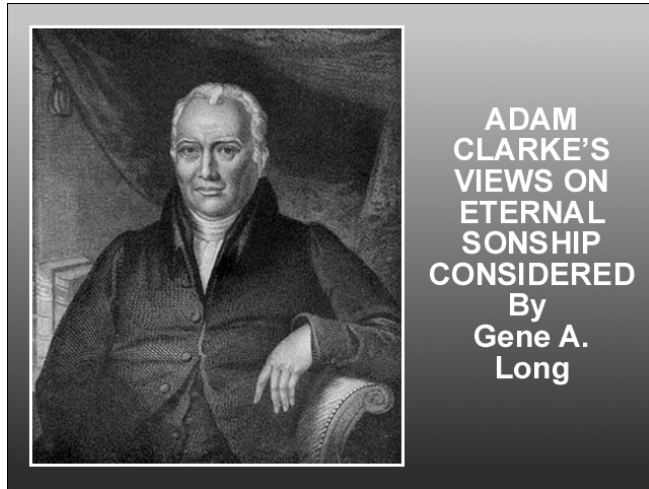


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ADAM CLARKE'S VIEWS ON ETERNAL SONSHIP CONSIDERED
By Gene A. Long



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INTRODUCTION

Duane Maxey has once again asked me to write an article; this time on Adam Clarke's Doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of Christ. Clarke rejected the doctrine of Eternal Sonship much to the consternation of his peers and theologians ever since his day. In HDM file 1019, Duane presented Clarke's argument and concluded that he was mistaken. But in the correspondence between the two of us concerning writing this article, he expressed that he was no longer convinced that Clarke was in error and asked me to give my opinion.

Recently I received a book written by one of the teachers at my old Alma Mater, Kentucky Mountain Bible College, titled "Who Do I Think I Am?" That title seems to be a perfect fit for any attempt I might make to interpret, consider or correct something taught by the greatest theologian Methodism ever produced.

But Clarke's argument was so controversial at the time he presented it that it needs to be examined once more in an attempt to understand what he was saying, the context in which he was saying it, and most important of all whether he was correct or in error as his peers believed.

The rejection of his argument has come down to the present and has been treated with disdain, almost as a heresy. But the question must be examined as to

whether Clarke was in error, and more importantly exactly what did Clarke mean by his rejection of the Eternal Sonship of Jesus.

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I. ADAM CLARKE ON ETERNAL SONSHIP

I do not want this to be just a repeating of Duane's article HDM 1019, but in order to present what Clarke said and why he said what he did, it will be necessary to include some of what Duane used in his article.

From his autobiography we learn that when Clarke was still a child a theological discussion on the Atonement in the home of friends brought him to the point of despair and darkness because he accepted and was confused by a statement that seems to have denied the Trinity of God. He struggled with spiritual darkness until he prayed through to victory, but while once again accepting the Deity of Jesus, he had enough of the discussion in his mind and heart to desire to question the Eternal Sonship of Jesus. The complete description of the discussion and Clarke's subsequent struggles is included in HDM 1019.

In Clarke's mind he came to what to him was a satisfactory conclusion that accepted Jesus as an eternal member of the Triune God who BECAME the Son of God. His concluding paragraph in which he presents his argument is included below. Note that he refers to himself in the third person.

"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 1:35, which is absolutely unanswerable. Attempts have been made to confute his doctrine, but they are all absurd, as long as that argument remains unanswered."

We must examine the weight of Clarke's argument and determine 1) whether he was right or wrong, and, 2) if he was mistaken, what is the correct approach to the Eternal Sonship of Jesus. This is a difficult task because Adam Clarke was a master of the principles of logic and sound argument. His argument is not easily overturned.

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1. CLARKE'S ARGUMENT

The strongest presentation of his doctrine is found in his commentary on Luke 1:35, which is presented in the next section. The section following that presents a statement of Clarke's view of the Eternality of Jesus as part of the Eternal Trinity. We must keep in mind that Adam Clarke did not in any sense deny that Jesus was eternal, nor that He was part of the Eternal Trinity, only that His position in the Trinity as the Son of God was not eternal.

A. What Clarke Said

Clarke On Luke 1:35

35 And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

Adam Clarke's Commentary:

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, Ge i. 2, I am the more firmly established in the opinion advanced on Mt 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 agion, 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, 1Ti 3:16; it was that Word which being in the beginning (from eternity) with God, Joh 1:2, was afterwards made flesh, (became manifest in human nature,) and tabernacled among us, Joh 1:14. 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, Mr 13:32; Joh 5:19; 14:28, and the Divine nature which was from eternity, and equal to God, Joh 1:1; 10:30; Ro 9:5; Col 1:16-18. 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 offences of mankind, or 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!

B. What Clarke Did Not Say

In Clarke's sermon "The Doctrine of Salvation by Faith" he presents his Christology. In logic that still is burning after 200 years have passed, Clarke

presents irrefutable proof that Jesus is eternal and an equal member of the Divine Trinity. The lengthy passage presented below is a marvel of clarity and sound reasoning. It must again be emphasized that he in no way denies the Jesus is an equal and eternal member of the Trinity.

Here is Clarke's Christology:

What remains to be considered, is the merit of sufferings; their capability to atone for sin, and their tendency to purify the soul...

VI. I come, therefore, to the scheme proposed by the Almighty, and contained in the apostle's answer to the terrified jailor, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

In order to see the force of the apostle's meaning, and understand the propriety of his exhortation, we must endeavour to acquaint ourselves with the Person of whom he speaks. "Believe," says He, "on the Lord Jesus Christ." From this answer, it is certain the apostle intimates that the believing, which He recommends, would bring from the Person, who is the Object of his exhortation, the salvation after which the jailor enquired. And as trusting in an unknown person for his eternal welfare would be a very blind and desperate confidence; it was necessary that he should be informed of the Author, and instructed in the principles, of this new religion, thus recommended to his notice; and, therefore, it is immediately added, ver. 32. that they spake the word of the Lord unto him, and to all that were in his house, [Greek: the doctrine of the Lord] all the teaching that concerned Jesus Christ, and the salvation which He came to dispense to mankind.

From the specimens we have of the apostle's preaching in the book of the Acts, as well as in his Epistles, we cannot be at a loss to find what the doctrine was which he preached both to Jews and Gentiles: it was, in general, Repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts xx. 16. And of this Jesus, he constantly testified, that although He was the most high and mighty of beings, yet He died for our offences, and rose again for our justification.

But who is this Person in whom he exhorts the jailor to believe, and who is here called the Lord Jesus Christ? That there has been much controversy on the subject of this question in the Christian world, is well known; and into it I do not propose at present to enter: I shall simply quote one text from this apostle's writings, on which I shall make a few remarks, in order to ascertain what his views of this Person really were: and the conclusions which we must necessarily draw from these views. The text is, Coloss. i. 16, 17. By him were all things created that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible or invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created by him, and for him; and he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

Four things are here asserted:

1. That Jesus Christ is the Creator of the universe; of all things visible and invisible; of all things that had a beginning, whether they exist in time or in eternity.

2. That whatsoever was created, was created FOR himself:-- that He was the sole end of His own work.

3. That He was prior to all creation; to all beings whether in the visible or invisible world.

4. That He is the Preserver and Governor of all things for by him all things consist.

Now, allowing St. Paul to have understood the terms which he used, he must have considered Jesus Christ as being truly and properly God: -- I. Creation is the proper work of an infinite, unlimited, and unoriginated Being; possessed of all perfections in their highest degrees, capable of knowing, willing, and working infinitely, unlimitedly, and without control: and as creation signifies the production of being where all was absolute non-entity; so it necessarily implies that the Creator acted of and from Himself: for, as previously to this creation, there was no being, consequently He could not be actuated by any motive, reason, or impulse, without Himself; which would argue that there was some being to produce the motive or impulse, or to give the reason. Creation, therefore, is the work of Him who is unoriginated, infinite, unlimited, and eternal: but Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things; therefore, Jesus Christ must be, according to the plain construction of the apostle's words, truly and properly God.

2. As, previously to creation, there was no being but God; consequently, the great First Cause must, in the exertion of His creative energy, have respect to Himself alone: for He could no more have respect to that which had no existence, than He could be moved by non-existence to produce existence or creation. The Creator, therefore, must make every thing for himself.

Should it be objected, that Christ created officially, or by delegation, I answer, this is impossible; for, as creation requires absolute and unlimited power or omnipotence, there can be but one Creator, because it is impossible that there can be two or more omnipotent, infinite, or eternal beings. It is therefore evident, that creation cannot be effected officially, or by delegation for this would imply a Being conferring the office, and delegating such power; and that the being to which it was delegated, was a dependent being, consequently not unoriginated and eternal. But this, the nature of creation proves to be absurd -- 1. The thing being impossible in itself; because no limited being could produce a work that necessarily requires omnipotence. 2. It is impossible, because if omnipotence be delegated, he to whom it is delegated had it not before: and He who delegates it ceases to have it, and consequently ceases to be God; and the other to whom it is delegated, becomes God; because such attributes as those with which he is supposed to be invested,

are essential to the nature of God. On this supposition God ceases to exist, though infinite and eternal; and another, not naturally infinite and eternal, becomes such; and thus an infinite and eternal Being is produced in time, and has a beginning, which is absurd. Therefore, as Christ is the Creator, He did not create by delegation, or in any official way. Again, if He had created by delegation, or officially, it would have been for that Being who gave him that office, and delegated to him the requisite power; but the text says that all things were made BY him and FOR him, which is a demonstration that the apostle understood Jesus Christ to be the end of His own work; and truly and essentially God.

3. As all creation necessarily exists in time, and had a commencement; and there was an infinite duration in which it did not exist; whatever was before or prior to that, must be no part of creation; and the Being who existed prior to creation, and before all things, all existence of every kind; must be the unoriginated and eternal God: but St. Paul says, Jesus Christ was before all things; ergo, the apostle conceived Jesus Christ to be truly and essentially God.

4. As every effect depends upon its cause, and cannot exist without it; so creation, which is an effect of the power and skill of the Creator, can only exist and be preserved by a continuance of that energy that first gave it being: hence God, as the Preserver, is as necessary to the continuance of all things, as God, as the Creator, was to their original production; but this preserving or continuing power is here attributed to Christ; for the apostle says, and by him do all things consist; for, as all being was derived from Him as its cause; so all being must subsist by him, as the effect subsists by and through its cause. This is another proof that the apostle considered Jesus Christ to be truly and properly God, as he attributes to Him the preservation of all created things, which property of preserving belongs to God alone; ergo, Jesus Christ is, according to the plain obvious meaning of every expression in this text, truly, properly, independently, and essentially, God.

Taking, therefore, the apostle as an uninspired man, giving his own view of the Author of the Christian religion; it seems, beyond all controversy, that himself believed Christ Jesus to be God: but, considering him as writing under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, then we have, from the plain, grammatical meaning of the words he has used, the fullest demonstration that He who died for our sins, and rose again for our justification, was God over all: and as God alone can give salvation, and God alone remit sin, hence with the strictest propriety the apostle commands the almost despairing jailor to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he should be saved.

In examining the preceding schemes of salvation, we have already seen, that God cannot act from one attribute exclusively; that He can do nothing without infinite reason; and that when He acts, it is in and through the infinite harmony of all His attributes.

In the salvation of the human soul, two attributes of God appear to be peculiarly exercised; viz. His justice and His mercy; and to human view, these attributes appear to have very opposite claims; nevertheless, in the scheme of salvation laid down in the Gospel, these claims are harmonized so, that God can be just, and yet the "justifier of him that believeth on Jesus." In this scheme "Mercy and Truth are met together; Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other."

From St. Paul's doctrine concerning Christ, as the Saviour of men, we may learn what it was which he wished the jailor to believe, viz. 1. That this glorious Personage, who was the Creator, Preserver, Owner, and Governor of all things, was manifested in the flesh, and suffered, and died, to make an atonement for the sins of the world: for it is most evident from all the apostle's writings, that he considered the shedding of Christ's blood in his death, as a sacrificial offering for sin; and he ever attributes the redemption of the soul and the remission of sins, to the shedding of this blood. 2. That His life was offered for the life of men; and that this was a sacrifice which God Himself required; for Christ was considered "THE LAMB OF GOD which takes away the sin of the world." 3. That all the Law and the Prophets bore testimony to this; and that He, as a sacrifice for sin, was the end of the Law, for righteousness, [Greek: for justification,] to every one that believeth.

That God manifested in the flesh is a great mystery, none can doubt; but it is what God Himself has most positively asserted, John i. 1--14, and is the grand subject of the New Testament. How this could be, we cannot tell: indeed the union of the soul with its body is not less mysterious; we can just as easily comprehend the former as the latter: and how believers can become "habitations of God through the Spirit," is equally inscrutable to us; yet all these are facts sufficiently and unequivocally attested; and on which scarcely any rational believer, or sound Christian philosopher, entertains a doubt. These things are so; but how they are so, belongs to God alone to comprehend: and as the manner is not explained in any part of Divine Revelation, though the facts themselves are plain; yet the proof and evidences of the reasons of these facts, and the manner of their operation, lie beyond the sphere of human knowledge.

From what has been said, we derive the following particulars:-- 1. That the Word, which was with God, and is God, became flesh, and tabernacled among us: this is a truth which we receive from Divine Revelation. 2. That God never does any thing that is not necessary to be done; and that He never does any thing without an infinite reason: -- these are truths, also, which we learn from the perfections of the Divine Nature. 3. That God has required the incarnation, and passion of Jesus Christ and this the Sacred Scriptures abundantly declare. 4. That this would not have taken place, had it not been infinitely reasonable, and absolutely necessary, we learn from the same perfections. 5. That the sacrifice of Christ, thus required by God, was infinitely pleasing to Him, and completely proper to accomplish the end for which it was appointed:-- this is evident, from its being required; for God can require and devise nothing that is not pleasing to Himself, proper in itself; and fit to accomplish the end for which it was required. 6. That, as the sacrifice of Christ was

required to take away the sin of the world, we may rest assured that it was proper to accomplish that end; and that God, in the claims of His justice and mercy, is perfectly pleased with that sacrifice. 7. That, as the dignity of Jesus Christ is infinitely great and glorious; so all His acts have an infinite merit; because they are the acts of a Being absolutely perfect. 8. That, though His passion and death could take place only in the human nature which He had associated with His Divinity, for in that "dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily;" yet this association stamped all the acts of that manhood with an infinite value. 9. And, as these sufferings, &c. took place in human nature, and were undergone on account of all those who were partakers of that nature, therefore they were sufficient to make atonement for the sins of the whole world; and are, to the Divine justice, infinite reasons, why it should remit the sins of those in whose behalf these sufferings, &c. were sustained. When, therefore, a sinner goes to God for mercy, he goes, not only in the name, but with the sacrifice of Christ: this he offers, by faith, to God; that is, he brings it with the fullest confidence, that it is a sufficient sacrifice and atonement for his sins; and thus he offers to Divine justice an infinite reason why his sins should be blotted out. To this faith can attach itself without wavering; and on this, God can look with infinite complacency and delight. And it follows, that the man whose business it is to make known the way of salvation to perishing mortals, can say with the utmost confidence to every genuine penitent, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and THOU shalt be saved."

This scheme is of God's own appointment: by it His law is magnified and made honourable; from its very nature it must be effectual to the purposes of its institution; and is liable to none of the objections with which all other schemes of salvation are encumbered. By it, the justice of God is as highly magnified as His mercy. "What the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God" has done by "sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, [Greek: as a sacrifice for sin,] condemned sin in the flesh." Rom. viii. 3. And thus our salvation is of grace; of the free mercy of God, in and through Christ; not of works, nor of sufferings, that any man should boast; and thus God has the glory to eternity while man enjoys the unspeakable gift, and the infinite benefits resulting from that gift.

In this scheme of redemption we see a perfect congruity between the objects of this redemption, and the redemption price which was paid down for them. The objects of it are the human race; all these had sinned and come short of the glory of God: it was right, therefore, that satisfaction should be made in that same nature, either by receiving punishment, or paying down the redemption price. Now we have already seen that, bearing the punishment due to a crime, is no atonement for that crime nor can answer any of the purposes of that original law which God gave to man in his state of innocency: and we have also seen, that no acts of delinquents, however good they may be supposed, can purchase blessings of infinite worth, or make atonement for the past. Hence, it is absolutely impossible that the human race could redeem themselves; and yet, justice and the fitness of things required that the same nature which sinned should be employed in the work of atonement. Behold, then, the wisdom and goodness of God! Christ assumes human nature:--

that it might be free from blot, stain, or imperfection; it is miraculously conceived, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the womb of a Virgin; and, that it might be capable of effectually performing every redeeming act, GOD was manifested in this flesh. Here, then, we see the same nature suffering which had sinned; and we see all these sufferings stamped with infinite merit, because of the Deity who dwelt in that suffering humanity. Thus Christ was man, that he might suffer and die for man; and He was GOD, that the sufferings and death of the man Christ Jesus might be of infinite value! The skill, contrivance, and congruity of this system, reflect as high honour on the wisdom, as on the mercy of God!

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2. REACTIONS TO CLARKE'S POSITION

Reaction to Clarke's denial of the Eternal Sonship of Jesus was negative at the time he wrote and has not changed since that time. His biographer, J. W. Etheridge, cites a warning concerning Clarke's argument from no less than John Wesley himself. Wesley says Clarke's grounds for his belief were largely rationalistic. Etheridge's opinion is the Clarke was in error and that he was inconsistent with it, especially in two points: he seems to contradict it in his comments on Hebrews 1:3, and when Clarke was elected President of the Methodist Conference he required ministerial candidates to state their agreement with the church position, which was that Jesus was the Eternal Son of God.

Etheridge has a lengthy critique of Clarke's position in his biography of Clarke that is quoted by Duane Maxey in HDM 1019. If you would like to see what Etheridge wrote, I suggest that you review it there. There is one point Etheridge made that is important: Clarke's position was contradictory to the early church creeds.

William France and Richard Watson, who were early Methodists, wrote "In Defense of the Doctrine of Eternal Sonship." Just the fact of them writing such an article points out the seriousness with which Clarke's position was viewed.

More recently, Ralph Earle abridged Clarke's Commentary to a single volume. In doing so, it is interesting that he omitted Clarke's argument concerning Eternal Sonship in the comments he chose to retain for Luke 1:35. Evidently he considered Clarke to be in error as evidenced by his omission.

In HDM 1019, which Duane Maxey wrote in 1999, Part 4 presents two telling arguments rejecting Clarke's position. However, Duane may now be questioning whether Clarke was indeed in error. That is why he asked me to write this article.

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II. CLARKE'S POSITION CONSIDERED

We come now to the all important question. Was Adam Clarke in error in his position or was he right? Or is there a possibility that he could be correct but only partially so?

To lay a foundation for our conclusion, there are three positions of our own that must first be established.

*** * ***

1. DIFFERENT BASES OF SONSHIP

From reading what Clarke wrote it is evident that he only recognized one definition of the father/son relationship. To him a father by definition had to precede a son in time order. A father was therefore superior to the son. Thus the relationship was made up of three elements: time, generation and authority.

However, there are many things that are recognized as father/son relationships, which are different from each other in nature as well as in time requirements. Here are a few of them. No doubt this is not a complete list, and you might be able to add to this list.

A. Physical Sonship

This is the normal and generally accepted understanding of the father/son relationship. I am the son of my father, Merritt E. Long. My father was born before I was. The passage of time is necessary in this type of sonship.

B. Genealogical Sonship

This is a similar relationship to physical sonship, but is not necessarily a direct father to son tie. The Bible tell us that Jesus is the Son of Abraham, but over a thousand years separated them. Physical kinship is necessary, but not direct. The passage of time is necessary in this type of sonship.

C. Adoptive Or Legal Sonship

An adopted son has all the legal rights of a physical son, but not direct kinship with the father. There may be some kinship between the father and son, but this is not necessary. Please note that it is possible, if unusual, for the adopted son to be older than his adoptive father. However, the passage of time is necessary in this type of sonship.

D. Spiritual Sonship

Paul referred to Timothy as his son in the gospel. This was not the same as physical sonship. Paul was not Timothy's physical father. In this relationship Paul came first. Again it is possible for a son in the Gospel to be older than his spiritual father. The passage of time is necessary in this type of sonship.

E. Sonship Role

In this aspect of sonship the person takes on the role of a son without actually being one by kinship. He serves as a son without being one. Once more it is possible for the "son" in this case to be older than the "father." The passage of time is not necessary in this type of sonship.

F. Authoritarian Sonship

This is similar to the role of sonship. Here the "son" by an act of his will takes a position subservient to the father figure. As in the several of the sonship types already given, the ages of the son and the father are immaterial. The passage of time is not necessary in this type of sonship.

G. Symbolic Sonship

This is similar to the previous two types of sonship E and F. The difference here is that "son" is recognized by the announcement of the father figure. Again the passage of time is not necessary in this type of sonship.

H. Associational Sonship

When I was young one of the popular western singing groups was known as "The Son's of the Pioneers." Whether there was any relationship between the singers and the pioneers is immaterial. The title, "sons," came from the association, not physical relationship. There is no real father figure in this relationship. The passage of time is assumed in this type of sonship.

I. Organizational Sonship

Organizational sonship comes from membership in some organization. Relative ages are immaterial. The father figure here is the organization itself. The passage of time is not necessary in this type of sonship.

* * *

2. APPELLATIONS OF CHRIST

The Bible is filled with many names and titles of Jesus. He is called the Word, the Good Shepherd, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Son of God, the son of Abraham, and many more descriptive names. Most of these reflect the ministry

of Jesus to His followers and to the world. They are descriptive of the roles of Jesus.

Adam Clarke seems to favor Jesus as the Eternal Word who became the Son of God. To him, Jesus was as eternal as God because He was always part of the Trinity. The first chapter of John tells us the Jesus was the Eternal Word, and that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. While Clarke does not cite this reference in his argument, it could well have become the basis of his position in his Luke 1:35 comments. He does use it in his sermon on Salvation by Faith.

At this point another speculative question that Adam Clarke never broached could be asked. "Is it also an error to refer to God as the Eternal Father?" Could he be referred as the Father if he had not yet an Only Begotten Son? I only throw this out to stimulate your thought processes.

* * *

3. GENERATIONAL VS POSITIONAL SONSHIP

As we seek to organize and understand the various aspects or types of sonship from the list in point 1 of this section something becomes evident. It is this: there appear to be two different types of sonship. These are generational sonship and positional sonship.

Generational sonship involves some sort of physical relationship between the father and the son, either direct or ancestral. The exception to this, of course, is adoptive sonship where the relationship becomes legal rather than physical. For the rest of the list of generational sonship, the father precedes the son in time and in authority. The son is under the authority of the father, represents the father and is the heir of the father. This is a perfect picture of the God-man, Jesus.

Positional sonship is totally different. It does not require either a physical or a legal relationship. It does not require a time relationship. In fact age does not enter the equation at all. It is a relationship that involves taking or being in the position of a son.

The understanding of these two types of sonship is key to our analysis of Clarke's position because Clarke only uses and acknowledges the concept of generational sonship. It is on the basis of this understanding of the father/son relationship that Clarke rejects the Eternal Sonship of Jesus.

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III. CONCLUSIONS

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1. CLARKE'S BASIS OF ARGUMENT

As stated in the paragraph above Adam Clarke only recognizes the generational concept of sonship. By definition the term "father" must of necessity precede in time the term "son." Clarke also uses the word "begotten." Again, these must include by definition the passage of time.

If we accept Clarke's understanding of father, son and begotten, there is absolutely no way to defeat his argument. His logic is based on sound principles, and we are forced to agree that he is absolutely correct. There is no way around this conclusion. By the very definition of the words as used by Adam Clarke, he proves his argument

However, in Argumentation and Debate, we learned that in certain cases an argument is unwinnable IF THE BASIC PREMISE is accepted. Clarke's logic cannot be overturned if we accept his premises: that is his basis of argument is his definition of the words he finds in the Father/Son relationship that the Bible uses.

If we accept Clarke's use of the words and their definitions, we must admit he is correct in denying that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God. In his argument, he recognizes that his position cannot be overturned and says so emphatically.

The question we need to ask ourselves is whether his basis is sound. If we accept that "son" can either be generational or positional, we can then find other possibilities that allow Eternal Sonship without compromising sound logic. There are several possible arguments that we can examine that will be as strong in their logic as Clarke's was. We will examine three of these below.

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2. POSSIBILITIES

A. Changing Sonship

By considering both positional and generational sonship we are able to accept Jesus as the Eternal Son of God. With this recognition, the change cited by Clarke was not from an unspecified relationship between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity to that of Father and Son. Instead Jesus went from the position of Son of God (positional) to being the Only Begotten Son of God (generational). There seem to be a differentiation in Scripture between these two terms: Son of God and Only Begotten Son of God. It would be an interesting study to look at the places in Scripture where each term is used, but that goes beyond the scope of this already lengthy article.

Clarke says there was a change in the relationship between Jesus and His Father that occurred at His birth. He with sound logic establishes this change. Here we are accepting his perfect logic while rejecting his definition of terms. We accept his argument, but reject his basis of argument. That means his strength of argument becomes our logic as well.

B. Omniscient Foreknowledge

The second possibility which explains the Eternal Sonship of Jesus in terms of generational Sonship is based on the Foreknowledge of God. Here we say that from all eternity God knew that Jesus would become a man to redeem man from his lost estate. Thus since the plan of redemption is eternal, Jesus as the Redeemer was the Eternal Son of God. Until His birth (or some other point in time) Jesus was recognized as the Son of God (positional). When the fullness of time arrived, His position as the coming Redeemer changed to that of the present Redeemer. In other words, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The planned Redeemer became the actual Redeemer.

Since God is Omniscient, He always knew Jesus would come as Son of God and Son of Man. Therefore, this Omniscience recognized Jesus as Eternal Son of God until He came.

C. Eternity

There is another thing we need to consider. Clarke spoke of eternity as if it were time stretching back with no beginning. He defined "eternal" in time terms. In fact, we all think of eternity in terms we associate with time because we are creatures of time ourselves. The hymn Amazing Grace gives us some concept of eternity in terms of time.

"When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the Sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun."

This is eternity in our concept of endless time. However, as far as God is concerned, eternity may not be endless future time and an un-beginning past time. It may be a dimension that we cannot understand or can even conceive in our wildest imagination.

If eternity to God is, as we have been told, an ever PRESENT TENSE state with no past, present or future, then by this definition of eternity, Jesus always has been, is now and always will be the Eternal Son of God.

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3. ONE FURTHER CONSIDERATION

If we accept Clarke's argument of the change of Jesus from the Eternal Second Person of the Trinity to the Only Begotten Son of God, there is one more point to consider. That is when this change actually took place. Clarke says it was at His birth, but that seems flawed to begin with. Even if we accept Clarke's position, we would have to push the time back to conception rather than to birth. Human life begins at conception, not at birth.

But there are some scriptural considerations that this position begs. Hebrews 10:5, quoting from Psalm 40, says "A body hast thou prepared for me." We must ask when this body was prepared for it was at that point that Jesus became the Only Begotten Son of God.

Some light on this subject is shed by two verses of scripture. Rev. 3:14 says Jesus is "the beginning of the creation of God." Most commentators make "beginning" to mean "originator." However, the Greek word "arche" that is translated beginning can mean oldest or first. Col. 1:15-20 refers to Jesus as "the firstborn of creation." Here the Greek word "protokos" usually means "first-begotten." Are these verses telling us that the first thing that was created was a body for Jesus? That would certainly give a whole new meaning to man being created in the image of God.

There are two other verses I would like to cite in conclusion. 1 Pet. 1:20 says of Jesus, "Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifested in these last times for you." Rev. 13:8 reads, "And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [the antichrist], whose names are not written in the book of life of THE LAMB SLAIN FROM THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD." What a pair of marvelous truths. God had a plan that was laid before anything was created that His Son would come to redeem the world. The fall of man did not catch God by surprise making Him come up with an emergency plan. No, when the foundation of the world was laid there was a slain Lamb right in the cornerstone of creation. Hallelujah!

In conclusion, was Clarke wrong in rejecting the Eternal Sonship of Jesus? With Clarke's understanding eternity and his definitions of father, son and begotten, he was absolutely correct in his conclusion. BUT by accepting eternity as a timeless "NOW" it appears that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God. By looking at the concept of positional sonship, we can also come to the same conclusion: that Jesus Sonship is Eternal.

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THE END