

REEXAMINING THE ETERNAL SONSHIP OF CHRIST

By John MacArthur

Near the end of his life, Augustine of Hippo meticulously reviewed everything he had ever published. He wrote an entire catalogue of his own works, a painstakingly annotated bibliography with hundreds of revisions and amendments to correct flaws he saw in his own earlier material. The book, titled *Retractationes*, is powerful evidence of Augustine's humility and zeal for truth. Not one of his earlier publications escaped the more mature theologian's scrutiny. And Augustine was as bold in recanting the errors he perceived in his own work as he had been in refuting the heresies of his theological adversaries. Because he reviewed his works in chronological order, *Retractationes* is a wonderful memoir of Augustine's relentless, lifelong pursuit of spiritual maturity and theological precision. His forthrightness in addressing his own shortcomings is a good example of why Augustine is esteemed as a rare model of both godliness and scholarship.

I've often wished for the opportunity to review and amend all my own published material, but I doubt I'll ever have the time or the energy to undertake the task. In this day of electronic recordings, my "published" material includes not just the books I have written but also nearly every sermon I have ever preached--about 3,000 of them so far. It's far too much material to be able to critique exhaustively the way I wish I could. Not that I would make sweeping or wholesale revisions. Throughout my ministry, my theological perspective has remained fundamentally unchanged. The basic doctrinal statement I subscribe to today is the

same one I affirmed when I was ordained to the ministry almost 40 years ago. I am not someone whose convictions are easily malleable. I trust I am not a reed shaken in the wind, or the kind of person who is naively tossed about by various winds of doctrine.

But at the same time, I do not want to be resistant to growth and correction, especially when my comprehension of Scripture can be sharpened. If more precise understanding on an important point of doctrine demands a change in my thinking--even if it means amending or correcting already-published material--I want to be willing to make the necessary changes.

I have made many such revisions over the years, often taking measures to delete erroneous or confusing statements from my own tapes, and sometimes even preaching again through portions of Scripture with a better understanding of the text. Whenever I have changed my opinion on any significant doctrinal issue, I have sought to make my change of opinion, and the reasons for it, as clear as possible.

To that end, I want to state publicly that I have abandoned the doctrine of "incarnational sonship." Careful study and reflection have brought me to understand that Scripture does indeed present the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son as an *eternal Father-Son relationship*. I no longer regard Christ's Sonship as a role He assumed in His incarnation.

My earlier position arose out of my study of Hebrews 1:5, which appears to speak of the Father's begetting the Son as an event that takes place at a point in time: "*This day* have I begotten thee"; "*I will be* to him a Father, and *he shall be* to me a Son" (emphasis added).

That verse presents some very difficult concepts. "Begetting" normally speaks of a person's *origin*. Moreover, sons are generally *subordinate* to their fathers. I therefore found it difficult to see how an eternal Father-Son relationship could be compatible with perfect equality and eternity among the Persons of the Trinity. "Sonship," I concluded, bespeaks the place of voluntary submission to which Christ condescended at His incarnation (cf. Phil. 2:5-8; John 5:19).

My aim was to defend, not in any way to undermine, Christ's absolute

deity and eternity. And I endeavored from the beginning to make that as clear as possible.

Nonetheless, when I first published my views on the subject (in my 1983 commentary on Hebrews), a few outspoken critics accused me of attacking the deity of Christ or questioning His eternity. In 1989 I responded to those charges in a plenary session of the annual convention of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (the denomination that ordained me). Shortly after that session, to explain my views further, I wrote an article titled *The Sonship of Christ* (published in 1991 in booklet form).

In both instances I reemphasized my unqualified and unequivocal commitment to the biblical truth that Jesus is eternally God. The “incarnational sonship” view, while admittedly a minority opinion, is by no means rank heresy. The heart of my defense of the view consisted of statements that affirmed as clearly as possible my absolute commitment to the evangelical essentials of Christ’s deity and eternity.

Still, controversy continued to swirl around my views on “incarnational sonship,” prompting me to reexamine and rethink the pertinent biblical texts. Through that study I have gained a new appreciation for the significance and the complexity of this issue. More important, my views on the matter have changed. Here are two major reasons for my change of opinion:

1. I am now convinced that the title “Son of God” when applied to Christ in Scripture *always* speaks of His essential deity and absolute equality with God, not His voluntary subordination. The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ time understood this perfectly. John 5:18 says they sought the death penalty against Jesus, charging Him with blasphemy “because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.”

In that culture, a dignitary’s adult son was deemed equal in stature and privilege with his father. The same deference demanded by a king was afforded to his adult son. The son was, after all, of the very same essence as his father, heir to all the father’s rights and privileges--and therefore equal in every significant regard. So when Jesus was called

“Son of God,” it was understood categorically by all as a title of deity, making Him equal with God and (more significantly) *of the same essence as the Father*. That is precisely why the Jewish leaders regarded the title “Son of God” as high blasphemy.

If Jesus’ sonship signifies His deity and utter equality with the Father, it cannot be a title that pertains only to His incarnation. In fact, the main gist of what is meant by “sonship” (and certainly this would include Jesus’ divine essence) must pertain to the eternal attributes of Christ, not merely the humanity He assumed.

2. It is now my conviction that the begetting spoken of in Psalm 2 and Hebrews 1 is not an event that takes place in time. Even though at first glance Scripture seems to employ terminology with temporal overtones (“*this day* have I begotten thee”), the context of Psalm 2:7 seems clearly to be a reference to the eternal decree of God. It is reasonable to conclude that the begetting spoken of there is also something that pertains to eternity rather than a point in time. The temporal language should therefore be understood as figurative, not literal.

Most theologians recognize this, and when dealing with the sonship of Christ, they employ the term “eternal generation.” I’m not fond of the expression. In Spurgeon’s words, it is “a term that does not convey to us any great meaning; it simply covers up our ignorance.” And yet the concept itself, I am now convinced, is biblical. Scripture refers to Christ as “the only begotten of the Father” (John 1:14; cf. v. 18; 3:16, 18; Heb. 11:17). The Greek word translated “only begotten” is *monogenes*. The thrust of its meaning has to do with Christ’s utter uniqueness. Literally, it may be rendered “one of a kind”--and yet it also clearly signifies that He is of the very same essence as the Father. This, I believe, is the very heart of what is meant by the expression “only begotten.”

To say that Christ is “begotten” is itself a difficult concept. Within the realm of creation, the term “begotten” speaks of the *origin* of one’s offspring. The begetting of a son denotes his conception--the point at which he comes into being. Some thus assume that “only begotten” refers to the conception of the human Jesus in the womb of the virgin Mary. Yet Matthew 1:20 attributes the conception of the incarnate Christ to the Holy Spirit, not to God the Father. The begetting referred to in Psalm 2 and John 1:14 clearly seems to be something more than

the conception of Christ's humanity in Mary's womb.

And indeed, there is another, more vital, significance to the idea of "begetting" than merely the origin of one's offspring. In the design of God, each creature begets offspring "after his kind" (Gen. 1:11-12; 21-25). The offspring bear the exact likeness of the parent. The fact that a son is generated by the father guarantees that the son shares the same essence as the father.

I believe this is the sense Scripture aims to convey when it speaks of the begetting of Christ by the Father. Christ is not a created being (John 1:1-3). He had no beginning but is as timeless as God Himself. Therefore, the "begetting" mentioned in Psalm 2 and its cross-references has nothing to do with His *origin*.

But it has everything to do with the fact that He is of the same essence as the Father. Expressions like "eternal generation," "only begotten Son," and others pertaining to the filiation of Christ must all be understood in this sense: Scripture employs them to underscore the absolute oneness of essence between Father and Son. In other words, such expressions aren't intended to evoke the idea of procreation; they are meant to convey the truth about the essential oneness shared by the Members of the Trinity.

My previous view was that Scripture employed Father-Son terminology *anthropomorphically*--accommodating unfathomable heavenly truths to our finite minds by casting them in human terms. Now I am inclined to think that the opposite is true: Human father-son relationships are merely earthly pictures of an infinitely greater heavenly reality. The one true, archetypical Father-Son relationship exists eternally within the Trinity. All others are merely earthly replicas, imperfect because they are bound up in our finiteness, yet illustrating a vital eternal reality. If Christ's sonship is all about His deity, someone will wonder why this applies to the Second Member of the Trinity alone, and not to the Third. After all, we don't refer to the Holy Spirit as God's Son, do we? Yet isn't He also of the same essence as the Father?

Of course He is. The full, undiluted, undivided essence of God belongs alike to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is but one essence; yet He exists in three Persons. The three Persons are co-equal, but they are still

distinct Persons. And the chief characteristics that distinguish between the Persons are wrapped up in the properties suggested by the names *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*. Theologians have labeled these properties *paternity*, *filiation*, and *spiration*. That such distinctions are vital to our understanding of the Trinity is clear from Scripture. How to explain them fully remains something of a mystery.

In fact, many aspects of these truths may remain forever inscrutable, but this basic understanding of the eternal relationships within the Trinity nonetheless represents the best consensus of Christian understanding over many centuries of Church history. I therefore affirm the doctrine of Christ's eternal sonship while acknowledging it as a mystery into which we should not expect to pry too deeply.

This statement by John MacArthur was received by way of e-mail from the office of Phillip Johnson who serves on John MacArthur's staff. It was sent 9/1/99. It since has been placed on many websites (just "google" in the title, "Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ").

A Response to John MacArthur's Statement

MacArthur, for a period of at least 25 years, taught that Christ did not become the Son of God until He was born in Bethlehem, at the time of the incarnation.¹ This “incarnational Sonship” view is in sharp contrast to the “eternal Sonship” position which says that Christ has always been the Son of God and that His Sonship is essential to His true identity and cannot be divorced from the Person He is.

In his published and public writings MacArthur at one time strongly denied the eternal Sonship of Christ as the following quotes indicate:

“The Bible nowhere speaks of the eternal Sonship of Christ...He was always God, but He became Son. Eternally He is God, but only from His incarnation has He been Son...Christ was not Son until His incarnation” (*Hebrews*, 1983, pp. 27-28).

“Don’t let anyone tell you that Christ is the eternal Son...Christ’s Sonship began at a point in time, not in eternity...Christ was not a Son until He came into this world through the virgin birth” (*The Superiority of Christ—Hebrews 1-2*, 1986, pp. 52-54).

“Nowhere in Scripture does it say that Jesus has eternally been the Son...He assumed the role of a Son in His incarnation” (*Acting on the Good News—Romans 1*, 1987, pp. 35-41).

¹ MacArthur’s incarnational Sonship view was first set forth publicly in a taped message given in 1972 (Tape GC-1602) dealing with Hebrews 1:4-6. On this tape he said, “Don’t you let anyone tell you that He is the eternal Son....His Sonship began in a point of time, not in eternity.”

MacArthur’s strong denial of Christ’s eternal Sonship can also be found in his major commentaries on *Galatians* and *Romans*.

In light of this strong denial of eternal Sonship, how could MacArthur sign the IFCA doctrinal statement which says, “We believe in one Triune God, **eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit....** We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, **the eternal Son of God**, became man”?²

MacArthur’s denial of eternal Sonship, which is forcefully stated in his earlier writings, is more cautiously stated in his *Study Bible*. Note the following:

“God’s Son was born in a point of time. He was always God, but He fulfilled His role as Son in space and time at His incarnation” [Hebrews 1:5].

“God’s Son was born in a point of time. He was always God, but He demonstrated His role as Son in space and time at His incarnation” [Hebrews 1:5, revised edition].

MacArthur held the belief that Christ was always God, but that He was not always the Son of God. He became the Son when He was born in Bethlehem. His Sonship, according to MacArthur, was merely a “role” that He assumed in time.

“It (Psalm 2:7) is the only OT reference to the Father/Son relationship in the Trinity, a relationship planned in eternity past and realized in the incarnation” [Psalm 2:7].

² MacArthur’s Incarnational Sonship view has been answered in the book, *The Eternal Sonship of Christ* (Loizeaux Brothers), by George Zeller and Renald Showers (available from us for \$5.75 plus postage). The book explains why the doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of Christ is so important and why its denial is serious error.

Christ's Sonship was planned in eternity past but was not actually realized until the incarnation. Prior to the incarnation, according to MacArthur, He was not the Son of God. In the revised edition this was modified slightly:

“It is also the only OT reference to the Father/Son relationship in the Trinity, a relationship decreed in eternity past and demonstrated in the incarnation” [Psalm 2:7, Revised Edition].

Here is his comment under Romans 1:4:

“While He was eternally the Son in anticipation of His incarnation, it was when He entered the world in incarnation that He was declared to all the world as the Son of God and took on the role of submission to the Father” [Rom. 1:4].

MacArthur implies here that Christ did not actually become the Son until the incarnation. Prior to Bethlehem He was only the Son “in anticipation.” He also teaches that Sonship is merely a “role” which Christ assumed and that it involves “submission” to the Father [the Bible teaches that Sonship involves not servitude, but equality with God (see John 5:18), and notice also how Sonship is contrasted with the idea of servitude in Galatians 4:7, Hebrews 3:5-6, Matthew 21:33-39].

“We teach that, in the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity laid aside His right to the full prerogatives of coexistence with God, assumed the place of a Son, and took on an existence appropriate to a servant while never divesting Himself of His divine attributes” [this quote is taken from the section called “Overview of Theology” in *The MacArthur Study Bible* and the section called “Key Teachings of the Bible” in *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*].

This last quotation finds its origin in the doctrinal statement of The Master's College and Seminary. The most troubling part of this paragraph is the following phrase, “In the incarnation the second person

of the Trinity...**assumed the place of a Son.**” This statement implies that prior to the incarnation Christ had not assumed the place of a Son. Also it implies that Christ did not assume the role of a Son until the incarnation. However, the Bible teaches that Sonship is not a role that Christ played, nor is it a place that He assumed. Sonship relates to Christ's essential identity. He has always existed as the Son; He has forever been in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18). Sonship is not something that He ever assumed.

After the *MacArthur Study Bible* was first published, John MacArthur seemed to reverse his view on Christ's Sonship. He seemed to repudiate the “incarnational Sonship” view which he taught for over 25 years. In a document entitled, *Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ* (September 1999, and quoted in full at the beginning of this paper), MacArthur said the following:

“I want to state publicly that I have abandoned the doctrine of ‘incarnational Sonship.’ Careful study and reflection have brought me to understand that Scripture does indeed present the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son as an eternal Father/Son relationship. I no longer regard Christ's Sonship as a role He assumed at His incarnation.”

I am thankful for Dr. MacArthur's clear affirmation of Christ's eternal Sonship as stated in the quotation just cited. I sincerely thank God for his willingness to humbly admit and acknowledge that his earlier teaching on Christ's Sonship was erroneous and not in line with Scripture.

In spite of MacArthur's apparent reversal on this issue, I still have some lingering concerns.

MacArthur said, “I no longer regard Christ's Sonship as a role He assumed at His incarnation.” If this is true, then why hasn't he changed his school's doctrinal statement? Why does it still say that in the incarnation He “assumed the place of a Son”? Why does MacArthur still publish this doctrinal statement in both his *Study Bible* and his *Commentary* without changing this phrase which strongly implies that Christ did not assume the place of a Son until His incarnation (thus denying His eternal Sonship)? And if MacArthur no longer regards Christ's Sonship as a role He assumed at His incarnation, then why does

he still speak of Sonship as a “role” in his note under Hebrews 1:5?

Also his note under Romans 1:4 is confusing. Was Christ actually the Son of God prior to the incarnation, or was He only the Son in an anticipatory sense? The note seems to imply the latter.

It has now been over a decade since MacArthur supposedly repudiated His incarnational Sonship view. I have not yet found, in any of MacArthur’s published writings since 1999, any clear, unequivocal statement defending Christ’s eternal Sonship. There may be such a statement, but I have not found it. At the very least MacArthur could have changed His doctrinal statement in favor of a clear statement affirming Christ’s eternal Sonship. To my knowledge He has not done this.

MacArthur’s former denial of the eternal Sonship of Christ triggered a great amount of controversy in the IFCA which lasted for years and which resulted in scores of men (including this author) and a number of churches leaving the IFCA. These men who left were merely defending the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ, based on the IFCA doctrinal statement. In 1989 MacArthur appeared at the IFCA National Convention in Limerick defending the incarnational Sonship view, and in 1991 he wrote a booklet “The Sonship of Christ” defending this same erroneous doctrine. This booklet was sent to all IFCA members.

The damage all of this did to our fellowship of Churches was inestimable. We are *not* blaming John MacArthur for what happened. The burden of responsibility rested on the IFCA leadership. But the fact remains that it was his teaching that triggered the controversy. In MacArthur’s 1999 statement, we wish that there could have been some indication of remorse or regret over the damage that took place in the IFCA. I know that I personally would be deeply grieved if something I taught had triggered a tremendous controversy in a fellowship of churches resulting in great damage and division. Especially so if I later concluded that my teaching had been in error. “Be not many teachers knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment” (James 3:1).

I could only wish that MacArthur would speak to the issue of Christ’s Sonship as clearly as does the IFCA doctrinal statement:

“We believe in one Triune God, **eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit....** We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, **the eternal Son of God**, became man” (Sections 2 and 3a).

There is no need here for an uncertain trumpet.

Other literature items related to this topic:

- The Eternal Sonship of Christ (Zeller/Showers), \$5.75.
- The Eternal Sonship of Christ (2 helpful papers)–(15¢).
- The Deity of Christ (Alva McClain & others)–(30¢)
- The Teachings of John MacArthur (120+ pages)–\$6.00.
- The John MacArthur Study Bible (30¢).
- Clarifying statement on Modern Trends and Positions (50¢).
- Does Doctrinal Purity Hinder the Cause of Missions?(20¢).
- The Importance of Doctrine—Campus Crusade Critique (20¢).
- Saved by Grace Alone (Lordship Salvation Issues)—(35¢).
- The Dangers of Reformed Theology (50¢).

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