

# Understanding 1 Corinthians 8:6

By Terry Hill

But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. 1 Corinthians 8:6 KJV

There are many today who use this text of scripture to promote the belief that (a) Christ is not God, (b) Christ should not be referred to as God, (c) Christ is not, in any way, truly God, and (d) the Father is the only person who should be called God. All of these views come under the heading of *Unitarian* although there are many variations of belief that come under this same heading.

In order to understand what the apostle Paul meant by the above statement, we first need to understand the context in which he used it. When endeavouring to understand any statement, whether it is in scripture or anywhere else, context is always of the highest importance.

This was not Paul's first letter to the believers at Corinth. He had written to them previously (1 Corinthians 5:9). The apostle was the founder of the church at Corinth. This was probably during the early AD 50's. This letter (1 Corinthians) was possibly written mid to late AD 50's.

From reading Paul's letter, it is evident that he had become aware of numerous problems within the church. One of these problems concerned the eating of food sacrificed to idols. We need to take note of this problem. It is the direct context of 1 Corinthians 8:6. He prefaced his words by saying

“Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.” 1 Corinthians 8:1-5

The first century Greeks had numerous 'gods'. These were represented by many idols. It was common practice to offer sacrifices to them. Some of the food, sacrificed in the temples to these idols, would later be sold in the markets and eaten for the family meal. It would also be eaten at other social gatherings. This 'sacrificed food' therefore, to the Christian, was not just a religious problem. It was a social problem. The question is: Was it right to buy it and eat it, and was it right to eat it at a social gathering? This was the major part of the problem that Paul was addressing.

Paul knew that these 'gods' were not real. This is why he was making it clear that to the Christian, “there is none other God but one”. It is quite possible he was thinking in terms of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4). It was then that he wrote

“But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” 1 Corinthians 8:6 KJV

It must be remembered here that when Paul wrote this statement, he did so in the backdrop of the problem of whether it was right for Christians to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. He was not addressing himself to the issue of the Godhead. He completely avoided such a discussion.

So what can we learn from his statement?

From this, we can see that “the Father” is the source of “all things”, and that *through* Christ came “all things”. This though, apart from telling us that that the Father is the great source of all, does not tell us anything about the relationship of the persons of the Godhead. It talks of “God, the Father” and the one “Lord Jesus Christ”, whom the readers would probably have reasoned to be the man Christ Jesus, but it tells us nothing else. Certainly it says nothing about the pre-existence of Christ. This was the same as when Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy

“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;” 1 Timothy 2:5

This verse neither denies nor confirms the divinity of Christ. It simply reveals that God the Father and Christ are two distinct personalities. Notice it says, “the man” Christ Jesus.

In itself, the above verse, like 1 Corinthians 8:6, tells us nothing about the pre-existent relationship of Christ to the Father. It tells us nothing either of whether Christ, in His pre-existence, was God – or, if He was God, how this could be. In both 1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5, Paul avoided all such discussion.

It needs to be remembered here that at that time (mid to late AD 50’s), there was no New Testament. The only ‘Bible’ that people then possessed, was that which we now call the Old Testament. In fact at this time, much of Paul’s writings had not been written, and even that which he had written, was far from universally known. This is why the things he wrote in this epistle (1 Corinthians), could not be, as they can be today, compared with everything else he had written or would write.

There is also something else in 1 Corinthians 8:6 that needs to be considered. This is the Greek construction of the text.

There is nothing in this verse that demands where the comma should be placed. In fact there is nothing to suggest that a comma is even necessary. This verse therefore, could be translated into English a number of different ways. One of these could be

“But to us there is but one God the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” 1 Corinthians 8:6

Translated this way, this verse reads quite intelligibly. It tells us there is “one God the Father” and “one Lord Jesus Christ”. This phrase, or similar, was often used by Paul (see Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:1, 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, 6:23, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4 and Philemon 3 etc.)

A few years ago, in answer to my request regarding the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 8:6, I received this reply from someone who is Greek, and who also researches ancient Greek

“My answer to your question is that, yes, the original Greek sentence is every bit as ambiguous as its English translation. True, the original way in which these texts were written was lacking all punctuation although some basic punctuation, such as the use of spaces and full stops, had already been in use by the Greek grammarians in Alexandria, Egypt, by the time Paul wrote his epistles. This practice though was not yet widespread. Therefore, merely on the basis of reading this verse, *we cannot, in*

*this case, know* what original interpretation was intended by its author. It could be this way or that way — the evidence is insufficient for a definite conclusion. If the KJV has inserted a comma, I would say that this is an arbitrary decision.

The Greek Orthodox version that I have, and use, which comes from the Patriarchate of Constantinople and originates from a different codex than the KJV, does not have a comma after “God”. But, of course, this doesn’t mean much because after the first few centuries AD every version has to make a decision there, one way or another: either there will be a comma or not, there is no alternative; so either one interpretation will be favored or another. The point is, we cannot know just by looking at the original text.”  
*(Harry Foundalis, Website, [www.foundalis.com/lan/grkask.htm](http://www.foundalis.com/lan/grkask.htm) Email to Terry Hill. 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017)*

So what can be concluded about 1 Corinthians 8:6?

Like 1 Timothy 2:5, it tells us that God and Christ are two distinct personalities. It tells us nothing though about the pre-existent identity of Christ therefore no attempt should be made to use it as such. Having said that, today we need to consider many New Testament scriptures that do reveal this information. Collectively, these texts tell us, as Paul summarised here

“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: **God was manifest in the flesh**, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.” 1 Timothy 3:16

The same author also wrote to the believers at Colossae

“For in him dwelleth **all the fulness of the Godhead bodily**.” Colossians 2:9

Matthew, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote of the miracle of the incarnation

“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, **God with us**.” Matthew 1:23

Wonder of wonders. Jesus Christ, the mighty God, yet a helpless babe. This condescension, on the part of our God, remains unequalled.

## **Conclusion**

1 Corinthians 8:6 does not prove that Christ is not God, neither does it prove that Christ should not be referred to as God. It does not prove either that Christ is not, in any way, truly God, neither does it prove that the Father is the only person who should be called God. The relationship of Christ to God can only be established by comparing all the texts of Scripture that deal with this subject.

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First published 29<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Last edited 18<sup>th</sup> January 2021

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