

Chapter 9

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS AND OBJECTIONS

Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God (Matthew 22:29).

Stones are being hurled at the impregnable fortress known as the doctrine of eternal Sonship. Objections are being raised against this cherished precious truth that concerns the second person of the triune God and His relationship to the Father. We should not be surprised that the Bible's true teaching regarding the person of the Son is under attack. The essence of Christianity revolves around Jesus Christ and who He really is. Believers need to be extremely careful to remain and abide in the true doctrine of Christ (2 John 9).

No Biblical doctrine is without its problems. Countless objections have been raised against vital doctrines of the faith such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement, eternal punishment, and the second coming of Christ. Our frail feeble minds have difficulty grasping the depths and wonders of God's revelation. Our thoughts are not His thoughts, and only humble submission to the written Word of God as taught by the blessed Spirit of God will enable us to correct our thinking and bring it more into harmony with God's truth. Trusting

God to be our infallible teacher and looking to God's Word as our inerrant guide, let us now deal with some objections and problems relating to eternal Sonship.

Second Samuel 7:14 indicates that His Sonship is yet future: "I will be his father, and he shall be my son."

Opponents of eternal Sonship sometimes emphasize the future tense in this verse: "I will . . . he shall." They argue that when God gave this promise, the second person of the Trinity was not yet the Son of God but that He would become the Son at the incarnation. Likewise they insist that the first person of the Trinity did not become the Father until Christ was born. They deny the eternal Sonship of the second person and they deny the eternal fatherhood of the first person. While they rightly understand the promise to mean that the future King would be the Son of God, they err in their unwarranted conclusion that prior to the incarnation Christ did not exist as the beloved and eternal Son of the Father. According to Christ's divine nature He was the Son of God from all eternity (Romans 1:3-4).¹

What is in view in 2 Samuel 7:14 is not Christ's relationship in the godhead as the preincarnate Son of God, but His relationship to the Father as the Son of David. The emphasis is on relationship, not origin. The Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7:4-17 and 1 Chronicles 17:3-15) emphasizes the humanity of Christ. He was the human Son and descendant of David, the rightful heir to the throne (Luke 1:32-33). The man Christ Jesus, the promised Messiah, would have a special Father/Son relationship with God. The Messiah, God's Son, would be a man possessing and exhibiting the same nature as God.

William R. Newell, a firm defender of the doctrine of eternal Sonship, commented on 2 Samuel 7:14 as it is quoted in Hebrews 1:5: "I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son." Newell wrote:

How wonderfully the Spirit of God brings out the thought of God, where our poor minds could not have followed! The words, **He shall be to Me a Son**, are of course spoken of Christ as a Son of David—as Man. As God He was eternally in the relationship of Son. Again we would warn against seeking to probe into this mystery, which faith and faith alone can receive. A godly and deeply instructed brother has written: “We cannot fathom what He was. Our hearts should not go and scrutinize the Person of Christ as though we could know it all. No human being can understand the union of God and man in His Person: ‘No one knoweth the Son, save the Father’ . . . All that is revealed, you may know; we may learn a great deal about Him . . . but when I attempt to fathom the union of God and man . . . no man can.”²

Those who teach that the Son did not become the Son and the Father did not become the Father until the incarnation face a problem. In the opening chapter of the Bible we are told that “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). The third person of the Trinity is clearly identified in this verse as being the Spirit of God at the time of creation. Are we to believe that the third person of the Trinity assumed His “role” as the Spirit thousands of years before the Father became the Father and the Son became the Son? No, He is eternally the Spirit. Indeed He is called “the eternal Spirit” (Hebrews 9:14). Likewise the Son is eternally the Son, and at the time of creation the Father made all things by the Son (Colossians 1:13,16). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all actively involved in the great work of creation. May the name of the triune God be forever praised!

Luke 1:35 indicates that Christ’s Sonship began at His birth: “And the angel answered and said unto her, The

Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”

Those who teach that our Lord’s Sonship began at the incarnation frequently use this verse as a proof text. We should be careful to notice, however, that the passage does not say that He would *become* the Son of God, but that He should be *called* the Son of God. At His birth the Messiah would be called the Son of God because that is exactly who He was. He became the Son of man—the Son of David—at birth (Romans 1:3-4). He did not become the Son of God at birth. His humanity had a beginning because He was not always a man. His deity has no beginning because He has always been God. His relationship with the Father cannot be dated. It is eternal.

Luke 1:35 does not mark the beginning of Christ’s Sonship. It does, however, mark the beginning of something important. For the first time in history a baby was called the Son of God. For the first time in history a man born of a woman was called “the Son of the Highest” (Luke 1:32). The glory of the incarnation is that He who eternally existed as the Son of God stooped to become a man without ceasing to be God.³ The incarnate One is clearly identified as God’s unique Son (Luke 1:32,35). The God-Man possesses and exhibits the same nature as the Father.

The One who was born in Bethlehem was the Son who “came forth from the Father” (John 16:28) and had been “sent forth” by the Father (Galatians 4:4). According to Isaiah 9:6 the child who would be born would be called the “mighty God.” Obviously He existed as the mighty God long before He was called this, just as He existed as the Son of God long before the angel announced that He would be called the Son at His birth. His Sonship did not originate through conception in Nazareth or through birth in

Bethlehem. At the baptism and the transfiguration, God clearly identified His Son. At His birth Christ was clearly identified as the Son of God as well.⁴

In the Old Testament Christ is never called God's Son except prophetically.

Some people believe that the references to God's Son in Psalm 2 are prophetic. When this Psalm was written, they say, Christ was not the Son of God—the prophecy points toward a future day when He would indeed be the Son of God, beginning with His incarnation.

In Psalm 2:12 the kings of the earth are told to “kiss the Son, lest he be angry.” A blessing is pronounced upon all kings and rulers who put their trust in God's Son. This verse is in sharp contrast to the future scene, introduced prophetically in Psalm 2:2, when all the kings of the earth will be gathered together against Jehovah and against His Son the Messiah. In that day the Christ-hating rulers of the earth will not kiss the Son. Any king reading this Psalm even during Old Testament times could say, “I do not want to be like those future kings who will declare their independence from God. Instead I want to kiss the Son and honor Him and trust in a great God who can bless my heart.” The reference to God's Son in Psalm 2:2-9 is definitely prophetic; these verses describe the time just prior to Messiah's second coming to earth. Psalm 2:10-12 is the personal application of the prophecy and the reference to God's Son there is not prophetic. Any king or ruler or judge reading this Psalm could apply those verses to Himself and realize that he has a responsibility to trust in God's Son the Messiah.

Those who do not believe that Christ is the eternal Son also say that Isaiah 9:6 is prophetic. This verse speaks of the time when God's Son would be given. However, the fact that God gave His Son implies that He existed as the Son

before He was given. The greatness of God's gift lay in the fact that He gave One who is eternally His beloved Son. Isaiah 9:6 certainly does *not* predict that the Messiah would someday *become* the Son of God.

Proverbs 30:4 clearly makes mention of God's Son and this verse is not prophetic. It poses a series of questions concerning the Creator: "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?"

Little is said of the Trinity in the Old Testament but there are important hints (such as Genesis 1:26; Psalm 110:1; Isaiah 6:8; 48:16; 61:1; 63:9-10). Likewise although the Sonship of Christ finds its full revelation on the pages of the New Testament, the Old Testament is not totally silent about God's Son. The verse cited above (Proverbs 30:4) is an example. A normal and natural reading of this verse leads to the obvious conclusion that God has a Son, not that God would at some future time have a Son. Charles Bridges wrote a masterful and classic commentary on the book of Proverbs and his comments on this verse are worthy of note:

There is a Son in the Eternal Godhead; a Son, not begotten in time, but from eternity (Prov. 8:22-23); his name therefore, not as some would have it, a component part of his humiliation, but the manifestation of his Godhead: co-existent with his Father in the same ineffable nature, yet personally distinct.⁵

Christ has eternally existed as the Son, but only in the mind of God.

Some people who are opposed to eternal Sonship teach that while Christ did not actually become the Son

until the incarnation, He was eternally the Son in the mind of God; that is, God always knew and purposed that the second person of the Trinity would someday become the Son of God. In God's mind it was settled and certain, although it did not come to pass historically until the incarnation.

To support this objection people point to the expression *the Lamb of God*. In the mind and purpose of God even before creation Christ was the Lamb that was slain, although He did not actually and historically become the Lamb of God until His sacrificial and substitutionary death on Calvary's cross. Before the world ever existed it was settled and certain that the second person of the Trinity would die for sinful men. He was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). In a similar way could we not also speak of the Son of God as pre-existing in the mind and counsels of God and yet not actually becoming the Son until the incarnation?

On the surface this argument seems plausible but we must not miss an important distinction. The expression *Lamb of God* points us to our Lord's historical sacrificial work accomplished on the cross when He died as our sinless substitute. The expression *Son of God* is very different in that it describes our Lord's eternal relationship to His Father. *Lamb of God* points to Christ's work, but *Son of God* describes His person. Christ is the second person of the Trinity, eternally related to His Father as Son. The Lamb who was slain is none other than the eternal Son who became a man so that He might "taste death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9).

Hebrews 1:4-5 teaches that Christ obtained the name "Son" at the incarnation: "Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten

thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?"

It is assumed by those who teach this view that "this day have I begotten thee" refers to the incarnation at which time Christ obtained the more excellent name of "Son" (a name that was not His prior to His birth in Bethlehem).⁶

Yet to do justice to the context of this passage, we must understand it as a reference not to Christ's incarnation but to His resurrection and exaltation. Hebrews 1:3-4 states, "When he had by himself purged our sins, [He] sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; Being made so much better than the angels . . ."

As God, our Lord has always been superior to the angels. In His deity He did not obtain a more excellent name than the angels because as God He always possessed a more excellent name. Indeed He is their infinitely superior Creator (Colossians 1:16). By becoming a man at the incarnation, Christ assumed a position inferior to that of the angels as Hebrews 2:9 reveals: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death." At His exaltation He obtained a higher position and a more excellent name than the angels as Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:20-21: "Which he wrought in Christ, when he [God] raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come." As believers we share with Christ in His exalted position because we are seated in heavenly places with Him (Ephesians 2:6).

It is wrong to say that Hebrews 1:4-5 refers to the incarnation because the context is speaking of Christ's exaltation (1:3). It is also wrong to say that at His exaltation Christ became the Son of God. He was clearly identified as God's Son prior to His exaltation—at His transfiguration

(Matthew 17:5), at His baptism (Matthew 3:17), and at His birth (Luke 1:32,35). Indeed the author of Hebrews declared that by the Son the worlds were made (Hebrews 1:2), thus making it certain that Christ existed as God's Son even at the time of creation.

The term "Son" primarily signifies submission, obedience, subservience, and even inferiority.

In Jewish usage the term *son* did not generally imply subjection and subordination, but rather equality and identity of nature.⁷ When the Lord Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, the Jews did not say, "You are making Yourself to be inferior and subservient to God." They clearly understood that the Lord was claiming for Himself equality with God (John 5:17-18). Even on the human plane, *son* does not always convey the idea of subjection:

The term "Son" only "denotes subjection" in childhood and in the adolescent stage, before maturity is reached. When full-grown or fully developed, the son is competent to represent the father, because he corresponds in nature and qualities with the father. The son, therefore, in normal conditions, is considered not inferior but equal to the father, and able to maintain the prestige of the family.⁸

Hebrews 5:8 contains the ideas of both Sonship and subjection. Notice how they are contrasted: "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered." This verse teaches that Christ existed as a Son. It does not say, "When He became a Son, He learned obedience." Hocking explained this passage well:

The truth is that the new theory which claims that "sonship" denotes subjection confuses the scriptural

distinction between “son” and “servant.” Subjection is a feature which is essential to the character of a servant, but exceptional and voluntary in the case of a son. A son may consent to become a servant, but a servant cannot elevate himself to become a son. . . . Subjection was foreign to the nature of the Eternal Son, yet He learned obedience when incarnate. The absurdity of the assertion that subjection is denoted by the word “Son” is seen at once when applied to this passage, substituting those words for the word “Son.” The statement of the Messianic glory is converted into a mere platitude by this change: “Though He were *in subjection*, yet learned He obedience from the things which He suffered.” How commonplace! The one who is subject *must* obey. The emphatic force of “though,” which means “notwithstanding the fact that,” is lost. The glory of the obedient Son has departed from the passage when the eternity of the Sonship is denied!⁹

Another important difference between Son and servant is shown in the contrast between Christ and Moses in Hebrews 3:5-6: “Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant . . . But Christ [was faithful] as a son over his own house.”

Praise be to the Son! He who was equal with God willingly emptied and humbled Himself, being obedient to the Father’s will even to the point of submitting to a shameful death on the cross (Philippians 2:6-8). Although He was God’s eternal Son, He became our servant, our Savior, and our substitute. The majesty of His condescension is not that the eternal God became Son. The majesty lies in the fact that the exalted Son of God laid aside His heavenly glory and became a man so that He by the grace of God might “taste death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9). Let us not seek to exalt His condescension by degrading His Sonship.

The second person of the Trinity took on a new function, assumed a new role, and received a new name and title that He did not previously possess.

To refute this objection to eternal Sonship, we must make a careful and clear distinction between who a person is and a title he may receive, a function he may assume, or a role he may play. For example let us say that Mr. Samuel Jones is the son of Mr. Thomas Jones. Many things about Mr. Samuel Jones could change. He could work for a new employer or be promoted to a new position. He could receive a new title such as vice-president of the bank. None of these changes, however, would alter his basic identity as the son of Mr. Thomas Jones. So how can it be said that Sonship was just a role that Christ played and a function that He assumed? How can it be taught that *Son* was His incarnate title and a new name that He never before possessed?

What does the Scripture say? Does it not call Christ God's "own Son" (Romans 8:3)? Is He not the Father's proper and peculiar Son, His own in a sense different and distinct from any other? Does Scripture not speak of Him as the Father's "beloved," "wellbeloved," and "only begotten" Son? If such expressions do not indicate an actual relationship—that Christ is indeed the true, real, proper, and unique Son of the Father—what could these words possibly mean?¹⁰ As to His very person, He is God's Son, the One who is distinct from the Father yet equal in nature. W. J. Ouweneel noted the following important distinction:

"Son (of God)" is a *name*, and not a title (such as King). The distinction between these two things is this: a name belongs to a person, but a title belongs to an office. A name gives expression of *who* a person is; a title expresses *what* he is. Thus in Psalm 2 Christ is called King (this tells us what He is) and

He is called Son (which tells us who He is). The first thing is an “official” matter and the second a personal one. . . . Sonship is not an office. It is definitely objectionable to refer to the expression “Son” as a title.¹¹

If being the Son of God involves Christ’s real, true, and proper relationship with the Father as a distinct person in the godhead who shares the Father’s divine nature, then certainly His Sonship must be as eternal as His relationship to the Father. To say that Christ became the Son at the incarnation is to say that prior to this there did not exist a Father/Son relationship in the godhead. But there could never be a time when He was not the Son because there could never be a time when He was other than the person He is—the Father’s beloved and only begotten Son. He is “the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” (Hebrews 13:8). To understand the doctrine of eternal Sonship correctly it is essential to recognize that His Sonship directly relates to His essential nature and identity. *Son of God* is not merely a role or a title that Christ assumed in time.

The concept of eternal generation is erroneous and therefore the doctrine of eternal Sonship is erroneous.

Opponents of eternal Sonship object to the idea of eternal generation. Indeed, a common approach is to attack the doctrine of eternal Sonship by attacking eternal generation.

Some of the objections against eternal generation are well founded. *Eternal generation*, a theological term that does not occur in the Bible, refers to a concept that is used to attempt to describe and explain the doctrine of eternal Sonship, which is difficult for finite and frail men to understand. The idea of eternal Sonship is well beyond the range of our experience because we do not know of any son

who did not have a beginning and birth. But some of the arguments in support of eternal generation are weak and lack Biblical support. For example, many proponents of eternal generation employ a very questionable exegesis of Psalm 2:7 (understanding “this day” as a reference to some kind of mystical “eternal day”). Others totally misunderstand the term *only begotten*, which is found in John 3:16 (the term really means “one of a kind, unique”).

Those who reject eternal Sonship must also reject eternal generation. Those who firmly hold to eternal Sonship do not necessarily accept the entire concept of eternal generation.¹²

The denial of eternal Sonship cannot be successfully substantiated with Scripture. The incarnational Sonship position is weighed in the balance and found lacking. The virgin birth of Christ was certainly a key event in the history of redemption, but it did not mark the beginning of the Father/Son relationship in the godhead. Christ’s Sonship is from everlasting. “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17).