Lion and Lamb Apologetics
Appendix G
Eternal Generation

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In human life, a child's existence begins in an event called begetting or generation. The same was true of the incarnate Christ: Jesus was begotten in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now many theologians have asked if there is an analogous event in the eternal realm. As we have seen, Jesus is the Son of God, not only in his earthly life, but also eternally. His sonship is ontological, not merely economic. The begetting of Jesus in the womb of his mother was a historical event, an economic event. Can we also speak of an ontological begetting, an eternal generation, to which he owes his eternal sonship?

Many have dismissed this question (and the answers to it) as speculative, and there is some truth in this criticism. But we should give attention to this discussion because of its prominence in the history of doctrine, and also because it deals with real concerns of faith.

Our faith moves us to worship Jesus as the Son of God, in the power of the Spirit. So it is legitimate for us to ask what it means for Jesus to be the Son, and for the Spirit to be the Spirit. As we have seen, these titles, understood biblically, imply that both persons are divine. But do they teach us anything more than that?

The divine Son and Spirit are analogous to human sonship and spirituality. But how far does the analogy reach? Human sons are younger than their fathers, but this is not true of the divine Son, who exists in eternity alongside his father. Human sons are born weak, ignorant, and sinful, but not the divine Son, who shares his Father's perfections through all eternity. So our concept of divine sonship must be refined, purged of connotations that are inappropriate to an infinite being. But after all the refining, what is left? Does Jesus' sonship have anything in common with ours?

A common answer has been that both divine and human sonship are the result of *generation*, of *begetting*. Thus, the Nicene Creed (revised in 381) confesses faith in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created." But what is this begetting? The idea of begetting, like the idea of sonship, must be refined, if it is to refer to God. Among human beings, begetting normally occurs in a sexual relationship. It occurs in time, so that a human being who did not exist at one time comes into existence

at a later time. But eternal begetting is surely neither sexual nor temporal, nor does it bring into existence someone who otherwise would not have existed, for God is a necessary being, and all three divine persons share the attribute of necessary existence.

After we have refined the concept, then, what is left of the idea of eternal begetting? Or should we discard that idea as part of our refining of the term *Son?*

Some have described eternal generation as the "origin" or "cause" of the Son.[1] But that notion poses serious problems.[2] God has no origin or cause, and if the Son is fully God, then he has no origin or cause either. He is *a se*. He has within himself the complete ground of his existence. Is begetting the cause of the Son in the sense of the divine act that *maintains* his existence, so that he constantly depends on the Father?[3] But this idea would imply that the Son's existence is contingent, rather than necessary; it, too, would compromise the aseity of the Son.

Most insist that eternal causality or origin must be distinguished from causes and origins in the finite world, by not being temporal. It is not by the Father's choice or will, but by his nature—or by his necessary will, rather than his free will.

Certainly creation *ex nihilo* is inappropriate within the Godhead, as the church insisted over against the Arians. But then what is it that eternal generation generates? If eternal generation does not confer existence on the Son, what does it confer? Some have claimed that by it, the Father communicates the divine nature to the Son. Zacharias Ursinus wrote, "The Son is the second person, because the Deity is communicated to him of the Father by eternal generation."[4] Calvin, however, attacked that position, arguing that "whosoever says that the Son has been given his essence from the Father denies that he

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[1] Heppe, Heinrich (1950, 1978). *Reformed Dogmatics*. (Grand Rapids: Baker) 115: "This intrapersonal relationship results in the distinction of the divine persons according to origin, order and operation.… As therefore the Son has his existence from the Father, and the H. Spirit His from the Father and from the Son, so too in divine action the Father's will takes precedence." Likewise, the Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky, quoted in Fortman, *The Triune God*, 280, says, "The Father is called the cause of the Persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit," although, Lossky adds, "this unique cause is not prior to his effects.… He is not superior to his effects." These are, Lossky says, "relations of origin." Olin Curtis even says, "The Father is the causal ground of the Son's existence," in *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971).

[2] Speaking of the Cappadocian theology, Gerald Bray says, "It is difficult to see what 'cause' can mean when speaking of an eternal person, and all too easy to reflect that the word represents a lingering trace of pre-Nicene subordinationism, which held that there was a time when the Son (and the Spirit) did not exist" (*The Doctrine of God*, 159).

[3] This idea would be similar to the idea of creation as a continuous process; see chapter 15.

[4] Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati: T. P. Bucher, 1851), 135.

has being from himself."[5] If the Son's deity is derived,[6] then, says Calvin, the Son is not *a se*. But if he is not *a se, autotheos*, God in himself, he cannot be divine.

But then what is it that the Father confers upon the Son in eternal generation? According to Calvin, what the Son receives from the Father is not his divine essence, but his personhood:

> Therefore we say that deity in an absolute sense exists of itself; whence likewise we confess that the Son since he is God, exists of himself, but not in relation to his Person; indeed, since he is the Son, we say that he exists from the Father.[7]

Calvin is apparently saying that the Son receives his sonship from the Father, but neither his existence nor his divine nature. He is the Son because the Father has made him the Son. But what does that mean? It could be taken to mean merely that *Father* and *Son* are reciprocal terms. A person cannot be a son unless he has a father. And since the reverse is also true, we could say that just as the Son receives his sonship from the Father, so the Father receives his fatherhood from the Son. That would be a clear understanding of the relationship, and rather obvious, but trivial. Certainly it does not suggest anything closely analogous to human begetting.

But Calvin and others in the Reformed tradition seem to have a more unidirectional concept in mind: the Father is the origin of the Father-Son relationship, in some way that the Son is not. But what does it mean to be the originator or creator of a relationship in which one stands necessarily and eternally? Certainly we should not imagine that a unitarian God, by executing some eternal process, became triune. Nor should we imagine that the Father, existing eternally with two other unnamed beings, somehow acted to make them his Son and his Spirit, respectively.

The terms *Father* and *Son* bring to our minds the idea of generation. But when we try to apply that idea to the divine being, words fail us. When we try to refine it, to make it appropriate to the divine being, its meaning seems to slip away from us. Can Scripture help us to formulate a clearer concept of eternal generation? Let us explore some of the biblical data used by theologians to prove and explain the doctrine.

1. Many have emphasized, as I did in the preceding chapter, that Jesus' sonship is eternal and ontological, not merely temporal. So, they have concluded, he must have been begotten, not only temporally, but eternally as well. But what does *begetting* mean in this

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[5] *Institutes*, 1.13.23. Compare B. B. Warfield's discussion in *Biblical Doctrines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 171.
[6] The notion of derived deity is oxymoronic.
[7] *Institutes*, 1.13.25.

context? If it is merely a verbal form of the noun *Son*, taking *Son* to mean "one begotten," then the conclusion follows trivially. Eternal sonship implies eternal begetting, because that is what sonship means. But this reasoning doesn't tell us anything about eternal begetting beyond what we already know about sonship. On this basis, sonship and begetting are simply alternate ways of saying the same thing: to be a Son is to be begotten, and to be begotten is to be a Son. The doctrine of eternal generation on this basis is verbally superfluous.

On the other hand, if begetting is an event prior to sonship, one that brings sonship into being, then the conclusion does not follow at all. The fact that Jesus' incarnate sonship is due to an act of begetting (Luke 1:35) does not imply that Jesus' eternal sonship is also the result of begetting. Obviously there are major differences between the origin of Jesus' earthly sonship and the origin of his eternal sonship. As I indicated earlier, the concept of sonship is subject to theological refinement. For example, no one would argue that since Jesus' earthly sonship began in the womb of a woman, his eternal sonship must also have begun there (or in some analogous place). The idea of begetting is, *prima facie*, also inappropriate to God. Should it not also be dropped in the interest of theological refinement? Apart from other biblical data, there is no reason to conclude that begetting is more appropriate to the ontological Trinity than gestation in the womb.

2. Some have argued from the term *monogenēs*, which Scripture applies to Christ (e.g., John 1:14, 18; 3:16), that the Son is eternally begotten. The KJV translates this term "only begotten." Recent translations, however, have preferred such translations as "only," "unique," or "one and only." The debate concerns both etymology and usage. The etymological question is whether the *genēs* in *monogenēs* comes from *gennaō* ("beget") or from *genos* ("kind, genus"). In my view, a good case can still be made for the former view of the etymology.[8] On the question of usage, I agree with Lee Irons[9] and John V. Dahms[10] that the uses of *monogenēs* in John should be taken in the traditional way, based on considerations of context and intelligibility. On John 1:18, "the only begotten God, who is in the Father's bosom, has made him known" (Irons' translation), Irons comments:

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[8] See Lee Irons, "The Eternal Generation of the Son," available at http://members.aol.com/ironslee/private/Monogenes.htm. As Irons points out, however, the usage of the term is far more important than the etymology in determining meaning—a point definitively argued by James Barr in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[9] Irons, "The Eternal Generation of the Son."

[10] John V. Dahms, "The Johannine Use of *Monogenēs* Reconsidered," *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983): 222–32. F. F. Bruce, also, in *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 65, n. 26, says that the evangelist may himself have associated (informally, not as an expert on etymology) *monogenēs* with *gennaō*, drawing parallels with our new begetting or birth from God.

The NIV completely misses the point ("God the One and Only … has made him known"), for it is not the fact that the Son is the only God (as opposed to another god) but the fact that he is begotten of God (and thus truly God) which enables him to make God known.[11]

The other *monogenēs* texts, in my view, are also consistent with this understanding of the term.

These considerations, then, justify the language of eternal generation.[12] But, in my judgment, the *monogenēs* texts tell us very little about the nature of that generation. "Begotten" is little more than a synonym for "Son." If it suggests or presupposes an event prior to Christ's sonship, by which he became the Son, it certainly does not describe that event. "Begotten" stresses the unique status of this Son over against all creatures, over against any other being that might be called a son of God,[13] but "only" adds nothing to our understanding of the nature of divine begetting. Certainly the texts employing *monogenēs* will not enable us to decide whether the generation is of existence, divine essence, or personhood, or what a communication of personhood, if that is the nature of eternal generation, might mean.

3. A third consideration, only hinted at in the literature, is this: Although it is improper to assume an exact correspondence between human sonship and divine sonship, nevertheless the former ought to be similar to the latter. That the Son, rather than the Father or Spirit, became incarnate, was not arbitrarily decided by God. There must have been some reason why it was more appropriate for the Son to become incarnate than for the Father or the Spirit to do so.

Thus, the fact that Jesus was begotten and born in history does give us some hints as to his eternal nature. His earthly begetting images something of his eternal relationship to the Father. I would suggest that perhaps the phrase "eternal generation" could be taken to designate that parallel. To say that the Son is eternally generated from the Father is to say that something about his eternal nature makes it appropriate for him to be begotten in time.

As we thus meditate on the nature of Jesus' eternal sonship, we should not confine our attention to his begetting. As Pannenberg says:

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[11] Irons, "The Eternal Generation of the Son."

[12] However, the understanding of *monogenēs* underlying this argument is controversial. So I do not believe that the doctrine should be made a test of orthodoxy on the basis of this argument.

[13] This stress, of course, is shared by the interpretation of *monogenēs* that derives it from *genos*.

Relations among the three persons that are defined as mutual self-distinction cannot be reduced to relations of origin in the traditional sense. The Father does not merely beget the Son. He also hands over his Kingdom to him and receives it back from him. The Son is not merely begotten of the Father. He is also obedient to him and he thereby glorifies him as the one God. The Spirit is not just breathed. He also fills the Son and glorifies him in his obedience to the Father, thereby glorifying the Father himself. In so doing he leads into all truth (John 16:13) and searches out the deep things of Godhead (1 Cor. 2:10–11).[14]

Along with the Son's eternal generation, then, we can speak of his eternal obedience and eternal glorification of the Father. But these assertions (including the assertion of eternal generation) should not be the subject of microscopic analysis and rigid enforcement as tests of orthodoxy. They are biblical hints as to the nature of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.

To summarize: the biblical data authorize us to speak of the eternal generation of the Son, and it is certainly appropriate for the church to confess the statements of the Nicene Creed quoted earlier. But they do not describe this eternal relationship in any detail. We know at least that *Son* is not an arbitrary title; the eternal Son is analogous to human sons in some way. Negatively, we should reject the idea that the Father gives existence to the Son by a creative act and the idea that the Father confers divine essence upon the Son, giving him a derived deity. Whether we confess that the Father confers sonship upon the Son should await further clarification of the idea.

A certain amount of reverent agnosticism is appropriate here. There is much that the Bible does not reveal about the relationship of the Son to the Father. Charles Hodge says:

> The relation, therefore, of the Second Person to the First is that of filiation or sonship. But what is meant by the term, neither the Bible nor the ancient creeds explain. It may be sameness of nature; as a son is of the same nature as his father. It may be likeness, and the term Son be equivalent to *eikōn, apaugasma, charaktēr*, or *logos*, or revealer. It may be derivation of essence, as a son, in one sense, is derived from his father. Or, it may be something altogether inscrutable and to us incomprehensible.[15]

And Robert Dabney says:

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[14] Pannenberg, Wolfhart (1991). *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 320.

[15] Hodge, Charles (n.d.). *Systematic Theology* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1:468. He adds, "The Nicene fathers, instead of leaving the matter where the Scriptures leave it, undertake to explain what is meant by sonship, and teach that it means derivation of essence."

[This doctrine] seems to me rather a rational explanation of revealed facts, than a revealed fact itself. On such a subject, therefore, none should dogmatize.[16]

Earlier, Dabney expresses his concerns more strongly:

The discussions and definitions of the more formal and scholastic Theologians, concerning the personal distinctions in the Godhead, have always seemed to me to present a striking instance of the reluctance of the human mind to confess its own weakness. For, let any read them with the closest attention, and he will perceive that he has acquired little more than a set of terms, whose abstruseness serves to conceal from him their practical lack of meaning.[17]

What the Bible reveals is that there is one God in three persons, persons related to one another as Father, Son, and Spirit. Much of the rest of Trinitarian theology, one suspects, is an attempt to get beyond this fundamental truth by multiplying forms of *Father, Son*, and *Spirit*. When we are told, for example, that there are four "relations" in the Godhead, namely *paternity*, *filiation*, and *active and passive spiration* (*procession*), we get the impression that we are being taught something beyond the meaning conveyed by *Father, Son*, and *Spirit*. But is that impression correct? Does *eternal generation* mean anything more than that the Father is eternally Father and the Son is eternally Son? Do we know anything more about eternal generation than that? Much of this reflection, it seems to me, really amounts to putting the names of the three persons into different forms, without any increase in knowledge or edification. I have tried to treat these discussions with respect and to point out what I think can be gained from them. But I confess that I cannot escape the notion that at least some of this discussion amounts to playing with words.[18]

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[16] Dabney, Robert L. (1972). *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 205.
[17] Ibid., 202.
[18] Frame, J. M. (2002). *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing), 707-714.