

**Translating “Son of God”: Insights from the Early Church**  
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In my first talk, I argued on the basis of Jesus’ Upper Room Discourse and High Priestly Prayer that the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father is central to Christianity, and therefore that one needs to allow the uniqueness and centrality of that relationship to shine forth clearly in the translated text of the New Testament. The question I would like to raise in this talk is whether “Son” or “Son of God” must always be translated the same way, or whether it may be translated with different expressions in different passages, so as to render more clearly the contextual meanings it conveys in those different passages. For convenience, I will label and describe what I consider to be the legitimate options as follows:

- a) On the basis of the fact (if it is a fact) that “Son of God” sometimes means something other than “eternal Second Person of the Trinity” (even though the phrase always refers to the eternal Second Person of the Trinity), we could in some cases translate it with a word or phrase other than the common language equivalent.
- b) In spite of the fact (if it is a fact) that “Son of God” sometimes means something other than “eternal Second Person of the Trinity,” we should nevertheless always translate it with the same phrase, so that the reader will understand the phrase in connection with the overarching truth (made clear in many ways in Scripture) that Jesus is God’s eternal Son.

If we state the issue this way, then it appears to be similar to a complex of issues the church faced early in its history (especially in the fourth century), and a look at the way the church dealt

with these issues may help guide us in our decision making about translation today. We shall see that the overwhelming practice of the church fathers was consistent with option “b” above, for reasons that grew out three interrelated factors: 1) their fundamental approach to interpretation, 2) their theological insight into the nature of fatherhood and sonship, and 3) their way of linking Jesus’ Sonship to our sonship/daughtership.

### **1) The Early Church’s Fundamental Approach to Interpretation<sup>1</sup>**

During the on-going discussions about translating the phrase “Son of God,” it has often been argued (as I have mentioned above) that the phrase sometimes has the meaning of “Messiah” or the like. This fact (again, if it is a fact) has sometimes become the basis for the practice of never rendering the phrase “Son of God” with the common language equivalent. In this section of the paper, I would like to point out that such a move from the narrow to the more general is characteristic of our contemporary approach to interpreting Scripture but is somewhat at odds with the way the early church interpreted the Bible. I believe that the church fathers’ interpretive approach is one from which we can learn, one that may well be relevant to the question of whether we should always translate “Son of God” the same way.

We contemporary Christians generally believe that the starting point for understanding any Bible passage correctly is the direct context of the passage itself. We look at the historical background to the passage, its literary context, its syntactical structure in the language in which it was written, and the precise usages of the important words in the passage. We study the *immediate* context of the passage as carefully and exhaustively as we can *before* we move out

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<sup>1</sup> This portion of the paper is adapted from chapter six of my book *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009). That chapter is itself closely related to a more detailed treatment of the early Church’s biblical interpretation in my article “Patristic Exegesis and Theology: The Cart and the Horse,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007), pp. 1-19.

from that passage to take other relevant passages or relevant theological ideas into consideration. We move from the narrow to the broad. And of course, our reason for this is that we believe starting with the broad would lead us to read our own theological ideas into the passage rather than reading the passage's own meaning from its context. Only by starting with the passage in and of itself, we think, can we be objective and truly grasp what the passage really means. As I have mentioned, the MIT discussion has highlighted this tendency: if "Son of God," considered in light of the background to certain New Testament passages, means "Messiah," then we are prone to assume that it can (or must) mean "Messiah" in other passages, and thus that we are justified in translating it with the equivalent of "Messiah" elsewhere.

At this point, we need to recognize that our contemporary way of trying to ensure accuracy in biblical interpretation is starkly different from the way the early church went about the same task. The church fathers had no qualms whatsoever about reading pre-conceived theological ideas into a given passage, as long as they got those ideas from elsewhere in the Bible. In fact, they regarded any attempt to *avoid* such a reading to be unchristian. To say this another way, the church fathers believed that the *entire* Bible was a book about Christ, and therefore they were determined to read *every* passage of Scripture as being directly or indirectly about Christ, the Christian's relationship to Christ, or the church's relationship to Christ. Note carefully what is happening here. In interpreting the Bible, *we* start with the immediate context of the passage in question, and we generally refuse to allow any interpretation of that passage that cannot be drawn *from the passage itself*. In sharp contrast, the church fathers started with the *whole* Bible, with its *entire* message, and they read each passage in light of that entire message. We start from the narrow and work to the broad. They started from the broad and read each narrow passage in light of their understanding of the Bible's broad, overall message. We and the

church fathers start the process of interpretation from opposite ends of the contextual spectrum, and this is part of the reason they see connections between biblical passages that we do not think are there. This fact shows up very clearly in the following citation from Irenaeus, written in the late second century. His purpose here is to refute the biblical interpretation of the Gnostics, second-century heretics who believed that there were two distinct gods, one of the Old Testament and the other of the New Testament.

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should re-arrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skilled artist constructed... In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connections, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions.<sup>2</sup>

Notice that Irenaeus' criticism of the Gnostic style of biblical interpretation is not focused on details; it concentrates on the big picture. The Gnostics get the overall message of the Bible wrong, and so they are wrong on the individual passages as well.

In fact, the church fathers worked from the broad to the narrow *consciously* and *deliberately*. In the second century, they coined the phrase "rule of faith," by which they meant the totality of what the Bible teaches and what the church has said about the Bible. Then they read all passages of Scripture in light of this rule of faith. Irenaeus explains:

All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent; and the parables shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain; and those statements the meaning of which is clear, shall serve to explain the parables; and through the many diversified utterances [of Scripture] there shall be heard one harmonious melody in us, praising in hymns that God who created all things.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, bk. 1, chap. 8, par. 1 (Ante-Nicene Fathers [available in many printed and electronic editions], vol. 1, p. 326).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. 2, chap. 28, par. 3 (Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, p. 400).

One should notice here that the key to interpreting the parables (which Irenaeus finds to be obscure and therefore difficult) is clearer statements elsewhere in Scripture, not the context of the individual parables themselves. Similarly, at the end of the fourth century, Augustine writes:

When words used literally cause ambiguity in Scripture, we must first determine whether we have mispunctuated or misconstrued them. When investigation reveals an uncertainty as to how a locution should be pointed or construed, the rule of faith should be consulted as it is found in the more open places of the Scriptures and in the authority of the Church... But if both meanings, or all of them, in the event that there are several, remain ambiguous after the faith has been consulted, then it is necessary to examine the context of the preceding and following parts surrounding the ambiguous place.<sup>4</sup>

Here we see that when there is ambiguity in the meaning of a certain passage, Augustine argues that one should *first* consult the rule of faith (which he describes as both the clearer passages of Scripture and the church's authoritative statements about it), and *only if that fails* should one consult the context of the passage.

Irenaeus and Augustine are putting into concrete expression what the entire early church practiced: using the whole Bible and the church's teaching based on the Bible to interpret each individual biblical passage. This does not mean simply that one should consult clearer passages *on the same subject* as the ambiguous passage. In addition, it means that one must clearly see the *whole of Scripture*—the whole picture of the king, in Irenaeus' illustration above—before one can correctly interpret any of the individual passages.

However, there is another difference between our biblical interpretation and that of the church fathers. We tend to stick to interpretations for a given text that the *human* author of the passage could have meant and the *human* audience could have understood *at the time*. But as the

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine.*, bk. 3, chap. 2 [Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., The Library of Liberal Arts (New York, Macmillan, 1958), p. 79].

church fathers drew numerous connections between the Testaments, they relied on their perception of what the Holy Spirit meant, not what the human author could have known or intended.

Of course, if one is going to move from the broad to the narrow, as the early church did, the question becomes urgent: What is the overall message of the Bible? Here again, the church fathers differ from Christians today. In contrast to modern liberals (who might see *no* unifying theme in Scripture because they see the Bible as a disparate set of human testimonies to the human experience of God), and in partial contrast to modern conservatives (who tend to organize Scripture around concepts such as the “covenant” or the “dispensations” which have governed God’s dealings with humanity), the church fathers tended to see the unifying theme of Scripture as Christ *himself*. Again, this unifying theme places the emphasis in a rather different place than we do. We today often start with *ourselves* and ask how God relates to us. The church fathers started with God, and especially with Christ, and asked how we participate in Christ. And in their understanding of this unifying theme, Jesus’ relationship to God the Father *as his eternal Son* was absolutely central. The truth that Jesus is God’s unique, eternal Son, and the derivative truth that our adopted sonship is based on his unique sonship, were so central to the church fathers’ understanding of the Bible that they saw these truths reflected in the whole Bible.

We need to recognize here that each approach carries with it a particular propensity. The church fathers were prone to find the Trinitarian Persons *everywhere* in Scripture. They read the Father-Son relationship and our adoptive sonship into passages where those truths were surely not intended to be present (either by the human author or the Holy Spirit). Contemporary interpreters, in contrast, are prone to *avoid* reading the Trinitarian Persons into individual passages, especially in the Old Testament and in New Testament passages obviously dependent

on Old Testament background. The church fathers, for the most part, tended to think that since all of Scripture was about the Father, Son, and Spirit, then the Holy Spirit must have meant us to find the Father, Son, and Spirit in every passage. We tend to think, for the most part, that if the human writer of a given passage could not possibly have been thinking about Father, Son, and Spirit, then the passage is not about the Trinity. We might argue that the church fathers were missing many dimensions of what the individual passages mean because they treated the Bible as a treasure trove into which they dived to find Trinitarian (and especially Christological) riches. Conversely, the church fathers might argue that we are missing what they consider the *main point* of the Bible because we are not looking for the right things as we interpret each passage.

Clearly these interpretive approaches are very different, but what do they have to do with the MIT discussions? Keeping in mind that translation *is* interpretation, we see that these interpretive approaches affect the very concept of what “meaning” entails. In our mind, a given passage’s meaning grows out of its immediate background, and so we tend to think that if that background implies that “Son of God” means “Messiah” or the like, then we believe the phrase should be translated with the receptor language’s closest equivalent to “Messiah.” But in the mind of the church fathers, what a passage means is determined by the way it points to the message of the whole Bible, and especially to the Christ whom the whole Bible proclaims. So if the phrase “Son of God” occurs in a given passage, the church fathers believe that since the person to whom that phrase refers is the eternal Son of God, then that is what the phrase “means.” The one to whom the phrase refers becomes the dominant feature of the phrase’s meaning. Therefore, the church fathers would say that any word that refers to Jesus should be translated with a word that makes it clear that it is pointing to Jesus. “Son” should always be rendered with the common language equivalent to “Son” in the receptor language.

Now, the church fathers' practice is not necessarily normative. We may not agree with them, but even so, we should heed the warning the church fathers give us. The task of Bible interpreters (including Bible translators) is not merely to convey the meaning of individual passages to the reader. It is also to convey to readers the body of truth that the Bible as a whole conveys in its original languages. Part of the way the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek conveys that body of truth is by associations of ideas and words over the whole of the Bible. If a given passage contains a word such as "Son" that is clearly central to that body of truth, a word whose full significance is impressed upon the reader by associations with different passages throughout the Scriptures, then that passage is part of a broader "concordance" that builds up the full significance of the word. The church fathers would say that the meaning of the word in a given passage depends on the broader concordance, but even if we disagree with them on that point, we can still argue that the reader deserves to see the word in light of that broader concordance, by seeing that it is the same word as the word used in other significant passages.

Here one may object that I am arguing for a verbal correspondence or formal correspondence theory of translation. Actually, no. I believe that under ordinary circumstances, the same word may be translated with different words in different contexts when its meaning is clearly different. Nevertheless, I believe that the words and phrases that bear the most weight in conveying the central truths of Scripture should be translated uniformly, consistently. This is especially true in some pioneer Bible translation work, when the fruits of our labor may be the *only* translation a group of people will see for a very long time, if not forever. In English, one can easily compare a paraphrase, a dynamic equivalence translation, and a formal equivalence translation. For that matter, one can easily use an electronic concordance to find occurrences of a certain Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic word without knowing those languages. Native speakers of

the languages in which SIL works may never have such luxuries (although it should be acknowledged that many of these native speakers also know other languages that have Bible translations). The translations we prepare may in a few cases be people's *only* access to the Word of God, for the indefinite future. If that is so, would it not be wise to keep in mind the big picture, the full significance of crucial theological words like "Son"? Should we not let our understanding of the big picture inform the way we render those words in every passage?

## **2) The Early Church's Theological Insight into the Nature of Fatherhood and Sonship**

One of the major factors leading translators to look for translations of "Son of God other than the common language equivalent is that that in human languages the words "father" and "son" normally carry with them the connotation of sexual, biological procreation. Some argue that in languages where the words carry such a connotation, and in Muslim-dominated cultures where people are taught that Allah cannot have a son, the phrase "Son of God" is inevitably misunderstood when rendered with its common language equivalent. It is noteworthy that the church faced a similar linguistic and cultural challenge in the fourth century, and the way the church fathers handled this challenge may be instructive for us today.

In the early centuries of Christianity, there were two major connotations of the Greek words "father" and "son" that the church fathers recognized did not apply to God, and it is significant that they chose to continue using the word "Son" as their main way of describing Jesus in spite of the potential misunderstandings that arose from these connotations. The first was that in the pagan world surrounding the early church, the notions of father and son certainly included sexual, procreative connotations. (One could argue that in *every* language, these words carry such connotations!) Moreover, the pagan religious systems of the Near East, Africa, Europe, and Asia (and arguably, most pagan religious systems in the world even today) included

the notion of sexual activity on the part of the gods. (Indeed, one of the most striking things about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—from the standpoint of world religions—is that they affirm no female consort for God.) In such an environment, the potential for misunderstanding the Christian affirmation that God has a Son was extremely high. In this respect, the Near East of late antiquity was similar to Muhammad’s Arabia in the seventh century and to Muslim-dominated regions of the world today. Now, there is doubt about whether very many people in late antiquity actually believed in the gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon or approved of the tales of their sexual exploits and multiple children. It may be that the popularity of those stories was more akin to the popularity of television shows and movies that glamorize illicit sex today than it was a reflection of people’s actual religious beliefs. But be that as it may, the church took no chances. The church fathers spared no effort in criticizing the pagan gods and the ceremonies connected with their worship. Justin Martyr in the second century, Tertullian in the third, and Augustine in the fifth, were only the most famous of many apologists in the early church who gave the Greco-Roman pantheon a thorough bludgeoning. Significantly, though, the church fathers never seem to have considered the option of moving away from “Father” and “Son” language because of the potential misunderstanding of God that might come from using those words in a pagan context.

The second connotation of the words “father” and “son,” one that was much more serious for the church fathers, was that a son begins to exist after his father. Again, one could argue that this connotation would be present with the words for “son” and “father” in *any* language, and it was certainly a major focus of the church’s attention, especially in the fourth century. This attention centered around two Greek words, *genētos* and *gennētos*, which were pronounced the same way and were generally considered as synonyms, even though they came from different

verbs. (*Genētos* with one nu [equivalent to an “en” in English] is an adjective from the verb *gignomai*, meaning “to become” or “to come into existence,” whereas *gennētos* with two nus [equivalent to two “ens”] is an adjective from the verb *gennaō*, meaning “to beget.” Thus, *genētos* with one nu means “having come into existence,” or in the substantive use of the adjective, “the one who has come into existence.” On the other hand, *gennētos* with two nus means “having been begotten/born, or in the substantive, “the one who has been begotten/born.”) Around the year 318, Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, argued that since the Son is begotten, he must have come into existence (since he is *gennētos*, he must also be *genētos*), and therefore, he must be a created being. Arius further argued that the defining characteristic of God is that he is *agenētos* or “unoriginate,” never having come into existence because he has always existed. Arius urged the church to affirm God as *agenētos*, rather than as “Father.”

Another factor contributing to this discussion was that in the philosophical thought world of the time (largely Neoplatonic), the idea of God as a Trinity was very common, but the hypostases of the “Neoplatonic trinity” were not equal to one another and were not personal/relational. The first was called “the One” (the form of “one” was neuter, indicating an impersonal supreme god), the second was called “the Word” or “Mind,” and the third was called the “Soul” or “Spirit.” This system created remarkable points of contact with the Christian faith, but it also posed the great danger that people would misconstrue God as an unequal and impersonal trinity. The obvious connotation of a “son” as one who had come into existence and who was therefore chronologically later than his father added to the danger that people would misunderstand God the Son as a lesser being, a different god, than God the Father.

Notice the similarities between the fourth-century situation and the current situation in Muslim-dominated countries. In both cases, the idea that Father/Son language implied

procreation lay in the linguistic and cultural background. In both cases there was pressure to move away from Father/Son language, although in the case of the early church the pressure came not from the procreative connotations of those words per se, but from the connotation that a son is chronologically later than his father. In both cases, a seemingly viable alternative way of referring to God was a word that emphasized the utter uniqueness and transcendence of God (“Unoriginate” in the fourth century, and “Allah” today), in lieu of the relational word “Father.” (It should be remembered that in the case of the fourth-century church, this was not a translation issue in most cases. The controversy took place primarily in Greek-speaking areas, so there was no translation involved.) And in both cases, there was a word ready to use in place of “Son” that was present in the Bible and was well known to the broader culture: “Word” (which, of course, John uses in the prologue of his Gospel, and which the Koran uses in its description of the conception of Jesus). Then, as now, there was great pressure to speak of God as “Unoriginate/Allah” and of Jesus primarily as “Word,” the first in order to avoid potential miscommunication and the second in order to build bridges.

In light of this situation, it is noteworthy what the fourth-century church actually did. The controversy was long and protracted, but I believe (and my current scholarly research will eventually seek to show) that the reason for the drawn-out controversy was more political than doctrinal, more terminological than substantive. Apart from a small number of “Arians,” there was, I believe, a substantial consensus among the whole church virtually the whole time. That consensus, which admittedly took some 50 years to become universally recognized, was that as congenial as it was in the Greek thought world to speak of God as “Unoriginate” and of Jesus as “Word,” such language was not acceptable without extensive explanation to counter the mistaken ideas embodied in the Neoplatonic trinity. The overwhelming sentiment was that

“Father” was vastly to be preferred to “Unoriginate,” and the biblical word “Word” had to be used hand-in-hand with the biblical word “Son.”

Why? Why did the church make a decision that seemed to handcuff its evangelistic efforts by burning bridges instead of building them? The answer, in short, is that the church fathers believed that Father/Son language was fundamental to the gospel and had to be preserved at all costs. More specifically, the church fathers recognized that being Father was more fundamental to what it meant to be God than being Creator was. For example, although Athanasius of Alexandria often referred to Jesus as the “Word” or “Wisdom” of God (cf. the title of his most famous work, *On the Incarnation of the Word*), his most common way of referring to him was as “Son.” In *Against the Arians* (written in the late 330s as the Arian controversy began to heat up), Athanasius asserts:

It would be more pious and true to indicate God from the Son and to call him Father than to name him from works alone and to say that he is unoriginated. For as I have said, this term individually and collectively indicates all things which have come into existence at the will of God through the Word, but “Father” is indicated and determined only by the Son. The more the Word differs from originated things, so much more would the statement that God is “Father” differ from the statement that he is “unoriginated.”<sup>5</sup>

We see here that the title “Father” is more fundamental to who God is than “unoriginate” precisely because his loving relationship to his Son is prior to and more basic than his general relationship to all that he has made. Shortly after this, Athanasius continues: “‘Unoriginated’ was discovered by the Greeks, who do not know the Son. But ‘Father’ was known to our Lord, and he rejoiced in it.”<sup>6</sup> Then he goes on to quote John 10:30 and 14:9-10, showing Jesus’ use of the word “Father” to refer to God, and Matt. 6:9 and 28:19, indicating that we are to call God

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<sup>5</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, bk. 1, chap. 34 [William Rusch, ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 96-7. Cf. *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, chaps. 30-1 [Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers (available in many printed and electronic editions), second series, vol. 4, p. 171].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

“Father” in prayer and to be baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Notice that calling God “Father” preserves not only his unique relationship to his Son (in distinction from all created things), but also the relationship he has with believers (in distinction from the rest of humanity). Jesus is God’s Son in a unique way; we are God’s sons and daughters in a derivative way. In both of these cases, the fact that God is “Father” is more fundamental to who he is than his general role as unoriginate Creator with respect to all originate things.

This is the sort of reasoning that led the church fathers to recognize that Father/Son language could not be revised without compromising the gospel and thus that it had to be retained as the central linguistic rubric for describing God. But with this decision came the urgent need to explain the Father/Son language in a non-procreative, non-temporal way. The church’s solution to this problem was to assert that for God, who is non-sexual and outside of time, begetting is different from the way it is for people. We beget in time through sexual intercourse, but God begets non-physically and eternally. In other words, to say that the Son is eternally begotten from the Father is to say that he has always been in a relationship as Son to Father. There was no time when he did not exist, and no time when he was not in that relationship. Around the year 350, Cyril of Jerusalem explains to candidates for baptism:

There is one God, who is unique, unbegotten, without beginning or change or alteration. He was not begotten by another, and has no one who will succeed to his life. He did not begin his life in time, nor will he ever end it.... Though Creator of many beings, he is the eternal Father of one alone, his one, Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom he made all things, both visible and invisible.... Believe too in God’s one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God begotten by God, Life begotten by Life, Light begotten by Light, like in everything to the one who begot him. He did not begin to be in time, but was begotten by the Father before all ages, eternally and inconceivably. He is God’s Wisdom and Power and Justice in substantial form.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 4, pars. 6-7 [*Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Edward Yarnold, *The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 98-9].

Later he explains the begetting of the Son more fully: “Do not conceive the begetting anthropomorphically, as for example Abraham begot Isaac... For God was not originally childless before becoming a father. He always had his Son, for he begot him not after the human fashion, but in a unique way before all ages, begetting him as ‘true God.’”<sup>8</sup>

In order to make the Son’s eternality even clearer, the church fathers also explained that with God, “unbegotten” and “unoriginate” are not synonyms. Father and Son are both unoriginate; both have always existed. Yet of the two, only the Father is unbegotten, because the Son is his *Son*, and thus begotten. (Of course, the Holy Spirit is unbegotten as well, since he is Spirit and not Son. The early church spoke of the Spirit’s relation to the Father by saying the Spirit “proceeds” from him and thus that the Father “spirates” the Spirit.) The Son is not another Father or a Brother to God. In the year 380, just before the Second Ecumenical Council that ratified the Nicene Creed, Gregory of Nazianzus explains this most clearly by responding to the question of whether anyone can be a father without beginning to be one. He states: “Yes, one who did not begin his existence. What begins to exist begins to be a father. *He* did not begin to be Father—he did not begin at all. He is “Father” in the true sense, because he is not a son as well. Just as the Son is “Son” in the true sense, because he is not a father as well.”<sup>9</sup> Here Gregory indicates that the concepts of fatherhood and sonship apply to God and Jesus in a greater way than they do to us, because (in contrast to all human fathers) God is Father without first having been a son, and (in contrast to most human sons) Jesus is Son without ever becoming a father. Since God exists apart from the constraints of time, he does not “become.” (Keep in mind here that we are talking about God’s life in eternity. God’s actions take place in time and space, and

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, *Catechesis* 11, par. 8 [Yarnold, p. 132].

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 29, par. 5 [St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, trans. Lionel Wickham, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), p. 73].

the incarnation was an action of God by which the Son began to exist in time, as a human being, while still existing eternally as God's Son. I'll say more about this later.) Therefore, the Father is always Father and never becomes Son. Likewise, the Son is always Son and never becomes Father. The eternal relationship of Father to Son is intrinsic to what it means to be God, and indeed human fatherhood and sonship are partial reflections in time and space of the archetypal relationship that has always existed between God and Jesus outside of time and space.

These passages are only a few of *many* illustrations one could bring forth from the fourth-century church to show that the Father-Son relationship is the centerpiece of the Christian understanding of God. Jesus makes this relationship the center of the Upper Room Discourse and the High Priestly Prayer, and the church fathers follow him in making this the center of their understanding of God and the archetype for understanding our relationship to God. As awkward as the concept of "eternal begetting" was, as prone to misunderstanding as it may have been, as offensive as it was to the Greek philosophical mind, the early church nevertheless insisted that the language of "Father" and "Son" had to be retained, and thus had to be explained as well as possible.

But once again, we must remember that what the church fathers did and said is not necessarily normative for us. They were not necessarily right, no matter how strongly they felt about this issue or how persuasively they argued their case. In fact, today it is very common in scholarly circles to argue that the church of the fourth century was too philosophical, too "Hellenized," and thus that its understanding of God departed from the Hebraic roots of the gospel and the Scriptures. This claim that the fourth-century church was "radically Hellenized" was most famously put forth by Adolf van Harnack about 120 years ago, and scholars since Harnack's time have often expressed concurring opinions. While the question of Hellenic and

Hebraic influences on the church fathers is admittedly a complicated one, what I have already said today should be enough to show that this interpretation is not accurate. The church's insistence on Father/Son language certainly did not grow out of a Hellenic philosophical mindset, because such language was an embarrassment to the Neoplatonic philosophers. Likewise, the church's insistence that the Son is an eternal *person*, in relationship to the Father, was an embarrassment to the philosophical minds of the day, since Greek philosophy's concept of god was impersonal. If the church had said that the Word (as an impersonal hypostasis or "aspect" of God) was personalized in the man Jesus, that claim would have made much more sense and been much more acceptable to the philosophical minds of the time. Yet even though saying *that* would have made it much easier for people in the surrounding culture to accept the church's message, nevertheless the church resoundingly rejected that view. Instead, the church said that Jesus was and is in an eternal relationship to God as Son to Father. Why? Because they believed the Scriptures and the Christian message demanded that they say this.

Do the same Scriptures demand that we retain this Father-Son relationship at the heart of our proclamation, however hard this may be for the audiences around us to understand? Do we need to translate the words "Father" and "Son" with their common language equivalents? Are the potential misunderstandings inherent in using such language less severe and more easily corrected than the potential misunderstandings that would come with using words other than the common language equivalents? The practice of the fourth-century church in a situation with some noteworthy parallels to our situation suggests that the answer to these questions should be "yes."

### 3) The Early Church's Linking of Jesus' Sonship to Our Sonship/Daughtership<sup>10</sup>

We have seen that the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son is the archetype and basis for believers' own relationship to God as his children. In the fourth century, the church fathers thought carefully about and articulated very clearly both the similarities and the differences between Jesus' sonship and ours. Once again, I could give many illustrations of their reasoning, but on this point I think it would be helpful to follow the argument of a single church father. About the year 350, Cyril of Jerusalem gave a series of catechetical lectures (from which I have already quoted above) to candidates for baptism. In the eleventh and twelfth of these lectures, he focuses on the relationship between Christ and Christians. Cyril declares: "Once more, when I tell you that he is the Son, do not take this statement to be a mere figure of speech, but understand that he is the Son truly, Son by nature, without beginning, not promoted from the state of slave to that of son, but eternally begotten as Son by an inscrutable and incomprehensible birth."<sup>11</sup> A bit later, he speaks of the way in which those who are about to be baptized are going to be become sons:

You are becoming sons by grace and adoption, according to the scriptural statement: "As many as received him, he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were begotten not of blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1.12-13); we are begotten of water and the Spirit (cf. Jn 3.5). But the begetting of Christ by the Father was not like this. For when the Father addressed him at the moment of his baptism, saying: "This is my Son," he did not say, "This has now become my Son," but "This is my Son," because he wanted to show that he was already the Son before he had received the effect of his baptism.<sup>12</sup>

Here we see that Cyril stresses the distinction between being Son by nature and being sons/daughters by grace and adoption. When Cyril and the other church fathers refer to Jesus as

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<sup>10</sup> The theological issues I discuss in this section are the subject of my book *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: University Press, 2003). That book deals mainly with the fifth century rather than the fourth.

<sup>11</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 11, par. 4 [Yarnold, p. 130].

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, *Catechesis* 11, par. 9 [Yarnold, p. 132]

“Son by nature,” or “natural Son,” what they mean is not that he was son because of natural processes (that is, sexual intercourse), but that he is the Son who shares the same nature as the Father. As I mentioned in my first talk, the divine nature or substance was understood as the set of characteristics that define what it means to be God (omniscience, omnipotence, perfect love, etc.). To say that Jesus is Son by nature is to say that he possesses the same set of characteristics (what western theology would later call “attributes”) as the Father, and therefore he is the same God as the Father, even though he is distinct as a different person. With that background in mind, Cyril’s comments make perfect sense: eternity is a characteristic of God, and so for the Son to have the same nature as the Father means (among other things) that he is eternal. Thus, his begetting is eternal, and outside of time: he has always been the Father’s Son. In contrast, we *become* sons and daughters of God. We are adopted in time into a participation in the relationship that Jesus has eternally had with his Father.

In the next catechetical lecture, Cyril explains the incarnation as an action of God’s Son by which our adopted sonship is made possible. He says to the candidates for baptism: “Let us celebrate the God who was conceived by the Virgin.... For if Christ were God—as indeed he is—but did not assume humanity, we would be debarred from salvation. So while we adore him as God, let us believe him also to have been made man.”<sup>13</sup> A bit later, he continues:

For errors of the heretics take many different forms: some flatly deny that he was born of a virgin; others say that he was born not of a virgin but of a woman living with a man; others again say that Christ was not God made man, but a man who became God. For they have dared to say that he was not the pre-existent Word who became man, [but] a man who was promoted and crowned. Remember what we said yesterday [in the previous lecture] about his divinity. You must accept that, being God’s Only-begotten Son, he underwent birth again of the Virgin.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., *Catechesis* 12.1 [Yarnold, p. 140].

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., *Catechesis* 12, par. 3-4 [Yarnold, p. 141].

The phrase “birth again” is disconcerting to us, but it was a crucial phrase for the church fathers. The first birth or first begetting (“begetting” and “birth” are the same word in Greek) was the eternal begetting of the Son outside of time—in other words, the fact that he had always been the Father’s Son, as Cyril makes clear. The second birth is the human birth of the Son, from Mary, in time, in order that he might be fully human. This human birth of the eternal Son is the link between his sonship and ours. After the incarnation, God the Son is now human as well as divine, and he lives in a human way as well as the divine way he has always lived.

The *human life* of God’s Son, and especially the human *death* of God’s Son, are the means by which he makes believers his adopted brothers and sisters, and thus adopted sons and daughters of his Father. Earlier in the *Catechetical Lectures*, Cyril has explained this:

You must believe too that this Only-begotten Son of God came down from heaven to earth because of our sins, assumed a humanity subject to the same feelings as ours, and was born of the holy Virgin and the Holy Spirit. The humanity he assumed was not an appearance or an illusion, but true. He did not pass through the virgin as if through a pipe, but truly took flesh from her and was truly nourished by her milk. For if the Incarnation was an illusion, so too is our salvation. Christ was twofold: man according to visible appearance, but God according to what was not visible. As man he ate truly as we do, for he had the same fleshly feelings as ourselves; but it was as God that he fed the five thousand from five loaves. As man he truly died; but it was as God that he raised the dead body to life after four days. As man he truly slept on the boat; but it was as God that he walked on the waters.<sup>15</sup>

Here, notice how strongly Cyril stresses the genuineness of Jesus’ humanity, and equally significant, the fact that this humanity came from Mary herself. His humanity was not a phantom or a bit of cosmic play acting. He was genuinely human and experienced the joys, sorrows, and temptations of human life. But the person who underwent these human experiences (including death) was God the Son. This is the truth that the phrase “double birth of the Son” was designed to emphasize.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Catechesis 4, par. 9 [Yarnold, p. 100, translation slightly modified].

In affirming this, the early church was rejecting an understanding of Jesus in which he was a man who was endowed with special grace from God, a man in whom God's power or "word" (considered as a quality of God) dwelt so that he could rise up to some sort of "sonship" with God. Instead, the church fathers insisted, he had always been the Son of God, an eternal person in relationship to his Father. Rejecting this view of Jesus went hand-in-hand with rejecting a view of salvation in which we receive grace from God so that we may follow Jesus in rising up to God. In sharp contrast to such an idea, the way the church read the Bible was to say that we could not rise up to God, so God had to come down to us. Thus, the Son himself became fully human (in effect, becoming our brother in terms of his humanity), so that we could be adopted as his brothers and sisters and thus become children of his Father. As the Nicene Creed so eloquently puts it, Jesus Christ is the one who was "*begotten from the Father before all ages,*" "true God from true God," and "*begotten, not made,*" yet who "for us men and for our salvation *came down* from heaven and was incarnated from the Holy Spirit and Mary the virgin, and was *made man*" (my translation and emphasis).

Once again, we see that as the early church understood it, Father/Son language was central to the entire economy of salvation. But of course, we must recognize yet again that the early church was not necessarily right. Scholars can, and many scholars do, reject some of the central features of the church fathers' theology. But here we should note that modern rejections of the church fathers' thought is not just a matter of our re-connecting with the Hebraic roots of the gospel, in contrast to a distorted "Greek" understanding of it. At heart, much modern interpretation of Scripture has grown out of an overall view of Jesus and of our salvation very similar to what the early church was *fighting*, and thus very different from what the early church was affirming. Especially in the nineteenth century, modern readings of Scripture were based on

the assumption that the Christ of the church was not the real, historical Jesus, and that the historical Jesus was a man with a special connection to God, who could be our paradigm for our own development of a connection to God, our own march upward toward God. It was and is argued that Jesus was a man who became divine, just as we are men and women who can become divine in some sense. Such a radical shift in the understanding of the big picture required a thorough re-interpretation of the individual passages, and this re-interpretation was forthcoming in some scholarly circles in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As conservative Christians, we reject the overall view of salvation that modern scholarship has adhered to. But because we often work exegetically in the realm of the narrow, we may not always notice the overall framework that undergirds mainstream interpretation of individual passages. Interpretations that grow out of what we insist is a flawed framework may seem plausible when considered in isolation. But the church fathers' steadfast focus on the big picture can help to remind us that we need to remember the big picture as well. At heart, the Bible and the Christian faith are telling us that human beings cannot rise up to God, and so we need a "Savior" who is more than just a leader showing us the way to God, more than just a Messiah/King to rule over us. We need God himself to come down to us. The persons of the Trinity are co-eternal, co-equal, and in eternal fellowship with one another, and therefore the persons who have come down (the Son at the incarnation and the Spirit at Pentecost) were and are truly divine, truly equal to the Father. The individual passages of Scripture are consistent with this overall message, and therefore, keeping this overall message in mind will help to guide us in our readings of the individual passages. By helping us to see more clearly the overall message of Scripture—the Son's (and the Spirit's) eternal relationship to the Father, and our relationship to God as an image of the Son's relationship—the fourth-century church can guide

our interpretation, and thus prevent us from unwittingly accepting interpretations (and translations) of individual passages that seem plausible but may undermine this central message.

In our MIT discussions, some have argued that the consensus of conservative biblical scholars is that “Son of God” sometimes means something other than “eternal, unique Son to the Father.” Others have insisted that this is not the consensus at all. Even if this *is* the consensus of conservative biblical scholars, it is still worth raising the question of whether we ever want to render “Son of God” with words other than the common language equivalents. I have already claimed that even when (or if) “Son” does not *mean* “eternal second Person of the Trinity,” the word still refers to the One who is the eternal second Person of the Trinity.” At this point, I can add the claim that the word “Son” is a marker that points to a whole complex of ideas related to God, humanity, and salvation. Can we remove that marker anywhere without the risk of pointing to a different conception of Jesus’ relationship to God, and thus a different conception of our relationship to God?

#### **4) Conclusions**

In my first talk, I argued from Jesus’ own words in John 13-17 that the truths enshrined in the phrases “my Father” and “our Father” are central to the Christian gospel. In this second talk, I have argued that the early church had opportunities to avoid certain misconceptions and to build bridges with its surrounding culture by adopting categories for speaking of God other than “Father” and “Son.” The church fathers refused to adopt these other categories (or, when they did use words like “Word,” they balanced them with “Son”), because they believed that only Father/Son language did full justice to the heart of the Christian faith.

Is such Father/Son language deeply offensive to Muslims? Yes it is, in ways that those who work directly with Muslims know far better than I do. But remember that Father/Son

language has also been and still is deeply offensive to many others besides Muslims, for various reasons. Most obviously, it was deeply offensive to the Jewish audience of Jesus' ministry, and yet Jesus used such language, as did the New Testament writers. This language was deeply offensive to Greek intellectuals influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy, and yet the church used it nonetheless. It is deeply offensive to all whose concept of "god" is impersonal or non-relational. (Hindus and Buddhists come to mind here.) Even in the west, it is deeply offensive to the many people whose concept of "fatherhood" is shaped by human fathers who have not loved them, who have neglected them, who have abused them. But precisely because this language causes so much offense, it also has the capacity to expose and correct our human notions of what it means to be "God," to expand and redeem our human notions of fatherhood, to point to that which Christianity uniquely offers to the world. As I mentioned briefly at the conclusion of my first talk, the differences between Christianity and Islam do not consist merely in the fact that Christianity offers a different *means* of salvation. Much more fundamental than this is the fact that Christianity offers a different *kind* of salvation. Allah, as Muslims conceive him, can have no son. Correspondingly, he cannot really have personal relationships, and his followers are not (and do not consider themselves to be) in anything like what we call a personal relationship to him. Allah has nothing personal or relational to *offer* his subjects. But the true God, the God of the Bible, offers us not merely servant-status, but actual relationship as sons/daughters, as friends. Indeed, the very names for the two religions make this clear. "Muslims" are those who submit to Allah, and Islam is "submission" pure and simple. But although submission to Christ is very important to Christianity, "Christians" are more foundationally "the Christ ones," the ones who are related to Christ in a way that derives from his own relationship to God the Father. This is a fundamentally different approach to the Divine, a fundamentally different approach to

salvation, than Islam or any other religion offers. And one of the ways the Bible proclaims this kind of salvation to us is through the words “Father” and “Son.” Is there *any* biblical passage using these words in which this kind of salvation is not hinted at, not pointed to, not marked out at least indirectly? Is there any passage in which we can be so sure that the Holy Spirit meant something else that it is worth breaking the link between that passage and other passages by translating with a word or phrase other than the common language equivalent to father” and “son”?

Another way of looking at this is to ask what we would gain—and what we would lose—by translating “Son of God” *in some passages* with words other than the common language equivalent. In order the possibility of any misunderstandings along procreative lines, we would likely have to translate *all* of the Father/Son language in a different way. I have suggested that doing that is simply not an option. If we must use common language equivalents to “Father” and “Son” in the most theologically significant passages, then what would it accomplish to use other language in a few places? My hunch is that we would gain very little.

On the other hand, what would we lose by sometimes translating “Son of God” language with words other than the common language equivalents? We would lose some of the markers by which the Bible points to its central affirmation, that Jesus is the Father’s eternal Son. Even if we can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that in some passages “Son of God” means something other than this, nevertheless in those passages the language of “Son” *still* points to other passages in which “Son” bears this significance. Do we really want to remove such markers from the translated Bible?