

**A Review and Evaluation of Diverse
Christological Opinions among American
Evangelicals:
Part 1: The eternal generation of the Son¹**

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Abstract

The writer, himself an American evangelical, intends to discuss, in three articles, areas in which American evangelicals disagree about how God the Son relates to God the Father and the meaning and effects of the true humanity and the true deity in Christ. Each position will be defined and exemplified. The rationale offered by proponents of each position is provided. Evaluations are made. This first article focuses primarily on the ancient doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son as held by some American evangelicals but denied by others. The second article will be used to discuss the issue, within the perimeters of evangelicalism in America, of whether God the Son is eternally or temporally only relationally subordinate to God the Father. The final article will be used to address several different understandings within American Evangelicalism regarding incarnational Christology. That article will include meanings

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given the Kenosis, views about what it means to say that Christ is true Man and true God, and how the two natures in the one Person of Christ relate to each other. Therefore, while this series is certainly connected to more general Trinitarian thought, the articles will be written especially to focus on Christ. Aside from just exposing, perhaps for the first time to some readers, a number of the considerable differences regarding the doctrines of God and Christ held by Trinitarians, it is hoped by the writer that these articles might also provide material useful to some to better understand the blessed Person of Jesus Christ our God, our Lord, and our Savior to Whom be glory forever.

1. Introduction

James R. White (1998:14) writes: “. . . the Trinity is the highest revelation God has made of Himself to His people. It is the capstone, the summit, the brightest star in the firmament of divine truths.” If this is so, and if “the things revealed belong to us” (Deut 29:29), then Christians have a mandate to understand, within our human limitations, the meaning of the Trinity including how the divine Persons relate to each other. These are Scriptural doctrines given to us and, therefore, are proper subjects of study.

Despite that mandate, the particulars of how the Trinal Persons interact is much argued in the literature of American evangelicals. By “evangelical” the writer means, as described by Pierard (1996:379-382) and McIntire (1999:433-435), that movement in modern Protestant Christianity which conforms to the essential elements of the Christian faith while avoiding what some, wrongly or rightly, perceive as anti-intellectualism and a suspicious nature in the older Fundamentalism in America. While some American theologians discussed below wrote before the development of modern evangelicalism, they are included among evangelicals as the tenets and attitudes expressed in their writings put them ideationally in that later group.

One of the organizations representing evangelicals is the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). This requires of its members adherence to two doctrines. In addition to an affirmation on the inerrancy of the autographa of

Scripture, the ETS requires its members to affirm annually in writing that “God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated Person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.” One might suppose that such an affirmation made by Trinitarians on the doctrine of the Trinity would effect a uniformity of belief in regard to intra-trinal relationships.

However, as this article and the next will show, despite there being an agreement among evangelicals referenced, many of whom are ETS members, over the tenet that God is three equal Persons each having the identical, undivided essence, there definitely is not a uniformity among these evangelicals about how the Trinal Persons eternally relate to each other or even, as a secondary question, whether economic Trinal relationships are equivalents of ontological ones.

Thesis: It is the opinion of this writer that God the Son is not eternally generated or begotten of God the Father.

2. Some American Evangelicals Assert That The Son Is Eternally Generated.

Many evangelicals in America have argued for the position that God the Son receives His personhood, and/or essence, and/or deity eternally from God the Father. This tenet was widely affirmed in Patristic Theology in ecumenical creeds, personal belief statements, personal correspondence, and treatises. In this article, despite it being about modern theologians, the writer will be obliged to comment on historical theology, in the evaluation section, because historical viewpoints are made an argument for modern Christological opining.

Williams (1996:93) asserts that God would not be God were the Son not to receive personal subsistence timelessly from the Father. The Son is eternally begotten or generated by the Father. The only evidence which Williams offers his readers for his teaching is lexical as found in the article by Buchsel (1981:739-741).

To clarify the view of Williams, it is noted that Buchsel in that Dictionary concludes that *monogenēs* in the New Testament means “only begotten” and

“denotes the origin of Jesus.” To be the Son of God, Buchsel suggests, means to be the only begotten of God. That understanding of the Greek adjective is also the view of some of those below referenced. These see *monogenēs* as an evidence of the eternal generation doctrine.

Berkhof (1996:88-95) believes that the Trinal Persons are distinguished by personal attributes which are works within the divine being. These works imply a subordination of subsistence. The distinctive property of the Father is that of generating. The property of the Son is being generated. Berkhof explains that generation is a timeless act which is always continuing, and by it the Father communicates to the Son the divine essence in its entirety. The Son is still being begotten! Berkhof’s evidence is John 5:26 and the names “Father” and “Son.” A parallel to the essentiation of the Son by the Father, Berkhof believes, is the eternal spiration of the Holy Spirit by which to that Person is communicated the entirety of the divine essence. So one supposed relationship in God is made corollary and evidential to another.

Shedd (1980:251-296) opines that in eternal generation the entire divine nature is caused to be the nature of the second Person. Shedd believes that if one accepts the nouns “Father” and “Son” to be indicating absolute truths, then that one would not deny or doubt the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Shedd also thinks that the Holy Spirit is eternally essentiated by spiration.

Dahms (1983:222-232) argues from the usage of *monogenēs* in the Septuagint that the adjective applied to Christ by John in the New Testament means that the Son is eternally generated. Elsewhere (1994:363), Dahms reasons that since the Son is eternally role subordinate to the Father, it follows that the Son is eternally generated. As that eternal subordination, Dahms thinks, finds its ontological basis in generation, that generation must be eternal too.

Kitano (1999:90-98) understands begetting passages as Psalm 2:7 and John 6:57, as well as the adjective *prototokos* in Col 1:15-20 to indicate that the Son is derived from the Father by eternal generation. Kitano also argues (pp.7-35) that this view of the derivation of the Son from the Father is endorsed throughout Church history.

Pieper (1950:391) tells his readers that the reason the Father is called “Father” is because “He is not of another.” But the Son “...has the divine essence from the Father.” That is why He is called Son.” Peiper’s argument is limited to the terms “Father” and “Son” which Scripture gives the Persons.

Lewis and Demarest (1987:255- 256) say that “the Son is begotten from the eternal essence of the Father” Augustine and some ancient Greek theologians are cited as support for that view by Lewis and Demarest.

Wiley (1940:431) believes that the order of the subsistences [that is “Persons”] in the one divine essence is that the Father is independent. But the Son derives His Godhead from the Father, and so the Son is eternally dependent on the Father because of the Son’s filial relationship. Wiley, like most of the above, does not acknowledge any position contrary to his being held by evangelicals, and Wiley does not apparently feel compelled to provide evidence for his views other than a brief reference to the Nicene Creed and his corollary tenet of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.

Clark (1985:109-126) insists, with others above, that the names “Father” and “Son” imply generation and filiation. Clark stipulates in his explanation, that it is not the essence which is generated but the Person of the Son which is begotten. The careful reader of this article will have already noted that in making this qualification, Clark is not in agreement with all listed above who affirm a belief in eternal generation. Some of those do say that the divine essence is generated! One may be justified in inferring that as these scholars disagree about just what it is that is eternally generated—subsistence, deity, or essence—that the entire tenet of eternal generation becomes suspect. How clearly Scriptural can the doctrine of eternal generation be if adherents to that tenet cannot agree about what is generated? But Clark does not evidence an awareness of that being a difficulty.

Instead, not being distracted by such “minor” inconsistencies in the opining of those who assert the eternal generation of the Son, Clark vigorously expends energy and space, to take to task those evangelicals who suggest that the framers of the Nicene Creed wrongly understood the adjective *monogenēs* to mean derivation, not uniqueness. Consequently, Clark thinks it proper for those who wrote that Creed to apply as well the verb *gennaō* to the begetting

of the Son in eternity—even though Scripture does not. Clark insists that certainly the one hundred bishops whose native tongue was Greek knew more about the propriety of saying the Son is eternally begotten of the Father than do modern critics of that view who vainly quibble, Clark thinks, over the meaning of the Greek adjective *monogenēs*.

In summary some of the arguments advanced for the eternal begetting of the Son are : (1) the begetting passages, (2) the meaning of *monogenēs*, (3) the meaning of *prototokos*, (4) passages where the Son is said to receive life from the Father, (5) the doctrine is affirmed in church history, (6) the names “Father” and “Son,” (7) the eternal spiration of the Holy Spirit evidences the eternal generation of the Son, and, (8) the eternal relational subordination of the Son evidences the eternal generation of the Son. Each of these arguments will be briefly evaluated below. However, before that, the reader should be introduced to some American evangelicals who deny the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father.

3. Other American Evangelicals Reject The Doctrine Of Eternal Generation.

The sheer confidence, unflinching conviction, and varied and substantial argumentation of these samples of American evangelicals who hold to the eternal generation doctrine would not suggest that a number of other American evangelicals just as confidently reject that doctrine. Nevertheless, it

is the case that there are a number of American evangelicals who do not subscribe to the doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son, and these also have their reasons. Some of these theologians will be identified below.

But first, the writer should make it clear that the following particular examples of American theologians who doubt that the Son is eternally generated by the Father, are not teaching some narrowly held, new view to Conservative Christological thought. First, soon after the turn of the 20th century, a series of twelve volumes called “The Fundamentals” were published (Torrey and Dixon 2000). These were freely provided to hundreds of thousands of ministers and missionaries through out the English speaking world. This set discusses eighty-three doctrines of the Christian Faith. Now despite the alarming

warnings of some of those who fall into the class of theologians exemplified above, as Williams, who asserts that were the eternal generation doctrine not true, then God just could not be God, that tenet finds no place among the eighty-three doctrines in *The Fundamentals*! In fact, R.A. Torrey, an editor of that series, in his “What The Bible Teaches,” rejects eternal generation by saying that the begetting passages refer only to Jesus’ birth from Mary (1933:85-88).

Then, second, various creedal statements as that of the interdenominational Evangelical Theological Society do not require adherence to the doctrine. Neither do some American denominational creeds require belief in eternal generation, for example, the Baptist New Hampshire Confession of 1833, the Presbyterian Auburn Declaration of 1837, the Reformed Episcopal Articles of 1875, and, the American Congregational Declarations of Faith of 1883. While each affirms the Trinity, none of these even mention the doctrine of eternal generation (Schaff 1983)! So, the following examples of theologians who deny that doctrine appear not to be asserting some new or narrowly held view regarding intra-Trinal relationships.

Erickson in two books on the Trinity offers several arguments against the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation. He says the begetting passages refer only to temporal relationships and the name “Son” indicates a likeness not a derivation (1984:298-299, 301). Erickson believes that each Trinal Person depends on the others instead of One being the Cause of the others. This dependence refers to the perichoresis doctrine which defines that each Person interpenetrates the others (2000:62-65).

Buswell (1976:110-112) argues against the eternal generation doctrine lexically by saying that *monogenēs* does not indicate derivation. Buswell also says that assumptions about ontological relationships in God should not be made based on relationships seen in the economy of redemption. The doctrine of eternal generation, Buswell asserts, should ,therefore, be dropped.

Warfield (2003:163,171) opines that both the eternal generation of the Son doctrine and that of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit are but “remnant suggestions of derivation and subordination.” The word “Son” merely indicates a likeness to the Father, not a begetting from the Father.

Boettner (1947:112-117) also thinks that the terms “Father” and “Son” indicate equality not derivation. Neither does the term “Firstborn” refer to a begetting. Economic Trinal relationships are not evidences of activities innate in God.

Reymond (1998: 324-335) denies that *monogenēs* and the begetting passages evidence eternal generation. The titles “Father” and “Son” do not indicate sources or superiority. Christians should not believe that the Father is eternally begetting the Son.

Charles Hodge (1986:468-471) rejects the opinion that passages claimed to evidence an eternal begetting, as John 5:26 really evidence that, it is unreasonable to think that a communication of essence as in human paternity exists in God. Terms as “Father” and “Son” may not indicate derivation at all.

This article has been brought to the place where the writer must go beyond just saying that there are two views about eternal generation. It is time to evaluate, however briefly, each of the eight arguments mentioned above for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

4. An Evaluation of Eight Arguments for Eternal Generation

4:1. Is the begetting passage in Psalm 2:7 convincing evidence of an eternal generation of the Son? Psalm 2:7 does not appear to indicate an eternal begetting. The verb *yālad* can be used figuratively as in Job 15:35. The verb rather than evidencing eternal generation may only indicate that a loving relationship exists between the Father and the Son (Gilchrist, 1980:868). As Calvin says (2003:18), the verse refers to a temporal context where the Son is God’s Agent on earth. Hebrews 1:5 is an exact quotation from the Septuagint. Yet, as Westcott (1955:21) explains, in Hebrews 1:5 eternal generation “appears foreign to the context.” Hebrews 5:5 also cites Psalm 2:7, but there Christ’s Sonship is connected to Christ’s being High Priest not to an eternal begetting (Ellingworth 2000:281-282). The Lukan citation in 3:22 may not be original (Metzger 1985:136).

4:2. Does *monogenēs* prove eternal generation? Opinion is divided over the question of from what is *monogenēs* derived. Some say it is derived from the

verb *gennaō* (Dahms 1983:222). Others say it is derived from the noun *genos* (Harrison 1984:799). As meanings change with usage, etymology, however, may not be a deciding factor (Carson 1989:26, 29).

To respond to Dahms above, in the Septuagint, which profoundly influenced the New Testament writers and first century readers (Grassmick 1976:157; Girdlestone 1974:9), only the Hebrew *yāhîd* is rendered by the Greek *monogenēs*! But *yāhîd* does not mean birthed; it means “only one” or “only” (Alden 1997:434; Gilchrist 1980:373). Further, by consulting a concordance of the LXX, as Morrish (1976:164), one discovers the four places in the canonical literature where *monogenēs* is used in that translation (see Jdg 11:34; Pss 22:20; 25:16; 35:17). And in none of these is the idea of begetting required. For example, in Psalm 35:17, is it really likely that David is saying that his soul or life is “only begotten”?

Jumping forward, when Hebrews calls Isaac *monogenēs* (11:17), are we to think the writer is saying that Isaac was the “only begotten” of Abraham? Is it not instead that Isaac was the unique son? Again jumping forward, when Clement of Rome in his first letter to the Corinthians (chap. 25) calls the fabled bird of Egypt, the Phoenix, *monogenēs*, should we suppose that Clement believed that the phoenix was “only begotten”? Is “unique” not more likely Clement’s meaning? That John (only) calls Christ *monogenēs* does not prove that Christ is eternally begotten because *monogenēs* does not mean “only begotten.”

4:3. Does *prototokos*, “first-born,” as applied to Christ in Colossians 1:15 refer to eternal generation? Despite the opinion of Shedd (1980:325) and Walvoord (1969:43) that it does, this seems unlikely. By the time the New Testament literature was written, *tokos* in the compound adjective had probably lost its force (Arndt and Gingrich 1957:734). The only probable usage in the New Testament of *prototokos* meaning a birthing, and that physical, is a reference to Jesus’ being born of Mary (Michaelis 1995:878; Bartels 1986:668). It rather seems to be the case that “first born” in Colossians refers to the pre-eminence of Christ (O’ Brien 1982:44; Lightfoot 1969:148).

4:4. Do passages like John 5:26, where it is said that the Father gives life to the Son, refer to eternal generation? This may be approached both exegetically by observing context and theologically by referencing God's qualities.

The writer wishes to do the latter first. It is observed that systematic theologians often see it that the divine attributes inhere in the divine essence (Lewis 1989:451; Strong 1967:245). One divine attribute is that of aseity by which is meant that God is the Cause of His own being; God is self-existent (Theissen 1952:120; Berkhof 1996:58). The Trinal Persons do not each have a different set of attributes as each has the same essence in which the attributes inhere (Erickson 1985:265). So, just as Frame (2000:708) says, if the Father is not derived and has no cause, then neither can the Son be derived or have a cause. If the Father gives life to God the Son ontologically and eternally, then God the Father is the Cause of God the Son. But this cannot be because if the Father is uncaused then the Son is uncaused.

Then the context of John 5:26, after an examination, reveals that this passage does not reference an eternal relationship. How can it since it says that the Father will show the Son things in the future so that the Jews of that time will marvel? Beasley-Murray (1987:77) and Brown (1966:215) would concur with Calvin's stipulation when the Reformer unconditionally states that the text "strictly applies to Christ as He was manifested in the flesh" (2003:207).

4:5. As the doctrine of eternal generation is widely held among the church fathers must it be held by moderns? Certainly it cannot be denied that both Western and Eastern fathers even before Nicaea assert the eternal begetting of the Son. Tertullian states that the Father is greater because the Father begets the Son, and the Son is only God because He proceeds from God (Against Praxeas, 26). Origen avers that only the Father is *autotheos* because the Son receives His deity from the Father (Commentary on John, 2.6; De Principiis, 1:2:2).

The Nicene Creed requires the faithful to believe that the Son is begotten (*gennēthenta*) of the Father before creation (Schaff 1998:3). Was this doctrine of the framers of that Creed purely based on Scripture? Or, could a concern as Novatian's, be a motivating factor? Novatian said that unless

the Son were begotten there cannot be only one God (A Treatise Concerning The Trinity, 31). Positing the Father as the Source of the Trinity possibly was the motivation for the acceptance of the eternal essentiation of the Son. Were the monarchy of the Father taught, then the unity of God is thought preserved and tritheism is disavowed. This is Kelly's opinion on the function of the eternal generation doctrine as held by the Apologists (1978:101).

The eternal begetting also assures the *homōousios* of the Son and counters the Arian and Semi-Arian churchmen who deny that the Trinal Persons are of the identical essence (Grillmeier 1975:268; Werner 1972:93-94). But the virtue of a doctrine comes not just from its being useful but the virtue of a doctrine comes from being Scriptural. While much respect should be given the church fathers and the ancient creeds, Scripture, not tradition, is the authority over faith and practice.

4:6. Does the name or title "Son of God" when applied to Christ clearly evidence eternal generation? It does not! It should be noted that none of those mentioned above who deny eternal generation would deny that Christ is eternally God's Son. As Erickson (2000:89) and Warfield (1970:77) say, "Son" is a Hebrew idiom not expressing derivation but likeness or equality. Bess (1965:17-24) provides evidence that when the Old Testament says "sons of", for example in "sons of the troop," 2 Chronicles 25:13, the meaning is membership in that group. Sons of the troops are soldiers! "Man" and "son of man" are used interchangeably (Psalm 8:4; Job 25:6). And, as John 5:18 shows, "Son of God" means equal to God—not derived from God!

4:7. Does the eternal spiration of the Holy Spirit prove the eternal generation of the Son? As stated above, some, as Wiley affirm not just the eternal generation of the Son but also aver the eternal spiration of the Holy Spirit. The latter tenet becomes corollary to the former and is assumed to be evidential of it. Adherents of that doctrine both internationally and in America go so far as to involve themselves in discussions of whether, as in the Western view, the Spirit eternally proceeds from both the Father and the Son or just, as in the Eastern view, from the Father only (Bray 1998; Torrance 1998:447; Hodge 1997:165).

However, the evidence for the teaching of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit is quite weak. Frame (2000:715) and Boettner (1971:122) correctly assert that the issue pivots on the interpretation of John 15:26. Is that being described in 15:26 eternal or temporal? It appears to be temporal! First, the argument advanced by Hengstenberg (1980:273) and Lenski (1961:1069) that eternal Trinal relationships are the subject because verb is present tense is not convincing. A verb is identified as being gnomic partly by the context (Wallace 1996:525), but here the context is temporal just as Morris says (1984:638). Second, “proceeds” is thought to be qualified by the future tense “will send” (Beasley-Murray 1987:276). Third, 15:26 should be interpreted in the light of 14:26 which is temporal (Reymond 1998:338). Fourth, as the Son’s “coming forth” is economic not eternal in John 8:42, that of the Spirit may also be economic (Carson, 1991:529). Fifth, as the preposition is *para* not *ek*, the Spirit does not proceed “out of God” but “from the side of God” (Robertson 1934:596, 614) which seems less to be describing an eternal relationship as the Father being the Source of the Spirit than it does a temporal one (Bernard 1963:449).

4:8. Does the eternal relational subordination of the Son prove the eternal generation of the Son? This question leads to the subject of the second article. In that article, the writer will try to convincingly evidence that God the Son is not according to Scripture eternally role subordinate to God the Father despite the assertions of many American evangelicals who say He is; the Son rather is only temporally role subordinate.

5. Conclusion

The writer has demarcated the views of those American evangelicals who subscribe to the eternal generation of the Son from those who do not. After considering the evidence advanced for that doctrine, the writer suggests that none of the reasons offered, or the cumulative effect of all, require evangelicals to affirm the tenet.

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