

## 2. The Son of God, Begotten, Not Made

### THE DOCTRINE OF THE SON

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The most important question that anyone has to answer is, “Who is Jesus Christ?” Or, as he put it himself, “Who do you say the Son of Man is?” How you answer that question determines your faith, and your fate.

Almost everyone believes that Jesus lived, that he was a teacher, a famous prophet, even a miracle worker, although they may not accept everything the Bible says about him. Islam believes he was a good prophet, that he died and went to heaven, and that he will come again (as a prophet of Islam); but it does not believe that he is God and that his death was salvific. And liberal teachers in the churches today might claim something similar, that he was a good man, a great teacher, a wonderful example, but not God in the flesh. But the Bible and thereafter the traditions of the church claim much more for him.

So in this section of the study we want to examine the doctrine of the Son of God, or, the second person of the trinity, called in his earthly ministry Jesus the Christ, or the Son of Man, or the Son of God. The early church struggled with the issue until they finally formulated the creed and condemned Arianism. At the heart of the Nicene Creed are these words:

“And [we believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, 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 . . . .”

In other words, although Jesus was a fully human person, he also was and is fully God. When we speak of the deity of Christ, we cannot water it down to mean that he was supernatural, or a divine being, or most God-like. He was and is God; but he was manifest in the flesh. This is why he alone is able to redeem us. This is why he is to receive our worship and our obedience.

Those who have rejected this teaching in part or in full often claim that the doctrine was formulated after the fact by the early church, and that it was never there in the Bible. But this is simply not so. The teaching is anticipated in elementary form in the Old Testament, imbedded in the Gospels, and fully explicated by the apostles. When we read the great prophecies of Isaiah about the Messiah, we catch a glimpse of what that greatness would be: he would have such an amazing birth (Isa. 7:14) that he would be known as Immanuel, “God with us.” And by his nature and through his works he would be known as the “Mighty God” and the “Everlasting Father” (Isa. 9:6). This one alone would bring everlasting peace and righteousness to the earth, for he would come into the world for that purpose. Isaiah is very precise: the child would be born, but the Son would be given. It would take the incarnation (the subject of a later section in this series) before people could fully comprehend what that meant.

A careful reading of other passages will also show that the prophecies identify the Messiah with or as the LORD. Isaiah 48:15 and 16 identifies him as the LORD, the one who is sent into the world by the Spirit. By itself this passage could be given different interpretations; but as part of the collection of Messianic passages it underscores the theme that the Messiah is not merely a mortal. Malachi 3:1-5 describes the Messiah as the messenger of the covenant who will come to his temple (the house of the LORD), but clarifies that it is Yahweh, the speaker, who will draw near. Proverbs 30:4 equates the Son with God the creator. These, but a few, give us a hint that this one who will be the Messiah will be much more than just a great human.

And the New Testament fully explicates these prophecies as fulfilled in the person of Jesus. There was a birth in Bethlehem, for Messiah was to be born of the family of Judah. He would be known as Jesus. But the Son of God did not begin at Bethlehem. John 1 claims that he was the eternal Word, God himself, who created everything that exists, and that in time he became flesh and dwelt among us. Philippians 2:6 makes it clear that he is God, and that he set aside the use of some of his attributes to take on the form of the human, and die for the sins of the world. Titus 2:13 equates Jesus with God. Romans 9:6 describes him as God, who is blessed forever. And Revelation 5:13 and 14 portray Christ as deity. These are but a few of the New Testament passages that one would consider first in dealing with the topic.

But the creed had to focus on some of the language the Bible uses for Christ, and some of that language has confused people from time to time. How could the Son be said to be begotten if he is eternally God? To study this more closely I have chosen to use a Pauline passage, Romans 1:1-7, which shows that Jesus is the son of David and the Son of God, and that he has authority over us by virtue of his deity. While we will be studying this passage we will consider other related passages as well, and have several more sections on the doctrine of Christ.

## BIBLICAL EXPOSITION OF ROMANS 1:1-7

There are many passages in the Bible that we could use for the basis of this study, but this simple introduction to the Book of Romans states clearly what the message of the New Testament is all about--it is about the person and work of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

### *Jesus Christ is Authoritative (1,2)*

The first two verses of the book are simply a salutation or greeting from the apostle Paul to the church in Rome. But the fact that there is a church at all and that it is devoted to the worship and service of Jesus, indicates the deity and the authority of this one person. Accordingly, in the simple salutation we see some references to the doctrine of Christ that is the foundation and focus of the church.

### *Believers are His Servants*

This is the practical starting point for all who worship Jesus as Lord and Savior--they are his servants. Paul's expression, "a bond-servant of Jesus Christ," is the equivalent of the Old Testament's "servant of the LORD [Yahweh]," because to Paul they are one and the same person. This is the highest title that any human could have: Moses, David, Paul--they are all the servants of the LORD. The word for LORD in the Old Testament is the revealed name Yahweh, explained by God to Moses as "I AM."<sup>[1]</sup> Paul is simply identifying Jesus as this Yahweh of the Old Testament, which is why he calls himself his servant.

The term "servant" also needs some clarification. Unlike today, a servant in those days would actually be owned by the master. He, his family, his possessions, all belonged to the master. Likewise, anyone who is the servant of the LORD, or as Paul puts it, a bond slave of Jesus Christ, no longer is his or her own; they have been bought with a price, the blood of Jesus, and are now under his absolute authority. If Jesus were just a good man, a great teacher, no such authority would be expected. But because he is God the Son, we owe him our lives. This is why in the book Paul will say that if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is LORD (=Yahweh) and believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, we shall be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

### *Believers are Called by the LORD*

Paul was called to be an apostle; others are called for different works in his kingdom. But the word "called" indicates that this life-long task was not of his (or our) choosing, but

God's. Jesus called all the disciples from their jobs, and they dropped everything and followed him. That is authority. Paul's calling was dramatic: on the road to Damascus God dramatically changed his whole life. To be called of God means that we have a new purpose in life, a new mission, a new reason for living. And that new life and mission is to worship and serve Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul was therefore separated to the Gospel. He was dedicated by God's calling to take the good news to other lands. People do not choose ministries and avenues of service; God chooses people and equips them for the task before them.

The Gospel, or good news, that Paul was to declare was promised beforehand in the Old Testament. Once Paul came to faith in Jesus the Messiah, then all the Old Testament made complete sense to him (and he had studied it all his life). Paul's formulation of the Gospel, that Christ Jesus died according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again according to the Scriptures, was clearly drawn from the Old Testament and explained fully in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. So both Paul's calling and his message came from God. Thus it is with all believers.

### ***The Authority of Jesus is Based on His Deity (3, 4)***

The subject matter of Romans is stated in the words "concerning His Son." That is what Paul is writing about. He will here say two things about the Son: he was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and he was declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection.

### ***The Son of David***

Jesus was born into this world as a Davidic king, in line to the throne of David, king of Judah. This is what people usually focus on at the season of Christmas--the birth to Mary in a stable, in Bethlehem, in the tribe of Judah, and of the family of David. It is familiar material for even the most irregular Church-goer.

But the text says that he was the son of David "in the sphere of" the flesh. There was a birth, to be sure, but that was not the whole story; it was only the story of his physical nature. People do not usually say someone was born into a family "in the sphere of the flesh" unless there was another sphere to consider as well. The physical birth did not mark the beginning of the Son of God, only the beginning of his physical life on earth. He entered the race through the line of David so that he would become the promised Davidic king and restore the dominion that was lost because of sin.

## *The Son of God*

Jesus was “declared to be” or perhaps “appointed to be” the “Son of God” by the resurrection from the dead. This was not in the sphere of the flesh, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. What this means is that the resurrection from the dead demonstrated that Jesus was not just another physical descendant of David--he was the divine Son of God who had authority over death and the grave.

(Note how the doctrines are so intricately connected. It is no surprise that unbelievers try to nibble at the issue from the related themes, the resurrection, the virgin birth, the miracles, for if those are taken away, the person of the Son of God is changed).

Hebrews 1 explains how this appointment developed in the exaltation of Jesus (resurrection and ascension = exaltation; we shall study these in later sections). The writer draws upon Psalm 2 and Daniel 7:9-14 to show that Jesus is the heir to the throne of David and that he would come from heaven to claim his throne. The Bible says that the heir would become the king and have the title of Son of God when he ascended the throne (2 Sam. 7:14). So every Davidic king could claim the title “Messiah” (= “anointed one”) or “Son of God” (= heir to the kingdom of God) because of these promises. No doubt that was uppermost in Peter’s mind when he first declared his faith that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God. But Hebrews takes this all to another level because Jesus was not a normal son of David. Jesus was not crowned as a king on earth, but he died and rose again and ascended to heaven where God declared him to be the Son who “this day” (=exaltation) was begotten (from the dead; Rev. 1:5). So his exaltation inaugurated his kingship; but he awaits the second coming to put all things under his authority. This resurrection declared for all time that Jesus was not merely a mortal in the line of David with a claim to a special title; it declared that he was by nature the Son of God.

But what exactly does “Son of God” mean? We know it cannot be literal, for that would mean that the “Father” procreated him by a woman or a goddess (as the pagan religions, which had such human activities among the gods). These ideas are foreign to the true faith of the Bible. There is no heavenly consort; God has no wife; there is no goddess. And Arianism, which claimed that Jesus was the first of God’s creation, cannot be right either, for it denies too much Scripture. To understand what is meant here we have to consider several lines of revelation.

**1. *The “Father-Son” Language.*** At least 100 times in the Gospels Jesus called God His Father. Is this just a general reverence to the spark of divinity in all people (for they too can refer to God as Father), or does it actually mean He was procreated in some way, or does it have a totally different meaning?

We have to link this terminology with the claims of Jesus Himself, namely, that He was sent to earth by the Father (John 14:24; John 5:26). Or the claims of those he taught, namely that he is the eternal God who created everything (John 1). And then there is also the hostile witness

of his enemies: they sought to kill him because he made himself equal with God (John 5:17). From a human point of view, that is why he died: the charge was blasphemy. Or, study the parable of the vineyard: the owner sent his son to the vineyard, and they killed him (Matt. 21:33-46). Why? Because he was the son. In other words, there would have been no cross without Jesus' claim to be equal with God the Father and heir of all things. And everyone, believer and unbeliever alike, acknowledges that Jesus was crucified. So the point of Jesus' use of the "Father-Son" language was meant to teach that he was equal to the Father in nature but subordinated to the Father for the mission.

**2. The "Only Begotten Son" Language.** The second piece of evidence we must examine is the expression "only-begotten." It is the Greek word "*monogeneis*." This is not simply "begotten," for that expression can be applied to all believers, those who have been begotten or born again by the Spirit. This is a unique expression for a unique person, the only-begotten Son of God. The expression appears in John 1:14, 4:18, 3:16, and 3:18. It would literally mean the "only generated one." This is the key expression for the doctrine of "the eternal generation of the Son," meaning, he always was the only begotten Son. The expression does not refer to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, because he is the Son from eternity past.

Perhaps the language can be better understood if contrasted with synonyms. Take the verbs "make," "create," and "beget." The verb "make" is general; one can make dinner, clothes, a house, or any other product. The "create" can have the same objects, but usually elevates the act to an art: one creates a masterpiece, or a work of art, or a symphony. While these creations bear the imprint of the creator, they do not share his nature. But "beget" is different. You can only beget a child that has the same nature as you have--a son or a daughter. There is nothing else you can beget (unless you were speaking very figuratively). Your son or your daughter will inherit his or her nature from you--genes, personality--all of it. You can use "make" or "create" for producing a child; but when you use "beget" it only means you produce a child that has your nature.

Now follow this carefully. If Jesus is said to be the begotten Son of God (using the figure from human language to make the point), then Jesus has the same nature as the Father. If Jesus has the same nature as God the Father, then Jesus is divine and eternal as well. If he is eternally God, then there was never a time he was literally begotten--which is why we know the language is figurative to describe his nature, and not his beginning. To call Jesus "the only begotten Son" means that he is fully divine and eternal. He is God the Son.

This is why the creed says that Jesus was "begotten, not made." Why? Because he is of one substance with the Father.

One more point. The word "begotten" has "only" (*mono-*) prefixed to it. There is only one. This means that Jesus has a unique relationship with the Father--they two along with the Holy Spirit make up the Godhead. You and I, if we are believers, have been born into the family of God--we are said to be begotten of God. But we are not "only-begotten." That refers to Jesus' divine nature. We were adopted by grace and given the divine nature by the Spirit so that we may be called the children of God. But Jesus--he is very God of very God. He is the only-begotten Son of God (that is the part of the creed that reads "of very God"), which means that he is God (that is the part that reads "very God").

**3. The “I Am” Language.** The third line of evidence concerns the Lord Jesus Christ’s use of “I am.” Although there are times when “I am” in Jesus’ words mean simply “It is I,” or “I am here,” there are a number of occasions where it clearly means that he was identifying himself as the “I Am” of the Bible. In the Old Testament the great “I am” revelation has numerous predications that make amazing claims: I am with you always, I am your healer, I am your rock, I am the first and the last, I am Yahweh and there is no other,” etc. And so too do we find Jesus’ revelation of himself making similar claims: I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the good shepherd; I am the door; I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, etc.”

But there are certain passages that stick out because of their claims of “I am” without predicates. In John 8:58 the Pharisees were disputing over the identity of Jesus, and Jesus said that Abraham rejoiced to see his day (perhaps a vision of the sacrificial death of Jesus). They challenged this statement because Jesus was not yet fifty years old. Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I Am.” And they wanted to kill him for blasphemy. In that very same chapter, verses 24 and 28, Jesus said, “unless you believe that I am . . . .” Now, if you compare Isaiah 43:10, 11, you will see that same thing being said by God in the Old Testament. Clearly, Jesus was equating himself with Yahweh, the I Am of the Old Testament. These and other passages show that Jesus was identifying himself with God. Finally, in John 10:30 Jesus declared “I and the Father are one.”

All these claims and works of Jesus would have fallen flat after his death if he had not risen from the grave. But he did rise from the grave, and ascended into heaven, and will come again to judge the world. That resurrection declared that he was indeed the Son of God, not in a general sense, but in his nature equal with the Father. He is the one who came into the world as Immanuel, God with us, and not merely one born in time.

### ***The Authority of Christ Calls for Devotion (5-7)***

What is the effect of this on all who believe in Jesus? There are three listed here: (1) We receive grace and peace through Jesus Christ; (2) we receive a commission to serve him in this life; and (3) we must be set apart to him, sanctified, for he is our Lord and our God.

If Jesus is not the divine, eternal Son of God, of one substance with the Father, then all Christian worship of him is idolatrous. But if he is the true and living Lord, then all worship must be in Christ Jesus, for no one comes to the Father except by the Son.

□ The explanation “I am” is the Hebrew word *‘ehyeh* (pronounced *eh-yeh*); the name *Yahweh* is actually the third person form of the verb and would translate “He is.” Worshipers declare, “He is!” But God explains that it means “I am.”