

Chapter 7

THE MEANING OF THE TERM “SON OF GOD”

*And I saw, and bear record that this is the Son of God
(John 1:34).*

The term *son* has a threefold significance. It signifies that a son is a separate person from his father; a son is the heir, not the servant, of his father; and a son has the same nature as his father. Let's develop and apply these three points to the vitally important issue of the Sonship of Christ.

A son is a separate person from his father.

The fact that a son is a separate person from his father is self-evident. In light of this, Jesus' designation as the Son of God signifies that He is a separate person from God the Father. Various statements Jesus made concerning His relationship with the Father emphasize this truth. For example in John 5:19-22 He said:

The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. For as the Father

raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.

In John 6:38-39 Jesus declared:

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

These statements can only make sense if Jesus as the Son is a separate person from the Father.

A son is the heir, not the servant, of his father.

The term *son* signifies that a son is not a servant of his father. In contrast to his father's servants, a son is his father's heir. Scripture illustrates this contrast between a servant and a son in several ways.

First, the Lord Jesus contrasted servant and son in the parable of a householder who planted a vineyard and turned it over to the care of husbandmen (Matthew 21:33-39). When the harvest season came, the householder sent servants to the vineyard to collect his share of the harvest. The husbandmen abused and killed the servants. Since the husbandmen did not respect his servants, the householder finally decided to send his son. He said, "They will reverence my son" (21:37). The householder's decision and statement indicate a clear distinction in his mind between his servants and his son.

When the son arrived at the vineyard, the husbandmen said, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance" (Matthew 21:38). This statement indicates that a son (not the servants) is his father's heir.

In this parable the householder represents God the Father; the householder's servants represent God's Old Testament prophets; and the householder's son represents Christ, the Son of God. Through this parable Jesus drew a contrast between God's servants (the prophets) and Himself as God's Son and heir.

Second, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) Jesus contrasted servant and son. When the prodigal son came to his senses and decided to return home, he determined to say to his father, "I . . . am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants" (15:18-19). When the son returned, the father ordered his servants to do beneficial things for his son (15:22-24). The elder son called one of the servants and asked him for information (15:25-26). All of these details in the story indicate a contrast between a servant and a son.

Third, Paul contrasted servant and son: "Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Galatians 4:7).

Fourth, to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over Moses, Scripture presents Moses as a servant of God in contrast to Christ who is the Son and heir of God (Hebrews 3:5-6). Concerning this contrast F. F. Bruce wrote:

Moses' relation to God's household, then, was that of a servant; Christ's relation to it is that of the Son and heir. Moses served *in* the household as one who was himself part of the household; Christ rules *over* the household as the Son whom His Father, the owner of the household, has appointed to exercise this rule. The Son's authority is greater than the servant's.¹

Hebrews also presents Christ as being superior to the angels. Christ is set forth as Son (1:2,5-6,8) and heir (1:2,4), whereas the angels are called ministers or servants (1:7,14).

In light of these contrasts between a servant and a son, we can conclude that subservience to one's father is not associated with the Biblical idea of sonship. Christ as Son is the Father's heir, not His servant.

A son has the same nature as his father.

The term *son* also signifies that a son has the same nature as his father. In the Old Testament and in the writings of post-Biblical Judaism, the Hebrew words for *son* were "often used to denote the relationship which determines the nature of a man."² Thus Jesus' designation as the Son of God indicates that He has the same nature as the Father. He is as fully divine as the Father.

The Scriptures give evidence supporting the conclusion that the term *the Son of God* signifies the divine nature of Jesus. Let's look at nine of these Scriptural proofs.

First, the Bible makes it clear that the Jews recognized that absolute deity is inherent in the expression *the Son of God*. Because Jesus called God "My Father" the Jews "sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:17-18). On another occasion as Jews attempted to kill Jesus they said, "For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God" (John 10:33). Replying to this charge Jesus asked, "Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?" (John 10:36). This reply indicates that it was His claim to be the Son of God that prompted the Jews to accuse Him of making Himself God. A comparison of Matthew 26:63-66 and Luke 22:66-71 further substantiates that the religious rulers of Israel accused Jesus of blasphemy because He claimed to be the Son of God.

Second, in Hebrews 1 the Father ascribes deity to Jesus as the Son of God. "But unto the Son he saith, Thy

throne, O God, is for ever and ever" (1:8). "Therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows" (1:9). In both statements the Father calls His Son *God*.

Third, Scripture refers to the incarnated Christ as both the Son of God and the Son of man. What would be the purpose of these two designations, except to emphasize His two natures—human and divine? One language scholar stated that the expression *Son of man* "denotes true humanity."³ Another scholar declared that it clearly "signifies what essentially appertains to man, to human nature in its inner reality."⁴ Another asserted that "it refers to Christ's humanity. . . . It therefore stresses His manhood . . . partaking of the characteristics (sin apart) of manhood belonging to the category of mankind."⁵

If the expression *the Son of man* indicates Christ's humanity, then the expression *the Son of God* must indicate His deity. Another language scholar wrote, "Unquestionably the title 'Son of God' affirms the full deity of Jesus, as the title 'Son of Man' affirms his true humanity."⁶

Fourth, in John 10:30 Jesus claimed to be one with the Father. The fact that Jesus called God *Father* indicates that He was speaking as God's Son. As God's Son, He was claiming to be one in nature with the Father.

Fifth, in John 5:19-21,25-26 Jesus as Son claimed to have equal authority or power with the Father. Jesus asserted that He does the same things as the Father. He and the Father both raise the dead; He and the Father both have life in themselves.

Sixth, in John 5:23 Jesus as Son claimed to have equal honor with the Father: "All men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him."

Seventh, Hebrews 1:2 reveals that God made the worlds by His Son. According to this declaration the Son of God is the Creator. Only deity can be the Creator.

Eighth, Hebrews 1:2-3 asserts that as the Son of God, Jesus is the brightness of God's glory, thus identifying the Son with the shekinah glory of God. The shekinah glory always signified the presence of deity, so the identification of the Son with the shekinah glory is an identification of the Son with deity. When Jesus displayed the shekinah glory in His person at His transfiguration, the Father clearly acknowledged Him to be His Son (Matthew 17:1-5).

Hebrews 1:2-3 also states that as the Son of God Jesus is "the express image of [God's] person." The Greek word that is translated *express image* means "impress, reproduction, exact representation."⁷ Judaism used this term to refer to "the likeness between parents and children."⁸ The Greek word that is translated *person* means "substantial nature, essence, actual being, reality."⁹ With these definitions in mind, one language scholar concluded that Hebrews 1:2-3 presents the concept that "Christ as the Son of God is the impress of God's nature."¹⁰

Ninth, the Scriptural expression *the only begotten Son* indicates that the designation *the Son of God* signifies the divine nature of Jesus. In contrast to believers who are begotten of God (John 1:13; 1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18) and are sons of God (Romans 8:14; Galatians 3:26), Christ is "the only begotten Son" of God (John 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9). Christ is the Son of God in a way that believers are not. He is uniquely the Son of God. John, who alone used the term *only begotten* to describe Christ, used it to emphasize "more strongly the distinction between Jesus and believers and the uniqueness of Jesus in His divine sonship."¹¹

Jesus emphasized the concept of His unique Sonship when He declared "that God was his Father" (John 5:18). The Greek word that is translated *his* in this verse literally means "his own," "in contrast to what is public property or belongs to another."¹² The Jews recognized that Christ, through this declaration, was "making himself equal with God."

Christ is related to the divine nature in a way that believers are not. As begotten of God and sons of God believers are partakers of the holiness aspect of God's divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), but not His other attributes. As the only begotten Son of God, Christ possesses the total nature of God.

Angels are called "the sons of God" (Job 2:1); God referred to the nation Israel and to King Solomon as "my son" (Exodus 4:22; 2 Samuel 7:14); and Adam is designated "the son of God" (Luke 3:38). But Christ alone is called the only begotten Son of God. Others are called God's sons to indicate that God brought them into existence or installed them in their positions. Christ is designated the only begotten Son of God because He possesses the same divine nature as God and has a unique eternal relationship with the Father.

We can conclude that the expression *the Son of God* indicates absolute deity for Jesus Christ. As the Son He has the same nature as the Father and is a separate person from the Father. One scholar said, "The title has already become a cipher which presupposes a unity of essence between Father and Son."¹³ Another wrote, "Thus, absolute Godhead, not Godhead in a secondary or derived sense, is intended in the title."¹⁴

Since the expression *the Son of God* indicates absolute deity and since Christ has always been deity, we can conclude that Christ has always been the Son of God and we can rule out the idea that Christ *became* the Son of God at some point in history. A person who claims that Christ became the Son of God either at His conception, birth, baptism, or resurrection and therefore was not the Son of God before His incarnation, should also deny the preincarnate deity of Christ in order to be consistent.