

Jesus' Relationship to God, from His Words in John 13-17
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From what I have seen, many of the papers in the MIT discussion have taken as their starting point the use of the phrase “Son of God” in specific New Testament passages. Other papers have offered more of a big-picture approach by surveying the use of the words “Son” and “Father” throughout the Bible. What I propose to do in this paper is also big-picture in nature, but rather than surveying the broad uses of words, I would like to focus on one extended biblical passage that I believe undergirds not only the way the Bible presents the concepts of “Father” and “Son,” but also the way the Bible links those concepts to salvation and Christian life. This passage is John 13-17, and I believe that Jesus’ words here give us a window into the very heart of the Christian faith.¹

1) A Window into the Heart of the Faith: Jesus’ Words in John 13-17

There are several ways in which the words of the Upper Room Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer are central to the entire Christian message. First, of course, John was the last of the Gospels to be written, as a complement to the Synoptics. The first three Gospels focus on Jesus’ public ministry; John concentrates more on Jesus’ private ministry with the twelve disciples. The Synoptics give the broad sweep of Jesus’ actions; John includes more of what he said (even more than Matthew, and vastly more than Mark and Luke), and in so doing, John gives us Jesus’ own interpretation of the significance of his actions much more than the Synoptics do.

¹ This paper is adapted from chapter two of my book *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009).

Second, Jesus' words in these chapters were spoken just before *the* central events in all of human history, his crucifixion and resurrection. He knew what was coming the next day—his betrayal, arrest, trial, and death by crucifixion—but his disciples did not. The words Jesus spoke at this time were full of meaning as they came from one who knew he was about to die a premature death.

Third, and most important, these chapters constitute essentially the only place in Scripture where anyone describes what God was doing before he created the world. Keep in mind that the disciples were expecting Jesus' words to point back to the Passover and the Exodus, the great deliverance of God's people that had taken place so long before. To their surprise, Jesus spends a great deal of time looking *forward*, speaking of the future—the way the disciples will love and serve one another. And when he does look backward, he points back not just to the Passover, but all the way back to the “time” (one can hardly even use that word) *before* the world existed. They are expecting a look at what to them seems like the distant past, but Jesus gives them a look at the past before the past, before there was even a universe. And then from the past he takes them to the future, a future that he sees clearly but they, of course, do not. In doing so, Jesus ties what Christian life will look like in the future directly to what his own relationship with God the Father has looked like for all eternity past. This connection is what gives these chapters the right to stand as a viable starting point for understanding the entire Christian faith.

If I am correct about the significance of Jesus' words in these chapters, then they are also an appropriate starting point for considering the way the Bible uses key words related to Jesus' and our relationships to God. These chapters undergird the conceptual framework for translating key biblical words and phrases. In this paper I do not intend to go sentence-by-sentence through

what Jesus says here. Instead, I would like to concentrate mainly on a few key passages from John chapters 13, 15, and 17, and through these passages I would like to call your attention to the interplay between Jesus' own relationship to God and our relationship to him and to each other.

2) Christian Love: The Reflection of Jesus' Love

Just after Jesus washes the disciples' feet in chapter 13, he says to the disciples:

Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (Jn 13:31-35)²

At first glance, this passage seems to be utterly preposterous. Jesus is about to *die*. Why would he speak of *this moment* as the moment when God is going to *glorify him*? How can Jesus say that God will be glorified in the Son, who is about to undergo the most humiliating, un-glorious kind of death one can imagine? To understand this, we need to look fairly carefully at what "glory" means in the Bible.

Literally, the Hebrew word translated "glory" means "weight," and the Greek word means "praise." These words are starting from different ends of an idea, but the concept that both are heading toward is that God is the one who is massive, great, ponderous, magnificent, and thus worthy to be praised. So when we "glorify God" or "give God glory," we are praising him because he is great and magnificent. This does not mean that we are giving him anything he does not already possess. He is majestic and spectacular whether anyone acknowledges this or not. Rather, for us to give God glory is to acknowledge that he is glorious, to state publicly that he is vastly greater than we are. This is why the Bible sometimes uses the phrase "ascribe to God the

² In this paper, all Scriptural quotations are from the New International Version.

glory due his name” (see Ps 29:1-2) as a more precise version of the shorter phrase “glorify God.”

However, one should recognize that majesty or greatness is not all that is conveyed by the word “glory.” In addition, throughout the Old and New Testaments the glory of God is connected to his presence with his people. A brief look back through Israel’s history will make this clear. Just after the Exodus, as the people of Israel prepare to cross the Red Sea, God gives them a visible symbol of his presence with them—a pillar of cloud in the daytime, and a pillar of fire at night (Ex 13:20-22). This pillar guides them during the upcoming forty years of wandering in the wilderness before they enter the land of Israel promised to them. Shortly after this, as the people are camped in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, they begin to grumble against Moses and Aaron because they have no food. Moses and Aaron say to the people, “In the evening you will know that it is the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him” (Ex 16:7). As promised, the next day the people “looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud” (Ex 16:10). Here the cloud that has previously signified God’s presence is specifically called “the glory of the Lord,” and furthermore, this event coincides with God’s beginning to give the people manna to eat, another visible sign of his presence with them and provision for them. (See all of Ex 16 here.) Later, as the people camp at the foot of Mount Sinai and God begins to give them the Law, starting with the Ten Commandments (Ex 20), he calls Moses up to the top of the mountain. The text reads: “When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain” (Ex 24:15-

17). Here, just after the breathtaking deliverance from Egypt that constituted Israel as a nation set apart for God, the Lord gives the people this constant reminder of his presence with them, his unique relationship to them. And the phrase Scripture uses for this presence is “the glory of the Lord.”

For the rest of Old Testament history, God’s majestic greatness is linked to his unique presence with his own people through this cloud of “the glory of the Lord.” After the tabernacle—the *movable* place of worship representing God’s presence with his people—is completed, we read: “Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.... So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels” (Ex 40:34-38). Similarly, once the temple—the *stationary* place of worship representing God’s presence—is completed and the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the Holy of Holies, the text declares: “The cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple” (1 Kings 8:10-11). As he watches this event, King Solomon says, “The Lord has said that he would dwell in a dark cloud; I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever” (1 Kings 8:12-13).

Of course, the temple was not the final sign of God’s presence with his people, nor was this earthly temple permanent. Instead, the New Testament ties God’s majestic presence with his people to the incarnation and life of Christ. As the angels appear to announce Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, Luke writes, “The glory of the Lord shone around them” (Lk 2:9). When John describes the incarnation with the famous words, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” he explains by writing, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The glory of God is

connected to the presence of God with his people, and this presence is uniquely shown in the entrance of his one and only Son into the world. Finally, in the chapter just before the Upper Room Discourse begins, Jesus speaks of his impending death by saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn 12:23). This brings us up to where we are now, in the Upper Room, puzzling over Jesus’ strange association of “death” with “glory.” But now we can recognize that the idea of glory is not just that God is majestic and great. It is that this God, the only God, the God who is majestic, is *with us* and acting *for us*.³

So with all this in mind, look at the first part of John 13:31ff again: “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.” If God’s glory is not just his greatness, but his presence with us, then this passage must mean that the impending death of Jesus is the supreme way in which God is present with us. This is the very definition of what it means for God to be present with us. This is somehow going to be the most glorious moment in history.

With this most improbable description of glory in place, Jesus then tells the disciples what he wants them—and all of us who follow Jesus today—to do. In the latter part of the passage we are considering, he says: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34-35). Notice two things about this passage. First, Jesus says that our love for one another is intimately connected to his love for us. *As* he has loved us, *so* we are to love one another. What is the nature of this connection? Does he mean *because* he has loved

³ For other uses of the word “glory” in connection with God’s presence, see, e.g., Ex 33:12-22, Lev 9:23-24; Deut 5:24; 1 Sam 4:21-22.

us, we should love one another? Surely he means at least this much. Does he mean we should love one another *in the same way* that he has loved us? Probably so, especially in light of the stunning demonstration of servant love he has given through washing the disciples' feet. I suggest that what Jesus means here includes both of those ideas, but goes even further. Jesus means we should love one another *with the very same love* with which he has loved us.

What Jesus means here becomes clearer later in the Upper Room Discourse, but for now, we need to recognize that our love for one another is meant to be a mirror of the love Christ has shown us. And that leads directly to the second thing we should notice about the passage, that the way the world (that is, the broader society of people who do not yet follow Christ) will know we are Christ's disciples is by the way we love one another. Our love somehow grows out of Christ's love for us, and our love for one another *reflects* Christ's love for us. It is so much like his love that when people see us, they are reminded of the way Christ acted when he was on earth. Thus, a life reflecting the love Jesus has shown for us lies very close to the heart of Christian faith. Notice that this is not the same as saying simply that we should love one another, that we are looking for some kind of community life in which people get along and are nice to each other. This is more than that, and a different kind of love than that. This is a love that is specifically connected to the life of one person who lived 2000 years ago. Near the heart of our faith, and thus near the heart of our theology, lies a love that reflects *that* love.

As the Upper Room Discourse progresses, Jesus gets increasingly specific about the kind of love, and the kind of glory/presence, he is talking about here.

3) Christian Love: The *Same* as the Love between the Father and Jesus

One of Jesus' best-known speeches is his vine-and-branches talk in John 15. As beloved as this talk may be, it probably does not have nearly the impact with us that it did with its original audience, since not that many of us live in agrarian societies. But for a group of Jews living in ancient Israel, nothing could have been a more appropriate image of the relationship between God, Jesus, and Christians than a grape vine. Grapes were one of the primary crops of ancient Israel, since they grew well in the arid climate, especially in the hill country where the contours of the land created natural terraces. They were essential to the lifestyle of the people, since wine was generally safer to drink than the available water was. Grapes were thus closely connected to life, to survival itself, and growing them provided the livelihood for a significant segment of the population.

Let us take a look at part of what Jesus says in this famous speech:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.... No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.... This is my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (Jn 15:1, 4-5, 8)

From these words it becomes clear why Jesus chose this image. Christians are the branches, the ones who bear the grapes and thus the most visible producers in the grape-growing operation. But the branches cannot produce grapes on their own. If they are cut off from the vine, they become useless. And they must be pruned every spring and protected from predators. The connection between the branch, the vine/root, and the gardener who tends the vine would have been perfectly clear to the disciples.

Notice also that in this paragraph, the fruitfulness of Christians is the Father's glory.

Remembering that glory is connected to God's presence, we see that one of the ways God shows his presence on earth is through the actions of Christians, through the love we show for one another, through the fruit we bear. On our own, we can accomplish nothing. If we remain (or abide) in Jesus, then we can keep God's commands and bear the sort of fruit that God intends us to. First and foremost, then, Christian life is a process of abiding in Jesus, of relying on him, of recognizing and maintaining one's connection to him in all aspects of life. This image helps to explain what Jesus has said earlier in the discourse. Remember that when he said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" in John 13, I mentioned that there were various possibilities about how one might understand the connection between Jesus' love and ours. One possibility was that he means we should love others because he has loved us. But by this point, it is clear that this cannot be all Jesus meant there. If we were simply to love because he loved us, then that would mean that we love "on our own," merely by imitating Christ. But from what Jesus has said in chapter 14 (which I have not discussed in this paper), we know that the Holy Spirit lives within us—helping us, enabling us, leading us to love others. And now the image of the vine and the branches removes any possibility that we could or should imitate Christ's love "on our own." The connection between his love and ours is closer than this: as we remain in his love, Jesus works through us to make us fruitful, so that the Father's glorious presence may be known.

This brings us to the next part of Jesus' speech, in which he pulls together the various threads of the tapestry he has been weaving so far and articulates most clearly the relation between Christians, himself, and God his Father. Jesus says:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may

be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (Jn 15:9-15)

Previously Jesus has forged a link between his love for us and our love for one another. Here, he extends that link. His love for us is connected to his Father's love for him. Furthermore, he does *not* say merely that we are to love each other *because* the Father loved him and he loved us, or even that we are to love each other *in the same way* as the Father loved him and he loved us. Instead, he says, "Now remain in my love." We are to remain *in the very same* love with which Jesus has loved us, which is in fact *the very same* love with which the Father has loved him. Somehow we are called to do more than simply imitate God's love. We are called to remain in and to carry forward to the world the very love with which the Father has loved Jesus. The loving relationship between Father and Jesus, the glorious presence of the Father with Jesus, is not simply a model that we are to follow. That relationship is the very substance of what Jesus says Christians are to possess. Christ is not simply giving us an example; he is offering himself to us as a person, that we might share in his most deeply personal relationship, the relationship he has with God the Father.

Here Jesus is tying our human relationships to his own relationship with the Father. God loves him; he loves his Father and obeys him. In obedience to the Father, he comes into the world to love us *with the very same love* with which he and the Father have loved each other. He calls us to love each other with *that very same love*, and as we will see later, this will involve a willingness to be both leaders and followers, initiators and receptors of love. But another thing that we need to notice in this passage is that Jesus insists his disciples are not just servants, even though they are to obey him. In fact, "servants" is not his preferred word for describing them,

even though many followers of Christ will later use that word to describe themselves. (See Rom 1:1 and Jas 1:1 for examples of this.) Instead, Jesus calls the disciples “friends.” Why? Because someone who is merely a servant is not privy to his master’s reasons for doing something; he is simply told what he should do. A servant who is also a friend shares in his master’s purposes in a much greater way. He knows the big picture of who his master is and what his master is doing, and thus he sees clearly why he is being called to do his part of the task. God the Father called on Jesus to obey, but at the same time, Jesus shared fully in both the Father’s personal presence with him and in the big picture of the Father’s purposes. He knew the Father’s love toward him and thus the loving nature of the Father’s purposes toward humanity. In a similar way, Jesus now calls us to obey, but he shows us who he is and what he is doing. He gives us a glimpse of the love that lies behind his purposes, and so he calls us his friends, rather than just his servants.

This is one of the ways in which Christian teaching about love and obedience differs radically from that of other religions. Islam and other religions command obedience, but they do not usually grant us much insight into why the commands are important or how they fit with what God is doing. In the Upper Room Discourse Jesus shows us that the key to Christianity is linking our lives to him, and indeed linking our lives directly to his own relationship with God the Father.

4) Christian Love and the *Unique* Relationship between Jesus and the Father

From what I have said so far, it may seem that the relationship between believers and God is essentially like that between Jesus and God, and therefore that Jesus does not belong in a fundamentally different category than us. But this is not what Jesus is saying here. Instead, what he is emphasizing is that there is both a similarity and a difference between himself and us with

respect to the Father. To put it differently, his relationship to the Father is unique, but it is nevertheless the archetype for our own relationship with the Father.

In the Upper Room Discourse and High Priestly Prayer, Jesus articulates the uniqueness of his relationship to the Father in three major ways. First, he identifies himself with the Father through very startling assertions. In 14:1, he commands, “Trust in God; trust also in me,” and in 14:12, he affirms, “Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing.” In these passages, he identifies himself with God the Father as the object of our faith. Even more famously, he declares himself to be “the way, the truth, and the life” in 14:6 and claims in 14:9, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Jesus is not merely a child of God on the same level that we are. Instead, his relationship to God is unique, even though we are meant to share in the love between the Father and him.

Second, Jesus indicates the uniqueness of his relationship to God by the intensely personal way he speaks *of* the Father in the Upper Room Discourse and *to* the Father in the High Priestly Prayer (which I will discuss in more detail later). He refers to God not only as “the Father” (in 14:6, 14:10, 14:24) and “Father” (in 17:1, 17:11), but also as “*my* Father.” In 14:2, he claims, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” In 14:7, he asserts, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.” In 14:20, he says, “On that day, you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” (Notice that this passage shows clearly both the uniqueness of his relationship to God and the connection between his relationship and ours. God is *his* Father in a unique way, but just as he is in the Father, we are in him.) In 15:1, as we have already seen, Jesus begins the vine-and-branches speech by saying, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.” And in 15:10 (as we have seen, a crucial passage because it shows most clearly the link between God’s love for him, his love for us, and our love for him),

Jesus says, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” Contrast this uniquely personal way of speaking with the fact that Jesus elsewhere instructs his disciples to pray to “our Father” (Mt 6:9). There is at once a similarity between our relationship with God and Jesus’ relationship (we can call God “Father”), and a difference (God is Father to Jesus in a different way, such that Jesus can call him “my Father,” and we call him “our Father”). Notice here that what is essential to the articulation of Jesus’ unique relationship to God is not the phrase “Son of God” (which does not even occur in the Upper Room Discourse or High Priestly Prayer). What is essential is the word “Father” and the distinction between “my Father” and “our Father.”

This way of referring to Jesus’ relationship to the Father as both unique and the archetype of our relationship to God becomes the basis for one of the major ways the New Testament writers describe our salvation. For example, John himself affirms near the beginning of his Gospel: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13). Although this passage does not use the words “Father” and “Son” (it earlier refers to Jesus as “the Word”), John’s use of the word “children” to describe us establishes both a similarity to the one John will normally call “Son” and a difference from him. We are “children” because he is “Son.” Likewise, Paul affirms in Gal. 4:4-7: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons [literally, “the adoption as sons”]. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God made you also an heir.” Here the familial language is very direct: Jesus is God’s true Son, the one

whom he sent. The purpose of sending the Son was that we might be adopted as sons, and the Spirit dwelling in us enables us to call God “Father.” Likewise, in Rom. 8:14-17, Paul declares, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” Here again, we are children because Christ is Son (although the passage does not use the word “Son”). As children, we are heirs of God along with Christ. There is both similarity and difference between our relationship to God and Jesus’ relationship to him. Jesus is the unique Son, but in a derivative way, we are also children of God.

But this is not all. The third way, and the most dramatic way, in which Jesus indicates the uniqueness of his relationship to the Father is that he asserts it to be an eternal relationship. Unlike us, he never began to be in this relationship as Son to Father; he has always had such a relationship. Jesus affirms this in the High Priestly Prayer, to which I now turn.

5) Christian Love and the *Eternal* Love between the Father and Jesus

In many ways, the High Priestly Prayer is an exact complement to the Upper Room Discourse. In the discourse, Jesus has laid out a picture of life as God intends it, and in the prayer, he asks his Father to bring about the kind of life he has just described to the disciples. In this prayer, Jesus prays first for himself (vv. 1-5), and then for the twelve disciples (vv. 6-19), and then for all those who will later become his followers (vv. 20-26). Let us look at what Jesus prays for himself:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you

gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (Jn 17:1-5)

In this passage, the phrase that may jump out at you first is “eternal life.” We all know that Jesus gives eternal life to those who believe in him. But what *is* eternal life? Most of us think that either it means “living forever” or it is a synonym for “heaven.” But neither of these really gets to the heart of what eternal life, in the biblical sense, means. “Heaven,” the way many people use the word, means little more than the actualization of whatever a particular person happens to like. Heaven is the place where you never have to work, or the place where you can play baseball all day long, or the place where you can eat whatever you want and not have to worry about your cholesterol level. The word “heaven” has been trivialized so much that it is almost meaningless today. And “living forever” can be very misleading as well. According to Scripture, *all people* are going to live forever, in one way or another. One of the marks of the significance God has given to *every* human being is that *all* will live forever, either with God or apart from God.⁴ But that is not what Jesus means by “eternal life” here. Rather, the phrase translated “eternal life” actually means “life of the age.” It is referring to a future age, to the new kind of life that God will establish at the end of history, a life that will be shared by all those who believe in Christ and follow him. Eternal life is not just living forever; it is living in a certain way, having a certain “quality of life” that is available only to those who have faith in Christ.

So what is this kind of life like? Jesus says here that eternal life consists of knowing God, and knowing Jesus Christ whom God has sent. Notice right away how personal this description is. Jesus is not saying eternal life is *something* that he will give us. He is not saying that because of what he has done, or what he will do, or what we do, then we will get x, y, or z while living forever in heaven. Eternal life *is* knowing Christ and his Father, God. At the very heart of the

⁴ See, e.g., Dan 12:1-3; Mt 13:36-43, 47-50; 2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 20:11-15, 21:1-8.

central idea of Christianity lies the reality that Christians will *know* the Father and the Son. This concurs very closely with what he has said in the Upper Room Discourse about our sharing in the love between the Father and the Son.

What makes this description of eternal life even more striking is that it comes not as Jesus is praying for *us*, but as he is praying for *himself*. His giving *us* eternal life is intimately connected to God's glory, so much so that Jesus speaks of our eternal life in the same breath as he speaks about his glorifying the Father and the Father's glorifying him. God does not just bask in his own magnificence; he shares it. He shares that greatness within himself among the persons of the Trinity, and he shares that glorious presence with his people as well. So part of the way that God shows forth his magnificence is by leading human beings to know him. And knowing him implies knowing both the Father and the Son whom the Father has sent.

In light of this idea, let us look at several other aspects of this passage from Jesus' prayer. We see that Jesus' completion of the work God has given him to do (living and dying for our salvation—a work that he has almost finished as he speaks these words) ascribes glory to the Father. That work shows the world just how magnificent God is. But notice verses 1 and 5. Jesus is praying that the Father would now glorify *him*, just as he has glorified the Father. And he describes that glory with the word "presence" and as something that he has had with the Father before the world began. The glory of God is the majestic presence of God. From all eternity, from before the moment he created the world, God has shared his magnificent presence. How? By sharing that presence between the Father and the Son. Christianity is unique among world religions in claiming both that there is only one God and that this one God exists as three persons, as the Trinity. Here Jesus indicates that God's majesty shines forth as God shares his presence. Before there was a world or any people to sense that presence, God's glory shone forth

in the relationship between the Father and the Son (and the Holy Spirit as well, although Jesus does not mention him here). As we come to know the Son, we too see God's glorious presence, and *this* is eternal life. The presence that God has shared within himself, between the Father, Son, and Spirit, is the heart of that knowledge of God which he gives to us and which constitutes eternal life. Through this part of the prayer, we see that eternal life is much more than just *something* Christians get because of what Christ has done. Eternal life is a deeply personal knowledge of the one who has shared from all eternity in the glory of the Father. Somehow, the eternally glorious relationship between the Father and Son is shared with us as we follow Christ. The *end*, the future that awaits Christians, involves sharing in the relationship that has characterized God from the very *beginning*, indeed from *before* the beginning, before there was human history or even earthly history. And again, this is very similar to what we have seen in the Upper Room Discourse.

Even more striking than what Jesus prays at the beginning of this prayer is what he says at the end, as he prays for all who will follow him. He continues to speak of glory and of the "time" before the creation of the world, but now he introduces another key idea, that of oneness or unity. Let us look carefully at the passage itself. Jesus says:

My prayer is not for them [the twelve disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them, and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. (Jn 17:20-24)

There are a number of things in this passage that we need to consider. First, notice that when Jesus prays that Christians would be "one," he explains this idea by saying that he is *in the*

Father, the Father is *in him*, and Christians are to be *in the Father and the Son*. For followers of Jesus to be one with each other is somehow tied to the relationship between the Father and the Son, and Jesus uses the word “in” to describe that relationship. Second, notice that the unity between Christians is to be a major sign to the non-Christian world that God has sent Jesus. In other words, part of the reason the world will believe that Jesus is really God’s Son is because of the unity or oneness between Christians. Third, and perhaps most important, notice that Jesus ties oneness to love. In fact, he has talked a great deal about love in the Upper Room Discourse, and now as he prays for Christians, he speaks not only of love, but also of oneness. Saying that Christians should be one in the same way the Father and Son are one means the same thing as saying that Christians should love one another with the same love the Father has shown the Son. Fourth, notice that Jesus again speaks of eternal glory—of the presence of the Father with him before the world was created—and this time he ties that presence to the Father’s love for him.

So what kind of unity is Jesus talking about? He clearly has in mind something much greater than just a unity of purpose, like that which binds people together when they have a common task. He is not talking about a physical or emotional unity, like what binds wife and husband together. And he is not talking about a unity of substance, in which the distinction between God and people is lost, as is often the case in Eastern philosophical concepts of unity. In contrast to all of these, he is talking about a unity of love, and “unity” in this prayer is a synonym for “love” as Jesus has used that word throughout the Upper Room Discourse. To say that the Father and Son are “one” and are “in” each other is to speak of the love they have for each other, and Jesus says they have shared this love from all eternity, from before the time when they made the world. The glory of God has gleamed forth from all eternity past, through the loving presence of the Father with the Son (and the Holy Spirit, but again, Jesus does not mention him here).

After God made the world and placed human beings in it, his desire for us was that we share that same glorious love with him and with each other. Jesus prays that those who follow him may be one with each other in the same way that he is one with the Father.

The link between the Son's relationship to God and ours was one that the church fathers spent countless hours pondering. Perhaps the most insightful reflection on this idea comes from the fifth-century father Cyril of Alexandria, who (like many others) makes adoption into the Son's relationship to the Father the key aspect of salvation. Cyril distinguishes two kinds of unity between the Father and the Son. The first is a unity of substance. To say that the Father and Son share the same substance is to say that they possess the same set of characteristics (what later western theology will call "attributes"). The Father and the Son do not share this kind of unity with us in any way whatsoever—we do not become divine in the sense of possessing attributes like omniscience and omnipotence, that define what it means to be divine. The second, though, is a unity of love or fellowship that the Father and the Son have enjoyed from all eternity precisely because of their unity of substance. Cyril argues that God does, in fact, share this kind of unity with us. In his *Commentary on John*, while considering John 1:12-13 (verses that I just quoted above), Cyril writes:

Shall we then abandon what we are by nature and mount up to the divine and unutterable essence, and shall we depose the Word of God from his very sonship and sit in place of him with the Father and make the grace of him who honours us a pretext for impiety? May it never be! Rather, the Son will remain unchangeably in that condition in which he is, but we, adopted into sonship and gods by grace, shall not be ignorant of what we are.⁵

Notice here that Cyril insists that we in no way mount up to the level of God himself. Instead, we

⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, bk. 1, chap. 9 [Cyril, Archbishop of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to S. John*, Vol. 1: S. John 1-8, trans. P. E. Pusey, Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, vol. 43 (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1874) , p. 86 (translation modified)].

are adopted as daughters and sons of God by grace, not by nature and in essence, as Jesus is. A bit later, he writes:

When he [the apostle John] had said that authority was given to them from him who is by nature Son to become sons of God, and had hereby first introduced that which is of adoption and grace, he can afterwards add without danger [of misunderstanding] that they were begotten of God, in order that he might show the greatness of the grace which was conferred on them, gathering as it were into natural fellowship those who were alien from God the Father, and raising up the slaves to the nobility of their Lord, on account of his warm love towards them.⁶

Notice that Cyril again clearly maintains the distinction between Christians and God, but at the same time he insists that we share in the natural fellowship between the Son and the Father.

According to Cyril, we share *by grace* in the very same fellowship or love that the persons of the Trinity share *by nature*. This is why Jesus can pray that believers are to be one *in the same way* the Father and the Son are one. The Father and the Son are one in two ways, and we can be one with the Trinity and with each other in one of those two ways, by sharing in their fellowship of love.⁷

⁶ Ibid., p. 106 (translation modified).

⁷ In fact, Cyril develops his own technical terms to distinguish these two kinds of unity. He uses the Greek word *idiotēs* to refer to the identity of substance or nature between the persons of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit share *idiotēs* (identity of nature) with one another because they are the same God, the same being. Furthermore, Cyril uses the word *oikeiotēs* to refer to the unity of love and fellowship that binds the persons of the Trinity together. Even more strikingly, Cyril uses the phrase *oikeiotēs physikē* or “natural fellowship” to refer to the unity of love that the persons of the Trinity share precisely because they are of the same substance. They share *oikeiotēs physikē* (natural fellowship) because they share *idiotēs* (identity of nature). Armed with this distinction, Cyril insists that Christians do not in any way whatsoever share the *idiotēs* (identity of nature) of the Trinity (that would be pantheism!), but in spite of this, we do share in God’s *oikeiotēs* (fellowship). For a comprehensive explanation of Cyril’s use of *idiotēs* and *oikeiotēs* to lay out his understanding of our participation in God’s fellowship, see chapter three of my book *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: University Press, 2003).

6) Implications

From Jesus' words in the Upper Room Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer, we can see that two crucial truths lie at the heart of his own understanding of his relationship to God and of our relationship to him/God. These are:

- 1) Jesus stands in a unique, loving relationship to God as Son to Father, and our relationship to God is derived from his unique relationship. We become sons and daughters of God by grace and adoption, based on the fact that Jesus is the unique Son of God.
- 2) Jesus' unique relationship to God is not merely a post-incarnational one. He has always been the unique Son of God, as shown by the fact that in these chapters he says he has always shared love, joy, fellowship, and unity with the Father (and the Spirit).

Notice that these two points constitute the most central affirmations of the Christian faith, the *foundation* on which other affirmations are based. The new life that God gives to Christians does not consist merely of a new status (justification) before him, or of a set of benefits (such as forgiveness of sins) that are achieved because of what Jesus did. Instead, justification, forgiveness, and other aspects of Christian identity grow out of a deeper reality that is fundamentally personal, relational, and familial. Notice also that these points aptly summarize the utter *uniqueness* of the Christian faith; there is nothing similar to them in Islam or any other religion. However much Christianity has in common with other religions, and thus however many legitimate entry points there are for evangelism, at some point Christian ministers need to make clear that Christianity offers a fundamentally different kind of salvation, on the basis of a fundamentally different understanding of God.

Notice also that in Scripture, the person who makes the connection between the eternal loving relationship between Jesus and the Father and the love we share with him and with one

another clearest is the person who has the greatest “vested interest” in explaining it this way: Jesus himself. Paul, John, and the other NT writers make this point as well. But its clearest, most extended, and most detailed exposition comes in the words of Jesus himself. This is why I have chosen to make this portion of Scripture my focus in this talk.

As a result, it is clear that Jesus is *not* God’s Son in merely the way that we are God’s sons and daughters, because unlike us, he never *became* God’s Son. He always was God’s Son, beloved by his Father. Furthermore, he is *not* a man in merely the way that we are men and women. Although he *became* man, he did not *begin to exist* as a personal being when he became man, as we did. He *always was* God’s beloved, unique Son, but in time he *became* human for our salvation. The Bible makes these truths clear in many ways, but most significantly, in the words of Jesus himself, spoken to his best friends as he entered the darkest hour of his life prior to the crucifixion.

Notice further that John chapters 13-17 elucidate these central truths without relying on the phrase “Son of God” or the word “begotten” (or, for that matter, “Word” or “Wisdom”). None of these words or phrases on which the MIT discussions have focused occurs in these central chapters, and the two fundamental truths I have just elaborated do not depend on those words/phrases. Rather, in these chapters the phrase that is most central to Jesus’ articulation of his relationship to God is the phrase “my Father,” coupled with the descriptions of his eternal fellowship with his Father.

Therefore, I suggest that the theological starting point for discussions about how to translate divine familial language should not be the question of whether the word “begetting” or the phrase “Son of God” can have non-procreative meanings in certain biblical passages. Instead, the starting point needs to be the question of what words in a given receptor language can best

convey both the similarity and the distinction between Jesus' eternal filial relationship to God and our relationship to God. Even though it is true that Jesus' "begetting" is associated with the resurrection in Acts 13:33 (cf. Psalm 2:7 and Rom 1:4) and could be understood as analogous to the coronation of an Israelite king, it is nevertheless true that Jesus has from all eternity had a personal relationship of warm fellowship, unity, and joy with his Father, because he says so directly in John 17:20-26. (In other words, the begetting/coronation of Jesus as royal Son at the resurrection is an act by which God shows that Jesus has always been the eternal Son.) Thus, he has always been a person and a Son, not just an aspect of God's communication that became personalized in the man Jesus at the incarnation.

Similarly, even though in some contexts, "Son of God" may mean no more than "Messiah," it is nevertheless true that the person to whom those statements refer, Jesus, has from all eternity been the Son of God, because he indicates this directly in these chapters of John's Gospel and elsewhere. Likewise, even though the word "Logos" can refer to communication in general with no personal connotations, and even though "Logos" is used to describe the pre-incarnate One in John 1, it is nevertheless true that this pre-incarnate Logos was personal and was in a relationship as Son to his Father before the incarnation (and indeed before creation), again because Jesus says so directly in John 17.

It is true that Jesus fulfills the role of Messianic King. It may be true that in some passages where "Son of God" occurs, this is all the phrase means. But even if this is the case, it is not true that God's Word or Wisdom (understood as an attribute or aspect of God's character) became personified in the man Jesus, thus enabling this man to fulfill the role of Messianic King and "Divine Son." Such an interpretation simply does not do justice to what Jesus says about himself in these chapters. An attribute or aspect of God's character could not have fellowship

with Another, and yet Jesus claims not only that he has shared love, joy, glory, and unity with the Father, but that he has done so from before the world was created. Indeed an interpretation of the Trinity in which the Word was an aspect of God that became personalized in the man Jesus would imply that the Trinity was not eternal at all, because God would not always have had a Son to love. Instead, Jesus has always, from all eternity past, been a person distinct from God the Father, possessing the same nature as the Father (just as human children possess the same nature as their parents), and existing in intimate fellowship with God the Father. True, he has not always borne the title “Christ/Messiah” (he was anointed for this role by becoming human, and this anointing—“messiahship”—was recognized publicly at his baptism), and one could even say that he has not always borne the name “Jesus” (this name was given to him at his human birth), but the person we call “Jesus” and “Christ” *has* always been a person and has always been *the same* person, the person who alone can call God “my Father.” Jesus’ act of calling God “my Father” points to the most fundamental truth of his identity, the truth on which the fundamental truth of our identity—our ability to call God “our Father”—is based. God is Father to Jesus in one way and to us in another way that is both derivative and distinct. The entire Christian understanding of salvation hinges on this similarity and distinction.

Moreover, if Jesus can call God “my Father” in a unique way, then Jesus is the Father’s “Son” in a way that is distinct from the way we are. He is “Son” in a unique way, an eternal way. In other words, if “Father” language serves to communicate Jesus’ understanding of his own *relationship* to God, then “Son” language likewise reinforces and communicates Jesus’ *identity* with respect to God. And if “Son” language describes Jesus’ identity, then the language of adopted sonship and daughtership also describes our fundamental identity as Christians. I believe we must allow both the uniqueness of Jesus’ eternal relationship as Son to his Father and the

similarity between that relationship and our relationship to God to shine forth clearly in all Bible translations. What words we will use in a given receptor language to convey this similarity and distinction will depend, of course, on the words available in that language for describing father/son relationships. But it is worth asking, and discussing, whether there are likely to be any languages in which words describing other kinds of relationships than father/son relationships could possibly handle the theological weight that the Bible places on the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words for “father” and “son.” In any language, could any words taken from other semantic domains do justice to the interplay between “the Father,” “the Son,” and “the sons,” an interplay that lies at the heart of the Christian faith?

In my second talk I would like to consider the way the early church handled some issues that are related to the ones being discussed among us today, in the hope that this will provide guidance (or at least discussion starters) for our own reflections on translating divine familial language.