

Is God the Son Begotten in His Divine Nature?

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SUMMARY

The doctrine of the Father's begetting the Son in his divine nature, despite its credal affirmation, enjoys no clear scriptural support and threatens to introduce an objectionable ontological subordinationism into the doctrine of the Trinity. We should therefore think of Christ's sonship as a function of his incarnation, even if that role is assumed beginninglessly.

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Introduction

On the Christian view God is not a single person, as traditionally conceived in Jewish monotheism, but is tri-personal. The New Testament church was sure that only one God existed, but it also affirmed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while personally distinct, all deserved to be called God. The challenge facing the post-apostolic church was how to make sense of these affirmations. How could the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each be God without there being either three Gods or only one person?

Logos Christology

The stage for both the later Trinitarian Controversy and the Christological Controversy, in which the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation were forged and given credal form, was set by the early Greek Apologists of the second century, such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, and Athenagoras. Connecting the divine Word (*Logos*) of the prologue of John's Gospel (Jn. 1.1-5) with the divine Logos (Reason) as it played a role in the system of the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (25 BC-AD 40), the Apologists sought to explain Christian doctrine in Philonic categories. For good or for ill, their appropriation of Hellenistic thought is one of the most striking examples of the profound and enduring influence of philosophy upon Christian theology. For Philo the Logos was God's reason, which is the creative principle behind the creation of the world and which, in turn, informs the world with its rational structure. Similarly, for the Christian Apologists, God the Father, existing alone without the world, had within Himself His Word or Reason or Wisdom (cf. Prov. 8.22-31), which somehow proceeded forth from Him, like a spoken word from a speaker's mind, to become a distinct individual who created the world and ultimately became incarnate as Jesus Christ. The procession of the Logos from the Father was variously conceived

as taking place either at the moment of creation or, alternatively, eternally. Although Christological concerns occupied center stage, the Holy Spirit, too, might be understood to proceed from God the Father's mind.

Here is how Athenagoras describes it:

The Son of God is the Word of the Father in Ideal Form and energizing power; for in his likeness and through him all things came into existence, which presupposes that the Father and the Son are one. Now since the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son by a powerful unity of Spirit, the Son of God is the mind and reason of the Father... He is the first begotten of the Father. The term is used not because he came into existence (for God, who is eternal mind, had in himself his word or reason from the beginning, since he was eternally rational) but because he came forth to serve as Ideal Form and Energizing Power for everything material (...) The (...) Holy Spirit (...) we regard as an effluence of God which flows forth from him and returns like a ray of the sun (*A Plea for the Christians* 10).

According to this doctrine, then, there is one God, but He is not an undifferentiated unity. Rather certain aspects of His mind become expressed as distinct individuals. The Logos doctrine of the Apologists thus involves a fundamental reinterpretation of the Fatherhood of God: God is not merely the Father of mankind or Israel or even, especially, of Jesus of Nazareth, rather He is the Father from whom the Logos is begotten before all worlds. Christ is not merely the only-begotten Son of God in virtue of his Incarnation; rather he is begotten of the Father even in his pre-incarnate divinity.

The Heritage of Nicea

The Logos-doctrine of the Greek Apologists was taken up into Western theology by Irenaeus, who identifies God's Word with the Son and His Wisdom with the Holy Spirit (*Against Heresies* 4.20.3; cf. 2.30.9). Tertullian not only accepts the view of the Greek Apologists that there are relations of derivation among the persons of the Trinity, but that these relations are not eternal. The Father he calls "the fountain of the Godhead" (*Against Praxeas* 29); "the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole" (9). The Father exists eternally with His immanent Logos, and at creation, before the beginning of all things, the Son proceeds from the Father and so becomes His first begotten Son, through whom the world is created (19). Thus, the Logos only becomes the Son of God when He proceeds from the Father as a substantive being (7). Tertullian is fond of analogies such as the sunbeam emitted by the sun or the river by the spring (8, 22) to

illustrate the oneness of substance of the Son as He proceeds from the Father. The Son, then, is “God of God” (15). Similarly, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son (4). It seems that Tertullian would consider the Son and Spirit to be distinct persons only after their procession from the Father (7); but it is clear that he insists on their personal distinctness from at least that point. In the East theologians like Origen also adhered to the derivation of the divine Son from the Father, although they maintained, in contrast to Tertullian, that the begetting of the Logos from the Father did not have a beginning but is from eternity.

In 319 an Alexandrian presbyter named Arius began to propagate his doctrine that the Son was not of the same substance with the Father, but was rather created by the Father before the beginning of the world. What the orthodox Fathers found so objectionable about Arius’s doctrine was not that the Logos had a beginning but that he was created. Arius denied that the Logos pre-existed even immanently in God before being begotten or was in any sense from the substance of the Father, so that his beginning was not, in fact, a begetting but a creation *ex nihilo* and that therefore the Son is a creature. As Athanasius was later to protest, on Arius’s view God without the Son lacked His Word and His Wisdom, which is blasphemous (*Orations against the Arians* 1.6.17). On Arius’s view, the Son is “a creature and a work, not proper to the Father’s essence” (1.3.9). In 325 the Council of Antioch condemned anyone who says that the Son is a creature or originated or made or not truly an offspring or that once he did not exist; and later that year the ecumenical Council of Nicea issued its creedal formulation of Trinitarian belief.

The Nicene Creed states,

We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father, through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and in earth; Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human. He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into the heavens. And he will come to judge both the living and the dead.

And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.

Notice that the Son (and by implication the Holy Spirit) is declared to be of the same essence (*homoousios*) as the Father. This is to say that the Son and Father both exemplify the same divine nature. Therefore, the Son cannot be a creature, exemplifying, as Arius claimed, a nature different

(*heteroousias*) from the divine nature. Therefore, the Son is declared to be begotten, not made. This anti-Arian affirmation represents the legacy of the old Logos Christology and is said with respect to Christ's divine nature, not his human nature. In the creed of Eusebius of Caesarea, used as a draft of the Nicene statement, the word "Logos" stood where "Son" stands in the Nicene Creed, and the Logos is declared to be "begotten of the Father before all ages." The condemnations appended to the Nicene Creed similarly imply that this begetting is eternal:

But, those who say, Once he was not, or he was not before his generation, or he came to be out of nothing, or who assert that he, the Son of God, is a different *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.^[1]

Athanasius explains through a subtle word play that while both the Father and the Son are *agenētos* (that is, did not come into being at some moment), nevertheless only the Father is *agennētos* (that is, unbegotten), whereas the Son is *gennētos* (begotten) eternally from the Father (*Four Discourses against the Arians* 1.9.31).

A Social Trinitarian Model of the Trinity

Enlightenment thinkers denounced the doctrine of the Trinity as an incoherence; but during the twentieth century many theologians came to a reappraisal of Trinitarian theology, and in recent decades a number of Christian philosophers have sought to formulate defensible versions of the doctrine of the Trinity. In *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* I have defended a type of social Trinitarianism, which lays emphasis on the diversity of the divine persons.^[2] According to the model offered there, we are to think of God on the analogy of the human soul. What makes the human soul a person is that the human soul is equipped with rational faculties of intellect and volition which enable it to be a self-reflective agent capable of self-determination. Now God is very much like an unembodied soul; indeed, as a mental substance God just seems to be a soul. We naturally equate a rational soul with a person, since the human souls with which we are acquainted are persons. But the reason human souls are individual persons is because each soul is equipped with one set of rational faculties sufficient for being a person. I invite us, then, to suppose that God is a soul which is endowed with three complete sets of rational cognitive faculties, each sufficient for personhood. Then God, though one soul, would not be one person but three, for God would have three centers of self-consciousness, intentionality, and volition, as social Trinitarians maintain. God would clearly not be three discrete souls because the cognitive faculties in question are all faculties belonging to just one soul, one immaterial substance. God would therefore be one

being which supports three persons, just as our individual beings each support one person. He is a single, tri-personal being. Such a model of the Trinity seems to give a clear sense to the classical formula "three persons in one substance."

The Begetting of the Son by the Father

Notice that my proposed model does not feature (though it does not preclude) the derivation of one person from another, enshrined in the confession that the Son is "begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made" (Constantinopolitan Creed). God could simply exist eternally with His multiple cognitive faculties and capacities. This is, in my view, all for the better. For although credally affirmed, the doctrine of the generation of the Son (and the procession of the Spirit) is a relic of Logos Christology which finds virtually no warrant in the biblical text and introduces a subordinationism into the Godhead which anyone who affirms the full deity of Christ ought to find very troubling.

Biblically speaking, the vast majority of contemporary New Testament scholars recognize that even if the word traditionally translated "only-begotten" (*monogenēs*) carries a connotation of derivation when used in familial contexts—as opposed to meaning merely "unique" or "one of a kind" as many scholars maintain^[3]—nevertheless the biblical references to Christ as *monogenēs* (Jn 1.1, 14, 18; cf. Rev 9.13) do not contemplate some pre-creation or eternal procession of the divine Son from the Father, but have to do with the historical Jesus's being God's special Son (Mt. 1.21-23; Lk. 1-35; Jn. 1.14, 34; Gal. 4.4; Heb. 1.5-6).^[4] In other words, Christ's status of being *monogenēs* has less to do with the Trinity than with the Incarnation. This primitive understanding of Christ's being begotten is still evident in Ignatius's description of Christ as "one Physician, of flesh and of spirit, begotten and unbegotten (...) both of Mary and of God" (*Ephesians* 7). There is here no idea that Christ in his divine nature is begotten. Indeed, the transference by the Apologists of Christ's Sonship from Jesus of Nazareth to the pre-incarnate Logos has helped to depreciate the importance of the historical Jesus for Christian faith.

Theologically speaking, orthodox theology has stoutly rejected any depreciation of the Son *vis á vis* the Father. Athanasius writes sternly, "They that depreciate the Only-Begotten Son of God blaspheme God, defaming His perfection and accusing Him of imperfection, and render themselves liable to the severest chastisement" (*In illud omnia mihi tradita sunt* 6). The target here was subordinationism, a doctrine inspired by Neo-Platonic and Gnostic metaphysics, according to which ultimate reality, or the One, could have no intercourse with the world and thus spawned a

descending series of intermediate beings which, falling away from the perfection of the One, served as mediators between it and the world. Origen, trained under the Neo-Platonist philosopher Ammonius Saccas, had dared to speak of the Son as a deity of the second rank, having a sort of derivative divinity as far removed from that of the Father as He Himself is from creatures. Subsequent Church Fathers flatly rejected any suggestion that the Son was in any respect inferior to the Father, insisting that He shares the same substance or essence with the Father. Nevertheless, these same theologians continued to affirm the generation of the Son from the Father. The Son in their view derives his being from the Father. Athanasius quotes approvingly Dionysius's affirmation that "the Son has His being not of Himself but of the Father" (*On the Opinion of Dionysius* 15). Similarly, Hilary declares that "He is not the source of His own being (...) it is from His [the Father's] abiding nature that the Son draws His existence through birth" (*On the Trinity* 9.53; 6.14; cf. 4.9). This doctrine of the generation of the Logos from the Father cannot, despite assurances to the contrary, but diminish the status of the Son because He becomes an effect contingent upon the Father. Even if this eternal procession takes place necessarily and apart from the Father's will, the Son is less than the Father because the Father alone exists *a se*, whereas the Son exists through another (*ab alio*).^[5]

It is interesting to note that the Church Fathers interpreted the Arian proof-text, "The Father is greater than I" (Jn 14. 28), not in terms of Christ's humanity, but as an expression of his being generated from the Father (Athanasius *Four Discourses against the Arians* 1.13.58). Hilary admits: The Father is greater than the Son: for manifestly He is greater Who makes another to be all that He Himself is, Who imparts to the Son by the mystery of the birth the image of His own unbegotten nature, Who begets Him from Himself into His own form (*On the Trinity* 9.54).

But then is the Son not inferior to the Father? Hilary denies it: "The Father therefore is greater, because He is Father: but the Son, because He is Son, is not less" (9.56). This is to talk logical nonsense. It is like saying that six is greater than four, but four is not less than six. Basil, who sees the contradiction, would elude it by saying, "the evident solution is that the Greater refers to origination, while the Equal belongs to the Nature" (*Fourth Theological Oration* 9). This reply raises all sorts of difficult questions. Does it not belong to the nature of the Father as an individual person to be unbegotten and to the nature of the Son to be begotten? Is there a possible world in which the person who is in fact the Father is instead begotten and so in that world is the Son? Classical Trinitarian theology denies this. But then how are the Father and the Son equal in nature, if greatness refers to origination and manner of origination belongs to each individual's nature? And

even if the Father and the Son are equal in nature, why does the accidental property of being unbegotten, which inheres in the person of the Father alone, not make Him greater than the Son, since it is admittedly a great-making property or perfection? If the Father is greater than the Son in any respect, not just in nature, then the Son is in that respect inferior to the Father. At the end of the day Basil must deny that having existence *a se* is not, after all, a perfection or great-making property. He asserts, "That which is from such a Cause is not inferior to that which has no Cause; for it would share the glory of the Unoriginate, because it is from the Unoriginate" (*Ibid.*) This claim is unconvincing, however, for to be dependent upon the Unoriginate for one's existence is to lack a ground of being in oneself alone, which is surely less great than being able to exist on one's own. Such derivative being is, as Brian Leftow says, the same way in which created things exist.^[6] Despite its protestations to the contrary, Nicene orthodoxy does not seem to have completely exorcised the spirit of subordinationism introduced into Christology by the Greek Apologists. Protestants bring all doctrinal statements, even Conciliar creeds, before the bar of Scripture. Nothing in Scripture warrants us in thinking that Christ is begotten of the Father in his divine nature.

The Economic Trinity and the Ontological Trinity

If, then, we decide to drop from our doctrine of the Trinity the eternal procession of the Son and Spirit from the Father, how should we construe the intra-Trinitarian relations? Here it will be useful to distinguish between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. The ontological Trinity is the Trinity as it exists of itself apart from God's relation to the created order. The economic Trinity has reference to the different roles played by the persons of the Trinity in relation to the world and especially in the plan of salvation. The question raised by this distinction is the degree to which the economic Trinity reflects the ontological Trinity.

Marcellus of Ancyra, one of the leaders at Nicea, noticed that in John's Gospel the Logos is not referred to as "Son" until after the incarnation. Indeed, nowhere in the New Testament is Christ unambiguously referred to as "Son" in his pre-incarnate state (I Jn 4.14 is sometimes suggested, but even it may be read naturally in light of the Incarnation). Moreover, he found no biblical grounds for affirming the eternal generation of the Logos from the Father. These observations led Marcellus to hypothesize that prior to creation, the economic Trinity did not exist. The Logos becomes the Son only with his Incarnation. On Marcellus's view distinctions present in the economic Trinity need not always reflect distinctions in the ontological Trinity.

Although they did not share Marcellus's maverick view, both Athanasius and other members of the Nicene party continued to support him as orthodox. Athanasius does consider the view that the Logos became the Son in virtue of his union with the flesh (*Four Discourses against the Arians* 4.20-22). In response to those who say that the Logos and the flesh together are the Son, Athanasius replies that either the Logos became the Son because of the flesh or else the flesh became the Son because of the Logos. In either case, he says, it will be either the Logos or the flesh, not their union, which really is the Son. But he notes that his opponents might escape his dilemma by holding that the Son is constituted by the concurrence of the two, so that neither in isolation can be called the Son. Athanasius's objection to this plausible solution is that then the cause of the union of the Logos and the flesh is the true Son. But Athanasius's objection does not seem to follow. If water is formed by the union of hydrogen and oxygen, it is not the cause of their union which is water. Similarly, the Son is the result, not the cause, of the union of the Logos with the flesh. Athanasius notes another option that his opponents might advocate: that the Son is the Son in name only. This seems even more plausible: the Son is not a new substance formed by the union of the Logos with the flesh, rather "Son" designates an office or role which the Logos enters into in virtue of the Incarnation, just as someone becomes President in virtue of being elected to that office. Athanasius objects that then the flesh is the cause of his being the Son. But that does not follow; rather it is the union of Logos and flesh together that put the Logos into the role of the Son in God's economy.

On the view I have defended, the persons of the ontological Trinity could be as similar to one another as three distinct persons can be, knowing, willing, and loving the same things (though each from a different personal perspective, so to speak), so that it may well be arbitrary which person plays the role of "Father" and which of "Son." These titles have reference to the economic Trinity, to the roles played by the three persons in the plan of salvation with respect to the created order. The Son is whichever person becomes incarnate, the Spirit is he who stands in the place of and continues the ministry of the Son, and the Father is the one who sends the Son and Spirit. In a possible world in which God did not choose to create but remained alone, the economic Trinity would not exist, even though the ontological Trinity would. *Pace* Marcellus, however, in the actual world the economic Trinity exists eternally, since the persons of the Godhead all know the respective roles they will play in God's eternal plan of salvation, even if the deployment of that economy does not occur until the fullness of time.

Moreover, Marcellus went too far in reverting to the view of the Greek Apologists that the second

and third persons of the ontological Trinity existed only in potentiality in God prior to creation, a view which, ironically, reintroduces the subordinationism that Marcellus wanted to avoid. On my model there is no danger of our lapsing, like Marcellus, into a sort of primordial Unitarianism, since I have not grounded the distinctness of the persons of the Trinity in intra-Trinitarian relations of any sort. The one spiritual being which is God possesses three distinct sets of cognitive faculties each sufficient for self-consciousness, intentionality, and volition, and so for personhood, wholly apart from the intra-Trinitarian relations. Indeed, it seems doubtful that mere relations could in any case serve as the basis for the ontological distinctness of the persons. For one person can relate to himself, for example, as knower/known or lover/beloved. In order for these relations to exist between two persons, the persons must exist as distinct individuals logically (if not chronologically) prior to their standing in said relations. In other words, the persons' distinct existence is explanatorily prior to the relations in which they stand, not *vice versa*. It might be said that in the special case of the father/son relation, no one person could stand in such a relation to himself, so that such a relation is sufficient to distinguish ontologically persons in the Trinity. But this is not in fact true. One of the most popular thought experiments in connection with time travel concerns a scenario in which the time traveler goes back in time, marries his mother, and begets himself, so that he turns out to be his own father! A father/son relation between two persons thus presupposes the logically prior individuality of the persons involved. Since entities which stand in a relation seem to be explanatorily prior to the relations in which they stand, intra-Trinitarian relations already presuppose a plurality of persons in the Godhead, which must be grounded in some other way, such as I have proposed.

Conclusion

On the view I prefer, the persons of the ontological Trinity are equal and underived. In the economic Trinity, by contrast, there is subordination (or, perhaps better, submission) of one person to another, as the incarnate Son does the Father's will and the Spirit speaks, not on His own account, but on behalf of the Son. The economic Trinity, while eternal, does not reflect ontological differences between the persons but rather is an expression of God's loving condescension for the sake of our salvation. The error of Logos Christology lay in conflating the economic Trinity with the ontological Trinity, introducing subordination into the nature of the Godhead itself.

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[1] I leave to the side the controversial assertion that the Son is the same *hypostasis* as the Father because it is not germane to our discussion.

[2] See Moreland and Craig (2017, chap. 31).

[3] See the fine summary discussion in Harris (1992, 84-103). That *monogenēs* in reference to Christ means more than just "only," but has a derivative connotation, is evident from the fact that

while God the Father is called *ho monos theos* (the only God), He is not called (*ho monogenes theos*, as is the Son (Jn 1.18).

[4] See discussion and literature in Baur (1992).

[5] This sentence should make it clear that my complaint is not that the Son's being contingent on the Father implies that the Son does not exist necessarily, as Makin (2018, 4) alleges, but that the Son does not exist *a se*. Makin offers an intriguing model of eternal generation of the Son as the essential dependence of the Son on the Father. Essential dependence, he explains, holds when one entity is a constituent of a real definition of another entity. Makin seeks a real definition of the Son which involves the Father as a constituent. What is a real definition? Makin (2018, 8) says, "A *real definition* is a proposition representing the essence of an entity." So is the Father a constituent of a proposition? We can avoid this untoward consequence by holding that a real definition of the Son in some way refers to the Father. We might then wonder why a real definition of the Father may not also refer to the Son, in which case essential dependence fails to be asymmetric. More troublesome still, Makin backs away from the claim that the Son depends essentially on the Father with respect to his generic essence and reserves that claim for the Son's individual essence. But the notion of real definitions has to do with generic or kind essences, not individual essences, so that we seem to have a confusion of categories here. Finally, it seems that Makin's essential dependence is altogether too weak to capture the notion of being begotten. How does one's being defined in terms referring to something else make one generated by that thing or even dependent upon it?

[6] Brian Leftow (1999, 232).