

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son

By Terry Hill

Within Seventh-day Adventism today there is an ongoing controversy over whether Christ really is the Son of God. This little article serves to shed some light on the subject. Jesus said

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

Jesus told Nicodemus that God “gave” His Son. This is the everlasting gospel. If God did not possess a son then He would not have had a son to give. It must follow therefore that Christ was God’s “only begotten Son” before He came to earth. Ellen White commented

“Jesus unfolded before this noble Pharisee [Nicodemus] the whole plan of salvation, and his mission to the world. In none of his subsequent discourses did the Saviour explain so thoroughly, step by step, the work necessary to be done in the human heart, if it would inherit the kingdom of Heaven. He traced man's salvation directly to the love of the Father, which led him to give his Son unto death that man might be saved.” (Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, 15th November 1883, 'The all-important lesson')

If the Father did not have a Son to give then this ‘giving of a Son’ is nothing more than divine play-acting. In fact it could even be called a lie. According to Jesus, also to what is said here by Ellen White, it was God the Father who had the prerogative of deciding whether or not Christ should come to earth. It was therefore the Father’s ultimate decision that His Son should be allowed to become the ‘sacrificial lamb’ to make the atonement for mankind. The reality of the Father-Son relationship is borne out by these words

“Said the angel, "Think ye that the Father yielded up His dearly beloved Son without a struggle? No, no." It was even a struggle with the God of heaven, whether to let guilty man perish, or to give His darling Son to die for them.” (Early Writings, supplement, page 127, see also Volume 1 *Spiritual Gifts* page 26, *Early Writings*, spiritual gifts page 151 and *Spirit of prophecy* Volume 1 page 48)

It is no wonder that the same author was led to write

“O how wonderful, how almost incredible it is, that the infinite God would consent to the humiliation of his own dear Son!” (Ellen G. White, *Christian education*, page 107 'The book of books', 1893)

That God gave His Son as a sacrifice for sin is the core-belief of Christianity. Without this belief, Christianity is meaningless. It is therefore a subject that not only demands our fullest attention but also needs great care when being presented. To get it wrong will pervert the gospel. A correct understanding of the atonement is totally dependent on a correct understanding of the relationship between God the Father and His Son.

Those who teach that Christ is not really the Son of God are perverting what it cost God in redeeming mankind from sin. They are also perverting, in the minds of those who believe what they say, the love that God has for humanity. The apostle Paul wrote

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:” Romans 8:3

“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” Romans 8:32

When expressing this great truth to his little flock, John the gospel writer put it this way

“Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” 1 John 4:7-11

It is only when we realize that God really did give His Son that we can say we truly understand the gospel. Any other understanding of it is a perversion. In order to make manifest God’s love in the way that we treat others we need to correctly understand what God has done through His Son. It is only when we see the ‘other person’ (whoever that may be) as someone purchased by the blood of God’s only begotten Son that we are able to treat that person as they should be treated. Christ died for everyone. He did not die only for those who will be saved. We must regard everyone as the purchase of God. There are no exceptions. John also wrote

“Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?...He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” 1 John 5:5, 10-11

Begotten in the express image of God’s person

The Scriptures also tell us

“For it pleased the Father that in him [in Christ] should all fulness dwell; Colossians” 1:19

This is referring to the fullness of deity. As it says in Colossians 2:9

“For in him [in Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”

The Scriptures tell us that it was God’s pleasure to have His fullness dwell in the Son. Christ therefore was God Himself (the fullness of deity) in the person of the Son (John 1:1-3, Hebrews 1:1-3). This was Christ’s inheritance as a son. As a son He received (inherited) all things from His father (God the Father). As we are told in the opening verses of the book of Hebrews

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, **and the express image of his person**, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high:” Hebrews 1:1-3

Prior to coming to earth, Christ existed as the divine Son of God. He therefore existed in eternity as the “**express image**” of His Father’s “**person**”. This did not take place at His birth in Bethlehem as a baby, neither did it first happen at His resurrection. He was already the “**express image**” of God’s person prior to the incarnation.

All of this is made clear to us through the spirit of prophecy. In 1895 Ellen White wrote

“A complete offering has been made; for “God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son,”-- not a son by creation, as were the angels, nor a son by adoption, as is the forgiven sinner, **but a Son begotten in the express image of the Father's person**, and in all the brightness of his majesty and glory, one equal with God in authority, dignity, and divine perfection. In him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” (*Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 30th May 1895, ‘Christ our complete salvation’*)

Take particular notice here of the three acts of God. These are creating, adopting and begetting. They are three different actions. Each of these words used here by Ellen White are verbs. Verbs are ‘doing’ or ‘action’ words. They denote activity. This is as opposed to adjectives (describing words) and nouns (naming words). Here Ellen White uses the word “**begotten**” as a verb.

God’s messenger said that angels are sons of God by creation whilst forgiven sinners become sons of God by adoption. In contrast to this she tells us that Christ is a son because He was “**begotten in the express image of the Father's person**”. This must be in eternity.

This was exactly the same as was believed and taught by Seventh-day Adventists throughout the entire time of Ellen White’s ministry. Her statement therefore was confirming Seventh-day Adventists in their begotten (Sonship) belief. This is why two years earlier she had this to say (this was when a schoolteacher accused SDA’s of not teaching that Christ is divine)

“This man may not have known what our faith is on this point, but he was not left in ignorance. He was informed that **there is not a people on earth who hold more firmly to the truth of Christ's pre-existence than do Seventh-day Adventists.**” (*Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, 5th December 1893, ‘An appeal for the Australasian field’*)

Allow yourself to meditate here upon what was said by God’s servant. Read it again if necessary. Her words are crystal clear. Ellen White is unmistakably stating that concerning Christ’s pre-existence, the belief of Seventh-day Adventists (meaning that in eternity He was begotten of the Father) is “**the truth**”.

It should not need emphasising that concerning Christ (or anything else for that matter), Ellen White knew exactly what Seventh-day Adventists were teaching. It would be ridiculous to reason otherwise. Never once though did she say that this begotten belief was error. In our quest for the truth, this fact should be regarded as of major significance. It was this begotten faith that Ellen White was here endorsing as “the truth of Christ's pre-existence”.

This same belief was held by SDA's not only up to when she died but also for decades afterwards. In fact in 1936, by the General Conference, it was said to be the official faith of Seventh-day Adventists. You can read about this here

The Official 1936 official beliefs of SDA's

Six weeks after she had said that Christ is “a son begotten in the express image of the father's person” (see above), the same writer penned these words

““The Eternal Father, the unchangeable one, gave his only begotten Son, tore from his bosom Him who was made in the express image of his person, and sent him down to earth to reveal how greatly he loved mankind.” (Ellen G. White, *Review & Herald* 9th July 1895 ‘The Duty of the Minister and the People’)

Notice here the sequence of events. It says that Christ was first “made” in the image of the Father's person and then “sent” down to earth. It is just as though she was confirming her statement of 6 weeks previous. How can it be misunderstood?

In the 30th May 1895 statement we are told that Christ is “a Son *begotten* in the express image of the Father's person” whilst in the latter it says that Christ “was made in the express image of his [the Father's] person”. This shows that Ellen White regarded “begotten” as the same as “made” (but not created or adopted). Nowhere in Scripture or the spirit of prophecy are we told *how* Christ was begotten but the words spoken here certainly denote action.

This shows too that it was PRIOR to coming to earth that Christ existed as the “express image” of God's person. This means He was “begotten” in God's “express image” prior to both the virgin birth and the resurrection. As Ellen White explained

“Before Christ came in the likeness of men, he existed in the express image of his Father. He thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Nevertheless he voluntarily emptied himself, and took the form of a servant. He was the incarnate God, the light of heaven and earth. In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Ellen G. White, *Youth's Instructor*, December 20th 1900”)

There are many statements from the spirit of prophecy (far too many to quote here) saying exactly the same thing. Here are a few.

“The apostle now would call our attention from ourselves to the Author of our salvation. He presents before us His two natures, divine and human. Here is the description of the divine, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. He was the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person. Now of the human: He was made in the likeness of man and found Himself in fashion as a man. He was in all things like unto us. He voluntarily

assumed human nature.” (Ellen G. White, Letter 11 1887, See also Review and Herald July 5th 1877, also Review and Herald September 4th 1900, also MS 141 1901)

From this we can see that Christ being “the express image” of His Father’s person had nothing to do with Christ’s humanity (the incarnation). In other words, it had nothing to do with Christ’s birth at Bethlehem or His resurrection. As Ellen White made clear, it pertains to His divinity (His divine status). This begetting in God’s image must have happened in eternity. It certainly did not happen here on earth. To dispute this we would need to disbelieve what we are told through the Scripture and the spirit of prophecy.

Again Ellen White wrote

“The love of God, manifested toward fallen man in the gift of his beloved Son, amazed the holy angels. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” The Son was the brightness of the Father’s glory, and the express image of his person. He possessed divine excellence and greatness. He was equal with God. It pleased the Father that in him all fullness should dwell. He “thought it not robbery to be equal with God.” Yet he “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Ellen G. White, Review and Herald December 31st 1872, see also Testimonies Volume 2 page 200, also Spirit of Prophecy, Volume 2 page 38, also Bible Echo January 1st 1877)

As previously stated, Ellen White wrote in numerous places that prior to the incarnation Christ was in the express image of God’s person. Another such example is

“Christ was the Father’s “appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.” He was the “brightness of his glory, the express image of his person.” And he upheld “all things by the word of his power.” He possessed divine excellency and greatness. It pleased the Father that in him all fullness should dwell. And Christ “thought it not robbery to be equal with God.”” (Signs of the Times, February 20th 1893, see also Bible Echo July 15, 1893)

This tells us that Christ was God’s “appointed heir” through whom He made all things (see Hebrews 1:1-3, John 1:1-3, Ephesians 3:9). A “heir” is someone who receives things by inheritance. Christ received all things from the Father. This was His inheritance as the Son of God. All of this mentioned here by Ellen White pertained to Christ’s divine pre-existence.

Here is a really interesting statement

“The Son of God was next in authority to the great Lawgiver. He knew that his life alone could be sufficient to ransom fallen man. He was of as much more value than man as his noble, spotless character, and exalted office as commander of all the heavenly host, were above the work of man. He was in the express image of his Father, not in features alone, but in perfection of character.” (Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, December 17th 1872, ‘The first Advent of Christ’, see also Spirit of Prophecy Volume 2 page 9)

No one would ever dream of saying that Christ was not the express image of God's character but here we are told that He was also in the express image of His Father's "features". This therefore is how Christ was (as Ellen White said above) when He was "begotten in the express image of the Father's person" in eternity (prior to coming to earth). How impossible this would be if applied to the baby Jesus born of Mary.

All of the above is summarised in this one statement

"Christ is the express image of His Father's person, and the angels could see in the Son a perfect representation of God." (Ellen G. White, Letter 55 1903 to John Harvey Kellogg, 15th April 1903}

We have seen that this begetting of the Son, in the express image of God's person, made the divine Son of God a "perfect representation of God". He is in fact, because He is begotten of God, God in the person of the Son (John 1:1). This is why He was equal with God (Philippians 2:5-8)

Satan does not want us to see that Christ really is God's only-begotten Son. He will go to any length to obscure it. This is because it tells us of God's love in giving His Son. As Ellen White explained

"Satan is determined that men shall not see the love of God, which led him to give his only begotten Son to save the lost race; for it is the goodness of God that leads men to repentance." (Ellen White, Review and Herald, 20th March 1894, 'Christ the center of the message')

The question is: why do Satan and his followers do this? It is because

"The contemplation of the love of God, manifested in the gift of his Son for the salvation of fallen men, will stir the heart and arouse the powers of the soul as nothing else will." (Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, January 7th 1890, 'Christ revealed the Father')

It is the belief that God really did give His Son that brings about conversion (John 3:16, Romans 8:3, 32). This is why it is Satan's aim to pervert this life-changing truth.

An ongoing deception

The deception that Christ is not really the Son of God did not begin here on earth. It began in Heaven itself. The Scriptures tell of a war in Heaven (Revelation 12:7). With regards to this warfare, Ellen White was given a very precious insight. We should not overlook it. She wrote

"Christ was the only begotten Son of God, and Lucifer, that glorious angel, got up a warfare over the matter, until he had to be thrust down to the earth." (Ellen G. White, Sermon, Berkeley California, August 21st 1910)

So what was the problem?

"This fact the [fallen] angels would obscure, that Christ was the only begotten Son of God, and they came to consider that they were not to consult Christ. One angel began the controversy and carried it on until there was rebellion in the heavenly

courts among the angels.” (Ellen G. White, Letter 42, 1910, to D. A. Parsons, April 29th 1910)

In consequence of what was being done by the fallen angels, we are told of the work of the unfallen angels

“They [the unfallen angels] clearly set forth that **Jesus was the Son of God, existing with him before the angels were created**; and that he had ever stood at the right hand of God, and his mild, loving authority had not heretofore been questioned; and that he had given no commands but what it was joy for the heavenly host to execute.” (Ellen G. White, Signs of the Times, 9th January 1879, ‘The fall of Satan’, see also Spirit of Prophecy Volume 1 page 17, ‘The Fall of Satan’)

This controversy (between good and evil) is still being carried on today. Satan has brought it down to earth. His first challenge to Christ in the wilderness was “If thou be the Son of God” (see Matthew 4:3, 6, Luke 4:3, 9 etc.)

The Jews understood perfectly who Christ was claiming to be. This is why they condemned Him. It is why they said He deserved to die (John 19:7). They said that by claiming to be the Son of God He was committing blasphemy (John 10:36). They said He was making Himself equal with God (John 5:18).

If you begin to doubt that Christ really is the Son of God then remember the gospel spoken by Jesus Himself

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

As Christ also led Ellen White to say at the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference session

“It is true that **God gave his only begotten Son to die for us**, to suffer the penalty of the [broken] law of God. We are to consider this and dwell upon it. And when our minds are constantly dwelling upon the matchless love of God to the fallen race, we begin to know God, to become acquainted with Him, to have a knowledge of God and how Jesus Christ, when He came to our world, laid aside His royal robes and His kingly crown and clothed His divinity with humanity. For our sakes He became poor that we through His poverty might be made rich. **The Father sent His Son here**, and right here on this little atom of a world were enacted the grandest scenes that were ever known to humanity.” (Ellen G. White, Sermon, Minneapolis, October 13th 1888, ‘Tell of God’s love and power’, Ms 7 1888)

God bless you as you think upon these things

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