

## John 17:5 — a Trap for the Unwary Bible Reader

This verse is very frequently a weapon of Trinitarians against the pure monotheism of Jesus and the apostolic Church. In it Jesus said,

“Now, Father, glorify me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”

Many readers take a leap from this saying into the Trinitarian theology which lies several centuries ahead of the time of Jesus. The public has been schooled to believe that Jesus was God the Son, a second member of an eternal Triune God or Trinity. With this conviction that “Jesus is God,” surely John 17:5 provides just the biblical proof Trinitarians need for reassurance. What, however, if minds are made up before the text in John 17:5 is carefully examined in its overall biblical context? Is it a solid fact that Jesus, when he asked for the glory which he “had” before the world was, was asking to regain a glory which he once possessed literally before he was a human being? Jesus did not speak twentieth-century English and we must do him the honor of understanding his language in the context of first-century patterns of thought. If I announce that “I’m mad about my flat,” many of you will automatically assume that I am upset over my flat tire. There I am, sweating it out on the side of the highway, struggling to make my car driveable once again. But I actually meant no such thing. You might be upset that I had misled you! In fact what I meant in my native British English is that “I’m excited about my apartment.” To be “mad” about something means in English as I learnt (not learned!) it, to be excited about it or very keen on it. But in American English the ideas conveyed are quite different. In the USA one is “angry about a flat tire” — “mad about a flat.”

Many churchgoers have not troubled to understand Jesus in his first-century context, and they read their own inherited version of Jesus’ words into his actual words and Jewish expressions. Certainly in modern English, if someone had glory with the Father before the creation, this might mean that he was personally and consciously there with the Father before Genesis. But Jesus was not speaking your language! He was not necessarily using words just as you do today. Let me suggest to you a better procedure for understanding Jesus and thus for gaining a grasp of his “health-giving words” (1 Tim. 6:3). This is a matter of trying to think like Jesus and be like Jesus. And sometimes your church experience has hindered you rather than helped you.

Because no one has challenged you to consider a more Hebrew way of understanding Jesus, you may find it odd and unacceptable that your long-standing patterns of thinking are going to be called into question.

So let us first apply the golden rule for all Bible study: we must all carefully examine the context of a given verse. Sometimes that context is the whole of the Bible. If Jesus was claiming to be an eternal, uncreated, self-existent “God the Son” who experienced glory alongside the eternal Father from eternity past, Jesus would have been contradicting everything that the Old Testament

had said about the Messiah, son of David, promised as Savior. Not only that — Jesus would have been flatly contradicting the very creed which he had announced only two verses earlier in John 17:3. If John 17:5 means that Jesus was a glorious personal Being, equal in every way to God, then he would be erasing the truth which he had declared so plainly in John 17:3.

Is it reasonable to read John 17:5 in a way which stifles the precious truth of John 17:3? In John 17:3 Jesus gave us a vitally important summary statement about who God was and who Jesus was. And they certainly were not both equally God! Listen carefully to John 17:3 and dig your theological stake deep into this primary text for defining God, i.e. who is God and who is not God. Jesus said, addressing his Father:

“This is what eternal life means: that they may come to know You [Father], the only one who is truly God, and Jesus Christ whom you commissioned.”

It cannot be too difficult to understand that if the Father is “the only” or sole “true God” then no one else is. If this is not true, then language has ceased to have meaning and Scripture is a revelation of nothing!

Jesus, then, was not God. He said it plainly also in Mark 12:29 where again he recited and approved the Jewish unitarian creed, confining God to a single Person. (For further detail, please see our recent book *Jesus Was Not a Trinitarian*, available at 800-347-4261 or [www.focusonthekingdom.org/books.html](http://www.focusonthekingdom.org/books.html)). If Jesus cannot be God, because only the Father is truly God (John 17:3), what did he mean when he asked for glory at the end of his selfless mission in Israel? The plain fact is that in verses 22 and 24 of the very same chapter Jesus defined the glory he referred to as the same glory which was given to you, the reader now living. Yes, you too had that same glory before the world began. But you of course were not personally alive then.

“The glory which You have given me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as we are one” (John 17:22).

Jesus is here praying for Christians who were not yet born. They are to have (in fact they already “had” it in God’s intention and promise) the same glory which Jesus asked for. God, Jesus said, had already given those yet unborn Christians the same glory Jesus was asking for himself. It was glory as promised in God’s plan. Jesus further defined what sort of glory he had in mind:

“Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given me, be with me where I am, so that they may see my [future] glory which You have given me, for You loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

Jesus had been promised that glory from the beginning and he now asked to have it bestowed on him. You can have something, in Jewish ways of thinking, “with God,” meaning that it is

planned and promised for the future. John 17:5 means that Jesus desired that God now give him the glory which he “had,” stored up in God’s plan for the future.

When Paul said that Christians now “have” an eternal body in heaven (2 Cor. 5:1), he meant that we have it in God’s promise. We do not have it in actuality, but we will be given it at the resurrection when Jesus returns. Do you have an eternal body now? Obviously not. But Paul says you “have” it, meaning that you possess it in God’s promise. Jesus said also that if we do not behave humbly as we should, “you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:1). The meaning is obviously that we have no reward stored up with God. In John 17:5 Jesus is asking God to grant him at the end of his ministry the reward of the glory stored up with the Father from before the beginning of creation. Jesus “had” that glory in God’s predetermined Plan. When Jesus was resurrected he received it in reality and he is now the glorified man at the right hand of the Father (1 Tim. 2:5).

If you think Jesus was claiming to be God, just as the Father is God, you are committed to belief in two who are God, and that destroys the rest of the Bible, which thousands and thousands of times declares that God is a single Person, the Father of Jesus, the “only one who is truly God” (John 17:3).