

Chapter 5

THE DENIAL OF ETERNAL SONSHIP

We have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God (1 John 4:14-15).

The vital doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is under attack today. Those who deny this doctrine teach that Jesus *became* the Son of God at some point in history. Some say He became the Son at His baptism. Others say He became the Son at His resurrection, or even at His exaltation. Most of them, however, say He became the Son of God at the incarnation. They believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, before His incarnation in the womb of the virgin Mary, was the eternal Word, the eternal God, and even the eternal second person of the Trinity, but He was not the eternal Son. He did not assume the role of Son or bear the name or title of Son, they believe, until the incarnation. Regardless of different understandings concerning the time and event marking the beginning of His Sonship, those who deny the eternal Sonship of Christ all agree that there was a time when He was not the Son of God.

Such teachers do not deny the deity of Christ, and for this we can be thankful. They do not deny the eternal existence of Christ or deny that three distinct persons in the

triune godhead have eternally existed. They teach that Christ was always God but that He *became* the Son. According to this teaching, only when the Word became flesh did He take on the role, function, and title of Son. Thus they deny that He is essentially and eternally the Son of God.

A brief history of the controversy

Many years ago there was a great controversy, especially among the Plymouth Brethren assemblies, as to whether the Lord Jesus was the Son throughout eternity or whether He became Son at the time of His incarnation. An influential teacher who denied the truth of His eternal Sonship, F. E. Raven, made this statement in 1895: "Now, 'Son of God' I understand to be the title of Christ incarnate; I should hardly use 'Son of God' as referring to His eternal Person."¹ In contrast to this, Plymouth Brethren leaders such as John Nelson Darby, William Kelly, and C. H. Mackintosh strongly defended the doctrine of eternal Sonship.²

This same controversy raged among some of the Baptists. To resolve the dispute, J. C. Philpot wrote a ninety-three-page defense of the doctrine of eternal Sonship. It is a well-written, well-reasoned, and reverent study.³

Attacks on the doctrine of eternal Sonship are not new and have come from a variety of sources. Theologians have denied that Christ has eternally existed as the Son⁴ and noted commentators have taught the same.⁵ A nationally known television preacher also espoused this view.⁶ *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible* in its comment under Acts 13:33 strongly rejects the doctrine of eternal Sonship:

As God, the person we now know of as Jesus Christ had no beginning, was not begotten, was not a Son, and did not come into being. . . . but as man and as God's Son He was not eternal, He did have a beginning, He was begotten, this being the same time Mary had a Son. Therefore, the doctrine of eternal

sonship of Jesus Christ is irreconcilable to reason, is unscriptural, and is contradictory to itself.⁷

A respected theologian and author of a classic book on the cults, Dr. Walter Martin, has also repudiated the doctrine of eternal Sonship:

The Scripture nowhere calls Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God, and He is never called Son at all prior to the incarnation, except in prophetic passages in the Old Testament. The term "Son" itself is a functional term, as is the term "Father" and has no meaning apart from time. . . . Many heresies have seized upon the confusion created by the illogical "eternal Sonship" or "eternal generation" theory of Roman Catholic theology, unfortunately carried over to some aspects of Protestant theology. Finally; there cannot be any such thing as eternal Sonship. . . . the word "Son" definitely suggests inferiority.⁸

A more recent denial of the doctrine of eternal Sonship comes from the published writings of one of America's most popular Bible teachers, Dr. John MacArthur, Jr. In his commentary on the book of Hebrews he wrote:

The Bible nowhere speaks of the eternal sonship of Christ. . . . He was always God, but He became **Son**. He had not always had the title of Son. That is His incarnation title. Eternally He is God, but only from His incarnation has He been Son. . . . Christ was **not** Son until His incarnation. Before that He was eternal God. It is therefore incorrect to say that Jesus Christ is eternally inferior to God because He goes under the title of Son. He is no "eternal Son" always subservient to God, always less than God, always under God. Sonship is an analogy to help us under-

stand Christ's essential relationship and willing submission to the Father for the sake of our redemption. As already mentioned, the **today** of verse 5 (Heb.1:5) shows that His sonship began in a point of time, not in eternity. His life as Son began in this world. . . . He was not a Son until He was born into this world through the virgin birth. . . . The sonship of Christ is inextricably connected with His incarnation [emphasis his].⁹

In his commentary on the book of Galatians, Dr. MacArthur made similar statements:

Some 900 years before Jesus was born God prophesied, "I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me" (Heb.1:5; 2 Sam. 7:14), indicating that in eternity past that [*sic*], though there were always three persons in the Trinity, there were not yet the roles of Father and Son. Those designations apparently came into being only at the incarnation. In the announcement of Jesus' birth to Mary, the angel Gabriel declared, "He will be great, and **will be called** the Son of the Most High . . . the holy offspring **shall be called** the Son of God" [Luke 1:32,35]. **Son** was a new name, never before applied to the second person of the Godhead except prophetically, as in Psalm 2:7, which is interpreted in Hebrews 1:5-6 as referring to the event of His incarnation. John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Only when "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" as "the only begotten God" (John 1:14,18) did He take on the role and function of **Son** [emphasis his].¹⁰

Dr. MacArthur has also published a commentary deal-

ing with Romans 1 in which he again made his position on Sonship clear:

Over the years, theologians have debated about whether Christ is the Son of God in eternity. Christ is and always has been the second member of the Trinity but only became a Son in His incarnation. When you think of the word **son** you probably think of the submission, obedience, and honor shown to one's father. That is the sense in which Jesus is the Son. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that Jesus has eternally been the Son. . . . From eternity He has been the second Person of the Trinity. He assumed the role of a Son in His incarnation.¹¹

Dr. John MacArthur may be the best-known proponent of the Sonship-by-incarnation position, but he is by no means alone in holding this view. Many others do as well, including one professor from a prominent seminary who has carried this teaching to a dangerous extreme. In a letter to me he stated, "I know that hypotheses are problematic, but I have personally hypothesized that when the divine decision was made with regard to the incarnation, any of the three members of the Trinity could have accepted the various roles."¹² This means that the Father could have been the Son, the Son could have been the Spirit, the Spirit could have been the Father, etc. This is dangerous doctrine, but after all if Sonship and Fatherhood are merely assumed roles, then there is no reason for them not to have been interchangeable.

The position that Christ *became* the Son of God can be summarized as follows: (1) Nowhere in Scripture does it say that Jesus has eternally been the Son. (2) He was always God, the second person of the Trinity. (3) He became the Son at the time of the incarnation. (4) Sonship involves taking on a new function, receiving a title, and assuming a

role that He previously did not have. (5) The main ideas conveyed by the term *Son* are those of submission, obedience, subservience, and even inferiority.

In sharp contrast to this, the doctrine of eternal Sonship affirms the following: (1) The Bible clearly teaches that Christ has eternally been the Son. (2) He was always God, the second person of the Trinity, **and He was always the Son of God.** (3) The eternal Son became man at the time of the incarnation. (4) Sonship involves the very person and nature of Jesus Christ, the essence of who He is as the second person of the Trinity, and thus there could never have been a time when He was not the Son because there could never have been a time when He was other than who He is. (5) The term *Son of God* indicates three things—(a) He is a person distinct from God His Father, (b) He is the heir, not the servant of His Father (*Son of God* does not mean “subservient to God”), and (c) He shares the divine nature of God His Father. The Biblical significance of the term *Son of God* will be developed further by Dr. Showers in chapter 7.