

## Jesus, the Son of God

In the affirmation every one must openly subscribe to in order to become a follower of Jesus of Nazareth there are two essential facts. The first is that Jesus is the Christ ('Christ' is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'Messiah'). The other is that He is the Son of the living God. Peter made such an affirmation about Jesus and it gained Jesus' unmistakable endorsement. After Jesus' probing question about how His closest followers identified Him Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Such an insight, Jesus indicated, was evidence that Peter had been blessed by understanding revealed to him by God, Himself! The importance of the fact which Peter's affirmation contained was of such a high order that on it Jesus promised He would establish His church. All this is obviously and explicitly contained in the record of that brief but highly important dialog between Jesus and Peter which has been preserved for us by Matthew. "But what about you?" he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'" (Matthew 16:15-18 NIV)

Of these essential facts which we must affirm about Jesus, the fact of His being the Son of God is the most profound and, therefore, is more frequently misunderstood. It is misunderstanding of this great truth which is a main cause of rejecting the Gospel. There are many who accept Jesus as the Word of God, as a Prophet of God, as The Spirit of God, as the Servant of God, as The Son of Mary, but never as the Son of God!

To some extent such people are not at fault in this matter because, through the centuries, Christians have often presented a muddled Christology. The muddling came out of the extravagant credal statements about the deity of Jesus which grew out of the attempt to rebut the Arian Heresy. As a result many have concluded that Christians acknowledge more than one God!

The first step in trying to understand the fact that Jesus is The Son of God is humility. For, to achieve such understanding is, to some extent, to achieve understanding of The Most High. Thus, we who are finite must try to understand The Infinite! We should never forget that, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit." (Psalms 147:5 NIV) In our effort to gain understanding we cry with Elihu, "The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power..." (Job 37:23 NIV) In the course of our search for understanding we are often brought to the sense of awe experienced by Paul when he exulted, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:33 NIV) Perhaps David made the ultimate statement of the case when he said, "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom." (Psalms 145:3 NIV)

In spite of the limitations inherent in our finitude we must try to satisfactorily answer the question which Jesus posed about himself, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" (Matthew 22:42 NIV) It is obvious from Jesus' response to the answer that was given that He expects us to understand something considerably more profound than His being

the son of David. He is one who may be properly called 'Lord' (Matthew 22:43) because He is not only the son of David but is the Son of God!

Everyone must achieve a certain level of knowledge of Jesus to become a Christian. This was clearly implied when Jesus said, "...unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins." (John 8:24 WEB) Part of the minimum level of understanding of what Jesus meant by "I am he" is He is the Son of God. That understanding is foundational. As we have seen, Jesus builds His church on that. After one becomes a Christian he must go on to even higher levels of comprehension about the person of Jesus. We must progress in that understanding, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13 NIV)

For every serious seeker after the truth prayer to God is completely appropriate. God's invitation to Jeremiah can be ours too. He said, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." (Jeremiah 33:3 NIV) We can do this with confidence because, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." (Psalms 145:18 NIV)

With great confidence I can say that when we call Jesus the Son of God that appellation has at least three significant meanings:

**First of all**, "Son of God" is a name given to Jesus which expresses rank or eminence.

That "Son of God" is a name and that it does express eminence is clearly and explicitly expressed in Scripture: "So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'?" (Hebrews 1:4-5 NIV)

If we study the second Psalm from which the first quotation in Hebrews 1:4-5 is taken, it becomes clear that the name 'Son of God' was prophesied to be one of the titles of the Messiah. Among the cast in the second Psalm there are 'the LORD' and 'his Anointed One.' (Psalm 2:2) These are to be identified with The Almighty and the Messiah or the Christ (both the Hebrew word 'Messiah' and its Greek translation, 'Christ' mean the 'Anointed One'.) It is in relation to the Anointed One being proclaimed king, ("I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill" Psalms 2:6 NIV), that The Almighty says to the Messiah, "You are my Son". (Psalms 2:7) In His position as Son He rules (as the vicegerent of God) over the kings of earth, not only over the kings but over the nations subject to them: "...and I will make the nations your inheritance... Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth." (Psalms 2:8-10 NIV) Thus Jesus' eminence or rank above men in general and kings in particular is declared by the exalted name, 'Son of God' which The Almighty has bestowed on him.

However, in the revealed commentary on the second Psalm which we have in the first chapter of Hebrews it is emphasized that even angels, who in many ways are superior to man, have not been honored with a name which expresses eminence equal to that conveyed by the name, 'Son of God.' This lesson comes through the challenge, "For to which of the angels did

God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son”?” (Hebrews 1:5 ESV) Thus Jesus has been given a name, ‘Son of God,’ which shows He ranks not only above commoners and kings but above angels as well!

Though at this point it may be an anticlimax to do so, it still should be pointed out that in harmony with Jesus’ observation about the relative standing of servants and sons Jesus is far superior to Moses. Jesus said, “Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.” (John 8:35 NIV) Applying this principle to the relative standing or rank of Moses and Jesus the divinely given message of the book of Hebrews says, “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boasted.” (Hebrews 3:5-6 NIV) (While the concept in both John 8:35 and Hebrews 3:5-6 about the relative standing of servants and sons is the same, it should be pointed out that the word in John 8:35 for slave is ‘doulos’ while the word for servant in Hebrews 3:5 is ‘therapon’.)

In summary, we have seen so far that ‘Son of God’ is a name which The Almighty bestowed on Jesus through which Jesus’ rank or eminence is stressed. He ranks far above mankind, above their kings, above the prophet and lawgiver Moses, and even far above the angels who stand before God.

**In the second place,** ‘Son of God’ is not only a name which expresses the rank or eminence of Jesus but is a name which stresses the relationship which exists between the Most High and Jesus.

If it were not for the gross misrepresentations of the biblical message that have taken place, it would not have to be stressed that none of the relationships between Jesus and the Almighty are physical. How could they be when, “God is spirit”? (John 4:24 NIV)

The name ‘Son of God’ expresses, first of all a relationship of authority. There is a vicarious relationship which exists between The Almighty and Jesus. Jesus represents God as a deputy or vicegerent. Jesus Himself, in His parable about the expropriated vineyard, stressed this significance of His sonship. “Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ ‘He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,’ they replied, ‘and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.’” (Matthew 21:33-41 NIV)

This vicarious relationship, God acting through the Son as a king would act through a deputy or vicegerent or viceroy, not only is stressed by the parable we have just reviewed but

also in Jesus' teaching about the judgment. He said, "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him." (John 5:22-23 NIV)

Not only does the name, 'Son of God' express a relationship of authority between The Almighty and Jesus, but a relationship of love. It is this relationship, probably more than any other, which explains the choice of the name, 'Son of God.' It is because, "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands." (John 3:35 NIV) (From this it is obvious that the relationship of authority grew out of the relationship of love.) Thus, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." (John 3:36 NIV)

The love which The Almighty had for The Word (cf. John 1:1-3 and John 17:5) in eternity obviously continued after The Word became flesh. (cf. John 1:14) Because the natural love between fathers and sons is the only relationship which is even roughly analogous to the love between The Almighty and The Word, when The Word became flesh, that is, when Jesus was born, God expressed that love in language borrowed from the human situation. This analogy is perhaps most vividly perceived if one draws on the relationship between Abraham and Isaac. When God put Abraham to the supreme test He said to him, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, WHOM YOU LOVE, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." (Genesis 22:2 NIV)

Thirdly, it should be noted that the relationship between the Almighty and Jesus is not only a relationship of authority (that is, Jesus as Son of God has been appointed to act as the divine Deputy), and a relationship of love (implied by the vocabulary: Father – Son), but it is also a relationship of continuity.

However, before specifying the areas of continuity in the relationship between God and Jesus which are implied by the name 'Son of God', it should also be noted that the incarnation, (i.e. The Word becoming flesh, John 1:14), inevitably involved some discontinuity in the relationship between God and The Word. There was, first of all, a discontinuity in the glory in which The Word shared with God. This became unmistakably obvious when, shortly before His death, Jesus prayed, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." (John 17:5 NIV) Not only was there a discontinuity of glory but of position as well. The surrender of position by The Word to become The Son of Man was voluntary and, therefore, serves as one of the highest challenges to every follower of Christ. The voluntary discontinuity of position is stressed by Paul in a beautiful passage in his letter to the Philippian church, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-8 NIV) In spite of these discontinuities we should not overlook the fact that the relationship between God and Jesus was a continuing relationship. To say it another way, it was a relationship of continuity.

There was continuity of Jesus being The Word. John informs us of this when he wrote, “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us...” (John 1:14 NIV) So, while Jesus was The Son of God (John emphasizes His Sonship in the second half of that verse) He continued to be The Word of God, however the incarnate Word.

There was also continuity of Jesus being I AM. This startling reality came out during a heated debate between Jewish leaders and Jesus. For our point of concern I break into the flow of the dialog: “At this the Jews exclaimed, ‘Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if a man keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?’ Jesus replied, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.’ ‘You are not yet fifty years old,’ the Jews said to him, ‘and you have seen Abraham!’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was born, I am!’” (John 8:52-58 NIV)

The identity of the one who shares in timelessness and is, therefore, known as ‘I AM’ is given in a remarkable passage in Exodus 3:13-14. However, one should read from the first verse of that chapter. It seems that ‘I AM’ is Jehovah. Thus, Jesus as ‘I AM’ is to be identified with Jehovah of the Old Testament.

While, as we saw above, there was a discontinuity in the glory which Jesus shared with God before He was born in Bethlehem, we should now note that there were also degrees in which there was a continuity of glory. So we are reminded that, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory...” (Hebrews 1:3 NIV) It seems Isaiah prophetically saw that there would be, at some level, a continuity of that eternal glory which Jesus had with The Almighty before the incarnation. For, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.” (John 12:41 NIV) Perhaps Isaiah’s vision of that glory is the one recorded in Isaiah 6:1-5.

**In the third place**, and finally, let us note that the name, ‘Son of God’ not only was given to Jesus to express His eminence or rank, and His relationship to The Most High, but also to suggest that through Him we may have the highest level of revelation.

There are only three forms and three corresponding levels of revelation. The first of these is Natural Revelation. This is the revelation of God we may receive through creation or nature. This concept is best known from passages such as, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” (Psalms 19:1 NIV) and, “...since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” (Romans 1:20 NIV) However, this natural revelation is severely limited. As Job said, “And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?” (Job 26:14 NIV) We desperately need to understand the thunder of His power. Therefore, we do need a higher form of revelation.

The next higher form of revelation is Verbal Revelation. This is revelation in the form of an inspired verbal or written message from God. This concept is graphically expressed by

Peter when he reminds us, "...prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21 NIV) We have an inspired value judgment on this form of revelation when Paul reminds us, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV)

As we strive for perfection there is the indispensable help we may gain from the ultimate form of revelation, that is, Personal Revelation or revelation by example. We need the greatest possible revelation of the nature of God. This can only come through personal revelation. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9 NIV) This ultimate form of revelation has come through Jesus, and only Jesus, in His high position as the Son of God, for, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by HIS SON..." (Hebrews 1:1-2 NIV) God has spoken to us both verbally and personally through Jesus in these last days. Because Personal Revelation is the highest form of revelation, Jesus could say, "...no one knows the Father except THE SON and those to whom THE SON chooses to reveal him." (Matthew 11:27 NIV)

Jesus, the Son of God, is able to reveal God in this unique personal way because, "...in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form..." (Colossians 2:9 NIV)

The greatest revelation of the nature of God is the revelation that God is love. How was this revelation made? By demonstration, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 ARV)

Not only do we have the highest revelation of the nature of God through personal revelation but we also gain the highest revelation of the work of God through personal revelation, for "...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them..." (2 Corinthians 5:19 NIV) (cf. John 5:36, Matt. 11:2-6)

'Son of God' is the name used for Him through whom the highest revelation of the nature of God, the work of God, and, finally, the message of God has been given to man. Jesus made this last point unmistakably clear when He said, "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work." (John 14:10 NIV)

To summarize, when we call Jesus 'The Son of God' we are using a name, divinely given, which first of all declares His rank (above man, above Moses, above angels and above nature). It is a name which also reminds us of Jesus' relationship to The Almighty (vicarious or representative, loving, and continuing). It is, last of all, the name which reminds us that through Jesus, by personal revelation, God has given the highest, most profound revelation of the ages (he has revealed the nature of God, the work of God, and the message of God).

Not only should we be fully aware of what the name 'Son of God' implies, we should be careful that no one affirm more than is implied by that holy name. This error has driven many away from Christ. It was a false implication about the meaning of the name 'Son of

God' which became the basis for the hatred of the Jewish leaders against Jesus. John records the initial incident as well as Jesus' response to it: "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." (John 5:18 NIV).

How did Jesus respond to the allegation that by using the name 'Son of God', that is by, "calling God his own Father" He was "making himself equal with God"? We must remember the voluntary subordination which Jesus had accepted. (See Philippians 2:5-9.) His use of the name 'Son of God' did not negate that! "Jesus gave them this answer: 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.'" (John 5:19-20 NIV). In answering in this way Jesus clearly distinguishes himself from The Father, that is from The Almighty. To understand this we only have to ask, Would it be true to affirm of The Almighty that he, "can do nothing of himself"? The answer is, obviously, no. For The Almighty is totally autonomous and self subsistent. On that occasion Jesus repeatedly disavowed the allegation that by using the name 'Son of God' He was "making himself equal with God". For He said, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me." (John 5:30 NIV).

On other occasions also Jesus denied the charge that He was, "making himself equal with God". He said, "...I live because of the Father..." (John 6:57 NIV). But could we say of The Almighty that He lives because of anyone? No, because He is self-subsistent! Again, Jesus said, "...When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." (John 8:28 NIV) Again, could The Almighty say in regard to himself, "I do nothing on my own"? Obviously not!

In perfect harmony with Jesus' own teaching that the name 'Son of God' does not imply that He was "making himself equal with God" is explicit teaching through the Apostle Paul. He tells us clearly that, "...the head of Christ is God." (1 Corinthians 11:3 NIV) Paul gives us a more detailed exposition of the relationship between Christ and The Almighty when he says, "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." (1 Corinthians 15:24-28 NIV) When Paul tells us, "that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:28 NIV) it is clear the name 'Son of God' does not mean Jesus has made himself equal with God, The Almighty.

At this point it only remains to stress how utterly essential it is for every person to openly acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. For, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God." (1 John 4:15 NIV) Also it is the only way of victory, for, "Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God." (1 John 5:5 NIV). The final conclusion is, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1 John 5:12 NIV)