PFRS Commentary
John 1:1-3
By Tim Warner

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1 In the beginning[1] was the Word[2], and the Word was with God[3], and the Word was God[4].
2 He was in the beginning with God[5].
3 All things were made through Him[6], and without Him nothing was made that was made[7].
(NKJV)

Introduction

The Prologue to John's Gospel was written specifically to refute the emerging heresy of Gnosticism. According to early writers like Irenaeus and Tertullian, Gnosticism can be traced back to Simon Magus, the magician who wanted to buy Peter's power to impart the gifts of the Spirit in Acts 8. John's Gospel and Epistles were written decades later, after this heresy had already begun to spread and seduce many Christians into its apostasy.

Gnosticism's premise was that physical matter is inherently corrupt and evil. The existence of evil in the world was directly traced to the substance of the creation — physical matter. Hence, "salvation" to a Gnostic involved escaping the material creation into a purely "spiritual" existence. Yet, Genesis states that God created everything "good."

Gnostic's like Marcion claimed that the creator god in the Jewish Scriptures was not the supreme God, but a lesser "god." The "god of the Jews" was viewed as mankind's oppressor, first trapping him in a creation made of corrupt matter, and then demanding that he rigidly obey and worship him alone. "Christ," on the other hand, was a pure "spirit" sent by the supreme God (the Father) to show mankind how to escape the physical creation in which they were trapped by the creator "god of the Jews."

This theory drove a necessity to distinguish between the physical man "Jesus" and the "Christ spirit" because the Redeemer could not be "physical" or He too would be corrupt. According to Gnostics, Jesus was not himself the "Christ." Jesus was just a man. The "Christ" was a divine spirit sent by the supreme God to indwell the man Jesus, to proclaim the mysteries of Gnosticism.

John directly challenged Gnosticism in his prologue to his Gospel as well as in his Epistles. John focused on the person of Christ in all his anti-Gnostic teaching. His approach was to claim that the physical person named "Jesus" is Himself the divine "Christ," not merely a man who possessed the "Christ spirit." The man Jesus, whom the disciples saw, touched, and lived with for three years, was Himself the Logos (Word), who was Himself God and who Himself participated in the creation of the material world and everything therein. John's first Epistle begins with a statement about John's own credibility regarding his knowledge of the person of Christ. *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life — the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us — that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the*

Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:1-3). Obviously, the Gnostics could make no such historical claim to having personal knowledge directly from Jesus when He walked this earth. John was essentially saying, *"I knew Him, I saw Him, I handled Him, and I heard what He taught. I am therefore a credible witness to these things, while the Gnostics can make no such claims."*

1. *"In the beginning"*
The opening statement to John's Gospel takes us back to "the beginning." This was clearly meant to parallel the opening statement in Genesis, *"in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."* It is significant that John did not begin his Gospel by saying *"in the beginning was God,"* and then deal with the origin of the Word. There is no hint here or elsewhere in the Bible that there was ever a time when the "Word" did not exist. John takes us back in time to a point before creation, perhaps before time itself, and tells us simply that the Word existed. In essence, John has closed the door to any kind of philosophical speculation regarding the origin of the Word prior to the point he calls *"the beginning."* He existed in *"the beginning,"* before the creation and before all things that God has revealed to us. That is sufficient for John's purpose.

2. *"the Word"*
The Greek term "the Logos" (ο λογος) is a title for Jesus used only by John, (John 1:1,14, 1 John 1:1, 1 John 5:7, Rev. 19:13). Logos implies the One who communicates God's message to man. That is, the *"mediator between God and man"* (1 Tim. 2:5). This idea is clearly stated in verse 18. God, who is beyond our comprehension, unknowable through human senses, perception, or contemplation, has been made known to us through the Logos (cf. John 12:49 & Heb. 1:1-2). That "the Logos" is a title for the preincarnate Christ, and not merely descriptive, is proven by Rev. 19:13.

3. *"and the Word was with God"*
Again, John expands on the Genesis account. That more than one Person was involved in creation is clearly indicated in Genesis. God said, *"let us make man in our image and after our likeness."* The use of plural personal pronouns indicates a plurality of persons were involved, as both the model for man and the creator of man. *"Let us make..."* means more than one Person were involved in creating man. And, *"in our image and after our likeness"* means man was fashioned after this plurality of persons. Yet, Moses continued in the next verse by saying, *"so God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him."* Here Moses used the singular personal pronoun. God created man. And, He did so after His own image (singular). The only logical inference from Moses' statement is that one God is a plurality of persons. John's intent was to identify one of the plural persons, mentioned by Moses, with "the Word."

4. *"and the Word was God"*
This statement unquestionably proves the deity of Christ. It is unambiguous. It was meant by John to sum up the inferences we have already observed from our comparison between John's prologue and the Genesis account. John has already established that the Word was one of the persons implied by Moses' use of the plural personal pronouns. To cement his point, John stated clearly that the Logos (Word) was Theos (God).

Very early in the Christian Faith this concept was assaulted from without, by Gnostics, and also from within the Christian Church by Arius and his followers. Today it is assaulted by modern day Arians — the Jehovah's Witnesses and others. The Jehovah's Witnesses have gone so far as to mistranslate this last statement in order to support their Arian beliefs — that Jesus is not one with Jehovah God, but a sub-deity. Their New World Translation reads, *"and the Word was a god."* Their claimed rationale for inserting the article "a" before God is that "Θεος" (God) in this statement does not have the definite article in Greek, and therefore does not refer to "the God" (Jehovah). The problems with this are enormous.

First, one must assume that there are other gods apart from Jehovah, which the Bible flatly denies (Deut. 4:35,39, Isa. 43:10, Isa. 44:6, Isa. 45:5,22). Secondly, there are plenty of examples in the New Testament where "Θεος" (God) does not have the definite article, yet all are clearly speaking of the one and only true God, YHVH[1]. The use or absence of the definite article in Greek is not the same as English. Nor is there an indefinite article in Greek equivalent to our "a."

When two nouns are in the nominative case, (such as "Word" and "God" in this clause), and where some kind of equivalence is being stated between them by the use of the verb of being (was), the definite article is used with one of the nouns to distinguish the subject (the person spoken about) from the predicate nominative (the person or category they are being identified with). Unless the definite article is used with only one noun, there is no way to tell whether John meant that "Word" was "God," or "God" was "Word," or whether "God" was a subset of "Word" or "Word" was a subset of "God." The distinction between the two in Greek is not indicated by word order, as in English. It is indicated by the use of the definite article.

For example, "President is believer" is not the same thing as "believer is President." The former may be true, but the latter is not true. The former implies that the subject (President) belongs to, or is a subset of the category, "believer." This is established by word order in English, but not in Greek. "Believer is president" is not true because there are many "believers" who are not "President" (the individual to whom the personal pronoun refers). "President" is the subject, and "believer" is the predicate nominative, indicating a larger group to which "President" belongs.

In Greek, this distinction is not based on word order, but by the use of the definite article to identify the subject in the clause. That is, "THE President is believer" would be the English equivalent to the proper Greek syntax. The reverse word order in Greek still means the same thing, ("believer is THE president"). The definite article (the) tells us which of the nouns is the subject. But, if we wrote, "THE president is THE believer," using the definite article with both nouns, we have no way of telling which is the subject and which is the predicate nominative, because in Greek word order makes no such distinction. There is no difference in Greek between "the President is the believer," and "the believer is the President." Nor is there any distinction if neither noun has the definite article.

The subject could be distinguished if one of the nouns is a proper name but not the other. For example, if we said, "George is believer," because "George" is a proper name, and "believer" is not, "George" is easily identified as the subject. However, in the clause, "and the Word was God," neither "Word" nor "God" are proper names, but both are titles. The only way to tell whether John meant "Word was God" or "God was Word" is to identify the subject by the use of the definite article. Hence, John wrote, "the Word [subject] was God [predicate nominative]."

Finally, had John used the definite article before "Θεος" (God), not only could we not distinguish the subject from the predicate nominative, but that would also imply absolute identity and equity between the terms "Word" and "God." That is, the terms would be synonymous. Yet, that is not compatible with the implications of Moses' statements in Genesis that John was clearly expanding. "God" is a plurality of persons. "Word" is not. John's statement is perfectly consistent with this, naming the Word as being God in essence, but not God in totality. John's and Moses' statements indicate that each of the persons of the Godhead are themselves "God," and yet "God" is a term for the unity of persons as well. That is, one God consisting of a plurality of persons, each being "God" individually, and all being "God" collectively.

Contrary to what the Jehovah's Witnesses claim, had John used the definite article before "Θεος" (God), his statement would not be consistent with Trinitarianism, but with Modalism. That is, the "λογος" and the "Θεος" would be identical, merely two titles for precisely the same

person. John's statement rules out both Arianism and Modalism, supporting only a plural God (although not necessarily placing the number of persons at three). He deals only with two of the three in this passage. Consequently, this passage alone cannot be said to prove Trinitarianism. Rather, it proves the basic premise of Trinitarianism, that God is a plural being. It also excludes the other competing theologies of the Godhead, Modalism, Arianism, and Gnosticism. It still remains to be demonstrated that the plural Godhead consists of three persons rather than two or four. This issue is settled in other passages. But, John's purpose in this chapter was not to define "God," but to explain the person of Jesus Christ, the "Word" who became flesh (vs. 14).

5. *"He was in the beginning with God"*
Here John continues his commentary on Genesis 1. His point is not to be redundant, simply repeating what he said in verse one. Rather, John wanted to make sure that the reader understood the role of the Logos in the creation account. Hence, he repeats the prepositional phrase, "in the beginning," again referring to the same prepositional phrase that introduces the Torah, Genesis 1:1. The Logos, according to John, was present when God said, "Let us make man in our image and after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).

6. *"All things were made through Him"*
That John has the creation in view is clearly established by verse 3. Everything mentioned in the creation account in Genesis 1 was created "through" the Logos. The preposition, "through," is the Greek word "dia," meaning the channel of an act. That means the Logos was an active and necessary participant in God's work of creation. In Genesis we also see the Spirit explicitly mentioned as having an active part in creation. "*And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters*" (Gen. 1:2).

7. *"without Him nothing was made that was made"*
This last sentence leaves no room to suppose that the Logos participated in only some of the creation. John's purpose in making this point clear was to refute the Gnostics. Gnosticism taught that matter was inherently evil. Only "spirit" was good. Consequently, "salvation" for a Gnostic was escaping the material creation and reaching another realm of pure spirit. To explain the creation, Gnostics claimed that the Creator god was an inferior being, not the Father that Jesus proclaimed, who was the supreme God. Since they viewed the creation as corrupt, it had to have been created by a less than perfect god. The Logos, in Gnosticism, was the Messenger of the supreme God, sent to earth to show mankind how to escape the corrupt physical creation of the inferior god of the Jews.

By John's bold statement in verse 3, Gnosticism was soundly refuted by one of the Apostles who knew Jesus personally. John had just established that the Logos was with God and was God "in the beginning" (before creation). Now he established that the same "Logos" was the agent for the creation of the physical world and absolutely everything in it made of matter. The logical conclusion is that either physical matter was NOT inherently corrupt, or else the Logos Himself must have been corrupt. Gnosticism was soundly refuted with this statement because the alleged dichotomy between the "creator" god and the Logos (Christ) has been demolished by John. The physical creation was therefore "good" when it was created by the Logos.

Notes:
1. There are four other examples of "Θεος" without the article in the first chapter of John, vss. 6,12,13, & 18. In each of these it is apparent from the context that the Father is in view. The New World Translation does not translate "Θεος" in these verses as "a god."