

Feature Article: JAF5401

**BEGOTTEN OF THE FATHER BEFORE ALL AGES:
THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF ETERNAL GENERATION
ACCORDING TO THE CHURCH FATHERS**

by Charles Lee Irons

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 01 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

SYNOPSIS

The purpose of this essay is to understand the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Eternal generation is not a philosophical speculation, nor a theological deduction, but an exegetically grounded doctrine. The church fathers appealed to several biblical texts in both the Old and New Testament in support of their conviction that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The concept of begetting is a metaphor drawn from the embodied experience of human fathers begetting human sons. This doctrine is important because it is crucial to defending the full deity of the Son, and it is the linchpin of the classical doctrine of the Trinity.

Throughout the fourth century, the church fathers¹ were engaged in a bitter debate with Arianism, and it was within the context of that debate that they clarified the church's doctrine of the Trinity. Arianism was the view that the Son is a subdeity who did not always exist but was created by God as the first and most glorious being in the universe, "the firstborn of all creation." Arians affirmed the preexistence of Christ — He existed as the Logos before His virgin birth. But they denied the eternal preexistence of Christ. They said there was a time when He did not exist, and that before His generation, He did not exist. They said He was created out of the things that do not exist. Although He is the most glorious and first creature made by God, and can even be

called “God” in some sense because of His exalted honor and divine glory, He falls on the creature side of the Creator-creature distinction.

In response, the church fathers appealed to the scriptural teaching that the Son is not a creature external to God but is the eternal offspring of the Father and proper to the very essence of God. As the bishops confessed at the first ecumenical council at Nicaea (325), the church believes “in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *begotten* of the Father *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”² (emphasis added). The contrast “*begotten*, not made” is a broadside against Arianism. As Athanasius put it, “The Son is other than things originate [i.e., created], alone the proper offspring of the Father’s essence.”³ The church fathers saw a massive distinction between a creature made by God and an offspring eternally begotten of God.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF ETERNAL GENERATION

The doctrine of the eternal generation or begetting of the Son was not concocted by means of philosophical speculation. Nor was it primarily a theological deduction from the correlative names “Father” and “Son.” Rather, the Son’s personal property of being eternally begotten of the Father was grounded in the explicit teaching of Scripture. The church fathers appealed to a number of verses in both the New Testament and the Old Testament (interpreted in light of the New), which they read as teaching that the Son is “begotten, not made.” Let’s review some of these key passages.

The Old Testament Evidence

The first Old Testament text cited by the church fathers is Psalm 2:7, which says, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you” (ESV), and the church fathers interpreted “today” as the day of eternity. This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament with reference to Christ (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5).

It has been objected that the first of these, Acts 13:33, views Psalm 2:7 as fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ, and therefore the “begetting” cannot be a reference to the pretemporal, eternal generation of the Son. But according to the uniform teaching of the New Testament, the resurrection of Christ was not the moment when He became the Son. The Gospels are clear that He already was called the Son at least from the time of His baptism (see Mark 1:11, echoing Psalm 2:7). It is better to interpret Acts 13:33 as teaching that, by His resurrection, Christ was “*declared* to be the Son of God in power” (Rom. 1:4 ESV, emphasis added).

The two citations of Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5 are clearer. The author of Hebrews gives clues in the immediate context that he understands Psalm 2:7 to be speaking of the Son’s generation as occurring before God “brings the firstborn into the world” (Heb. 1:6) and prior to “the days of his flesh” (Heb. 5:7).

Another important Old Testament text that the church fathers relied on to support the notion that the Son is begotten of the Father is Psalm 110:3 (109:3 LXX). As rendered in the Old Greek, the verse reads, “From the womb, before the morning star, I begat you” (translation mine). The church fathers read the Old Testament in Greek translation, so they saw the word “begat” there and applied it to Christ.⁴ This was perfectly natural, since the immediate context is the famous Psalm 110:1, quoted or alluded to at least twenty-two times in the New Testament concerning the exaltation of Christ: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’” (Ps. 110:1, translation mine). Since Jesus and the New Testament writers clearly interpret this psalm as a prophecy of the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God, the church fathers felt it was appropriate to take verse 3, which is in the past tense (“I begat you”) and therefore prior to His exaltation, as a reference to the pre-incarnate begetting of Christ. This was reinforced by the language, “From the womb, before the morning star,” which was taken as a reference to the time prior to creation (Job 38:7) when the Son was “in the Father’s bosom” (John 1:18).

The church fathers also quoted Proverbs 8:25 frequently in the Old Greek, which has the figure of Wisdom saying, “Before the mountains were created, before all the hills, he begets me” (translation mine). The church fathers believed the figure of Wisdom in this passage was the pre-incarnate Christ. This was based on two considerations: (1) the New Testament refers to Jesus as God’s Wisdom (Matt. 11:19; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3); and (2) Wisdom is pictured in Proverbs 8:22–31 as being present with God as His “master workman” at the beginning, which fits with the New Testament teaching that the Word was with God “in the beginning” (John 1:1–2) as the intermediary of creation (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2).

The New Testament Evidence

When we turn to the New Testament texts that the church fathers appealed to, we find that a favorite was Hebrews 1:3, which describes the Son as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (ESV). This verse does not use the language of begetting but it implies that the Son is derived from God, just as radiance is derived from light, while still being light. If the Father is light, so is the Son. Furthermore, they argued that just as the light is never without its radiance, so the Father was never without His Son. “The Son is the begotten light who has shone forth from the unbegotten light.”⁵ This important verse is the basis of the Nicene Creed’s affirmation that the Son is “Light of Light.”

Another group of texts that the church fathers used is Matthew 11:27 (“All things have been handed over to me by my Father,” ESV), and John 16:15 (“All that belongs to the Father is mine,” NIV). They were obviously attracted to these verses because of the emphatic “all.” Athanasius argued that if the Father has everlastingness, eternality, and immortality, and if the Father has given “all” that He has to the Son, then the Son must

possess these attributes as well, and He must possess them eternally, otherwise He would not really possess everlastingness, eternity, and immortality.⁶ Similarly, in John 5:26, Jesus says, “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (ESV). These verses affirm that the Father puts the Son in full possession of His own divine nature. Indeed, the great expository preacher Chrysostom argued that the verb “has given” in these contexts is tantamount to “has begotten.”⁷

Finally, we must consider the five references in the Johannine literature to Jesus as “the only begotten” Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). The Greek word traditionally rendered “only begotten” is *monogenēs*. The consensus of modern scholarship rejects this translation and argues that it just means “unique” or “only,” without any notion of “begotten.” That was not how the church fathers interpreted the word, however, and there are good lexicographical arguments for the traditional rendering.⁸

The church fathers were interested particularly in the two occurrences of this word in the prologue of John’s Gospel. John opens his Gospel by describing who Jesus Christ was before He became incarnate: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1–2 ESV). We then come to our first occurrence of the key word *monogenēs*: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, translation mine). The church fathers interpreted John as teaching that “the Word” (the Son before creation and before He “became flesh”) and “the Only Begotten from the Father” are the same. Additionally, the church fathers, taking their cue from this verse, often referred to the Son as “the Only Begotten,” as the peculiar identifying designation of the Son. When using this title, they clearly didn’t mean “the Unique One,” because that name would not be a peculiar designation of the Son, since the Father and the Spirit are also unique.

A few verses after John 1:14, we come to verse 18, which reads, “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God (or Son), who is in the Father’s bosom, he has made him known” (translation mine). The manuscript tradition is divided pretty evenly between “the only begotten God” and “the only begotten Son,” and the church fathers quoted it both ways. But what is interesting is the first variant, “the only begotten God.” The ESV translates this “the only God,” but that can’t be right, since it would imply either that Jesus is the only God (leaving the Father and the Spirit outside of the Godhead) or it would imply modalism, both of which are denials of the Trinity. The church fathers understood that the Son is not the Father but rather the Father’s only begotten Son. Yet because He is eternally begotten of the Father, He shares the same divine nature as the Father and rightly can be called “the only begotten God.” As Irenaeus said, “The Father is God, and the Son is God, for whatever is begotten of God is God.”⁹

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE BEGETTING ANALOGY

To say the Father “begets” the Son is to use a metaphor or analogy from the embodied human experience of fathers begetting literal sons. The point of the analogy is very narrow: to affirm that just as human fathers beget sons in a way that puts them in possession of a fully human nature, so when God begets the Son, the Son is in possession of a fully divine nature. But the church fathers were well aware that human begetting has significant limitations or points of dissimilarity with the divine begetting. They saw two major points of dissimilarity.

First, human fathers precede their offspring in time. A son is always younger than his father. This is a major point of difference with the eternal begetting, for the Father’s begetting of the Son is beyond time, never having a beginning and never having an end. There was no point in eternity past when the Father existed without His Son. To make this dissimilarity clear, the church fathers used some important Greek adverbs. They said the eternal generation of the Son is *achronōs* (“without time”) and *anarchōs* (“without beginning”). Augustine used the metaphor of fire and its radiance to explain how the Father begets the Son yet without any chronological interval. As fire begets radiance and yet fire does not precede radiance temporally, as if there was a time when the fire existed without giving off radiance, so the Father begets the Son and yet the Father does not precede the Son temporally. The Begetter and the Begotten are coeternal.¹⁰

Second, human begetting is a bodily action that involves a number of physical processes that are not to be attributed to the divine begetting. For example, there is the intercourse of a father with a mother. There is a physical process that begins with conception, continues for nine months of gestation, and concludes with the birth of the one begotten. Such processes of change can all be set aside as not part of the analogy when applied to the Father and the Son. The church fathers used two more adverbs to explain this. They said the eternal generation of the son is *asōmatōs* (“without body”) and *apathōs* (“without passion”).¹¹ Athanasius said, “Let every corporeal inference be banished on this subject.”¹²

WHY ETERNAL GENERATION IS IMPORTANT

The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is important because it specifies what it means to say that Jesus is “the Son of God.” There is no question that this Christological title is doctrinally significant in the New Testament. To be sure, Jesus bears other doctrinally significant Christological titles, such as “Lord,” “Christ,” and “Son of Man.” But the title “Son” carries special theological significance due to its frequency and its close connection with the preexistence of Christ. Many of the other titles designate the messianic office of Christ as man.

But “Son” goes back before His incarnation to describe who He is ontologically and eternally. But what exactly does the title “Son of God” signify? Some say it is

merely a messianic title, based on its usage in the Old Testament with reference to the Davidic king (2 Sam. 7:14). This isn't a satisfying interpretation, given Jesus' own teaching in the Gospels that His being God's Son makes Him far more than David's son (Matt. 22:41–46). Perhaps the title "Son" is intended to emphasize the relationship between the Father and the Son. Some say it focuses on the intimacy and love between the Father and the Son. Others say it focuses on a relationship of authority and submission. Just as sons were expected to submit to and obey the authority of their fathers in the ancient world, so the pre-incarnate Son eternally submits to and obeys the Father.¹³ But it is more appropriate to reserve such language to the incarnate Son who perfectly obeyed His Father's will, even to the point of death.

What exactly is being affirmed when the New Testament calls Christ "the Son of God"? It is here that the notion that the Father eternally begets the Son comes into its own. Since the Scriptures not only affirm that Jesus is the Son of God but also states that He is "the only begotten Son of God," we can be sure that we are on the right track in determining what is meant by referring to Him as "Son." The precise point of the metaphor is that when a father begets a son, he imparts his own nature to the son. The son of a human father is fully human, not a mere primate or some other creature. The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son therefore specifies that the Son shares the same divine nature as the Father, or as the Nicene Creed puts it, "Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." The Son is not a creature made by God, but the very Son of God. Thus, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is important because it grounds the full deity of Christ.

The doctrine is important also because it is the linchpin of the doctrine of the Trinity. The classical doctrine of the Trinity states that within the one, undivided nature of God, there are three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The divine nature is not divided into three parts, nor are there three gods; rather, the divine nature is one, simple, and undivided. But there is personal differentiation within the one being of God. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, and there is only one God. Of course, this is a great mystery that we cannot fully comprehend, but Christians believe it is how God has revealed Himself, both in the economy of redemption (when the Father sent the Son and the Spirit) and in Scripture's authoritative interpretation of these pivotal events. By sending His own Son in the flesh, and by giving the Holy Spirit, God has revealed Himself to be a tripersonal God.¹⁴

The Christian church in its classical doctrine of the Trinity is insistent on maintaining the unity of God, while at the same time affirming the full ontological deity and individual subsistence of the Son and the Spirit. But this raises a question. If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not three gods, nor simply different modes of existence of the one God, but one God existing eternally in three persons, what distinguishes the three persons? And how can we identify those distinctions without compromising the undivided oneness of God? The answer is the doctrine of eternal

generation. For on the one hand, the Father eternally generates or begets His own Son, who is not a creature separate from Himself and external to Himself but is the very reproduction of His own nature. Yet on the other hand, the Son is a distinct person. He is not the Father but the Father's only begotten Son.

Of course, to flesh out a complete doctrine of the Trinity, we also would need to discuss the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). But we can see how the same logic would apply. The eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit enable us to see, however dimly, how there can be three distinct persons within the undivided being of God.

The church knows this is a great mystery, and so it must reverently submit to what the Scripture says, not going beyond Scripture into philosophical speculation. The classical formula, since the time of the fourth-century church fathers, has been that what distinguishes the three persons is their relations of origin: the Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father.¹⁵ These are the only safe distinctions because they are the only ones that have been revealed. Herein lies the clearest ground of the church's belief that there is one God who exists eternally in three distinct and equally divine persons.

Charles Lee Irons, PhD, is an adjunct professor at California Graduate School of Theology. He maintains a website of biblical and theological studies at www.upperregister.com.

NOTES

- 1 I have in mind primarily Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa).
- 2 The Nicene Creed as reaffirmed at the second ecumenical council at Constantinople (381) changes the wording slightly.
- 3 Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.56 (NPNF² 4.339).
- 4 The Septuagint has a significantly different understanding than most modern English translations, which are based on the Masoretic text.
- 5 Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius* 2.25; *The Fathers of the Church* 122; trans. Mark DelCogliano and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).
- 6 Athanasius, *In Illud: Omnia*, etc. (NPNF² 4.87–90); *Against the Arians* 3.35–36 (NPNF² 4.413).
- 7 Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homily 39 (NPNF¹ 14.137).
- 8 Charles Lee Irons, "Let's Go Back to 'Only Begotten'" (The Gospel Coalition, November 23, 2016), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-go-back-to-only-begotten>.
- 9 Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* §47; trans. Armitage Robinson (London: SPCK, 1920).
- 10 Augustine, Sermon 117 (NPNF¹ 6.461–4); *On the Creed* §8 (NPNF¹ 3.371).
- 11 Gregory Nazianzen, *Third Theological Oration* §2 (NPNF² 7.301).
- 12 Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* §24 (NPNF² 4.166).

- 13 Wayne Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 223–61.
- 14 The theological axiom that "missions reveal processions" is explored at length by Fred Sanders in *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).
- 15 The Western church adds that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son."