On the Sonship of Jesus Christ

By John Feakes, JF-M-525

The belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God has been axiomatic to the Christian faith from its inception.[1] This conviction is based upon the New Testament record, which repeatedly quotes Jesus as referring to God as his Father (For instance, Matthew 7:21;10:32-33; 11:27; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 26:53; Luke 2:49; John 2:15-16). Perhaps the clearest statement to this effect is found in John 8:54. Here the Lord declares to the religious leaders of his day, "If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God."[2] The Lord gave his approval to those who recognized his sonship (Matthew 14:33; 16:16; John 1:49-50; 11:27), and in several instances he unambiguously declared that he was the Son of God (Matthew 26:63-64; Luke 22:70; John 9:35-37; 10:34-38).

The Scriptural data indicate that "Son of God" may be considered as a class that includes many otherwise very different beings. For instance, angelic beings are referred to as sons of God (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), even the fallen ones (Genesis 6:2, 4). God called the nation of Israel his son (Exodus 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1), and Luke recognizes the first man, Adam, as "the son of God" (Luke 3:38). According to John (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1-2) and Paul (Romans 8:14, 19; 2:15) all born-again believers in Jesus Christ are rightly called "sons of God." It would seem that entities created directly and supernaturally by God (as opposed to beings arising from what are commonly referred to as the ordinary processes of nature) are scripturally considered sons of God. This applies to the angelic

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[1]Richard W. DeHaan, *The Living God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1967), p. 103.

[2] All Scripture from the *King James Version* of the Holy Bible.

realm (Colossians 1:15-16), to Adam (Genesis 2:7), and the nation of Israel (Genesis 21:18; 46:3; Psalm 100:3; Isaiah 43:1, 15; 44:21; 45:11, Ezekiel 37:22). Born-again believers are also sons of God by virtue of their new spiritual nature and identity in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10; 4:24). Christ alone, however, is referred to as the *only begotten* Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). The Greek term (monogenes) refers to *uniqueness*. Everett Harrison states that the term may legitimately be translated "one of a kind."[3] Hebrews the first chapter contains vital data regarding the sonship of Christ:

> God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Several important facts may be gleaned from these few precious verses. First, Christ's sonship has a *revelational* quality to it. The beloved disciple John stated that "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (John 1:18). Doubtless John recalled the words of the Lord himself who claimed that to see him was to see the Father (John 14:9). The writer to the Hebrews affirms not only that the Son reveals God to humanity, but that he does so in an infinitely superior way. Christ, according to the great apostle Paul, is the very image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

Second, sonship entails *inheritance.* Christ as the Son is the heir of all things; the entire created order is his. Third, Christ as the Son is the very means by which the created order came into being. John declared that "all things were made by him; and without him

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[3]Everett F. Harrison, "Only Begotten," *Baker's dictionary of theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 386.

was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). Paul expounds upon this, insisting that "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" (Colossians 1:16). Christ's role as Creator necessary entails his having eternality as an essential property. This leads to the third important truth that may be gleaned from the Hebrews passage, namely, that the Son shares the exact same nature as the Father. Adam Clarke concluded from Hebrews 1:1-3 "that Christ is eternal with the Father, as the proceeding splendor must necessarily be coexistent with the inherent splendor. If the one, therefore, be uncreated, the other is uncreated; if the one be eternal, the other is eternal."[4] John Gill observes that "'The express image of his person' intends . . . equality and sameness of nature, and distinction of persons; for if the Father is God, Christ must be so too; and if he is a person, his Son must be so likewise, or he cannot be the express image and character of him."[5] The religious leaders of Christ's day understood that "son" referred primarily to one's nature. John wrote that "the Jews sought the more to kill [Jesus], because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18). The Lord endorsed this understanding of his Sonship when he insisted that "all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureh not the Father which hath sent him" (John 5:23). Elsewhere Jesus endorsed the Jewish belief in the existence one God who alone is to be worshipped (Matthew 22:37 referring to Deuteronomy 6:4-5). The only conceivable way to reconcile this biblical data is to

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[4]Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, (1831) available at http://sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/clarke/heb001.htm (Accessed March 26, 2015).

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John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible,* (1746-63) available at http://sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/gill/heb001.htm (accessed March 26, 2015).

conclude, as the early church did as reflected in her classic creeds, that God is one eternal being who subsists as three distinct Persons. These Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—all eternally share the same great-making properties to an infinite degree. The doctrine of the Trinity has thus become a standard test for orthodoxy; to reject the doctrine of the Trinity is to reject classic Christian theism.

Lastly, the Hebrews passage indicates that God's Son *alone* accomplished what was necessary for mankind's redemption. The apostle John affirmed as much when he penned what has become the golden text of the Bible: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).The Lord stated categorically that he is *the only* way to a right relationship with God (John 14:6). Peter would later declare that there is salvation in no one else, "for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The biblical data indicate clearly that at a point in time the Second Person of the Trinity took on a human nature. As a bona fide member of the human race he was introduced to the world as Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Paul admits that the incarnation is a great mystery (1 Timothy 3:16), nevertheless he is able to provide some data. He declares that though the Lord was

> in the form of God, [he] thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

Since the incarnation, the Lord Jesus has been (and ever will be) one person with two natures; he has had a divine nature from all eternity but he adopted his human nature at a certain point in time. He has therefore both eternal divinity and finite humanity. Being fully God and fully man, he alone is qualified to mediate between the two (1 Timothy 2:5). He not only reveals and represents God to man, he also intercedes to God on man's behalf (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). None of this is controversial within orthodox Christianity. What *is* controversial, however, is not Christ's eternally divine nature, but the history of his sonship. The debate over the sonship of Christ centers on whether or not the Second Person of the Trinity was *actually* the Son from all eternity. The classic Christian position affirms that he was. The alternative view, which does nothing to challenge the doctrines of Christ's essential deity or his assumption of a human nature at incarnation, holds that sonship is descriptive of, among other things, a *functional* role that he assumed. On this view, "son" is not only descriptive of his identical nature with the Father, but is a title descriptive of a role that he acquired in time.

In wrestling through this difficult issue, it is perhaps best to begin by considering the distinction between the members of the Trinity that existed prior to the creation. The only conceivable distinction, it seems, is their individual volitions. That is to say, though each member of the Trinity shares the exact same power, knowledge, and moral perfection, they differ in how they have chosen to act. The Second Person of the Trinity, for instance, made an eternal decision to assume a human nature in order to redeem fallen humanity. The First and Third Persons of the Trinity likewise made their own eternal decisions to act in distinctive ways with respect to creation and redemption. This is just to say that each member of the Trinity decided to assume distinct roles that influenced not

only the created order, but created relational changes within the Trinity itself. The question comes down to whether or not the *Father and Son* relationship between members of the Trinity has existed from all eternity or was assumed at a point in time. Neither suggestion undermines the essential Christian doctrine of God's immutability; the change being contemplated here is not intrinsic to either member of the Trinity, but purely *extrinsic and relational*.

The vast majority of Christians throughout history have assumed that the Father and Son relationship is eternal. Among the ancients who held this view were Justin Martyr[6], Tertullian[7], Origen[8], and Athanasius.[9] In more recent times, distinguished Christian scholars such as C. H. Mackintosh,[10] Charles Spurgeon,[11] Charles Hodge,[12]

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[6]Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 61, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: MA, Henrickson Publishers, 2004).

[7]Tertullian *Against Praxeas* 7:1, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 4. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: MA, Henrickson Publishers, 2004).

[8]Origen *De Principiis*, Book 1, 2.4, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 4. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody: MA, Henrickson Publishers, 2004).

[9]Athanasius *Discourses Against the Arians* 1:14, available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/28161.htm (accessed March 26, 2015).

[10] C. H. Mackintosh, *Genesis to Deuteronomy* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1972), 295.

[11]Charles H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1975) 5:243.

[12]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005) 1:471.

Benjamin B. Warfield,[13] Lewis Sperry Chafer,[14] John F. Walvoord,[15] and John MacArthur[16] have voiced their opinion that the First and Second persons of the Trinity were actually Father and Son, respectively, from all eternity. Notable exceptions include Walter Martin[17] and William Lane Craig.[18]

From ancient times, the church has maintained that the eternal relationship between Father and Son is *causal* in nature. On this view, the First person is rightly called the Father because he is the source of the Second Person; from all eternity he has held the Son in existence.[19] Though the Son shares eternality with the Father, only the Father exists independently; the Father alone is unbegotten. There is no obvious *logical* problem with eternal generation. Furthermore, advocates of this doctrine have pointed out several verse passages that seem to lend support to it. The eighth chapter of the Book of Proverbs, in which the writer personifies wisdom, has become something of a standard proof-text. Here wisdom declares:

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[13]Benjamin Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ*, (Phillipsberg, NJ: P&R Publishing,), p. 77.

[14]Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), VII: 290.

[15]John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969) pp. 39, 41-42.

[16]John MacArthur quoted in "Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ," article available at http://www.gtycanada.org/resources/articles/A235/reexamining-the-eternal-sonship-of-christ (accessed March 26, 2015).

[17]Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), p. 138.

[18]William Lane Craig, *The Doctrine of the Trinity,* Audio Lecture Series, available at www.reasonablefaith.org (accessed March 26, 2015).

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Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 145-146.

> 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; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him (Proverbs 8:22-30).

Not only does Paul refer to Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), the Lord himself speaks of wisdom as a divine person (Luke 11:49). Furthermore, the New Testament states that God created the world through Christ (Hebrews 1:2) whereas the Old Testament sees wisdom as the agent of creation: "[God] hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion" (Jeremiah 10:12).[20] One common objection to the identification of wisdom (as depicted in the eighth chapter of Proverbs) with the Lord is based upon the lack of gender agreement between the two. In both Hebrew and Greek, wisdom is a feminine noun, which makes the identification of wisdom and the Son somewhat strained. The problem is not unanswerable however. As Gerald O'Collins points out, "Members of prophetic circles and other Israelites acknowledged that God embodies in a perfect way the best characteristics of both men and women—the fullness of fatherhood and motherhood."[21] He notes that in medieval times, St. Hildegard of Bingen, and Julian of Norwich,

> helped to encourage . . . the use of the motherhood metaphor in Christology and Trinitarian theology. Christ was understood to act like a mother in loving,

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[20]Also see Proverbs 3:19; Psalm 104:24,136:5; Jeremiah 51:15.

[21]Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus,* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 126.

feeding, and instructing the individual soul. This fresh use of feminine language for Christ was encouraged by a widespread interest in the Song of Songs and a return to Jesus' own image of himself as a hen with her chickens (Matt. 23:37 par.), an image which had already drawn comments from Clement of Alexandria, Origen, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine and Anselm."[22]

Based on the Proverbs eight passage, one could justifiably affirm, deny, or remain agnostic on the issue of eternal generation. However, there are two important points of Christian doctrine that must be considered. The first is ontological, the second is soteriological.

First, according to Hebrews 1:1-3 and related passages and creeds, the First and Second Persons of the Trinity share the exact same nature. It is difficult to understand, however, how the Father and Son could share the same nature when one of them (the Father) is necessary whilst the other (the Son) is contingent. It is contradictory to claim that only the Father has unbegottenness as an essential property and yet shares the same nature as the Son who is by nature begotten. Louis Berkhoff, anticipating this objection, insists that the generation of the Son by the Father is not a free act, but "a necessary and perfectly natural act of God."[23] Though the Father is delighted to be generating the Son, he is nevertheless not free to do otherwise.[24] On Berkhof's view, this makes the Son's existence necessary, not contingent. He further defines the Son's generation as "that eternal and necessary act of the first person of the Trinity, whereby he, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like his own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or

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[22]
Ibid, p. 207.

[23]Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958, Reprint 2005), p. 93.
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Ibid.

change."[25] Berkhof's views seem conflicted. If the Father is not compelled to generate the Son by anything except his own nature, then the Son, if he indeed shares that same nature, ought to be generating a Third Person, and the Third to be generating a Fourth and so on ad infinitum. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how the Father and Son could have ontological equality when the Father has the divine nature immediately while the Son's divinity is mediated to him by the Father. To say that the Father has *unmediated* divinity as an essential property and the Son has *mediated* divinity as an essential property is just to say that the Father and Son share different essences. It is almost self-evident that a person whose existence and great-making attributes are his immediately is greater than a person whose existence and great-making attributes are granted by another. This leads to the soteriological concern.

Because man's sin offends God, who is the maximally great being, the only appropriate payment for sin is a maximally great sacrifice. The church has long maintained that Christ alone was able to pay humanity's sin debt precisely because he possesses not only genuine humanity, but "the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). Nevertheless, in her rejection of the patripassianism heresy, the church made it clear that it was the Son and not the Father that suffered and died on the cross for sin.[26] If the Father alone has maximal excellence, as the doctrine of eternal generation seems to entail, then the Son's sacrifice was not maximally great. This calls the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice into serious question. Unless advocates of eternal generation can

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Ibid, p. 94.
[26]William Nigel Kerr, "Patripassianism," *Baker's dictionary of theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 396-397.

answer the difficulties outlined above, a basis for Christ's eternal sonship must be found elsewhere.

Appreciating the problems with the doctrine of eternal generation, Norman Geisler suggests that while the First and Second Persons of the Trinity share complete ontological equality, there has from all eternity existed a *social order* that distinguishes them as Father and Son. On Geisler's view, the Second Person's *obedience* to the First Person is what makes him the Son. Geisler states:

> "All members of the Trinity are equal in essence, but they do not have the same roles. It is a heresy (called subordinationism) to affirm that there is an ontological subordination of one member of the Trinity to another, since they are identical in essence . . . nonetheless, it is clear that there is a functional subordination, that is, not only does each member have a different function or role, but some functions are also subordinate to others.[27]

While this view leaves the efficacy of Christ's work intact, it is difficult to understand how obedience could have been demonstrated in the timeless state prior to the creation. Furthermore, Geisler's view seems to entail a contradiction, for even though he adamantly affirms ontological equality between the Father and Son, he elsewhere states that functional subordination "is essential and eternal."[28] If the Father is *by nature* the one who commands the Son, and the Son is *by nature* he who obeys the Father's commands, it cannot be the case that two share the *same* nature.

At this juncture it is worth noting that "eternal son" or any similar phrase is completely absent from the Scriptures. Hebrews 9:14, which comes closest, does little to vindicate the doctrine of eternal sonship. Here the writer asks, "How much more shall the

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[27]Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2011), p. 548.

[28]Ibid, p. 549.

blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" Thomas Hewitt observes concerning this passage that "the more probable meaning of the Greek is 'through (His) eternal spirit.' Spirit here is used in opposition to 'flesh' which is outward, material and transitory. Christ offered Himself through the virtue of his eternal spiritual nature, which made the offering of infinite value, and accomplished eternal redemption."[29] Wuest adds that the "Pneuma aionion (eternal spirit) is not the Spirit of the Father dwelling in Christ, nor is it the Holy Spirit given without measure to Christ, but it is the divine Spirit of the Godhead which Christ Himself had and was in His inner Personality."[30] Hebrews 9:12 therefore cannot be used to support the idea that the functional distinctions between the members of the Trinity *actually* existed prior to the creation. Nevertheless because each member of the Trinity is maximally great, each possesses both omniscience and individual volition as essential properties. Each made a timeless choice to assume a specific role, presumably at the moment of creation, and each gave whole-hearted eternal approval to the choices made by the Trinity's other members. The writer to the Hebrews alluded to this anticipation of relational change within the Trinity. While speaking of the superiority of Christ he writes:

> Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, *I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son*? (Hebrews 1:3-5, emphasis added).

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[29]Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's 1978), p. 148.

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Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* Vol. II, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p.161.

Clearly the First and Second Persons of the Trinity existed in a state in which Father and Son relationship was a *future* reality. That is to say, though the First and Second Persons of the Trinity timelessly decided to assume the roles of Father and Son respectively, they did not *actually* assume those roles until durational and sequential relationship was actualized.

Some respond to this line of argumentation by citing Revelation 13:7-8: "And it was given unto [the beast] to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.*" (emphasis added). Using this verse, some argue that if Christ could actually be the Lamb of God before the creation of the world then he could actually be the Son from before the creation as well. In answer to this objection, it should be pointed out that the passage does not say "*before* the foundation" but "*from* the foundation." John might be thinking of the animal slain in the Garden from whose skin God made coats for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21). The Passover Lamb, which Paul sees as a shadow of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:7) was to be a perfect animal of the first year. The animal slain in the garden must have been a perfect animal of the first year as well, making John's statements likely a reference to it. Peter's first epistle contains a similar passage. Peter states that believers are redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Peter 1:18-20). Again, the text does not require that the Second Person of the Trinity actually be the Lamb before the creation. The Greek word translated "foreordained" (προγινώσκω)

means "to know beforehand, that is, foresee."[31] All members of the Trinity knew infallibly that the Second Person would assume a salvific role prefigured in both the sacrificial Passover lamb and the animal slain in the garden at the dawn of human history. The Son, by virtue of his eternal divinity and sinless humanity does indeed provide the ultimate worthy sacrifice for sin. This, however, is not the only function entailed by his sonship.

As noted earlier, the Son also reveals the Father to the created order (John 1:18). This is not to adopt a Gnostic view of God's transcendence whereby God is so "wholly other" that he is virtually *unable* to relate to the creation without mediation. Rather, it is just to say that God has *chosen* to relate to his creation through the Second Person of the Trinity. Elsewhere Jesus declared that to see him was to see the Father (John 12:45; 14:9). Even in heaven it is the Second Person of the Trinity who reveals God to the high angelic realm. Isaiah the sixth chapter describes a heavenly scene in which angelic beings minister to God (Isaiah 6:1-10). John later declared concerning this event that the angels were actually ministering to the pre-incarnate Christ (John 12:37-41).

It is true that the Holy Spirit and the written word of God also reveal God to humanity, but it is important to note *how* this is accomplished. The Spirit testifies of Jesus (John 15:26; 16:14-15). The Scripture declares that the spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 19:10). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit moved men to write the Bible (1 Peter 1:21), whose grand, unifying theme is the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 5:39). In short, it is the Second Person of the Trinity as the Son of God who decisively reveals God to his creation.

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[31]James Strong, *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), p.687

Some cite Hebrews 1:2 as evidence that the Second Person of the Trinity existed as the Son of God prior to the creation. The text declares that "[God] hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, *by whom also he made the worlds"* (Hebrews 1:2, emphasis added). The Lord's high priestly prayer contains what many interpret as an allusion to eternal sonship as well. The Lord prayed, "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). Neither verse, however, *requires* eternal sonship in order to be intelligible. In both cases the Second Person of the Trinity is referred to by the title he had at the time of utterance, even while making reference to a state in which Father and Son relationship may not have yet been actualized. Paul's comments to the Corinthian believers about "the twelve" seeing Jesus after the resurrection is roughly analogous. Paul declares that Christ "was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve" (1 Corinthians 15:5). When Paul was writing, "the twelve" included Mathias, for he was numbered with the Apostles after Judas killed himself (Acts 1:26). When Jesus first appeared to his apostles after the resurrection, he actually appeared to the eleven plus Matthias, who at the time was *not* one of the twelve apostles. Nevertheless, it was perfectly appropriate for Paul to describe the event as Christ appearing to "the twelve" since at the time Paul made the statement (and when he received it), Matthias had become an apostle. In a similar way, it is appropriate for the writer to the Hebrews to say that it was the Son who actualized the universe even though the Second Person of the Trinity needn't have actually had the role of "Son" prior to the universe being actualized. In the same way, the Second Person of the Trinity could legitimately refer to the First Person as

"Father" even when referring to a prior state in which Father-Son relationship was not yet actualized.

Because many Old Testament references to Christ's sonship are prophetically looking ahead to a time subsequent to his incarnation, Walter Martin insisted that Christ's sonship was a functional role that he assumed *at* incarnation.[32] The fourth verse of the thirtieth proverb seems to call this interpretation into question however. Here the writer asks rhetorically, *"*Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? Who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment? Who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?" This powerful text not only rules out the idea that "Son" is a proper name for the Second Person of the Trinity, it also affirms that Second Person of the Trinity existed as the Son *prior* to his incarnation. Given the Son's function in mediating God to the created order, it is perhaps best to see sonship as a role adopted *at the moment of creation*.

Comprehensive understanding of Christ's sonship is clearly beyond the grasp of finite human minds. Because God is the objective identifier of all things, things and people are what he declares them to be. In light of this fact, the eternal sonship of the Second Person of the Trinity is certainly possible. If there was eternal agreement amongst the Trinity's members that the Second Person is the Son, then eternal sonship is correct, regardless of whether or not finite minds can grasp the exact reasons for this eternal identification. From the scriptural data, however, it is not clear that such an identification was actually made prior to the creation.

One can certainly affirm eternal sonship for some other reason than eternal generation or eternal obedience. Even if an exact reason for affirming eternal sonship is

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[32]Martin, p. 138.

elusive, given God's transcendence, it would not be improper to appeal to divine mystery. However, though eternal sonship is congruent with orthodox Christianity, given its lack of unambiguous scriptural support, it ought not to be regarded as test for it. The belief that the Second Person of the Trinity assumed sonship at the creation of the world is at least as justified from the scriptures as eternal sonship, and probably more so.

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