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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE SUPREME CLAIM

“He said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.”¹

THE Fifth Chapter of John’s Gospel contains the fullest and most explicit declaration of Christ’s Divine Sonship which He Himself ever made to men. The occasion which drew it from His lips was the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda. This miracle was performed on the Sabbath, and the Jews were so indignant at what they regarded as a breach of the Fourth Commandment that they sought to kill Him. Our Lord defended His action by appealing to the example of His Father. “My Father worketh hitherto,” He said, “and I work.” The meaning of these words is unmistakably plain. God entered into rest on the Seventh day when He had finished the work of Creation, but that rest did not imply inactivity. His energies have been flowing forth in a ceaseless stream since then in His government of the world. His work of Creation has been succeeded by His works of Providence. Throughout the ages He has been upholding all things by His power, guiding the planets in their course, and, down on this earth, preserving and directing the lives of men, giving them the rains and the fruitful seasons and filling their hearts with food and gladness. And all those activities—none the less real because in the main they are noiseless in their exercise and so unfailing in their recurrence as to be invested with the character of immutable laws—are being carried through on Sabbath days as surely as on week days. It was on this fact that Christ based His own justification for having performed a work of healing on the Sabbath. But when He appealed to His Father’s example He advanced by implication a claim which His enemies were not slow to recognize. They were filled with a still more intense indignation when they realized that He had “said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God”. In their eyes He had invaded not only the sanctity of the Sabbath but the prerogatives of Deity. They were certainly right in the construction which they put on His words. In that single sentence the Supreme Claim of Jesus is clearly set forth.

¹ John v. 18.

In the discourse which follows¹ He proceeds to show that that claim was well founded. It may be profitable for us to consider :

I.—THE MANNER IN WHICH THE CLAIM IS PRESENTED.²

It is not always by means of direct assertion that Jesus claims to be the Son of God. Seldom, indeed, did men hear His voice in the streets proclaiming His Supreme Deity. Frequently the claim is implicit in His words and actions, although it is not specifically set forth. We arrive at the truth by the pathway of inferences which we are left to draw, rather than of affirmations which we are asked to accept. One of the most beautiful of these indirect evidences is contained in the parable of the wicked husbandmen,³ where, after the servants had one by one failed in their mission, the Lord of the Vineyard—by whom is obviously meant God the Father—is represented as saying, “What shall I do ? I will send my beloved Son : it may be they will reverence Him when they see Him.” The distinction drawn in the parable between the servants and the Son marks the gulf which separates the highest of the prophets from the Lord Jesus Christ, and the reception given by the husbandmen to the Son when He came is a prophecy of Calvary. So also the invitations and promises of Christ, which at first glance seem to unfold only the riches of His grace, will be found on closer examination to imply the Divine-ness of His glory.⁴

A striking instance of this undesigned form of proof occurs in the very passage we are now considering. The Jews, as we have seen, were wroth with Christ because He had made Himself “equal with God”. What was His attitude to this apparently reasonable protest ? Did He hasten to say, “Stop ; you have put a wrong construction on my words ; I never meant them to be understood in that sense ; I make no claim to equality with God.” That would be the reply of every sane human being, however exalted among his fellows. But it was not the reply of Jesus. He quietly accepted the conclusion which they drew from His reference to His Father, and then, as has already been said, proceeded to show that in “making Himself equal with God” He was not stretching out His hand, in daring presumption,

¹ John v. 19-47.

² John v. 19-30.

³ Luke xx. 9-18.

⁴ Cf. Matt. xi. 27 ; John vii. 37, 38. This theme is worked out with convincing force in a little volume entitled *The Divine Glory of Christ*, written by Dr. Charles Brown, an eminent Edinburgh preacher of a former generation.

to grasp at honours which were not His by inherent and inalienable right. In doing so He bears "witness of Himself" in a series of definite affirmations.

The words in which Jesus proclaims His own eternal Sonship are deep beyond our searching out. They confront us with truths so profound that we can only accept them in humble reverence, believing where we cannot fully understand. We must remember also that they are forms of expression which are derived from human relationships, and these can do little more than enable us to see "through a glass darkly" the mystery of the being of God. Christ makes mention of three facts bearing upon His relation to the Father, which establish His claim to be equal with God.

(1) *Harmony of will, issuing in unity of action.* "The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do."¹ This restriction does not imply limitation of resources, as the words appear to suggest. Rather do they indicate perfect harmony of mind and purpose. In human life a pupil may say, "I can do nothing of myself; I am under tutors and governors, who correct my mistakes, and quicken my intelligence, until one day I shall reach the stage of thinking and acting for myself." A servant in using the same words indicates that he is under the authority of his master, doing simply what he is told, with little or no right of individual initiative. But it is not this idea of personal subordination that underlies the expression as applied by our Lord to Himself. Here at any rate He is speaking not primarily as the servant of the Father, but as His Son—although it must be added that in some of His statements in this discourse the ministerial and the strictly filial relationships appear to be intermingled. The fact which He declares in this particular utterance is that He knows the Father's will with a perfect understanding; that this knowledge implies a mutual agreement in purpose; and that this agreement, in turn, means that He "can do nothing of Himself" *along the line of independent action.* This co-operative harmony, again, must be rooted in identity of nature.

(2) *Equality of Power, both in range and in achievement.* "What things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise."² What finite mind can compass the sweep of the Father's power? Instinctively we form our conception of it in terms of

¹ John v. 19.

² John v. 19.

the material universe. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and He created them by the *word* of His power. We look up unto the heavens, and our imagination fails us when we seek to realize that, beyond our farthest ken, there are millions of millions of stars that are strewn across their immeasurable spaces. And that same power is exercised, and needs to be exercised, in the spiritual life of men. It is the God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, that shines in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ.¹ The primeval miracle of creation is repeated day by day in the new creation of human souls. And what things soever the Father can do, these Christ can do also, both in the physical and in the spiritual domain. His power reaches to the uttermost extent of His Father's might. In human life, however, one man may do all things that his neighbour can do, but that does not necessarily imply that the two stand on the same plane of achievement, for the first man may not be able to do the "all things" equally well. There is equality of range, but inferiority of execution. It is in this connection that the word "likewise" used by Jesus reveals its significance. It means more than "also", and tells us that "what things soever the Father doeth", these Christ does *in like manner*—with the same majesty, and ease, and grace, and perfection.

(3) *Perfection of Love, resulting in fulness of Knowledge.* "The Father loveth the Son, and showeth Him all things that Himself doeth."² How shall we speak of the love of the Father to His only begotten Son—a love that pours forth its treasures in infinite gladness on Another who is worthy of it all, and who is able both to receive and to return it in fullest measure? In this perfect communion lies, we must believe, the infinite joy that dwells everlastingly in the heart of the Triune God. "No small part of the eternal blessedness of the holy God," says John Owen in his massive treatise on *The Person of Christ*, "consisteth in the mutual love of the Father and the Son by the Spirit. As He is the only-begotten of the Father, He is the first, necessary, adequate, complete object of the whole love of the Father. In Him was the ineffable, eternal, unchangeable delight and complacency of the Father, as the full object of His love. The same is expressed in that description of Him, 'the only-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father.'"

¹ 2 Cor. iv. 6.

² John v. 20.

Such a love knows no reserve. The Father "showeth all things" to the Son because He loves Him. The language used is again derived from the facts of human life. It is in the intimacies of mutual love among men that the secrets of the heart are most fully disclosed. In their application to God the words imply that the knowledge of the Son is co-extensive with that of the Father. There is no length or breadth or depth or height of attainment to which it does not reach. From all eternity the Son had access to the profoundest counsels of the Father's will.

Let us take all those facts together, and can we fail to see that they set forth a claim to Divine Sonship on the part of Jesus Christ? And shall we not assent to that claim in the familiar words which express the homage of all believing hearts: "Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ; Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father"?

II.—THE EVIDENCE BY WHICH THE CLAIM IS SUPPORTED.¹
 In the words which we have considered, Christ is presenting a claim on His own behalf. But with regard to that personal testimony, He makes the startling assertion, "If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true."² Once more He is using words which are borrowed from human custom. According to the standards which are observed in this world a man's judgment of himself is not considered adequate unless it is confirmed by reliable corroborative testimony. Jesus accommodates His language and His method to this common practice, and proceeds to substantiate His personal claim by external evidence. So He brings forward a number of witnesses—four in all—to support His own assertions.

(1) *The first is John the Baptist.*³ "Ye sent unto John", He says, "and he bare witness unto the truth." The words refer to the interview between the Baptist and the emissaries who were sent from Jerusalem by the Jews to ask him who he was,⁴ for so profound was the impression that his majestic personality had made on the people that they "mingled his name with naming of the Lord". It was on that occasion in particular that John "bare witness unto the truth". First of all he denied that he was the Christ; he was merely, he said, a voice crying in the wilderness, a man with a mission to "make straight the

¹ John v. 31-39.

² John v. 31.

³ John v. 32-35.

⁴ John i. 19-34.

way of the Lord". Then he paid tribute to the unique pre-eminence of this greater One of whose coming he was the herald. "He it is", he declared, "who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." On the following day John bore an even more striking testimony: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon Him . . . and"—for this was the sign by which the forerunner was to recognize his Master—"I bare record that this is the Son of God." This was the evidence borne by the man who had been Divinely commissioned to prepare the way for Christ.

Now the credibility of any witness depends on his personal character. What kind of man, then, was the Baptist? Jesus himself tells us. "He was a burning and a shining light"—a lamp that flamed with the very light of God, "burning" in sincerity, "shining" in purity. That strange, almost wild figure that appeared in the wilderness of Judea, clad in the rough garments of the prophet, living on such food as lay about him in the desert, denouncing with passionate vehemence the ungodliness of men, tearing aside the rags of their hypocrisy, and sparing none, whether high or low—this second Elijah, who was well-nigh consumed with the fire of his own zeal, was held in universal esteem as a prophet of God.¹ For a season at least the people rejoiced in his light² and testified that his witness concerning Jesus was true.³ John, beyond question, was a man whose character authenticated his message.

John, than which man a grander or a greater
Not till this day has been of woman born,
John like some iron peak by the Creator
Fired with the red glow of the rushing morn.

This, then, the first of Christ's witnesses, bore record that He was the Son of God. But in the very midst of so lofty a tribute to His forerunner, our Lord disavowed any kind of dependence on human evidence. "I receive not testimony from man"⁴ He declared, in the quiet assurance of conscious Deity. It was as if He had said, "You do not need the light of a candle to behold the glory of the Sun." Jesus was meek and lowly in heart, but He knew His own worth.

(2) *The second is provided by the mighty works which He performed.*⁵ In recent years there has been a tendency on the part

¹ Matt. xiv. 5.

² John v. 35.

³ John x. 41.

⁴ John v. 34.

⁵ John v. 35.

of many scholars to disparage the evidential value of Christ's miracles. The old way of putting it, that through His miracles our Lord "toll'd the great bell of the universe which summoned men to listen to His sermon," is accepted by these writers only in an attenuated sense. There can be little doubt that this attitude can be traced to the challenge which is offered by the modern mind to the supernatural character of most, if not all, of those works of power. Some of them at least, we are told, did not happen; the record which declares that they did happen is simply not true. With regard to others, especially the miracles of healing, explanations are given which ascribe them to psychological influences, or to even more mysterious psychic powers which Jesus is assumed to have possessed in a pre-eminent degree. Such explanations, however, are but the devices of a scepticism which has the effect, if not the design, of eliminating from the works of Christ those elements which could justly lay claim to a miraculous character. In any case it has to be recognized that it is in this lack of hospitality to the idea of the supernatural that the modern belittling of the apologetic value of miracle has its roots.

But among the witnesses to which He appeals in support of His Supreme Claim, Christ assigns a high place to His miracles.¹ Their evidence, He declares, is of even greater value than that of John.² And remembering the character both of the deeds and of the Doer of them, this is only what we should expect; for Christ and His miracles authenticate each other. They were works of power, which did not always require for their performance a co-operative faith on the part of those whom they benefited. This is particularly true of the "nature" miracles and of at least one work of healing.³ They were also works of mercy—the blighting of the barren fig-tree not excepted, for through it the withering of an inanimate object conveyed a warning of judgment to an unbelieving and unfruitful generation. And at the same time they were signs, which had the effect of attesting the Divineness of Christ's Person and mission, even when their direct purpose was the deliverance of men from physical or spiritual evil. The greatest sign of all—specifically designated as such by

¹ This fact does not appear to receive due recognition even by Principal D. S. Cairns in his original and penetrating study of this subject, when he affirms that the evidential purpose of our Lord's miracles "is a meaning imposed upon the New Testament by a supposed apologetic necessity".—*The Faith that Rebels*, p. 36.

² John v. 36.

³ Luke xxii. 51.

Christ Himself, in response to the reiterated appeals of His enemies—was His rising again from the dead. And before the fact of the empty Tomb the explanations of rationalistic criticism fall to the ground. He who was “made of the seed of David according to the flesh” was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead”.¹ And to this final attestation the other signs add their own contribution.

(3) *The third witness is the Father Himself.*² In His secret consciousness, Jesus of course had the continuous testimony of His Father throughout all the days of His flesh. The Spirit who dwelt in Him in immeasurable fulness bore witness with His spirit that He was the Son of God. But the words “hath borne” point to some definite public occasion. The Transfiguration was still in the future, and so was the experience which followed the request of the Greeks.³ We must therefore conclude that the reference is to Christ’s Baptism at the commencement of His public ministry. In connection with that event the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended upon Him, “and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”⁴ Whether this testimony was heard by those who stood about Him on the banks of the Jordan, or whether it was audible to Jesus alone, is uncertain. The words, “Ye have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His shape,” appear to favour the latter alternative, but they are not altogether conclusive, for at the Transfiguration, at least, the three chosen disciples heard the voice “from the excellent glory”.⁵ In any case we can realize how fitting it was that in the hour when He was formally putting His hand to the work of a Servant, He should receive from Heaven the public recognition of a Son.

(4) *The final witness is found in the Scriptures.*⁶ “They are they which testify of Me”, our Lord declared. From the beginning to the end “in the volume of the Book it is written” of the coming Messiah. Moses spoke of Him. The Psalms are full of Him. The great theme of the Prophets was “the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow”.⁷ Those ancient oracles, indeed, testified of Him with such minuteness that they foretold the time and place and circumstances of His coming.

¹ Rom. i. 3, 4.

² John v. 37.

³ John xiii. 20-34.

⁴ Matt. iii. 16, 17.

⁵ 2 Peter i. 17, 18.

⁶ John v. 39.

⁷ 1 Peter i. 11

And the witness of prophecy was confirmed by the facts of history. Take the last scene of all in His earthly life. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter; the soldiers cast lots for His raiment; the Shepherd was smitten and the sheep were scattered; in the intensity of His physical distress He said, "I thirst"; in the deeper agony of His soul, He cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me,"—all these details of His Crucifixion had been predicted hundreds of years before, and now were fulfilled to the letter. The Scriptures testify of Christ with no uncertain voice, and their evidence "cannot be broken".

The Forerunner, the Works, the Father, the Scriptures—four witnesses, who proclaim with concurrent emphasis that Jesus is the Son of God. Could any claim be more resistlessly substantiated?

III.—THE IMPLICATIONS WITH WHICH THE CLAIM IS CHARGED. If Jesus is the Son of God—in the unique sense of the term—that fact has inevitable implications which bear upon our own duty and destiny as sinners of mankind. One or two of these may be briefly mentioned.

To begin with, He has a right to the allegiance of men. It is the will of God "that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father".¹ Equality in glory carries with it the right to equality of homage. In other words, Christ is entitled to receive from men the worship which is due to God alone. We do not encroach upon the prerogative of the Father when we render unto the Lord Jesus the love and trust and loyal service of our whole heart and life. On the contrary, we are assured that if we do not honour the Son, neither do we honour the Father: so real a fact is the unity of the Godhead in three Persons. It is our part, then, to endeavour to realize, ever more clearly, the Divine glory of the Saviour whom the Gospel reveals. Surely He is worthy of the best that we can give Him; for it was nothing less than *His* best that He gave for us. "*The Son of God*," said Paul, ". . . loved me and gave Himself for me"—and we, when once we accept that fact for ourselves, what can we do but fall down before Him and worship? And what further can we do, as the days go by, but deny ourselves, and take up our Cross and follow Him loyally to the end?

¹ John v. 23.

For ah, the Master is so fair,
His smile so swæet on banished men,
That they who meet Him unaware
Can never rest on earth again.

And they who see Him risen afar
At God's right Hand to welcome them,
Forgetful stand of home and land,
Desiring fair Jerusalem.

But there is another aspect of this truth which we forget only at the peril of our soul. It is the Divine glory of Christ that makes unbelief the most aggravated of all sins in the sight of God—the sin which, if persisted in, will bring men into the final condemnation. “He that believeth not *the Son* shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on Him.”¹

In the second place, He has Power to save men. “He that heareth my words . . . shall not come into condemnation”;² that is one effect of His saving power. “The Son quickeneth whom He will”;³ that is the second effect. The one means deliverance from the guilt of sin; the other means deliverance from the power of sin, or, in other words, from spiritual death. The Son has life in Himself, and, because of that, is a fountain of life to others. Here lies the only hope for a perishing world—the strong Son of God is able to quicken the dead. However terrible the ruin which sin has wrought in the lives of men, however deep the pit into which they have fallen, and however tenacious the grip in which they are held by the god of this world, He can proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. But we must guard against the danger of divesting this Divine Liberator of His real humanity. He who has “in Himself” such energy of life that He is able to quicken the dead is that same tender, compassionate Kinsman who wept at the grave of Lazarus.

In the third place, He has Authority to judge men. “The Father”, we read, . . . “hath committed all judgment to the Son.”⁴ This statement is amplified in another sentence which declares that the Father “hath given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man”.⁵ These two utterances provide us with an instance of the conjunction of Divine Sonship with mediatorial authority which is revealed in the work of Jesus Christ. On the one hand He has a delegated

¹ John iii. 36.

² John v. 24.

³ John v. 21.

⁴ John v. 22.

⁵ John v. 27.

authority as the "Son of Man", that is, as the Redeemer who finished the work which had been given Him to do. But the Son of Man is also the Son of God, and so in the last analysis His judicial authority is rooted in His eternal Sonship. But let us glance at the solemn fact which is here affirmed. God will one day "judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained",¹ and Christ's own rising from the dead is the guarantee of that awe-inspiring reality. "The hour is coming", Jesus assures us, "in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice. And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of damnation."² We dare not attempt to tone down the impressiveness of this two-fold affirmation. With a definiteness which is far removed from the nebulous evasions of a great deal of modern teaching, it enshrines the hope of the righteous, and unfolds the doom of the wicked. The final word which is relevant to such an assurance of the "Judgment to come", is contained in the first of the Messianic Psalms: "Kiss *the Son*, lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him."³

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¹ Acts xvii. 31.

² John v. 28, 29.

³ Psalm ii. 12.