

The Acknowledgment of the Son of God.

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From time to time we have to consider the overwhelming subject of the Godhead, and two aspects of it relating to the Lord Jesus Christ are constantly coming to the fore, namely His Deity and His Sonship. We state straight away that, concerning God unconditioned and limitless, we know nothing. We are shut up completely to what He has been pleased to reveal of Himself in the holy Scriptures. Then again we must remember our very limited powers of comprehension and that, however advanced we are spiritually, we can now only see partially as in a mirror (I Cor. xiii. 12) which often creates for us a puzzling problem. This being so, we approach the subject in real humility and dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit, Whose main object is to reveal and exalt the Lord Jesus (John xvi. 7, 14).

That the Scriptures reveal the one God in a threefold capacity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is true for all who have eyes to see and minds that are unbiased. In his *Institutes of Theology*, the theologian Dr. Chalmers states that this, when viewed as *separate* propositions is abundantly plain, but it is when we seek to bring them together and attempt their reconciliation that the problems start.

This is certainly true concerning the Deity and Sonship of Christ and the subject has been made increasingly difficult by some of the creeds. If ever there was a need to be accurate and to keep within the bounds of the Word of God it is in respect of the Deity and Sonship of Christ. Once we exceed or detract from what God has written concerning Himself we get into an uncharted ocean and are completely lost. We have dealt with the Deity of Christ in the booklet *The Lord Jesus Christ, God or only man?*. We now wish to consider His Sonship.

There are those who believe in 'the eternal Sonship of Christ', but when one seeks plain Scriptural basis for such doctrine, we find it is conspicuously lacking. We are treated to theological statements such as 'the eternal generations of the Son' (attributed to the early Fathers), but these words are meaningless and no one who uses them ever attempts to explain them. We never find such expressions as 'the eternal Son' or 'the eternal Father' in the Bible, and we should expect them there if they were true. Sonship in relation to human beings is invariably connected with the thought of being begotten and this thought is definitely connected with the Son of God when He became incarnate. He was begotten by the Father through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. The angel who appeared to the virgin Mary said to her:

"The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which *shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God*" (Luke i. 35, and see verse 32).

Note that the Son of God was not His name before His birth, but the future child that was to be born. Through this miraculous birth, He would be called the Son of God. On this point we should carefully note the quotation from II Sam. vii. 14 given in Heb. i. 5:

“ And again, I *will be* to Him a Father, and *He shall be* to Me a Son.”

This was prophetically looking forward to His *future* manifestation in the flesh. It was *at that future* that this context stresses the Father-Son relationship, not in past eternity. The dogmatism of the creeds on this point is amazing, considering there is no clear statement in Scripture that teaches this relationship obtained before the birth of the Lord Jesus. The title “Only begotten” as applied to the Lord Jesus is not only a term of strong endearment, but one expressing unique relationship, of which Isaac’s relationship to Abraham was a type. Isaac was Abraham’s “only begotten son” (Heb. xi. 17), and although he had other children, no other son was begotten in the same wonderful way as the child of promise and of resurrection power. Isaac was truly born ‘according to the Spirit’ (Gal. iv. 29). Similarly the word ‘begotten’ is definitely used of the Son of God as *born in time* and in no other sense is the word ‘only-begotten’ ever used of Him.

Another reference back to Heb. i. should make this clear in its quotations from the Psalms:

“For unto which of the angels said He at any time, Thou art My Son, **THIS DAY** have I begotten Thee?” (Heb. i. 5).

The divine begetting of the Son took place at *a specific moment in time—THIS DAY* and it therefore cannot refer to past eternity. If we ask when THIS DAY occurred, the next quotation from the Psalms tells us:

“And again, when He bringeth in *the First begotten into the world*, He saith, And let all the angels of God *worship Him*” (Heb. i. 6).

The bringing in of the First begotten into the world relates to *His birth*. Furthermore, although the Father-Son relationship commenced here, His Deity is still affirmed, for the angels are bidden to *worship Him* and *worship* in the Scriptures is *the sole prerogative of God*. The worship of any created being, however exalted, is not tolerated. It is noteworthy that Paul in Acts xiii. 33 links the quotation from Psa. ii. 7 (“this day have I begotten Thee”) with the resurrection of Christ. So we see that this divine begetting is linked with the beginning of His human life and reaffirmed at the beginning of His new life in exaltation when He was raised from the dead by the Father.

Theologians, feeling that the word ‘begotten’ implied the posteriority of the Father Who begat the Son, and not seeing that this referred to Him Who was born of a virgin in time, tried to escape the difficulty by asserting that in some way the Deity of the Son was derived or communicated from the Father in past eternity. This leads to serious error, denying His *external existence* in the past *as God* and according Him the position of a lesser Deity than the Father, thus in turn denying the emphatic monotheism of the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation.

The Bible reveals little of the Lord Jesus Christ before Bethlehem. What an opportunity John had when he commenced writing his Gospel to support the view we have just given if it was truth. John did not write:

“In the beginning was *the Son*, and *the Son* was with God, and *the Son* was God”
(John i. 1).

John was careful to avoid this, giving Christ the title of *the Word* before His birth. The title of the Son is found in a variety of associations:

- (1) The Son (Matt. xxviii. 19).
- (2) The Son of God (Matt. iv. 3).
- (3) The Son of David (Matt. ix. 27).
- (4) The Son of Man (Matt. viii. 20).
- (5) The Son of the Highest (Luke i. 32).
- (6) My Beloved Son (Matt. iii. 17).
- (7) His only begotten Son (John iii. 16).
- (8) The Son of His love (literally Col. i. 13).

Every reference in the N.T. to Christ as the Son of Man goes back to Psa. viii. and the great prophetic use of the title there showing us He was truly Man. By comparison with I Cor. xv. 23-28, Heb. ii. 5-9 and Eph. i. 22, 23, we see the Lord as the second Man and the last Adam with all things finally under His feet as enemies, or under His Headship of the universe as redeemed. The Son of God emphasizes His divine origin, teaching us that He had no human father, thus being free from the taint of sin and making it possible for Him to become the Saviour of sinners. The two titles, the Son of Man and the Son of God are complementary. Neither can he held apart from the other.

It is the fusion of His human nature with His Deity that becomes the great problem for our limited understanding:

“ no man knoweth the Son (that is completely), but the Father ” (Matt. xi. 27),

and truly Christ is the secret (mystery) of God (Col. ii. 2 R.V.). The Bible makes no attempt to explain this great secret, but it is there in the Word of truth for our faith and acceptance even if we cannot fully comprehend it. Sometimes the Scriptures stress His Deity and sometimes His humanity as the Sent One, the perfect Servant. The danger comes when anyone stresses one at the expense of the other or ignores one and concentrates solely on the other. This is bound to lead to a defective view of God and is dangerous indeed for the believer.

There are at least two reasons why the Lord Jesus became man. One is that God “Who only hath immortality” cannot die, yet death was the penalty He had prescribed for sin (Gen. ii. 17), and if ever man was to be saved and death abolished, this penalty must be paid. So, in His infinite love, He took upon Himself a sinless human body so that it could be said with truth that the Lord “laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. liii. 6) and that ‘through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil’ (Heb. ii. 14).

Another reason is that sin and death make a yawning chasm between man and God that no created being can ever bridge. It needed someone who was both God and man, to

be able to reach right up to heaven and right down to earth, in other words the perfect mediator or Go-between:

“For there is one God, one Mediator also between God and men, Himself man, Christ Jesus, Who gave Himself a ransom for all” (I Tim. ii. 5, 6, R.V.).

Until the redemptive purpose of the ages is realized and at last a perfect creation embodying heaven and earth comes into existence, the mediatorial work of the Son of God is necessary.

When all that separated God and man is removed and abolished then we read:

“. . . . Behold, the tabernacle (dwelling place) of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God” (Rev. xxi. 3).

At last there is no more need of Temple ritual, priests or mediators, for all barriers between men and God have vanished at this point of time and God’s great redemptive purpose is finally achieved.

When we consider the earthly life and service of Christ in the Scriptures, we link it therefore with His Sonship and His voluntary humiliation in laying aside His will for the will of the Father (John v. 30; vi. 38), so that this will might be permanent in word (John xiv. 24) and work (John xiv. 20; xvii. 4).

The Lord, as it were, suppressed His own Deity. He ‘emptied Himself’ (“made Himself of no reputation” Phil. ii. 7) of everything pertaining to His own will, His own words and His own deeds, and became the “Sent One”, the perfect Servant of the Father. It was from this standpoint and from this only that He said:

“My Father is greater than I” (John xiv. 28).

It was only from the standpoint of *relative position during His earthly life* when He became the Son and the Servant, that this was true. In human affairs a lieutenant is in an inferior position to his captain, though he may be personally and in ability much his superior. We must not confuse *status* with *role and operation*. Oscar Cullman was right when he expressed a similar thought: “to speak of the Son has meaning only in reference to God’s revelatory action, not in reference to God’s Being”. The essence of God was not touched when He Who was the Word and was God (John i. 1) became flesh and took upon Himself a human body. That human Body was never a *substitution* for His Deity, but an *addition to it*. It was “God Who was manifest in the flesh” (I Tim. iii. 16) not just an exalted human being raised up by God.

When we realize that His Sonship commenced at Bethlehem, we can understand why the four Gospels have more reference to this Sonship than the rest of the N.T. Coming to the Prison Epistles we are struck by the fact that there are two references only to Christ as the Son:

“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge (acknowledgment) of the Son of God” (Eph. iv. 13).

“(The Father) Who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. i. 12, R.V.).

When He is the ascended and exalted Son in glory, it is His Headship over all things to the church which is His Body, that is now stressed. There are seven references to this supreme Headship in the prison ministry of Paul (Eph. i. 22; iv. 15; v. 23; Col. i. 18; ii. 10, 19. Also Eph. i. 10 where “gather together in one” is literally “head up again” all things “in heaven and earth”).

The object of all this is ‘that in all things He might have the first place (pre-eminence)’ (Col. i. 18) which will be demonstrated in a future day of triumph manifestly when every being in existence bows the knee to Him and gives Him His rightful place as LORD (Phil. ii. 9-11).

His mediatorial position lasts as long as it is needed, that is as long as sin and imperfection remain in the creation. We come to the furthest point in I Cor. xv. 24-28 when at last a new heaven and earth come into being (Rev. xxi. 3-5), when sin and death are eradicated for ever, and the whole universe is now standing in the power of God Himself and not in the strength or ability of any created being. Then, and not till then, will the Son hand over the kingdom to the Father that GOD (not the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit) may be all in all. Here we have traversed a huge circle:

“In the beginning GOD created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. i. 1).

At the end “GOD all in all” (I Cor. xv. 28).

In between is the long span of time covered by the ages during which God is working out His great redemptive plan to bring all things back to perfection. In order to do this, He has found it necessary to manifest Himself in a threefold way, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Word of God reveals nothing of eternity past or eternity in the future when the ages are completed. We are therefore not in a position to say that the Trinity existed in past eternity and will do so in the future for evermore. If we keep to what is revealed we shall link the Trinity with the redemptive purpose of God and go no further. This does not touch the eternal Being of God nor alter the glorious fact that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, has wonderfully made Him known to us, “He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father” (John xiv. 9).