

"HIS ONLY SON"

In the Apostles' Creed, Jesus Christ is confessed to be God's 'only Son'. Scripture affirms that God has many sons.¹ This raises the question; in what sense is Jesus Christ God's *only* Son? We need a little church history as background. The Apostles' Creed was gradually formed by common consent as a digest of the apostolic doctrine. The present form dates from the end of the second century.

The rise of various heresies resulted in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325. This was twice added to by Church councils. The final form is universally accepted by churches that profess to be Christian, with the exception that the Greek Church accepts only that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, not that he proceeds from the Father 'and the Son'. The Nicene Creed affirms Jesus Christ to be 'the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made...'

I think you will see that this is quite an expansion of the three words, 'His only Son!' The additions show that, in the light of heresies begun in the earliest centuries, the Church universal eventually considered 'His only Son' to be an inadequate definition of the Divine dignity of Jesus Christ. It is capable of too many *different* interpretations. What truths had to be defended and incorporated into Christian profession and worship?

The Son of God is a *Divine* person.

In three key verses the Apostle John presents the mystery of the hidden identity of Jesus Christ. In John 1.1 he writes: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In John 1.14 he writes: '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.' In John 1.18 John adds, 'No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.'

Christians do not claim to comprehend the mystery of the Son's relation to the Father but they do believe that there are truths plainly revealed in the

scriptures that can be stated. We may cite the following from these verses.

The Son's relation to the Father is 'essential'

We use the word 'essential' in a depleted sense meaning 'necessary'. The proper sense is 'relating to the essence of a thing.' It is something without which that spoken of ceases to be what it is. If a child asks for diluted orange juice to drink and her mother forgets to add the concentrated orange juice to the water in the glass she does not serve diluted orange juice. The essential ingredient, that which makes diluted orange juice what it is, would be missing.

We describe the essence of God by his attributes such as self-existence, sovereignty, power, love and so on. The Son possesses all of these in the fullest extent for 'the Word was God'. There is *no inferiority of nature*. The Father and the Son are *equal in power and glory*. John testifies: 'we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father'.

The Son's relation to the Father is eternal

We mean by this that there never was a time when the Father had no Son and when the Son was without his Father and there never will be. There was a time when there was no universe, no angels and no created beings or things. Then, 'in the beginning was the Word'. The Son is *not posterior in time* to the Father. He did not come after him in any way.

The Son's relation to the Father involves union without merging and distinction without separation.

God the Father is God and God the Son is God but there are not two Gods but one. Yet the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father but Jesus could still say, 'I and my Father are one.' We accept the distinction of persons without division or separation in the being of God. It is mystery but the Son is with the Father (John 1.1), even 'in the bosom of the Father'. (John 1.14)

The Son of God is eternally begotten of the Father.

When we enquire concerning the exact relation of the first Person of the Trinity to the second we find it is *paternal*. When we enquire concerning the exact relation of the second Person of the Trinity to the first we find it is *filial*. This raises the question as to how we are to understand this. Is the Sonship official or pertaining to nature? Are we to view Christ as an

adopted creature such as the Jehovah's Witnesses maintain? Is he *made* or *begotten*? We cannot evade the question. The Nicene Creed had reason to explain further what was meant by 'God's only Son' in the Apostles' Creed. Many heresies could fit within the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene Creed was much more explicit affirming Jesus Christ to be 'the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made.' Four things are involved here in referring to Jesus Christ as God's Son.

The Uniqueness of the Son

Christ is God's 'only Son'. Christ is the only one that is as he is. There is none like him and none to be compared to him as Son of God. He shared our nature but was first altogether different as *the* Son of God. The angels are glorious and sometimes called sons of God but Hebrews 1 tells us they are but creatures and servants. In what then is the Saviour unique as the Son of God? The statement 'the only Son' would be without significance unless there is something distinctive about the relationship he has to the Father.

God has many sons when we take adopted believers into consideration (John 1.12). We may say that believers are begotten of God (John 1.13). John elsewhere writes, 'Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.'¹² In referring to the Son as 'the only begotten of the Father' (John 1.14), John draws our attention to the unique relationship. This relationship may be called 'generation'. It is this that defines the uniqueness of the Saviour as Son of God. 'Christ is the "only-begotten Son" by *generation*; we become begotten sons of God by *regeneration* and *adoption*.'¹³

The Generation of the Son

This is indicated in the words 'the only *begotten* Son of God'. Begotten has to do with the Son's relation to the Father. In John 1.14 he is called the 'only begotten of the Father' or more literally, 'the 'only begotten (forth) from the Father' (*para Patros*). Clearly there is nothing physical about this generation because God is a spirit. This generation results in no division, alienation, or change. There is distinction without disharmony. It remains both mystery and reality.

The contrast with the spiritually begotten sons of God (referred to in John 1.12 – 13) requires the heightened sense 'only-begotten' of the Father in John 1.14.⁴ Even if the noun 'only-begotten' is not taken as derived from the verb 'to beget' but from the noun for a member of a kin drawn from the verb 'to become', in its meaning 'born' or 'begotten' it still refers to the Son as the kith and kin or stock of the Father. In the context of verses 12 – 13, this could only mean *generated* in a unique sense as opposed to many *regenerated* sons.

The Eternal Generation of the Son

Eternal generation is taught in the Creed's words, 'begotten of his Father before all worlds'. The generation of the Son stands outside of time and space. He is eternally begotten of the Father 'before all worlds'. This makes a difference between 'generation' and 'creation'. Everything created is *outside* of God. Generation is *within* the eternal Divine Being 'always continuing and yet ever completed'. By it, without any temporal precedence, the Father ever 'generates the personal subsistence of the Son' and thereby in this generating communicates to the Son 'the divine essence in its entirety'.⁵

The Full Deity of the Son

The complete and undiminished Deity of Christ is stated in the words 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God'. To this we now turn.

The Son of God is fully Divine

The Son is fully God in every way. He is the Second Person of the Godhead. John is not intending to deny that the Son of God is a Divine *person* by calling him 'the Word'. Our words are *impersonal*. We, the subject, use them to make our thoughts known. When John writes that 'the Word *was* God' he is showing to us that the Son is a full personal member of the Godhead. At the same time he is giving to us a remarkable insight into the Trinity, by which we mean three persons in one God.

We can list differences between our thought and the word we use to express it but there is a unity between the thought and the word. If we bring our observation into it we have an analogy of trinity in unity. I *see* a dog and *think*, 'a dog'. I *speak* to my friend and say 'a dog'. My thought is not the word and my word is not the thought and both differ from my seeing but the three are in some sense *one*. This illustrates 'trinity in unity'

but not 'tripersonality in unity of substance'.

Without denying the personal subsistence of the Son, we can safely maintain that all that God the Father is is expressed in God the Son. This can be better appreciated from the following statements of the Nicene summary. (1) The Son is 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God'. Whatever God is belongs to the Son without being diminished in any way. All the Divine perfections belong to him as Paul affirms, 'in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.'⁶ (2) The Son is 'begotten, not made'. This is an unambiguous statement that the Son was *not* created in any way. He is not a creature and, therefore, is fully Jehovah God. (3) The Son is 'of one substance with the Father'. We have already seen that the Son is of the same essence as the Father being 'forth from' it. (4) The Son is the one 'by whom all things were made'. Far from being a creature the Son is the creator of all things (John 1.3).

Application

Failure to confess the Nicene doctrine placed individuals or congregations beyond the pale of the universal church and so it continued through the Reformation up to the present. The message of history concerning the testimony of scripture is plain. Christ is to be confessed as 'the only begotten Son of God' by those admitted into the Church and this is to be reflected in our worship in prayers, preaching and praise. It is scripturally and historically an integral part of Christian profession. A mere creature cannot save us. Only the infinitely precious blood of Emmanuel, God with us, can save us.

¹ Hebrews 1.10.

² 1 John 5.1.

³ Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *ad loc.* (Italics added).

⁴ So W. Bauer, in Hastings (ed.) *Dictionary of the Bible*.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 93.

⁶ Colossians 2.9.