

A Matter of Concern

Doctrinal Orthodoxy and the Writings of
John MacArthur

Critically Reviewed
by
Paul Fahy

Part Three

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person of Christ

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This is the most serious area that we will examine, it is the denial of the eternal generation of Christ. This question has been raised with JMcA before, but his rebuttals of the charge of heresy have left more questions than answers.

The problem first came to light in JMcA's commentary on Hebrews. In this he makes a number of serious statements regarding the eternal sonship of Christ. Some sample quotes will suffice.

- *Son is an incarnational title of Christ as God's incarnate Son (p27).*
- *He did not receive the title of Son until He was begotten into time (p27).*
- *The term Son has only to do with Jesus Christ in His incarnation (p27).*
- *The Bible nowhere speaks about the eternal sonship of Christ (p27).*
- *He had not always had the title of Son. That is his incarnational title ...this is an extremely important point (p28).*
- *Just as you and I become sons of God in the fullest sense not by being born once but by being born twice, so Jesus Christ became Son in the fullest sense by being born not once but twice (i.e. referring to the resurrection, p29).*
- *He became the Son for our sake (p29).*
- *It is only at the second coming that the fulness of the prophecy, **And let all the angels of God worship Him**, will come to pass (p31).*

(Emphasis original)

If JMcA's argument is true, God only becomes the Father at the incarnation.

Even the Jews who rejected Christ's messiahship knew about the Father and understood that Jesus equated himself with God by calling himself God's son. Where did they get this idea from if it only happened at the incarnation, an incarnation the Jews rejected?

Now to be fair to JMCA he now qualifies these statements as we shall see. But remember, this is a widely sold book; it has been edited by JMCA's theologian colleague; and he states that the subject is "an extremely important point", i.e. one which he has considered for some time and now brings to our attention as a vital truth. In fact, the idea is heresy.

When JMCA spoke at the FIEC conference in Caister in April 1997, he was interviewed by Jonathan Stephen regarding this issue. Extracts were published in *Evangelical Times* for November 1997. JMCA made the following statements:

- *I did a very inept job of articulating what I meant.*

But it is not inept. His manner of communication is repetitive and effective. Over several pages he makes his point clear, and even tells us it is "extremely important", the fruit of considered thinking. Saying it was inept is an insufficient excuse.

- *I did not articulate that as appropriately as I should ... and it did raise some unnecessary questions.*

And later: *It left a wrong impression.*

Of course it did because the statements are erroneous. It wasn't the poor articulation which caused the problem. This sounds like sophistry, the difficulty is what he actually said as the fruit of consideration, which he considered important. The problem has nothing to do with impressions and vocabulary. He argues his point in page after page.

- JMCA says, *The same question could be asked about the title 'Lamb of God' - is that an eternal title of Jesus Christ or is it a title related or connected to the work that he did in his incarnation. And there are many other titles, many other references to the 'Messiah', 'Rose of Sharon', 'Lily of the Valley'.*

Firstly this is not comparing like with like. "Lily of the Valley" is not equivalent with Christ's title as the Son of God. Secondly, scripture explains the confines of these names. "Lamb of God" for instance, appears to have been a description given to Christ from eternity due to his agreement in the covenant of redemption in eternity, to die for his people (Rev 5:13; 7:9-17; 13:8, 14:10; 19:7; 21:23; 22:1-3).

- JMCA tries to allay fears about his doctrinal orthodoxy by saying that he is: *comfortable with saying that he is eternally the Son of God, that, Jesus Christ*

is eternally deity. He then explains that what he meant, in his commentary on Hebrews, was that Christ, entered into the fullest expression of what that Sonship, or that service to the Father indicated.

But that is not what he is at great pains to state in the commentary. He labours the point that the title "Son" only occurred at the incarnation. That it is not an eternal title. This is crystal clear. JMcA can only get away with his excuse because the audience would not have had his commentary open before them. But he also, here, begins to elucidate another problem. Does JMcA believe that Christ is co-equal with the Father?

- He goes on to say: *There is a certain servitude that the second member of the trinity, the Son of God, offered to the Father, even in the Old Testament... submission is implied [in the titles 'angel of the Lord' and 'servant of the Lord'] it is obvious to me that the Son, the second member of the trinity, took on a subservient role to the purposes of the Father in the redemptive history. He emphasises this by pointing out that the two "servant" titles appear frequently in the OT but "Son" arises only twice. In his summing up he explains: He is eternally the Son of God, in the sense that his identification, his essence, his deity and his relationship to the Father never changes. But the fulness of what that title explains, which is submission, is expressed redemptively in the incarnation.*

JMcA seems to believe that Christ is eternally related to the Father, but only in a subservient role. He never uses the term "co-equal" or even "equal" in the interview.

It is of first importance in theology, that Jesus is co-equal with the Father. This question of equality caused considerable controversy in the early church until it was resolved by the Council of Nicea (325 AD) which declared Christ to be: co-equal, consubstantial and co-eternal with the Father. The Westminster Confession states that Christ is "eternally begotten of the Father" (2.3). Christ is, "very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father" (8.2). Christ took on humanity at the incarnation but not Sonship.

Yet JMcA says: *Son is an anthropomorphic expression ... in the actual reality of the eternal trinity, Father and Son aren't the same as they are to us because they talk about generation and The Father did not generate the Son.*

We know JMcA's final position because his recent study Bible tells us Christ's sonship is: A relationship **planned** in eternity past but only **realised** in the incarnation. (Notes on Ps 27, emphasis mine.) Sonship is: A title expressing ... voluntary submission ... for the purpose of fulfilling the program of redemption... God's Son was born in a point **of time** ... at His incarnation. (Notes on Heb 1:5.)

So JMcA does not believe that Christ is eternally begotten of the Father. He

is not the eternal Son really, it is a title that helps us understand his subservience in the Godhead. He fails to understand that a subordination of function (as redeemer) is not a subservience of essence. He also looks at eternal generation in a human way, failing to understand that Christ as eternally begotten cannot be understood that way, it cannot be compared with human generation. Generation is not merely for the purpose of performing the atonement, but is an essential part of God, possibly, as Augustine suggested, to facilitate the pure self love within the Godhead. It does not imply that there was a time when the Son “was not” (Arianism), and a time when the Son appeared. It is about the distinction of persons and the relationship of the persons in the Godhead. It is the rôle of the Son to make God known (Jn 1:18), whether as the angel of the Lord, the servant of the Lord, or as the saviour of the elect. The function of the Son is God as self-revealer. “God sent his only son into the world that we might live through him” (1 Jn 4:9).

So JMcA has departed from traditional orthodoxy, but then goes even further by emphasising Christ's inferiority to the Father. Christ is not subservient, he is co-equal. His role as a servant is a picture for us to understand his willingness to suffer as our saviour. He covenanted with the Father to perform an atonement which required him willingly to lay down his divine prerogatives in order to rescue his people. This is not a “certain servitude” in the Trinity as JMcA propounds. The Trinity is a place of co-equality. Redemption is where specific functions of the members of the Godhead become a highlighted feature for us. Sonship does not imply qualitative subservience. Jesus' service to God, as seen in the incarnation, is by his choice as a man to perform God's will. John's Gospel explains that even Christ's sonship still expressed oneness with the Father (Jn 4:34; 5:19, 30; 6:38; 7:28; 8:42; 10:28-30; 13:3; 14:10; 16:32). JMcA teaches that the incarnation was *the fullest expression of what that Sonship, or that service to the Father, indicated*. In other words, Christ's subservience began before the incarnation, as JMcA has already made clear.

A word from the theologian R. L. Dabney is apposite here, especially as JMcA is fond of quoting Dabney approvingly. In his *Discussions*, Dabney takes issue with the erroneous ideas of Alexander Campbell. One of Campbell's ideas was exactly what JMcA proposes, which Dabney summarises as: “*While he admits an eternal personal relation between the Father and the Son, he denies that it is one of eternal generation. The second Person, according to him, is Son only as incarnate.*”¹ Dabney refutes this error on the following basis: scripture has chosen the words “The Father” and “The Son” specifically to express the relationship between

¹ R.L. Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol. 1, Banner of Truth, (1967) p.331. Curiously, JMcA has quoted a passage only a few pages earlier in this book to support an argument in his own book *The Love of God*. Presuming he has read Dabney and not just been given the quote by a researcher, JMcA must be aware of Dabney's condemnation of exactly the teaching which he espouses.

them which corresponds to our understanding of these terms. In passages such as Matt 11:27, 28:19; Lk 10:22; Jn 5:22, 10:33-37; Rm 8:32, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that "Son" is reciprocal to "Father". If paternity is characteristic of God the Father, then filiation is characteristic of Christ. If God is eternally "Father", then Jesus is eternally "Son".

A final point regards the strange idea that the angels of God will only worship Jesus after the second coming. This seems to be resultant from his Dispensational theology which teaches that Jesus is not Lord now, but only becomes sovereign in the millennium. He posits that angels have insufficient understanding to worship Christ before that time. He compares this lack of knowledge with that of the prophets who did not fully understand their messianic prophecies.

What can we say about this? To say that I'm stunned by it would be an understatement. To compare the knowledge of godly men, in the dispensation of shadows, with that of angels living in the presence of God, an environment clearer than ours, even with our knowledge of God's word and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, is staggering. I'm tempted to say to JMcA, "Are you serious?" It is such a foolish statement that I cannot believe he wrote it. However, the Dispensational scheme, once followed, leads to such absurdities. Folk who superficially accept it's teaching often study little and fail to notice it's contradictions. Teachers, however, are forced to encounter problems and are thus led to either abandon such unbiblical views (as many have) or adopt increasingly absurd conclusions. There are multiple examples of this in Dispensational writings. One obvious example would be Dake's claim that God has a physical body, resulting from his consistent literal hermeneutical application. Others are less consistent. Rev 5:11-14 shows us clearly that angels worship Christ, and this passage is before the second coming, even by JMcA's own Dispensational reckoning.

Interim Conclusion

JMcA's statements appear to be confused and confusing. He tries to say two things at once and it is hard to pin down what he really means. Remember the interview is JMcA's great opportunity to clarify his position. We must presume that JMcA knew about this interview, having agreed to do it, and must have had some time to gather his thoughts, at least. It is his chance to clear the matter up, to clarify the previous "misunderstanding". The impression one is left with is that JMcA's ordered, rational and clear statements in his commentary on Hebrews are what he really thinks, and that the interview was a bungled attempt to shut the door after the horse has bolted.

His new study Bible also gave him the opportunity to correct any misunderstandings due to poor expression in his commentary on Hebrews. In fact the state-

ments there undergird JMcA's wrong position. He believes that Jesus only became God's son at the incarnation. This was planned in eternity but was only actualised in time. Sonship is not a constituent of the Godhead, further, Christ's current sonship emphasises a position of subservience to the Father.² This implies inequality, but in JMcA's confused and contradictory expressions it's hard to be sure if he means an essential subservience. Certainly, some of his statements imply this. In one place he states that Jesus is only a son in time and that this necessitates subservience. In another he states that subservience is not restricted to sonship, but also the titles of "servant" and "angel" of the the Lord, and the subservience began before the incarnation. Yet again he says that Christ's sonship is eternal but that this doesn't mean generation, it's only anthropomorphic, a picture not a reality. Then in his study Bible he explains that the sonship was only planned in eternity, but not actualised until the incarnation.

JMcA has studied the doctrine of eternal generation because he mentions it in his interview. Surely he must understand that he departs from Reformed orthodoxy here. From eternity there is something answering to filiation in Christ and paternity in God the Father. This does not require that Christ was begotten at some point in time or even that there was a specific point in eternity when the Son was not. From eternity, part of God has always been "Father" and part has always been "Son". There is no Biblical basis for believing that the Son only arose at Bethlehem. What was Christ before that time? Campbell called his pre-incarnate existence "the Word", but that does not do justice to God as Father from eternity. Surely JMcA should just come clean and say that he doesn't understand this doctrine; the only alternative is that he does not believe in Christ's eternal sonship, but doesn't want the church to know this.

Dissembling

Now this title may seem inflammatory, but I really don't know what else to call it. If a godly man is called to account for an error, he should know that the best thing to do is to bring as much light onto the situation as possible. If a teacher writes something erroneous, when given the opportunity he should explain the situation, take advice and correct what's necessary. I'm glad that JMcA expressed such a desire in the interview. He recognised the need to change a position that is seen to be wrong. This is laudable, we all make many mistakes.

The problem is that JMcA did not do this when given the opportunity at Caister. This we have seen, it only caused more confusion. Furthermore, his study Bible published several months later, seemed to turn some of his verbal statements

² See *The MacArthur Study Bible*, notes on Ps 2 and Heb 1.

upside down. Why did he not stick to what he believes as stated in the study Bible. Could it be that he did not want to draw attention to them because they would be seen to be heterodox?

What is more concerning is that I have also come across two godly men who have written to JMcA regarding his error in the matter of eternal sonship. They did not get replies. Now JMcA has a large supportive organisation. Even if he could not write back, someone could, even if it was just a holding reply. Why has no one done this?

CONCLUSION

I said that I was sad to undertake this study, in completing it I am more so. The more I read JMcA's study Bible, the more I am amazed by it's contents. There are many truly appalling comments which totally cut across the grain of Reformed scholarship. This is such a wasted opportunity as the overall design, page layouts, historical and archaeological data, and many of the academic notes are better than other available study Bibles.

I started this study to investigate some concerns about JMcA's ministry. The more I delved, the more I am disturbed. I now believe that his study Bible will do great damage to injudicious readers. The attractive and effective design will disguise some truly dangerous notes. Time after time JMcA is guilty of eisegesis, he constantly reads his presuppositions into scripture. Not only that, but notes on his pet Dispensational subjects amass large areas of the page, frequently swamping the scripture text. Many sound folk buying this Study Bible as the product of sound Reformed scholarship are going to be thoroughly disappointed or very confused depending upon their doctrinal perceptions. This is worsened by the typical cover credits saying: *'It is simply the finest study Bible in existence'* (R. Kent Hughes), *'a reliable voice and a diligent student of scripture'* (Max Lucado). The liner notes even state that *'unlike "past classics" burdened by outdated theological systems, The MacArthur Study Bible strives to let the systems go and allow the Word of God to speak'*. That is exactly what it does not do. It is the voice of Dispensationalism throughout, mixed with some very confused comments on key doctrines which spoil some otherwise excellent notes and graphics.

APPENDIX

As JMcA includes appendices from worthy preachers to support his position, and since one focuses particularly upon the first epistle of St. John, I deemed it necessary to show that this epistle, far from supporting JMcA's case, actually speaks against it.

Particular Love in 1 Jn. 4

Some have taught that because John here portrays Jesus as the saviour of the world (v14), and because he repeatedly talks about the love of God in this letter, then the love of God, referred to, is applicable to all men. Some boldly state that God, therefore, loves evil men, loves wicked sinners, and loves the non elect.³

This is a serious matter because scripture repeatedly informs us that God does not love the wicked, in fact it states over and over again that he hates the wicked.⁴ Even John's Gospel says that sinners do not have the love of God in them (Jn 5:42) and are condemned already (Jn 3:18,36). Either John's letter is in complete contradiction to these statements or these teachers have misunderstood John's meaning. What is this key chapter in John's letter really saying?

Firstly, John has in mind two sets of people. He introduces chapter 4 by explaining the need to judge false prophets who have arisen in the church, we must test the spirits. After this John distinguishes between those who are of God and those who are not:

*v6 We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.*⁵

The thought of *us* and *them* is then carried on throughout the passage. There are those that love God and those that do not:

7 Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.

8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

The love of God is directed to the elect, the *us*:

9 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.

10 Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

What could be clearer? The love of God is directed to a certain group identified as *us*. The *us* that John refers to are those that know Jesus Christ as the propitiation of their sins. The effect of God's love results in the giving of Jesus for atonement. God's love is seen to be upon those whose sin is dealt with. John emphasises this by saying, '*herein is love ... propitiation for sin*'. Those whom God sets his love upon are those who have sins cleansed and put away. You cannot know God's love

³ For instance see John MacArthur Jr, *The Love Of God*.

⁴ Cf.: Ps 5:4-5, 11:5-6, 34:21, 37:20; Prov 3:33; Mal 1:2-3; Rm 9:11-13 etc.

⁵ Quotes are from the King James Version.

and not be delivered from sin.

Another test of seeing where God's love is directed is to see who is reflecting that love to others. Those loved by God are of one family. Those in the family love all the members in it because they share the same root - the love of God. God's love is upon his family and they love each other because God has loved them first.

11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

12 No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

John moves on to another distinctive of those loved by God, they dwell in Him because they share His Spirit:

13 Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.

Those whom God loves are those who dwell in Him and those who have His Spirit.

It is only after all these distinguishing marks are explained that John states that *we* (i.e. the *us* we saw earlier, the family of God, the elect) see Jesus as the saviour of the world.

14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.

As in his Gospel, John has in mind here the effect of Jesus as saviour upon the world - to draw out a world of believing people. He is not the saviour of everyone in the earth or everyone would be saved. He comes to the world as a saviour, his role in coming is that of saviour, and then he rescues his people from their sins.

But then John draws further marks to distinguish the elect, those who dwell in God. They also confess Jesus to be God's Son.

15 Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

They have also believed in God:

16 And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

Again John states that it is a certain group, it is *we*, not all men, who know this love of God. Only those who dwell in God can know God's love. The elect are united with God.

John concludes his logic, in this chapter, by drawing to a climax.

The end result of knowing the love of God is that we can have boldness and no fear on the day of judgment. Receiving God's love destroys all fear of condemnation. If you know that you are in God's family, you will not fear his actions as a

judge to his enemies.

17 Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.

18 There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.

19 We love him, because he first loved us.

John then draws all this out in practical application. Those who do not love other believers cannot be true Christians and cannot love God. God's love cannot be upon such people according to John's earlier statements.

20 If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?

21 And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.

I trust that this shows that a careful analysis of what John actually says in this chapter indicates that John teaches that God's love is only shared with a certain group. This group consists of those who: love God, love their brethren, dwell in God, have had their sin propitiated, are heard by God, confess Jesus to be God's Son, have received His Spirit, have believed in God and are assured of no condemnation on the day of judgment. Far from teaching that God's love is given to sinners, to all men indiscriminately, God's love is particular; it is only towards the elect and its end is to truly save to the uttermost.

Concluded.

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Understanding Ministries 60 Washington Street BRIGHTON BN2 2SR

**But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
is all one:
the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal.**

Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreated: the Son uncreated: the Holy Ghost uncreated.

The Father infinite: the Son infinite: and the Holy Ghost infinite.

**The Father ETERNAL: the Son ETERNAL: and the Holy Ghost
ETERNAL.**

Excerpts from the Athanasian Creed, 4th - 5th Century AD.