

Which Son of God Are You Confessing?

Three main — and differing — views of Jesus and his status as Son of God have been held since New Testament times. The public is largely unaware of the centuries-long theological and political warfare which occurred in connection with arguments over the Bible's teaching about who Jesus is and was. (A "must-read" is *When Jesus Became God*, by R.E. Rubenstein, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1999.) Many churchgoers seem complacent, unconcerned, when invited to consider the biblically crucial matter of identifying the Jesus of the Bible — as distinct from any "other Jesus" (II Cor. 11:4) who may be offered as a savior. For some, such questions fall into the awful area of "doctrine," and in pragmatic America have little or nothing to do with real Christian life. The anti-intellectual mood of our times erects a barrier against Berean-style searching (Acts 17:11), meditation and progress towards saving Truth (II Thess. 2:10-13). As Christians, however, we cannot afford to be lethargic. The stakes are too high. Easy-going compliance with "what we have always believed," "the majority which cannot be wrong," may be the signal that our powers of discernment have been dulled. Jesus and Paul recognized no division between "right doctrine" and "right practice." Believing falsehoods, doctrinally or otherwise, is dangerous, and theological falsehoods are especially pernicious. The battle for the minds of men, as Schaeffer said, lies in the world of ideas.

Jesus, we repeat, knew of no such compartmentalizing of "doctrine" and "Christian living." For him Truth mattered supremely. We either believe what is true or what is false, and it requires effort and investigation to establish Truth to the best of our abilities. If ever a verse urged a solution to "the present distress," it would be this one: The Bereans were warmly commended when they "searched the Scriptures daily to see if what they were hearing was true" (Acts 17:11).

Though Jesus confirmed the love of neighbor as a cardinal duty of all his followers, that was not all he taught. He came as the bearer of *the Gospel about the Kingdom of God*. That Gospel was his "core belief," since it was the reason for his Commission: "I must preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God to other towns also. That is the reason why God commissioned me" (Luke 4:43). Here it may be useful to take one's spiritual temperature by comparing one's own sense of mission with that of Jesus. He mandated that his followers continue the same Kingdom Gospel work (Luke 9:60; Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 8:12; 20:25, 28:23, 31, etc.).

Jesus also came to found his Church. It was to be built on the solid rock, not of agreement with the Golden Rule (important as it is), but on an enlightened understanding of *who Jesus is*. It was Jesus as Master-Rabbi who probed the intelligence of his students. "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (see Matt. 16:13-16). This utterly correct response was greeted with enthusiastic praise from Jesus. "Congratulations, Peter, because flesh and blood [human wisdom] did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in Heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter ["rock"], and on this rock I will found my Church, and the gates of the realm of the dead will not prevail against it."

The whole point of the New Testament is that Jesus is the Messiah. This backbone doctrine, this central conviction appears repeatedly. "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ/Son of God..." (I John 5:1, 5, 9, 10, 12; 4:2; 2 John 7).

Luke and Mark do not fail to include in their reports the watershed event by which Jesus established that his chosen team knew beyond any doubt that he, their lord and master, was indeed the Messiah. According to the version given us by Matthew, Peter identified Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." The latter part of the title interestingly identifies the model Christian believer with the ideal Israelite as predicted in Hosea. The time is coming when the now apostate people will be entitled to be called "Sons of the Living God" (Hos. 1:10). Jesus demonstrated that ideal status to perfection. Mark records Peter as identifying Jesus as "the Christ" (Mark 8:29), Luke as "the Christ of God" (Luke 9:29). Clearly, then, since each writer makes a solemn and clear point, "Messiah and Son of God" are virtual synonyms. It is sufficient to declare Jesus to be "the Messiah." "The Son of the Living God" describes the

Messiah's relationship to his Father. But Messiah and Son of God are the essential, defining titles of the true Jesus. Any "Jesus's" who do not fit the biblical picture of Messiah are imitations.

Confessions are all very well. But they depend for their truth on *the meaning* we attach to the words we confess. We may "make the right sounds" and say "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God." But if perhaps we have been misled into a false idea of what "Son of God" means in the Bible, our confession will lack authenticity. When we say "Jesus is the Son of God," we must mean what Jesus and the Apostles meant by "Son of God."

Church history is a stormy affair. Professing Christians have attacked each other unmercifully both by word and physical force. They have excommunicated each other, anathematized each other, banished each other and even killed each other precisely over the issue "Who is Jesus?" Which of the various Jesus's offered to us by different Christian groups is the real Jesus — the one who lived and lives?

Here are the major available options:

1) "Jesus is the Son of God" means belief that the Son existed from eternity. There was never a time when the Son did not exist. He was "eternally generated" (few, if any, can offer a clear idea about what that puzzling phrase might mean). There was no beginning to his generation.

2) "Jesus is the Son of God" means belief that the Son was generated by God, his Father, sometime before the Genesis creation. This generation occurred in time. There was a time when the Son of God did *not* exist.

3) "Jesus is the Son of God" means belief that the Son of God came into being when Mary conceived a child supernaturally under the creative influence of the spirit of the Father. The Father caused the Son of God to be begotten in history, in Palestine some two thousand years ago.

Which of these differing views will stand up under careful examination from the whole range of Scripture?

It is interesting to note that view 1 (the so-called Trinitarian, orthodox view) has been held by a large majority since the time of the famous Councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451). Prior to that time (from the second century), view 2 (the so-called "Arian" view, held today by Jehovah's Witnesses) was either predominant over or in fierce competition with view 1. Few know that a major church council (actually a bigger council than at Nicea) decided that the Arian view was the correct one, and that everyone should accept it in order to remain a Christian in good standing. This happened at the Council of Rimini-Seleucia (359).

View 3 existed alongside the other two views. It had many adherents in the pre-Nicene period, though their writings were often suppressed by the party — view 1 — which eventually gained the theological victory concerning the identity of Jesus. Nevertheless view 3 is well known enough to have been given a label: "Dynamic Monarchianism." This view was insistent that God was a single Monarch and that His Son was subordinate to Him. It was held by a Bishop Paul of Samosata and (in principle) by those like Marcellus of Ancyra who denied that there was a "Son of God" before the birth of Jesus, and clearly by his pupil Bishop Photinus of Sirmium. It was held by early Jewish Christians known as Ebionites (that section of them which also held to the Virginal Conception). This view 3 was revived by Michael Servetus (whom John Calvin authorized to be burned at the stake in 1553 — because Calvin thought that view 1 was the only view to be permitted). View 3 was held heroically by John Biddle (1615-62) in England, by the Italians Faustus and Laelius Socinus and their followers, by Polish Anabaptist brethren (documented in their Racovian Catechism), and by a number of well-known 19th-, 20th-century and contemporary scholars. View 3 can be usefully labeled as "Socinian."

Trinitarian, Arian or Socinian. Which of these understandings of the meaning of "Son of God" can claim to match the Bible? We can begin by simplifying the question: All three views agree that Jesus is the Son of God in a special sense, the unique Son of God. The question is: Did this "Son of God" have a beginning, and if so, when was that beginning? The question is thus about origins. Is the Son of God of the Bible an eternal, uncreated Person equal to God the Father? Is he a created Person in the category of angel? Or is he a human being originating by miracle in his mother's womb?

A reasonable way to proceed to an answer is to ask: What light does the Hebrew Bible throw on our question? The Old Testament, as all agree, has much to say about the Messiah before he arrived. What

sort of Son of God were the Jews expecting? Do any texts in the Hebrew Bible instruct us to expect “the Son of God” to give up a conscious life in heaven in order to enter the womb of a Jewish woman and be born as a man — or rather God-Man or Angel-Man?

The answer we suggest allows for little doubt. What does the Old Testament say about the Son of God? Centrally important is the Davidic Covenant (II Sam. 7:14). Here we find a *promised* Son of God who is to arise from the family of David. This Son of God is certainly not alive in the time of David. He is the object of a divine promise. “He *will be* [not ‘he is’] my Son, and I will be his Father.” So also in Isaiah 9:6: “A Son *will be* born [to Israel] and he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, *el gibbor* [‘divine hero, reflecting the divine majesty,’ *Brown, Driver and Briggs Lexicon of the Old Testament*], Prince of Peace.” The Son is to be born when “a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son” (Isa. 7:14). No one can reasonably assert that this promised Son is anything other than a royal descendant of Judah and David, miraculously born, but obviously a unique member of the human race — the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15).

No one in Old Testament times could possibly have imagined (in view of all the other Messianic promises, Deut 18:15-18; Num. 24:17; Ezek. 21:27; 34:23 etc.) that this Son to be born of a virgin, would in fact be alive as an Angel or as God *before his birth* and then enter the world by passing through the womb of a woman and becoming a man. Expert commentators on the Hebrew Bible agree that the idea of an Incarnation (becoming man) of *an already existing Son of God* would be alien to the Hebrew Bible. In fact the Jews have never found any such non-human Son of God in the 75% of the Bible we call the Old Testament. Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have often gone on record to deny that the later doctrine of the Incarnation of the Son is found there.

Views 1 and 2 thus suffer an enormous blow at the outset of our investigation. What might proponents of these views offer in defense? They might answer that the promised Son of God was actually operating in Old Testament times under the title “Angel of the Lord.” They might contend that when God said “Let us make man in our image” (Gen. 1:26) that God was addressing His already existing (whether from eternity or just before Genesis) Son. But many now admit that these arguments are without solid basis. The Angel of the Lord was an angel and Jesus was never an angel (Heb. 1), and God did not say, “Let me and my Son make....”

Staying with our field of investigation in the Old Testament we inquire, What is the meaning of the term Son of God? We have found the title in the Davidic Promise (II Sam. 7:14). But we find also that Israel was collectively the Son of God (Exod. 4:22; cp. Hosea 11:1). And in Psalm 2 we have the classic passage about the Son of God. He is “the Lord’s Anointed” (i.e. Messiah) (v. 2), “my [God’s] King,” (v. 6) and “My Son: Today I have begotten you” (v. 7). Here the Bible presents us with a trio of synonyms. The Son of God is the Messiah, God’s King, whom God personally begets — in time, “today.”

The fact that the Son is begotten “today” will rule out view 1 immediately. Obviously a “Son of God” who has no beginning will not match the Son of God, Messiah who has been begotten “today.” What’s more, the New Testament is very interested in that verse in Psalm 2. Does the New Testament use of Psalm 2:7, “today I have begotten you,” throw light on the crucial question as to *when* that begetting took place? It certainly does. Unfortunately the KJV confused the translation of Acts 13:33 (which cites Psalm 2:7) by leading us to believe that the begetting took place when Jesus was *resurrected*. There is an important point at stake here: In Acts 13:33 Paul delivered the essential facts of the faith: “And we declare the good news of how the promise made to the Fathers has been fulfilled by God to us their children: God *raised up* Jesus [note that the word “again” does not appear in Paul’s speech, but was wrongly added in the KJV], as it stands written in the second psalm: ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten you.’” The next verse proceeds to tell us of God’s other great intervention in history: “And as for the fact that He raised him *from the dead*, never again to return to corruption, He said: ‘I will give you the sure mercies of David’” (Acts 13:34). So there are two events here: The begetting of the Messiah when God created him in the womb of Mary (v. 33), and secondly the Messiah’s resurrection to immortality (v. 34). The major point to be grasped is that Psalm 2, which predicts the begetting of the Son of God, declares that event to be an event in time. It is an event which marks the “raising up” of the Messiah — that is, his production and appearance on the scene of history (cp. Acts 3:26; Rom. 9:17, “raised up”).

There is no reference to a begetting of the Son of God either in eternity (view 1), or in a time prior to Genesis (view 2). But there is a further supremely important scriptural testimony to the Son's begetting, just as we would expect from the data we have presented, when Mary became pregnant. Matthew records: "Now the 'genesis' of Jesus was as follows..." (Matt. 1:18). The Greek word here is not the word which simply means birth. It has the more precise meaning of "origin." It points to the beginning of the Son of God's existence. "Before Joseph and Mary came together, Mary was found to be pregnant — a pregnancy having its origin (*ek*) in divine spirit...Behold the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph and announced these words: 'Joseph, descendant of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife, for what has been *begotten* [i.e. brought into existence] in her has its origin in the holy spirit" (see Matt. 1:18-20). It is important to observe that the angel refers (v. 20) not to Mary's part in the creation of the Son, her conception, but to the action of the Father who begets the Son in her womb. This simple fact is avoided by the KJV when it mistranslates *yenneethen*¹ (begotten) as "conceived." There is evidence here of bias by orthodox translators for whom the notion of a begetting of the Son in history is unwelcome. On the highest authority, that of Gabriel himself, Luke records the *beginning* (and he certainly does not hint that there is any *other* beginning) of the Son's existence. In answer to Mary's reasonable question about pregnancy in the absence of a physical father, Gabriel explains in a manner which should silence all objectors: "Holy Spirit [i.e., Divine creative energy reminiscent of the Genesis creation, Gen. 1:2] will come upon you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and it is *for that reason precisely* that the one being begotten will be called Holy, the Son of God."

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the angel's statement would be a very partial truth, if in fact that Son of God had been *already* in existence for millennia past. Gabriel's succinctly stated point is that the cause of Jesus' Sonship is the creative miracle by which God acted in Mary to beget His Son. As Raymond Brown admits candidly (*Birth of the Messiah*, p. 291), this statement of Gabriel has caused embarrassment both to orthodoxy (view 1) and to Arianism (view 2). According to these views the miracle in Mary's womb is not the causal basis of Jesus' right to be called the Son of God. If Trinitarianism or Arianism is correct Jesus would have been rightfully the Son of God long before his conception.

In the absence of any Bible verse hinting at a begetting of the Son (1) in eternity or (2) just prior to Genesis, we conclude that the Bible does not recognize as Messiah a Person other than the Son whose origin and inception are to be traced to the unique act of God in the reign of Herod the King. Just as the Father had produced from the dust of the earth Adam "the Son of God" (Luke 3:38), the first man, so now He inaugurates the new creation by bringing into existence miraculously the second Adam, the unique, virginally conceived, Son of God.

John of course describes this Son of God, who is the very expression of God's mind and word (John 1:1) as the unique Son of God (John 1:18 — here we agree with that member of the committee who decided on a "D" rating for the very improbable reading "only begotten god"). That Son, Jesus, is the one also who keeps the Christian safe: "the one who was begotten by God keeps him and the wicked one is not able to touch him" (I John 5:18, note again the KJV's inadequate text, corrected by modern versions).

Truly, as the distinguished systematic theologian and general editor of the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown, observed: "The title 'Son of God' is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead. Indeed to be a 'Son of God' one has to be a being who is *not* God. It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's Son" (*Ex Auditu* 7, 1991, p. 88).

On this magnificent truth, may we renew our confession of Jesus as Son of God. To do so is to place ourselves on the rock-confession which has the Savior's vigorous approval (Matt. 16:16-18), as the hallmark of participation in his church. ☩

¹ Transliterating the Greek to follow modern Greek pronunciation.