

Begotten Without Beginning

The Eternal Sonship of Christ

The doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is an important, biblical, historical truth. It is one that needs to be reaffirmed in our day.

Let us define the issue. The question I seek to answer is, “Is the relationship of Father and Son eternal and essential in the Godhead; or is it temporal, incarnational and pertaining only to the economy of redemption?” I believe the Scriptures teach the former: that the paternal-filial relationship in the Godhead stands from eternity. The Son is eternally the Son. He is eternally begotten, or generated, of the Father. There is no point in eternity in which the Son began to be the Son, and there is no point in eternity in which the Son was not begotten of the Father.

Obviously, our earthly ideas of begetting must be set aside when we consider the eternal existence of the Persons of the Godhead. There is no posteriority; each Person is coeternal. There is no subordination; each Person is coequal. There is no sexual reproduction. Some have jested, “Who was the eternal mother?” But such sophists will soon be asking, “Who was the mother of Adam or the angels?” After all, they too are called sons of God (Luke 3:38; Job 1:6). We creatures want to think of our Creator in terms of our own limitations. But the finite can never fully comprehend the infinite. Eternal concepts are unfathomable for creatures of time. We simply must be content to believe what Scripture says about this admittedly complex subject. The Father and Son and Holy Spirit are co-equal and co-eternal, and at the same time these personal distinctions are sustained.

Why is this subject important?

1. We ought to be faithful to the Scripture in what is revealed to us. Certainly there is much about God that is incomprehensible to us. Furthermore we all have our individual “blind spots” and must be patient with one another. But we must go as far as we can in the knowledge of the Holy.

2. The glory of Christ is a paramount doctrine. If Scripture reveals Him as the eternal Son, then it is detracting from His glory to believe otherwise.

3. The Sonship of Christ is vitally involved with our salvation, as the following verses declare:

- (1) John 3:18 *He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*
- (2) John 6:40 *And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.*
- (3) John 6:69 *And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.*
- (4) John 20:31 *But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*
- (5) Acts 8:37 *And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*
- (6) 1John 4:15 *Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.*

Error concerning His Sonship implies error about salvation altogether.

4. Our whole Christian experience, our whole walk with God, is based on the Trinity (John 16:23-24; 1John 5:5, 13). A lack of clear definition of the Persons in the Godhead will lead to a lack of clarity in our own personal experience.

Though some good men have denied this doctrine, let us endeavor, as Isaac Backus said, to “leave good men and bad men out of the question, and inquire: What saith the Scripture?”

What Scripture Says About Eternal Sonship

1. John 1:14 *And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.* His glory as eternal Logos is same as His glory as only begotten Son. Compare 1John 1:1-3 where three terms are used to speak of the Second Person of the Trinity—"Word, eternal life, Son"—without any apparent distinction.
2. John 1:18 *No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.* Under the title of "Son" He is in the bosom of the Father. That is, He possesses perfect and intimate knowledge of God the Father.
3. Matthew 11:27 *All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.* The knowledge between the Persons as Father and Son is exclusive and is essential to their Being. It is not an acquired knowledge, as is ours by revelation.
4. Hebrews 7:28 *For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore.* God's oath was made to the Son, appointing Him to be the great High Priest. Christ is not the Son because He is the High Priest; rather, He is the High Priest because He is the Son. He is not the Son because He is Mediator; rather, He is Mediator because He is the Son. His eternal glory as the Son qualifies and fits Him for the office.
5. John 17:5 *And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.* Christ's glory as the Son with the Father was His before creation.
6. John 17:24 *Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.* The Fatherly love for the Son pertains to the realm of eternity and is without beginning.
7. Colossians 1:16 *For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him.* In the context, the "him" is the "dear Son" of the "Father" (v. 12-13). Under the designation of "Son" He created all things, including things in heaven. Therefore, His Sonship is not a created relationship, but one of eternal standing.
8. Some verses speak of the **Father** sending the **Son** into the world.
 - (1) John 5:23 *He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father which hath sent him.*
 - (2) 1John 4:14 *And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.* This implies that He was the Son before He was sent. We never read that the Father sent into the world the One who became the Son. We never read that He was given to be the Son. Martha's confession was, *I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world* (John 11:27). He was the Son before He became man.
9. Similarly, we read of **God** sending His **Son** into the world or giving His **Son**.
 - (1) 1John 4:9-10 *God sent his only begotten Son into the world.* The wording here, as elsewhere, points to the Son existing as the Son prior to His arrival into this world.
 - (2) John 3:16 *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.*
10. Again, we read of the **Father** sending our Lord:
 - (1) John 10:36 *Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?* Earlier in this context (v. 30-33), the Jews took His statement of oneness with the Father to be grounds for stoning because *thou, being a man, makest thyself God*. The contrast in the mind of the Jews was clearly between that of humanity and that deity.
 - (2) John 16:28 *I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.*

- (3) John 20:21 *...as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.* Fatherhood necessitates Sonship in the deity. There was a Father already existing as Father who sent Christ. Therefore, there must have been a Son existing as Son before He came into this world. Furthermore, 1Corinthians 8:6 speaks of God's Fatherhood as synonymous with His Godhood, *But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.* The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God and Father of glory (Eph. 1:3, 17). The significance of the many references to God as Father throughout the New Testament cannot be overstated in this discussion of Sonship.
11. Galatians 4:4 *But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.* His being made of a woman did no more make Him to be the Son than did His being made under the law. Consider the parallel construction of John 1:14, *And the Word was made flesh.* Inasmuch as He was the Word before He was made flesh, He was the Son before He was made of a woman. Similarly we read in Romans 8:3 that *God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.* He was the Son before He took human flesh.
 12. 1John 3:8 *...the Son of God was manifested.* Consider the parallel construction of 1Timothy 3:16, *...God was manifest in the flesh,* and 1John 1:2, *...the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us.* In each case the thing said to be manifest existed before its manifestation.
 13. John 11:4 *This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.* The glory of God as God and the glory of the Son as God is one and the same.
 14. Acts 9:20 *And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.* The newly converted Saul of Tarsus preached Christ in His highest glory in terms of Sonship. He was the One who had confronted him, spoken to him and blinded him with His glory while he was en route to Damascus.
 15. Matthew 4:3, 6 *...If [or since] thou be the Son of God...* The devil was seeking to flatter Christ by calling Him by His loftiest name. If it were merely an incarnational name bespeaking humiliation, it would have defeated the devil's purpose to call him "Son of God."
 16. Matthew 28:19 *...baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.* If we understand "Father" and "Holy Spirit" to be eternal Persons in those designations, then it follows that the same is true of the Son. The same order is given in 1John 5:7 *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.* The One who is essentially the "Word" is essentially the "Son."
 17. 1John 5:20 *And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.* The true God is the One who is defined in terms of Fatherhood and Sonship.
 18. Hebrews 5:8 *Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.* His Sonship is spoken of as the height of His glory, not the depth of humiliation in His incarnation. If incarnational Sonship were true, we would expect the verse to read, "Because he was a Son He learned obedience..." But the verse intends a contrast of His glorious Sonship with the depth of His humiliation in incarnational sufferings.
 19. John 5:18 *Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.* It does not say, "making himself inferior to, or subject to, God." That would not have angered the Jews. The Father-Son relationship in the deity is not one of superior-inferior, but rather of **equality**. Christ's Sonship is an essential perfection (i.e. perfection in the very essence of the divine Being, not a mere incarnational, incidental feature).

20. Hebrews 1:8 *But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom.* This quotation from Psalm 45 is the Father speaking to the Son long before His incarnation.
21. Proverbs 8:22-24 *The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth.* Wisdom personified is Christ (1Corinthians 1:30). These verses speak of His being possessed, set up and brought forth from eternity.
22. Proverbs 30:4 *Who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?* Here the Son of God is referred to long before His incarnation. He is spoken of as creating the earth along with the One who must necessarily be considered as His "Father."
23. Micah 5:2 *...whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.* The "goings forth" here most naturally refers to origin or **generation**. It is said to be from **everlasting**, hence the concept of "eternal generation."

Objections to the Doctrine

Objection 1. "What about Luke 1:35, *And the angel answered and said unto 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?*"

Answer: This verse does not say that Christ's incarnation made Him to become the Son of God. Instead, it tells us why He is *called* by that title. Following the method of this objection, we might also say that His resurrection made Him to become the Son, according to Acts 13:33, *God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.* I understand Paul here to refer to the **human** nature of Christ being "begotten" in resurrection from the grave. The other citations of Psalm 2:7 in the New Testament (Hebrews 1:5 *For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?* and Hebrews 5:5 *So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee*) seem to refer to the **divine** nature which was begotten on the eternal "day" or "eternal now." This is the same idea that is in view in the context of Psalm 2:7. Perhaps this same distinction of human and divine natures in the Person of Christ accounts for the phraseology of Isaiah 9:6, *For unto us a child is born [humanity], unto us a son is given [deity].*

Romans 1:4 tells us that by His resurrection He was *declared to be the Son of God*. So did His birth. These earthly acts proved and acknowledged Him to be what He already was, but they did not constitute Him as such.

Objection 2. Some object on the ground that we do not find the terms "eternal Sonship" and "eternal generation" in Scripture. But this argument is only employed when it is convenient. Lack of biblical terminology to define a doctrine does not negate the validity of the doctrine. The terms "trinity," "penal substitution" and "church perpetuity" are not used, but these principles are certainly found in Scripture. While we ought to use Scriptural terminology as much as we can, the use of non-biblical terminology is no solid objection.

Objection 3. Some stumble at the doctrine because they think it implies some inferiority in the Person of Christ. But Sonship in the essential divine relationship does not imply such. The Son and the Spirit are equal in glory to the Father. As to their essence they are eternally self-existent; as to their Persons they are eternally derived—the Son from the Father, and the Spirit from the Father and the Son. There is order in the Trinity, but not inferiority.

In the economy of redemption, the Son did assume a subordinate, submissive role in His state of humiliation and death. But this humbling did not make Him the Son; it made Him a Servant (Philippians 2:7). The concepts of Servant and Son are very distinct.

Concluding Observations

The doctrine of eternal Sonship spares us from confusion in the Trinity. Without Father, Son and Spirit as eternal designations we have no biblical way to differentiate the Persons of the Trinity. What is there to know about the Trinity apart from these designations? Without them we are left with featureless, indistinguishable Persons in their essential glory. The Father could have been the Son or the Spirit, etc. In fact, we could not rightly speak of the “First Person” or “Second Person” or “Third Person.” There would be no identifiable structure in the Trinity at all. If there is any differentiation between the Persons, it must be essential and eternal, not merely economical and temporal.

The doctrine of eternal Sonship is a safeguard against outright denials of the Trinity and the many Christological errors of the cults, such as:

- Arianism, a denial of the full deity of Christ,
- Socinianism, a denial of the pre-existence of Christ altogether,
- Unitarianism, a denial of the Trinity,
- Sabellianism or Modalism, which teaches that there is but one Person manifested in three modes of existence.

The doctrine of eternal Sonship shows forth the glory of the gospel. Without these eternal relations much of the richness of redemption is lost. Instead of a Father giving His only and dearly beloved Son for us, we merely have one undefined Person giving another undefined Person. Does not Romans 8:32 teach otherwise? *He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?* Calling Christ His **own Son** points to the tenderness and intimacy of the relation between the Father and the Son, the amazing love of the Father for us to give us such a One to be our Savior. The Father delivered up His precious Son to unspeakable suffering as our Sacrifice! We read in the parable of the vineyard, concerning the husbandman, *Having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved, he sent him also last unto them* (Mark 12:6). The thought of it grips us and moves us like nothing else can! It fills us with profound wonder and prompts us to intense worship! These paternal and filial designations lie at the very heart of redemption.

The Scripture teaches eternal Fatherhood and Sonship in a divine dimension. Let us hold fast to this revelation for the glory of the triune God and for the preservation of His glorious gospel!