



# The Sonship of Jesus

By: David Ervin

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Son of God. That is precisely the question that D. A. Carson explores in his book, *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed*. This paper is a brief review of my impressions of the book.

Carson begins by explaining that the title "son of God" in scripture is not at all unique to Jesus. Many persons are referred to in this way. Angels are called sons of God (Job 1:6). Israel is called God's son (Hosea 11:1). A person who is a peacemaker is called a son of God (Matthew 5:9). While these forms of sonship are inferior to the sonship of Jesus, they all share a common trait that sheds light upon what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. All of them connote something or someone acting like God.

In order to illustrate that concept, Carson shows that in antiquity the father-son relationship was intimately connected to one's vocation. In the ancient world, nobody asked little boys, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" That would have been a silly question because every boy knew that he would be exactly what his father was. If your father is a farmer, then you will be a farmer. If your father is a blacksmith, then you will be a blacksmith, and so on. This vocation-father-son connection is so close in antiquity that it became an axiom that describes who you are, so then what a man *does* indicates who his father is. If then you are a worthless man, then you must be the son of worthlessness. If you do the work of Satan, then your father must be the Devil (John 8:44).

Likewise, when anyone becomes a peacemaker they enter into God's vocation, and therefore are the sons of God. So then "son of God" in one sense, is when someone or something imitates what God is like.

This vocation theme terminates and finds its pinnacle in Jesus who exhaustively and perfectly imitates the Father in all ways: "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19).<sup>1</sup> And again Jesus says, "The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:20). Like an apprentice son in Joseph's carpenter shop, Jesus entered into his heavenly Father's business. By all that he does (from the creation of the universe to the giving and sustaining of life) Jesus perfectly reflects the Father's work in a way that no one else can. This makes Jesus' sonship unique and superior. As John Piper states, "There is the Son, by eternal generation, and there are other "sons" by adoption."<sup>2</sup> Others become sons of God when they begin to imitate the work of God. Jesus, however, does not become the Son of God at the incarnation. He has always been the Son by nature, and has eternally entered into the Father's work by doing all that pleases him (John 8:29).

Carson expends a good deal of ink threshing out other sonship themes in scripture that terminate on Jesus. Israel is called the son of God; Jesus is the personification of the true Israel (Matthew 2:15). The Davidic dynasty is called God's son (2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7); Jesus is the ultimate Davidic King who rules in perfect righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture is from the New International Version (Zondervan Publishing Company, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, Rev. ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2000), p. 32.

Sonship also connotes something derived or begotten. Carson treads carefully here so that we do not end up with a created, contingent Christ. I found his exegesis of John 5:26 helpful, "As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself." Carson is quick to show that this is an *eternal* grant. The Father has from all eternity generated the Son, so that John Calvin could rightly say, "Everything that can be ascribed to the Father, the Son correctly claims for himself."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the book concludes with an application to the recent debate over whether "Son of God" should be substituted in Bible translations where the primary target audience is Muslim. Because this is a commonly misunderstood and often offensive concept to the Muslim mind, some have argued to remove (what they believe is) an unneeded barrier by replacing the phrase with a more culturally sensitive alternative.<sup>4</sup>

Carson responds to this issue by pointing out that many idioms in scripture can be substituted for the sake of fluency with little loss. "Son of a bow" for example, can be replaced with "arrow" (Job 41:28). But can we do with "Son of God" what we can do with "son of a bow"? "Son of a bow" does not carry with it massive theological themes and so its loss is not a big problem. However, the term "Son of God" is a theme that is heavily woven throughout the pages of scripture. It is a concept that is developed along several different lines of thought which all terminate in Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *John*, ed. Alister McGrath, and J.I. Packer (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 135.

<sup>4</sup>Rick Brown, et al., "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 28, no. 3 (2011): 105-120.

The term is so laden with theological connections throughout scripture that its loss would be enormous were it substituted. What's more, Son of God can never mean to *any* culture all that Jesus meant by it. As Carson notes:

This is not a mere translational matter. No language, no culture, means by “Son” what Jesus means in John 5—yet “Son” is the category Jesus uses, even though nothing in English, or Urdu, or Arabic, prepares us for a Son of God whose relationship with the Father is anything like what the text describes.<sup>5</sup>

Carson argues that Christians in every culture must wrestle with this important concept and should not be shielded from it. With that, I say a hearty “amen.”

The book is kind of brief so I found myself hungry for more at the end, but there was much in this short volume for my mind to chew on. And what better to contemplate for the delight and nourishment of my soul than Jesus the Son of God?

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<sup>5</sup>D. A. Carson, *Jesus the Son of God: A Christological Title Often Overlooked, Sometimes Misunderstood, and Currently Disputed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012), p. 103.

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