

Is Jesus God in Acts 20.28?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Church fathers cited Acts 20.28 as an important New Testament (NT) text which supported their belief that Jesus was God. Some traditionalist Christians still do; but in recent times, their scholars have abandoned it as a support for Christ's deity.

Luke relates that the Apostle Paul was journeying to Jerusalem when he met with the elders of the church at Ephesus. He said to them, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20.28).

Three problems about Jesus' identity emerge from this verse. Two of them regard a question about the proper Greek text, and the other problem is grammatical.

The first textual problem with Acts 20.28 is that the Greek (Gr.) manuscripts (MSS) do not agree concerning one word, making it a matter of textual criticism. The question is whether the Greek (Gr.) text should have the word *theou* (Gr. for "God") or the word *kuriou* (Gr. for "Lord"). English versions slightly favor *theou*, as the following show:

- "the church of God" (AV, RVmg, RSV, NASB, TEV, JB, NEBmg, NIV, ESV)
- "the church of the Lord" (RV, RSVmg, NASBmg, NEB, NIVmg).

The MS evidence as well as other external witnesses, such as quotations of this verse in patristic writings, is about evenly divided on this matter, as the following show:

- *ten ekklesia tou theou* (Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, also Latin Vulgate)
- *ten ekklesian tou kuriou* (Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Bezae, also some versions).

On the whole, textual critics seem about evenly divided between which of these two, well-attested readings in the MS evidence is to be preferred as authentic. The Committee for the United Bible Societies' (UBS) Greek NT (and many other scholars) tentatively concluded that *theou* is the authentic reading in Acts 20.28. But they gave it a C-rating, indicating that they had "a considerable degree of doubt."

Much of the discussion among textual critics as to whether *theou* or *kuriou* is the authentic word in Acts 20.28 regards reasons why copyists might have changed *theou* to *kuriou* or vice versa. These reasons are actually principles of textual criticism. It is quite likely that a scribe changed the original text of *theou* and substituted *kuriou* because he considered *theou* to be confusing. The obvious reason is that God did not personally possess a physical body consisting of flesh and "blood" whereas the "Lord" Jesus did. On the other hand, it is plausible, but less likely, that a scribe did the opposite—substituting *theou* for *kuriou*—in opposition to the heresy known as "Patripassianism."

One important element of internal evidence supports that "God" is the proper reading in Acts 20.28. The phrase, "the church of God," appears eleven times in Paul's writings whereas "the church of the Lord" does not appear anywhere in the NT.

The second textual problem with Acts 20.28 is whether the word *idiou* ("own") in the Greek text should be treated as an adjective or a noun. That is, is the correct text *tou idiou haimatos* ("his own blood") or *tou haimatos tou idiou* ("the blood of his own;") some would also translate this "his own blood")? The former reading lends itself to calling Jesus "God," and, indeed, it is usually found in MSS that have *theou*.

The UBS' Committee also rendered *tou haimatos tou idiou* ("blood of his own") as the correct text and gave it a B-rating, meaning that the committee had "some degree of

doubt” about the matter. This UBS text for Acts 20.28 therefore translates as follows: “the church of God which he purchased with the blood of his own (One/Son).” This translation, of course, does not call Jesus “God.”

If *theou* is authentic in Acts 20.28, there are two primary translations of this verse and three ways to understand it. These are as follows, with commentary appended:

1. “To shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.” This translation suggests that “God” refers to Jesus since the Father does not have blood. Traditionalist A.W. Wainwright admits that “it is difficult to imagine that the divinity of Christ should have been stated in such a blunt and misleading fashion.” Indeed, this reading led some church fathers to use the even more misleading phrase, “the blood of God.” However, this translation can also be understood to mean that God the Father purchased the church with Jesus’ blood and that this blood belongs to both God the Father and Jesus Christ (cf. John 17.10).
2. “To shepherd the church of God which he purchased with the blood of his own (One/Son).” This rendering in the UBS Greek NT clearly makes “God” refer to the Father, “the blood” belongs to Jesus, and “his own” means the Father’s own Son, viz., Jesus Christ. This translation, which is preferred by a majority of contemporary scholars, does not call Jesus “God.” Rather, it highlights the intimate union between the Father and his Son. The meaning of this translation is encapsulated in a new song sung to Jesus in heaven, “You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5.9).

A very large majority of biblical exegetes in recent decades have treated Acts 20.28 as a passage that does not identify Jesus as God. Even most recent traditionalist commentators, especially those who have written extensively that the NT identifies Jesus as God, have concluded that Acts 20.28 does not do so. For instance, Raymond E. Brown, the preeminent Catholic NT scholar of the latter half of the 20th century, states, “we are by no means certain that this verse calls Jesus God.” Murray Harris deems it “unlikely, although not impossible.” And A.W. Wainwright admits that “this passage cannot be adduced as convincing evidence that Jesus was called God in New Testament times.”