

## Who Is “the True God” in 1 John 5.20?

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Later church fathers unanimously cited 1 John 5.20 as a primary text supporting their belief that Jesus Christ is God. It and the preceding verse reads as follows: “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5.19-20).

The christological debate regarding 1 John 5.20 is about grammar. The question is what the pronoun, “This” (Gr. *houtos*), refers to? If *houtos* refers to the nearest antecedent, as it usually does in English, which is “Jesus Christ,” the verse indirectly calls him “God.” But if *houtos* refers to the subject of the previous clause, which is “Him who is true,” which refers to “God” the Father, the verse does not call Jesus “God.”

The view that *houtos* refers to “Jesus Christ” in 1 John 5.20, so that he is called “the true God,” has dominated biblical scholarship since the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons given to support this view, with corresponding rebuttals, are as follows:

1. Proper grammar requires that *houtos* refers to the immediately preceding antecedent, which is “Jesus Christ.”

Rebuttal: Such usage in English has not been proved for NT Greek. Many Greek grammarian authorities, who surely would tend to favor a grammarian interpretation, identify the referent of *houtos* in 1 John 5.20 as God the Father. Textual critic B.F. Westcott explains, “As far as the grammatical construction of the sentence is concerned the pronoun *houtos* may refer either to ‘Him that is true’ or to ‘Jesus Christ.’ The most natural reference however is to the subject not locally nearest but dominant in the mind of the apostle ... This is obviously ‘He that is true,’ further described by the addition of ‘His Son.’ Thus the pronoun gathers up the revelation indicated in the words which precede ... [so] to know God as Father is eternal life.”

2. No one would be so repetitive, calling the Father “true” three times in a short space.

Rebuttal: Repetition is this author’s style. Yet the author is not repeating himself a third time but identifying his vague expression—“the true One”—as “the true God.” And it is unlikely that in a single verse an author would refer twice to the Father as “true” and then switch to calling Jesus Christ “true” without explication.

3. The expression “eternal life” must refer to Jesus Christ, making Him “the true God,” because Jesus Christ is called “life” in 1 John 1.1-2 (also John 11.25; 14.6).

Rebuttal: But the prologue of 1 John shows clearly that eternal life originates only “with the Father, and was manifested unto us” through “His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1.2-3; cf. 5.11). Therefore, God is the ultimate source of eternal life for all, including even for Jesus according to his own words (John 5.26; 6.57).

In the last two centuries, many New Testament (NT) scholars have treated *houtos* in 1 John 5.20 as referring to God the Father for the following reasons:

1. In vv. 19-20, the author clearly distinguishes “God” and “the Son of God,” thus identifying “God” as the Father and Jesus Christ as “the Son of God.” In doing so, he establishes that subsequently writing “the true God” must refer to the Father.

2. While the NT calls both the Father and Jesus “true,” in accordance with the Old Testament (OT) and Judaism, it only calls the Father “the true God.”
3. Paul calls the Father “a living and true God” while also distinguishing him from “His Son” (1 Thessalonians 1.9-10).
4. If *houtos* refers to the nearest antecedent in 1 John 2.22 and 2 John 7, it identifies Jesus as “(the deceiver and) the antichrist.”
5. The warning in 1 John 5.21 to avoid “idols” supports that *houtos* in the previous verse refers to God (the Father) because Jews often contrast God and idols.
6. Since the author writes in 1 John 4.12, “No one has seen God at any time” (cf. John 6.46), it would seem contradictory to soon write that Jesus is “God.”
7. The author interchanges “God” and “the Father,” making them synonymous, and juxtapositions “God” and “the/His Son,” distinguishing them (1 John 4.9-10, 14-15; 5.9-11).
8. The Johannine Jesus prays to “the Father,” calling him “the only true God” (John 17.1, 3).
9. The second sentence in 1 John 5.20 is a summary of its first sentence.

C.H. Dodd adopted the view that 1 John 5.20 does not identify Jesus Christ as God. He explains, “The writer is gathering together in his mind all that he has been saying about God ... and *this*, he adds *is the real God*,... is eternal life.”

Murray Harris, a traditionalist and an authority on NT Greek, examines this question about 1 John 5.20 quite thoroughly and concludes, “Although it is certainly possible that *houtos* refers back to Jesus Christ, several converging lines of evidence point to “the true one,” God the Father, as the probable antecedent. This position, *houtos* = God, is held by many commentators, authors of general studies, and, significantly, by those grammarians who express an opinion on the matter.” And Harris cites several such scholars.

Yet scholarly opinion is about evenly divided on whether *houtos* in 1 John 5.20 refers to Jesus Christ or God the Father. A few notable commentators think the question is irresolvable. William Barclay says of the matter, “It is hardly possible to be certain ... the doubt is such that we could not base any firm argument on the passage.”

All arguments considered, it seems doubtful that the author of 1 John 5.20 intended to call Jesus Christ “the true God,” especially with no explanation.