A Review of the Asher-Bonner Debates

In the first and last week of August, Jeff Asher and David Bonner debated in North and East Texas. The first week of August the debate was in Amarillo, Texas, in the Texas panhandle, where Jeff Asher preaches for the Dumas Drive congregation. The last week in August the debate was held in Lufkin, Texas, where David Bonner preaches for the Fourth and Groesbeck congregation.

The debate in Amarillo was held in a Junior High School auditorium, while in Lufkin the debate was held in the building of the Fourth and Groesbeck congregation. Attendance was roughly the same at both locations. There were approximately 200 people in attendance the first night at both places with the crowd dropping throughout the week, till it came down to about 80 to 100 persons present (87 were present Thursday night in Lufkin counting the debaters and assistants). There was good attendance from the Dumas Drive congregation in Amarillo, while the Fourth and Groesbeck church seemed to fall drastically in attendance. In Lufkin there were many more preachers attending from the many churches through east Texas and Louisiana. Brother Bonner bragged repeatedly that he would have to provide the bulk of the audience and that the attendance would be much better in Lufkin. He failed.

Much of the flavor of the debates was determined in the arrangements. Brother Bonner insisted that there be no computer presentations during the debate. He felt these were a distraction in previous debates and had resulted in other men being unfairly beaten in those discussions. Brother Asher graciously consented to give Brother Bonner this concession. Brother Bonner also insisted on having the first affirmative speech and the last negative speech in both weeks' debate. This is, among debaters, generally considered

to be the most advantageous position. Brother Asher conceded to this. Some described Brother Asher's participation from these demands as having both hands tied behind his back.

Brother Asher went further than Brother Bonner had demanded and refused to use any visual presentation throughout the debate lest Brother Bonner claim some other advantage had been taken. He insisted on using the Bible and it alone. This seemed to be very disconcerting to Brother Bonner throughout the discussion. He seemed to have the habit in debate of referring to his opponent's charts and making comments concerning them. When Brother Asher had no charts, he seemed to have considerable difficulty referring to the Scriptures alone and reviewing through the text. He wound up repeating his own arguments a lot. Others attending the debate have since commented on the difficulty of taking notes when Brother Asher did not use charts. It seems to be a case such as in the New Testament, "And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept" (John 7:31-32). They were not happy when John Welch used a computer and they are not happy when Jeff Asher does not.

Other brethren, notably Wayne Goforth, had insisted that the Dumas Drive congregation conduct an open forum session during the debate in Amarillo. Most who attended these four 2-hour sessions profited from the frank discussions as brethren from both sides of the issue congenially exchanged views. Brother Goforth did not attend the open forum sessions. In fact, he did not attend the debate in Lufkin at all. The brethren in

Lufkin apparently decided not to hold an open forum session there. Yet, there were many more preachers in attendance at this debate that might have profited from such discussions.

Jeff's presentations were powerfully and forcefully presented, with, as we have said, reference almost exclusively to the Bible as authority. He called for every one of Brother Bonner's charts and arguments and responded to them in detail. His speeches on Monday night in Lufkin were as good as they could be. You should get a copy of His closing speech on Friday night in Lufkin. If for no other reason, listen to his review of Bonner's modernist position on Isaiah 7.

Brother Bonner's speeches were also powerfully presented from his very distinctive speaking style. He refused throughout the debate to refer to Jeff as his "brother." He would only concede that he was "opponent." Most debaters would use the word "honorable opponent" or "worthy opponent", but Brother Bonner was a man of few words choosing to refer to Brother Asher just as opponent. Even the rules usually used in debates (Hedge's) say that each debater should assume that the other is honorable. These simple things spoke volumes about his attitude throughout the debate. Some would have slipped occasionally as we have all been known to do when debating a denominationalist, but Brother Bonner was determined to the end. He claimed he never raised the issue of fellowship.

Brother Bonner spoke sarcastically and sneeringly to Brother Asher as he addressed him and his arguments throughout the debate. This was very disconcerting. I trust that in his other debates that Brother Bonner treats his opponent with more respect and accords him more a sense of honor and dignity or it will be hard to see how much

good could be accomplished in such insulting debates. One of his assistants affected a sneering smile throughout the entire two weeks of discussion. It cracked a little bit the last night. Several in the audience were offended at this obvious disrespect. I say this knowing that these remarks will be countered as merely personal opinion. However, they seemed to be the opinion of many. If this is the normal and ordinary demeanor of these two brethren, I apologize from the beginning. If it is ordinary it is remarkable. If it is not ordinary, it is insulting and distracting.

Brother Bonner mentioned repeatedly the various degrees, which he received. He has a bachelor's degree in Chemistry and a Master's degree in some other area of study. He also did some studying apparently at Abilene. I believe that he also mentioned the other schools that awarded his degrees, but I cannot remember them. Jeff seemed to have a fondness for his third grade teacher, who, though deceased now would be happy to know that he had managed to remember a few things, such as pronoun antecedents.

Brother Jesse Jenkins was the moderator for Brother Bonner and Brother A.W. Goff was the moderator for Jeff Asher. Both these men behaved with superb dignity and kindness both to one another, the debaters, and the audience. There was no point of order called throughout the debate. These men in what appeared to be a congenial and brotherly fashion handled most issues between the tables. Both Brother Jenkins and Brother Goff attended the Open Forums in Amarillo and contributed to these discussions in interesting and gentlemanly ways. They were both a blessing to the discussion.

Just as a note, I should mention that Ed Dye was scheduled to be the moderator for Brother Asher. Just before the beginning of the discussion he was discovered to have bladder cancer and had to undergo surgery and begin Chemotherapy in the latter part of

August. He called several times during the debates and much prayer was offered for his well being. His prognosis as of this writing seems to be hopeful.

The propositions were as follows:

The Scriptures teach that Jesus, while on earth in the flesh, had and used both human and divine attributes--David Bonner affirmed

The Scriptures teach that Jesus, while on earth in the flesh, had both human and divine attributes, but never used any of His divine attributes--- Asher affirmed (Bonner insisted on underlining the word "never.")

In both debates Brother Bonner presented the same basic line-up of arguments. He presented most of these in his first affirmative speech and spent the majority of the remainder of the debate simply recalling these arguments and denying Brother Asher's argument.

His basic arguments were as follows:

1. Mark 2—Jesus forgave sins and this was a prerogative reserved for Deity
2. Jesus received worship which can only be justifiably accepted by Deity—thus using an attribute of Deity
3. John 20:30-31—Jesus performed signs to prove His deity therefore the signs must have been performed by His own power.
4. Argued that the existence of the divine attributes cannot be proven without a demonstration of the same. He continually urged that Jeff believed that Jesus was deity in name only.
5. Miraculous Wisdom and Knowledge—Jesus knew things that other men could not know therefore He must have been using intrinsic knowledge.

6. John 17:5—Jesus must have possessed intrinsic knowledge reaching back before His birth.
7. Colossians 1:17—Jesus was actively and consciously "holding all the atoms together" while on this earth.
8. Possibility and probability. Postulated that there was a 0% possibility of Jesus sinning and that there was a 100% probability that man will sin. Thus, Jesus must have accomplished this by His intrinsic power of deity.
9. He argued throughout the debate that Jesus had His moral character from heaven and did not achieve it through His efforts as a man. He added that Jesus had all knowledge throughout His life from the manger on. That He merely allowed men to see that amount of spiritual development that was commensurate with His assumed age.
10. He ridiculed Jeff's notion that Jesus could have avoided sin from studying the Scriptures, the teachings and influence of his parents and simple ordinary inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
11. He argued from Hebrews 10 that Jesus was in Spirit what He had always been, but had just been given a body.
12. Brother Bonner used an illustration that imagined what Jesus would have replied as a 12 year old to a series of questions. The questioner might have asked how strong Jesus was. Brother Bonner said that he would have responded that on his mother's side He had the strength of an average 12 year old boy, but on his Father's side He was omnipotent. If the questioner had asked how smart are you. He would have replied that on his mother's side He

> was about average for a 12 year old boy, but on his Father's side He was Omniscient. He knew all things. What do you eat might have been a question. On his mother's side He admitted that He was occasionally hungry and tired, but on His Father's side He was never weary and never hungered.

Brother Asher responded to these arguments by showing that in Mark 2, Jesus was working from delegated power. He showed this by referring to the parallel accounts of the parable in Matthew and Luke.

He argued that the divine attribute of worship was to require worship and that Jesus had not required such while on the earth. He continued by saying it was entirely possible to worship men and that it is done regularly. He argued that Jesus' reception of worship does not establish that He was divine anymore than it proves that the Pope is divine. He argued that for Jesus to refuse to accept such worship would have demonstrated that He did not believe that He was the Son of God, a thing which He most surely did believe. It is a sin to receive worship (though regularly committed) only if one is not God.

He argued that in John 20:30-31 that there was no certain establishment that the gifts referred to were intrinsic as opposed to delegated powers. Therefore the argument upon the passage proved nothing.

He showed that what brother Bonner was requiring, a demonstration of intrinsic power, was the one thing that Jesus said that he could not and would not do, from John 5:19.

He showed that the various miracles involving knowledge of things beyond ordinary knowledge and prophecy could not be established as intrinsic gifts, but most assuredly could have been delegated gifts.

Jeff argued that for Jesus to use the intrinsic intelligence of God in the manger and throughout His young life would have made His presence as an example for us useless. Since His intelligence was no more or less that God always had, brother Asher wondered why it was necessary for him to come to earth if, in fact, all that was intended was for Him to masquerade as a man. Jeff referred to his position of gradually revealed intelligence as a "disguise."

Jeff also wondered how and when the Son of God died for us, since the preexisting Word never died and only the charade was nailed to the cross. He also wondered that since Brother Bonner was so determined that the unity of the Godhead meant that the Divine Three did all things together, just which died?

In Colossians 1:17 Jeff argued that Jesus served as "upholding all things" through His word in creation. All that is functions by His law and will continue till He changes that word. So, God is not consciously required to keep each atom spinning.

Brother Asher had a field day with that mother's side and Father's side "argument." He asked what the boy would have replied if asked whether he could be tempted. Would he have replied on my mother's side I can be tempted and can sin, but on my Father's side I can't be tempted and certainly am incapable of sinning. He then asked which side Jesus was being tempted on when the Bible says that he was tempted. Brother Asher also wondered whether this was not identifying two separate spirits or personalities in Jesus. At one moment His mother's spirit answered and at another

moment his Father's spirit answered. Perhaps like the Oneness Pentecostals believe, He could have prayed to himself. It is a rather obvious case of multiple personalities.

Brother Asher affirmatively argued:

1. Brother Asher began by establishing the basis for arguing a negative proposition. He argued that we have a negative view on the instrumental music question. Thus, when we study all the Bible has to say on a subject and find that it does not mention instrumental music in the New Testament this is conclusive. He made the same comparison to the subjects of benevolent aid to non-saints and to the subject of sprinkling as the mode for baptism. He then stated his intention to examine all the Bible said on the subject and would conclude that Jesus never used his intrinsic divine attributes to perform miracles.
2. From Isaiah 7:14-16 that the Messiah learned. He continued this theme of learning to Luke 2:52 and Hebrews 5:8.
3. From Isaiah 11:1-4 and other like passages as quoted in Matthew 12:17-18, and Luke 4:18 he argued that Jesus was the recipient of the gifts and miracles of the Holy Spirit.
4. He argued from Acts 10:38 that Jesus was the recipient of the gifts and miracles of the Holy Spirit.
5. He argued from Philippians 2 that Jesus had emptied himself of the form (outward manifestation) of God and lived in the circumstance, fashion and likeness of man. He was a man.

6. He argued from Hebrews 2 that Jesus was the "same" as we are, subject to temptation. He found that He was capable of faith.

Brother Bonner responded to these by saying that Isaiah 7 was not a reference to Jesus but to the wife of Isaiah (a young woman, not a virgin) and her son Mahershahalhashbaz. He argued that the New Testament passage in Matthew was taken out of context and applied to Jesus.

Jeff responded to this by saying that this was a modernist position and that it was difficult to see how Mahershahalhashbaz could be referred to as "God with us." Brother Bonner used this argument in Amarillo. In Lufkin he had to be challenged for four nights to present it and threatened with Brother Asher's introduction of what he believed.

Jeff responded that there are two separate prophecies in Isaiah 7 and 8 not one. He said that the prophecy in Isaiah 7 is Messianic. Ahaz had rejected the prophecy. The pronouns demanded it. The New Testament Greek and the Septuagint Old Testament in this context use a word that must be translated virgin. Isaiah's wife was not a virgin. The prophecy was to the House of David. Mahershahalhashbaz is not "God with us." The two prophecies are different. Brother Bonner made no additional response.

Brother Bonner responded to Isaiah 11 by saying that the capitalization of Isaiah 11 indicated that this was a reference either to Jesus own spirit or to the personal spirit of the father. Jeff responded to this by saying that capitalization was not part of the text and that it was entirely at the whim of the translator. He then invited Brother Bonner to respond to John 5 where the testimony of Jesus and the testimony of the Father were separated or to any of the other like passages that he had used such as Luke 4.

Brother Bonner responded to Acts 10:38 by saying that the power with which Jesus was anointed was simply the "powerful voice of God." He compared this voice at the baptism to the voice of God Moses heard on Sinai. Jeff showed that there was nowhere else in the scripture where this word was so translated and that the notion would not make sense in any like context. He also showed that according to Hebrews 12 this voice Moses heard could not be the voice in the Baptism for that voice of Moses was to be spoken only "once more."

Brother Bonner said that Philippians 2 was "his passage," because it taught that Jesus was humble.

Brother Bonner also quoted from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia to bolster his position on Philippians 2. However, He misrepresented the quotation to make it more favorable to his position, when in reality the writers of the ISBE were in agreement with Jeff. The quotation appears below. The small type is the portion that Brother Bonner presented. The bold type is the material he left out. Judge for yourself.

Empty
"Kenosis"
From the ISBE, p. 1792

"KENOSIS, the word 'kenosis' has entered theological language from Philippians 2:7 where in the sentence he 'emptied himself' the Gr. Vb. Is ekenosen. 'Kenosis,' then, the corresponding noun, has become a technical term for the humiliation of the Son in the incarnation, but in recent years has acquired a still more technical sense, i.e. of the Son's emptying himself of certain attributes, esp. of omniscience.

"(1) The theological question involved was one about as far as possible from the minds of the Christians of the Apostolic age and apparently one that never occurred to St. Paul. For in Phil. 2:7 the only 'emptying' in point is that of the (external) change from the 'form of God' to the 'form of a servant.' Elsewhere in the NT it is usually taken as a matter of course that Christ's knowledge was far higher than that of other men (John 2:24 is the clearest example."…..**But passages that imply a limitation of that knowledge do exist and are of various classes…. Limitation of knowledge may perhaps be deduced from the fact that Christ could be amazed (Mt. 8:10, etc.), that He could be really tempted (Esp. Heb. 4:15), or that he possessed faith (Heb. 12:2; see comm.) More explicitly Christ is said to have *learned* in Luke 2:52; Heb. 5:8. And finally in Mark 13:32//Matt.24:36, Christ states categorically that**

He is ignorant of the exact time of the Parousia…. Not only does the mind of the Christian revolt from seeing in Christ anything less than true God, but it revolts from finding in him two centers of personality—Christ was One. But as omniscience is an essential attribute of God, it is the essential attribute of the incarnate Son….**But that ignorance in the intellect of the manhood is fully consistent with omniscience in the person seems to be not merely a safe answer to the question as stated, but an inevitable answer if the true humanity of Christ is to be maintained at all."**

Brother Bonner never apologized for this obvious misrepresentation. He merely commented that he only took from the quotation the parts that he wanted. We are accustomed to this attitude toward Bible Study in debating denominationalists.

Brother Bonner's argument on Hebrews 2 was brief and hard to follow through the brief interlude it occupied. He argued that Jesus was perfected by the church. He was a head and would not have been perfect without a body, which was the church. It was hard to relate this to the text of Hebrews 2.

Brother Bonner argued that at the temptation that Jesus was being tempted as God since He could turn stones to bread, but that He was entirely human as He was tempted. He did not explain this.

Brother Bonner said that the "not….but" construction of some passages would explain the passages in John wherein the scripture was saying that Jesus was not working by his own power but by the Father's. Brother Asher responded that in all the passages the thing under consideration was a matter of authority or primacy. This only served to intensify the point he wanted to make. Jesus' authority was certainly secondary or derived from that of the Father.

Brother Bonner read long passages from various brethren establishing the "background" of this argument, as he perceived it. He read from Keith Sharp, Wayne Greeson, and some brief passages from Jeff's own writings. He read extensive passages

from this reviewer (John Welch) especially from the book, *The Word Became Flesh.* He read the same passages from this book repeatedly and apparently to fill in gaps when he had run out of material for the moment.

Brother Bonner ridiculed the idea that this debate had come about as a result of reaction to the "have to sin" positions of some brethren. He argued that this "have to sin" position had been misunderstood and that really there was no one who believed that men "have to sin." He read several letters from some brethren who are assumed to believe this position where they denied the idea that men are born guilty of sin. Jeff responded by saying that no one had ever accused them of believing that men are born with such nature. However, they have been and do believe that men acquire a sinful nature after birth and can thenceforth not avoid sinning.

Brother Bonner continually argued that Jesus had an edge on us and that he could not be our example unless he had an edge on us. Jeff responded by saying that Brother Bonner was changing the argument he had originally made in an article that had created the furor. Jeff said that originally Brother Bonner had argued that Jesus had an edge because His attributes of deity made Him impervious to temptation whereas He was rewriting the statement now to make it more palatable. Now, he wanted to convey the idea that Jesus was merely more patient than other men and therefore could be an example.

Brother Bonner continually complained that he had to debate all the writers for *Faith and Facts* at the same time since all their computers were connected. He said this in spite of the fact that Brother Asher did not use one chart computer generated or otherwise and simply opened a small stenographer's notebook and an old black Bible.

Many of Bonner's own charts were obviously generated by computer. Before the week was out he furnished me with his e-mail address. Before the week in Lufkin was over, Brother Bonner's son who did not attend the debate and was 600 miles away began reviewing the debate without being present. His review appeared on the Internet. The legs of the lame are not equal…

Several remarked on the new Middle-of-the-Road developing on this issue. It seems that most brethren if asked what their position is on this question will immediately get a clouded look in their eyes for a moment and then say, "Well, I don't agree with either one of them." Upon questioning, the point of disagreement is usually some arcane and small difference and sometimes it is even a difference that cannot be immediately remembered. However, it sounds thoughtful and studious. It has the desired effect of silencing objection from those who are hurling intentions to withdraw fellowship. We all know what the writer is trying to say when he makes this statement. His studies and disagreement on all sides will probably continue for decades. This is a definite career move. I suspect that it is done for the same reason that Indians wore Breechcloths. It is just better to sit on a briar with them than without them.

For those who have claimed that the last two debaters on this subject have gone down to embarrassing defeat (get the books and tapes) only because computer assisted presentations were made and have implied that simple gospel preachers are at a disadvantage in the computer age, get the tapes from Amarillo and Lufkin and remember that the power is and always has been in the word. Any excuse will do when error is upheld and defeated.

David was offered Saul's armor to do battle with a blustering and insulting giant. He refused saying God would provide. He took five stones. We know the outcome.

Jeff Asher was offered every computer advantage possible and the help of many men. He refused and denied himself every advantage saying that the Bible alone would do the job. He took five stones and smacked a blustering and bragging giant right between the eyes with all five of them. He cut off his head and hung his sword and armor in the temple.

He did it just by reading his Bible.

John A. Welch