

2011

John 8:42 and the Trinity (The President's Desk)

Stephen Bauer
Southern Adventist University

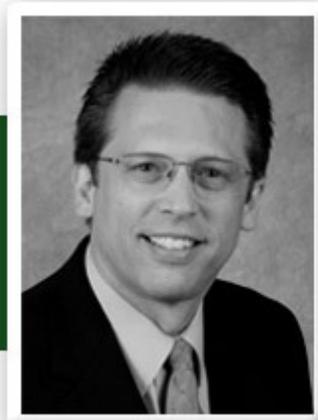
Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bauer, Stephen (2011) "John 8:42 and the Trinity (The President's Desk)," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol16/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Adventist Theological Society at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspective Digest by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.



The President's

DESK

Stephen Bauer

John 8:42 and the Trinity

When students of Scripture adopt a theological idea contrary to mainstream understanding, they sometimes invest texts with novel interpretations. These often strain the simple meaning of the text to lay claims to biblical support for their unique beliefs.

Such is the case with some anti-Trinitarians. In their view, Jesus “proceeded out” of the Father’s essential being prior to any divine act of creation. Their position can be illustrated to some degree by observing that as a clone is preceded by the parent cell, so the Son is preceded temporally by the Father. The essential nature of the Son is thus derived from the Father. The process of the Son literally coming out of the Father into a separate, personal existence is equated with the idea of being “begotten.” In their parlance, then, Jesus was begotten, but not created or made. Thus, even back in eternity, Christ was quite literally God’s Son.

One text that is used to support these claims is John 8:42. It reads: “Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for *I came from God* and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me’” (John 8:42, ESV, italics)

supplied).¹ In English, the key phrase is “came from God.” In the Greek text, this phrase is comprised of the preposition *ek*, used in conjunction with the genitive form of the noun for God and a verb for departing. This phrase is interpreted by some as Jesus’ statement that, back in eternity, He very literally came out of the Father’s being. Hence, they say, who can argue with Jesus’ teaching about Himself?

While it is true that this interpretation may be one possible way to understand the text, the Greek phrase can have more than one possible meaning. According to Greek grammars, though *ek* has varying nuances, the core meaning is driven by the idea of separation from something. This word can connote either coming out from inside something (like exiting a city) but more often expresses separation, increasing the distance between one thing and another. How, then, to deduce which nuance John intended? The context of John 8 provides several reasons for rejecting the anti-Trinitarian interpretation of verse 42.

John 8 opens with the confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders over the woman caught in adultery. The rest of the chapter continues, recording an ongoing debate that appears to have been launched by the incident with the adulteress. Jesus claims to be the light of the world (8:12), then challenges the Pharisees that they do not know where He came from or where He is going (vs.14). Jesus reiterates and expands this point: He was “sent” (*apostello*) by the Father (vs. 18), will go where the Jewish leaders cannot go (vss. 21, 22), and is from above while they are from the world below (vs. 23).

Being sent by the Father controls the understanding of what Christ is describing here. *Apóstello* implies being sent on some kind of mission. With the context clearly indicating that Christ’s statements focus on His earthly mission, this statement about coming “from God” (vs. 42) seems best understood as a further

comment about that mission. Hence, it is not describing an event prior to Earth's creation back somewhere in the annals of eternity, but is describing Christ's incarnational entrance into this world. As such, then, though the Greek grammar may be capable of supporting the anti-Trinitarian assertion, the context makes it clear that the text is not discussing some kind of begetting of Christ in eternity. It is, rather, describing His incarnation into human existence and earthly life. This conclusion is bolstered by the fact that we find the same elements and focus in John 6.

In John 6:38, Jesus states that He came down from heaven (*apo*). Three verses later, "the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven'" (vs. 41), and they repeat this phrasing again in verse 42. It is interesting that the Jews restate Christ's use of the preposition *apo* with the same grammatical construction found in John 8:42, namely *ek* in conjunction with a genitive noun form, in this case "'heaven.'"

Jesus uses spatial language describing His spatial separation from heaven in order to come to earth. By rephrasing *apo* with *ek*, the Jewish leaders show that *ek* is being used in the same way, namely geographical movement and distancing from something. Jesus clearly ties His separation from the Father to His coming to this earth. As in John 8, this passage makes no statement about some kind of emergence from the Father's being prior to the creation of the universe. Additional comments of Jesus further bolster this point.

As we have seen, Jesus said He came out (*exerchomai*)² from (*ek*) God (8:42), while in John 16:27, 28, He twice says He came (*exerchomai*) from (*para*) God and from (*para*) the Father. *Para* fundamentally points to being spatially beside something or someone; *exerchomai* is to leave or depart a place. Thus, in John 16, Christ uses spatial language to describe His coming from the

Father to earth in His incarnational form, but in so doing, He creates a parallelism to the *ek* clause in John 8:42, much as the Jews did in John 6.

Christ's parallel statement to that of the Jews provides yet another reason to conclude that John 8:42, which is clearly spatial in nature and that the act of departing from the Father is, again, pointing to His incarnation and mission on the earth. The fact that Jesus mentions coming from the Father to the world, while announcing an imminent departure from the earth to return to His Father (16:28) clinches the point. Jesus is not describing a primordial event back in eternity.

Further justification that "coming out from" the Father is referencing Christ's coming to earth in incarnate form comes from Jesus' vocabulary used in the promise that He was about to leave and return to (*pros*) God. *Pros* is likewise geographic language, signifying direction (toward) or proximity to (near) something. Hence Jesus says He came away from (*para*) God and is going back to (*pros*) God. The symmetry of Jesus' statement is clearly based on a difference of spatial position between heaven—where God is—and earth, to which Christ came. Thus, Jesus' use of positional language in John 16 strongly suggests that John 8:42 is to be understood the same way: as describing a spatial movement of Christ from His pre-incarnation position beside the Father in Heaven, to His incarnational position with us on earth. The text says nothing about events in eternity past, and thus the anti-Trinitarian exposition of John 8:42 strains common-sense interpretation and the context.

Some anti-Trinitarians might object to this analysis by noting that there is one use of *exerchomai* that is clearly related to begetting: Hebrews 7:5. Hence, they might argue that *exerchomai* in John 8:42 should be also understood this way.

Such an assertion, however, cannot withstand scrutiny. This is because the text in question clearly uses *exerchomai* in a

genealogical context, which is shown by its attachment to “loins”: the Levites come out of the loins of Abraham. But John 6, 8, and 16 give no such evidence of a genealogical intent or use. Rather, multiple evidences point, not to a genealogical context, but to a spatial motif. Jesus relocates from heaven and God to earth and humankind, eventually to return to heaven and God. Thus, there is no evidence in John 8 or its context to support the idea that Jesus was begotten back in eternity. John’s record addresses only the earthly mission of Jesus and His coming from the Father to us in the incarnation.

It seems evident that the context of John 6, 8, and 16 is not agreeable to the anti-Trinitarian position. There seems to be great danger in ignoring the obvious to grasp at relatively minor points in the text to justify one’s view. This approach to the text diminishes biblical authority, leaving the impression that one can play games with the text to make it say what one wishes. At some point in that process, human interpreters supersede Scripture in authority. This should remind us of the importance of being careful to see what is in the text and let the text calibrate our perceptions and desires, instead of reading our desires and perceptions into the text.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this column are from the English Standard Version.
2. The actual Greek word in the text is a form of *exelthon*. *Exelthon*, however, is a second-aorist form of *exerchomai*. Second aorist forms change the spelling of the stem, often with no resemblance to the main verb stem. Hence, *exelthon* is a form of *exerchomai*. The prefix, *ex* (from *ek*) remains unchanged between forms.