

GRANVILLE SHARP AND THE DEITY OF CHRIST

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A name often associated with grammatical arguments in support of the deity of Christ is that of Granville Sharp. Sharp was born in 1735 in Durham, England. Both his father and grandfather were clergymen in the Church of England; however, he declined to take ecclesiastical orders. Instead, he first worked as an apprentice to a linen trader, then studied law for a time, and finally obtained a position as a clerk in the ordinance office in London. Sharp is most well known for his struggle to liberate slaves in England. It was largely through his efforts that the English outlawed slavery in 1772.

Sharp also took up the cause of the American colonies. In 1774 he published *A Declaration of the People's Natural Right to a Share in the Legislature*. He resigned his post in the ordinance department in July of 1776 rather than assist in dispatching war material to the British troops fighting the colonists. Sharp was well known in America, corresponding with men like Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams. He was eventually awarded honorary degrees by a number of American colleges, including Harvard and William and Mary.

Sharp was involved in a number of Christian causes. In 1804 he took a prominent part in founding the British and Foreign Bible Society, and in 1808 he established the Society for the Conversion of the Jews. During his leisure time, Sharp taught himself Greek and Hebrew and became a proficient linguist. With the rise of Unitarianism, he diligently studied the Scriptures in order to defend the deity of Christ. The culmination was his publication in 1798 of a small volume entitled, *Remarks on the Definite Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament, Containing Many New Proofs of the Divinity of Christ, from Passages Which Are Wrongly Translated in the Common English Version*. In this work Sharp presents six rules related to the use of the article in Greek, but it is the first of these that has become known as the Granville Sharp rule because of its importance in several Scripture texts dealing with the deity of Christ. Briefly, the rule states: If two or more nouns (or participles or adjectives, used as nouns) are joined by “and” (*kai*) and the article precedes only the first noun, then the other noun(s) refers to the same person. As Sharp himself phrased it: “the second noun...denotes a farther description of the first-named person.” However, as Sharp carefully observed, in order for the rule to be valid, the nouns cannot be plural, cannot be impersonal nouns (e.g., love, righteousness), and cannot be proper names (e.g., Jesus).

There are about eighty constructions in the New Testament that satisfy the requirements of Sharp's rule. For example, in Hebrews 3:1 we read of “Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (NASB). The words “the Apostle and High Priest” fit the requirements of the Granville Sharp rule—two nouns (“Apostle” and “High Priest”) joined by “and,” with the article (“the”) preceding only the first noun. Thus, in this case, “Apostle” and “High Priest” refer to the same person—Jesus. In 1 Peter 1:3 we read: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The words “the God and Father” also constitute a Granville Sharp construction. “God” and “Father” refer to the same person.

The Granville Sharp rule has not infrequently been misused by those who have failed to observe the requirement that the nouns involved cannot be plural, impersonal, or proper names. In discussions of Ephesians 4:11, one regularly discovers appeals to Sharp's rule. In that text Paul says that at the ascension of Christ “He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers” (NASB). We are commonly told that the

final words, “pastors and teachers,” are a Granville Sharp construction, meaning that “pastors and teachers” have reference to one gift, that Paul has one group in view—the pastor-teachers. But, as we have noted, because these nouns are plural, they do not meet the conditions for Sharp’s rule. Though it is possible that Paul only has only one gift in view, grammatically, this is unlikely. There is no other example of this construction in the New Testament in which one group is in view. More likely, Paul has in view two different groups that are, nevertheless, related. That is, pastors and teachers represent two different groups that are somehow related. The grammar suggests that in Ephesians 4:11 the first group (pastors) is a subset of the second (teachers). This kind of construction is quite common in English. For instance, in the phrase, “The deaf and handicapped people of our city,” the first group (deaf) is a subset of the second (handicapped). In other words, all deaf people are handicapped, but not all handicapped people are deaf. “Handicapped” is a larger group, encompassing “the deaf.” In the same way, “teachers” is the larger group, encompassing “pastors.” But, still, “pastors” and “teachers” are two distinct gifts. The implication of Paul’s grammar in Ephesians 4:11 is that all pastors should be teachers though not all teachers are pastors. A better translation of Paul’s language might be, “pastors and other teachers.”

The Granville Sharp rule does have important implications for the deity of Christ. There are two texts bearing on the question that do, in fact, conform to the parameters of the rule. The first is Titus 2:13: “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (NASB). According to Sharp’s rule, “God” and “Savior” are the same person; and, of course, that person is identified as Christ Jesus. The King James Version, which was translated long before Sharp’s rule was known, regrettably, is probably not quite as clear on this point (“glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ”). The second verse related to the deity of Christ is 2 Peter 1:1: “Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (NASB). Again, “God” and “Savior” are the same person—Jesus Christ. The King James translation, “the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ,” does not as clearly indicate that only one person is in view.

The rule that Granville Sharp formulated two hundred years ago has never been shown to be invalid in the New Testament. We can say without hesitation and with the greatest confidence that Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1 identify Christ as God and thus establish the deity of our Savior with grammatical certainty.