



## 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. Yet for Christians, both truths ~ the authenticity of the Bible and the sonship of Christ ~ are fundamental, since the Christian faith regards these doctrines to be firmly rooted in the Bible and rests upon them.

Throughout the centuries, then, the church has always affirmed on the basis of Scripture the eternal sonship of Christ and the eternal generation of the Son. Sometimes theologians distinguish these facets of the doctrine of Christ, yet they are intertwined and correlative. Donald Macleod rightly points out that, “The idea of eternal generation is an inevitable corollary of the eternal sonship . . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, we shall first discuss the eternal generation of the Son in its historical context. Then, secondly, we shall prove the veracity of the eternal generation of the Son by means of historical and scriptural proofs. Finally, we shall examine and refute the objections to the eternal generation of the Son.

### 1. Preliminary Remarks Concerning the Complexity of the Issue

Before entering into the discussion in detail, we must acknowledge that the eternal generation of the Son is a highly complex issue. Numerous theologians throughout history have admitted this. Observes Macleod, “it is revealed, but it is revealed as a mystery, and the writings of the fathers

abound with protestations of inevitable ignorance on the matter.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the perplexities of the eternal generation of the Son, the church has always affirmed her adherence to the teaching and diligently articulated its biblical significance in both ancient creeds and Reformation confessions. Although complex, the teaching of the eternal generation of the Son is critical to the ontological Trinity. Yet, some evangelicals have abandoned this core belief. Writes Kevin Giles:

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.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Eternal Generation Defined

The phrase “eternal generation” is used to describe the inter-trinitarian (*opera ad intra*) relationship, between God the Father and God the Son. The term refers, then, to what theologians call the ontological

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 131.

<sup>3</sup> Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 131.

<sup>5</sup> Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Kindle edition, locations 272-274.

Trinity, in distinction from the economic Trinity.<sup>7</sup> As complex as is the eternal generation of the Son, Louis Berkhof, for instance, says “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.”<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, Charles Hodge briefly defines it as “the communication of the same numerical essence whole and entire from the Father to the Son.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, we conclude that eternal generation means that, from all eternity past, God the Father has begotten God the Son. The Father, the first person of the Trinity, generates or begets the Son, yet without implying that the Father generates the essence of the second person. Since the divine essence is self-existent, eternal, and divine, it is but the person that the Father begets. Remarks John Calvin, “whoever says that the Son has been given his essence from the Father, denies that he has being from himself.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> 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 unbiblical. However, a careful analysis of Scripture explicitly reveals that the doctrine is biblically warranted. Several significant passages validate it. The most commonly used come from the Gospel of John, yet the church fathers frequently quoted Old Testament passages such as Ps 110:3; Ps 2:7; Prov 8:25. States 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).<sup>13</sup>

Then, in turning to the Gospel of John, we note primarily the word *monogenes* (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9). In the same place, Irons comments:

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

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<sup>7</sup> “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/>).

“When we speak of the economic Trinity 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/>).

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

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

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

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

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xiii.25.

<sup>13</sup> 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>.

nature" (Heb 1:3 ESV).

The church fathers also remarked on Colossians 1:15, emphasizing the use of *prototokos*. We deduce, then, that such texts provide sufficient evidence to prove that the eternal generation of the Son is biblically demonstrable. Indeed, Kevin Giles posits that the most significant proof 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)." <sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Creedal Affirmation of the Doctrine

Recall that the early church was confronted with numerous Christological heresies, such as Gnosticism, Docetism, Sabellianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism, yet 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 as the Father but was merely created by the Father before the beginning of the world. Thus, Arius denied both the pre-existence and the deity of the Son. As a 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, which affirmed 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. . . <sup>15</sup>

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. . . <sup>16</sup>

These italicized words explicitly express creedal emphasis on eternal generation. Subsequently, the Chalcedonian Creed also included a passing reference to eternal generation. Remarking on "one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man," the Chalcedonian Creed affirms that he is "begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead." <sup>17</sup> We may fairly deduce from these creedal statements, then, that the ecumenical councils explicitly affirm the eternal generation of the Son.

#### 5. Confessional Affirmation of the Doctrine

Likewise, the Belgic Confession of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (1561) affirms the eternal generation of the Son. Articles 9 and 10 read:

... 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 . . . <sup>18</sup>

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England also throw light on this matter. The second article states that:

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 . . . <sup>19</sup>

The Second Helvetic Confession adopted in 1566 contains the same truth of eternal generation. According to 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

<sup>14</sup> Giles, Kindle locations 810-817.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> "The Creed of Nicea and Constantinople," accessed September 16, 2019, [http://web.mit.edu/ocf/www/nicene\\_creed.html](http://web.mit.edu/ocf/www/nicene_creed.html).

<sup>17</sup> Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:62.

<sup>18</sup> "The Belgic Confession (1561)," *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/belgic-confession-1561/>.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds - Volume III, Part I* (Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 488.

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.<sup>20</sup>

Later, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) further highlights the eternal generation of the Son:

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).<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Westminster Larger Catechism's Q. 10:

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.*<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the Savoy Declaration, 1658, and the 1689 Baptist Confession are almost identical at this point. All told, then, this brief survey explicitly demonstrates that the doctrine of eternal generation is substantially in line with the historic Christian creeds and confessions of the church, and that the church has consistently affirmed, confessed, and maintained the eternal generation of the Son.

## 6. Major Objections Concerning the Doctrine of Eternal Generation

Although critics offer several objections to the doctrine of the Son's eternal generation, a careful analysis of their concerns can help resolve the difficulties. Here we shall discuss two of the most common objections:

### *A. The Danger of implying or necessitating the Ontological Subordination of the Son*

From the dawn of Christianity, the church has affirmed that each member of the Trinity is co-equal and co-eternally divine. There is no

hierarchy within the ontological Trinity. Subordination can be applied solely to the Trinity considered economically. Consider Philippians 2:6-8: "... though he [Christ] 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 indicates the ontological equality within God, underscoring the equality of the Father and the begotten Son, yet for the sake of our salvation the Son becomes economically or functionally subordinate to the Father.

It follows, then, that the Son is equally worshipped with the Father in heavenly realms. An ontologically subordinate son could not receive the same honor, glory, and praise from the angels as the Father. Thus, the claim that the eternal generation of the Son implies his eternal subordination to the Father does not hold water. Kevin Giles calls this objection "mind-boggling":<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

All those who assert the eternal subordination of the Son indirectly feed the Arian error, because the assertion implies that the Son is the creature and the Father the creator, and that the Son is lesser than the Father in position or rank. Comments Giles:

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

<sup>20</sup> "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](https://biblehub.com/library/schaff/the_creeds_of_the_evangelical_protestant_churches/english_version_of_the_second.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Pipa Jr., Joseph A., *The Westminster Confession of Faith Study Book: A Study Guide for Churches* (Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 297.

<sup>22</sup> Pipa, *The Westminster Confession of Faith Study Book*, 320.

<sup>23</sup> Giles, Kindle locations 2209-2210.

<sup>24</sup> Giles, Kindle locations 2214-2216.

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 rank . . .<sup>25</sup>

We conclude, then, that whereas the Arians sabotaged the eternal equality of the Son, the Nicene fathers composed their historic creed to uphold the eternal equality of the Son. Quoting J. N. D. Kelly, Giles 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 being of the Father,” and anathematizing all the Arian slogans, the Nicene bishops placed “Arian theology ... under a total ban.”<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, the Westminster Larger Catechism:

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.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that some argue that the term “begetting” or “generation” implies subordination. States Giles, “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.”<sup>29</sup> Giles responds remarkably by reference 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 the sun are the cause of the light, but they are not other than the cause or secondary to the cause.<sup>30</sup>

### B. *The Immutability of God is Shattered*

The church has always affirmed divine immutability and done so hand-in-hand with the eternal generation of the Son. While, then, the two doctrines seem incompatible, a careful treatment of this objection reveals that it has no firm foundation.

The first thing to understand is that divine immutability refers not to dead immobility. States Berkhof:

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.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the Bible contains numerous passages that demonstrate instances where God “repents” or “relents,” but this does not imply that God is changed in His being. He remains the same, these references to His repenting or relenting speak of His relationship to the created, specifically with human beings.

Second, we must understand that divine immutability always perplexes the human mind for we always seek to articulate things within the limits of time and space. We are confined to these natural laws, but the

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<sup>25</sup> Giles, Kindle locations 2221-2223.

<sup>26</sup> Giles, Kindle location 2223.

<sup>27</sup> Pipa, *The Westminster Confession of Faith Study Book*, 320.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Giles, Kindle locations 2262-2264.

<sup>30</sup> Giles, Kindle locations 2262-2264.

<sup>31</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 131.

eternal God is beyond such limits. 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 is never any change or possibility of change."<sup>32</sup> 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.

Both these citations from Haynes expound the fact that anything that happens in eternity does not conflict with divine immutability. Therefore, the doctrine of eternal generation is safeguarded since this generation occurred in eternity past.

Furthermore, the church has upheld both eternal generation and divine immutability, believing there to be no change that occurs in the process of eternal generation, for in the generation the essence of the Son is neither created nor originated, but rather communicated or transferred. Heinrich Heppe, 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.'"<sup>33</sup> This explicitly confirms that the same essence of the Father is *communicated* to the Son; the essence is neither generated nor originated. There is then no radical or dynamic change that takes place in eternal generation. Accordingly, the objection that the eternal generation of the Son impacts God's immutability cannot be sustained.

## Conclusion

We hold, then, that the eternal generation of the Son is biblically warranted and is historically affirmed by the most ecumenical creeds and Reformation confessions. Despite objections, there is no ontological subordination within the members of the Trinity. Each person is entirely God co-equal, co-eternal, and co-existent. Nor is the eternal generation of the Son a threat to God's immutability since no radical change occurs in God in the Son's eternal generation. The only begotten Son possesses the same essence as the Father. Thus, despite the challenges of the doctrine to our limited human intellect, it is affirmed both in Scripture and by historical affirmations of the faith. We shall always be encouraged, then, to uphold this significant truth rather than to reject it in unbelief.

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<sup>32</sup> Austen Haynes, "Aquinas on Divine Immutability," *Perfectihabia*, June 17, 2015, <https://monadshavenowindows.wordpress.com/2015/06/17/aquinas-on-divine-immutability/>.

<sup>33</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 120.

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