

THE DOCTRINE OF THE ETERNAL GENERATION OF THE SON

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Introduction:

While living in a Muslim majority country, Christians are often confronted with two significant objections concerning their religious beliefs. First, the Bible is not reliable because it has been changed and corrupted throughout history. Second, it is blasphemous to call Jesus the Son of God, because Muslims view God as one, with no plurality in the personhood of God. For Christians, the authenticity of the Bible and the sonship of Christ, are fundamental doctrines. The foundation of Christian faith rests on the trustworthiness of the Bible and on Christ's sonship. Both these core doctrines are firmly rooted in the Bible.

As regards the latter, the church has always affirmed throughout the centuries the eternal sonship of Christ while also believing in the eternal generation of the Son. Sometimes theologians distinguish these doctrines on a technical basis, but the concepts are intertwined and correlative. Donald Macleod rightly points out, “The idea of eternal generation is an inevitable corollary of the eternal sonship”¹ First, we will discuss the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son in its historical context. Then, second, we shall demonstrate the veracity of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son by means of historical and scriptural proofs. Finally, we shall examine and refute the objections.

1. Preliminary Remarks Concerning the Complexity of the Issue

Before discussing the doctrine in detail, it is significant to acknowledge that the eternal generation of the Son is a highly complex issue, as numerous theologians have admitted its complexity throughout history. Macleod admits, “it is revealed, but it is revealed as a mystery, and

¹ Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 131.

the writings of the fathers abound with protestations of inevitable ignorance on the matter.”²

Athanasius confesses the same:

Nor again is it right to seek . . . how God begets, and what is the manner of his begetting. For a man must be beside himself to venture on such points; since a thing ineffable and proper to God’s nature and known to him alone and the Son, this he demands to be explained in words . . . [I]t is better in perplexity to be silent and believe, than to disbelieve on account of perplexity.³

Similar remarks come from Gregory of Nazianzen:

But the manner of his generation we will not admit that even angels can conceive, much less you. Shall I tell you how it was? It was in a manner known to the Father who begat, and to the Son who was begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a cloud, and escapes your dim sight.⁴

These statements highlight explicitly the complexity of this doctrine. Nevertheless, the church has always adhered to this doctrine and diligently articulated its significance in the light of Scripture, both in historic creeds and in Reformation confessions. The complexity doesn’t imply that one should deny this fundamental truth, for it is crucial to the ontological Trinity. Yet, some have abandoned this core belief. Kevin Giles lists some well-known evangelicals who have and comments:

Today, some of the best-known names in the evangelicals world advocate the abandonment of the doctrine of the eternal begetting, or generation, of the Son. Those who have put this argument in writing include J. Oliver Buswell, Lorraine Boettner, Walter Martin, Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, John S. Feinberg, Millard Erickson, Robert Reymond, Paul Helm, William Lane Craig, and Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears.⁵

² Macleod, 131.

³ Macleod, 131.

⁴ Macleod, 131.

⁵ Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Kindle edition, locations 272-274.

2. Eternal Generation Defined

The phrase “eternal generation” refers to the ontological Trinity and is used to describe the inter-trinitarian (*opera ad intra*) relationship, between God the Father and God the Son.⁶ The incarnation, by contrast, expresses the economic relationship.⁷ Although complicated, theologians have tried to explain eternal generation. Louis Berkhof writes, “It is that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby He, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like His own, and puts the second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change.”⁸ Charles Hodge briefly defines it another way, as “the communication of the same numerical essence whole and entire from the Father to the Son.”⁹ A. A. Hodge is more explicit:

An eternal personal act of the Father, wherein, by necessity of nature, not by choice of will, He generates the person (not the essence) of the Son, by communicating to Him the whole indivisible substance of the Godhead, without division, alienation, or change, so that the Son is the express image of His Father’s person, and eternally continues, not from the Father, but in the Father, and the Father in the Son.¹⁰

Therefore, we can conclude that eternal generation means, from all eternity past, God the Father has begotten God the Son. The Father, the first person of the Trinity, generates or begets

⁶ “Ontology is the study of being. When we talk about the ontological Trinity, or as some theologians term it, the “immanent Trinity,” we are referring to the Trinity in itself, without regard to God’s works of creation and redemption.” R. C. Sproul, “What’s the Difference between the Ontological and the Economic Trinity?” *Ligonier Ministries*, August 15, 2014, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/whats-difference-between-ontological-and-economic-trinity/>.

⁷ “When we speak of the economic Trinity, on the other hand, we are dealing with the activity of God and the roles of the three persons with regard to creation and redemption.” R. C. Sproul, “What’s the Difference between the Ontological and the Economic Trinity?” *Ligonier Ministries*, August 15, 2014, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/whats-difference-between-ontological-and-economic-trinity/>.

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 94.

⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Vol. 1), Reprinted 1981 edition. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub, 1999), 468.

¹⁰ “Eternal Generation of the Son” Theopedia, accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.theopedia.com/eternal-generation-of-the-son>.

the Son, but this does not imply that the Father generates the essence of the second person; He only begets the person because the essence is self-existent, eternal, and divine. John Calvin reiterates this aspect, “whoever says that the Son has been given his essence from the Father, denies that he has being from himself.”¹¹ Calvin continues, “God is in one essence . . . hence . . . The essence both of the Son and the Spirit is unbegotten . . . and the Father also in respect to his person is unbegotten.”¹² Therefore, while discussing eternal generation, one must carefully maintain this distinction of person and essence; otherwise, the equality, deity, and pre-existence of the Son are sabotaged, leading to the pitfall of Arianism.

3. The Scriptural Affirmation of the Doctrine

One of the most prominent accusations made against eternal generation is that it is an unbiblical doctrine. However, a careful analysis of Scripture explicitly reveals that it is biblically warranted. The most commonly used passages come directly from the Gospel of John, but the church fathers frequently quoted Old Testament passages such as Psalms 110:3; 2:7 and Proverbs 8:25. Writes Lee Irons:

Athanasius quotes the three standard OT proof texts that the Son is begotten—Ps 110:3 (109:3 LXX); Ps 2:7; Prov 8:25—and then right after these he concludes by quoting John 1:18 (*Defense of the Nicene Definition* §13; NPNF2 4.158). Cyril of Jerusalem does much the same thing, quoting Ps 2:7 and 110:3 followed immediately by three of the *μονογενής* passages in John’s Gospel (3:16, 18; 1:14) (*Catechetical Lectures* 11.5-6; NPNF2 7.65-66).¹³

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Create Space Independent Platform, 2011), I.xiii.23.

¹² Calvin, I.xiii.25.

¹³ Lee Irons, “*Μονογενής* in the Church Fathers: A Response to Kevin Giles, Part 5,” *The Upper Register*, (blog) January 1, 2017, <https://upper-register.typepad.com/blog/2017/01/monogenes-in-the-church-fathers-a-response-to-kevin-giles-part-5.html>.

As we noted, the first set of proof-texts come from the OT. The second set of biblical affirmations is mainly derived from the Gospel of John and primarily uses the word *monogenes* (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9). Lee Irons presents more updated research and adds:

The church fathers didn't hang eternal generation solely on the Johannine μονογενής . . . There were also several New Testament texts outside of the Johannine μονογενής texts that the church fathers appealed to, most notably the following: "As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (John 5:26 ESV); "All that the Father has is mine" (John 16:15 ESV); and "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3 ESV).¹⁴

The church fathers also included Colossians 1:15, emphasizing the use of *prototokos*,¹⁵ thereby demonstrating how such vital texts support the biblical credentials of eternal generation. Moreover, Kevin Giles considers that the most significant proof of it lies in the use of the names Father and Son: "Those who have thought the deepest about the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son clearly recognize that this doctrine is rooted primarily in the revealed and correlated names 'Father' and 'Son' (77)."¹⁶

4. Creedal Affirmation of the Doctrine

The early church was confronted with several Christological heresies, such as Gnosticism, Docetism, Sabellianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism, but Arianism was the most prominent. In 319 A.D. an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius began to propagate that the Son was not of the same substance with the Father but was merely created by the Father before the beginning of the world. Arius denied not only the pre-existence but also the deity of the Son. As a

¹⁴ Irons.

¹⁵ Giles, Kindle locations 810-817.

¹⁶ Peter Strenberg, "Review: The Eternal Generation of the Son," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, n.d., accessed September 12, 2019, <https://www.wls.wels.net/review-the-eternal-generation-of-the-son/>.

result, the church called its first ecumenical council in 325 A.D. to refute what came to be called Arianism, and formulated its joint doctrinal statement commonly known as the Nicene Creed, affirming Christ's deity and eternal generation.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. . . .¹⁷

Later, the Constantinopolitan Creed made a slight revision of the Nicene Creed, and it is commonly used in many churches today. It also reiterated eternal generation in the following words:

And in one Lord Jesus, the *only-begotten* son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds* (ions), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. . . .¹⁸

These italic words explicitly express creedal emphasis on eternal generation. Afterwards, the Chalcedonian Creed also includes a brief reference to eternal generation in the following words: "one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man," it affirms that he is "begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead."¹⁹ Therefore, all of these creedal statements explicitly demonstrate that the ecumenical councils fully affirmed the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

5. Confessional Affirmation of the Doctrine

Later, the Belgic Confession of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in A.D. 1561 affirmed eternal generation. Articles 9 and 10 show:

¹⁷ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom (with a History and Critical Notes)* revised by David S. Schaff, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1:28-29.

¹⁸ "The Creed of Nicea and Constantinople," accessed September 16, 2019, http://web.mit.edu/ocf/www/nicene_creed.html.

¹⁹ Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:62.

. . . Therefore, in this point, we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely, that of the Apostles, of Nice, and of Athanasius . . . We believe that Jesus Christ, according to his divine nature, is the only begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made or created (for then he would be a creature), but co-essential and co-eternal with the Father . . .²⁰

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England also throw light on this matter. It is mentioned in the second article:

The Sonne, which is the worde of the Father, begotten from euerlastyng of the Father, the very and eternall GOD, of one substaunce with the Father, toke man's nature in the wombe of the blessed Virgin . . .²¹

The Second Helvetic Confession adopted in A.D. 1566 contains the same truth of eternal generation. It says in chapter three:

. . . the Father has begotten the Son from eternity, the Son is begotten in an unspeakable manner; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from them both, and that from eternity, and is to be worshiped with them both. So that there are not three Gods, but three persons, consubstantial, coeternal, and coequal; distinct, as touching their persons; and, in order, one going before another, yet without any inequality. For, as touching their nature or essence, they are so joined together that they are but one God; and the divine essence is common to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.²²

Afterwards, the Westminster Confession also highlights the same aspect in the following words:

In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; *the Son is eternally begotten of the Father*; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, (WCF 2.3).²³

Westminster Larger Catechism's Q. 10 also deals with the same subject of eternal generation. It says,

²⁰ "The Belgic Confession (1561)," *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/belgic-confession-1561/>.

²¹ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds - Volume III, Part I* (Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 488.

²² "English Version of the Second Helvetic Confession, A. D. 1566," Biblehub, accessed September 17, 2019, https://biblehub.com/library/schaff/the_creeds_of_the_evangelical_protestant_churches/english_version_of_the_second.htm.

²³ Pipa, 297.

*Q. What are the personal properties of the three persons in the Godhead? A. It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son, from all eternity.*²⁴

Moreover, the Savoy Declaration, 1658, and the 1689 Baptist Confession share almost identical language at this point. So, this brief survey explicitly demonstrates the fact that the doctrine of eternal generation is substantially in line with the historic Christian creeds and confessions, and that the Church has consistently affirmed and maintained its validity by confessing the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

6. Major Objections Concerning the Doctrine of Eternal Generation

The critics often present several objections questioning the veracity of the doctrine of eternal generation, but a careful analysis can help to resolve the controversies. Here, we shall discuss two of the most common objections, ontological subordination of the Son and the immutability of God, evaluating each objection accordingly.

a. The Danger of Ontological Subordination of the Son

The most common objection made is that the eternal generation of the Son implies or necessitates the eternal subordination of the Son. From the dawn of Christianity, the church has affirmed the fact that each member of the Trinity is co-equal, co-eternal, and eternally divine. There is no hierarchy within the members of the ontological Trinity. However, subordination can be applied to the economic Trinity. The Apostle Paul agrees, stating in Philippians 2:6-8, “. . . though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (ESV). This passage explicitly correlates to ontological equality and economic or

²⁴ Pipa, 320.

functional subordination of the Son. The ontological Trinity has no room for such a view of the ontological subordination of the Son. Rather, it underscores the equality of the begotten Son. The Son, then, is equally worshipped with the Father in heavenly realms. How could a subordinate son receive the same honour, glory, and praise from the angels? This objection of eternal subordination does not hold water. Kevin Giles calls this objection “mind-boggling”.²⁵

It indicates that those making this case have a minimum knowledge of the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity and do not understand what this doctrine teaches and safeguards. . . . It is hard to believe that any theologian could claim that the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, endorsed by the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and most of the Reformation and Post-Reformation confessions, actually teaches the ontological subordinationism and the Arian error.²⁶

All those asserting the view of eternal subordination indirectly feed the Arian error because they propound that the Son is the creature and the Father is the creator, implying thereby that the Son is lesser than the Father in position or rank. Giles comments:

The Arian understanding of the Son’s begetting was that he was contingently created in time by the will of the Father and is thus dependent and subordinated God. The Nicene fathers’ understanding was that the Son is eternally begotten not by will and is thus of the same divine being as the Father. He is not subordinated to the Father but is his equal in being, power and rank²⁷

So, we can conclude that the Arians were sabotaging the eternal equality of the Son. The Nicene fathers, however, composed their historic creed to maintain the eternal equality of the Son. Giles quotes J. N. D. Kelly and writes:

The principal aim of those who manufactured the creed [of Nicaea] was to call a halt, once and for all, to the Arian heresy. And he adds, in speaking of the Son as “begotten of the

²⁵ Giles, Kindle locations 2209-2210.

²⁶ Giles, Kindle locations 2214-2216.

²⁷ Giles, Kindle locations 2221-2223.

being of the Father,” and anathematizing all the Arian slogans, the Nicene bishops placed “Arian theology ... under a total ban.”²⁸

Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 11 also affirms the equality:

Q. How doth it appear that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father? A. The Scriptures manifest that the Son and the Holy Ghost are God equal with the Father, ascribing unto them such names, attributes, works, and worship, as are proper to God only.²⁹

Chad Van Dixhoorn comments:

Questions 8–11 subsume eternal generation and procession under “personal properties.” If there was an earlier allowance for the idea that the Father could be the fountain or source of the Godhead, it is gone, and as in the Shorter Confession, the equality between the persons is once again stressed. Equality is not merely asserted, but defended in question eleven.³⁰

Here, it is also significant to mention that some have argued philosophically that the term begetting or generation implies subordination. Giles describes the nature of this argument in the following words, “they make the case that the orthodox doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son subordinates him to the Father by depicting him as ‘caused’ by the Father, begotten ‘contingently’ by the Father and ‘dependent for his being’ on the Father.”³¹ Giles remarkably responds, referring to the fathers:

Possibly the most important contribution the Cappadocian fathers made to the developing orthodox understanding of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son was their exclusion of the Neo-Platonist premise that what is caused is less than its originating cause, a premise Origen, Arius and Eunomius all presupposed. Basil and the two Gregories saw clearly that speaking of the Son as eternally begotten of the Father implied derivation and cause, but they would not allow that this language resulted in any subordination whatsoever. They argued that what is caused is not necessarily separated or subordinate to its cause, giving the illustration of a fire and its light and the sun and its rays. The fire and

²⁸ Giles, Kindle location 2223.

²⁹ Pipa, 320.

³⁰ Chad Van Dixhoorn, “(Post-Reformation Trinitarian Perspectives)” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, Eds. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Zondervan Academic, 2017), 203, Kindle location, 4799.

³¹ Giles, Kindle locations 2262-2264.

the sun are the cause of the light, but they are not other than the cause or secondary to the cause.³²

b. The Immutability of God is Shattered

Another significant objection raised is that the eternal generation of the Son compromises or conflicts with the doctrine of divine immutability. Indeed, the church has always affirmed divine immutability. The two doctrines seem incompatible with one another. However, a careful treatment of this objection shows that it has no firm foundation on which to stand. Yet, to understand this, we must appreciate, fundamentally, that divine immutability is not the same as dead immobility. Berkhof rightly points out that:

The divine immutability should not be understood as implying *immobility*, as if there were no movement in God. It is even customary in theology to speak of God as *actus purus*, a God who is always in action. The Bible teaches us that God enters into manifold relations with man and, as it were, lives their life with them. There is change round about Him, change in the relations of men to Him, but there is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purpose, His motives of action, or His promises.³³

Indeed, the Bible contains numerous passages that demonstrate instances where God “repents” or “relents,” but this does not imply that God changes in His being. He remains the same in His very being. These references related to His repenting or relenting speak about His relationship with human beings and creation.

Second, divine immutability ever perplexes the human mind because human beings always try to articulate things within the limits of time and space. Human beings are confined to these natural laws, but God and eternity are beyond the limits of earthly time and space. Austen Haynes, in discussing Thomas Aquinas’ view of immutability, comments, “Time presupposes change, since it is defined by reference to change. Eternity, on the other hand, follows from things in which there

³² Giles, Kindle locations 2262-2264.

³³ Berkhof, 131.

is never any change or possibility of change.”³⁴ Haynes continues using Aquinas’s persuasive argument and concludes:

. . . . only God is immutable. Time and eternity are essentially different things. Time is not the subject of eternity, since they are not measures of the same type of thing. The fundamental difference between time and eternity is that time measures change and eternity measures permanent unchangeable existence. Boethius says that eternity exists as an instantaneous whole. There is no **flow** of time or *now* in eternity. Time, conversely, **flows**, and this flow consists in the changing *now* that refers to the **changing of changeable things** that time measures.³⁵

Both these citations from Haynes’ article explicitly expound the fact that anything that happens in eternity does not conflict with divine immutability. So, the doctrine of eternal generation cannot be objected to because this generation occurred in eternity past.

Another persuasive argument can be utilised to affirm both eternal generation and divine immutability. The church has believed that no fundamental change occurs in the process of eternal generation because the essence of the Son is neither created nor originated, but rather communicated or transferred. Heinrich Heppé, quoting Leiden Synopsis VIII, 7, describes the same truth: “The begetting of the Son is an ‘inward and personal act of God the Father, by which in a spiritual and ineffable manner He has begotten His Son as His Image from eternity out of Himself in the same essence and by the same essence has communicated to him the same infinite essence entire.’”³⁶ This explicitly confirms the fact that the same essence of the Father is *communicated* to the Son; the essence is neither generated nor originated. The main thrust of the

³⁴ Austen Haynes, “Aquinas on Divine Immutability,” *Perfectihabia*, June 17, 2015, <https://monadshavenowindows.wordpress.com/2015/06/17/aquinas-on-divine-immutability/>.

³⁵ Haynes.

³⁶ Heinrich Heppé, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 120.

argument lies in the fact that no radical or dynamic change takes place even in an eternal generation. Therefore, the objection to immutability cannot be sustained.

Conclusion

In this paper, we briefly discussed the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. We noticed that the veracity of this doctrine could not be questioned because it is biblically warranted. It is historically affirmed by the most ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions. In the last section, we briefly evaluated two significant objections regarding the eternal generation of the Son and explained how there is no ontological subordination within the members of the Trinity. Each person is entirely God co-equal, co-eternal, and co-existent. As far as the second objection of immutability is concerned, we explained that the doctrine of divine immutability remains as it is because no radical change occurs in the eternal generation; the only begotten Son possesses the same essence that the Father possesses. Here, it is also significant to admit that the doctrine of eternal generation will always be perplexing to our limited human intellect. However, the Scriptural and historical affirmations will always encourage us to uphold this significant truth rather than reject it in disbelief.

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