

The Sonship of Christ

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THE Bible explicitly and unequivocally teaches that Jesus Christ is eternal God. About that there can be no debate. Scripture is replete with passages that conclusively establish our Lord's deity and eternality (John 1:1, 8:58, 10:30, 20:28; Philippians 2:6; Colossians 2:9; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1; Hebrews 1:8; 1 John 5:20). Those beliefs are foundational to the doctrine of the triune Godhead as understood by the Apostles and all succeeding generations of orthodox theologians.

I affirm those essential truths, as does every true Christian. I believe in the Trinity, the immutability of the Godhead, and the absolute deity and eternal preexistence of Christ.

There should be no question where I stand on those issues. I have labored over the years to make my teaching as clear and consistent as humanly possible. But in recent months a few vocal critics have raised doubts about my orthodoxy, based on written statements I made about the sonship of Christ in my New Testament commentary series. Some of these critics seem to imply that my position is incompatible with the doctrine of Christ's deity.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Here is what I have written on the issue:

The Bible nowhere speaks of the eternal sonship of Christ. When His eternity is spoken of in Hebrews 1:8, God says to the Son, "*Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.*" When talking about Christ's eternity, the title "*God*" is used; only when taking about His incarnation is He called "*Son*". . . . Christ was not (called) Son until His incarnation. Before that He was eternal God. It is therefore incorrect to say the Lord Jesus Christ is eternally inferior to God because He goes under the title of Son. He is no "eternal son" always subservient to God, always less than God, always under God. Sonship is an analogy

to help us understand Christ's essential relationship and willing submission to the Father for the sake of our redemption. As already mentioned, the today of (Hebrews 1:5) shows that His sonship began in a point of time, not in eternity. His life as Son began in this world.¹

(Jesus) was not by nature eternally subordinate to God the Father but was equal to Him, yet He willingly submitted Himself to the Father during His incarnation, as an obedient son does to an earthly father. It seems that Jesus had not been eternally subject to the Father but was subject only during the time of His humanity. Paul makes that fact clear when he refers to the kenosis (emptying): "*Although He existed in the form of God, (He) did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men*" (Philippians 2:6-7). Jesus is eternally "*the radiance of (God's) glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power*" (Hebrews 1:3).

Some 900 years before Jesus was born God prophesied, "*I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me*" (Hebrews 1:5; 2 Samuel 7:14), indicating that in eternity past, though there were always three persons in the Trinity, there were not yet the roles of Father and Son. Those designations apparently came into being only at the incarnation. In the announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary, the angel Gabriel declared, "*He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God*" (Luke 1:32, 35; emphasis added). **Son** was a new name, never before applied to the second person of the Godhead

except prophetically, as in Psalm 2:7, which is interpreted in Hebrews 1:5-6 as referring to the event of His incarnation. John wrote, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (John 1:1). Only when "*the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us*" as "*the only begotten God*" (John 1:14, 18) did he take on the role and function of **Son**.²

Though the plan was eternal, the title **Son** is reserved as an incarnational term, applied to Jesus in its fullness only after He put on the robe of humanity. He was **Son of God** in the sense of oneness of essence and in the role of dutiful, loving submission to the Father in His self-emptying incarnation. There is, of course, no question that He is eternally God and eternally the second Person of the Godhead, but Paul says **He was declared God's Son** when He was supernaturally conceived in Mary and was **born a descendant of David according to the flesh**. We could say, then, that Christ was the **Son of God** from eternity in expectation and was declared God's **Son** in fulfillment at the incarnation and forever.³

As those citations show, the point I was making *underscored* the deity of Christ and His eternal equality with God. Nothing I have written can legitimately be twisted to suggest that I have in any way been unclear or equivocal about the deity and eternity of Christ.

I'm certainly not proposing any new or radical doctrine. Orthodox theologians have debated for centuries about whether the title "*Son of God*" applied to Christ throughout all eternity or if He formally took it on at His incarnation. The question has no bearing whatever on the issue of Christ's essential nature. And while I realize that my view on this matter is a minority opinion, this is by no means a crucial or fundamental issue.

Frankly, I am surprised that so much has been made of this. I have never made my views on Christ's sonship a major focus in my teaching. Aside from a few brief paragraphs in the commentaries I quoted above, all I have written about the issue has been in response to those who I believed misunderstood my position.

Nor have I sought to stir controversy about the issue. I have no fundamental argument with those who believe Christ bore the title "*Son*" through all eternity. Certainly they affirm the biblical teaching on the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Of course, Jesus *could* be called the Son of God from all eternity in an anticipatory sense—just as He is "*the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the earth*" (Revelation 13:8). The difference is not so much a theological issue as a matter of terminology. In no way should the distinction become a test of orthodoxy. When the Nicene Council called Jesus "eternal Son," they weren't claiming He was eternally called "Son," but affirming that the One called Son is eternal. **That** was the test of orthodoxy! It still is.

What Does Scripture Say?

My views on the sonship of Christ are not motivated by any theological agenda, but rather by a desire to interpret Scripture correctly. It is significant that those who have questioned my orthodoxy on this issue have put forth no biblical argument against what I have taught. They will argue passionately on theological, philosophical, or historical grounds, but almost no one has attempted to prove the doctrine of eternal sonship biblically. The reason for that is clear: no passage in the Old or New Testament states that Christ had the title or the role of "Son" in eternity past. The term "Son" in Scripture is applied to Christ only in connection with His incarnation.

In the Old Testament, for example, whenever Christ is called "Son," the sense of the passage is prophetic, looking

forward to His coming. Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 9:6, both key passages in this discussion, are messianic prophecies. That is true in every context where the title "Son" is applied to Christ in the Old Testament.

The only text ever cited as an exception to this rule is Proverbs 30:4, which clearly has no prophetic connotation: "*Who has ascended into heaven and descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son's name? Surely you know!*" (emphasis added). That verse is hardly conclusive proof of the eternal sonship doctrine. "*What is ...His son's name?*" is a rhetorical question. That is why the translators of the New American Standard Bible did not treat "son" as a proper noun. The words are from Agur, who was speaking to two men and asking if any human being could be compared to God. Has any human ascended to heaven, or gathered the wind, or wrapped up the waters, or created the earth? If so, Agur says, tell me his name--and tell me who his son is, so that I can identify him exactly.

Wherever Christ Himself appears in the Old Testament, He is seen as an envoy to men. In those instances He is referred to as "*the angel of the Lord*" (e.g., Genesis 22:11)--not "Son." No one would suggest that He functions eternally as an angel. Rather, he took that role in those Old Testament appearances. Likewise the term "Son" became applicable to Jesus Christ in His incarnation and not before.

Sometimes the Old Testament records conversations between members of the Trinity (e.g., Psalms 110:1). In such passages, Father-Son titles are never used. Throughout the Old Testament, both members of the Trinity are called "*Jehovah,*" never "*Jehovah-Father*" and "*Jehovah-Son.*"

New Testament passages that speak of the Son as eternal (John 1:14, 18) or being sent into the world (John 3:16; 16:28;

20:21; Galatians 4:4; 1 John 1:1-2; 3:8; 4:10, 14) do not say that He is eternally the Son, but that the One we now know as the Son is eternal and was sent into the world by God. At least two passages refer to the Son in connection with creation (Colossians 1:13-17; Hebrews 1:2). They are simply saying that the One we now know as Son is He who was the Creator God. That is as if someone in my church said, "Our pastor went to Glenoaks Elementary School." I wasn't a pastor back then, but everyone understands the meaning of such a statement. The New Testament speaks in similar terms. Verses that declare the Son's works in eternity past cannot be employed as proof that "Son" is His eternal title.

Those who wish to call Christ the Eternal Son will stumble over Isaiah 9:6, where He is called the Eternal Father: "*For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*" Are there two Fathers? This clearly indicates the anthropomorphic character of such biblical terminology.

What Happened at the Incarnation?

Those who deny the deity of Jesus Christ often suggest that it is impossible for Him to be both God and the Son of God. The key to understanding this important issue is not to ask how Jesus can be both God and the Son of God at the same time, but rather to ask *in what sense* He is the Son of God.

Christ was in no way inferior or subservient to God in eternity past. Yet a father-son relationship suggests several elements of subordination: *generation*--a father gives birth to his son; *submission*--a son obeys his father; and *age*--a son is younger than his father. None of those is applicable to the eternal relationships within the Trinity. The Second member was not "generated" in the sense that He came into being

(John 1:1). He was not in submission to the First but equal in sovereignty and authority (Philippians 2:6). And the Second member is not younger than the First (John 1:2). Thus the terms "Father" and "Son" would have no significance before the incarnation.

Jesus Christ became uniquely submissive to the Father during His incarnation to show us an example of perfect obedience. Philippians 2:5-8 says, "*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made (Greek, ginomai) in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming (ginomai) obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*"

The transition described there occurred when our Lord became a man. Paul wrote, "*Concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh*" (Romans 1:3, KJV). The Greek word for "*was made*" is also *ginomai*, literally "*became*." It denotes a transition from one state to another. Paul certainly isn't saying Jesus was created at His incarnation, but that He who was eternally solely Divine now also had become a human descendant of David. In a similar way, Christ's incarnation meant a transition from being equal with God in function and title to becoming a beloved servant or "Son" while remaining fully God in essence.

Hebrews 1:4 is a crucial verse in considering this issue. Many cults and unorthodox religions deny the deity of Christ on the basis of that verse, which says that Christ has been "*made so much better than the angels*" (KJV). They misunderstand that term "*made*," assuming it means Christ was a created being. Actually it is the same Greek word that Paul used in Romans 1:3 (*ginomai*, "*to become*"). That's why the New American Standard Bible renders Hebrews 1:4,

"Having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they." The verse actually describes the culmination of Christ's incarnation. In becoming a man, He became *lower* than the angels (Hebrews 2:7,9). In the end, however, because of His faithful obedience and the wonderful work He accomplished as a Son, He was exalted above the angels--which is where He had been before He came to earth.

Hebrews 1:5 continues with a quotation from Psalm 2:7, thus interpreting a crucial Old Testament passage for us. The First Person of the Trinity says prophetically to the Second Person, "*Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee.*" Some have suggested that the perfect-tense verb "*have begotten*" in Psalm 2:7 refers back to eternity past, indicating that the Son is eternally generated by the Father. Such a reading does not flow naturally from this verse, but seems contrived to support a presupposed doctrine of eternal sonship. Worse, it creates a major theological problem, requiring an explanation of what "eternal generation" means. Does it mean the Son was created in eternity past? If so, then He is a created god. If not, the concept of eternal generation is meaningless and confusing. As we have noted, cultists who deny Christ's deity often say Jesus' sonship is proof that He is eternally inferior and subservient to God. Unfortunately, orthodox teachers who hold to Christ's eternal Sonship unwittingly echo an element of that false belief when they teach that He was eternally generated by the Father. There is no need to demean Christ with a theory like that if we realize that He simply assumed the title and role of Son when He came into the world at His birth.

The word "*today*" in Hebrews 1:5 seems to settle the question. Clearly, Christ's sonship began at a point in time rather than in eternity past. Luke 2:11 uses the same Greek expression when it says, "*For today... there has been born for you a Savior*" (emphasis added). There was a day in time

when the Second Person of the Trinity was begotten as a Son, and I believe Scripture teaches that this was at His incarnation.

Hebrews 1:5 also quotes 2 Samuel 7:14: "*I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me.*" Note that both verbs are in the future tense. The First Person was looking ahead to a time yet future when He would be in the role of Father and the Second Person would be His Son. That prophecy was fulfilled in the incarnation. The writer of Hebrews was telling His Jewish readers that the incarnate Christ was God in human flesh.

Also, note the future tenses used by the angel who spoke to Mary in Luke 1:32: "*He...will be called the Son of the Most High*" (emphasis added). Similarly, verse 35 says, "*the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God*" (emphasis added). Christ was *not* called the Son of God until He was born. During Christ's incarnation, God said, "*Thou art My beloved Son*" (Luke 3:22). But prior to that, the First Person of the Trinity had never referred to the Second Person in that way.

The title "Son," used uniquely in our Lord's incarnation, was to emphasize His submission--but not that alone. It was also the best term to reveal that Jesus was of the same essence as God, just as any son is one in essence with his father.

Prior to the incarnation there was no need to defend the truth that the Second Person of the Trinity was one in essence with the First. Such defense became necessary only when the Second Person became man and His deity was veiled. "Son" took on great significance then because it affirmed that this man is one with God. Thus Jesus was God's Son not only in the sense of His functioning as an obedient Son in redemption, but also because He has eternally been one in nature with God.

What Happened at the Resurrection?

Psalm 2:7 is quoted three times in the New Testament: once in the aforementioned Hebrews 1:5 passage, once in Hebrews 5:5, and once by the apostle Paul in Acts 13:33. That last verse says, "*God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.'*" Note that Paul didn't relate Psalm 2:7 to the incarnation, but to the resurrection. Was Jesus begotten at His birth or at His resurrection? Scripture seems to say both. Is that a contradiction? No, it is not. Jesus' sonship came into full bloom in His resurrection. He is God's Son not only because He was begotten of a virgin, but also because He was begotten from the dead. Still, His sonship is inextricably bound with His incarnation.

Paul said that Jesus was "*declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead*" (Romans 1:4). In other words, God raised Christ as a tribute to the worthiness of His fulfillment of the duty of Son. That was the ultimate consummation of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 9:6. Christ came as a Son first of all in the virgin birth and was fully and forever declared to be the Son by His resurrection from the dead.

If not "Son," what was Christ's title in eternity past? The apostle John called Him "*the Word.*" He wrote, "*In the beginning (from eternity past) was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,*" but also, "*The Word became flesh*" --indicating Christ's transition from one role to another (John 1:1,14). "*Became*" is from the same Greek word (*ginomai*) that is used five times in the New Testament to speak of Christ's incarnation and change from one role to another. In the beginning, He was called "*the Word.*" He took the title "Son" when He "*became flesh.*"

Perhaps I should emphasize again, however, that at no time in His incarnation and earthly ministry did Christ ever

cease to be God; He was fully and perfectly God while also being fully and completely man. Moreover, from the moment of His incarnation through the rest of eternity, He will maintain both deity and glorified humanity. In the same sense, He is forever the Son of God.

What Does Church History Say?

In studying through church history on this issue, I encountered James Orr's classic work *The Progress of Dogma*, which contains some good insights:

They (the early Greek fathers) were practically agreed in their doctrine of the Logos, and aimed at conserving Christ's entire and perfect divinity. But in carrying back the distinction of Father and Son into the Godhead, they could not decline the obligation of showing how this was reconcilable with monotheism. The task was laid on them of reconstructing their doctrine of God so as to include the distinction of Father and Son--also of Spirit. They had to attempt not only a theology of the Person of Christ, but a theology of the Trinity.⁴

And what was that theology of the Trinity? They believed that God existed eternally in three persons, but that the Father-Son roles came into play as the plan of redemption unfolded. Tertullian wrote, "God is in like manner a Father, and He is also a judge; but He has not always been Father and Judge, merely on the ground of His having always been God. For He could not have been the Father previous to the Son, nor a Judge previous to sin."⁵

Orr goes on to say,
It will be evident that this Logos doctrine of the apologists gave a certain point of support to the later Sabellian and Arian constructions: to the Sabellian, in the idea of the Logos as a modal, not personal,

distinction in the Godhead; and to the Arian, in the admission that there was a time when the Son was not, and that He was produced by an act of the Father's will. Yet nothing could be further from the minds of the apologists than to give support to either of these views. Their doctrine differs diametrically from that of the Arians in that they held the Son to be truly of the Father's essence; and it differs from the Sabellian, in that they affirmed the existence of three distinct *hypostases*, or persons, in the Godhead, antecedent to and since the Creation.⁶

We see the majesty of Jesus Christ on display in His condescension. He stepped down from His exalted state in heaven to fulfill the eternally planned role of a Son. And He did so in order to model perfect humanness, to become a sympathetic high priest, to be tempted like us yet without sin, and to act as a substitute for mankind, bearing the fury of God's justice and holy wrath for us. He is eternally God. But now He is also forever our Great High Priest, touched by the feeling of our infirmities, because He deigned to become a submissive Son who humbled Himself on our behalf--even to the point of death.

Heresy? Hardly. The distinction between those who hold this view and those who want to affirm a doctrine of eternal sonship is not that great. All of us affirm the eternal deity and utter immutability of our blessed Lord. Let's not allow a technical difference to threaten our unity.



ENDNOTES

1. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), pp. 27-28 (emphasis in original).
2. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), pp. 107-108 (emphasis in original).
3. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), p. 15 (emphasis in original).
4. James Orr, *Progress of Dogma* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, n.d.), p. 80.
5. Tertullian, "Against Hermogenes," 3, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 reprint), p. 478.
6. Orr, p. 81.