

“SONSHIP” versus “ETERNALLY BEGOTTEN SON”

Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.

Excerpt from Apples of Gold

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Proverbs 25:11

In dealing with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, confusion arises if we fail to keep in mind that various Scriptures unmistakably represent Him as being 100% human whereas others declare Him 100% deity. Scripture does not present Him as 50% human and 50% deity. Such is pure mythology and/or paganism. After all, what is a 50% man? One is either 100% human or he is not human. The same is true of deity. The confusion concerning Jesus’ nature is compounded when we fail to recognize that some statements in Scripture are intended to emphasize only His humanity whereas others were given for the very purpose of stressing and reminding us of His deity. When this is acknowledged and carefully considered, most troubling questions related to His person can readily be resolved. Let us now apply this to the “sonship” - “eternally begotten son” issue.

I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; **this day** have I begotten thee. (Psalm 2:7)

The psalm clearly teaches that some day *after* King David, not in everlasting ages past, God would have a son. The verb tense here is *future* as is the companion verse, Hebrews 1:5 (“will” and “shall”).

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 1:5)

And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that **the promise** which was made unto the fathers, 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. (Acts 13:32-33)

The above refers to the incarnation.¹ (& resurrection) when the second person of the divine Trinity took a human body to redeem fallen man (Phil.2:5-11; Isa.7:14, 9:6: i.e., when God had a Son through Mary – Mat.1:18-25; Luk.1:35; Jn.1:14). This happened on a certain day: “This Day have I begotten thee” (Heb.1:5-6). Therefore, we cannot say that God had a Son before this time. Indeed, this demonstrates that sonship in connection with God must refer to humanity and not to deity.

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. (Luk.1:35)

¹ Finis Jennings Dake, *Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible*, 8th printing, (Lawrenceville, GA: 1974), Acts 13:33, left column, fn. f, p. 139. This and the following 5 paragraphs are taken almost verbatim from Dake. Albert Barnes states: “...there is nothing in the use of the phrase ‘this day,’ ...in the NT to sustain it” (the “eternal generation” of Christ); *Barnes Notes on the Old Testament, Psalms*, (Baker Books, 1998 [1870-72]), p. 19. Dr. John MacArthur has concurred in writing.

The teaching whereby Jesus Christ is a “god” begotten in Eternity (or sometime before Genesis 1:1) is the official theology of the Jehovah Witnesses cult. Miguel Servetus (1511-1553) was burned at the stake (with Calvin’s approval) for refusing to believe that the “begatting” was eternal. Servetus thought the “begatting” took place when Christ was born of the Virgin Mary – exactly as it appears in context! John Calvin and all Reformed theologians put the “begatting” before Genesis 1 on the philosophical idea that since “all of God’s decrees were eternal” (a philosophical part of Calvin’s theological belief), the decree of Psalm 2:7 had to be a reference to a transaction that took place before Genesis 1 (see Heb.1:6).

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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. (John 1:14)

As Deity, the person we now know of as Jesus Christ had no beginning, was not begotten, was not a Son, and did not come into being. He always existed as God (Mic.5:2), but as a man and as God's Son He did have a beginning. He was begotten – this being at the point in time when Mary miraculously conceived. Therefore, the doctrine of the “eternal sonship” of Jesus Christ is unscriptural, irreconcilable to reason, and is a self-contradictory concept. Eternity has no beginning; thus, since He has been God from eternity, then He could not have a beginning as God. Eternity has no reference to time so if He was begotten “THIS DAY,” then it was done in time and not in eternity.

The word Son supposes time, generation, father, mother, beginning, and conception – unless one is a son by creation as Adam (Luk.3:38), and the angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Gen.6:1-4). Time, created, beginning – these are opposites to God and eternity and are absolutely impossible to reconcile with the two. If sonship refers to deity and not to humanity, then this person of the Deity had a beginning in time and not in eternity. The only living God, the Creator, is immortal and eternal. He cannot die. No real God could so do. Therefore, as the one Scripture calls God's only begotten son did die, the word “son” or “sonship” in connection with Christ Jesus must always refer to the 33½ year time span of His un-fallen humanity – not to His deity (see Luke 1:32a).

It is plainly stated in Psa.2:7; Acts 13:33; Heb.1:5 and 5:5 that God had a Son “THIS DAY” and not in eternity (the day being defined in Acts 13:33 – the ultimate fulfillment of Psa.2:7 – is resurrection day: Heb. 5:5 shows that it was upon this very basis that Christ Jesus became qualified to become a priest forever “after the order of Melchizedek” – “by the power of an endless life,” Heb.7:16-17). The incarnation and resurrection are seen in Scripture as a single complete entity – the 33½ year span of Jesus' earthly life – with these two events as the beginning and ending, the bookends.

Heb.1:5-7; Luk.1:35; and Mat.1:18-25 tell us when the begetting took place. It was nearly 2,000 years ago. It had been predicted that God would have a Son (Isa.7:14; 9:6; cp. Heb.1:5; Mat.1:18-25; Luk.1:32-35). This was fulfilled when the Virgin miraculously “conceived of the Holy Ghost” (Mat.1:20), and not before. But before this, He and the Father were one and the same eternal Spirit¹ and therefore equal; hence, He was not then a son. Thus, we see the Scriptures neither teach that Christ was an eternally begotten son nor, if such, an eternally lesser god having always been in submission to His Father. (Isa. 9:6; Joh. 5:17-18 & 22; Phil. 2:6-9).

¹ “God is a Spirit” (Jn. 4:24), not three spirits. As there is but one God (1 Tim. 2:5; Jam. 2:19), Christianity is monotheistic. We do not worship three God's. Thus, the proper teaching of the Trinity is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all one and the same eternal Spirit. It was for the sake of redeeming fallen man that the Creator took upon Himself three differing ministries. Father continued to govern heaven and earth, the Creator also came to earth as a helpless, totally dependant babe – the only sinless human “Son of God” – so that He could shed His blood to pay for mankind's sin(s) (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22, 10:4: as God, He could not bleed). It is the Holy Spirit's ministry to convict us of this (Jn. 16:7-11, and much more).

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Moreover, the title “son” always refers to that of a position submitted to a father who is of higher authority – it is never meant to signify a position of equal authority to the title “Father”. Yet the Bible clearly declares Jesus to be equal to and one with the Father; hence, He was not then a son.

For unto us a **child** is born, unto us a **son** is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, **The mighty God, The everlasting Father**, The Prince of Peace. (Isa.9:6; Psa.50:1; Isa.1:24, 10:20-21; Jer.32:18 call Jehovah the Mighty God.)

... Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, 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. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Regarding “eternal sonship”, Albert Barnes (Presbyterian, Princeton, 1798-1870) has written:¹

“Psalm 2:7. Thou art my Son. That is, Jehovah had declared Him to be his Son; he had conferred on Him the rank and dignity fairly involved in the title – The Son of God. ... the appellation “THE Son of God” is not appropriated in the Scriptures to any one but the Messiah. It does not occur before this in the Old Testament, and it occurs but once after this (Dan.3:25). This makes its use in the case before us the more remarkable, and justifies the reasoning of the author of the epistle to the Hebrews (at 1:5) as to its meaning.

“This day.”...(see Acts 13:33; Heb.1:5). The whole passage has been often appealed to in support of the doctrine of the “eternal generation” of Christ, meaning that He was “begotten” from eternity; that is, that His Divine nature was in some sense an emanation from the Father, and that this is from eternity. Whatever may be thought of that doctrine, however, either as to its intelligibility or its truth, there is nothing in the use of the phrase “this day,” or in the application of the passage in the New Testament (Acts 13:33; Heb.1:5), to sustain it. The language, indeed, in the connection in which it is found, does...demonstrate that, He had a pre-existence, since it, is addressed to Him as the result of a decree or covenant made with Him by Jehovah, and as the foundation of the purpose to set Him as King on the hill of Zion.

“... Considered, then, as a promise or purpose, this refers to the period before the incarnation; Considered as pertaining to the execution of that purpose, it refers to the time when He was raised from the dead and exalted over all things as King in Zion. In neither case can the words “this day” be construed as meaning the same as eternity or from eternity; and therefore they can determine nothing respecting the doctrine of “eternal generation.”

¹ *Barnes Notes on the Old Testament, Psalms*, (Baker Books, 1998 [1870-72]), p. 19, and *Notes on the New Testament, Acts*, (Baker Books, 1998 [1884-85]), pp. 208-209.

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“Acts 13:33. God has fulfilled. God has completed or carried into effect by the resurrection of Jesus. He does not say that every part of the promise had reference to His resurrection; but His being raised up completed or perfected the fulfillment of the promises which had been made respecting Him. ...

“This day have I begotten thee. It is evident that Paul uses the expression here as implying that the Lord Jesus is called the Son of God because He raised Him up from the dead, ... This interpretation of an inspired apostle fixes the meaning of this passage in the psalm, and proves that it is not there used with reference to the doctrine of eternal generation, or to his incarnation, but that he is called his Son because he was raised from the dead (i.e., to beget means “to impart life” – on resurrection morning as Jesus lay dead in the tomb, the Father by the Holy Spirit imparted life to that lifeless body and thus that day begot Him, FNJ).

And this interpretation accords with the scope of the psalm. In ver. 1-3 the psalmist records the combination of the rulers of the earth against the Messiah, and their efforts to cast off his reign. This was done, and the Messiah was rejected. All this pertains, not to his previous existence, but to the Messiah on the earth. In ver. 4, 5, the psalmist shows that their efforts would not be successful; that God would laugh at their designs; that is, that their plans should not succeed. In ver. 6, 7, he shows that the Messiah would be established as a king; that this was the fixed decree, and that He had been begotten for this. All this is represented as subsequent to the raging of the heathen, and to the counsel of the kings against him, and must therefore refer, not to his eternal generation or his incarnation, but to something succeeding his death; that is, to his resurrection, and his establishment as King at the right hand of God.

This interpretation by the apostle Paul proves, therefore, that this passage is not to be used to establish the doctrine of the eternal generation of Christ.

“Christ is called the Son of God for various reasons. In Luk.1:35, because He was begotten by the Holy Ghost. In this place (Acts 13:33), on account of his resurrection. In Rom.1:4 it is also said that He was declared to be the “Son of God by the resurrection from the dead.”

Concerning his (God’s) 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)

“The resurrection from the dead is represented as in some sense the beginning of life (as explained in FNJ parenthesis above), and it is with reference to this that the terms Son, and begotten from the dead, are used, as the birth of a child is the beginning of life. Thus Christ is said to be “the first-born from the dead;” (Col.1:18,) and thus, in Rev.1:5, He is called “the first begotten of the dead;” and with reference to this renewal or beginning of life he is called a Son. In whatever other senses He is called a

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Son in the New Testament, yet it is here proved, (1) That he is called a Son from His resurrection; and (2) That this is the sense in which the expression in the psalm is to be used. ... The purpose was formed before Christ came into the world; it was executed or carried into effect by the resurrection from the dead.”

Finally, from Adam Clarke (Methodist, 1762-1832, colleague of John Wesley)¹ we find:

Psalm 2:7 ... “We have St. Paul’s authority for applying to the resurrection of our Lord these words, ‘Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee;’ - see Acts 13:33; ... It is well known that the words, “Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee,” have been produced by many as a proof of the eternal generation of the Son of God. ... The word haiyom, swyh = To-Day, is in no part of the sacred writings used to express eternity or any thing in reference to it; nor can it have any such signification. To day is an absolute designation of the present, and equally excludes time past and time future; and never can, by any figure, or allowable latitude of construction, be applied to express eternity. ...

“... and now gave farther proof of this by raising the Godman to his right hand ... (Rom.1:3-4) evidently alludes when speaking of “Jesus Christ, who was made of the seed of David according to the flesh, ...

From his 5th Volume, Clarke continues at Luke 1:35:²

Luke 1:35 ... “Therefore also that holy thing (or person) - shall be called the Son of God. We may plainly perceive here, that the angel does not give the appellation of Son of God to the Divine nature of Christ; but to that holy person or thing (to & agion) which was to be born of the virgin, by the energy of the Holy Spirit. The Divine nature could not be born of the virgin; the human nature was born of her. The Divine nature had no beginning; it was God manifested in the flesh, I Tim.3 16; it was that Word which being in the beginning [from eternity (???, not so but speaking of the Creation – the same beginning as Gen.1:1, FNJ)] with God, John 1:2, was afterwards made flesh, (became manifest in human nature) and tabernacled among us, John 1:14. ... Two natures must ever be distinguished in Christ: the human nature, in reference to which he is the Son of God and inferior to him, Mark 13:32; John 5:19; 14:28, and the Divine nature which was from eternity, and equal to God, John 1:1, 10:30; Rom.9:5; Col 1:16-18. It is true, that to Jesus the Christ, as he appeared among men, every characteristic of the Divine nature is sometimes attributed, without appearing to make any distinction between the Divine and human natures; but is there any part of the Scriptures in which it is plainly said that the Divine nature of Jesus was the Son of God? ... the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is, in my opinion, anti-scriptural, and highly dangerous. This doctrine I reject for the following reasons:

¹ Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, Vol. III, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1830), p. 223. Clarke worked 45 years in writing and publishing this work which originally consisted of 8 volumes.

² Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, Vol. V, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1830), pp. 360-361.

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1. I have not been able to find any express declaration in the Scriptures concerning it.
2. If Christ be the Son of God, as to his Divine nature, then he cannot be eternal; for son implies a father; and father implies, in reference to son, precedency in time, if not in nature too. Father and son imply the idea of generation; ...
3. If Christ be the Son of God, as to his Divine nature, then the Father is of necessity prior, consequently superior to him (i.e., from eternity – FNJ).
4. Again, if this Divine nature were begotten of the Father, then it must be in time; i.e., there was a period in which it did not exist, and a period when it began to exist. This destroys the eternity of our blessed Lord, and robs him at once of his Godhead.
5. To say that he was begotten from all eternity, is, in my opinion, absurd; and the phrase eternal Son is a positive self-contradiction. ETERNITY is that which has had no beginning, nor stands in any reference to TIME. Son supposes time, generation, and father; and time also antecedent to such generation. Therefore the conjunction of these two terms, Son and eternity is impossible, as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas.

“The enemies of Christ’s Divinity have, in all ages, availed themselves of this incautious method of treating this subject, and on this ground, have ever had the advantage of the defenders of the Godhead of Christ...The very use of this phrase is both absurd and dangerous; therefore let all those who value Jesus and their salvation abide by the Scriptures.”