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CHAPTER ONE
TWO IDENTITIES

What does the Bible mean when it calls Jesus “the Son of God”?

Oh, no! Is this gonna be one those boring, hairsplitting theological exercises?

Actually, no.

In fact, if you will take this little journey with me to its end, I assure you the rewards will be rich. You may even find yourself deeply moved by the beauty of God’s character and awestruck by the utter genius of the biblical narrative. Even if you find the above question boring at first glance, I promise you our time together will not be boring in the least.

First of all, you should be aware that this question has challenged Bible students for nearly two thousand years. It’s not an easy nut to crack. Scholars have been endlessly intrigued and baffled by the topic. And it’s easy to see why. On the rather compelling premise that Scripture calls Christ “the Son of God,” various groups have arisen throughout church history insisting that He could not, while bearing a title like that, preexist without a point of beginning, nor could He eternally coexist alongside the God whose “Son” He is. Logic, they insist, precludes a *son* from chronologically coexisting concurrent with a *father*.

You can hardly blame them.

Our normal understanding of “son” includes the idea of birth, and Jesus is said in Scripture to be “begotten” or birthed. Naturally, then, to be a “son” suggests a point of origin and a point of beginning. Since Jesus is called God’s “Son,” doesn’t it follow that He must have been generated from God and, therefore, had a starting point as a distinct person from the Father?

Certainly, there is logic to the perspective.

So I want to say to those who take this view, you will find no disrespectful or dismissive attitude from me. I affirm you for being studious and for using your brain. As Galileo once said, “I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.” You have simply attempted to be logical and consistent, and I commend you for that.

But on the premise of your honesty and logic, I am asking that you take a serious look at what we will explore on the topic, because I think you will find the perspective in this book to be profoundly convincing. I will make the bold claim, in fact, that what we are about to discover is so obviously the truth regarding the Sonship of Christ, that once you see it, you won’t be able to unsee it. I realize this is a lot for this little book to live up to, but please allow me to give it my best shot by taking the journey with me to the last page. And whatever you do, do not jump ahead. Take the material in its order, because, in our treatment of

the topic, one piece of the picture is vital to the next, and the next, and so on, to the end.

No matter who you are or what position you have taken on the Sonship of Christ, you have no doubt felt the tension and complexity involved in trying to make sense out of two apparently contradictory claims in Scripture.

On the one hand, the Bible calls Jesus God's "only begotten Son" (John 3:16) and describes Him as occupying a subordinate position under the Father (John 14:28; 1 Corinthians 15:27-28).

On the other hand, Scripture also states that Jesus is "in very nature God," insisting that He shares "equality with God" (Philippians 2:5-6) and that He is the One who "made" all things that are "made," placing Him, by contrast, in the *unmade* category (John 1:1-3). He is even called "the everlasting Father" (Isaiah 9:6, KJV), the eternal "I AM" (Exodus 3:14; John 8:58), and "the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8).

The tension between the two identities is immediately apparent.

The solution needs to be consistent with both of these claims . . .

and worthy of our wonder.

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CHAPTER TWO
**READING SCRIPTURE
ON ITS OWN TERMS**

I'm going to suggest that the reason we struggle to make sense of the Sonship of Christ is due to a selective and narrow reading of Scripture that ignores the overall storyline of the book. Not that anyone intends to read the Bible selectively or with a narrow focus. It's just that most Christians have been taught to handle Scripture as a doctrinal textbook, with the assumption that it basically operates like an encyclopedia from which to compose a collection of theological propositions. So we don't really read the Bible, *per se*, but rather we tend to comb its pages searching for verses, sentences, even partial sentences and isolated words, and we then assemble the disjointed mass of "verses" into topical categories from which we compose "beliefs."

The Bible writers themselves seem to know nothing of this topical framing of truth. It is apparently foreign to the ancient Hebrew way of processing reality. They, by contrast, see and convey the truth in the form of poetry and song, symbol and story—mostly story, since even the poems, songs, and symbols are enlisted to tell the story.

When the Bible is studied in a proof-text manner that overlooks context, it is possible, of course, to harness its many "verses" to formulate just about any "doctrine" a person is inclined to believe. Bible study, with this approach, is a rather subjective exercise in which I look for "verses" to support a premise that I usually bring to the Bible—and, no surprise, I find the support I'm looking for.

Using the proof-text approach to Scripture, we can easily, and with good intention, take hold of the word “son” as it occurs in reference to Jesus and then proceed to reason, quite apart from the biblical narrative, that He must have emerged from God sometime, long, long ago. The “Son of God” cannot be God in the same eternal sense that the “Father” is, we reason, or else He would not be called “the Son.”

Then, in order to deal with the other “verses” that present Jesus as God, we are obliged to venture into more philosophical, abstract explanations that Scripture itself does not offer. We say things along the line of, “Yes, Jesus always existed *in* the Father before He was brought forth *from* the Father, so He wasn’t *created by* the Father, but rather *emerged from* the Father.” And we feel like we’ve said something meaningful and deep, although we don’t really have any idea what we’ve said and we know the Bible, of course, says no such thing. But when we use a proof-text method that is not careful to notice context, we have no choice but to fill in the gaps with speculations that are not inherent to the text. In other words, we have to make stuff up.

Of course, we can’t blame people for trying to make sense of difficult language. Operating within the proof-text methodology, focusing on a few trees while failing to see the whole forest, it really is quite challenging to make heads or tails out of “God” being “begotten” as “God’s Son.” So we either downplay or over interpret the verses

that don't fit. Those who take the opposing view generally respond by assembling their own list of verses and offering their own strained interpretations. So we end up stranded on a proof-text impasse, my chosen texts against yours and yours against mine.

But there is a solution, and it is very clearly seen to be *the* solution once we engage with it and see where it leads:

Read the Bible.

The whole thing.

On its own terms.

When we read the Bible as an unfolding narrative—as the big story it actually is—with key characters played out in an overarching, intentional plot line, the meaning of the Sonship of Christ becomes unmistakably evident. In other words, if we really want to understand the sense in which Jesus is the Son of God, we need to pan out from our selected verses to take in the grand historical tale the prophets are telling.

When in doubt, pan out.

And when we do that—wow!—a whole new world of biblical understanding opens before us, and there is no need for strained interpretations. We just see it. The story

tells us the truth in ways that micromanaging individual verses never can.

So let's do just that. Let's read the Bible on its own terms and see where it leads.

This is going to be exciting.