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ADAM CLARKE'S VIEWS ON ETERNAL SONSHIP
Compiled and Edited by Duane V. Maxey

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INTRODUCTION

This file is a compilation that I have created from extracts taken from Adam Clarke's Autobiography (hdm0074), from the Clarke biography by Etheridge (hdm0085), and from Clarke's Commentary, -- Vol. V, pages 360-361, comments on Luke 1:5.

In the following paragraph, I will attempt to state what I understand to be Adam Clarke's views on the Eternal Sonship of Christ. Bear in mind, this statement and this article do not endorse his view. I merely set it forth, along with some material by those who disallowed Clarke's teaching on the subject.

As I grasp Adam Clarke's concept regarding his denial of Christ's Eternal Sonship, it was this: He believed in the Trinity, even a Trinity consisting of Three Persons in the Godhead, with one of those Divine Persons being the Eternal Christ; but -- he did not believe that the Eternal Christ was eternally God's Son. He believed that the Eternal Christ became God's Son on the day when he was begotten of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost -- "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." (Psa. 2:7, Acts 13:33, Hebrews 1:5)

Thus, Clarke was a Trinitarian, but disavowed belief in an Eternal Son in the Trinity. He apparently viewed the Eternal Trinity in terms more like: (1) The Eternal God; (2) The Eternal Word -- (Who later was made Flesh and then became the Son of God); and (3) The Eternal Spirit.

Again, however, my presentation of Clarke's views in this article are not an attempt to persuade the readers thereof. This article merely presents the material on Clarke's views of the subject, along with the views of his biographer, J. W. Etheridge who considered Clarke's views in error, and who presents comments by others, including John Wesley, who felt that Clarke's views were a departure from the long-accepted views of fundamental Christianity. -- DVM

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Part 1

CLARKE'S VIEWS AS SET FORTH IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

[In his autobiography, hdm0074, Clarke writes of himself in the third person, i.e., as if it were someone else writing about him.]

What Led Adam Clarke to Examine the Doctrine of Christ's Eternal Sonship

He had long been intimate in the house of a very respectable family in the neighborhood. He was there as their own child: for him they had all a very strong affection, and he felt for them in return, both affection and reverence. One evening the conversation in the family turned on the Doctrine of the Atonement; and some observations then made filled his soul with doubts and fears.

It was, in short, stated one present, that, "the Methodists were guilty of idolatry, for they gave that worship to Jesus Christ that belonged to the Father only." He came home full of confusion: "What have I been doing Have I been adding idolatry to all the rest of my transgressions? Have I had two Gods instead of one?" He went into the boviere, (shippon) the first place he came to, and kneeled down among the cattle, and began to ask pardon of God, fearing that he had given that glory to another, which was due to Him alone. He was not satisfied, however, with this; he thought he should go farther, and leave the name of Christ out of all his prayers; this proceeded so far that he did not like to converse about Him.

What he had lately heard, represented Him to his mind as an usurper; and at last he could not bear to see His name in any religious book. Darkness now entered into his mind, his spiritual fervor gradually diminished, 'till it was at last entirely gone. He prayed, but it was a form: he read, but it was without unction. He felt this lamentable change, and began earnestly to inquire whence it had arisen? Importunate prayer, his former refuge, was suggested to his mind, as the only help; for he had none to whom he could open his heart. That he might not be perceived by any of the family, he went once more among the cattle, a place to which he had often resorted, and fell down before his Maker, and prayed to this effect, -- "O Lord God Almighty, look with pity on the state of my soul! I am sinful, ignorant, and confused. I know not what to say, or what to believe. If I be in an error, O Lord God, lead me into thy truth! Thou knowest I would not deceive myself: Thou knowest I esteem thy approbation beyond life itself. O, my God, teach me what is right! if I be in an error, O show it to me, and deliver me from it! O deliver me from it, and teach me Thy truth! O God hear, and have mercy upon me, -- for the sake of JESUS CHRIST!"

These last words had no sooner dropped from his lips, than he started as if alarmed at himself. "What! have I been again praying in the name of Jesus? was this right?" Immediately his soul was filled with light, the name of Jesus was like the most odoriferous ointment poured out, he could clasp it to his heart, and say, "Yes, my only Lord and Saviour, thou hast died for me, -- by Thee alone I can come unto God, -- there is no other Name given from heaven among men by which we can be saved! Through the merit of thy Blood, I will take confidence, and approach unto God! He now felt that he was delivered from those depths of Satan, by which his soul was nearly engulfed.

This narrow escape from sentiments which would have been fatal, if not finally ruinous to him, he ever held as a most special interference of God; and he always found it his duty to caution men strongly against the Arian and Socinian errors. It was this, without any suggestions from man, led him to examine the reputed orthodox, but spurious doctrine, of the Eternal Sonship of Christ; which he soon found, and has since demonstrated, that no man can hold, and hold the eternal unoriginated nature of Jesus Christ. For, if His divine nature be in any sense whatever derived, His eternity, and by consequence His Godhead, is destroyed; and if His Godhead, then His Atonement. On this point he has produced a simple argument in his Note on Luke i. 35, which is absolutely unanswerable. Attempts have been made to confute his doctrine, but they are all absurd, as long as that argument remains unanswered.

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Clarke's Argument Against Christ's Eternal Sonship

The argument is simply this:-- "1. If Christ be the Son of God, as to his Divine Nature, then he cannot be eternal, for Son implies a Father; and Father implies, in reference to Son, precedence in time, if not in nature too. Father and Son imply the notion of generation, and generation implies a time in which it was effected; and time also antecedent to such generation. 2. If Christ be the Son of God, as to his Divine nature, then the Father is of necessity prior, consequently, in Godhead superior to him. 3. Again, if this Divine nature were begotten of the Father, then it must have been in time, i.e. there must have been a period in which it did not exist; and a period when it began to exist. This destroys the eternity of our blessed Lord, and robs him at once of his Godhead. 4. To say that he was begotten from all eternity is absurd; and the phrase Eternal Son is a positive self contradiction. Eternity is that which had no beginning, and stands in no reference to TIME. SON supposes time, generation, and father, and time also antecedent to such generation; therefore, the theologic conjunction of these two terms, son and eternity, is absolutely impossible, as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas."

* * *

Another Brief Argument by Clarke From His Autobiography

His Human Nature was begotten of the blessed Virgin Mary, through the creative energy of the Holy Ghost: but His Divine Nature, because God, infinite and eternal, is uncreated, underived, and unbegotten; and which, were it otherwise, He could not be God in any proper sense of the word: but He is most explicitly declared to be God in the Holy Scriptures; and therefore the doctrine of the Eternal Sonship, must necessarily be false. -- (See the Arg. p. 96.)

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Clarke Refers to His Commentary Comments on Luke 1:35

On the Tenth Article, relative to the Eternal Sonship of Christ, there has been some difference between him and some persons, who, in all other respects, held precisely the same doctrines. On this point, he has often been heard to say:-- "Let my Argument on Luke i. 35, be proved false, which, if it could be, might be done in as small a compass as that of the Argument itself; then I am prepared to demonstrate, from the principles of the Refutation, that Arianism is the genuine doctrine of the Gospel relative to the Person of Jesus Christ. But as that Argument cannot be confuted, and my Argument in favor of the proper Divinity of Jesus Christ, in my Sermon on Salvation by Faith, cannot be overthrown; consequently, the doctrine of the proper and essential and underived Deity of Jesus Christ must stand, and that of the Eternal Sonship must be overwhelmed in its own error, darkness, and confusion."

I do not intend to write a Treatise on Conscience, and those other punctilios connected with it: I desire you to supply my lack of service: I know you are capable enough unless your health forbids. For my own part, I am well assured I shall never make an author: were there no other reasons, my ideas flow too quick for the slow process of black upon white. The thought, therefore, I entirely relinquish. What I spoke to you relative to the Eternal Sonship" of the Almighty's Fellow, is not a slight opinion with me, but a deeply graven sentiment. I have read some of the strongest

reasonings of the Schoolmen and the Fathers of the church on this head, but their finest hypotheses appear so unmeaning, trifling, and futile as to afford no satisfaction to a sincere inquirer after essential truth. I believe that which we discover of this glorious truth is the opinion which Eternity will exhibit only in greater degrees, and with more abundant evidence. It appears to me that the Arian and Socinian schemes, cannot only be strongly combated, but effectually overthrown, by a firm adherence to, and judicious inferring from, these propositions. As Arianism, &c., abounds now, I think the Church of God has much need of a Treatise of this kind: were I equal to the task it should soon appear in the world; but here I must stop, finding much reason to adore my gracious Maker, notwithstanding he has not given me adequate abilities.

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Part 2

CLARKE'S COMMENTARY VOL. V, PAGES 360-361 ON LUKE 1:35

Verse 35. The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee] This conception shall take place suddenly, and the Holy Spirit himself shall be the grand operator. The power, dunamis, the miracle-working power, of the Most High shall overshadow thee, to accomplish this purpose, and to protect thee from danger. As there is a plain allusion to the Spirit of God brooding over the face of the waters, to render them prolific, Gen. i. 2, I am the more firmly established in the opinion advanced on Matt. i. 20, that the rudiments of the human nature of Christ was a real creation in the womb of the virgin, by the energy of the Spirit of God.

Therefore also that holy thing (or person) -- shall be called the Son of God.] We may plainly perceive here, that the angel does not give the appellation of Son of God to the Divine nature of Christ; but to that holy person or thing, "to hagian," which was to be born of the virgin, by the energy of the Holy Spirit. The Divine nature could not be born of the virgin; the human nature was born of her. The Divine nature had no beginning; it was God manifested in the flesh, 1 Tim. iii. 16; it was that Word which being in the beginning (from eternity) with God, John i. 2, was afterwards made flesh, (became manifest in human nature,) and tabernacled among us, John i. 14. Of this Divine nature the angel does not particularly speak here, but of the tabernacle or shrine which God was now preparing for it, viz. the holy thing that was to be born of the virgin. Two natures must ever be distinguished in Christ: the human nature, in reference to which he is the Son of God and inferior to him, Mark xiii. 32.; John v. 19; xiv. 28, and the Divine nature which was from eternity, and equal to God, John i. 1; x. 30; Rom. ix. 5; Col. i. 16-18. It is true, that to Jesus the Christ, as he appeared among men, every characteristic of the Divine nature is sometimes attributed, without appearing to make any distinction between the Divine and human natures; but is there any part of the Scriptures in which it is plainly said that the Divine nature of Jesus was the Son of God? Here, I trust, I may be permitted to say, with all due respect for those who differ from me, that the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ is, in my opinion, anti-scriptural, and highly dangerous. This doctrine I reject for the following reasons:--

1st. I have not been able to find any express declaration in the Scriptures concerning it.

2dly. If Christ be the Son of God as to his Divine nature, then he cannot be eternal; for son implies a father; and father implies, in reference to son, precedency in time, if not in nature too.

Father and son imply the idea of generation; and generation implies a time in which it was effected, and time also antecedent to such generation.

3dly, If Christ be the Son of God, as to his Divine nature, then the Father is of necessity prior, consequently superior to him.

4thly. Again, if this Divine nature were begotten of the Father, then it must be in time; i. e. there was a period in which it did not exist, and a period when it began to exist. This destroys the eternity of our blessed Lord, and robs him at once of his Godhead.

5thly. To say that he was begotten from all eternity, is, in my opinion, absurd; and the phrase eternal Son is a positive self-contradiction. ETERNITY is that which has had no beginning, nor stands in any reference to TIME. SON supposes time, generation, and father; and time also antecedent to such generation. Therefore the conjunction of these two terms, Son and eternity is absolutely impossible, as they imply essentially different and opposite ideas.

The enemies of Christ's Divinity have, in all ages, availed themselves of this incautious method of treating this subject, and on this ground, have ever had the advantage of the defenders of the Godhead of Christ. This doctrine of the eternal Sonship destroys the deity of Christ; now, if his deity be taken away, the whole Gospel scheme of redemption is ruined. On this ground, the atonement of Christ cannot have been of infinite merit, and consequently could not purchase pardon for the offenses of mankind, nor give any right to, or possession of, an eternal glory. The very use of this phrase is both absurd and dangerous; therefore let all those who value Jesus and their salvation abide by the Scriptures. This doctrine of the eternal Sonship, as it has been lately explained in many a pamphlet, and many a paper in magazines, I must and do consider as an awful heresy, and mere sheer Arianism; which, in many cases, has terminated in Socinianism, and that in Deism. From such heterodoxies, and their abettors, may God save his Church! Amen!

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Part 3
FROM THE CLARKE BIOGRAPHY BY ETHERIDGE
(HDM0085)

Footnote Remarks on Clarke's Denial of Christ's Eternal Sonship Containing Wesley's Warning to Clarke

15 The grounds of this denial he has given at large in his notes on St. Luke i. 35. They are mainly rationalistic; and, when dealing with Heb. i. 3, the Doctor himself uses a mode of reasoning in direct opposition to them, -- a mode which has been justly pronounced "perfectly satisfactory to the most fastidious of his opponents."

16 So early as about 1787 he had written the outline of his favorite argument against the Eternal Sonship, and in a conversation with Mr. Wesley took the opportunity to read the paper to him. His venerable friend, from the short reply which he made, evidently thought that it would be

sufficient to remind him that, in embracing such a doctrine, he was in danger of departing from the faith of the true church of God.

19 It deserves to be added, that when Dr. Clarke was elected President, after the Conference had pronounced on the Sonship question, he was most studiously exact in eliciting from each candidate for ordination a statement of his agreement, on this point, with the theology of the body.

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Comments by J. W. Etheridge, Clarke's Biographer

There was yet another topic introduced by the commentator, which led to a more serious controversy: I refer to his doctrine regarding the Divine Sonship of the Redeemer. I allude to it with extreme reluctance, as it is the only embarrassing subject in the entire biography of this most excellent servant of God; -- embarrassing, on account of any implied censure that it might seem to associate with his honored name. And this painful feeling of reluctance, I venture to believe, is participated by my reverend fathers and brethren who are the promoters of the present volume. I presume it is not their wish, and it cannot be my own, to give a renewed prominence to a subject so unpleasant. I am thankful to recollect that but few words are needed in alluding to it, as the controversy has long ago been brought to a peaceful termination. When the question was discussed, it was not discussed in vain. It was done in sorrow on both sides, but was productive, after all, of beneficial results, in bringing a solemn truth of revelation more fully before the eyes of the church, and in giving a greater clearness, rigor, and steadfastness to the faith of believers in the Divine -- and therefore eternal -- Sonship of the Saviour of the world.

The infirm and glimmering intellect of man can know nothing of the tremendous mysteries of the Infinite Nature, but by revelation. We must go to the word of God, with an humble and believing heart. It is there revealed, not only that in the Divine Subsistence there are Three Persons, but that the relation of the Second Person to the First is that of SON.

Dr. Clarke was a devout believer in the Trinity, but he demurred as to this relationship. He considered that the name of "the Son of God" was a Messianic title of the Redeemer, as the consequence of His having been born of the Virgin: he denied that it was descriptive of His mode of existence prior to the Incarnation.

Now revelation affirms that the only begotten Son was in the bosom of the Father; that God so loved the world as to give His only-begotten Son; that the Son of God was sent into the world that the Son of God was manifested in the flesh; that the Word who was in the beginning with God, and who was God, was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and that the glory which He then made manifest was the glory of the only-begotten of the Father.

But Dr. Clarke believed that the Second Person of the Trinity, who was thus revealed in the flesh, was thenceforward to be known as the Son of God, but not as the eternally begotten of the Father; because, according to his view, no such relation was possible.

In this respect, and this only, Dr. Clarke made a certain divergence from the faith of the catholic church. The church from the beginning has taken those emphatic statements of Scripture in their true and literal meaning, and has evermore taught and testified that the Second Person of the Trinity is, by an ineffable and eternal generation, the Son of God. That such is the sense in which the church has received these scriptures, is evident from those solemn enunciations of doctrine we call the Creeds. Even before the increasing heresies of the fourth century rendered an ecumenical declaration of that kind necessary, (at the council of Nicaea,) most of the great Christian communities had given their profession of faith in this particular, as well as others:-- That, for example, of Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians:-- "I believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, His Only begotten Son, born of Him before all worlds; True God of True God; by whom also the worlds were framed, and all things made." Or that of Jerusalem, the mother of us all, as it is found in the Catechetics of St. Cyril, bishop there in 345:-- "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages; the true God, by whom all things were made."

In the great assembly of Nicaea the universal church pronounced the faith once delivered to the saints, and called upon the faithful, in all ages to come, to abide in the same truth:-- "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father; that is, of the substance of the Father; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made; consubstantial with the Father; by whom all things were made."

No man had a greater abhorrence of Arianism than Dr. Adam Clarke; yet with this main point in the testimony of the church against Arianism he could not bring his mind to concur. He had embraced, and ever held fast, certain rationalistic arguments which prevented him from believing that "the Son of God was begotten of the Father before all worlds."

This unhappy twist in the Doctor's judgment was formed in his juvenile years, but never rectified. An intellectual conservative in the strictest sense, whatever he mentally apprehended he no more renounced; and, when far advanced in life, could affirm that he had never changed his creed.

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William France and Richard Watson Wrote
In Defense of the Doctrine of Eternal Sonship

When the gravity of the subject is considered, we are not surprised that the thesis laid down so formally by the learned and influential commentator, and defended by him with such an array of argument, should have called forth the most serious recriminations from his brethren in the ministry: but we are surprised that these remonstrances, though expressed in respectful terms, and enforced by earnest reasonings out of the Scriptures, should have been represented by some as betraying an animus of personal dislike to the Doctor, and as amounting, in fact, to a sort of ecclesiastical persecution. Certainly such divines as William France and Richard Watson had as good a right to show their opinion, as Dr. Clarke had to state and defend his own; nor did the practical assertion of this right involve the necessity of indulging in either disposition or language

discordant with the veneration which they entertained for the sanctity of his life, the multitude of his learning, and the dignity and honor of his name.

Writing a simple biography, and not a theological treatise, I abstain from any attempt to give an analysis of this controversy, content with recording the circumstances under which it arose. The discussion of the subject itself would require a volume. Happily, the question has been sufficiently settled, and determined, too, on the right side. Most of the pamphlets in which the discussion was carried on are now out of print; but whoever would master the entire argument should study Mr. Watson's "Remarks," and the "Inquiry into the Doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Richard Treffry, Junior." The latter work, distinguished as it is by genuine theologic science, consummate criticism, and Christian temper, has taken an abiding place among the classics of English divinity. From many years of intimate friendship with the lamented author, and repeated opportunities of conversation with him while engaged in the labor of that work, I can testify that, so far as Dr. Clarke was personally concerned, he had in Mr. Treffry an admirer whose reverence for him was almost boundless.

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Etheridge Considered Clarke's Denial of Eternal Sonship To Be A Flaw in Clarke's Otherwise Sound Theology

This, it should be remarked in conclusion, is the flaw in the Doctor's otherwise sound and scriptural theology. No man was more steadfast than he, in life and death, in his affiance in the great truth [betroth to the great truth] that Jesus Christ his Redeemer was "over all, God blessed for ever;" and to make this truth known to the world by preaching it, writing it, and living it, became his peace, his glory, and his joy. As to the peculiar point in which he differed from his brethren, he never gave prominence to it, except in the statements in his Commentary upon a very few texts. In his public preaching, he carefully abstained from making any allusion to it; and that, from a sense of honor, as a minister of a body which, in common with the church at large, held a doctrine in this one solitary instance opposite to his own; and from a persuasion, no doubt, that, could he otherwise make it with propriety an element in his popular addresses, it would be very far from promoting the edification of the people.

Dr. Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures is, on the whole, one of the noblest works of the class in the entire domain of sacred literature.

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Part 4 MY OWN VIEW -- CLARKE WAS WRONG

As I understand Clarke's views on this subject, he believed that Christ became God's only begotten Son the day in which He was born in Bethlehem, and not before that time: "Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee."

However, a little reflection on the scriptures provides abundant proof that JESUS WAS GOD'S SON -- BEFORE -- HE CAME INTO THE WORLD. Jesus spoke of Himself as God's Son prior to his birth in Bethlelem when he said in John 3:17 "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Do you see the significance here? "God sent... His Son into the world..."! So, Jesus was God's Son when He was "sent" -- meaning that HE WAS GOD'S SON BEFORE HIS BIRTH IN BETHLEHEM.

Another proof that Jesus was God's Son long before He was born in Bethlehem is found in Jesus' parable of the man who planted a vineyard, and let it out to husbandmen who refused to give him the fruit of the vineyard. After the wicked husbandment stoned and killed his first emissaries, he decided to SEND HIS SON: "But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son." Matthew 21:37 In this parable, Jesus was obviously speaking of Himself as God's Son, Whom He sent into this wicked world.

Now if Jesus was God's Son prior to the day in which he was born in Bethlehem, and prior to the time in which he was sent, then clearly He was always God's Son -- from eternity! He was the slain Lamb before he died on Calvary, before ever there was an earth, and He was the Son of God long before he was born in Bethlehem -- even from everlasting, the Eternal Son of God!

Finally, the awesome, Eternal Sonship and Godhead of Christ Jesus are seen in Hebrews 1:8 "But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom."

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THE END