

# **The Eternal Son**

With Special Reference to a Pamphlet by C.A. Coates

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From time to time during the centuries of Church history the question has been raised, whether Christ was Son only in and subsequent to incarnation, or whether it is scriptural to speak of Him as the eternal Son.

Just recently, among a certain section of the Lord's people, the question has been revived, and the extraordinary thing is the supposed discovery that Sonship only began with time, is welcomed as new light. "A definite bit of light kept for our day," is the way one describes it.

As a matter of fact, instead of being new light, it is a very old error, an error which, from time to time, has gained a new Lease of life, so that there is nothing new about it at all. It is really Sabellianism, only perhaps under a new guise. This early teacher, in opposition to Tritheism, maintained there was only one God, but that He sometimes acted "as Father, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Spirit, and sometimes as all three."

The writer, we quote, goes on to say: "It is but Sabellianism exaggerated to maintain that the persons are only notions of ours: and that, except in our perception, they would not exist at all... According to this form of the theory, the difference between the persons only began when there was an *intelligent* creation to see the difference... It is not therefore the original and eternal condition of God, but only began with the beginning of the world." [or, as some would say, with Incarnation]. The Scriptures would then be "no true revelation of the nature of God: on the contrary they would suggest what is actually false."

That the description here given of a form of Sabellianism does not differ materially from what has recently been claimed, in a certain quarter, to be new truth, may be seen if the following quotations are compared with what has been already stated.

"I am unable to see the justness of applying the designation Son to our Lord as 'in the form of God,' before Incarnation I mean."

Again: "The question is, Does Scripture apply Sonship to Him as 'in the form of God' or before He became flesh?"

Such is the doctrine, then, which we are asked to accept. For if it is scriptural, it is incumbent upon all believers to hold it. And certainly if it is "new light," or to speak more correctly "recovered light," we should be ready to welcome it. Let us see, then, how far we should be warranted in doing so as regards what is now under review.

Those who put forth this doctrine claim that Scripture nowhere uses the expression "the eternal Son," nor expressly states, in so many words, that He was Son in eternity, nor that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are eternal relationships.

The question might be asked, Where does Scripture *in so many words*, state the opposite? Where does it, say He *became* the Son, or is Son only in time? The answer is, nowhere. Nor would any but a mere novice in these matters ever expect Scripture so to speak, either one way or the other. Scripture does something far better than give us neat definitions. It gives us more than a description. If we search deep enough we discover the truth itself. Thus we

cannot find the word Trinity in Scripture, but the thing is presented. No one could have found the word *resurrection* in the Pentateuch, but our Lord discovered the truth there.

It is not otherwise with regard to the eternal Sonship of Christ. In Hebrews 1, verse 2, we are told God “has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” (or, in Son). This means far more than speaking by One Who had become Son in manhood. In his translation, J. N. Darby has a very important note on this particular passage. He says: “On the whole I have paraphrased it:” in [the person of the] Son. It is God Himself Who speaks; not by another; not as the Father, not merely by the Holy Ghost using a person not divine, but as Himself a Divine Person, and that Person the Son.” To say He speaks merely through One Who *became* the Son would rob the passage of much of its significance. What is intended, evidently, is to give the fact of this new way of speaking all the significance possible, and this is done by affirming God has spoken “in Son.”<sup>1</sup>

Again, in verse 8 we read: “But unto the Son He says, Thy throne O God is for ever and ever.” Now this declaration is a quotation from the Old Testament. It represents something said *before* Incarnation. Do we not see again the passage would lose much of its meaning if we had mentally to read into it, “But He was not the Son when it was said.” The reference to “the Son” is, of course, the comment of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews. But this only makes the truth more emphatic that Christ was ever the Son, for he can say without any qualification or reservation or explanation: “Unto the Son He says.”

In the light of such a passage as this how can we imagine that “the Son” applies only to time? It bears on its very forefront the stamp of eternity.

As J. N. D. truly says “You have no Father if you have no son.” In 2. John 3 we have the expression “The Son of the Father in truth and love.” Did this only begin when Christ was born in this world? Son tells us what He was to the Father, and whether we believe this or not affects the thought of the love which gave Him. “Because,” as J. N. D. again says, “I have not the Father’s love sending the Son out of heaven, if I have not Him as Son before born into this world, and I lose all that the Son is, if He is only so as Incarnate, and you have lost all the love of the Father in sending the Son as well.” From all this we see what serious loss would be ours if we accepted this supposed “new light.” Instead of being light it begins to seem rather like darkness.

Here we would quote from another authority on the subject.<sup>2</sup> He speaks of receiving

“with adoring reverence the glimpses of the inner life of God accorded to us in Holy Scripture... Here and there we are shown (as it were) an opened heaven and the Godhead is revealed in its ‘essential Trinity.’ God is seen to have been eternally and absolutely ‘the Father’ before time began... In the eternal days before creation He was actually Father, by the true communication of all His own glorious nature to One who was perfectly ‘the Son.’ That Son’s existence constitutes Him Father: *and it was not when the Son became incarnate, nor even when the Son began to fashion the world, that God acquired fatherhood by Him* (italics ours). ‘And now glorify Me, O Father, at Thine own side, with the glory which I had, before that the world was, beside Thee.’<sup>3</sup> ... God is

shown to us as dwelling in no solitary grandeur. One Who calls Him Father is in His company, and who establishes the truth of the title by sharing with Him the full possession of that glory, which created things may 'see,' but "none but God can 'have'."

Such a statement as we have just quoted, which is supported on every hand by Scripture, disposes of the argument (based upon the Greek preposition *eis*) that Christ was only in the bosom of the Father after Incarnation. But this is what the holders of this new doctrine assert.

There is a remark of J. G. Bellett, found, we believe, in his book *The Son of God*; referring possibly to this very error we are now discussing, in which he asks the pertinent question, Was the bosom of the Father ever empty?

Are we to suppose that Christ never lay in the bosom of the Father until He lay in the bosom of Mary? or that God had no Son until He became her Son? "Only begotten" does not refer to birth. It expresses the thought of "the only one"—"the darling." He filled that place from all eternity.

As we have seen, if we dismiss the *Son* from eternity we dismiss the *Father* also. You cannot have one without having the other. Where does Scripture imply that we are to think of the Father only in relation to time?

In John 5 the Father and the Son are frequently mentioned, and sometimes in such a connection as excludes time altogether. Verse 26 is an example. "For as the Father has life in Himself; so has He given to the Son to have life in Himself." And to show that this does not refer to manhood, something is immediately added which does refer to manhood: "and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man."

John 17 is equally emphatic. It is the Son who speaks, not merely as Jesus Christ the Sent One. "Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee." "The glory which I had with Thee before the world was."<sup>4</sup>

There is another aspect of the case. It has been noted that those who advance what they are pleased to regard as 'new light,' or fresh truth, usually do so with the plea that it is higher truth. The present case is no exception. The argument is advanced that by dissociating "Sonship" from the second person of the Trinity in eternity and confining the thought to His Incarnation and to time we thereby gain a higher conception of His Deity. This is the plea urged for the acceptance of the doctrine. But in reality the doctrine obscures the truth instead of elucidating it, and means loss and not gain. We cannot know God as to His nature and attributes apart from the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not merely revealed as such in time, or revealed solely in 'connection with man's' relationship to God, they are essential to the truth of

the Godhead.

In this connection Dr. Mason rightly says:

“The only approach which we can make to a right understanding of what is revealed lies in the doctrine of the derivation of the Son and Spirit from the Person of the Father... ‘God’ is always the Father. ‘To us there is but one God, the Father’ (1Cor 8:6). ...

“The Son is God, but God is not the Son... The Spirit is God, but “God is not the Spirit. But in regard to the Father it can be said, “The Father is God, and God is the Father... There never was a “moment when God was incomplete, as He would have been without Son or Spirit... The whole three Persons are co-equal; God would be still incomplete if Son or Spirit were not in everything ‘such as the Father is.’ And yet the ancient Greek teachers made no mistake “in doctrine when they interpreted the saying of Our Lord, ‘My Father is greater than I’ (John 14:28) to refer to the Father and the Son in their eternal relations.”

What this means is explained in what follows: “There is nothing in the Father which He does not bestow upon the Son by the very act of begetting Him, for fatherhood is the transmission to another of the parent’s own nature; but there is nothing in the Son which He does not owe to the Father.”

It is easy to see how all this is supported by Scripture; and not only supported by it, but it is at the same time also the explanation of such statements as: ‘By Whom also He made the worlds’; ‘The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do: for what things soever He does, these also does the Son likewise.’ Again, ‘For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that Himself does.’ ‘For as the Father has life in Himself: so has He *given* to the Son to have life in Himself.’ ‘I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just: *because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which has sent Me*’ (John 5:19-20; 26, 30). ‘All things that the Father has are mine’ John 16:15). It is a remarkable fact that Scripture *never* speaks of the Son bestowing anything upon the Father.

Scripture also reveals the fact that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are pleased to assume different offices and fulfil different functions, if one may employ human language to express these varied activities. “The Father judges no man, but has *committed* all judgment unto the Son ... and has *given* Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.” Here we see there is something the Father does not do: while on the other hand, He is the source of all and gives authority to all. It is He Who commits all judgment to the Son. Contrariwise there are matters He keeps in His own power. “But of that day and that hour knows no man, no not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, *but the Father*” (Mark 13:32). And again, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in His own power” (Acts 1:7).

Scripture frequently speaks of what the Father has given to Christ, never, as we have said, of what the Son gives to the Father—“The work which Thou gavest me to do” “Them which

Thou hast given Me”—and one day, as we read, the Son “delivers up the Kingdom to God, *even the Father*,” and again “Then shall the Son also Himself be subject unto Him that put all things under Him, that God may be all in all” (1Cor 15:24 and 28).

As to such statements, which might seem to put some limitation upon the Deity of the Son, we cannot forbear making a further quotation from the writer aforementioned:—

“There is but one cognition in the Divine being, although the Father, the Son, and the Spirit partake in the cognition in different ways... This it is which makes, we may say, the true oneness in the Eternal Trinity. God is love: and the union of the Three is not one *of* barren necessity. It is a free and living union in which all are bound together by an absolute outpouring of each to other in love. We may think of the joy which the Father has in giving—in communicating without reserve to the Son, ‘all the fulness’ (Col 1:19) of His being ... and finding it all the more His own because lavished freely on the Only Begotten. And it is the joy of the Son to receive—to feel the infinite flow of the Father’s love concentrated in Himself; and in the gratitude which must always be a part of filial love we may understand, to some extent, the gladness with which He welcomes most those wishes of the Father which will cost most to Himself, (the joy) with which He reflects that He mixes nothing of His own with what the Father gives Him.”

He then goes on to speak of the Holy Spirit in a similar strain, and concludes by saying:

It is the glory of them all to be One ... by a moral living for and in each other, in a mutual devotion such as serves as an example for men. ‘The glory which thou gavest Me I have given them; that they may be one, as We are one.’ ‘That they all may be one: as Thou Father art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in “Us.”’

“One in Us”! Can we conceive the glory, the joy and the blessedness such a prospect conveys? To think of such relationships and such love, and to know that we, though never sharing the possession of Deity, do share in the thoughts and desires and love of that bosom which was the Son’s dwelling place and portion from eternity. For these are His own words with reference to those who have believed on Him! “And hast loved them, as Thou hast loved Me.” “Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world.” “That the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them, and I in them.”

What losers then should we be did we cease to think of Christ as Son except in manhood and in time. How different to contemplate the place that was His from all eternity—“in the bosom of the Father”—the object of the love and eternal pleasure of the Father, and to know that that is the love in which we share. For God cannot love His Son in two different measures, though His death may give the Father a new motive for loving Him. “Therefore does my Father love Me, because I lay down My life that I might take it again” (John 10:17).

Christ never *became* the Son, though He did become Man, and in doing so brought all that was proper to sonship into manhood, that we might share it. This is why we are told, not merely that we are predestinated to sonship, but to sonship by *Jesus Christ* to Himself.” And this is the reason, too, why the word “grace” is the first word associated with incarnation. “The

Word became flesh ... full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And in this passage the thought of grace links itself with the bosom of the Father [notice how the word grace is repeated until verse 18 is reached] for the love of that bosom, and Him Who fills it and ever did fill it are alone the measure of the grace revealed in thoughts of blessing for poor needy sinners. The Son came to earth to make these thoughts known. For the grace is the outpouring of that love that filled the Father's bosom—love for the most undeserving. "The Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world": "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, *that we might live through Him.*" To live *through Him* is to enjoy the love which Divine persons have for each other. It means nothing less than being introduced to such a circle.

To think of the Father and the Son subsisting from eternity may baffle human reasoning, but that does not affect the question. We can wonder and adore though we may not understand. The mind cannot comprehend a Being without a beginning, or relationships which never had a commencement. If it seeks to fathom such mysteries it soon has to retire baffled and perhaps disconcerted. But the fact that our minds can travel only a certain distance, far from making us feel there is nothing beyond, should only convince us that there is something above and beyond all our knowing—a love which passes knowledge—the love of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father, yet which is ours to know because that Son has been given by the Father and has died for us. The Cross was the unveiling of the bosom which up to that point only the Son knew.

This thought of what the Son is to the Father and the Father to the Son adds radiance to many a Scripture and gives them a fuller meaning. And the practical issue is that we should love accordingly. "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." Only in this way can the prayer be answered: "That they all may be one *as We are One*. I in them and Thou in Me, that they may be made perfect in One; and that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, *and hast loved them*, as Thou hast loved Me."

How necessary then it becomes to have a right understanding of the eternal Sonship of Christ, in order to have an adequate conception of our own blessing. If we limit Sonship to time, and fail to grasp the character of the relationship existing between the three Persons of the Trinity from all eternity, we suffer immeasurable loss, both as regards God and ourselves. Scripture loses much of its meaning in the process. The thought of sonship is lowered likewise. Christ was not only the Son of God in time, He was the Son always. He became Man so that at last it might be true:

The unveiled mystery."

The eternal Sonship of the Son has been the faith of the saints in all generations of the Church's history. It was the faith of him who sang:

"God's righteousness with glory bright,  
Which with its radiance fills that sphere,  
E'en Christ of God the power and light,  
Our title is that light to share.

Thou gav'st us in eternal love,  
To Him to bring us home to Thee,  
Suited to Thine own thought above,  
As sons like Him, with Him to be.

O mind divine, so must it be  
That glory all belongs to God:  
O love divine, that did decree  
We should be part through Jesus' blood."

O that we might be so dwelling in this love that all inconsistent with it might drop off, and that we might "receive one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God."

## Footnotes

[1] It has been pointed out that in this same verse Christ is called Son before being spoken of as heir—as we say "Son and heir."

[2] A. J. Mason, D.D.—*The Faith of the Gospel*.

[3] The words here translated "at Thine own side" and "beside Thee" have *the force of "presence and place."*

[4] There is the reference in Heb 7:3 to Melchisedec being "made like unto the Son of God." Evidently this refers to something prior to Incarnation. The words "Having neither beginning of days nor end of life," are proof of this.