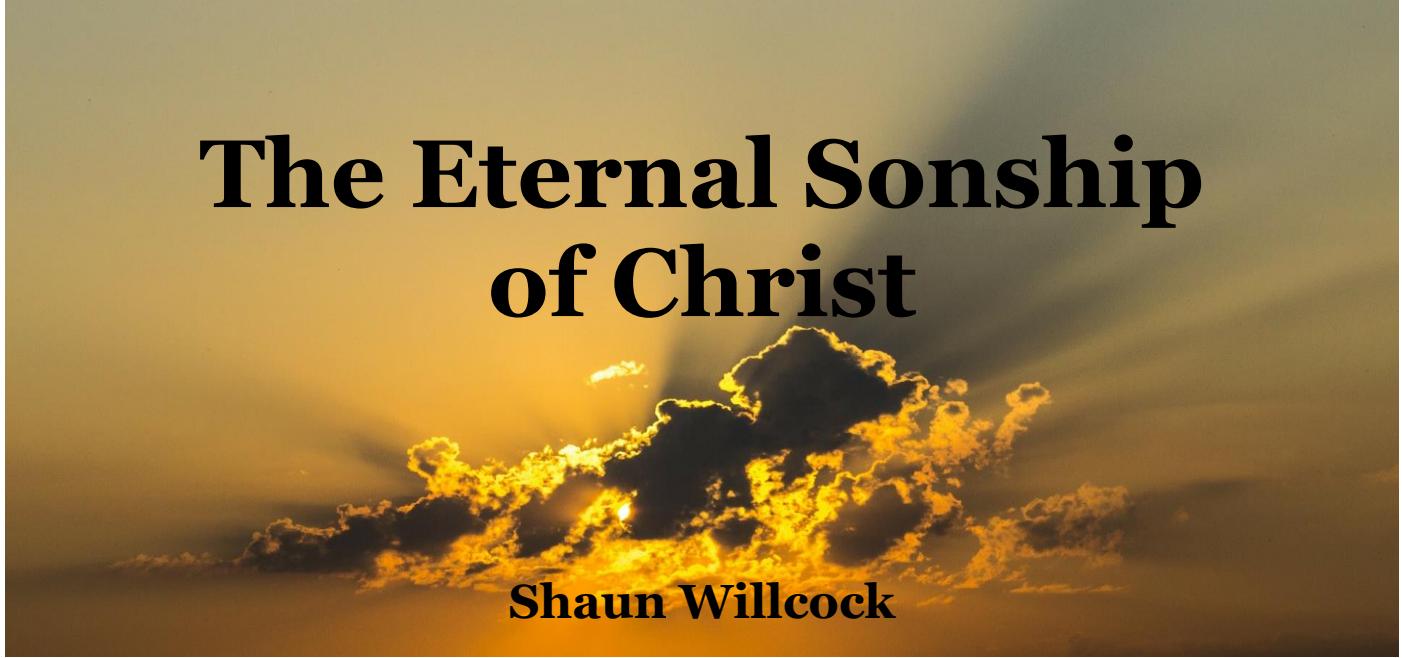


# The Eternal Sonship of Christ



Shaun Willcock

## Meaning and Importance of this Truth

Did the Second Person of the Trinity only become the Son of God at his incarnation, or was he, *from all eternity*, the only begotten Son of God?

Through the centuries, various men have fought against the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ, and are doing so today. A clear, biblical defence of the truth is desperately needed.

What is meant by the eternal Sonship of Christ, or the eternal generation of the Son? There is one eternal God, in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. From all eternity this one God has existed in these three Persons. God the Father has always been the Father, God the Son has always been the Son, and God the Holy Spirit has always been the Holy Spirit. Christ did not merely become the Son of God at his incarnation (or, as some imagine, at his resurrection), but he was the only begotten Son of the Father from all eternity; he has *always* been the Son of the Father by an eternal generation.

There is most certainly a great mystery here. Our finite minds cannot fully comprehend how the divine Son was *always* the divine Son; how there never was a moment when he was not the divine Son; and yet he was begotten by the Father. Yet this is most emphatically what the Holy Scriptures reveal. The spiritually blind have fought against it, but those who love God's revealed truth hold firmly to it. Strangely, there are those who reject this doctrine, and yet readily concede that there is a doctrine of a Trinity of Persons within the one Godhead--a truth equally as full of mystery as this. As we shall see, however, the eternal Sonship of Christ is essential to the doctrine of the Trinity itself.

## Christ was Eternally Begotten

Christ is called, in Scripture, the *only begotten* Son of the Father (Jn.1:14,18). What, precisely, are we to understand by this?

'Begotten' means 'generated'; and to 'generate' means to bring into existence. Now, this cannot mean that Christ became the only begotten Son by his *incarnation*; for then what was he prior to that? As a son is not in existence before he is begotten by a father, one must then either deny that the Second Person of the Trinity existed prior to the incarnation (which is heretical, for this would be to deny that he was God prior to that moment), or one must believe the ludicrous and unscriptural notion that the Second Person, though not the

Son but existing with the First Person from all eternity, became the Son at the incarnation (the First Person becoming the Father) – meaning that the First Person begat, at a point in time, one as his Son who *already* had an existence as a distinct Person! How can one who already exists be begotten (brought into existence) at a certain point in time?

Lk.1:35 has sometimes been brought forward to 'prove' that Christ only became the Son of God at his incarnation. It says, however, "that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be *called* the Son of God"--not "shall *be* the Son of God." He would be called so, for he was, and is, the Son of God; but he did not begin to be the Son *then*. The miraculous birth of Jesus would demonstrate that he was the Son of God, but it would not *make* him the Son of God.

And neither can it be that Christ became God's only begotten Son by his *resurrection*: for the Scriptures are clear that he was the Son of God before this; and besides, the words, 'only begotten', cannot refer to Christ's resurrection, because others were raised from the dead, and the entire human race will be raised at the last day; and as all men would then be the begotten sons of God, Christ could not be called God's *only* begotten Son.

Rom.1:4 is frequently used as a 'proof-text' by those who claim that he became the Son of God by his resurrection; but this verse simply tells us that his resurrection *declared* him to be the Son of God: it does not say he then *became* the Son of God. Another supposed 'proof-text' is Psa.2:7; but by comparing it with Acts 13:33, Matt.19:28, and Rev.1:5, it simply means that the one who was *already* the only begotten Son of God was 'begotten', as it were, from the *dead*: it does not mean that he was begotten as his *Son* at that time. Besides, it only speaks of his being 'begotten', not of his being the *only* begotten Son: the former can (in one sense) refer to his resurrection, as the above texts show; but the latter refers to what he was before his resurrection.

When, then, was he begotten? Christ, as we shall see the Scriptures reveal plainly, was *eternally* begotten of the Father, which means that he had no beginning: he always *was* the only begotten Son.

## The Divine Person, Not the Divine Nature, was Eternally Begotten

Now what, precisely, was begotten? Certainly not the divine *nature* of the Son, for his is not a separate nature to that of the Father. There are three divine Persons, but one divine nature. This one divine nature did not beget another divine nature, for then there would be two divine natures, and thus two Gods. What, then, was begotten? The divine *Person* of the Son was eternally begotten of the Father, for they are distinct as Persons, though of one nature.

But again it must be emphasised: he was *eternally* begotten! The Son was always the Son, and the Father was always the Father of the Son. Heretics, trying to show that the Son had a beginning as the Son, have argued that one who is generated comes into existence *after* the one who generates; a son does not exist until he is begotten by a father. This is correct: but a person is a father only when he begets a son, and not a moment before. And so in actual fact, a first-begotten son always co-exists with a father; he does not become a son after the man becomes a father, but at precisely the same moment, for the one who is his father is not a father until he begets a son. Up until that point, he may be a husband, but not a father.

Now think of God the Father: has he *always* been the Father? Yes, he has (1 Jn.5:7). There never was a time when God the Father was not God the Father. Well then, if he is the eternal Father, Christ *must be* the eternal Son! An eternal Father must have an eternal Son; it cannot be otherwise. For one is not a father, unless one has a son; and as the Father was always the Father, so the Son was always the Son. There never was a time when the Son was not the Son.

## The Testimony of the Scriptures

Let us consider various portions of the Holy Scriptures.

"But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law" (Gal.4:4). "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom.8:3). "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" (1 Jn.4:9). "And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world" (1 Jn.4:14). All four of these texts show plainly that God the Father sent the Son into the world. The Word does not say that one unnamed Person of the Godhead sent another unnamed Person of the Godhead into the world, who only became the Son when he was incarnated; it says that the *Father* sent the *Son!* The Son was, therefore, *already* the Son *before* he was incarnated! Otherwise the Father would not have had a Son to send. And the Father was the Father of the Son before the incarnation – otherwise the Son would not have been sent by the Father. And if we dare to say that it was not the Son who was sent, then not only do we accuse the Holy Spirit of lying (horrible thought!), but we are also left with this question to answer: who, then, did God send into the world?

As can readily be perceived, the denial of the eternal generation of the Son leads one into a veritable maze of confusion and heresy.

In Jn.17:5, Jesus prayed, "And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was." Christ was with the Father from all eternity: with *the Father!* (who could only have been a Father before the world was, if he had a Son before the world was).

Heb.1:2 says that God "hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds". If God made the worlds by his Son, then the Son was the Son before his incarnation – he was the Son in eternity, before all worlds existed, for it was he who made the worlds.

In Micah 5:2, we find these glorious words: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." This prophecy of Christ declares that his "goings forth" have been from everlasting; and this refers to his eternal generation, his eternal Sonship: his goings forth, his *proceeding forth*, his generation, as the Son of God from all eternity.

In Jn.8:42, Jesus said, "I proceeded forth and came from God". His "proceeding forth" from God speaks of his eternal generation.

The Lord Christ is the one who is speaking in Prov.8:24-26; and he says, "When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: while as yet he had not made the earth". What does "brought forth" mean here? It means generated, or begotten, for the Hebrew word used here is used of generation, in Job 15:7 and Psa.51:5. Christ was begotten, according to this passage, in eternity! For in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth, and before the beginning of space and time there was only eternity, when Christ was begotten.

Consider carefully the words of Prov.30:4, bearing in mind that they were penned centuries before Christ was "made of a woman": "Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? who hath gathered the wind in his fists? who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell?" Here is another testimony, written by divine inspiration, to the fact that the Son of the Father *was* the Son of the Father before he came in the flesh.

And then there is Heb.7:3. Of Melchisedec it is here written that he was "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God".

Melchisedec, of course, was an eminent type of Christ. He is here said to have had no father or mother, not

because he really had none (for being a mere man, he naturally had parents), but because no mention is made of them in God's Word; and they are deliberately not mentioned, so that in this he could typify Christ, who as man had no father, and as God had no mother. Melchisedec is said to be without descent, not because he really was without it (that would be impossible), but so that he could typify Christ, who, as God, had no descent. And he is said to have neither beginning of days, nor end of life, not because he really had no beginning or end, but because, again, no mention is made of his birth or death in Scripture; so that once again he could typify Christ, who *truly* had no beginning, and will have no end, but is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the I AM.

But take note of the next phrase: Melchisedec, in all these ways, was "made like unto the Son of God" – which means that *the Son of God* had no beginning of days. Note that: it does not merely say that the Second Person of the Trinity had no beginning of days, but that *the Son of God* had no beginning of days! Thus there never was a moment when the Second Person of the Trinity was not the Son. He was the Son from all eternity.

## **Christ's Eternal Sonship Essential to the Doctrine of the Trinity Itself**

If the eternal Sonship of Christ is not true, then, before the incarnation, the three divine Persons would merely have to be called the First, Second, and Third Persons of the Trinity, not the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet the truth is that without the eternal Sonship of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be maintained! Christ's eternal Sonship is essential to the doctrine of the Trinity. Here is why:

Does God exist by choice or will, or does he exist by necessity of nature? Obviously by necessity of nature; for if by choice or will, then it would either be by his own choice or will, or by that of another. If by his own choice or will, it would mean that he had to exist before he actually did, in order to choose or will to exist! – an utterly absurd hypothesis. Yet if he existed by the choice or will of another, then in fact that other would be God – which is equally absurd. God exists by necessity of nature.

But this is equally true of the relationship between the Father and the Son! If the Father and the Son were not Father and Son by necessity of nature, but only by choice or will, then we have to accept that it was possible for the relationship to have been the other way around, the First Person of the Trinity being called the Son, and the Second Person the Father. For if they are merely the First Person and the Second Person, what is it that makes the one the First, and the other the Second? Nothing whatsoever: it could just as equally be the other way around!

If the eternal generation of the Son is not true; if the Father and the Son are not eternally related *as* Father and Son; then there cannot be a distinction between them, as Persons. For what, then, *would* distinguish one divine Person from another, in the Godhead? Nothing. Thus the distinction of the Persons within the Trinity is dependent upon the eternal generation of the Son.

Furthermore, let us consider the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the divine Trinity. If the Son was not eternally the Son, then not only was the Father not eternally the Father, as we have already seen, but in addition the Holy Spirit was not eternally the Holy Spirit! For he "proceedeth from the Father" (Jn.15:26); and this refers to his proceeding from the Father from all eternity, as the context reveals. He is of the same nature, being God, and yet this shows that he is a distinct Person from the Father.

He is also called "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal.4:6), and "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom.8:9); and therefore proceeds from the Son as well as the Father (otherwise there would be no relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit), and yet is distinct as a Person from both. In Jn.20:22, when Jesus "breathed on them [the disciples], and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost", he was showing that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father. But if he proceeds from the Father and the Son from all eternity, then the Father *must have been* the Father from all eternity, and the Son *must have been* the Son from all eternity!

What, then, happens to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity if one denies that Christ was eternally the Son (which is also to deny that the Father was eternally the Father)? It is entirely overthrown! It has entirely

collapsed!

## God So Loved the World that He Gave His Son!

Let us, in conclusion, meditate on those lovely words of Jn.3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This verse speaks of God's love, a love so great that he *gave* his Son, his only begotten Son. The one who had lain in his bosom from all eternity (Jn.1:18), his Son, his beloved Son (Matt.3:17) – *this* was the one he gave! No greater love was ever shown. "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" (1 Jn.4:9). He did not give an animal, a lamb or a calf, he gave his Son! He did not give an angel, he gave his Son! He did not create some special being to accomplish this mission of love – he gave his Son! In *this* was manifested his love toward his chosen people!

But consider, for a moment, the implications if Christ was not the Son before his incarnation: it means, then, that God did *not* give his Son, but merely that one divine Person within the Godhead gave another divine Person within the Godhead. How greatly this detracts from the love of God for his people! We would not see God's great love if it was not the Son of his love that he gave! God *so loved* the world, that he gave the greatest gift he could have given: his Son, his only begotten Son, his beloved Son!

May God enable the reader to lay hold upon this blessed truth, and to praise and worship that great God, who gave his Son; and to praise and worship the eternal Son, Jesus Christ, "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" (Phil.2:6-8).

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