

# Reflections on "One God, One Church" by John Witcombe

As I've reflected on the ideas expressed in the book "One God, One Church" by John Witcombe, as well as Ken LeBrun's book, "Not a Mystery, Understanding God", I can't shake the feeling that somehow Jesus is being demoted in His status as God. Both authors state that they believe that Jesus is divine, but there is a lot of emphasis placed on texts such as 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:4-6; and 1 Timothy 2:4 that point to the Father as God, while other texts that speak of the Son as God seem to have diminished significance. Examples of the latter include Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 1:23; John 1:1; 1:18 (ESV); 20:28; Philippians 2:5,6; 1 Timothy 3:16; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:3; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20; and Revelation 1:8 (ESV). Jesus is called "the Mighty God", "God over all", "the true God", "the great God", "the Lord God".

I don't find Inspiration making distinctions between the members of the Godhead with respect to their divinity. There are no gradations of divinity where the Father is somehow God in a fuller sense than is the Son. There are many evidences in the Hebrew Scriptures that address the truth that there is only One God, yet this one God is revealed in the unity of three Persons: Father (Isa 63:16;64:8), Son (Isa 9:5,6;Pro 30:4), and the Holy Spirit (Isa 48:16;63:10,14). And in the New Testament we find the same concept of the unity of the Godhead manifested in the plurality of Persons (Matthew 28:19; John 10:30; 11:52; 17:21-23; 1 John 5:7). Reflecting the unity of the Godhead, the church which is made up of a plurality of individuals, is also to be "one" (1 Corinthians 10:17; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14-17; Philippians 2:2; Hebrews 2:11). From these texts it's clear that there is no basis for concluding from the NT use of the word "one" that God the Father is the one and only being in the universe that can rightfully be called God.

The divine name Jehovah, significant of eternal, immutable existence, is ascribed to both the Father and the Son (Isaiah 6:5 cf. John 12:41; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Joel 2:32 cf. Romans 10:13; Isaiah 11:3 cf. Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 8:13-14 cf. 1 Peter 2:7; 1 Peter 2:3; Zechariah 12:1,10 cf. John 19:37).

And Ellen White identified both Father and Son as the one true God:

**"Jehovah is the true God.** Let Him be feared and revered." - E.G. White, *Bible Training School*, January 1, 1908, par. 10

**"Jehovah is the name given to Christ.** 'Behold, God is my salvation,' writes the prophet Isaiah; 'I will trust, and not be afraid; for the Lord JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation.'" - E.G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 3, 1899, par. 18

**"Jehovah, our Father,** and His Son Jesus Christ are alone to be exalted. The knowledge of God is eternal life to those who receive it. His holy banner is to stand above all the greatness of the greatest men, above all the honor and glory of the world." - E.G. White, 13LtMs, Ms 11, 1898, par. 11

It seems clear throughout Scripture and the writings of Ellen White that the attributes of divinity apply equally to each member of the Godhead. Every attribute of the Father is found also in the Son (John 16:15; Colossians 1:19; 2:9).

**"Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore."** - *Review & Herald*, April 15, 1906

**"He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent.** He was above all finite requirements. He was Himself the law in character. ... He is the eternal, self-existent Son, on whom no yoke had come." - 12LtMs, Ms 101, 1897, par. 28

**"The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, powers infinite and omniscient,** receive those who truly enter into covenant relation with God." - Letter 43, 1901

Anti-Trinitarianism certainly represents a threat to the unity of the church, but the solution is not to make a further artificial distinction between the members of the Godhead by elevating one member above another. The great controversy began in heaven with a misunderstanding of the inherent divinity of the Son, and the refusal of Lucifer to submit to Christ's authority as God. Sadly, it seems that anti-Trinitarians are making the same mistake in their own misunderstanding of the nature of the Godhead and by confusing the voluntary submission of the Son to the Father with inherent subordination.

"There had been no change in the position or authority of Christ. Lucifer's envy and misrepresentation and his claims to equality with Christ had made necessary a statement of the true position of the Son of God; but this had been the same from the beginning. Many of the angels were, however, blinded by Lucifer's deceptions." - *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pg 38.1

"He came not to our world to give the obedience of a lesser God to a greater, but as a man to obey God's Holy Law, and in this way He is our example." - *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, pg. 140

I maintain that the source of Godhead confusion stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of the Godhead versus their work. Texts such as those highlighted in the books by John Witcombe and Ken LeBrun's along with texts that describe the Father as having an authoritative role and Christ and the Holy Spirit as having submissive roles represent one pole of truth (e.g. John 13:16; 14:28; 16:13; 17:3; Romans 15:6; 1 Corinthians 15:28; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3,17; 1 Peter 1:3; Revelation 3:12). These passages refer to eternal voluntary functional submission of the Son of God to the Father which became manifest with the creation of angels and unfallen beings and more pronounced at the incarnation and which will continue through eternity. This submission is not based on ontological subordination, but rather ontological equivalence and voluntary submission to authority based on role differentiation. (See <https://theheavenlytrio.com/confusion> for a more thorough study on this principle of headship, submission, and equality in the Godhead.)

The other pole of truth is that Christ is equal to the Father in His being and essence, for He is fully God. This balancing pole helps us to understand that while the Son is subject to the Father in authority, He is equal with the Father in attributes and deity and value and honor. These two balancing poles of truth are, I believe, the key to a proper understanding of the Godhead and in dealing with the unbalanced, speculative views put forth by proponents of anti-Trinitarianism.

Emphasizing the Father's deity over that of the Son or Holy Spirit seems to me to further contribute to the problem, rather than bringing about the balanced understanding that is key to achieving harmony (c.f. the law/gospel debate in the 1888 era which is resolved not in emphasizing the one over the other, but in a perfect synthesis of the two).

Regarding Jesus' reference to "the only true God" in John 17:3, this could not mean that the Father is the only true God to the exclusion of Christ for the following reasons:

1) Christ came to this world to reveal who the Father is. But He could only do this if He Himself is **also** the only true God. Christ, as Mediator, came to reveal the knowledge and character of God, which He could only do if He is also the true God manifested in the flesh (John 14:6-9).

“The existing religion left man without God and without hope in the world. But the Sun of Righteousness shines forth into the midnight darkness of superstition and error, and rolls back the cloud, and presents himself as the one in whom dwelleth **all the fullness of the Godhead bodily**, as the **exact representation of the Father**. This is his message to the world: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.'” - ST June 27, 1892, par. 4

“This is life eternal,' Christ declared, 'that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.' These words mean much. **It is only by knowing Christ that we can know God.**” - ST January 27, 1898, par. 8

2) Christ is identified as God all throughout the Bible. He is the LORD (YWHY), the great "I AM", the fullness of the Godhead bodily, God with us, the only true God (John 8:56; Colossians 2:9; Matthew 1:23; 1 John 5:20). If He is not also the only true God, then either He is a lesser God or He is a false god.

3) Christ is the self-existent, eternally-existent One (the LORD, Yehôvâh - the Self-Existent One), not dependent on any other for existence (Exodus 3:14,15; Isaiah 43:3,11; 45:21; 49:26; Hosea 13:4). When Jesus called Himself the I AM, the Jews tried to kill Him for blasphemy. This is because Jesus had used the words that to the Jews meant the Self-Existent One, which equated to God alone, thus calling Himself God.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.’ (John 8:53-58) Silence fell upon the vast assembly. The name of God, given to Moses to express the idea of **the eternal presence**, had been claimed as His own by this Galilean Rabbi. He had announced Himself to be **the self-existent One**, He who had been promised to Israel, ‘whose goings forth have been from of old, from the days of eternity.’ Micah 5:2, margin.” - E.G. White, Desire of Ages, pg. 469

Inspiration couldn't be any clearer: Jesus is eternal, self-existent, truly God in every sense of the word.

4) Christ is not making a distinction between Himself and the Father, but between the true God and all the false gods of the heathen (c.f. John 1:9; 4:23; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:9). Christ could not on the one hand make a statement about His equality with the Father (John 10:30; 17:21), and then subsequently deny that He Himself is not truly God. The Jews certainly understood Him as affirming His equality with God as they took up stones to punish Him for blasphemy (John 10:31), and they said to Him that they understood Him as affirming that He was God (vs. 33). Notice that whatever is said about the Father applies equally to the Son:

John 5:23 That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

Regarding this quote:

“The Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, is truly God in infinity, but not in personality.” - Ms. 116, 1905, Dec. 19

I believe Ellen White is simply saying that Jesus is a distinct personality from the Father. I think she is saying the same as the following:

"They are one in purpose, in mind, in character, but not in person. It is thus that God and Christ are one." - 8T, 269

Similar to how she makes the same distinctions in personhood between Christ and the Holy Spirit:

"The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, in Christ's name. He personifies Christ, yet is a distinct personality."  
- 20MR, 324

Drawing the conclusion from the Ms. 116, 1905 quote that Jesus is not God in personality is not in harmony with the consensus of EGW's writings. The two pillars of self-interpretation within the inspired text are context and consensus. The consensus of both Scripture and Ellen White on the Godhead issue is three co-eternal, co-equal distinct Persons united in nature, in character, and in purpose.