather

than its primary meaning, in order to create a second divine person.

The conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c in *trinitarianism* is not a trivial one, and is noted by many trinitarians. We now give five examples of this. These examples, especially the fifth, highlight the difficulties that arise when we pull the meaning of *pros* in John 1:1b away from its primary meaning.

Five examples of how trinitarians try to resolve the conflict between John 1:1b and John 1:1c

Example 1. F.F. Bruce, trinitarian and well-known NT scholar, is aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c when they are translated in the standard way. He says of John 1:1c that “the meaning would have been that the Word was completely identical with God, which is impossible if the Word was also ‘with God’” (*The Gospel of John*, p.31). Note the strong word “impossible” to describe the conflict. This conundrum impels F.F. Bruce to search for a rendering of John 1:1c which would resolve the conflict without compromising trinitarian doctrine. For example, he speaks positively of the rendering in the New English Bible, “what God was, the Word was,” while admitting that this is just a paraphrase. In the end, F.F. Bruce does not seem to find a solution that is satisfactory to himself, beyond taking John 1:1c to mean, “the Word shared the nature and being of God”.

Example 2. *IVP New Testament Commentary*, which often expresses a trinitarian opinion, mentions the same logical conflict that F.F. Bruce brings up, and then concludes, “These two truths seem impossible to reconcile logically, and yet both must be held with equal firmness.” (These “two truths” are the same two contradictory clauses that F.F. Bruce points out.) But after admitting that the two clauses “seem impossible to reconcile logically” (strong words), the commentary makes no effort to find a solution beyond the bare suggestion that we simply accept the two “with equal firmness”.

Example 3. H.A.W. Meyer, in *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* (p.48), is aware that it is possible to read John 1:1b in the referential sense (i.e. the Word had reference to God), and correctly saw that

this would make the Word a “periphrasis” (an indirect term) for God. But this periphrasis undermines the trinitarian insistence that the Word is a second person who is “with” God. Hence Meyer rejects the periphrasis in favor of the standard rendering, “the Word was with God”. But immediately he sees the same logical conflict that F.F. Bruce sees. So he insists that “God” in John 1:1c “can only be the predicate, not the subject,” and proposes the reading, “He was *with* God, and possessed of a *divine nature*” (italics Meyer’s), which is basically the standard trinitarian understanding.

Example 4. The NET Bible is fully aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c in the way they are translated in most Bibles. To resolve this, NET takes the principle that any reading of John 1:1c that collides with 1:1b must be “ruled out”. In other words, the *trinitarian* reading of John 1:1b takes precedence over all possible readings of John 1:1c. This is seen in the following statement (the words in parentheses are NET’s):

The construction in John 1:1c does not equate the Word with the *person* of God (this is ruled out by 1:1b, “the Word was with God”); rather it affirms that the Word and God are one in *essence*.

NET acknowledges the conflict between the standard reading of John 1:1b (“the Word was with God”) and that of 1:1c (“the Word was God”), the latter of which equates the Word with God (or what NET calls “the person of God”). But NET goes on to say that John 1:1b “rules out” the standard reading of 1:1c. Hence NET concludes that the Word in 1:1c is not the “person of God” but someone who is “one in essence” with God. This is in fact the trinitarian view that God is not a person but an essence or substance.¹²

In the end, NET renders John 1:1c as “the Word was fully God,” which is a paraphrase. It is a qualitative statement of God’s essence rather than an equation of

identity between Word and God. This is in fact the trinitarian view of John 1:1c.

Example #5. Robert Bowman Jr., an apologist for trinitarianism, has written one of the most detailed grammatical-exegetical analyses of John 1:1 ever by an evangelical. His book, *Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of John*, contains an exposition of John 1:1 from a trinitarian perspective, interwoven with a critique of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ interpretation of the same verse. We won’t go into the details of his book but will only summarize the two main currents that run through his exposition of John 1:1. Ironically, these two currents, especially the second one, weakens Bowman’s own trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1.

First current: Bowman is aware of the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c when these are rendered in the trinitarian way. For example, he says, “What needs to be treated in some depth is the question of how the Word can be with God and yet be God” (p.25). But his efforts to resolve the conflict is notable for the casual manner in which he alters the words of John 1:1 here and there without batting an eye, in contrast to F.F. Bruce who hesitates to do this to even one word. Bowman speaks freely of “shifts” in wording, changing the “significance” of words, and coming up with a “translation-paraphrase” (a euphemism for “paraphrase”). So it is not surprising that after making all these changes, this is his final and fully trinitarian rendering of John 1:1:

In the beginning the Word was existing; and the Word was existing in relationship with the person commonly known as God, that is, the Father; and the Word was Himself essentially God.

Second current: Bowman’s exposition reveals the shocking fact, which I had already sensed a long time ago, that the trinitarian interpretation of John 1:1 is fundamentally identical to that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in terms of grammatical-exegetical analysis! In fact, trinitarians and JWs agree fully on the first 80% of their interpretation of John 1:1, but diverge only in the final 20%. This conclusion is solidly based on the many grammatical-exegetical features and presuppositions

¹² Tertullian says: “God is the name for the substance” (*Early Christian Doctrines*, p.114). C.S. Lewis says: “Christian theology does not believe God to be a person. It believes Him to be such that in Him a trinity of persons is consistent with a unity of Deity. In that sense it believes Him to be something very different from a person.” (*Christian Reflections*, p.79).

that trinitarians and the Jehovah's Witnesses share in common for the interpretation of John 1:1.

Here are some examples: They agree on the Greek text of John 1:1 (i.e. no textual issues). They agree on how John 1:1a and 1:1b are to be translated into English. They both take "the Word" as referring to Jesus, and "God" in John 1:1b as referring to God the Father. They both take *pros* in John 1:1b in the secondary sense of "with" ("the Word was with God"), implying two distinct persons. They both acknowledge the conflict between John 1:1b and 1:1c that results from this. They both resolve the conflict by changing the meaning of "God" in John 1:1c so that it means something different from "God" in 1:1b, namely, as predicative, indefinite, qualitative. They both use the predicate anarthrous *theos* argument to justify their respective qualitative readings of "God" in John 1:1c.¹³

Bowman admits that trinitarians and the JW's agree on three key aspects of *theos* (God) in John 1:1c: the qualitiveness of the anarthrous *theos* (p.37); the predicatedness of *theos* (p.38); the indefiniteness of *theos* (pp.41,47). With these things in agreement, Bowman faces the challenging task of disproving "the Word was a god," which is the JW's rendering of John 1:1c.

This explains why Bowman, on p.62, after giving the most detailed grammatical analysis of John 1:1 that I have seen, has no choice but to admit that the JW's rendering of John 1:1c ("the Word was a god") is "a possible rendering" and is "grammatically possible"! But in Bowman's view, this rendering is simply not doctrinally acceptable (to him).

The true disagreement between trinitarians and the Jehovah's Witnesses is over doctrine, not exegetical procedure. After agreeing fully in the first 80%, they diverge in the final 20%, namely, over the degree and nature of Jesus' divineness: "God" (according to trinitarians) versus "a god" (according to the JW's). But even here they partially agree because when trinitarians speak of "God" in John 1:1c, they don't mean "the God" but "God" in the qualitative sense of a divine essence, which is not unlike the way the JW's understand "a god" to mean divine or godlike. In fact, both Bowman (p.63) and the JW's

accept "and the Word was divine" as a valid alternative reading of John 1:1c—further proof of the similarity of their respective grammatical-exegetical procedures.

In the final analysis, Bowman's disagreement with the JW's is really over doctrine, specifically the degree of the "divineness" of the Word: either "God" (trinitarianism) or "a god" (the JW's), both in a qualitative sense. This is really nothing more than a spat over the qualitative meaning of *theos* in John 1:1c. In fact Bowman spends a great deal of effort to show that his qualitative understanding of *theos* is better than the JW's qualitative understanding of *theos*!

The weakness of Bowman's analysis of John 1:1—and therefore that of the JW's—is that they never consider the possibility (recognized by Meyer) that *pros* could be understood referentially. This would make John 1:1b read, "the Word referred to God," which harmonizes with the next clause, "the Word was God". Bowman never considers this possibility because it would undermine his trinitarian presuppositions, but also because trinitarians agree perfectly with the JW's on the meaning of *pros* in John 1:1b (Bowman, p.25).

There is nothing farfetched about a trinitarian who concedes that "the Word was a god" (preferred by the Jehovah's Witnesses) is grammatically possible. Thomas Constable of Dallas Theological Seminary, a trinitarian, likewise admits that "the Word was a god" is grammatically possible, but like Bowman he rejects it as *doctrinally* unacceptable:

Jehovah's Witnesses appeal to this verse [John 1:1] to support their doctrine that Jesus was not fully God but the highest created being. They translate it "the Word was a god." Grammatically this is a possible translation since it is legitimate to supply the indefinite article ("a") when no article is present in the Greek text, as here. However, that translation here is definitely incorrect because it reduces Jesus to less than God. (*Dr. Constable's Expository Notes*, on John 1:1)

Note: In case the reader is wondering, CDC disagrees with some of the JW's' core teachings on Jesus Christ.

¹³ The Jehovah's Witnesses present these grammatical points in *Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures*, 1965, pp.1158-1160.

JOHN 1:14: “AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND TABERNACLED IN US”

John 1:14 is as important to trinitarians as John 1:1 because 1:1 without 1:14 does not support the deity of Christ when properly interpreted. While it is true that 1:1 focuses on the Word who is God, it is 1:14 that draws a so-called connection to Jesus Christ that trinitarians find vital for establishing trinitarianism. In this chapter we will look at John 1:14 which we divide into three parts called a, b, c:

John 1:14a	And the Word became flesh
John 1:14b	and dwelt among us,
John 1:14c	and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

We first look at 1:14b and then briefly 1:14c. We will leave 1:14a to the last because it is more easily studied after we have examined 1:14b.

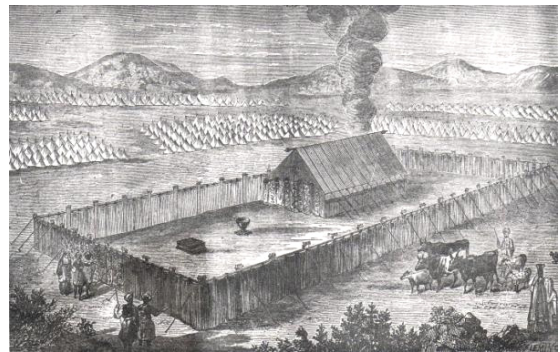
But to interpret the whole verse John 1:14 accurately, we need to bring in the concept of the tabernacle and the temple. That is because in John 1:14b (“dwelt among us”), the word “dwelt” is not the common Greek word for “dwelt” but the special word “tabernacled”.

Tabernacle and temple: a quick overview

The word *tabernacle* is not used in English except in a religious context. It is a mysterious word to many, but it is nothing more than a fancy or traditional word for “tent” (from Latin *tabernaculum*, “tent”). Therefore we will use the words *tent* and *tabernacle* interchangeably. In the Old Testament, *tabernacle* usually translates the Hebrew *mishkan* (“dwelling place”).

Here is a drawing of the tabernacle taken from an 1891 German Bible. The picture may be faded, but it is

in the public domain and serves its purpose of depicting God’s Shekinah glory filling the tabernacle. The word *Shekinah* refers to the dwelling or settling of God’s glorious presence.



In the picture is a courtyard surrounded by thousands of small dwelling tents arranged according to the tribes of Israel. Inside the courtyard is the tabernacle itself, which in the Bible is also called the “tent of meeting”. All the objects shown in the picture—the tabernacle, the courtyard fixtures, the altars, the surrounding tents—can be dismantled and transported by the Israelites as they sojourn in the wilderness to the Promised Land.

The tabernacle’s interior is divided into two sections: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The latter is the dwelling place of God’s Shekinah glory, a visible manifestation of His presence that descends upon the tabernacle and opens a way for God to meet with His people (hence “tent of meeting”). As shown in the picture, God’s glory is visible as “a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night” (Ex.13.22) that descends upon the tabernacle, filling it with His glory and presence:

Exodus 40:34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle.

Even before the tabernacle was made, it was conceived as God's dwelling place, for God had earlier said to Moses, "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex.25:8).

In the course of Israel's history, the tabernacle was later replaced by the temple. This took place a few centuries after Israel had entered the Land of Promise. Since Israel no longer needed the tent to be mobile, it was replaced by a permanent settled structure: Solomon's temple. The temple was also called "the house of the Lord" (literally "the house of Yahweh") because it was God's dwelling place in the presence of His people. Note the words in boldface:

1 Kings 8:10-13 ... a cloud filled **the house of Yahweh**, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for **the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh**. Then Solomon said, "Yahweh has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built you an exalted house, **a place for you to dwell in forever.**" (ESV, "Yahweh" restored)

But a few verses later, in v.27, Solomon declares that God's presence is ultimately too great to be confined to the temple:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1Kings 8:27, ESV; cf. Acts 7:48)

Yet the infinite and omnipresent God, in His mercy, was pleased to dwell in the house that His chosen people, the Israelites, had built for Him, and was pleased to fill it with His glory and presence.

Supplementary note: In English, "tabernacle" is a noun, not a verb, but Greek has a verb *skēnoō* (to tabernacle) and a noun *skēnē* (a tabernacle). BDAG says that the noun is used in the LXX of "Yahweh's tabernacle" and the "Tent of Testimony". More significantly, BDAG says that the verb *skēnoō* in John 1:14 is "perhaps an expression of continuity with God's 'tenting' in Israel".

In John 1:14, "among us" is literally "in us"—a fact that greatly weakens trinitarianism

The standard rendering of John 1:14b—"dwelt among us"—is defective on two counts, and in each case, an important word is not being translated according to its true or literal meaning. We have already seen the first case: In the original Greek, the word "dwelt" is not the common Greek word for "dwelt" but is "tabernacled" or "tented". This fact is known to all Bible scholars, and is mentioned in the footnotes of some Bibles.

But the second case is more significant because it greatly weakens trinitarianism: The rendering "among us" in John 1:14b is inaccurate because the original Greek text has "in us"! The exact phrase is *eskēnōsen en hēmin* ("tented in us") where the preposition *en* is the familiar Greek word for "in".¹⁴ Hence "dwelt among us" is literally "tabernacled in us" or "tented in us".

Trinitarians reject "in us" even though this is the direct and literal translation of *en hēmin*, and is lexically more probable than "among us". As we have seen in David Alan Black's list of prepositions, the basic meaning of *en* is "in, into".

The reason for the trinitarian rejection of the literal "in us" is that this rendering undermines trinitarianism by implying that the Word dwelt in flesh by tenting "in us"—*in God's people!* This makes improbable the deity of Jesus in John 1:1 and 1:14. Trinitarians favor the non-literal and less accurate "among us" because it implies that the Word became the very person of Jesus Christ who now lives "among us".¹⁵

In John's writings, *en* rarely means "among"

The Greek word *en* occurs 474 times in John's writings (226 times in his Gospel, 90 times in his letters, 158 times in Revelation). The crucial question for trinitarians is this: How many of these 474 instances actually mean "among"? The best way of arriving at an objective

¹⁴ In fact the English "in" is derived from the Greek "en" via Latin "in" and Old English "in" (*Oxford Dictionary of English*).

¹⁵ The literal rendering "in us" creates another complication for the trinitarian reading of John 1:14, since it would, in trinitarianism, say that Jesus the Word tabernacled "in us" such that we become the temple of Jesus. But the Bible never speaks of us as the temple of Jesus, but only as the temple of God and of the Holy Spirit (1Cor.3:16; 6:19).

answer to this question is not for me or for anyone else to do the counting, but for a *trinitarian* Bible such as NASB (1995 revised edition) to do the “counting” for us via *actual translation*. If you are willing to do the hard work, here are the final results: Of the 474 instances of *en* in John’s writings outside the disputed John 1:14b, only 7 are translated as “among” by NASB (Jn.7:12; 9:16; 10:19; 11:54; 12:35; 15:24; Rev.2:1). Hence, by NASB’s own reckoning, the preposition *en* rarely means “among”; this meaning appears in only 1.5% of all instances of *en*! On the other hand, by NASB’s reckoning, the sense of “in” (as opposed to “among”) is valid for around 90% of all instances! Hence the trinitarian choice of “among us” to the exclusion of “in us” can only be influenced by theology. This is not surprising, given that “in us” greatly weakens trinitarianism.

In John’s writings outside John 1:14b, *en hēmin* never means “among us” but always “in us”!

Instead of the single word *en*, what about the phrase *en hēmin* that we see in John 1:14? The exact and literal meaning of this phrase is “in us”.

Here is a crucial fact: In John’s writings outside the disputed John 1:14, *en hēmin* always means “in us” and never “among us,” *without exception*. In the writings of Paul and Luke, *en hēmin* likewise means “in us” though there are a few exceptions such as Luke 7:16: “a great prophet has risen among us”. But even in these cases, “among us” is not the literal rendering of *en hēmin*, and is valid only if “in us” makes no sense in the context.

But John’s use of *en* (“in”) is fairly consistent in meaning. In his writings apart from the disputed John 1:14, *en hēmin* always means “in us” and never “among us” without exception. To be specific, outside John 1:14, *en hēmin* is found ten times in John’s writings. It is significant that NASB never translates these ten instances of *en hēmin* as “among us” but always as “in us” (with the exception of 1 John 4:16 where NASB has “for us” but which can be rendered as “in us” in view of v.12). It is an easy exercise to verify that “among us” makes no sense if it replaces “in us” in the following ten instances (see the words in boldface):

John 17:21 ... even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be **in Us** ...

1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not **in us**.

1 John 1:10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not **in us**.

1 John 3:24 ... We know by this that He abides **in us**, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

1 John 4:9 By this the love of God was manifested **in us** ...

1 John 4:12 ... if we love one another, God abides **in us**, and His love is perfected **in us**. [*en hēmin* occurs twice in this verse]

1 John 4:13 By this we know that we abide in Him and He **in us**, because He has given us of His Spirit.

1 John 4:16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has **for us** ... [this can be rendered “in us” in view of verse 12]

2 John 1:2 for the sake of the truth which abides **in us** ...

John often uses *en hēmin* in the sense of “God dwells in us”

In some of the verses just listed, NASB uses the word “abide” in a way that may confuse the modern reader because it is used in the sense of “to live” or “to dwell”. This sense of “abide” is archaic according to *Oxford Dictionary of English*. But great insight is gained when we read three of these verses from a more readable Bible such as NIV (note the words in boldface):

1 John 3:24 The one who keeps God’s commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that **he lives in us**: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

1 John 4:12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, **God lives in us** and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:13 This is how we know that **we live in him and he in us**: He has given us of his Spirit.

In these three verses, the concept of God living in us comes out powerfully: “he lives in us” (1Jn.3:24); “God lives in us” (4:12); “we live in him and he in us” (4:13). This brings home the fact that in John 1:14, “tented in us” rather than “tented among us” is the rendering which is grammatically and lexically correct, as well as theologically consistent with the Johannine concept of God living in His people.

John makes a distinction between “in us” and “among us” using two different Greek words in the space of 12 verses

We have seen that outside the disputed John 1:14, the apostle John never uses *en hēmin* in the sense of “among us” but always of “in us”. This leads to another question: That being the case, does John ever use a different Greek word from *en* to express the concept of “among us” as opposed to “in us”? Yes he does, for just 12 verses later, in the same chapter, John records the words of John the Baptist: “but **among** you stands one whom you do not know” (Jn.1:26). Here the word “among” corresponds to the Greek *mesos* (“among” us), which is different from the Greek *en* in John 1:14 (“in” us). Hence, within the space of 12 verses, John makes a distinction between “in” and “among” using two different Greek words (*en* versus *mesos*), thereby invalidating the trinitarian conflation of “among us” and “in us” in John 1:14.

The rendering “in us” for John 1:14 is known in church history

There is nothing unusual or novel about the fact that the literal meaning of *en hēmin* is “in us” rather than “among us”. If you ask anyone who knows elementary Greek to translate the words *en hēmin* without showing him or her John 1:14, he or she will immediately give you “in us”. But because this most basic fact is suppressed in the trinitarian rendering of John 1:14, I feel compelled to list a few examples of people from various eras of church history who take John 1:14 to mean “in us”:

- **Jerome** (347-420), principal translator of the Latin Vulgate
- **Augustine** (354-430), the most influential theologian of the Latin church, e.g. in his exposition of Psalm 68 ¹⁶
- **Theodore of Antioch** (350-428), bishop of Mopsuestia, known for his perceptive criticism of the allegorical method of Bible interpretation
- **John Wycliffe** (1331-1384), Bible translator whose Wycliffe Bible has a note on John 1:14 that explains “dwelled among us” as “dwelled in us”
- **George Fox** (1624-1691), founder of the Quakers, who says that *en hēmin* is often mistranslated as “among us” (he says it should be “in us”)
- **Allen Dwight Callahan**, Baptist minister and Associate Professor of New Testament at Harvard University, in *A Love Supreme: A History of the Johannine Tradition* (p.51)

We won’t elaborate on these examples except to say a few things about Jerome, who is often regarded as the greatest biblical scholar of the early church. In my opinion, he is the greatest biblical scholar and Origen is the greatest textual critic of the early church. The 29-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, in its introduction to volume 4, says of Jerome:

Jerome (d.420) has generally been viewed as the finest scholar among the early church fathers and has been called the greatest biblical scholar ever produced in the history of the Latin church.

Jerome is the principal translator of the *Vulgate* (commonly known as the Latin Vulgate), a Latin Bible translated from the Hebrew Bible, the LXX, the Greek NT, and other textual sources. It is significant that for John 1:14 of the Vulgate, Jerome translates the Greek *en hēmin* simply as Latin *in nobis* (which usually means “in

¹⁶ Augustine often speaks of God dwelling in His people: “For when I call on him I ask him to come into me. And what place is there in me into which my God can come? How could God, the God who made both heaven and earth, come into me?” (*Confessions*, Book 1, Chapter 2)

us”). This Latin term is well known in English in the famous saying by Ovid, *est deus in nobis*, “there is a god in us” or “there is a god within us”. Ovid, one of the great Roman poets, lived a few centuries before Jerome, so the learned Jerome must have been familiar with *est deus in nobis*, a famous saying from Latin literature.

What about the word “among” in the Vulgate as opposed to “in”? Just 12 verses later, John the Baptist says, “but among you stands one you do not know” (Jn.1:26). Here the word “among” corresponds to Greek *mesos* in the NT and Latin *medius* in the Vulgate. These two words *mesos* and *medius* are different from the two words *en* and *in* in John 1:14. Hence, within the space of 12 verses, John makes a distinction between “in” and “among” in the Greek, as Jerome does in the Latin.

Moreover, in John’s writings outside John 1:14, the Latin phrase *in nobis* occurs ten times in the Vulgate (corresponding to the same ten instances of *en hēmin* in the Greek NT). As we have seen, in these ten instances NASB never has “among us” but always “in us” (except in 1 John 4:16 where NASB has “for us” but which can be rendered “in us” in view of v.12).

God’s people are the temple of God, with Christ as the head or cornerstone of the temple

John’s monumental declaration that the Word tabernacled “in us”—that is, in God’s people—aligns with Paul’s teaching that God’s people are the temple of God. Note the words in boldface in the following verses (NET):

1 Corinthians 3:16 Do you not know that **you are God’s temple** and that **God’s Spirit dwells in you**?

1 Corinthians 6:19 Or do you not know that **your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you ... ?**

Ephesians 2:20-22 ... Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building, being joined together, **grows into a holy temple in the Lord**, in whom you also are **being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit**.

In the English of these three verses, “you” or “your” occurs 11 times, each corresponding to the plural “you” or plural “your” (via a Greek plural pronoun or plural verb). The repeated plural expresses the *corporate* nat-

ure of God’s people as the temple of God. The second of these verses, 1Cor.6:19, connects the word “temple” to the word “body,” reminding us of the language of John 2:21 in which Jesus speaks of “the temple of his body”:

Jesus replied, “Destroy this **temple** and in three days I will raise it up again.” Then the Jewish leaders said to him, “This **temple** has been under construction for forty-six years, and are you going to raise it up in three days?” But Jesus was speaking about the **temple** of his body. (NET)

Here we need to make the distinction between Jesus’ physical body (“the temple of his body”) which was put to death and then raised from the dead, and Jesus’ spiritual body which is the spiritual temple of God consisting of God’s people. In both cases, there is use of language that connects the concept of “temple” to the concept of “body”.

In the spiritual realm, Jesus is the temple of God, and we are the temple of God, yet there are not two temples but one, namely, the temple of God whose cornerstone is Christ (to use the metaphor of a building) or whose head is Christ (to use the metaphor of a body). The corporateness of God’s people is expressed in Ephesians 2:20-22 (quoted above) which speaks of a building that grows together into a holy temple, with Christ as the cornerstone. Paul uses two metaphors: Christ the cornerstone (of a building) and Christ the head (of a body).

Just as there is one temple for God in the Old Testament, so there is one temple for God in the New Testament, namely, the body of Christ which is the church:

Ephesians 5:23 ... Christ is the head of **the church, his body**

Colossians 1:18 And he is the head of **the body, the church**. (also v.24)

Some trinitarians say that the Word in John 1:14 tabernacled *in Christ* rather than *in us*. For example, the NET Bible says in a study note:

The Greek word translated *took up residence* (*skēnoō*) alludes to the OT tabernacle, where the Shekinah, the visible glory of God’s presence, resided. The author is suggesting that this glory can now be seen

in Jesus. The verb used here may imply that **the Shekinah glory that once was found in the tabernacle has taken up residence in the person of Jesus.**

A similar view is found in *Linguistic Key to Greek New Testament*:

The flesh of Jesus Christ is the new localization of God's presence on earth; **Jesus is the replacement of the ancient tabernacle** (Brown).

The view expressed in these quotations, that John 1:14 depicts Christ as the tabernacle, is basically correct but incomplete: It is basically correct because Christ is the temple of God, but incomplete because John 1:14 says that the Word tabernacled "in us"—that is, in all God's people and not just in Christ, for we too are the temple of God (1Cor.3:16; 6:19; Eph.2:20-22).

We have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle is not God Himself, nor is it divine, but is the dwelling place of God. Likewise in the New Testament, the temple of God comprising God's people (with Christ as the head) is not God Himself, nor is it divine, but is God's dwelling place that is filled with His glory and presence. This picture comes from the Old Testament:

Ex.40:34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and **the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle.**

Jesus is the temple of God and we are the temple of God (1Cor.3:16; 6:19; Eph.2:20-22), yet there are not two temples but one. God's glory fills the whole temple, but shines most gloriously in Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of the temple and the head of the body. Paul speaks of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ:

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of **the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.** (ESV)

This harmonizes with what John says in John 1:14c: "and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son

from the Father, full of grace and truth". And since God's glory and presence dwells in Jesus the temple of God, God's entire fullness lives in Christ:

Colossians 1:19 For God was pleased to have **all his fullness dwell in him** (NIV)

Colossians 2:9 For in Christ all the fullness of **the Deity** lives in **bodily** form (NIV)

Paul is saying that all the fullness of God—all the fullness of the Deity—dwells in Christ bodily. It may come as a surprise to many that God's people are also filled with God's fullness: "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph.3:19). In the Greek, "you" is in the plural (since "filled" is the 2nd person plural), expressing the corporate character of God's people who as the temple of God are filled with the fullness of God.

We are collectively a holy temple, the "dwelling place of God in the Spirit":

Ephesians 2:21-22 In him the whole building, being joined together, **grows into a holy temple in the Lord,** in whom you also are **being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.**

The concept of God's fullness in Christ—and God's fullness in us—comes from the Old Testament picture of Yahweh's glory filling the temple:

1 Kings 8:10-12 And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, **a cloud filled the house of Yahweh,** so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for **the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh.** (ESV, "Yahweh" restored)

Since Jesus is filled with God's fullness, we can now better understand John 1:16, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace"—that is, from God's fullness in Christ we have all received the abundance of saving grace.

Finally, how do we understand “the Word became flesh”?

We now come to John 1:14a, “the Word became flesh”. The Greek for “became” is *egeneto*, a form of *ginomai*, a verb. The BDAG Greek-English lexicon gives ten definitions of *ginomai*, listed here with citations omitted. I highlight in boldface the two most probable definitions that apply to John 1:14:

1. to come into being through process of birth or natural production, *be born, be produced*
2. to come into existence, *be made, be created, be manufactured, be performed*
3. come into being as an event or phenomenon from a point of origin, *arise, come about, develop*
4. to occur as process or result, *happen, turn out, take place*
5. **to experience a change in nature and so indicate entry into a new condition, *become something***
6. **to make a change of location in space, *move***
7. to come into a certain state or possess certain characteristics, *to be, prove to be, turn out to be*
8. to be present at a given time, *be there*
9. to be closely related to someone or something, *belong to*
10. to be in or at a place, *be in, be there*

Because *ginomai* has so many definitions and nuances, John 1:14a is one of those verses (actually, one of many such verses in the Bible) in which the dictionary meaning of a single word does not govern the interpretation of the whole verse. Rather, it is the reverse: It is how we understand the whole verse that governs the way we understand the meaning of a specific word in the verse.

Definition #5 (“change in nature”)— and to a lesser degree definition #6 (“change of location”)—seems to align best with the trinitarian view that the second person of the Godhead became a man by incarnation. In fact definition #5a (note suffix “a”) is the one BDAG assigns to John 1:14.

To provide support for “change in nature,” many of BDAG’s biblical citations include a change in one’s status with respect to another person (e.g. Herod and Pilate “became friends,” Lk.23:12). In other words,

BDAG allows “change in nature” to have a wider meaning than how we might understand “change in nature” in English.

On the other hand, definition #6 (“change of location”)—and to a lesser degree #5 (“change in nature”)—applies to the other interpretation of John 1:14, namely, the one I advance in this paper, which takes *en hēmin* literally as “in us”. In this case, “change of location in space, move” (#6) would apply to God’s presence entering the temple. But “change in nature” (#5), in the wider sense allowed by BDAG, may have tangential relevance too, due to God’s new mode of existence in humanity.

But in the end, BDAG assigns definition #5a (change of nature) to John 1:14 because it harmonizes with the trinitarian view of the Word becoming Jesus Christ by incarnation.

But an examination of BDAG’s biblical citations for definition #5a reveals that none of them (excluding the disputed John 1:14) carries any meaning that resembles trinitarian incarnation. Examples include: the disciples will “become fishers of men” (Mk.1:17); Judas “became a traitor” (Lk.6:16); Herod and Pilate “became friends” (Lk.23:12); Abraham would “become the father of many nations” (Rom.4:18); Christ “became a high priest” (Heb.5:5); the stone rejected by the builders “became the cornerstone” (Mt.21:42). Not even John 1:12 (“the right to become children of God”) or Mt.5:45 (“that you may become sons of your Father who is in heaven”) has any meaning that resembles trinitarian incarnation. In all these cases, the people remain the same people, with no loss or gain of humanity, with no loss or gain of deity; there is, however, a new status in their relationship with fellow human beings or with God.

Not even Mt.4:3 (“command these stones to become bread”) can be used to prove the incarnational view of John 1:14, not only because Mt.4:3 deals with inanimate objects (bread and stones), but also because Mt.4:3 *stands alone* among all the biblical citations in definition #5a in carrying the sense of material transformation. Mt.4:3 therefore does not represent any primary meaning of *ginomai* but only a rare meaning. But why pick a rare meaning over all the other possible meanings? One would do this only if he or she is already presupposing the incarnational view of John 1:14. This kind of circular reasoning is called “begging the question” (that is,

the fallacy of assuming the conclusion of an argument that is being used to prove the conclusion). In any case, the incarnational view of John 1:14 is untenable because this verse says in the original Greek text that the Word tabernacled “in us”—not among us.

In the end, the only biblical citation remaining in BDAG definition #5a that “supports” the incarnational view of John 1:14 is John 1:14 itself! Hence using definition #5a to prove the incarnational view of John 1:14 would be an exercise in circular reasoning. It would be tautologous to say that the meaning of John 1:14 is determined by the meaning of John 1:14.

Ultimately the intended meaning of *ginomai* in John 1:14 is governed by the meaning of the whole verse. The declaration that “the Word became flesh” brings out the concept of “living in flesh” or “living in humanity” in one sense or another. God now lives and tabernacles “in us”—in God’s people who make up the temple of God—such that we, and preeminently Jesus Christ, are “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph.3:19).

John 1:1 and 1:14 are distorted in similar ways

Here I use “distort” in the basic sense of changing the meaning of a word, knowingly or unknowingly, without suggesting any intent to deceive. (The word “distort” fundamentally has the neutral meaning of physical deformation.) Distortion of biblical words usually stems from deep-rooted beliefs, not deliberate deception. Most Christians, whether trinitarian or non-trinitarian, write out of good intentions.

Much insight is gained when we compare the trinitarian distortion of John 1:14 and the trinitarian distortion of John 1:1. Here are the common features:

- The trinitarian distortion of both verses involves prepositions, *pros* in the case of John 1:1, *en* in the case of John 1:14. In each case, the common and literal meaning of a preposition is being rejected in favor of an obscure or non-existent meaning, in order to safeguard trinitarianism.

- Trinitarians take *pros* in John 1:1 to mean “with” even though “with” is a rare meaning of *pros* (only 2.3% of all instances of *pros* in the New Testament).
- Similarly, trinitarians take the preposition *en* in John 1:14 to mean “among” even though that is a rare meaning of *en* (only 1.5% of all instances of *en* in the New Testament).
- The trinitarian distortion of both verses involves not just prepositions but also phrases containing prepositions: *pros ton theon* in the case of John 1:1, *en hēmin* in the case of John 1:14.
- But none of the 18 instances of *pros ton theon* in the New Testament outside John’s Prologue is ever translated by ESV or NASB as “with God” as in John 1:1, “the Word was with God”.
- Similarly, in John’s writings outside the disputed John 1:14, *en hēmin* always means “in us” and never “among us” without exception. NASB never translates *en hēmin* as “among us” outside the disputed John 1:14.
- Trinitarians distort *pros ton theon* in John 1:1 in order to imply that the Word is a second person who is “with God”. But the original text says that the Word had reference to God, or referred to God, with no implication of a second person.
- Trinitarians distort John 1:14 to say that the Word tabernacled in Jesus Christ, this being an event that happens “among us” (such that we are mere witnesses or “spectators” of the tabernacling) whereas the Greek says that the Word tabernacled “in us” (such that we are the object of the tabernacling, which also involves Jesus).

In conclusion, trinitarianism in John 1:1 and John 1:14 hangs by a thread, surviving by distorting the meaning of Greek prepositional phrases in these two verses.