

Begotten but Not Created

The Council of Nicaea and the Doctrine of Eternal Generation

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Introduction

- In May of AD 325, 318 pastors gathered in Nicaea (modern Iznik, Turkey), to discuss the Christological claims of Arius of Alexandria and Eusebius of Nicomedia.
 - How can we confess Jesus as Lord and God, while at the same time confessing faith in only one God?
 - How can Jesus be truly God, when Jesus eats, sleeps, suffers, and dies, while God is immutable, impassible, and immortal?
- Arius and Eusebius would have said that Jesus was God, but not precisely in the same way that the Father was God—*homoiousios* (of a similar substance) rather than *homoousios* (of the same substance, or consubstantial).
 - “There was when the Son was not.”
 - “There is a Triad, *not in equal glories*. ... As far as their glories, one infinitely more glorious than the other. Father in his essence is foreign to the Son, because he exists without beginning” (Arius, *Thalia*).¹
- The Creed of Nicaea (325) – See Page 21
 - Trinitarian Structure
 - Concluding Anathema
- The Nicene Creed (381) – See Page 21
 - Also called the Niceano-Constantinopolitan Creed
 - Product of the second ecumenical council: the First Council of Constantinople

¹ <https://www.fourthcentury.com/arius-thalia-intro/>

- The Nicene Creed is “the most closely held and widely confessed statement about our triune God in the Christian church.”²
- The Relationship between Scripture and the Creeds
 - Scripture alone is the sole infallible authority for all matters of Christian doctrine (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21; cf. John 10:35; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18).
 - 2LCF: “The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved” (1.10).
 - We do not believe any doctrine simply because it was codified in a creed or taught by a preferred theologian. We believe our doctrine because we believe it is biblical—“either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (WCF, 1.6).
 - While Scripture is the sole *infallible* authority for the Christian, it is not the sole *authority*, period. That was never the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.
 - *Sola Scriptura* opposed the Romanist doctrine that conceived of Scripture and tradition as equally ultimate authorities (Tradition 2). But it also opposed the Anabaptist rejection of all other subordinate norms and authorities in the Christian life (Tradition 0).³
 - While Scripture alone is the norming norm which is not normed (*norma normans non normata*), the Nicene Creed is normative for the Christian faith, subordinate to Scripture—precisely because it is a faithful summary of biblical teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ.
 - The Nicene Creed’s antiquity does not make it inspired, but its biblical accuracy coupled with its longevity means that it is owed a greater reverence than a random sermon, commentary, or podcast.

² Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 15.

³ See Keith Mathison’s summary of Oberman’s taxonomy: www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/sola-scripture-three-views-in-church-history-on-the-relationship-between-tradition-and-scripture/

- To transgress the boundaries set by the Nicene Creed is to reject biblical teaching on the Trinity and the Person of Christ.
- “Begotten by the Father before all worlds”
 - Arius taught that “begotten” implied “beginning”—that the generation of the Son meant that He was a created being.
 - Nicaea didn’t refute Arianism by trying to downplay the doctrine of the Son’s generation, but by pressing into it, only insisting it was an *eternal* generation.
 - Eternal generation was Nicaea’s attempt to *refute* Arianism and subordinationism. It is the backbone of the Creed.
 - “...the only-begotten Son of God...”
 - “...begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God...”
 - “...begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...”
 - The central *conclusion* of the Creed was that the Son was *homoousios*. But the *justification* for how the Son could be both consubstantial with and distinct from the Father was the doctrine of eternal generation.
 - Eternal generation was the Nicene Council’s killshot against Arianism and the linchpin for Trinitarian Monotheism.

I. Essential to the Christian Faith

- John Gill: “All the sound and orthodox writers have unanimously declared for the eternal generation and Sonship of Christ in all ages, and that those only of an unsound mind and judgment, and corrupt in other things as well as this, and many of them men of impure lives and vile principles, have declared against it.”⁴
- John Gill: “[Eternal generation] is the distinguishing criterion of the Christian religion. ... Without this the doctrine of the Trinity can never be supported; of this the adversaries of it are so sensible, as the Socinians, that they have always set themselves against it with all

⁴ Gill, *Dissertation Concerning Eternal Sonship*, in *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts: In Two Volumes* (London: George Keith, 1773), 2:564.

their might and main; well knowing, that if they can demolish this, it is all over with the doctrine of the Trinity; for without this, the distinction of Persons in the Trinity can never be maintained; and, indeed, without this, there is none at all; take away this, and all distinction ceases.”⁵

- Keith Johnson: “...eternal generation is a central feature of pro-Nicene theology (both Latin and Greek).”⁶
- Eternal generation is the pro-Nicene (i.e., historic orthodox) accounting for how (1) there could be one God, (2) the Son could have the identical divine essence as the Father, and (3) the Son remains personally distinct from the Father.

II. Relations of Origin Derived from the Personal Names

- We distinguish the persons of the Trinity by means of the names by which they are called in Scripture: Father, Son, and Spirit.
- Gregory of Nazianzus: “The very facts of not being begotten, of being begotten, and of proceeding, give them whatever names are applied to them—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, respectively. The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of the Godhead. The Son is not Father [i.e., not *who* the Father is]; there is *one* Father, yet he is *whatever* the Father is. The Spirit is not Son [merely] because he is from God; there is *one* Only-begotten. Yet *whatever* the Son is, he is. The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in persons”⁷
- John Owen: “A divine person is nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner.”⁸
 - The Father’s manner of subsistence is paternity; He eternally begets the Son.

⁵ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/gill/doctrinal/doctrinal.ii.xxviii.html>

⁶ Keith Johnson, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Submission of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective,” *Themelios* 36/1 (2011): 11; cf. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 236.

⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, Popular Patristics (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 31.9, emphases added.

⁸ John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, in *Works*, 2:407.

- The Son's manner of subsistence is filiation; He is eternally begotten by the Father.
- The Spirit's manner of subsistence is spiration; He eternally proceeds from both the Father and the Son.
- W. G. T. Shedd: "Some trinitarians have attempted to hold the doctrine of the Trinity while denying eternal generation, spiration, and procession. ... But this is inconsistent. These trinal names Father, Son, and Spirit, given to God in Scripture, force upon the theologian the ideas of paternity, filiation, spiration, and procession. ... He cannot say with Scripture that the first person is the Father and then deny or doubt that he 'fathers.' He cannot say that the second person is the Son and then deny or doubt that he is 'begotten.' He cannot say that the third person is the Spirit and then deny or doubt that he 'proceeds' by 'spiration' (Spirit because spirated) from the Father and Son. Whoever accepts the nouns Father, Son, and Spirit as conveying absolute truth must accept also the corresponding adjectives and predicates—beget and begotten, spirate and proceed—as conveying absolute truth."⁹
- Scripture calls the Father "Father" because He fathers. It calls the Son "Son" because He is fathered.
 - Cyril of Alexandria: "If the Father did not beget at all, why is he called Father? And if the Son was not begotten from the Father, how is he really the Son? The names themselves demand such an interpretation" (Commentary on John).
 - Augustine: "When we say begotten we mean the same as when we say 'son.' Being son is a consequence of being begotten, and being begotten is implied by being son" (*On the Trinity*, 1.15.16).
- Consubstantiality (sameness of nature) and "fromness" (procession from)
 - Gregory of Nazianzus: "Just as with us these names indicate kindred and affinity, so here too they designate sameness of stock."¹⁰

⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan Gomes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 245.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, 29.16.

- Gregory of Nazianzus: “He is called ‘Son’ because he is...identical in substance with the Father, [and also] stems from him.”¹¹
- MacArthur: “There is another, more vital, significance to the idea of ‘begetting’ than merely the origin of one’s offspring. In the design of God, each creature begets offspring ‘after his kind’ (Gen. 1:11–12; 21–25). The offspring bear the exact likeness of the parent. The fact that a son is generated by the father guarantees that the son shares the same essence as the father. I believe this is the sense Scripture aims to convey when it speaks of the begetting of Christ by the Father. Christ is not a created being (John 1:1–3). He had no beginning but is as timeless as God Himself. Therefore, the ‘begetting’ mentioned in Psalm 2 and its cross-references has...everything to do with the fact that He is of the same essence as the Father. Expressions like ‘eternal generation,’ ‘only begotten Son,’ and others pertaining to the filiation of Christ must all be understood in this sense: Scripture employs them to underscore the absolute oneness of essence between Father and Son.”¹²
- *God* of very *God* (consubstantiality), and *God of* very *God* (fromness).
- The Father eternally communicates the undivided divine essence to the Son.
 - Turretin: “As all generation indicates a communication of essence on the part of the begetter to the begotten (by which the begotten becomes like the begetter and partakes of the same nature with him), so this wonderful generation is rightly expressed as a communication of essence from the Father (by which the Son possesses indivisibly the same essence with him and is made perfectly like him).”¹³
 - MacArthur: ‘Eternal generation’ describes the eternal, necessary, and self-differentiating act of God the Father by which he generates the personal

¹¹ Ibid., 30.20.

¹² John MacArthur, “Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 6/1 (2001): 21–23. Available here: <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A235/reexamining-the-eternal-sonship-of-christ>

¹³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennis, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 1:292–93.

subsistence of the Son and thereby communicates to the Son the entire divine essence.”¹⁴

- Gregory of Nazianzus: “But because the Son is ‘Son’ in a more elevated sense..., and since we have no other term to express his consubstantial derivation from God, it does not follow that we ought to... transfer wholesale to the divine sphere the earthly names of human family ties.”¹⁵
- Hilary of Poitiers: “God the Son confesses God as His Father, because He was born of Him; but also, because He was born, He inherits the whole nature of God.”¹⁶
- Augustine: “He did not mean that the Father gave life to the Son already existing without life, but that he begot him timelessly in such a way that the life which the Father gave the Son by begetting him is co-eternal with the life of the Father who gave it.”¹⁷
- John Owen: “...the Father is the original and fountain of the whole Trinity as to subsistence, ... the Son, ... [has] the divine nature communicated unto him by eternal generation, ... And thus he becomes ‘the brightness of his Father’s glory, and the express image of his person,’ namely, by the receiving his glorious nature from him, the whole and all of it...”¹⁸
- Petrus van Maastricht: “The Reformed state that for the eternal generation of the Son of God is required communication of essence with the image or likeness of the one communicating it.”¹⁹

¹⁴ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (eds.), *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 207.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, 31.7.

¹⁶ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 11.12, *NPNF*², 9:207.

¹⁷ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.47.

¹⁸ John Owen, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Works*, 19:99.

¹⁹ Petrus van Maastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology, Volume 2: Faith in the Triune God*, ed., Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2021), 556. Elsewhere, van Maastricht states, “...the Son, because he subsists from the Father and has his essence communicated to him from the Father, is the second” (*ibid.*, 539).

III. Divine vs. Creaturely Begetting

- But how can the Son receive the divine essence if He always had it? How can we speak of the generation of an eternal, uncreated Word?
- MacArthur: “At first glance, *eternal generation* seems oxymoronic. In normal human discourse, the words *generate* and *beget* speak of bringing someone or something into existence. In the human realm, begetting occurs only once, at a definite point in time. To pair the idea with the adjective *eternal* is to change it in the most radical way. And it is absolutely vital to understand and affirm the difference between the begetting of a human child and the eternal generation of the Son of God.”²⁰
- Human generation has a beginning; it happens at a single point in time; it requires that a father exist before his son exists; and it requires a mother. There is either a division of nature or a multiplication of nature, and in either case it results in a separate being.
- None of these things are true of eternal generation. There is no single point in time when it takes place; the Father did not exist before the Son and the Son is not after the Father; there is no multiplication or division of nature, no priority or posteriority, no passion or change.
- Turretin: “While whatever of perfection occurs in finite generation is attributed to it (as that the begetter begets a thing similar to himself by communication of essence), whatever denotes any imperfection must be carefully removed from it.”²¹
 - Without time, without place, without passion, without change
- Precisely because this communication of the full, undivided divine essence is *eternal*, the Son cannot be “less than” the Father in any way. Eternal generation is the orthodox refutation of the creation, subjection, or subordination of the Son, and the safeguard of the Son’s genuine equality with and distinction from the Father.

²⁰ *Biblical Doctrine*, 206.

²¹ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:302.

IV. Generation Language in Scripture

Psalm 2:7

- “But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.” “I will surely tell of the decree of Yahweh: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten [yālad; LXX: *gennaō*] You.’”
- There is a reference to David, but someone greater than David is in view.
 - “Worship Yahweh with reverence” (v. 11) is in parallelism with “Kiss the Son” (v. 12).
 - The King’s wrath is kindled unto the destruction of nations (v. 12), but those who take refuge in the Son are blessed (2:12).
 - The New Testament applies Psalm 2 to the Messiah.
 - Acts 4:25–28 – “...who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.’ For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”
 - Acts 13:33 – “that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You.’”
 - Hebrews 1:4–5 – “...having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You’?”
 - If this generation is the ground of the Son’s superiority to the angels, it cannot be something that can be predicated of a mere man.

- Hebrews 5:5 – “So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten you...’”
- Eternal Generation or Resurrection?
 - Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5 speak of Psalm 2:7 as being fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus. Is it legitimate to take this as a reference to eternal generation?
 - Jesus’ sonship does not consist in His resurrection. He was Son well before then (Matt 3:17; John 1:1, 14).
 - If the Son was not the Son until His resurrection, then the Father was not the Father until the resurrection.
 - Acts 13 and Hebrews 1 cite an eternal generation text as proof for the resurrection, because the resurrection declares or manifests Christ to be the Son of God that He was from eternity (cf. Rom 1:4).
 - Turretin: “Because, therefore, the resurrection was an irrefragable proof of his divinity and eternal filiation, the Holy Spirit, with the psalmist, could join both together and refer as much to the eternal generation as to its manifestation (which ought to be made in the resurrection). And Paul properly says that the oracle was fulfilled when its truth was exhibited, since by the resurrection the Father has most fully declared that he is really (*ontos*) and peculiarly (*idios*) his own Son.”²²
 - Steven Duby: “The Father’s eternal begetting of the Son accounts for the Son’s unique fitness for his incarnate work, and that eternal begetting is what the Father ultimately expresses and underscores in his economic declaration of the Son’s supremacy over all creatures.”²³
 - “Today” is a poetic way of expressing eternity—that with God there is no succession of moments, but that all things are an eternal present with Him.
 - Turretin: “And so with regard to the word ‘today’ (*hodie*), which is added not to point out a certain time in which that generation began; but that we

²² Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:294.

²³ Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 61.

may understand that all things are present with God, and that that generation is not successive, but permanent in eternity.... As, therefore, with God there is no yesterday or tomorrow, but always today, so this filiation being eternal can properly be designated by the today of eternity.”²⁴

- MacArthur: “It is now my conviction that the begetting spoken of in Psalm 2 and Hebrews 1 is not an event that takes place in time. Even though at first glance Scripture seems to employ terminology with temporal overtones (‘*this day* have I begotten thee’), the context of Psalm 2:7 seems clearly to be a reference to the eternal decree of God. It is reasonable to conclude that the begetting spoken of there is also something that pertains to eternity rather than a point in time. The temporal language should therefore be understood as figurative, not literal.”²⁵

Proverbs 8:22–30

- “Yahweh possessed [*qānāh*] me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. From everlasting [*m^e ‘ōlām*] I was established [*nāsak*; cf. Ps 2:6], from the beginning [LXX: *en archē*], from the earliest times of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth [*hīl*]; When there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, Before the hills I was brought forth [*hīl*; LXX: *gennaō*]; While He had not yet made the earth and the fields, Nor the first dust of the world.”
 - *qānāh* – to buy, but also to *create*, or to *get*, in the sense of receiving a child from the Lord
 - Genesis 4:1 – Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, ‘I have gotten [*qānāh*] a manchild with the help of Yahweh.’”
 - *nāsak* – to be woven, shaped
 - Psalm 2:6 – But as for Me, I have installed My King Upon Zion, My holy mountain.

²⁴ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:295.

²⁵ MacArthur, “Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ.”

- *hîl* – to be in labor; writhe, tremble; bring forth (though labor)
 - Isaiah 45:10 – “Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting [*yālad*; cf. Ps 2:7]?’ Or to a woman, ‘To what are you giving birth [*hîl*]?’”
- [1] Yahweh “got” Wisdom the way Eve had gotten Cain: as a son (cf. Gen 4:1). [2] Yahweh “established” Wisdom in the same way He installed His King, who is His eternally begotten Son (cf. Ps 2:6–7). [3] He did this “from the beginning,” which is the same phrase John uses to speak of the Word of God’s wisdom who “was in the beginning [*en archē*] with God.” [4] Yahweh was bringing forth wisdom, the same way a woman brings forth a child that a father begets (cf. Isa 45:10).
- Christ is explicitly called “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24).
- If wisdom refers only to the divine attribute, what is the relationship between God and an essential attribute (as they all are) if He “brings forth” that attribute? Apart from the eternal communication of the divine essence to a personal subsistence, it would seem there is no way to conceive of this relationship except God bringing His wisdom into being. This either undermines divine simplicity or makes God the creator of Himself.²⁶

Micah 5:2

- “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth (*yātsā*’) for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth (*mōtsā’āh*) are from long ago, From the days of eternity (*’ōlām*).”
 - Matthew 2:4–6 identifies Jesus as the referent of this ruler whose goings forth are from the days of eternity.
 - Turretin: “The things predicated prove it because he is called ruler in Israel by way of eminence...; to him is ascribed the calling the of the nations, a pastoral kingdom, the strength of Jehovah, the extension of glory and peace unto all the ends of the earth (Mic. 5:4, 5).”²⁷

²⁶ As Emerson notes, “If the Wisdom referenced in Proverbs 8 is not Christ but one of God’s attributes, does this mean that wisdom as an attribute did not exist in God from eternity? This introduces complexity into the nature of God and diminishes his wisdom” (Matthew Y. Emerson, “The Role of Proverbs 8: Eternal Generation and Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern,” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, 60).

²⁷ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:297.

The Johannine Literature

- John 1:14 – “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
 - Cf. John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9
 - Not a reference to the incarnation, since John is speaking about a divine glory (cf. Exod 40:34–38; Matt 17:2; 2 Pet 1:16–18).
- *Monogenēs*
 - *Monos* (“only”) + *gennaō* (“to beget”)
 - Not *monos* (“only”) + *genos* (“kind”)
 - The lexical argument that *monogenēs* comes from *monos* and *genos* and thus should be translated “unique” or “one of a kind” rests almost exclusively on Dale Moody’s 1953 JBL article.²⁸
 - Moody’s claims have been ably challenged in recent years by Charles Lee Irons.²⁹
 - The *-genēs* ending often denotes the concept of being *born*, rather than just being a “kind,” the way “genus” would indicate. A newborn was called *neogenēs* (*neos* + *gennaō*). Someone who was older was called *proterēgenēs*, sooner-born.
 - Only 12 of 145 lexemes with the *-genēs* ending have meanings related to “kind” / “of the same genus.”³⁰

²⁸ Dale Moody, “The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 213–19. “Virtually every evangelical who questions this doctrine appeals to this article” (Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012], 64).

²⁹ Charles Lee Irons, “A Lexical Defense of the Johannine ‘Only Begotten,’” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, 98–116. Also see his work at this web address: <https://www.upper-register.com/papers/monogenes.html>

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

- Also, the *-genēs* ending is common in proper names, where *Hermogenes* (2 Tim 1:15) means “offspring of Hermes,” indicating that the *-genēs* ending communicates the concept of birth or begottenness, not merely uniqueness.
- It’s not that *monogenēs* always and only means “only-begotten” and never “one of a kind.” But when the parent-child relationship or childbirth are present in the context (as in all five Johannine occurrences), the concept of “begottenness” is inherent in the term.³¹
- The one exception in the New Testament is Hebrews 11:17, where Isaac is said to be *ton monogenē*, even though Abraham had begotten other children.
 - Irons explains that this is a “nonliteral extension” of the term in which an heir functions *as if* he is the only begotten son: “If a father or mother has only one child, then the loss of that child would be especially tragic since it would mean losing one’s heir. This, then, is why Isaac can be called ‘only begotten’ (*monogenēs*) even though he is not literally the sole offspring of Abraham.”³²
 - He gives the example that Agamemnon is called *monogenēs teknon patri* even though his brother Menelaus was also a son of their father Atreus: “...this phrase...metaphorically describes him as one on whom depends the whole safety of the house and/or the city.”³³
 - Thus, Isaac can be described as *monogenēs* because he is the only heir, who receives the inheritance as if he were the only begotten child.
- The Nicene Creed follows a confession of Christ as “*ton monogenē*” with the clarification, “*gennēthenta* [from *gennaō*] *ou poiēthenta*” (“begotten, not made”). This shows that they understood the *-genēs* ending in *monogenēs* to derive from *gennaō*.

³¹ Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 187–88.

³² Irons, “A Lexical Defense,” 108.

³³ *Ibid.*, 109.

- It's also significant that they felt the need to explain how the Son could be begotten but not made. "Unique but not made" is an unnecessary contrast.
- The Vulgate and earlier Latin translations rendered *monogenēs* as "*unigenitus*" ("only begotten") rather than "*unicus*" ("unique"). In the Latin translation, the Creed has "*gentium, non factum.*" "*Genitum*" corresponds with *unigenitus* and shows that begetting is in view.

V. John 5

- John 5:17 – "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God."
 - Sonship implies equality (i.e., consubstantiality) with God.
- John 5:19 – "The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner."
 - Jesus grounds His equality with the Father (cf. v. 18) in the fact that they work inseparably. He is God just as the Father is God, because the Father's acts are His acts.
 - This is to say that He and the Father act from the same principle of action (i.e., the same nature). This is another affirmation of consubstantiality.
 - But to say He can do nothing "of Himself" is to say that He does not act from Himself, but from the Father.
 - If identical acts prove identical nature (consubstantiality), then acts "from the Father" prove that He has His nature from the Father (fromness).
- The Son raises the dead (5:21), judges all people (5:22), and receives worship just as the Father does (5:23).
- John 5:26 – "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself."

- Life in Himself = aseity, self-existence
 - John 1:4a – “In Him was life...” (*en autō zōē ēn*)
 - This is a well-attested reading, from the patristic period through the Reformed Orthodox, even down to contemporary exegetes with (it seems) no theological axe to grind.
 - For example, Carson says, “Like God he has life-in-himself. God is self-existent; he is always the ‘living God.’ Mere human beings are derived creatures...but to the Son, and to the Son alone, God has imparted life-in-himself. This cannot mean that the Son gained this prerogative only after the incarnation. The prologue has already asserted of the pre-incarnate Word, ‘In Him was life’ (1:4). The impartation of life-in-himself-to the Son must be an act belonging to eternity. ... Many systematicians have tied this teaching to what they call ‘the eternal generation of the Son.’ This is unobjectionable.”³⁴
 - Duby: “The life that the Father communicates to the Son is a life by which the Son can raise the dead by his mere speech. It is thus a divine life, not a life or power that pertains merely to Jesus’ human nature or economic office, and not a life reducible to the eternal life that all believers receive (cf. 1:4; 11:25-26). Indeed, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus has already ruled out the idea that humanity in its weakness (‘flesh’) might have the life by which one could grant spiritual life to others (3:5-6). The Son receives from the Father the fullness of the divine life, a life that pertains to what God is as God. The Son’s reception of this life assumes, then, an eternal going forth or procession on the Son’s part, ... fittingly called ‘generation’ or ‘filiation.’”³⁵
- The Father has life-in-Himself that has been given to Him by no one. The Son has this same life-in-Himself that was given to Him by the Father.
 - Augustine: “The Father remains life, the Son also remains life; the Father, life in himself, not from the Son; the Son, life in himself, but from the

³⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 256–57.

³⁵ Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 55.

Father. [The Son was] begotten by the Father to be life in himself, but the Father [is] life in himself, unbegotten.”³⁶

- If God is simple, then all His attributes are identical to His essence. This means that aseity is identical to the divine essence. Thus, when the Father is said to “give to the Son” the divine attribute of aseity, this is equivalent of saying the Father “gave to the Son to have” the simple, undivided divine essence “in Himself.” This is nothing other than eternal generation.
- Thus, The Son has all that the Father has: the identical divine nature. And thereby He is fully and truly God. But the Son has the identical divine nature in a manner distinct from the way the Father has it.
- The Father has the divine nature from Himself; He is begotten of no one. The Son has the divine nature from the Father; He is eternally begotten of the Father. That’s just what it means to be God the Son.
- Excursus: The Aseity of the Son
 - How can one have “life in Himself” that was “given to Him”? Isn’t self-existence either “in Himself” or “from another”?
 - Well, apparently not, because Jesus thinks it no contradiction to speak of life-in-Himself that was given to Him by the Father. The aseity of the Son is not at odds with the eternal communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son, or else Jesus misspoke in John 5:26. To be *God* is to be *a se* (*autotheos*). Thus, eternal generation is not a denial of the aseity of the Son, though some believe otherwise.
 - Some say the Father generated the personal subsistence of the Son, but did not communicate to Him the divine essence.
 - In my view, that is to say that the Son is eternally generated, but not eternally generated. What it means to eternally generate the personal subsistence of the Son is for the Father to eternally communicate the divine essence to Him. If we take that away, what *is* the generation of the personal subsistence of the Son?
 - Those making this objection see a contradiction where Jesus does not. The argument is, “The Son can’t be *a se* if He has His aseity *from* the Father.” But it

³⁶ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 19.13.

seems to me one would have to make the same charge against Jesus in John 5:26: “The Son can’t have life *in Himself* if He has that life *from* someone else.”

- John Webster: “In the terminology of post-Reformation divinity, the Son is still *autotheos*. He is this, not in respect of his person (which he has from the Father), but in respect of the common aseity which he has as a sharer in the one divine essence. The Father is a *se* in his person (as the principium of the triune life); the Son a *se* only in his divine essence. ‘The Son is God from himself although not the Son from himself.’”³⁷
- John Owen says: “The Father is of none, is *autautos*. The Son is begotten of the Father, having the glory of the only-begotten Son of God, and so is *autotheos* in respect of his nature, essence, and being, not in respect of his personality [i.e., personhood, subsistence], which he hath of the Father. The Spirit is of the Father and the Son.”³⁸
- Petrus van Maastricht: “The Reformed distinguish between essential and personal aseity: indeed they affirm essential aseity, in which the deity communicated to the Son and the Holy Spirit is *a se*, from itself; however, they deny personal aseity, insofar as the deity which the Son and the Holy Spirit possess, they do not possess from themselves but from the Father. ... Accordingly, although the Son and the Holy Spirit are *autotheos*, God from himself, even so they are not *autoprosopa*, persons from themselves. ... Nor does it lead to Sabellianism, for, although the essential deity is made common, even so personal aseity remains proper to the Father.”³⁹

VI. Radiance, Image, Word

Radiance – Hebrews 1

- “...in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance [*apaugasma*] of His glory and the exact representation of His nature [*charaktēr tēs hupostaseōs*]...”

³⁷ John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology: Volume 1: God and the Works of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2018), 37.

³⁸ John Owen, *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated*, in *Works*, 12:392.

³⁹ Petrus van Maastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:561–62.

- *charaktēr* – Refers to the imprint of a seal or stamp; the perfect imprint (consubstantiality)
- *apaugasma* – Radiance (fromness)
 - Swain: “Just as light naturally radiates its brightness, so too God naturally radiates his Son.”⁴⁰
 - Nicene Creed: “...begotten of the Father before all worlds, God *of* God, Light *of* Light, very God *of* very God...”

Image – Colossians 1

- “He is the image [*eikōn*] of the invisible God...”
 - Genesis 5:3 – When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image [LXX: *eikōn*], and named him Seth.
 - Seth was consubstantial with his father (human), but also from his father and not the same person as he was.
 - God the Son is not the Father, but He is the perfect reproduction of Him, His image, begotten in the likeness of His Father.
- Just as the image reflected back to you in a mirror is not modified or altered in any way, so also: all that the Father is, the Son is (consubstantial).
- But just as an image is distinct from and derivative of the archetype it represents, the Son is what He is by virtue of what He receives from the Father (fromness).

Word – John 1

- “In the beginning was the Word...”
- God’s Word is as God Himself
 - 1 Samuel 3:21 – “Yahweh appeared...at Shiloh...by the word of Yahweh.”

⁴⁰ Scott R. Swain, “The Radiance of the Father’s Glory: Eternal Generation, the Divine Names, and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, 41.

- Psalm 138:2 – “You have magnified Your word above all Your name.”
- Revelation 3:8 – “You have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.”
- A man may be identified with his word. The way you treat a man’s words is the way you treat the man.
 - Inasmuch as my word is conceived in my mind before I speak it, my words are my thoughts—the products of my own mind. And my mind is a faculty of my soul. My mind is “me,” in that sense. And so a man’s word is as the man himself (consubstantiality).
- God’s word goes forth from him (fromness).
 - Isaiah 55:11 – “...My Word which goes forth from My mouth.”
- Matthew Henry: There is the word *conceived*, that is, *thought*, which is the first and only immediate *product* and *conception* of the soul..., and it is *one* with the soul. And thus the second person in the Trinity is fitly called *the Word*; for he is the *first-begotten of the Father*, that eternal essential Wisdom which the [Father] possessed, as the soul does its thought” (Commentary).
- John Gill: The Son is “called [Word] from his nature, being begotten of the Father; | for as the word, whether silent or expressed, is the birth of the mind, the image of it, equal to it, and distinct from it; so Christ is the only begotten of the Father, the express image of his person, in all things equal to him, and a distinct person from him” (Commentary).
- ➔ Before there was a beginning, the Father eternally communicated the fullness of the whole divine essence to the Son in this incomprehensible, inexpressible act, internal to the life of the Triune God, which we call the mystery of eternal generation.
 - Image: The Perfect Representation of the Father
 - Radiance: Eternally Shining Forth from the Father
 - Word: Eternally Uttered by the Father
 - Son: Eternally Begotten of the Father

VI. Conclusion

- Without eternal generation, there is no consistent Trinitarianism.
- Without eternal generation, there is no hope for regeneration.

The Creed of Nicaea – 325

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

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, consubstantial with the Father;

by whom all things were made **both in heaven and on earth;**

who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man;

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven;

and he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say: “There was a time when he was not;” and “He was not before he was made;” and “He was made out of nothing,” or “He is of another substance” or “essence,” or “The Son of God is created,” or “changeable,” or “alterable”—they are condemned by the catholic and apostolic Church.

The Nicene Creed (Constantinople I) – 381

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker **of heaven and earth, and** of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the **only-begotten** Son of God, begotten of the Father **before all worlds**, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made;

who for us men and for our salvation, came down **from heaven**, and was incarnate **by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary**, and was made man;

was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, **according to the Scriptures**, and ascended into heaven, **and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;**

and he shall come **again, with glory**, to judge the quick and the dead; **whose kingdom shall have no end.**

And in the Holy Ghost, **the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son],** who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.