



new creation teaching ministry: tuesday night studies 2009

## the things we firmly believe

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### Study 4: The Person and Work of the Son

#### Eternally the Son

In our brief discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity in Study 2 we spoke of the three persons in the Triune Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of these persons shares in the eternal divinity of God; none of them ever came to ‘be’, they always ‘were’. As such, each three share in the divine attributes—both the ‘communicable’ and the ‘incommunicable’.

We know this eternal being of the Son from clear statements of Scripture. John 1:1-3 tells us that the Word was from the beginning with God and was God. John repeats for emphasis, ‘He was with God in the beginning.’ The phrase ‘In the beginning . . .’ in these verses really means ‘When the beginning came to be, the Word already was’. Colossians 1:15-17 says:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

We can read similar verses about the Son’s eternal being in Hebrews 1:2-3 and John 17:5. Other verses clearly indicate by implication that the Son had being prior to his taking flesh as the man Jesus Christ; e.g. Philippians 2:5ff., 2Corinthians 8:9 etc. All the statements in John’s Gospel about the son being sent into or given for the world (John 3:16-17 being the most ‘famous’) imply this also.

The Father—Son relationship then is before time. So, it cannot be thought of in human terms where a father has a son in time, being in chronological precedence before him. The Father never *became* the Father and there never was a time when the Son was *born*. (If there was a point when the Father became the Father by the Son’s arrival, then we would have to say that essentially God is not Father, that He was something before He was Father, and that His Fatherhood is something of an add-on.) The Creeds of the Church try to capture this by speaking of the Son who is ‘. . . *eternally begotten* of the Father; God from God, light from light, true God from true God; *begotten not made*; of one being with the Father.’

Eternally the Son has *subsisted* in the Father, i.e. his true being as Son lies in his dependency upon the Father. The Father has been called ‘the fountainhead of the Godhead’. The Son has no *independent* being. To speak of his Sonship without acknowledging the Father’s leadership of him would make the categories of ‘Sonship’ and ‘Fatherhood’ meaningless. What this means is that from before creation began there has been an eternal relationship of glad authority and submission within the Godhead that does not undermine at all the co-equality in divinity of the members of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For us human beings who reject authority and struggle ceaselessly and shamelessly for independence from all other controls, this seems almost incomprehensible. It is actually the secret of life: the mystery of love, the mystery of security

## The Eternal Works of the Son

Whilst the Son is not independent of the Father, neither is he redundant in the actions of God. He has discrete personality and his own functional work, appointed to him by the Father. He has ever been one with the Father, in His glory and His love (John 17:5, 24-26). The Father is the *initiator*, and in all of the Father's works the Son has been at work. He is the *mediator* of creation, redemption and of the ultimate glorification and renewal of creation (John 1:1-3, Col. 1:15-17, Heb. 1:2). Hebrews 1:3 tells us that the whole of creation has been sustained by the powerful word of this Son who is the exact image, the radiance of God's glory. The passage 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 gives us indication that this eternal Son has been engaged in the Father's plan for the world through Israel's history before his becoming man:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank from the same spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

It is in this mediatorial role that Jesus became man. We only came to know the relationship of the Father and the Son, and the person and the work of the Son when the Son of God took on human flesh and bones and became a man. The incarnate son shows to us what has always been. To see him is to see the Father and to know him is to know the Father (John 14:6f; 15:23-24). Without the incarnation there is nothing that enables us to discover the truth of the person and the work of the Son. If Jesus were not born, the eternal Son of God being made man, we would never have understood the Trinity.

## The Son in the Flesh

It has been difficult to think through and speak of just how the deity of the eternal Son and the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth subsist together in the one person, Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> This difficulty is undoubtedly because there is nothing at all of parallel in all history or creation! We must humbly accept that we don't know how it is that divinity and humanity coexist in one person, without either losing its true distinctiveness. What we must insist on is:

- Everything that Jesus did on earth he did as a man empowered by the Holy Spirit of God (Acts 10:38; Matt. 12:28). In his earthly ministry he did not call upon reserves of divinity to accomplish anything. Jesus Christ was truly man, and not simply God dressed up like a man.
- All the time that this is so, he is nonetheless Emmanuel, God with us. Philippians 2:5-11 speaks of Christ emptying himself, and certainly he did not call on the powers of divinity in any of his human action, but this man was also the eternal Son of God, and all the powers of his deity must have been at work as he continued his eternal mediatorial ministry e.g. sustaining creation by his word.

## The Works and the Titles of the Incarnate Son

Throughout the Gospels there are titles given to Jesus, which indicate that he is working to fulfil certain roles of 'offices' that have been prophesied throughout Israel's history. These spell out for the redemptive work of Christ. Jesus knew that he must accomplish these works (John 4:34, 8:29, 17:4, 19:30). These titles indicate works that the Father had given him to accomplish in sending him. All these works are done as the action of the Father's grace in the world—for us and for our salvation. And in all these works he is setting forth the glory of God.

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is the matter of submission and authority. See Geoffrey Bingham's booklet, *The Authority and Submission of Love* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1982) for a fuller and richer (and perhaps life-changing!) treatment of this theme.

<sup>2</sup> The appendix to this study tries to explain some of the errors of thinking in this matter that have troubled the church in her history.

*Son of Man*: Psalm 8:4 / Hebrews 2:5ff.; Daniel 7:13 /Mark 13:26; 14:62; 2:28; 8:31; 9:31; 10:33; 14:21—the Son of Man is an earthly and divine figure who is given by the Lord authority over the nations of the world. In Mark 10:45 this regal figure is linked with prophesied Suffering Servant of Isaiah 40-66. He establishes his authority by his suffering. The work of Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from his suffering. This title was Jesus' preferred self-designation.

*Son of God*: There are various times in Scripture where there is recorded for us declarations of the Father concerning Jesus Christ that he is His Son,. The prophets spoke of him (e.g. Psa. 2, 45, 89, 110). At the announcement of his birth it was said that 'the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God' (Luke 1:35). At his baptism (Luke 4:22) and at his transfiguration (Luke 9:35) the Father declared that this man was His Son, beloved and chosen by Him, and that His favour rested upon him, and that all should heed him. Hebrews 1 and Romans 1:4 indicate that by virtue of his resurrection and ascension Jesus has been declared Son of God.

In the ancient Greek-speaking world, this title was used of rulers, emperors and miracle workers. IN the Old Testament it was used in three ways:

1. The people of Israel are referred to this way (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1)
2. The kings of Israel are called by this title (2Sam. 7:14)
3. The expected future Messiah is called this in the kingly psalms (Psa. 2:7).

These statements are not primarily about the Son of God's eternal relationship with the Father, but rather indicates that Jesus is the One chosen by God the Father for all the ministry of redemption, atonement and reconciliation that lies ahead of him, i.e. the work of being the Christ and Lord of the Kingdom of God. You could say that they are the affirmations of the Father that Jesus Christ is the mediator of His actions in history. The Jews understood this claim as a blasphemous one to deity (John 10:33, 36), and so the idea of identity in relationship with God is present in the title also.

*Messiah*: literally this means 'anointed one' and is translated in Greek as *Christ*. In the Old Testament it was a title primarily for the king of Israel (1Sam. 9:16; 24:6) but called also be used of prophets (1Kings 19:16) and priests (Lev. 8:12). In Matt. 16:16 and 26:63, this phrase is parallel with *Son of God* which really means 'delegate of God', God's chosen servant accomplishing the Father's will. To be Messiah is to be the descendant of David who inherits the promises made to him and to be the one who ushers in the glorious day of God's kingly rule. Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection and made clear to them from the prophecy of the whole Old Testament the Christ had to suffer in order to establish the kingdom of God (Luke 24:26-27).

*Lord*: this refers to his place as Mediator of creation, i.e. he is the one in whose hands creation's destiny lies. He is the director of the flow of history, bringing everything to the appointed goal and intention of the Father. This Lordship involves the defeat of all those powers and personalities that oppose and seek to destroy the plan of God. 1 John 3:8 says, 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.' In Matthew's Gospel, those who are seeking help call to Jesus as Lord—8:2, 6, 25; 14:30; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30—and this surely shows that his Lordship means the authority and power to deal with the death-dealing forces that are at work in the world. After the resurrection, the basic cry of the early church was 'Jesus is Lord!' for it was clear that by death, resurrection and ascension Jesus had defeated sin, death, the world, Satan and all in league with him.

## The Post-Resurrection Works of the Incarnate Son

Perhaps one of the most amazing, and to some scandalous, claims of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ was raised bodily. The eternal Son is joined now into eternity with humanity. He does not relinquish his body in the resurrection; he has a continuing incarnation. One of the key themes of the resurrection accounts in the gospels is the absence of the body in the grave (Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:3, 6, 12; John 20:1-8). The appearing of the risen Jesus to the disciples was not that of a ghost but of a man who met with them and who could eat and drink with them, talk with them as friends, and be seen, touched and held by them (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:15ff, **36-43**; John 20:19-20, 26-28; 21:4-14). It is true that this body is transformed and glorified, but human still. Calvin: ‘Glorified dust sits at the right hand of God!’

So, in Acts 1:1 we hear that this book is to be about the ongoing works of *Jesus*, i.e. the man. The events recorded in Acts are the earthly evidence of what is described in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet”. Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

The resurrected Jesus is working out in history the fruit of the earthly ministry of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. This is the content also the great vision of Jesus Christ in Revelation 5:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no-one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

In all this Jesus Christ is progressing the triumph of the gospel in the world through judgment and blessing, and interceding / intervening for his people as they proclaim him and live in this world, often facing deep opposition and battle. The testimony of Scripture is that he will faithfully and successfully continue this ministry to its end, when he will have defeated all evil and returned to judge the world. He then with the Father will dwell with the people of God who are the fruit of his suffering in the renewed creation, the new heavens and earth. All this is the work of the Son of God, given to him by the Father and for which he is strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Appendix: Errors about the person and work of the Son<sup>3</sup>

### Ebionism

This offshoot from Jewish Christianity solved the problem of the relationship of the deity and humanity of Christ by effectively removing the divinity. Jesus was simply the human—though divinely appointed—Messiah, destined to return at the end of the age to reign on earth by God’s power. Christianity was primarily a moral code higher or fulfilling the law of Moses.

Perhaps liberal Christianity is the closest relative to this misrepresentation today. We must take the divinity of Christ very seriously if we are going to have a work of God in His grace which brings salvation for human beings. If Jesus is only human, he is part of the problem, inheriting all of Adam’s curse rather than taking it on to deal with it.

### Docetism

Hints of this movement are found in the New Testament. It solved the issue of the relationship between Christ’s divinity and humanity by abolishing his humanity. Christ only *seemed* (Gk: *dokeo*) to become a man. This idea came from a pagan idea that matter was evil (cf. the Bible’s strong teaching on the goodness of creation.)

At times evangelical Christianity strays towards this error when too much is claimed for the miraculous works of Jesus as ‘proof of his divinity’. We must take very seriously the humanity of Jesus in all respects if we are to have a Saviour who can represent us before the Father.

### Gnosticism

The world of this belief system is full of bizarre speculations; it is hard to find a unified system of thought. Christ is seen by some of these writers to have descended from the heavenly world and for a time united himself with the ‘human’ person Jesus, whose body was formed of a psychic substance. It was linked with docetism. Jesus ended up being neither God nor man in this system, but some weird hybrid between.

Gnosticism today is often met in new age spiritualities. So too there are hints of this in the idea of an ‘alien redeemer’ who will come from outside our world to save us.

### Arianism

This was one of the greatest challenges to Biblical teaching about the person of the Son. It held a majority position amongst church leaders for a time. Arius (AD 256-336) was an ordained minister who came to hold that the Son was created. He was influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Plato who saw a deep divide between the tangible world, which we experience through our senses, and the intangible world of ideas. God belonged to the second world, physical humanity to the first. The two are radically separated. Arius argued that the Word of God belongs to the creaturely side of being, and so the Son was not eternal, but a created being. ‘There was a time when Christ was not.’ Christ was the most exalted creature, but *only* a creature.

Arius was opposed by Athanasius. Athanasius’ stand was heroic and often lonely—he faced political forces as well as theological ones in his affirmation of Biblical truth. With great clear-sightedness he saw that anything less than a fully divine Saviour would be insufficient to meet our need. He clung to the truth that Christ was ‘of one substance’ with the Father.

Arianism shows itself today in the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians and similar movements.

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<sup>3</sup> These summaries are taken from Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, Intervarsity Press, Leicester 1982, pp. 142-144. Also information has been gleaned from various articles in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1984.

## **Apollinarianism**

Apollinarius (310-390) was a follower of Athanasius and had a reputation for saintly graciousness and godly ability. He suffered excommunication under an Arian bishop. However he deviated from Athanasius in a significant way. He argued that human beings were of three parts—body, sensitive soul and rational soul (the will element of humanity). In his understanding, the Logos took the place of the Jesus' human rational soul. Again Jesus was a kind of hybrid. Jesus did not possess an entire human nature. Against this the church argued, 'That which is not assumed (i.e. taken on, adopted by Christ in his incarnation) is not healed.'

## **Nestorianism**

Nestorius was bishop of Constantinople (Istanbul in modern Turkey) from AD 428. He wanted to preserve the full humanity of Christ, and the full deity, but he held that these two natures were almost completely separated. He did not want anything said of the divinity that diminished its greatness. But it resulted in a kind of schizophrenic view of Christ—one thing being attributed to his humanity and another to his deity.

## **Eutychianism**

Eutyches was an opponent of Nestorius. Rather than separating the two natures as Nestorius had done so radically, he claimed that the two natures were somehow melded into one nature and clad in human flesh in the incarnation. Eutyches denied that the body of Jesus was the same in essence as the body of other men. Eutyches' view implies that Jesus is some kind of third being, neither true God nor truly human, and so unable to act as mediator.

The great Creeds of the Church—Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, Chalcedonian—were formulated to give as clear as possible expression to truth about the relationship of Jesus' humanity and divinity (amongst other concerns also.) The central clause of the Chalcedonian statement is that:

' . . . we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son . . . perfect in Godhead . . . perfect in manhood . . . of one substance with the Father in Godhead, of one substance with us in manhood . . . made known in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation . . . the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one person and one subsistence.'

These debates should warn us too from having too strongly a *reactive* theology. Some of the heresies arose out of a desire to defeat a contrary error. Theological shots fired in anger nearly always miss the mark! Rather than our theology being defined in reaction to something that we (angrily) perceive as wrong, we must begin in Scripture and let that shape our whole system of thought before we engage the battle with contrary ideas. When we are reactive we may well end in a battle involving other agendas than the clear statement of the truth of God.

Reading through this list of errors can be useful to see if your own view holds to a truly Biblical understanding of the relationship of the divinity and humanity of the incarnate Son of God, or if you are trending away to an unhelpful position. The main problem of each of the errors is that they actually undermine the reality and fullness of the work of Jesus Christ who is the Mediator between God and man.