

THE TRUE SONSHIP¹

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning August 4th, 1861

By Mister JAMES WELLS

At the New Surrey Tabernacle, Borough Road

Volume 3 Number 137

“Has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.”

Hebrews 1:2

I SHALL in this; my last sermon for the present upon the question bearing upon Sonship, be as clear as I can, but I must say that the more I search the scriptures the more I feel established in my present position relative to the Sonship of Christ. And for the life of me I cannot discover any particular mystery as to the order of that Sonship, any more than there is as to the order of his priesthood. As to his person, I glory in the fact that his person is an infinite mystery, an incomprehensible mystery, an inexplicable mystery. Who can explain God manifest in the flesh? I will be second to no man in glorying in the infinity of the mystery of the person of Christ. But when I come to the order of his Sonship, why, the order of his Sonship is as clearly declared in the scriptures, and as clearly and definitely set forth as is the order of his priesthood. And people say we are not to meddle with it! You may just as well tell me I am not to meddle with the order of his priesthood, and that if a man should arise and try to put me off with the Levitical priesthood, to tell me that that is all that priesthood I need, and tell me that is Christ's priesthood, should I be justified in believing that? Now I can distinguish between the Levitical priesthood and the eternal priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ; and I can distinguish, and the scriptures clearly distinguish, between your sonship and the Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ. So strong I say are my convictions upon the matter, and so solemnly do I feel, and so thoroughly convinced that I am right, that I would meet any minister who stands opposed to me, that is a man of truth, the Editor of the “Earthen Vessel,” who stands opposed to me in this; the Editor of the “Standard” or any other

¹ We gain some small insight into the major controversy that raged at the time this sermon was preached upon the subject of the Sonship of Christ. As I stated in the sermon prior to this one my earnest desire is to avoid controversy and division. There has been more than enough of this in the past between those who should be dear brothers and sisters in the faith. I do feel however that the truth is too important to ignore or cover up this matter, as though it never happened or as if it has no relevance today. Let both those who agree and those who disagree with Wells prayerfully search the scriptures for themselves on this subject so that God may be all and all and receive all the glory that is his due. I do believe that both then and now no one involved sought or seeks in any way to dishonor God rather the reverse. May the Holy Spirit give us grace and wisdom. – Richard Schadle

minister of standing that is a man of truth in all other respects; I would meet such an one in this chapel in Exeter Hall, in any public place they choose to appoint, and under proper regulations, and in the fear of God, in the spirit of prayer, and in the spirit of a Christian, publicly discuss the question with them in the presence of hundreds or thousands of people that might choose to assemble. And I would pledge myself in that case, should any one accept this proposition, any minister that I should deem a proper person to discuss with, I would pledge myself that there should not be from me one reproachful or disrespectful word, I would seek to use the softest words, the hardest arguments, the strongest scriptures, and the clearest definitions that I could find; and if my opponent should be able to swallow up those scriptures that I might bring forth, and convince me that I am wrong, I should get the benefit of it; and if we could convince any of our opponents they are wrong, they would get the benefit of it. Such is my feeling, upon this matter; and I do this morning, in the fear of God, from the pulpit as well as from the press, throw out this proposition, from which, life and health being spared me, I will not shrink, if any honorable man will come forward and accept the challenge I thus publicly give; but, as I have hinted before, it must be a good man, must not be a duty-faith man, nor a Church of England man, because they differ in other respects, and their other differences would come into the discussion, and we perhaps should get angry with each other. I must have a man to hold the discussion with, that I can treat as a brother, as a Christian, that I can feel a love to that will overcome whatever prejudice I may feel against his difference with me in doctrine; so that my love to him as a man of grace shall so overcome my prejudice on the ground of difference, that I shall treat, him as a Christian and act as a Christian; and let the discussion be carried on as between Christians, I should like to have two, three, or four hours' discussion upon this. And I think such a discussion as this would fairly bring the question before the churches, and enable them to judge for themselves, and would do I think much more good than the bits of fragments with which we now appear before the churches. Having said then thus much, which I say advisedly and soberly, and I again repeat that I would not enter upon a discussion of that kind unless with Christian feeling and in a spirit of prayer, and go through it as free from disputation or caviling; as free from it; and work on as quietly as I would do if I were working out a problem in Euclid; and there is no room for caviling there, you have to think hard, work hard, and demonstrate your points as you go along.

I will now proceed to notice the subject. We have two clauses more to notice in our text, in addition to what we have said before that he is "heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds." And I may just before I enter upon the subject observe, friends, that it is far from me to dwell from time to time upon that which is unprofitable, but at the same time you must allow your minister sometimes to deviate a little. I am aware dwelling upon this subject is more like building up the bulwarks than feeding the flock; it is more like seeing to the foundations than spreading the table. But you know in time of war the bulwarks are very useful, and when the rains descend, and the floods rise, and the winds blow, a good solid foundation is not to be despised. So, if you go without a meal or two just, while the bulwarks are being looked to, and while the foundations are being looked to; why, you will get the benefit of it afterwards.

Now, relative then to the Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ: I hold that Jehovah is an infinite Spirit, that he is one God, that there are not three existences, but one; that there are not three Gods, but one; that there are not three Deities, but only one Deity, one infinite Spirit; that is what I believe. I believe in the distinct personalities of the Eternal Three, there is no priority, nor minority; that there is no superiority, nor inferiority; I believe that just what the Father is by nature, that is the

Divine Word; I believe that just what the Father and the Divine Word are by nature, that is the Eternal Spirit; in a word, "that there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one." But I do not believe that one of these Divine Persons did from all eternity by an act of Divine power turn another Divine Person from his original equality and likeness to the Father and the Holy Ghost into a Son, so that we have thereby a generated Divinity, called by men eternal generation. That is an assumption I do not believe. And I will merely state two points here for you to take notice of as I pass along; first, that there is not one scripture in all the Bible that calls Jesus Christ the Son of God apart from his complexity. There must be some reason for this. If his Sonship does not stand in his manhood and complexity, but stands in his abstract Deity, how is it that there is not one scripture from Genesis to Revelation that in his abstract Deity calls him the Son of God? I ask the question, and wait for an answer, and I may wait long enough, for there is not one. One of my opponents the other day, a man that I love as a good man, said, "You, have the letter on your side, I confess; but then it was revealed to me that Jesus Christ was actually the Son of God from eternity." Now, sir, where was it revealed to you? Well it was revealed to me. Can you give me a scripture, sir? No, I cannot give you a scripture, but it was revealed to me. What! something revealed to you contrary to the scriptures? The Holy Ghost give me the word to be guided by and give you something else in secret to be guided by? You cannot bring me one scripture, sir, to authenticate this dream of yours, for a dream it is; and until you can bring me a scripture to authenticate that dream, I must set it down as a human dream. You dream that he was actually the Son of God from all eternity, and yet the Bible (and you shall have a stronger point than this against it presently), yet the Bible does not in one instance call him the Son of God apart from his complexity. Let me then ask you in all soberness, and in the fear of God, for my soul trembles for the ark of God, and I tremble upon this subject, my hearer, for it is a solemn matter, what think you of Christ?"

"You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of him."

When a man comes and tells me that Jesus Christ in his eternal Deity has undergone what they call eternal generation; and cannot bring a scripture to prove it, but tells me it is revealed to him, what am I to do? Am I to be guided by that man's dream, or by the word of God? What does the 23rd of Jeremiah say upon the subject? "The prophet that has a dream, let him tell a dream and he that has my word, let him speak my word faithfully." What is the dream? Chaff. "What is the chaff to the wheat, says the Lord." What is the chaff? Why, this old Athanasian notion that one of the Persons of the Godhead, lowers the Godhead of Christ. I believe most solemnly that the doctrine of eternal generation, lowers the Godhead of Christ. I believe most solemnly that the doctrine of eternal generation is a device of the enemy intended to lower the absolute divinity of Christ, to lower the worth of his atonement, to lower the worth of his righteousness, to weaken the standing of the church, to pervert the truths of the gospel, to becloud the glories of a covenant God; that Satan might thus, even by the agency of good men, carry on some of his great designs. "What is the chaff to the wheat, says the Lord." You take the chaff, and welcome but let me have the wheat to sustain me, let me have God's word, and then I shall be sustained, One more idea here: it is a remarkable thing, not only is Jesus Christ never called the Son of God apart from his complexity, but there is something else, if possible, more striking, and that is this, that the scriptures never, in one solitary instance, put the Sonship of Christ, before his birth at Bethlehem. So then he was the Son of God actually from all eternity, in the same sense that he was born in Bethlehem from all

eternity; that is, in God's covenant, in God's counsel: the Messiah foreordained from the foundation of the world. I have said that the scriptures never put the Sonship of Christ before his birth. I come to the 2nd Psalm. "You are my Son, this day have I begotten you." I ask these men for an explanation; They say that "this day" means eternity; that is their explanation. I come to Acts 8:33 in the apostles' address at Antioch; he there says: "We declare unto you glad things, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers God has fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he has raised up Jesus again: as it is also written in the 2nd Psalm, you are my Son, this day have I begotten you." Here you perceive Christ's birth, Christ's life, and Christ's death, precede the naming his Sonship. The apostle takes up that 2nd Psalm and applies it to Christ's resurrection. I ask you in all soberness, and in the fear of God this morning, which am I to follow, the interpretations of men, or the unerring direction of inspired truth? Again, in the 9th of Isaiah, when does Sonship come in? Not till after birth. "Unto us a child is born;" the child is born first, "unto us a son is given." Sonship is placed after birth: so that it is not placed before his birth in one instance. Again, Nebuchadnezzar saw four men; he supposed the fourth to be a man, though I believe the fourth was not a man, but a Divine person in human form, but we will take his idea. But Nebuchadnezzar knew that these three men were born; they were not men before they were born, the three men, and the fourth looked like a man superior to the others: that would suppose if he were a man actually; he was born first. "The fourth is like the Son of God;" so there birth again goes before Sonship. Come to the 1st of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And what comes next, a little further on? "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Here then he is not called the Son until after he is made flesh. Previously in that chapter he is called God, but after he is made flesh, then he is called the Son. There must be reasons for this. Again, men tell us that the words "Son of God" always mean his divinity, whereas you know, I must not now stop to prove it, that again and again the words "Son of God" are applied to his human nature. I may mention only one scripture; "Simon, whom do men say that I am?" And a pretty account men gave, though as good an account as mere professors would now but leaving that out, what is Peter's answer? Leave out the intermediate words concerning the opinions of others, and bring Peter's answer into immediate contact with the Savior's words "Whom do men say that I, the Son of man, am?" Why, "you", the Son of man, "are the Christ, the Son of the living God." "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed it unto you, but my Father which is in heaven." Though he was like other men among men, Christ was sinless, but he was not griefless, nor sorrowless. How did Peter know that this assuredly was the Messiah, that this was the Son of the living God? He knew it by Divine teaching, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed it unto you." So much, then, for their saying that the term "Son of God" always means his divinity. They also tell us that the word "begotten" is not applied to his manhood, whereas, in the 13th of Acts, it is applied to his resurrection, and in the 1st of Revelation, "the first begotten of the dead." When I look at these scriptures in connection with that beautiful idea to my mind that I advanced last Lord's day morning from the 23rd of Jeremiah: in that chapter he is called the Branch: there is his Sonship, offspring: branch conveys the idea of offspring: there is his manhood, there is his Sonship. And a little further on in that chapter it is "Jehovah our Righteousness." Put the two together, there you get what you have in the 1st chapter of the New Testament, Emmanuel, God with us. Thus, then, I hold that the Sonship of Christ is not after the order of his Deity, having undergone any revolution, but after the order of his manhood and of his complexity, that his Sonship lies there. I will go further; our Sonship lies there. No manhood; no, Sonship; no manhood, no Christ; no

Christ, no election; no election, no blessing; no blessing, no predestination; no predestination, no regeneration; no regeneration, no justification; no justification, no glorification. If he had passed by the seed of Abraham, and taken upon him the nature of angels; instead of passing by the nature of angels, and taking upon him the nature of man, and the seed of Abraham, ne'er should we have known sonship, nor seen our standing in his eternal Sonship, in his complexity. I say it is eternal because eternal in God's purpose, I therefore, distinctly deny that Christ was actually in his person the Son of God from eternity. I deny this and shall continue so to do until the word of God is against me. One more point here and then I will go on. In the latter part of the 16th verse of the 63rd of Isaiah, it is said, "O Lord," O Jehovah, as though the Lord, foreseeing this matter declared his dear Son by nominating him by his self-existent name, "You, Jehovah, are our Father, our Redeemer, your name is from everlasting." We know that Christ is our Redeemer, and he is there called not a Son from everlasting, but "You are our Father," he is called an everlasting Father, or the Father of the future ages, which we shall have to dwell upon presently. "Your name is from everlasting;" what name? Why, his redemptional name. So, then his Sonship name, his priestly name, his pastoral name, every name he now actually bears, was from everlasting. "Your name is from everlasting;" "his goings forth were of old, even from everlasting." "So then, God in ancient times spoke unto the fathers by the prophets; he has in these last days spoken unto us by his Son whom he has appointed;" what, appointed infinite Deity heir of all things? His Sonship, they tell us, stands alone in his Deity, and so here is infinite Deity appointed to that which naturally belongs to him! Can you find out anything which does not belong to him as God, did not need appointment in order to become heir of all things. But as the Son of God, there is room for decree, room for action, room for work; here he is appointed heir of all things.

Well now, I shall dwell upon the two points here set forth. First, *the HEIRSHIP of Jesus Christ*. And I enter upon it with great delight; the very thought of his heirship does me good, when I contrast it with others. When I look at the first Adam, he was heir of all things: God appointed him heir of all things, made him to have dominion over the works of his hands; there was nothing which the Lord did not put under him; He made Adam heir of all things, this is, all things on earth, all things belonging to the dispensation to which he belongs; and that is the dispensation of an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure. But Adam, alas! while our inheritance, and our souls, and our bodies, and our welfare, were all entrusted with Adam, he sinned our inheritance away, he sinned our souls away, he sinned our bodies away, he sinned our welfare away. "By one man's disobedience, many were made sinners, by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; and we are left as orphans, we are left as babes, cast into the open field; without any to pity, with no hand to help. Ah, what is to be done? "We see not now, then," says the apostle, "all things put under him;" but we see the remedy, we see Jesus, he steps in, and he puts sin away by the sacrifice of himself. And the Lord entrusts to Jesus Christ an inheritance which is eternal; the Lord entrusts to Jesus Christ the accomplishment of our redemption; the Lord entrusts to Jesus Christ a number that no man can number; "yours they were, you gave them me." And I ask you this morning, while Adam lost everything, if Jesus Christ has ever lost anything? When you come to heaven, and come to recount the honors, I speak now of course after the manner of men, come to recount the honors, and the blessings, and the treasures, and the glories, and the joys, and the advantages which our God gave to him for us before the world was, not one will be missing, not one will be lost. Honor to his dear and lovely name, he came into this miserable world, and while the foxes had holes, and the birds of the air had nests, he was content for our sakes to have not where to lay his head. Yet nothing could stop his majestic march, could hinder his onward

movement, stay the exercise of his omnipotent arm, or prevent him from accomplishing that victory which he came into the world to achieve. And all he suffered, he suffered without sinning, he lived without sinning, he died without sinning; he did no sin, he has lost nothing. Ah then, my hearer, let me be a recipient in my soul of what Jesus Christ has done, faith shall be the evidence of things not seen, the confidence of things hoped for; let me receive into my soul in the liveliness thereof the testimony of Christ's heirship, heaven is mine, eternal life is mine, eternal salvation is mine, eternal, glory is mine; I can no more lose it, than Christ can lose it; all is safe, all is fixed, and all is firm. But let us hear the word of God upon it. Take the 1st chapter of Colossians. "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn," therefore the heir, "of every creature." Let us look at it, what does it mean by "first-born?" Does it mean first-born in the order of time as pre-existarians assert? Why, that would be simply preposterous, because we all know that he was born at Bethlehem, he was therefore not the first-born in the order of time. But I, will show that he was the first-born in order of place and of dignity. First, as to place. Where was he born? He was born under the law for you. Was ever any other man before or since born under the law for others? No. He was born under your sin for you, he was born under your curse for you, he was born under your sorrows for you, he was born under your griefs for you, he was the first that was ever so born, and he is the last that will ever be needed. All glory to his dear and blessed name that while he was thus born under the law for others, he did not refuse to remain there, but honorably, and graciously, and righteously worked his way to the end thereof, until he could say, "It is finished." And thus, he was the first-born in the order of place; no other person ever occupied that place, and now there is no such place to occupy, he is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes. I hope you will not say, Ah, I do not know what to make of these things, Not know what to make of them! Ah, my hearer, you are the very man, if you have a downward experience of your sinner-ship, you are the very man that should pay attention to the various departments of the remedy. Why, these things that you think so little of now will be your all-in all in heaven. If they make you miserable now, where is your fitness for heaven? your fitness for heaven does not lay in your griefs and sorrows, it lies in what you are in Christ; it is Christ that is our fitness for eternity. Now he was the first-born in order of place. Then also he was the first-born in order of dignity. No child was ever born holy before him.

The dignity of Christ's human nature did not lie in his being of the seed of David according to the flesh, but in its holiness, its freedom from sin. Sin is our degradation, holiness is our exaltation; holiness is the very majesty of God, the dignity of angels, the glory of the saints. "That holy thing." No one before was ever born holy, nor ever will be again naturally so, down to the end of time. Born therefore in the order of dignity, then, as being free from sin he was born in vital oneness with his Godhead, his manhood never existed apart from godhead. Was a person ever so born before? Never. Will a person be ever so born again? Never. "He dies no more; death has no more dominion over him." He therefore is the first-born, the heir of all things, of the life that now is. Whatever you want in providence he entitles you to; whatever you need in grace he entitles you to. You have no right to the bread you eat, you have no right to the raiment you wear, you have no right to the shelter that you enjoy, you have no right to any one of these temporal things, but he gives you a right, it is a given right, because sin had forfeited the whole, and much less have we any right to eternal things; but by Jesus Christ a right to eternal things is established, and so by what he has done God is just, and yet the justifier of him that believes in Jesus. He is the first-born in the order of place and dignity of the whole creation. No man was ever born in such a place, no man was ever born in such a dignity. It might well be said of him in his very birth, "Let all the

angels of God worship him.” What, worship that child? Yes, worship that child, and they were not afraid to call him Christ the Lord and associated with his infancy the highest glory of God, the essential peace of man, and good will; “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and good will towards men.” Then the apostle, lest we should stop short in this heirship of Christ, says that Christ is the first-born from the dead not in the order of time, there were persons raised up, one raised by Elijah, another by Elisha, and he himself raised several persons from the dead; he was not the first-born from the dead in the order of time, but he was in the order of place and dignity. Who rose from the dead besides himself as the life and resurrection of others? He is the first that ever rose from the dead as the eternal life of others; he is the first-born that ever rose from the dead on the ground of his own work. “Brought again from the dead through the blood of the everlasting covenant.” And thus, he is heir of all things, of the world that now is and of that also which is to come.

Thus, then by the Son of God I understand the complex person of Christ; his being heir of all things I apprehend to mean his Mediatorial character, as having a right to all things in this world and in that which, is to come; on two grounds, first, because he did no sin, and secondly, because he has wrought out that eternal perfection which the Father gave him to do.

I will now come to the last part of this terrible subject: “By whom also he made the worlds.” Ah, say you, there is a difficulty; if the Son of God were not there, how could it be said that God the Father made the worlds by him? I will come to that presently, after one remark, and it is this. You know that one of the names by which he is nominated, and which we all love because of its significance, is that of Christ and Jesus Christ. Now Jesus means “a Savior” and Christ means “Anointed.”

Now then, “Who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” Christ, means “Anointed;” could infinite Deity be anointed? It was his manhood that was anointed; as he says in the 4th of Luke, “This day is the scripture fulfilled in your ears; the Lord has anointed me;” there is his manhood. Why is he called Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world, then? Jesus, a Savior, he was not a Savior actually, until he died, actually so. Go back to the 63rd of Isaiah; “your name is from everlasting,” and thus if he were Jesus Christ from everlasting he was the Son of God in purpose from everlasting; so that by him, in consideration of him, God made the worlds, so that he who is now the Son of God is the person for whom and by whom the worlds were made. But why do I thus speak? The word “worlds,” in my text does not mean material worlds at all. I am conscious I am not giving you the right interpretation of the text, but if that were the interpretation, then the idea of it is that he who is now the Son of God is the person in consideration of whom the world was created. But I am not giving the meaning of the text. The word “worlds” in our text does not mean material worlds at all.

“Once in the end of the world has he appeared;” not cosmos, the material world, for we all know the material world did not end when Christ appeared; but “once in the end of the age has he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” And so here, “By whom he made the ages;” not the material worlds: material worlds are not referred to, but the ages. What ages? Ah, I will tell you, this is the most delightful part of my text, twofold ages, providential ages, and gracious ages. I will just prove that, and then close. Providential ages. I go to the 8th chapter of Genesis; I find

there that Noah offers a sacrifice to God after the flood; “and the Lord smelled a sweet savor;” and what follows upon that sacrifice? “While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.” Take away the preceding sacrifice, where are your providential ages? what assurance have you that universal famine shall not prevail, and the whole world perish? But let us have Christ, then by him we have providential ages, on his account there shall be seed time and harvest. So that the providential covenant of God is founded upon the Sacrificial excellency of Jesus Christ, he has made the providential ages by his Son. Secondly, he has made the gracious ages by him, 2nd chapter of Ephesians, “Quickened us together, raised, us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; that in the ages,” there it is, “to come, he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.” Take Christ away, there would not be a gracious age then. “That he might in the ages to come,” here is an age of grace now, and an age of glory hereafter; and by Christ Jesus he has made these ages. If there is no Christ, there is no providential age of certainty; if there is no Christ, there is no gracious age; if there is no Christ, there is no glorification age? “By whom he made the ages.” Ah then, I love my exalted and dear Emmanuel. It is by him I am assured that seed time and harvest shall continue, and there is nothing so essential as that; if we had all the silver and gold, and mechanical powers, and honors and pomp that the world could devise, what would that be without harvest, without sustenance? We can do without the other, we cannot do without sustenance. And that that we cannot do without is that that is especially promised by Jesus Christ, namely, the ages of providence. “By whom he made the ages.” Then I am quite sure that every age will accord with what he is, as every age has. The Old Testament saints saw his day, and theirs was an age of grace, by that Jesus Christ who in the fulness of time should come. The day of Pentecost was an age of grace. When the Lord called you, and made you what you are, it was an age of grace: it is an age of grace now. And Christ’s ages are eternal ages, and so the American Union Bible Society in their translation of the Book of Revelation, have rendered these words *aionos ton aionon*, “ages of ages;” that he shall live unto the ages of ages, that he shall reign unto the ages of ages. And so, God made these ages of ages of grace, by Jesus Christ.