

Let God be God:  
An evangelical critique of Evangelicalism

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July 20, 2008

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>The problem with evangelicalism</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Evidence of a problem . . . . .	1
	Militant Christian Clerics calling for international terrorism . . . . .	1
	God hates you: you are going to hell. . . . .	1
	The ‘Biblical’ message of racism . . . . .	2
	Preachers who place their Church over Christ’s Church . . . . .	2
	The Nicene definition of Christ is held as a matter of personal opinion . . . . .	2
	Conclusion . . . . .	3
1.2	New Creed . . . . .	3
	Why a new statement of faith? . . . . .	4
	Does the Evangelical statement of faith ‘set aside’ the Nicene faith? . . . . .	5
	Does the Evangelical statement of faith exclude the Heretics? . . . . .	5
	This is not the faith of the Fathers . . . . .	7
	Weaknesses of <i>Scripture Alone</i> . . . . .	7
	We need tradition. . . . .	7
	God, not Scripture . . . . .	8
	Jesus is the Word of God. . . . .	9
	Faith or Knowledge? . . . . .	9
	Views on salvation . . . . .	9
	The Orthodox view . . . . .	9
	The Evangelical view . . . . .	10
1.3	The answer is clear . . . . .	10
<b>I</b>	<b>But what about Jesus?</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>“Begotten... before all worlds”</b>	<b>13</b>
2.1	Three views . . . . .	13
	Tradition claims Eternal Sonship is essential . . . . .	13
	Some opponents to tradition claim Christians must reject Eternal Sonship . . . . .	14
	Others consider this a non-essential doctrine . . . . .	14
2.2	Why accept Eternal Sonship important? . . . . .	14
	Affirming the doctrines in the creed connects us to the ancient Christians . . . . .	15
	<i>Eternal Sonship is a Biblical doctrine</i> . . . . .	15

Contents	ii
Christ was sent to the Earth from his Father . . . . .	15
Paul teaches that Christ was “Firstborn of all creation” . . . .	16
The doctrine of the Trinity teaches <i>Eternal Sonship</i> . . . . .	16
<i>Eternal Sonship</i> is one of the doctrines about salvation . . . . .	16
2.3 Answers to criticisms against Eternal sonship. . . . .	16
Some object that <i>Eternal Sonship</i> is anti-scriptural . . . . .	17
Some object that if Christ was “Begotten before all worlds”, then he cannot be eternal, but had to come in a time after the Father .	17
Some object that idea of Sonship places Christ, in essence, below the Father . . . . .	18
Some object that the doctrine of <i>eternal Sonship</i> is Arian in origin . . .	18
Some object that Christ became Son through his Incarnation . . . . .	19
<b>II But what about the Church?</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>III Let God be God!</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>22</b>

## Chapter 1

# The problem with evangelicalism

### 1.1 Evidence of a problem

For a few generations, Protestants experimented with a new form of Christianity. Those practicing the new form now call themselves Evangelicals.<sup>1</sup> Though these Evangelicals call themselves conservative, they have produced a new Creed to exclude many traditional, conservative Christians. This Creed also fails to reject several 'Biblical' Heresies.

Evangelicalism fails to promote Church unity and prevent Heresy. The fastest growing kind of Church is the 'Independent' church which answers to none except themselves. This brings much danger, as these independent churches and preachers find the biblical message of war, racism, and the call to preach God's hatred.

#### **Militant Christian Clerics calling for international terrorism**

Pat Roberts of the 700 club used his position to call for the assassination of the President of Venezuela.<sup>2</sup>

#### **God hates you: you are going to hell.**

Rev. Phelps maintains a website, [www.godhatesamerica.com](http://www.godhatesamerica.com). He and his family attract media attention by picketing Iraqi soldier's funerals, and telling the families the deceased were going to hell. He also pickets Churches, evangelists, and places of business. As Phelps clearly documents his activities, it is not necessary to go into detail.<sup>3</sup> Phelps defends his message of hatred with many scriptural quotations. Although his Westboro "Baptist" church is over 90% relatives, his message is played by the media, lawmakers consider him in regulating religious activities, and his voice becomes the "Baptist" voice.

Heresy is not new. In the past, persons such as Arius had many followers. What is new is now, since the "Bible" is the primary authority, it is impossible to discipline

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<sup>1</sup>All Christianity is Evangelical. Christianity cannot exist without the Good news of Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup>Michelle Norris. *Annalysis: Christian leaders balk at Robertson's remarks*. URL: <http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/transcripts/2006/jan/060112.hagerty.html> (visited on //29).

<sup>3</sup>To be fair, Phelps is not evangelical. His message offers no hope of salvation.

Heretics. The personal interpretation of the scripture is held as superior to the interpretation of scripture that is understood by a group. Though the Southern Baptist Convention, and many of the smaller Baptist bodies are evangelical<sup>4</sup>, and none doubt they are Christian, Baptist are unable to excommunicate the Rev. Phelps. No one can tell the media that Phelps has no right to the name Baptist. The Baptists cannot sue the Phelps family for defamation and brand dilution.

### **The ‘Biblical’ message of racism**

Several Churches somehow attempt to use the Bible to defend racial segregation quoting Paul’s words “Be ye not unequally yoked...” somehow forgetting the next words are “with unbelievers: For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, and what communion hath light with darkness?”<sup>5</sup>

While this problem is reading Scripture to make it agree with the bias of the reader,<sup>6</sup> this view is not currently accepted by the NAE, who made a position statement that Paul’s letter to the Ephesians states that Christ is the true solution to Racism.<sup>7</sup>

### **Preachers who place their Church over Christ’s Church**

These days, there seems to be a numbers competition. It often seems that a successful ministry is measured by numbers sitting in the pew on Sunday morning. It does not matter if the preacher does more harm than good to bring them there.

In a recent interview with Steve Inskeep on NPR’s news service, Jerry Fallwell spoke of his ‘media suave.’ For years, Fallwell has been making incendiary remarks which offended millions, but placed Fallwells name in the national news. He credits his ability to get his name in the papers, and on television for the thousands of people in his church every Sunday.<sup>8</sup>

The question is, what about Christ’s church. Is it worth reaching thousands at the cost of offending millions? Perhaps the people attracted to controversy go to Fallwell, but what about the millions who want to see the Love the Christ spoke about? Does the means of more people in the Pew justify the end of portraying such a face in the media?

### **The Nicene definition of Christ is held as a matter of personal opinion**

The *Nicene Creed* describes the Son as “begotten of the Father before all worlds.” Several prominent Evangelical leaders and Biblical commentators strongly oppose this view of Christ, saying that the Son was not the Son until some point in the life of Christ. Organizationally, the view that the Son is eternal is considered a matter of personal opinion, and not an essential (i.e Biblical) doctrine.

<sup>4</sup>That is, the Baptist, as a whole, preach the gospel of Christ

<sup>5</sup>II Cor 6:14 KJV

<sup>6</sup>The greatest danger of the Biblicists

<sup>7</sup>The author agrees with the NAE on this point

<sup>8</sup>Steve Inskeep. *Religion, Politics, a Potent mix for Jerry Falwell*. URL: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=5522064> (visited on //29).

This matter cuts to the very core of the traditional understanding of God, the nature of God, and the Trinity. Respected leaders opposing the Nicene definition including Adam Clarke and formally John MacArthur<sup>9</sup> have clearly outlined their views and their opposition. This topic deserves fuller treatment, including the reasons that some Evangelicals have abandoned the doctrine of *Eternal Sonship*.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Clearly something in the modern church is wrong. About a century ago, there seemed to be a problem with agnostic “Christians” who attended Church only because it was respectable to attend church. Today, there is little social pressure to attend church. Agnostics are out of the picture. Today, it is the self-identified conservatives who are pulling the church away from the gospel – even as they claim to be “Evangelical.”

The Evangelical movement fails in three very important ways. First, it replaces the traditional faith of the Church with a new faith. Second, it puts the Bible in the role that Jesus Christ should hold. Third, it puts the individual or a single congregation in the role that the wider church should hold.

Instead of strengthening the authority of Holy Scripture modern Evangelicals replace the Scripture with their own ideas. In their attempt to uphold the letters they choose to uphold – they ignore the whole spirit of the Gospel. When Evangelicalism rejects the wider Church and the traditional Faith of the Church, the strange combination of personal ideas and novelty leads to nothing but schism and heresy.

## 1.2 New Creed

New creeds are very dangerous things. Little can come from them except heresy and schism. In general Evangelicals have replaced the traditional Ecumenical Creed, called the Nicene Creed with a new Creed. In doing this they ignored a warning imposed at Constantinople:

The Faith of the Three Hundred and Eighteen Fathers assembled at Nice in Bithynia shall not be set aside, but shall remain firm. And Every heresy shall be anathematized, particularly that of the Eunomians or [*Anomœans, the Arians or*] Eudoxians, and that of the Semi-Arians or Pneumatomachi, and that of the Sabellians, and that of the Marcellians, and that of the Photinians, and that of the Apollinarians.<sup>11</sup>

In Ephesus, they went even farther when they wrote:

When these things had been read, the holy Synod decreed that it is unlawful for any man to bring forward, or to write, or to compose a different

<sup>9</sup>MacArthur now considers *Eternal Sonship* to be a correct, but unessential doctrine. MacArthur, and the National Association of Evangelicals as a whole still opposes the Nicene council’s decision to anathematize all who said that there was a time before the Son was begotten.

<sup>10</sup>see Chapter 2

<sup>11</sup>“The seven ecumenical councils of the undivided church”. In: *Nicene and ante-nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Vol. 14. Ed. by R. Percival Henry. American edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999. URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.html>, 172 First Canon of the council of Constantinople.

(ἑτέραν) Faith as a rival to that established by the holy Fathers assembled with the Holy Ghost in Nicaea.

But those who shall dare to compose a different faith, or to introduce or offer it to persons desiring to turn to the acknowledgment of the truth, whether from Heathenism or from Judaism, or from any heresy whatsoever, shall be deposed, if they be bishops or clergymen; bishops from the episcopate and clergymen from the clergy; and if they be laymen, they shall be anathematized.<sup>12</sup>

As a whole, Evangelicals have ceased to define their faith by the Ecumenical creeds, and adopted a new statement of faith. The thoughtful Christian must ask several questions to consider if the 'Evangelical' movement represents a liberal, or a conservative faith.

- Why a new statement of faith?
- Does the Evangelical Statement of faith 'set aside' the Nicene faith?
- Does the Evangelical Statement of faith exclude the Heretics?
- Is it the same faith restated, or a new faith?

### **Why a new statement of faith?**

There is no question more central to a critique than the purpose of the new statement of faith. The Nicene creed formed to separate Heretics from Orthodox Christians. The first canon of the council of Constantinople gives a list of Heretics. Every word of Nicene creed was chosen both to affirm traditional orthodox faith, and exclude the given list of Heresies.

The Evangelical's creed is very much like the Nicene, it is intended to exclude people from the faith. The first point of the Evangelical creed reads as follows:

We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.<sup>13</sup>

This statement was originally intended to exclude Roman Catholics. The original purpose was to state the scripture, alone is the primary rule of Christian faith and practice. The wholesale rejection of tradition of course is a new thing. Tradition was held in such high regard before the great schism that Gregory the Great<sup>14</sup> wrote:

I confess that I receive and revere, as the four books of the Gospel so also the four Councils: to wit, the Nicene, in which the perverse doctrine of Arius is overthrown; the Constantinopolitan also, in which the error of

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 231 Canon 7 of the council of Ephesus.

<sup>13</sup>National Association of Evangelicals Statement of Faith. URL: [http://www.nae.net/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=nae.statement\\_of\\_faith](http://www.nae.net/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=nae.statement_of_faith) (visited on //25).

<sup>14</sup>The authors consider Gregory's views extreme, however the point is it is a novel idea to view Scripture as independent of Tradition.

Eunomius and Macedonius is refuted; further, the first Ephesine, in which the impiety of Nestorius is condemned; and the Chalcedonian, in which the pravity of Euyches and Dioscorus is reprobated. These with full devotion I embrace, and adhere to with most entire approval; since on them, as on a foursquare stone, rises the structure of the holy faith; and whosoever, of whatever life and behavior he may be, holds not fast to their solidity, even though he is seen to be a stone.<sup>15</sup>

Such regard for tradition stands against the ‘scripture alone’ principle that is common to many Protestants. Medhurst argues:

Romanism does not even profess to be founded on scripture only: it claims a right to depart from what is contained in it – a right to add to Scripture what is handed down by *tradition*;... It says that councils and the pope have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to make decrees....

*The Bible, the whole Bible, nothing but the Bible*, is the standard and the rule of Christianity. To know its meaning for ourselves, to receive its teaching, to rely on its promises, to trust in its Redeemer, to obey Him from delight of love, and to refuse to follow other teaching, is Christianity itself. But Romanism denies all this; and therefore, Romanism is not Christianity.<sup>16</sup>

In order to argue that the divine message given in scripture is greater than tradition, the evangelicals deny that God gives any other inspired message. Faith is placed in scripture, and Roman Catholicism is explicitly named “not Christianity.”

### **Does the Evangelical statement of faith ‘set aside’ the Nicene faith?**

New statements of faith have very much set aside the old traditional Faith. One must ask whether the Council of Ephesus was speaking against writing a new statement of faith, or teaching a faith that was substantially different than that of Nicaea. Either way, it is a dangerous practice to make new creeds.

### **Does the Evangelical statement of faith exclude the Heretics?**

The council of Constantinople expressed the purpose of the Nicene Creed when they listed the Heretics that the creed excluded. The Creed Arius uses fails to separate Heresy from orthodoxy. The following table compares the points of the Nicene creed, the heretical creed of Arius, and the Statement of faith used by the National Association of Evangelicals.

<sup>15</sup>Gregory the Great, Bishop of Rome. “Register of the Epistles of Saint Gregory the Great”. In: *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Vol. 12. Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Trans. by James Barmby. American Edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999. Pp. 73-243. URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212.html>, Epistle XXV.

<sup>16</sup>T W Medhurst. “Is Romanism Christianity?”. In: *The Fundamentals: A testimony to the Truth*. Vol. 3. Ed. by R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, et al. Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917. Chap. 20, pp. 288-300, pp. 290-291.

Nicene Creed	Private Creed of Arius	NAE Statement of Faith
We believe in one God the Father Almighty,	We believe in one God, the Father Almighty;	We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.
Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible.		We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ,	And in the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son,	We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.
the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all worlds; Light of Light. Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father;	who was begotten of him before all ages,	
By whom all things were made;	the Divine Logos, through whom all things were made, both those in the heavens and those on the earth;	
Who, for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven,	who came down and was made flesh;	
And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man		
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;	and suffered;	
And suffered and was buried;	and rose again;	
And the third day he rose again,	and ascended to the heavens;	
According to the Scriptures;	and shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.	
And ascended into heaven,	And in the Holy Ghost;	We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.
And sitteth on the right hand of the Father;	and shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.	We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.
And he shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead;		
Whose kingdom shall have no end.		
And in the Holy Ghost,		
The Lord, and Giver of life;		

Who proceedeth from the Father		
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;		
Who spake by the Prophets.		
	and in the resurrection of the flesh;	We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.
	and in the life of the world to come;	
	and in a kingdom of heaven;	
And in one holy catholic and apostolic Church;	and in one Catholic Church of God which extends to the ends of the earth.	We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.
We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;		
And we look for the resurrection of the dead;		

A quick look at the creeds, and it is easy to see that the Evangelical statement of Faith takes the divinity of Christ seriously. There is no statement that Christ's divinity is of the same type as the divinity of the Father and the Spirit, however this seems implied in the definition of "One God, eternally existent in three persons." This statement efficiently marks Jesus and the Father sharing the same Deity, and both being eternal. This successfully argues against the Heresy of Arius.

A careful look at the NAE *Statement of Faith* shows that it is missing the phrase "was made man." The Apollinarian heresy is not denied<sup>17</sup> – as this is a heresy that denies Christ has a human Soul. The Evangelical creed, in their zeal to protect the divinity of Christ, ignores the humanity of Christ. They should, like the Nicene Creed say that Christ is "incarnate by the Holy Ghost and the virgin Mary, and was made man<sup>18</sup>..."<sup>19</sup> By extension, none of the Heresies condemned at the Chalcedonian council are denied. If the humanity of Christ is ignored, the question of Christ's nature is never asked. An Evangelical can be a Monophysite, a Nestorian, an Apollinarian or even a Gnostic.

## This is not the faith of the Fathers

### Weaknesses of *Scripture Alone*

The complete focus on the Bible, as is common with self-proclaimed evangelicals is ultimately self defeating. The statement is flawed to the very point of being blasphemous.

**We need tradition.** Arguably, Gregory the Great defined the Bible to include several Ecumenical councils – if you allow some 'scriptural authority' inside of the earli-

<sup>17</sup>This is one of the Heresy's considered in the council of Constantinople

<sup>18</sup>that is to say a perfect man, receiving a soul, and body, and intellect, and all that make up a man

<sup>19</sup>Percival, "The seven ecumenical councils of the undivided church", pp. 164-165.

est Church councils where the Christian Faith<sup>20</sup>, doctrine<sup>21</sup>, and Biblical Canon were affirmed in the councils.

Without tradition, we have no guess to the content, interpretation, or extent of scripture. “The canon of the scripture; to wit, that there are so many books precisely, neither more nor less, cannot be proved by scripture.”<sup>22</sup> Each individual is left to choose what he will accept as scripture. If we appeal to Luther, the canon is somewhat reduced, as he calls James “An Epistle of straw”<sup>23</sup> He goes on to tell us that neither James nor Jude is a work of scripture, and in fact contain many ideas that are against the nature of scripture.<sup>24</sup> Calvin clearly states the Protestant attitude:

Nothings therefore can be more absurd than the fiction, that the power of judging Scripture is in the Church.... As to the question, How shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the Church? it is just the same as if it were asked, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their colour, sweet and bitter of their taste.<sup>25</sup>

So, Protestants in general are allowed to judge the clear evidence of white and black. The problem with this ‘clear evidence’ is that it allows a large variation. Some will only accept a specific edition or translation. Some will despise James, others will embrace pagan documents. Mormons accept the *Book of Mormon* based on Calvin’s ‘clear evidence.’ Without the definition offered by tradition, there is chaos. Eventually instead of one faith, there are as many faiths as individuals.

**God, not Scripture** The fundamentalist Medhurst writes:

Christianity consists of what Christ has taught, and commanded in Scripture... The Bible, the whole Bible, nothing but the Bible is the standard and the rule of Christianity.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, this is a mistake when we realize that there were Christians before a single book of the New Testament was written. It is as the Quaker George Fox writes:

The gospel was the power of God, which was preached before Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John were written; and it was preached to every creature, of which a great part might never see nor hear of these four books.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup>That is the Creed

<sup>21</sup>Endorsed books of doctrine such as Athanasius’s *Incarnation of the Word*

<sup>22</sup>Robert Barclay. *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. Ed. by Licia Kuening. Print Basis: New York: Samuel Wood and Sons, 1827. 8th ed. Glenside, PA: Quaker Heritage press, 2002. URL: <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/barclay/apology/index.html>, Proposition 3, §IX.

<sup>23</sup>Martin Luther. *Works of Martin Luther*. Vol. 4. Baker Book House, 1982, p. 444.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 477-479.

<sup>25</sup>John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. by Jon Van Hofwegen. Trans. by Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002. URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>, Chapter 7 § 2.

<sup>26</sup>Medhurst, loc. cit.

<sup>27</sup>George Fox. *Journal*. Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, Before 1934. URL: [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/fox\\_g/autobio.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/fox_g/autobio.html), p. 365.

**Jesus is the Word of God.** When the term Word of God is redefined to mean the Scriptures, and only the scriptures we separate ourselves from both scripture and tradition. When reading the Church Fathers, the term Word of God clearly<sup>28</sup> refers to Christ. This modern redefinition should be shocking that any who read the words in the first Chapter of John: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”<sup>29</sup> How could any Christian say that the Bible is the only infallible, reliable Word of God? Logic dictates that if the Bible is the only ‘Word of God’ that meets these criterion, then Jesus (who scripture clearly names *the Word*) must be either fallible, unreliable, or both. Clearly such a statement is unworthy of any Christian.

### Faith or Knowledge?

Perhaps the most striking difference between the Nicene Creed and the Evangelical *Statement of Faith* is the difference in putting faith in God, and putting faith in correct knowledge. The *Statement of Faith* reads “We believe that there is one God”, the Creed reads “We believe *in* one God.” The Nicene Christian believes *in* God, and the Church while the Evangelical believes *in* facts about God, and the “spiritual Union of believers”.<sup>30</sup>

At first, this may appear to be only semantics, however words do mean something. Rufinus writes:

[We say] We believe that there will be a “resurrection of the flesh;” we do not say “we believe *in* the resurrection of the flesh.” By this monosyllabic preposition, therefor, the Creator is distinguished from the creatures, and things Divine are separated from things human.<sup>31</sup>

In the end, the question is personal, not academic. Is faith placed in Christ, or in correct knowledge about Christ. One is faith in personal learning, the other is faith placed in someone beyond Human understanding. Knowledge is Human, but the Lord himself is Divine.

### Views on salvation

#### The Orthodox view

In the creed, we read that Jesus Christ the Son was made man for our salvation. For the Nicene Christian, the humanity of Christ is vital, salvation is centered on Christ. Because God took on every aspect of Humanity, Christ sanctifies the Human mind and body; Christ has a complete human soul, and thus sanctified the soul of all humanity.

<sup>28</sup>perhaps always

<sup>29</sup>John 1:14 KJV

<sup>30</sup>See table starting on page 5

<sup>31</sup>Tyrannius Rufinus. “Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed”. In: *Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Vol. 3. Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Trans. by William Henry Fremantle. 1999th ed. 3. Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 1892, reprint 1999. Pp. 541-563. URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203.html>, §36.

Christ lived a Holy life, but died in the place of killer. After experiencing the last thing all men face, Christ rose again from the dead.

Christ's Divine nature is sufficient for all humanity because the infinite is always enough to meet finite needs. Christ lived in the place of every one. His Holiness is the only source of sanctification that Human flesh experiences. When Christ died on the cross in the place of the murderer Barabbas He died in place of every person. Christ's resurrection is the only source of hope. Through the resurrection, we see that Christ has conquered death. Just as he woke up out of death, he will raise up those who live and die with him.

### The Evangelical view

The NAE "Statement of Faith" fails to mention the Humanity of Christ, and limits Christ's work to the atonement of sins upon the Cross. Salvation (regeneration) is changed from a work Christ's unique human and divine nature to the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Christ is depreciated from the source of Life to the sacrifice to pay for sins.

### 1.3 The answer is clear

Zealously defending one truth while ignoring another leads to an unbalanced view. Every ancient heretic learned and studied scripture "to array herself in Scripture language."<sup>33</sup> The Church honors some<sup>34</sup> heretics for their study although she anathematizes the heretical conclusions. Each heretic built an attractive system and attracted followers. Many defended a point of truth from other heretics.

The Evangelicals defend good and right things, yet merely defending invites grave danger. The defenders holding a small rock might forget the strongholds. Without the stronghold, the rock offers no safety. The defender invites defeat in spite of a clear victory.

The Evangelical *Statement of Faith* falls short because it fails to acknowledge what Christians have always confessed. It opposes a few of the popular heresies of the late nineteenth century, neither attempting to oppose the older heresies nor teaching correct doctrine. After a generation, many Evangelicals forget the truths that their Fundamentalists<sup>35</sup> ancestors never forgot.

The answer is simple. Faith needs balanced. No one should neglect scripture, the Virgin birth, or the Deity of Christ, yet we must embrace the Humanity of Christ. We must remember Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. Never forget the fol-

<sup>32</sup>Again, to be fair, this is only the *Statement of Faith*. Individual Evangelicals are likely to have a more Orthodox view than the organization.

<sup>33</sup>Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. "Four discourses against the Arians". In: *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Vol. 4: *Select writings and letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*. Ed. by Archibald Robertson. Trans. by Archibald Robertson and Newman. The editor revised an earlier translation by Cardinal Newman. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1892, reprint 1999. Pp. 303-447, ¶2.

<sup>34</sup>Specifically Tertullian and Origen

<sup>35</sup>I wish to limit my definition of Fundamentalist to those who's papers were published in *The Fundamentals*. The Fundamentalist freely acknowledged what the National Association of Evangelicals directly deny – that Jesus Christ is the Divine Word.

lowing: Jesus is our salvation, God is God, and a great cloud of witnesses went before us.

Part I

**But what about Jesus?**

## Chapter 2

# “Begotten... before all worlds”

One of the more interesting controversies in Evangelical theology is that of the *Eternal Sonship* of Christ. This doctrine has to do with the very nature of God, and the relationship of Christ to the Father.

The ancient church felt that Christ's *Eternal Sonship* was so important that they wrote it into the Nicene creed, and expelled all who did not agree that Jesus was the Son before the incarnation. Even though the Nicene Fathers felt that this was an essential doctrine Evangelicals have been divided in their views and there are passionate arguments on both sides.

It would be good to explore the doctrine of *Eternal Sonship*, looking briefly at the various views, why the early church thought the doctrine was important, and defending the doctrine against its opponents.

### 2.1 Three views

There are basically three views on Eternal Sonship, these three views cover the entire spectrum of opinions. One can agree, disagree, or decide that it is a nonessential doctrine. Every Christian theologian and organization falls into one of these three camps. As this issue relates to the very nature of Christ and the relationship of the Father to the Son, it represents our very understanding of God and His relationship to mankind.

#### **Tradition claims Eternal Sonship is essential**

The traditional view is that Eternal Sonship is essential. This doctrine is affirmed in the Nicene creed, and by the council. By including eternal Sonship in the Nicene Creed itself, the Church required all Christians to recite that they accepted the doctrine in order to be in communion with the church, thus excluding all who would say otherwise. The Nicene creed, as it was ratified in Constantinople is very clear in its words saying:

We believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds

If any have forgotten, the early church held the faith set forth in the Creed to be most essential, the doctrines of the creed are outside of debate, but an expression of what the traditional church holds to be most dear.<sup>1</sup>

### **Some opponents to tradition claim Christians must reject Eternal Sonship**

While it might seem odd that someone would claim that Christians should reject the Nicene Creed, those who reject the teachings reject it most strongly. The strength of there opinion is perhaps best expressed by Adam Clarke:

The doctrine of the *eternal Sonship* of Christ is, in my opinion, anti-scriptural, and highly dangerous... 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... I must and do consider as an awful heresy... From such hetrodoxies, and their abettors, may God save his Church.<sup>2</sup>

### **Others consider this a non-essential doctrine**

This third view is very strange considering the strength of views on the two obvious sides. The theology of the Nicene creed is always defended by the Fathers in terms of Salvation. Every doctrine is taught as important, because our understanding of God and the relationship of the father to the son is counted as part of the economy of salvation.

Opponents such as Clarke are closer to traditional Christianity in their views than those, such as the National Association of Evangelicals, who hold the official view that the doctrine is not essential. Clarke is fully right when he sees that the doctrine is tied to the scheme of redemption, this is also the feeling of the ancient church.

Clarke would be rejected as a heretic, as his teaching was renounced in the council of Ephesus<sup>3</sup>, however his view on the Sonship of Christ is far less dangerous than that of the NAE, and others who teach that the doctrine is non-essential. Those who teach that doctrines which are so closely related to redemption and salvation are nonessential reject traditional Christianity, placing a new faith in its place. This is a complete rejection of the creed and is very far from Conservative Christianity. The danger lies in that it is not an open rejection, but instead an invitation to accept heresy in the church. It is a redefinition of what is important, silently removing the old faith and replacing it with a new faith.

## **2.2 Why accept Eternal Sonship important?**

Anyone who carefully reads Adam Clarke, or John MacArthur quickly realizes that their feelings are strong, and honest. These, and other very prominent Evangelical leaders have strongly opposed the traditional view of *eternal sonship*. Any who accepts the

<sup>1</sup>See quotes from relevant councils starting on page 3

<sup>2</sup>Adam Clarke. *Comentary and critical notes*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, Luke 1:35.

<sup>3</sup>See page 3

Nicean view must reject a very central part of the teachings of several respected modern Pastors, Biblical teachers, commentators, and educators.

The American Evangelicals, as a whole were not willing to reject such popular and intelligent teachers, they prefer instead to make a new faith which can accept those they wish to accept. This begs the question: "Why is the traditional faith important?" Specifically, in this case: why is it important to us that Jesus Christ is, and always the Son of God "Begotten before all ages?"

### **Affirming the doctrines in the creed connects us to the ancient Christians**

When reading Christian writers, one realizes that the doctrines they teach lead them to their conclusions. Doctrines that are central to their faith are reaffirmed in all of their writing. Rejecting the creed by extension rejects every Christian writing after the council of Nicaea.

Looking backwards, because the creed dealt with parts of theology that the Fathers felt were important in the way God related to man and brought us salvation, rejecting the Creed also separates us from the body of Christian writing before the council of Nicaea, including what is accepted as scripture. Everything that did not build on the doctrines accepted by the church were rejected as heresy.

Those who reject traditional faith are either left to find their own way, or if they want to seek tradition, they must seek the rejected paths taken by the heretics before them. If we surrender these central doctrines, we are forced to give up the great cloud of witnesses that came before us. Evangelical Christianity becomes a purely modern faith, with no connection to the past.

### ***Eternal Sonship is a Biblical doctrine***

Scripture has much to say about the relationship of the Son and the Father. This relationship is stated throughout the gospels, and by Paul and the other Epistles. Scripture is rather consistent in describing the relationship, and it shows that the relationship of Son to Father is ongoing.

### **Christ was sent to the Earth from his Father**

Several passages speak of God sending his Son into the world.<sup>4</sup> This language names the Son as Son, and sets the time of Sonship before the incarnation.

We learn from Jesus that he came as revelation, showing the Father to the world. Matthew writes: "No man knoweth... the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him."<sup>5</sup> If our knowledge of the Father is dependent upon the Son's revelation, then we cannot rely on any understanding of God outside what was revealed through Jesus Christ. The Son revealed God through the relationship of the Father and the Son.

<sup>4</sup>John 3:17, Galatians 4:4, I John 4:9 &10

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 11:27

**Paul teaches that Christ was “Firstborn of all creation”**

Paul clearly writes, in his epistle to the Colossians in the same language as the Creed:

Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn of every creature*: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:<sup>6</sup>

Scripture clearly names the Son “the firstborn of every creature”, and the Son is also mentioned as the Creator so that nothing was made without the Son. This passage alone shows that the doctrine that Jesus was begotten before creation, and by extension before time began.

**The doctrine of the Trinity teaches *Eternal Sonship***

Christians do not believe in the Triune nature of God because of a philosophical understanding of God, but instead because of the divine revelation from the Incarnation of the Word. When Jesus was on Earth, he revealed his relationship with the Father, and promised that the Spirit would give life and power to his followers.

Scripture teaches that our knowledge of God comes from Christ's revelation – and our ability to see Christ's revelation comes from Divine help. Christ revealed the Godhead in the nature of relationship. If we assume that the relationship only existed while Christ was on Earth, then we assume that Christ did not honestly reveal God to the world. The Father is the Father of the Son. Fatherhood implies that there is offspring. As the Son was revealed as being co-creator with God, the Father is not Father by means of Creation. Fatherhood is not a role, but it becomes an identity.

If we assume that Sonship comes in time – we must ask ourselves what the nature of God is before the incarnation. If we cannot see the Father, Son and Spirit before the incarnation, as was revealed by the incarnation, then we do not see God as was revealed by the Divine Word. The doctrine of the Trinity demands eternal Sonship. The son must always Exist as the Son of the Father. The divine Spirit must exist.

***Eternal Sonship* is one of the doctrines about salvation****2.3 Answers to criticisms against *Eternal sonship*.**

The “Evangelical” opponents of traditional Nicene Christianity of course have their reasons for what they say. These opponents of course wrote their objections. It would be important to answer several of the objections.

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<sup>6</sup>Colossians 1:13-16, KJV

### Some object that *Eternal Sonship* is anti-scriptural

<sup>78</sup> The obvious counter would be that the doctrine of *Eternal Sonship* is taught in Scripture, and is in fact necessary for for scripture.

The scriptural argument is a common straw-man. It is very easy to claim that something is "Biblical", or "unscriptural". The proof that is offered is only that Clarke and MacArthur disagreed with this doctrine. Because they disagree (and their view came from scripture) the Nicene view of *eternal sonship* is anti-scriptural. People are quite skilled at reading their own bias into scripture. Interpretations and understanding vary greatly.

The scriptural argument is also very difficult to refute, because those who gave it failed to show how it was antisciptural. If *Eternal Sonship* is antisciptural, than there should be scripture to oppose it. Clarke and MacArthur failed to provide such scripture with their argument, thus the objection must be dropped as a strawman.

### Some object that if Christ was "Begotten before all worlds", then he cannot be eternal, but had to come in a time after the Father

<sup>9</sup> For Clarke, rejection of *Eternal Sonship* is natural. It is obvious that if one is begotten, there is a time that he is begotten, thus there "was a time when the Son was not." Clarke solves the difficulty in him self by expanding the Arian formula to "a time when the Son was not yet the Son." The answer to the problem is the answer not only to Clarke, but also to Arius.

Arius and Clarke look at the Divine with a very Human understanding. They cannot see the eternal, but instead assume that the Divine is limited by time. The rejection of *Eternal Sonship* is dependent on the assumption that the Father, who lives outside the limits of time, is limited by the confines of time. If the Father begets the Son outside of time, then the Son and the Sonship is Eternal. There never is a time that the Son is not the Son.

It would be even stranger to assume that the Father lives outside of time, but the Son is bound by time and has a beginning, because our own observation shows that when a father has a son, the son is the same sort of creature as the father. The Divine Father is outside the bounds of time, so, if the Son is, in essence, the same as the Father, the Son should also be Eternal. As Cyril of Jerusalem writes:

He is then the Son of God by nature... *God is a Spirit*, His generation is spiritual: for bodies time needs must intervene; but time intervenes not in the generation of the Son from the Father... begotten without beginning.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Id., *Comentary and critical notes*, Luke 1:35.

<sup>8</sup>John MacArthur. *The Superiority of Jesus: Jesus superior to the Angels - Part 1*. Taped lecture. Can order tape by calling 1.800.55.GRACE and ordering tape GC 1602.

<sup>9</sup>Clarke, op. cit., Luke 1:35.

<sup>10</sup>Cyril of Jerusalem. "Catechetical Lectures". In: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Second Series. Vol. 7: *Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazinzen*. Ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Trans. by Edwin Hamilton Gifford. American Edition. Peabody MA: Hedrickson, 1894, reprint 1999. Pp. 1-157. URL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.html>, Lecture XI ¶7.

### **Some object that idea of Sonship places Christ, in essence, below the Father**

<sup>1112</sup> When a human father has a son, the son is, in essence, human. When a dog produces offspring the puppies are dogs. Fatherhood does not imply superiority, but generation. In essence, sons are the same as the father.

Sons who are born in time, of course, have a later beginning than the father, but age neither changes essence nor value. A child, is not, in essence, lower than an adult. The Divine Father is timeless, and the Son was begotten outside of time. As the Son came outside of time, there is not even the difference in age, and without the difference in age, this argument completely falls apart.

### **Some object that the doctrine of *eternal Sonship* is Arian in origin**

<sup>13</sup> If the Son was not always the Son, then there must also be a time when the Father was not Father. Athanasius writes against Arius saying: "Arius maintains that God became a Father, and the Son was not always."<sup>14</sup>

It seems that Arius is in agreements with Dr. Clarke, and not with the traditional Nicene faith. In fact, the weakness of Clarke's views is it leads to the teachings of Arius instead of abandoning them. We are left to ask questions such as, "What was Jesus before he became the Son?" and "When did the Father become the Father?"

In the end, this leads to heresy and rejection of Scripture. Even the often quoted John 3:16-17 becomes impossible in Clarke's view. If there is no Son before the life of Christ, then God cannot send his Son into the world out of love for the world. Reading Clarke, we find that he dismisses any scriptural support for eternal Sonship with words such as:

The phraseology is... merely to denote his eternal *pre-existence*, and to point him out as the *cause* of all things; it... would be absolutely absurd if we could suppose that by the former he intended to convey any idea of the *inferiority* of Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

For Clarke, Sonship implies inferiority, thus, any scripture language talking about Christ being begotten is taken as metaphor. Clarke, like many other Biblicists carefully pick and choose which parts of the Bible they accept, and which part they ignore, crafting a Bible which can support any heresy they desire.

The origin of the teaching that the Son was begotten before Creation is Paul, not Arius. Arius rejected Eternal Sonship, so Clarke's objection is completely without merit.

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<sup>11</sup> Clarke, op. cit., Luke 1:35.

<sup>12</sup> MacArthur, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Clarke, op. cit., Notes on Hebrews 1.

<sup>14</sup> Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, op. cit., ¶4-5.

<sup>15</sup> Clarke, op. cit., Colossians 1:15.

**Some object that Christ became Son through his Incarnation**

<sup>16</sup> In this point, MacArthur is partially correct. Orthodox theology teaches that Christ had two “nativities”,<sup>17</sup> one as the Son of the Father “before all worlds” and a second one as the Son of man on the day of the incarnation.

If Christ was not the Son of the Father before the Incarnation, then our understanding of the Trinity and the relationship of the Son to the Father completely breaks apart. The nature and history of God becomes very different from traditional Christianity, or even what is implied in scriptures. We must suddenly read any portion of scripture that refers to God sending his Son into the world<sup>18</sup> as a theological error if we do not accept that there was a son before the incarnation.

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<sup>16</sup>MacArthur, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup>Percival, op. cit., Capitula 2, Second Council of Constantinople.

<sup>18</sup>John 3:16-17, Galatians 4:4, I John 4:9

Part II

**But what about the Church?**

Part III

**Let God be God!**

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