

A Letter on Eternal Sonship with Notes

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Reprint of a letter (revised), as to Divine Relationships in the Eternal Godhead

In view of the discarding by certain well-taught Christian brethren of the truth of SONSHIP of Jesus our Lord in connection with His Deity IN THE PAST ETERNITY, this little paper gives a letter and a summary of some exercises upon this most sacred subject. W.H.W.

August 18th, 1931.

My dear Brother in the Lord,

In reply to your further enquiry, in reference to 1 John 2: 22, 23 and 24, the Lord Jesus as there contemplated — whether confessed or denied — certainly is the One now in risen Manhood at the right hand of God. Of course if you start with the assumption that there was no such relationship between Divine Persons in eternity as Father and Son, you must then interpret those verses as relating only to His incarnation, or resurrection.

That they speak of JESUS CHRIST, THE FATHER'S SON, is clear from chapter 1: 3. He is MAN now, but was not ever Man. That He is ever GOD is manifest from John 1: 1. That He is ever discernible as a distinct Person in the absolute Godhead is not challenged by those who offer us "new light." Yet I see dangerous possibilities in the words of a prominent leader who recently wrote to me, endeavouring to discredit the term "eternal Sonship."

He says, "The Godhead as such is incomprehensible by creatures; dwelling in light unapproachable, Whom no man hath seen nor is able to see" (1 Tim. 6: 16), to which He adds) . . . "The essence or being of God is not a subject of revelation, and I think we may say with all reverence it could not be."

The danger in these words lies in the fact that he writes thus of Sonship, and confuses the inscrutable and undiscoverable ESSENCE of GOD and the RELATIONS between Divine Persons in the Godhead.

The essence or being of God is not the subject of our present discussion, — what folly that would be in creatures! But to advance the thought that in the Godhead, — where Persons are distinguishable if Scripture means anything, — such wonderful Persons have no relationship the One with the Other; and, further, to deny to such Persons if relationship do exist, the ability to reveal Themselves in that relationship, is unconsciously to assume a knowledge that has placed a limit even upon God Himself.

In casting aside as error what we have always believed to be the teaching of Scripture, namely, that in the eternal Godhead we discern Eternal Father, Eternal Son, and Eternal Spirit, they happily leave us God eternal it is true. But it is God without a Father's heart; it is God without a Son's affection, and God without a Spirit's acquaintance with any of the affections that flow between a father and a son. I say they happily leave us God eternal; and the One Whom we now know as our Lord Jesus they acknowledge as Eternally Divine in the Godhead. But even so this glorious Person is in their theology reduced to a nebulousity; for it is part of the teaching that not only as Son, but as the Word, our Lord Jesus became such at His birth at Bethlehem. What He was it is apparently denied to us to examine; for as our brother puts it above, — at any rate in His speaking of Eternal Sonship, — it is "not a subject of

Revelation," and he thinks (while saying it with all reverence) "it could not be."

The brother may rightly say that the essence or being of God is not a subject of Revelation; but relationship is a subject different from essence or being. It is probably because he confounds these two things in his letter that he would shut out saints from what we with equal reverence I hope, conceive to be a cardinal truth of Christian revelation and faith. I felt when I first read his letter that he was taking from Christians and from me one of the choicest themes in my communion with my God.

Turning to the Scripture, I enquire, "Is it possible for saints to know that Divine Personalities subsisted in the Eternal Mystery of the Godhead?" Recognizing that the mystery of the eternal essence and being of God is infinitely beyond analysis by mortal mind, I affirm boldly with John 1: 1 before me, that the eternal and distinguishable Personality of the One that we now know as Christ the Son is positively and definitely taught. So that it is wrong for any one however gifted to say that nothing can be known of Godhead in His eternal Godhead glory.

Moreover this is confirmed in Proverbs 8. Here, as in John 1: 3, the idea of the eternity of matter is confuted, and our Lord under the figure of Wisdom (see Note 1, page 14) is considered as antecedent to all created beings and all created things. God as God is Creator, but Wisdom is co-existent with Him (see Note 2, page 15), anointed from eternity (v. 23, N. Tr.). This wonderful Scripture repays examination. Christ is viewed objectively as the daily delight of Jehovah. We have presented to our faith in holy Scripture, in language suited or adapted to our spiritual understanding, One Divine Person Who finds delight objectively in Another Divine Person Verse 30. The "then" of that verse covers both the "before" of verses 22 to 26 and the "when" of verses 27 to 29. So that within the Godhead uncreate there are thus revealed to reverent faith Divine Personalities, distinguishable, both the One and the Other, the One being Object to the Other. And if distinguishable, and made so by Divine communication, then revealable if the Godhead so willed it.

In passing, I turn to Proverbs 30. The words of Agur are a prophecy, the utterance of an oracle. There is little doubt that we have therein a broad survey of the generations of mankind, of the developments of good and evil on the earth, and of the incoming of the Ruler Who will subdue all to God. But ere the writer unfolds his theme, and with a humble confession that what he writes is no fruit of earthly scholarship, he asks six questions in v. 4 which refer to the invisible and eternal God. The first embraces the wonders of the heavens above, a region inaccessible to man. The second is concerning the air, invisible and uncontrollable by man. The third relates to the waters no man can manage, the fourth to the earth, the establishment and maintenance of which could only be the work of God. That there must be a God is clear; yet can a man by searching find out the Almighty? If God did not give a revelation, the questions Who? Who? would have to travel round the world unanswered.

But two other questions remain. If God does not give Himself a Name who shall discover it? What is His Name? If God be pleased to call Himself EL is it not because He is El before He is so named? If He be revealed as SHADDAI, is it not because He ever was, and is, and is to come, — the Almighty? If He especially disclose Himself to the nation of Israel as JEHOVAH, did He only begin to be Jehovah when and because so named?

But there is the sixth question. "What is His Son's name? if thou canst tell? Is this only a stage question, asked for dramatic effect? The very next sentence in our Bibles says, "Every word of God is pure." Are we to decide the matter, and to say that such a disclosure is not a matter of revelation, . . . and could not be? Should we not humbly renounce with Agur all idea of scholarship or human reasoning, and with him learn that not all that is in the Godhead was at that time revealed; that there existed in the eternal Godhead relationships which had still to be brought to light?

The Christian revelation solves these then unrevealed relationships. It is not that the revelation of them made them to exist. God was God before He was revealed to be God. If we say there was no relationship of Son before incarnation, then there was no relationship of Father before incarnation, for whoever denies the Son has not the Father either, 1 John 2: 23. This verse which truly was written after incarnation and was said of the risen Son of God applies none the less, and just as truly to relationships within the Godhead eternally. If you have no Son you have no Father. The admission that the Word had His own distinct Personality, predicates the distinct Personality of Father and Spirit, and we know that Scripture does speak of the Eternal Spirit. They say that the term Eternal Son is not found in Scripture, and it is a misnomer. But whether so-named or not, the fact is there; and it is the fact that matters. Have they also dropped the Triune God, the Trinity, because the term is not in our Bibles? These are fair questions; let them answer.

I strongly object to the theory now put out that God becoming Father, and Christ becoming Son, was a sort of accommodation to man having such relationships as fatherhood and sonship. (One is ashamed to put baldly what they teach with more embellishment). It puts things the wrong way round. Has the history of sin added something to the Relationships of Divine Persons that was not there before? That it has been the occasion for the revelation of what God is, is theme for our everlasting praise. But the truth is quite the other way round; the creation of man is after the image and likeness of God. Marvellous indeed that God in infinite wisdom should be able to create a being, — none the less a creature — in whom might be found such counterpart to what is in the Godhead. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Thus when the time came for God to be fully revealed in Christ in Manhood, the Godhead was disclosed to be Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Now what appears sad to me is that the teachers of the "new light" present their teaching as gain. But what gain? All that such teachers have of truth as to the inscrutability of the essence or being of God we have always had. All they press as to the Deity of Christ is not new. All the truth of the Father's counsels, and of the purposes of God is precious, but nothing fresh. All the beauty of Christ, and His offices, the revelation of God, the triumph over sin and death and Satan's power, the blessed subjective work of the Spirit, the calling, and equipment, of the Assembly, the saints' priesthood, the coming kingdom and glory, are from time to time freshly presented, but it is not fresh light. When I read of these things that are true, I enjoy them, and find food. But 'fresh light'! I suppose they thus describe it because they do not happen to know of these things being presented elsewhere. But I think they sometimes unfairly judge their fellow Christians, and in so doing plume themselves with much complacency on superior light.

But gain? To have given up the truth of the eternal Sonship of JESUS I look upon as subtraction, and very great loss. The antichrist yet to come will deny the Father and the Son. He will not deny I suppose that there was ever such a Person as Jesus. But he will deny what Christians have always believed concerning Him. He will not credit, but will deny, that underlying the fact of Jesus in Manhood, there was the coming into this world of the One Who was in a certain defined relationship in the Deity. He will not only call in question the Eternal Sonship of Jesus, but will deny it. He will endeavour to blot it out of existence as though it had never been. Every book that refers to it, every hymn that proclaims it, he will ruthlessly destroy; every ministry that avows it he will discredit and silence. He will inspire his devotees to look upon it as the misty gropings of an unenlightened, credulously "orthodox" age. And accompanying this anti-christian campaign there will be emphasis laid upon man; upon himself in fact, as the centralisation of all new light, the one in whom is focused the best of which man is capable, an acme to satisfy every aspiration of the spirits of men, the summit of all spiritual attainment, before whom all should bow down, his voice the voice of God; yet, — the

Antichrist.

Of these things we are warned; we are not encouraged to follow them. That the germs of this need not be in some hole-and-corner movement, but in the very citadel of sainthood, and just at the time when saints are loudly proclaiming advance all along the line, is possible. That it should have the garb of spirituality, that it should have as its advocates very angels of light, yea, that ultimately it should have two horns as a lamb, yet speak as a dragon, is also conceivable. All I can say is, may the Lord keep us amid the real dangers that undoubtedly are near their full development.

I will add a note on 1 Tim. 6: 15, 16. I take it that v. 16 is in apposition to the "Blessed and only Ruler" of v. 15. If that verse had been written before the Creation, or before the Incarnation of Christ, we might have believed it to exclude any revelation of God at all. But seeing that it is written after the full revelation of God in Christ, we must be careful, in our interpretation of it, not to contradict the revelation that Christ has brought to us.

I ask, Is GOD now in the light? (1 John 1: 7). I ask, Is GOD now approachable? (Heb. 7: 19). I ask, Are the pure in heart blessed because they shall see GOD? (Matt. 5: 8). I know the writer of the letter I have received too well to think for one moment that he would deny these. Then let him be careful lest he give an application to his passage in Timothy, which is destructive of Christianity itself. Be it remembered that the inspired apostle Paul wrote those words in the same epistle as the words of 1 Tim. 3: 16. Our brother cannot give a meaning to the sixth chapter which flatly contradicts the meaning of the third chapter: the latter being meanwhile the basis of all true moral rectitude. The unrevealed and unrevealable "essence" of 1 Tim. 6. cannot mean the revealed "relations" between Divine Persons in which our souls have found such contemplative and formative delight. They have been expressed to us in their manifestation; but what has been manifested was there before it was manifested. I cannot understand how such brethren can bring themselves to believe that Christianity has added anything to God in the sense of creating new relationships between Divine Persons that they never knew before.

In the other letter which you have forwarded the writer says, "Now as to the expression we have made use of without the authority of Scripture, — and based no doubt largely, with most of us, on our hymns, — it seems perfectly clear to me that if we accept John 1: 1, 2, as it doubtless is, an absolute statement of fact, it precludes the idea of emanation of Christ by way of Sonship, which of necessity would have been subsequent to the beginning," etc., etc.

I do not know whom he is combating in thus speaking of 'an emanation of Christ by way of Sonship.' My correspondent in the first letter referred to, does refer to theologians who suggest our Lord becoming Son in some distant era in eternity. But if he contend with that, so do we all. In fact I should have thought that the expression "Eternal Son" would itself have precluded the idea of "emanation of Christ by way of Sonship." But do not these our brethren in one sense go almost further than the theologians? For these last, in their misconception of the word 'only-begotten,' do think of Sonship ages before incarnation ("begotten before all worlds"), but those deny it altogether to pre-incarnation ages, or at any rate exclude it from their belief. Of course the difference lies in this that these many theologians do not apparently accept what my correspondent does, namely, that Christ is God, and from eternity. But I have yet to meet with the brother amongst us who, having given thought to the matter, imagines that Christ as Son had a beginning in the sense alluded to by your correspondent.

He says further, "I feel sure that it has been spiritually damaging to many of us to attempt to dissect the Person of Christ, — viewing Him in a way as two Persons, Divine and Human, whereas Scripture never does." This also has been the subject of much controversy, but has for the moment no

direct bearing on the truth of Eternal Sonship. But here again, I have no personal acquaintance with any who present Christ as two Persons.

He appears to put emphasis on the future tense in Luke 1: 35. "That holy thing that shall be born shall be called Son of God." But the angel was speaking to a human being, in relation to a time subject; and an ordinary lapse of time ere an event is to take place requires in English or Greek the future tense in speaking of it. It affirms incidentally and precisely that the title "Son of God" would attach to Him in Humanity, in the condition He would take up in Manhood, — which we have always understood. The angel was not giving a dissertation on the truth of the Person of Christ, for he says nothing about His pre-Existence at all. His omission of this latter does not lead us to call in question His pre-existence. It simply shews that beneath the simple and yet miraculous appearance of Jesus in Manhood there would lie the unfathomable Mystery of Who He is, a fact that always bows the heart in worship. It does not impair the truth of His eternal existence nor of His eternal Sonship.

I may conclude by saying that several paragraphs in your correspondent's letter would call for comment, but I must stop.

In warm affection, yours in Christ,

Wm. Hy. WESTCOTT.

ADDENDA.

Note 1.

November 1931.

In reporting on. the Bristol Conference (1931) one of these well-taught Christian brethren, who took notes at the time, says,

"As to Proverbs 8, Mr — seemed definite, and was unchallenged in saying, 'Wisdom is not Christ. Wisdom was His nursling. I cannot love Wisdom, it is a quality.'"

"These are my jottings at the time, and thinking it over since, I can see that to limit Christ to one attribute is utterly unwarranted, though we can admire that quality as belonging to Him." And he adds, "Are you suggesting that the great truth of the Incarnation was unfolded in Prov. 8?"

Let us remember that the dictum 'I cannot love Wisdom, it is a quality' is in relation to the very chapter in which occurs "I love them that love me, and those that seek me early shall find me."

Here we find not only that we can love Wisdom. but that Wisdom can love us. We do not bring incarnation into Prov. 8: but we remember that when Christ had become incarnate, and had been crucified and raised, He was designated both the Power and Wisdom of God. 1 Cor. 1. At the same time one does not at all like the suggestion above thrown out that we or any Christians limit Christ to one attribute, in applying what is said in this chapter to Him.

W.H.W.

Note 2.

My dear

November 10th. 1930.

The passages which have always seemed to us to convey this truth are well-known to you, and it would be invidious in me to pretend to remind you of them. Yet in a family reading recently in a

brother's house, considering the personal glory of the One Whom we now know in His Mediatorial position, I was decidedly struck by Heb. 7. It is true one does not look for the unfolding of relations between Divine Persons in Eternity in that Epistle, but attention is called to the greatness of the Person — Melchizedek — brought so mysteriously into the narrative in Gen. 14, as introducing the readers to the surpassing greatness of Christ.

You will note if I comment upon it, that in speaking of the Son as come into the world Incarnate, we have to speak of a time of beginning of days. Further, if we have to speak of the risen One us taking up the place of Mall according to the purpose of God, this too implies a beginning of days. The greatness of Melchizedek consists in his being type of the One Who had no beginning of days, even the Son of God.

The idea conveyed by Mr — seems unavoidably to involve the error that the Son of God had a beginning of days. Have you thought of this?

Candidly I felt when I read his remarks as though I was being robbed of one of the choicest joys I had known. To me, the passages he quotes declare that the One Who is ever Son, came forth as the expression of the Father, and the bearer of the Revelation of His Father's Name, and Hand, and Heart. I know that the utterances were made when He was incarnate, but the things uttered lose none of their meaning when one reads them as declaring what subsisted eternally; and the defects of his explanation of them are two-fold: one being that one has to submit to a lengthy line of reasoning ere one can bring himself to comprehend mentally all that is alleged; and the other is that any simple soul learning from the plain words that the Father it was Who sent the Son, has to unlearn what the plain words say and apply his mind to the study of this new theology ere he can consent to their interpretation.

As to Revelation and Incarnation, it has appeared simple to faith that the Revelation is the rolling away of a veil from before an existing object. In Christ Incarnate is revealed to us the fact that God is Love. Did not the fact exist before the disclosure of the fact? I speak of what is revealed, not of office or honour acquired, (as for example the Lordship or Christhood of JESUS). So, God is Light; so, God is a Spirit. These things were eternally and essentially true, though for their revelation and demonstration, a certain platform was required; — the revolt of Satan, the fall and subsequent testing of man.

But the God revealed as Love and Light, is the One Who in eternal essence is unchanged, from everlasting to everlasting He is God. All that we know now through redemption and the gift of the Spirit was ever true as to the Godhead, though requiring certain processes for the time of their complete revelation, and the coming of the Son as Revealer. His coming did not make them to exist; it was because they existed eternally that He was able to reveal them. Yet though these facts are discernible now it remains true that He is the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, etc. We reverently bow to and our faith subscribes to, this impassable barrier to the irreverent intrusion of man into the secret of Godhead glory; yet to say that God is Love, God is Light, and God is a Spirit, is not speculation, nor irreverence; we know these things because they are conveyed to us in language inspired by the Holy Spirit.

If I say, with my Bible in my hand, that the Father sent the Son, and affirm that He was the Father Who sent, and that He Who was sent was Son when sent, is this in keeping with the words used by the Holy Ghost?

If I on the other hand, affirm that He had to become the Son before He was sent or could be sent, then am I not assigning to Him a "beginning of days" both in purpose and in fact?

In affirming that (Christ is eternal Son, I am at once bowed in reverent admission of the

inscrutability of Divine and Godhead glory; just because in the things of a man I am limited to what the spirit of a man can comprehend. In the things of a man sonship implies derivation and inception. In the things of God, the Mystery of eternal Sonship and eternal Fatherhood is inscrutable; no one knows the Son but the Father.

You suggest that Divine wisdom planned His becoming Son, because it was a relationship which men could comprehend. I would rather say that because the Father and the Son subsisted eternally in those relationships, it was Divine wisdom that created man (within the limits of a created being) to understand what such relationships meant; else how could the terms Father and Son be understood at all?

In all affection,

Your brother in Christ,

W.H.W.

Note 3.

August 30th. 1931.

It seemed evident to me that if we, who by searching cannot find out the Almighty, can learn in Scripture the three Personalities in their Godhead glory, — when subsisting in the Form of God — it is very wrong to quote 1 Tim. 6 as forbidding any apprehensions of Their relations One with the Other when in that Form. That it is only by revelation we can learn the Three Persons in One God, and through the volume of inspiration is self-evident; but for any person to write or say that not even the Godhead call reveal Itself, — that there can only be for us the revelation of the Revelation, — to say in effect that what is revealed had no existence before it was revealed, is to make of Christianity not a revelation but a creation. The God that is, is not then the God that was; we have a 'post hoc' God in Christianity, whenever the 'hoc' began.

It is the egregious assumption that this negation of truth is the last phase of "new light" (that needed to be added as they say to the faith of the saints to pave the way for the rapture,) that so amazingly captures the imagination of the saints. Otherwise one cannot understand how it can be so readily received as a phase of truth hitherto overlooked. It adds nothing; for all that is still held of truth with regard to Christ in Manhood, and the counsels of God in Man, is held in common with us. It is subtraction, not addition, to take from saints that which is to most of us one of the most glorious of our Lord's glories, and is to us abundantly substantiated for faith in the scriptures of truth. That reason cannot account for any such relationship as Father and Son without conceiving of the Father as preceding, and antecedent to, the Son, is simply to create for ourselves a conception of GOD, to which reason can subscribe; to make in effect a God of our own reason to which even the true and living God must conform.

W.H.W.

Note 4.

Aug. 30th, 1931.

With reference to "brought forth" in Proverbs 8 vv. 24, 26, before which expression one has at times mentally shrunk, I recommend to your spiritual judgment the study of Young's Analytical Concordance in relation to that expression, and other related expressions.

The Hebrew word 'chul' which is the verb employed in those passages may be contrasted with

the Hebrew word 'yalad.' This last is the word used in varied forms for the bearing of children, or offspring, man or beast, and occurs round about five hundred times. It covers the actual giving of birth, and sometimes refers to the pain of so doing.

But 'chul' is used under fifty times, and in its meaning is used of any deep suffering or exercise which is to result in something to come into manifestation. In relation to the birth of children, it is the word used in Ps. 51: 6 'shapen.' The Revisers of 1881 in translating Isa. 45: 10 altered the words, "hast thou brought forth", to "travailest"; (I suppose) because the verb does not mean so much the bringing forth as the pains of bearing preceding. In its fifty uses it is variously translated fear (of God), grief, anguish, pain, sorrow, wounding, (Saul wounded of archers), travail, tremble (at God's presence), dance, shake, etc. It is not so much the thought of bearing of offspring, as of various forms of suffering, or as we say, exercise, that accompany a certain action or event.

It is very remarkable that when the Holy Spirit had choice of a word that signified birth or inception of being, if He had intended that idea, He deliberately avoided its use in Prov. 8, and used 'chul' instead. It is our English translation which creates difficulty for us by putting "brought forth" twice, where the idea was that of deepest exercise.* All the operation of God (through Christ the Son, the Word. John 1; Heb. 1) in the Creation, brought into evidence thoughtful and wise exercise; everything created was to be in one direction or another an expression of its Creator. It involved emotion, and solicitude, it expressed wisdom in forms unseen before, calculations of space, and force, designs of life and matter, depths of knowledge which were to be the wonder, and to form the study of generations of yet unborn beings. It was not the birth of wisdom, but wisdom came into movement and expression through what we may call — for want of a better word deepest exercise.

{*In fact in Psalm 90: 2 "when the mountains were brought forth" — where He required a word which would imply a beginning of existence, he uses "yalad" and not "chul".}

A note on the eternal Deity of Christ clearing away what presents a difficulty in the reading of Proverbs 8 in the English Authorised Version, might contribute to the help of souls. Where eternal Sonship is called in question, a mistranslation, or rather an imperfect translation, may possibly appear to support the non-eternity of Sonship.

W.H.W.