

Chapter 6

THE DEFENSE OF ETERNAL SONSHIP

*For what saith the scripture?
(Romans 4:3)*

God's inerrant Word must be the final authority for all that we believe and teach. Let us prayerfully and carefully search the Scriptures to determine if Jesus Christ became the Son of God at some point in history or if He has eternally existed as the Son of God, basking in the sunlight of the Father's love and enjoying delightful fellowship in the Father's bosom even before the foundation of the world (John 17:5,24; John 1:18).

By the Son all things were created. "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son . . . Who is the image of the invisible God . . . by him were all things created . . . And he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (Colossians 1:13-17).

In Colossians 1:13 we learn that we have been translated into the kingdom of the Father's dear Son (literally, "the Son of His love"). The succeeding verses contain a series of pronouns, all of which refer to "his dear Son" in verse 13. W. J. Hocking observed:

We note that all the 15 pronouns in verses 15 to 20 inclusive are in apposition with the noun, Son (v. 13). Each dependent sentence, therefore, declares some fresh glory of the Son, to Whom they all relate, and in Whom they all combine with a transcendent harmony.¹

Therefore Colossians 1:16 clearly states that by the Son all things were created. All things were created by the Son of His love. The Son of God therefore must have existed as the Son at the time of creation, long before He became incarnate. Those who insist that Christ did not become the Son of God until the incarnation must put a strained interpretation on the clear statement of this verse. A typical explanation from one holding this view would be as follows:

By the Son all things were created, according to this text, but at the time He did His creative work He was not the Son of God. He was the eternal God, but He did not become the Son of God until His birth thousands of years later. Paul referred to the Creator as the "Son of His love" because we now know Him by this title even though He was not the beloved Son of the Father at the time of creation. Also at the time of creation, the first person of the Trinity was not yet the Father. These were roles that They would assume later. Just as we might refer to the fact that President George Bush played on the baseball team at Yale University even though he was not actually the president when at Yale, so we could say that the Son of God created all things even though He was not the Son of God when He did His creative work.

Such an involved explanation ought to be rejected. We must simply accept the obvious meaning of the text: the

Father created all things by the Son of His love. The normal and natural meaning of this passage is that at the time of creation He existed as the Father's beloved Son.

Hebrews 1:1-2, which is similar to Colossians 1:13-17, also identifies the Creator as the Son of God: "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." It was by the Son that the Father made the worlds. John Darby concluded from this passage that "we are therefore justified in speaking of the Son as before the worlds."² Hocking wrote, "Since the Holy Spirit attributes creatorial activity to the Son, His existence must have preceded that of the universe which He called into being."³ The hymnist declared, "Crown Him the Son of God / Before the worlds began"!

W. E. Vine skillfully showed the bearing of Hebrews 1:2 on the doctrine of eternal Sonship. He pointed out that

the design in the stress on the word "Son" in verse 2 is not to convey the idea that God has spoken to us in One Who became His Son, but that He has done so in One Whose relationship to Him as Son stands in antecedent existence both to creation and to His incarnation. . . . The passage is itself a testimony to the pre-existent Sonship of Christ; for not only has God spoken to us in Him Who is His Son, but by Him . . . He "made the worlds" (the ages). The plain implication is that He by Whom God made the worlds stood in relationship to Him in this respect as His Son.⁴

The Son of God is the only begotten of the Father. "And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father. . . . 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 1:14,18).

John beheld the divine glory of the only begotten of the Father, even the unique Son of God. William Hendriksen concluded that John 1:14 must refer to Christ's trinitarian Sonship—that is, “to the fact that He is the Son of God from all eternity.” Hendriksen continued: “This is favored by the context (John 1:1,18) and by such passages as 3:16,18, which prove that the Son **was already** the only begotten before his incarnation . . . the sonship here indicated was present **from eternity**” (emphasis his).⁵

J. G. Bellett posed this question for those who teach that Christ was not the Son of God until the incarnation: “Had the Father no bosom till the Babe was born in Bethlehem?” He then answered: “Indeed, fully sure I am, as that inquiry suggests, He had from all eternity. The bosom of the Father was an eternal habitation, enjoyed by the Son, in the ineffable delight of the Father.”⁶

Bellett also stated: “Matthew and Mark first notice His Sonship of God at His baptism [Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11]. Luke goes farther back, and notices it at His birth [Luke 1:35]. But John goes back farther still, even to the immeasurable, unspeakable distance of eternity, and declares His Sonship ‘in the bosom of the Father.’”⁷

Lamb of God, Thy Father's bosom
Ever was Thy dwelling-place!⁸

The Greek construction of John 1:18 is significant with respect to the doctrine of eternal Sonship. The verb translated “which is” can be literally rendered “the One being” or “the One ever existing” in the bosom of the Father. According to Charles Hodge, the Greek construction of this verb expresses permanent being: “He who is, was, and ever shall be, in the bosom of the Father, i.e., most intimately united with Him.”⁹ W. E. Vine also defended the eternal Sonship of Christ. His comments on John 1:18 are worthy of note:

The plain implication of the pre-existent Sonship of Christ given in verse 14 is confirmed in verse 18 by the description of the Son as the One Who is “in the bosom of the Father.” The phraseology employed is that of the definite article with the present participle of the verb “to be,” lit., “the (one) being in the bosom . . . ” This form of phrase provides what is virtually a titular description, and is to be distinguished from the use of the relative pronoun with the present tense of the verb to be (“who is”). Had it been the intention of the writer to state that the Son is at the present time in the bosom of the Father, in contrast to a time in the past when He was not in that position and relationship, the relative clause, that is to say, the relative pronoun with the present tense, would have been used (i.e., *hos esti*, “who is”). The participial construction (the definite article with the present participle “being”) is not thus limited in point of time. Here the construction conveys a timeless description, expressing a condition and relationship characteristic, essential and unoriginal.¹⁰

That He is “the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father,” expresses both His eternal union with the Father in the Godhead, and the ineffable intimacy and love between Them, the Son sharing all the Father’s counsels and enjoying all His affections. “The bosom of the Father” ever has been and ever will be the Son’s dwelling place.¹¹

The unmistakable teaching of John 1:18 is that the Son of God is perfectly qualified to be the revealer of the invisible Father because from all eternity He has existed in the Father’s bosom. As Matthew Henry said, “He had lain in his bosom from eternity. . . . In the bosom of his **special love**, dear to him, **in whom he was well pleased**, always his delight” (emphasis his).¹²

God sent His Son. “The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world” (1 John 4:14). “He loved us, and sent his Son” (1 John 4:10). “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you” (John 20:21). “When the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son” (Galatians 4:4).

Numerous verses speak of the Father’s sending the Son into this world (just a few of them are cited above). These passages clearly indicate that Jesus was the Son before God sent Him into the world. If God sent His Son, then He must have been the Son even before His mission. “This at least is the most obvious sense of these passages, and the sense which an ordinary reader would doubtless affix to them.”¹³ The Father sent the One who was already His Son. These verses do not say that God sent forth One who became His Son at the time of His birth.¹⁴ They tell us that prior to His mission He was really and truly related to His Father as Son. J. C. Philpot pointed out the faulty logic of those who teach that the incarnation marked the beginning of Christ’s divine Sonship:

But what unprejudiced mind does not see that sending a person to execute a certain task does not make him to be what he was not before? A master sends a servant to do a certain work; or a father bids a son to perform a certain errand; or a husband desires his wife to execute a certain commission which he has not time or opportunity to do himself; the servant does not cease to be a servant, the son to be a son, nor the wife to be a wife by being so sent.¹⁵

The wife was a wife before the mission, and she was a wife after the mission. So also the Son of God was the Son of God before His mission (before He came into this world by means of the incarnation) and after the mission.

In Galatians 4:4-6 the term “sent forth” is used in

reference to both the Son and the Spirit. And in John 14:26 the Lord Jesus promised that the Father would “send” the Comforter. Did the third person of the godhead become the Holy Spirit when He was sent or was He already the Holy Spirit prior to His being sent? The answer is obvious. The Holy Spirit did not become the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, just as the Son of God did not become the Son of God at Bethlehem. The Spirit was the Spirit and the Son was the Son prior to Their respective missions. The many verses that speak of God’s sending His Son make sense only when we understand that He was the Son prior to His being sent.

The parable of the vineyard owner (Mark 12:1-12) portrays Christ as eternal Son. “Having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved, he sent him also last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son” (12:6).

It is evident that the son of the vineyard owner was the son before he was sent on his mission. He was his father’s son before he was sent. This parable obviously portrays the sending of God’s well-beloved Son into a world that rejected and murdered Him. As we reverently ponder this parable, we must conclude that the Lord Jesus was the beloved Son of the Father before He was sent on His mission. Philpot wrote, “If the parable has any force, or indeed any meaning—and it would be sacrilege to say it has not—God the Father must have had a Son in heaven with Him before He sent Him.”¹⁶

God the Father gave His Son. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

How amazing is the love of the Father! What a sacrifice He was willing to make, yielding up the One who was so near and dear to His heart—His well-beloved unique Son who ever was in His bosom! Since God “gave his only

begotten Son,” Christ was God’s Son before He was given. To say that He became God’s only begotten Son by the incarnation would rob John 3:16 of its meaning, force, and preciousness. Vine wrote: “The value and greatness of the gift lay in the Sonship of Him who was given. His Sonship was not the effect of His being given.”¹⁷ Philpot reasoned:

Now must He not have existed as His Son before He gave Him? If I give a person a thing, my giving it does not change the nature of the object given, does not make it different from what it was before I gave it. So, if God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son, He must surely have been His only-begotten Son before He gave Him. . . . His giving Him could not make Him His only-begotten Son, because the wondrous love consisted in this, that though He was God’s only-begotten Son, still He gave Him. Any other interpretation quite destroys the meaning and force of the passage.¹⁸

Hocking agreed:

The measure of God’s love of the world is to be seen in His giving the One Who was peculiarly and exclusively the object of His affection—His Only-begotten Son. The stupendous wonder to our faith is that One was along with God in this unique relationship of Son, and God gave that One. This is surely the teaching of the text, not that God’s gift was One Who became His Only-begotten Son in manhood, that is, in the process and at the time of giving. If Sonship began in incarnation, why do we not read that God gave the Son of man? But no, the Only-begotten Son of God was given. . . . To think otherwise of Him than as the Eternal Son is to detract from the personal glory of God’s incomparable gift.¹⁹

Romans 8:32 asks, “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?” This verse reminds us of the time when Abraham delivered up his son Isaac (Genesis 22). The patriarch was told to take his only son, whom he loved, and bring him to an altar of sacrifice. Surely Isaac, who was a type of Christ (Hebrews 11:19), was Abraham’s son long before he was delivered up to the altar. It was the loving father/son relationship already existing that made this sacrifice so costly. God the Father took His Son—His unique Son Jesus, the One whom He loved before the foundation of the world—and delivered Him up for us all. Love so amazing!

If God had spared His Son (and we shudder even to think about this), then there would be no Savior for sinners. We would be without hope and without help. If the Father had not sent His Son, had not given His Son, salvation would have been impossible. But He still would have been the Son of God, because this is who He is, essentially and inherently. He is truly and properly the Son of God because of His eternal relationship to the Father, not because of His incarnate mission. His saviorhood relates to His incarnate mission (Matthew 1:21; John 3:17), but His Sonship relates to His eternal person. Thanks be to God that the Son was sent and was given for our sakes—the One who was with the Father from the very beginning (John 1:1-2; 1 John 1:1-2).

Long ago the prophet Isaiah proclaimed this message: “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” (Isaiah 9:6). As to His humanity, the Lord Jesus was the child who was born. As to His deity, He was the Son who was given by the Father (compare John 3:16). Christ became a child, but He did not become the Son. He who was God’s Son from all eternity was sent forth on a saving mission and was “made of a woman” nearly two thousand years ago (Galatians 4:4). His divine Sonship did not come about by human birth.

Christ had a relationship with the Father prior to the incarnation. “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father” (John 16:28).

How could He come forth from the Father if His existence as the Son did not begin until the incarnation? John 16:28 clearly implies that He was with the Father before coming into the world and thus there must have existed a Father/Son relationship prior to Bethlehem. If Christ did not become the Son until the incarnation, we might expect this verse to say something like this: “I came forth from God and then I became the Son. I leave the world and go back to God who ever since My birth has been My Father.” Vine wrote:

His return to the Father was in the reverse order of procedure to that of His coming. He came from Heaven to the world; He returned from the world to Heaven. He speaks of the One from Whom He came as “the Father,” not in the sense that He came out from One Who subsequently became the Father at His birth, but from One Who was the Father when He came out.²⁰

We enter holy ground as we listen to the Son praying to His Father: “And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. . . . thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:5,24). These verses bring us back to the time prior to creation. Before the world ever was, the Father and the Son existed in an intimate, loving relationship. People who believe that Christ was not the Son until the incarnation must interpret these verses differently. They say that before the foundation of the world, the Father was not yet the Father and the Son was not yet the Son; the

Father and the Son were nameless persons of the Trinity who would not assume their Father/Son roles until the incarnation. Such an understanding is forced, irreverent, and out of harmony with the clear, simple statements of Scripture. Vine wisely asked, “If that pre-existent love was not between the Father and the Son, what could have been the relationship in which it was exercised?”²¹

In 1 John 1:1-2 we learn that the Word was in the beginning and the Word was with the Father. If Jesus was with the Father from the beginning, He must have been there as the Father’s Son. Vine wrote: “The term ‘Father’ implies the existence of a Son. . . . He does not here say that He who was the Life was ‘with God,’ but that He was ‘with the Father.’”²² Because the Father/Son relationship existed from the very beginning, Jesus must be the eternal Son.

The Son of God became the Son of David. “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:3-4).

He was David’s Son from Bethlehem; He was God’s Son from all eternity. He became the Son of David by human birth, but He did not become the Son of God. Benjamin Warfield said it well:

He who always was and continues to be the Son of God was manifested to men first as the Son of David, and then, after His resurrection, as also the exalted Lord. He always was in the essence of His being the Son of God; this Son of God became of the seed of David and was installed as—what He always was—the Son of God, though now in His proper power, by the resurrection of the dead.²³

It is helpful to compare Romans 1 to John 1. John wrote, "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). Paul also spoke of the incarnation when he wrote that the Son "was made of the seed of David" (Romans 1:3). Christ existed as the Word long before He became flesh (John 1:1-2). Likewise He existed as the Son long before He became David's seed according to the flesh. John 1 tells us that He who was God became flesh. Romans 1 tell us that He who was the Son of God became the Son of David. At the incarnation the eternal God became flesh and the eternal Son became a man. The eternal God did not become the Son. On the contrary "we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man, without ceasing to be God."²⁴

His Sonship had no beginning but it did have a manifestation. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

It is one thing to speak of the manifestation of the Son of God.²⁵ This is Biblical. It is quite another thing to speak of the origination of the Son of God. This is heretical. His Sonship had no beginning. The verb *to make manifest* means "to make visible or to bring to light what has previously been hidden." Hocking wrote:

The idea of manifestation is never a transition from a state of non-existence to that of existence. . . . Accordingly, if we would do the honour to the Son that is due Him, we must acknowledge that He was the Son of God before His manifestation. . . . Being Son of God eternally, He has been manifested publicly and visibly in flesh for His mediatorial work."²⁶

Melchizedek was a type of the eternal Son of God. "Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like

unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually” (Hebrews 7:3).

The strong testimony that this verse presents for the eternal Sonship of Christ must not be missed. The blessed Spirit of God guided the pen of Moses in such a way that the biography of Melchizedek says nothing about his parents or his birth or his age or his death. These deliberate omissions were for the purpose of presenting Melchizedek as a type of the Son of God: “He was made ‘like unto the Son of God,’ and the similarity lay in this, that he had ‘neither beginning of days nor end of life.’ Accordingly it was as the Son of God that Christ was without beginning of days. His Sonship was therefore unoriginated and eternal.”²⁷ As the “Son of God” He was “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life.”

Those who hold the view that *Son of God* is an incarnate title or role would falsify this verse because in His incarnation as the Son of man the Lord Jesus did have a mother (Galatians 4:4), did have a descent or genealogy (Matthew 1 and Luke 3), did have a beginning of days (compare Luke 3:23), and did have an end of life (He died). However, His divine Sonship has nothing to do with human parents, human lineage, human birth, or time measurements; it is an eternal Sonship.

May the reader thoughtfully consider the united testimony of the many passages cited in this chapter and form safe and solid conclusions based upon “Thus saith the Lord!” May we search the Scriptures diligently and daily to see if these things be so.