

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Eternal Processions: What It Means for the Son to Be Begotten

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The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the greatest mystery revealed in Holy Scripture. This is the teaching that there is one God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a profound and wonderful mystery. But where do these names come from, and why does each Person have them? Where do we get the names “Father,” and “Son,” and “Holy Spirit?” The answer to these questions lies in the divine processions.

By the term “processions,” theologians mean the eternal “going forth” ([Micah 5:2](#)) of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the other divine Persons. The Son is of the Father. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son. These processions reveal profound truths about the divine Persons. The Son of God is not simply the Son because He became man. He was the divine Son from eternity. The Holy Spirit did not begin to be the Spirit of the Father and the Son at creation. He was the Spirit of the Father and the Son from eternity. These names are true of each Person eternally.

The key point that the processions seek to explain is how one divine Person is “from” another. To put it another way, how is God the Son a Son if He never had a beginning? Well, the answer is that He was eternally the Son of God the Father. He never began to be the Son of God the Father, He always was the Son of the Father. The same is true of

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the Holy Spirit. He was always the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The Son comes from the Father eternally, and the Spirit comes from the Father and the Son eternally. The Father is from no other.

Thus, there are two processions that we see in Scripture: the eternal generation of the Son, and the procession of the Holy Spirit.

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First, there is the eternal generation of the Son. When we speak of the eternal generation of the Son, we note that God the Son is “eternally begotten.” This is clearly taught in [John 3:16](#): “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (KJV) The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. This means that God the Son is eternally the Son of God the Father. He has never begun to be the Son of the Father. He has always been the Son of the Father. There was no time when God the Son did not exist. And there was no time when God the Son was not the Son of God the Father. He eternally comes from the Father as His Son. As [Micah 5:2](#) states, His “*goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*”

And so we must understand that God the Son is eternally begotten, revealing the nature and the character of God fully. Just as earthly sons reflect the nature of their fathers, so also does God the Son reflect the divine nature of God the Father from eternity. His Sonship is the eternal going forth and mirroring of the Father’s divine nature.

One aspect of this that is helpful to understand is that the Son always reflects the glory of the Father as an image reflects the glory of the original. We read in [Genesis 5:3](#) that Adam “*begat a son in his own likeness, after his image.*” Human sons bear the image of their fathers, reflecting who they are in many ways. But Jesus is called the Image of God ([Colossians 1:15](#); [2 Corinthians 4:4](#); [Hebrews 1:3](#)). This means that He eternally reflects the glory of God the Father perfectly. There is no time in which He did not reflect the glory of the Father. Nor is there any way that the Son fails to communicate the Father’s divine nature truly and perfectly.

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So in what sense is Jesus the Son? He is the Son as He eternally comes from the Father, reflecting the fullness of the Father’s divine nature. He is eternally begotten, meaning that He never began to be the Son, but He has always been the Son. He is continually of the Father, reflecting the fullness of His divine nature.

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And this is precisely what Scripture teaches. In [John 5:26](#), we read, “For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself.” The Lord Jesus is the Source of life even as God the Father is. Moreover, the Son and the Father are one in nature. “I and my Father are one.” ([John 10:30](#)) The Son eternally communicates the character of the Father, full of grace and truth: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” ([John 1:14](#)) The eternally begotten Son communicates the glory of God in all of its fullness. “The Son...being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his Person.” ([Hebrews 1:2,3](#)) Jesus is the eternally begotten Son of God.

But what about the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Thus, when we refer to the way in which the Spirit comes from the Father and the Son, we speak of His eternal procession. This means that He eternally comes from the Father and the Son, without beginning and without end. He has always been the Spirit of the Father and the Son. There was no time when He began to be the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Nor was there any time when He did not exist. He has always been the eternal Spirit of God the Father, and God the Son.

And as the Holy Spirit of God, He reveals the Son and the Father perfectly and truly. He is their Spirit, meaning that He comes from both of them. He is thus able to communicate the fullness of the divine nature perfectly. There is nothing in the Son’s nature that is not in the Spirit. Nor is there anything in the Father’s nature that is not in the Spirit. This is because it is one divine nature which is possessed by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. He does not proceed from the Father alone, but from the Father and the Son. He is the Spirit of Jesus just as much as He is the Spirit of the Father. This means that He is capable of communicating the presence of Christ to us.

The Holy Spirit is able to communicate the fullness of the divine nature perfectly.

And this is exactly what we see in Scripture. The Lord Jesus states, “But when the Comforter is comes, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.” ([John 15:26](#)) Jesus sends the Spirit, who proceeds from Him and from the Father. Likewise, He states that the Spirit glorifies Him. “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you.” ([John 16:13-14](#)) The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.

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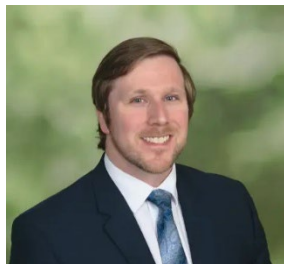
As this is true of the Son and the Spirit, the question may be asked, what about God the Father? Does He have a procession as well? And the answer is no. God the Father is unbegotten, and unproceeding. He eternally begets the Son. And the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son eternally. He possesses no procession of His own and is not from another in the way that the Son and the Holy Spirit are.



Why are the divine processions so important? The processions are important because they reveal who the divine Persons are. God the Son is not merely the Son because of a title or a name. He is the Son because He is begotten of the Father from eternity past. This is who He is. Likewise, God the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit because He eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. This goes to the heart of who God the Trinity is. This is why it is so important.

But along with this, the processions teach that there is not a “greater” or a “lesser” among the divine Persons. They each possess the one divine nature from eternity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all truly and fully God. As the Athanasian Creed expresses so well, “in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal.” They are each of them truly and fully divine. And yet, as the Athanasian Creed also notes, “the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty.”

We serve one true and living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the glorious Triune Lord whom we will have the privilege of praising for eternity.



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