

Chapter 4

THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL SONSHIP

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, the One ever being (existing) in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him (John 1:18, literal rendering from the Greek).

The doctrine of eternal Sonship declares that the second person of the triune godhead has eternally existed as the Son. The inspired Scriptures clearly identify Him as the Son of God. There was never a time when He was not the Son of God. At the incarnation He became a man; He did not *become* the Son. He was, is, and ever will be the Son. Son of God is His essential and inherent identity: “And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:69). These are solid, indisputable, Biblical facts on which the Christian faith may be fixed.

Those who deny this doctrine teach that Jesus *became* the Son of God at some point in history. Some say He became the Son at His baptism. Others say He became the Son at His resurrection, or even at His exaltation. Most of them, however, say He became the Son of God at the incarnation.¹ Regardless of different understandings concerning the time and event marking the beginning of His Sonship, those who deny the eternal Sonship of Christ all

agree that there was a time when He was not the Son of God.

The controversy surrounding Christ's Sonship hinges on certain key questions: Has there always existed a Father/Son relationship between the first and second persons of the godhead? Is Sonship merely a role, title, or function that Christ assumed at some point in history or is He essentially and eternally the beloved Son of the Father? Is Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God, or did He become the Son of God at the incarnation? Is He the true, proper, and actual Son of God intrinsically? Was the Son of God always in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18)? Is it wrong to refer to Him as the only begotten of the Father prior to His conception at Nazareth and His birth at Bethlehem? Before the creation of the world was Christ the Son?

God's Word provides solid and satisfying answers to all such questions. We approach this study with much caution and reverence, for we are speaking of the blessed Son of God, our Savior and Lord. May we write nothing that would bring shame or dishonor to His holy name and to His blessed person.

"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. . . . I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matthew 11:27,25). May the Father open our eyes and clearly reveal these things to us that we might worship, adore, and serve His Son.

A detailed defense of the doctrine of eternal Sonship will be presented later. For now an overview of the evidence will suffice. We will begin our survey at the resurrection and go backward in time to before the world was created to see if we can find evidence showing that the second person of the Trinity existed as the Son.

At the resurrection Jesus Christ our Lord was "declared

to be the Son of God with power” (Romans 1:4). He did not become the Son at this point in time, but He demonstrated that He was the Son. The resurrection was the promised sign (John 2:18-19; Matthew 12:38-40) that vindicated His claims and proved He was exactly who He said He was.

Going further back in time, we come to the transfiguration when the Father spoke audibly and declared Christ’s Sonship: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him” (Matthew 17:5). Traveling back to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, we hear a similar declaration on the occasion of His baptism: “And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

The next step in our trip backward through time will be at Jesus’ birth. An angel spoke these words about the One who would be born: “Therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). At His birth Jesus was Lord (Luke 2:11), King (Matthew 2:2), and Son of God (Luke 1:35)!

As we go back into the Lord’s preincarnate history, is there any evidence that He was identified as God’s Son? In John 16:28 the Lord Jesus said, “I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world.” This passage clearly indicates that before coming into this world Jesus was with the Father, strongly implying that a Father/Son relationship existed prior to the incarnation. Also the many passages that speak of the Father sending the Son (John 3:17; Galatians 4:4, etc.) suggest that Jesus existed as the Son prior to His mission. The Father did not send One who would become His Son; He sent One who was already His Son into the world.

Do we find mention of the Son of God prior to the New Testament? The Old Testament says little about the distinct persons of the Trinity. Some passages, however, mention or at least hint at Christ’s Sonship. Isaiah predicted that there would come a day when God’s Son would

be given. (Compare Isaiah 9:6 with John 3:16.) In Psalm 2:12 the kings of the earth are told to “kiss the Son.” In Daniel 3:25 Nebuchadnezzar was astounded to see a fourth person in the fiery furnace, whose form “is like the Son of God.” Regardless of Nebuchadnezzar’s understanding of who was in that furnace, from our perspective we can identify that fourth person as the preincarnate Christ, God’s unique Son.² Proverbs 30:4, another fascinating passage, speaks of the Creator and also the Creator’s Son! These passages suggest that during the Old Testament period the idea of God having a Son could be found in the Scriptures, although the full revelation of this truth awaited the New Testament period.

Let us now go back to the time of creation. In Colossians 1:13-16 and Hebrews 1:2 we are told that all things were created by the Son. These passages point to the fact that Jesus was the Son of God at the time of creation. They do not say that all things were made by One who would become the Son of God at a later time.

Finally we come to the time before the universe existed. We can know nothing of this time apart from divine revelation. The Lord Jesus gave us a remarkable glimpse into those past ages of eternity in His prayer to the Father: “And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I [the Son] had with thee [the Father] before the world was. . . . for thou [the Father] lovedst me [the Son] before the foundation of the world” (John 17:5,24).

We conclude that before the world existed, the Father and the Son had a marvelous love relationship. The eternal Son of God was ever the delight of His Father’s heart. Before the foundation of the world, the only begotten of the Father was constantly abiding in the Father’s bosom (John 1:18). We are reminded of the Father’s words, “This is my beloved Son.”