THE GENERATION OF THE SON

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According to the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) the divine Son was "begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead." In this paper we consider (1) whether the Bible teaches that the Son was begotten, (2) whether the doctrine has theological significance, and (3) objections to the doctrine.

I. BIBLICAL TEACHING

1. *That the NT represents the Father as uniquely the Father of the Son, and the Son as uniquely the Son of the Father, needs no argument.* The evidence is unmistakable in Matt 11:27 ("All things have been delivered to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him"), in 1 John 4:14 ("The Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world"), and in numerous other passages.

The relevant question is whether such language implies the generation of the Son. In this connection several points must be noted. (1) In the OT God can be called Father, and personal beings can be called sons of God, without generation or derivation from God being in view (e.g. Deut 32:6; Mal 2:10). Generation language can also be used when derivation from God is not literally intended (e.g. Exod 4:22; Deut 32:18; Ps 89:27). Moreover there is no evidence either in the OT or in the intertestamental literature that a personal being was ever thought to have been begotten by God.

(2) In the first-century hellenistic and Near Eastern environment, relevant father-and-son terminology was often used without any suggestion of generation or derivation.[1]

(3) In the NT, relevant father-and-son terminology can occur without any suggestion of generation (e.g. Jas 1:17; Eph 3:14-15; Rom 8:15-16; Gal 4:4-7). Indeed it has been argued that God can be described as the Father of Jesus, and Jesus as the Son of God, without implying a metaphysical relationship between them. It has been contended that such usage is due solely to Christ's unique obedience to God, his unique

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[1] See W. von Martitz in *TDNT* 8, 336, 398; G. Schrenk in *TDNT* 5, 953-956.

fellowship with God, his unique revelation of God, and/or his messiah-ship. (Luke 4:41; Acts 2:36; 9:20-22; 13:33; Rom 1:3-4; Heb 1:4, 5, 9; 3:2-3; 5:5, 7-10 are sometimes thought to be supportive of such a view.)

On the other hand it must be remembered that a good deal of the NT is addressed to Gentiles—that is, to people who were familiar with the conception of deities begetting other deities and heroes. And many of them, if not all, were familiar with the conception of birth from a male deity alone.[2] This would predispose them, when confronted with the NT statements about God as uniquely the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and about Jesus as the unique Son of God, to think that the generation of the Son by the Father was implied. And in this connection it is to be noted that nowhere in the NT is there any warning against the idea of divine generation. Belief in many gods and many lords is rejected in 1 Cor 8:4-6, but the relationship of the one Lord to the one God is left undefined therein (cf. John 17:3). It is therefore not surprising that C. E. Raven should state that our terminology "would suggest [to Greeks] the popular polytheism and the gross fables of Olympus."[3]

It may be contended, however, that the OT was the Bible of Gentile Christians and that the OT lends little credence to the idea of divine begetting, to say nothing of the fact that our knowledge of what Gentile Christians of NT times were commonly taught is very limited. It is therefore precarious to conclude that the NT terminology we have been considering implies that the Son was begotten of the Father.

2. *The Son is said to be the "Word (Logos)" of God in John 1:1, 14* (cf. 1 John 1:1; Rev 19:13). As is commonly recognized, this designation owes much to Genesis 1 (with its repeated "God said") and to the Jewish personification of the dynamic word of the Lord (cf. Ps 33:6; Isa 55:11; Wis 9:1; 18:14 ff.; Jewish targums; Philo).[4] And there is a sense in which speech is generated by the speaker (cf. Isa 55:11: "My word . . . that goes forth from my mouth").[5]

But can we say that the designation of the Son as the Word of God implies the generation of the Son? May it not be that to say so is to read more into the description than is warranted? Perhaps so. Nonetheless the designation is more or less suggestive of divine generation, to say nothing of the description of the Word as *monogenēs*, a term we shall consider shortly.

3. *In the fourth gospel there is a recurrent motif, articulated in its most characteristic form in John 13:3: "He [Christ] came from God and was going to God"* (see also 8:14; 16:27-30; 17:8-13; cf. 7:28-29, 33; 8:21-22, 42;

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[2] See J. M. Tatlock, *Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Century, 1917) 43.

[3] C. E. Raven, *Apollinarianism* (New York: AMS, 1978) 8-9.

[4] This is not to deny that a debt is also owed to the conception of the divine Wisdom in Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach and to the conception of the *Logos* in Greek philosophy.

[5] The authors of the Chalcedonian creed were well aware that God is a spirit, so that they undoubtedly thought that the begetting of the Son was only analogous to human begetting.

13:1, 33, 36; 14:2-5, 12, 28; 16:5-10). The occurrence of this motif is significant because, as I have argued at length, it is derived from Isa 55:11, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."[6]

As with the designation of the Son as the Word it is perhaps assumed that the Son is begotten of the Father, but the evidence falls short of demonstration. At most we have an intimation of the generation doctrine.

4. *It is commonly agreed that Jesus Christ is understood to be the incarnate Wisdom of God in John 1, Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1.* It has also been argued that the same is true in Matthew 11 and 23.[7] This is significant because generation language is used of the divine Wisdom in Prov 8:24-25: "When there were no oceans I [Wisdom] was given birth. . . . Before the hills I was given birth" (*NIV*).[8] Perhaps we ought not to press the details of Proverbs 8 in developing our Christology.[9] On the other hand, belief in the generation of the Son receives encouragement therefrom.

5. *In Col 1:15 "his beloved Son" is said to be "the firstborn of all creation."* Some scholars hold that this phrase "echoes the wording of" Ps 89:27: "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth."[10] If so, "firstborn" implies superiority and preeminence. What is clear, however, is that the phrase (also?) derives from Prov 8:22: "The Lord *qānānî* [Wisdom] at the beginning of his work" (cf. the birth language concerning Wisdom in vv. 24-25).[11] Indeed Paul may be "quoting from Sirach," which in 24:5 (Vg) interprets Proverbs 8 to mean that Wisdom was *primogenita ante omnem creaturam* ("firstborn before all

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[6] J. V. Dahms, "Isaiah 55:11 in the Gospel of John," *EvQ* 53 (April-June 1981) 78-88. There are interesting points of contact between the Johannine motif and *1 Enoch* 42:1-2, but the differences preclude derivation of the motif therefrom, to say nothing of the question of the date of *1 Enoch* 42.

[7] See M. J. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1970) 24, 57, 59, 70; J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 258-259. Among others Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 182, judges that the same is true in 1 Corinthians 1-2. But those who hold this view fail to notice that the Greek conception of wisdom is in view in the first chapters of 1 Corinthians, not the Jewish conception as in the other passages to which we have referred.

[8] In an unpublished article, "*Qānâ* in Proverbs 8:22," I have argued that *qānâ* in Prov 8:22 does not mean "create" but "possess" or, perhaps, "beget." This conclusion is drawn from a study of the verb in the OT, its cognates in other Semitic languages (especially Ugaritic), its rendering in the LXX, and its interpretation by the fathers.

[9] Without any warrant, F. F. Bruce in E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 195, asserts that Proverbs 8 was "not regarded by them [the NT writers] as a prophecy whose details may be pressed to yield Christological conclusions." Like the editors of *JB* and others, Bruce seems unaware of (1) the original meaning of *ktizō* (see W. Foerster in *TDNT* 3, 1025-1026) and (2) the rendering of Prov 8:22 in Philo *de Ebr.* 31.

[10] E.g. Bruce in Simpson and Bruce, *Ephesians* 194.

[11] According to W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper, 1967) 150, it is a "direct allusion to Prov. 8:22."

creation").[12] But even if the Vg is unreliable at this point the influence of Proverbs 8 is unmistakable, and Paul is almost certainly implying that the Son is begotten.

The same is probably true of Heb 1:6: "When he brings the firstborn into the world." It is possible that "firstborn" here denotes simply pre-eminence and superiority.[13] Or it may be a reference to Christ's "exaltation and enthronement."[14] But the "identification of Christ with the Wisdom of God" in v. 3[15] suggests that "firstborn" is probably to be taken as implying the generation of the Son, as Col 1:15 apparently does.[16]

6. *John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9 teach that Christ is God's mono-genēs Son.* That *monogenēs* implies that he was begotten is the understanding of Justin Martyr *Apol.* 1.23 (c. A.D. 150); *Dial. Trypho* 105 (c. 153). Theophilus of Antioch (115–181) *Theophilus to Autolycus* 2.10 seems to assume such an understanding. Tertullian (c. 197–c. 225) *Against Praxeas* vii evidently had such an understanding. And Hilary of Poitiers *On the Trinity* 1.10; 6.39 (before 358) implies that the Latin Bibles with which his readers were familiar had *unigenitus* in John 1:14, 18.[17] Moreover the fact that Isaac could be described as Abraham's *monogenēs* son (Heb 11:17), despite Ishmael, is not surprising. Philo had stated: "He [Abraham] had begotten no son in the truest sense but Isaac" (*de Abr.* 194; cf. *de Sac.* 43) and had even spoken of Isaac as Abraham's "only (*monos*) son" (*de Abr.* 168; cf. *de Abr.* 196; *Quod Deus Imm.* 4). And the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis 21 says, "In Isaac shall sons be called unto thee [Abraham]: This son of the handmaid [Ishmael] shall not be genealogized after thee" (cf. Targum on Genesis 22).[18]

7. *According to 1 John 5:18 the Son of God "was born of God"* (cf. vv. 13, 20). In this verse it is explicitly stated that the Son was generated by the Father.[19]

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[12] Cf. R. Harris, *The Origin of the Prologue to John's Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1917) 16–17. The Hebrew text of Sir 24:5 (24:3 LXX) is not extant. Since the Greek version sometimes diverges from the Hebrew text, the Vg may preserve the correct reading at this point.

[13] So J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1952) 11.

[14] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 17.

[15] Ibid. 5.

[16] In our opinion "again" in 1:6 is not to be taken with "brings . . . into" but is parallel to "again" in v. 5; cf. Moffatt, *Hebrews* 10. "Firstborn" in Rom 8:29; Col 1:18; Rev 1:5 is irrelevant.

[17] The idea that the Arian controversy was responsible for the view that *monogenēs* included the idea of generation is untenable. Words do not gain new connotations under such circumstances, to say nothing of (1) the evidence from earlier times adduced above and (2) the fact that Arians described the Son as "begotten before all ages" ("The Private Creed of Arius"; cf. P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [6th ed.; New York/London: Harper, 1919], 2. 28; cf. Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius* 2.7).

[18] For a more extensive study of the question at issue see J. V. Dahms, "The Johannine Use of *Monogenēs* Reconsidered," *NTS* 29 (April 1983) 222–232.

[19] Cf. I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 252 nn. 37–38. See Dahms, *"Monogenēs"* 230–231, with respect to an argument to the contrary.

Not only do we have it intimated in various ways that the Son is begotten of the Father, but the use of *monogenēs* in the Johannine literature and the express statement of 1 John 5:18 make it certain that the doctrine is taught in the NT.[20]

II. THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The generation doctrine is not only taught in Scripture but is also essential to theological orthodoxy.

1. *The doctrine provides an ontological basis for the dissimilarity of the Father and the Son that is necessary for fellowship and interaction between them.* Fellowship and interaction between persons cannot exist without dissimilarity of some kind. Fellowship involves communication, but there is nothing to communicate if there is no dissimilarity of any kind. And the same is true of interaction.[21] Moreover unless there is fellowship and interaction between the members of the Godhead they are not persons in any meaningful sense of the term.[22]

2. *The generation doctrine provides an ontological basis for the subordination of the Son of the Father*, which the NT emphasizes (e.g. John 5:19–30). The view that this subordination is only an economic subordination and originates solely in a mutual agreement among the members of the Godhead implies that the divine persons can choose and do what is contrary to their nature. If it is their nature to be independent of each other, that independence is denied if they decide that one shall have authority over another. And that the subordination involved is only temporary does not lessen the problem in the least. If they can thus deny themselves (cf. 2 Tim 2:13) they cannot be trusted, and to speak of God's faithfulness is irresponsible.[23]

3. *Having been begotten of the Father, Christ is not misleading concerning the deity when he speaks of the Father as "my Father . . . [and]*

[20] According to J. O. Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 1. 112: "The Son is not presented [in the Scriptures] as generated, as a subordinate, or an inferior in any sense." Cf. B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952) 53. The evidence is to the contrary.

[21] The procession of the Spirit is the ontological basis for fellowship and interaction between him and the other members of the Trinity.

[22] The fear of tritheism has led to hesitation concerning the propriety of describing the members of the Trinity as persons. Rationalist presuppositions are at the root of this fear.

[23] Cf. C. Welch, *In This Name* (New York: Scribners, 1952) 184: "We must make the doctrine of immanent Trinity conform exactly in content to the economic Trinity." According to W. J. Hill, *The Three-Personed God* (Washington: Catholic Press of America, 1982) 17, it is "hinted at [in 1 Cor 15:28; Phil 2:6] . . . that [the roles of the divine persons] within the economy are themselves grounded in an ontic situation which prevails within God's own inner being. . . . Paul is striving to say that function is grounded in being. . . . God's revelation is self-communication. . . . The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity. . . . The Son of God is God as is the Father . . . yet the Son is always from the Father. . . . The sort of subordination Paul has in mind is not . . . inimical to equality."

my God" (John 20:17; cf. Matt 11:27), when he declares that the Father had sent him (John *passim*), when he prays to the Father (e.g. John 17), or when he affirms: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord. . . . I can do nothing on my own authority" (John 5:19, 30; cf. 14:10; 17:2; Matt 28:18). If what is eternally true is not being represented, it is not correct to say that Christ "made him [God] known" (John 1:18). At most it would be possible to say that at times Christ made him known. At other times he was misleading concerning him.

4. *The doctrine of the generation of the Son is an essential component of the theological basis for Biblical ethics.* Fundamental to Biblical ethics is the teaching that we are to be like God (Lev 11:44; Matt 5:48; Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 1:15-16; 1 John 3:3; etc.). What is right for us is analogous to what is true of him. But the Scriptures teach that Christians are to recognize the authority of those who are over them in the state, the Church, the home (e.g. Rom 13:1-7; Heb 13:17; Col 3:18-25).[24] Because the Son is begotten (and the Spirit spirated) this recognition of human authorities has a theological basis. On the other hand, without the generation doctrine (and the spiration doctrine) the social ethics urged in the Scriptures is not compatible with ultimate truth. There are other components of trinitarian doctrine that have significant implications for ethics, but this does not detract from the importance of the generation doctrine (and the spiration doctrine) with respect thereto.

Theological and ethical considerations require belief in the (eternal) generation of the Son.

III. OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE

Objections to the doctrine of the generation of the Son have been advanced from time to time.

1. *J. O. Buswell, Jr., contends that by dropping the generation doctrine we "clarify the absolute essential equality of the Son with the Father."*[25] Of course orthodoxy (to say nothing of such passages as John 1:1; Col 1:19; 2:9) requires us to maintain the essential equality of the Son with the Father but, as we have seen, there are serious consequences if we do not also hold to the existential inequality of the Son with the Father. And if we give up the doctrine of the generation of the Son there is no basis for holding to that existential inequality.[26]

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[24] This is not to deny that there may be occasions when a Christian should disregard persons who are in positions of authority and even seek to dislodge them (2 Kgs 9:6-7; Acts 5:29; cf. Matt 10:37).

[25] Buswell, *Theology*, 1. 111. He also states: "I can personally accept the ancient creeds without equivocation, for when one says 'begotten, not created,' he is reducing the word begotten to absolute zero" (ibid. 111-112). But to reduce "begotten" to "absolute zero" is irresponsible.

[26] C. K. Barrett in *Neues Testament und Kirche: Für Rudolf Schnackenburg* (ed. J. Gnilka; Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 159 states that in John's gospel Jesus is represented "as both claiming

2. *Leonard Hodgson holds that "the Divine unity is a dynamic unity unifying in the one Divine life the lives of the three Divine persons."* Though he recognizes that the Athanasian creed teaches that "the Son and the Spirit only share in the Divine substance by derivation from the Father," he insists that in this same creed there is "the express rejection . . . of all subordination" when it says, "In this Trinity none is afore, or after other; none is greater, or less than another; but the whole three persons are co-eternal and co-equal."[27]

To Hodgson we reply that if the doctrine of the Trinity implies that "the Divine unity is a dynamic unity unifying in the one Divine life the lives of the three Divine persons," Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not exhaust the divine reality. That which unites them is in addition to them, so that "the one Divine life" is more than "the lives of the three Divine persons." But of this there is no intimation in Scripture. Moreover Hodgson's view seems to imply that knowing the Son does not mean knowing the fullness of deity. The one who redeems us is not one in whom the fullness of deity resides (contrast Col 1:19; 2:9).[28] Furthermore one part of the Athanasian creed must not be so interpreted as to negate what is said in another part. However much the equality of the persons is emphasized in the creed, the derivation of the Son from the Father is also affirmed.

3. *In an extended argument C. C. Richardson explains his rejection of the generation doctrine.*[29] We consider his argument point by major point.

(1) He assumes that the doctrine "derives from an analysis of abstract thought" *à la* Philo. But whatever may have been said by Philo and by others it should be obvious that the idea of "begetting" is not derived from an analysis of abstract thought but from the way in which children come into existence. However often it may be that thought is said to be begotten by a thinker, the concept of generation originates in the way in which a person's "being" derives from his parents. Moreover, as we have seen, the Biblical use of generation language concerning the divine Son is the language of such derivation (cf. John 1:13-14; 3:3-8, 16, 18; 1 John 4:7-9; 5:18).

In this connection Karl Rahner has stated:

The classic psychological speculations about the Trinity . . . have no evident model *from* human psychology *for* the doctrine of the Trinity. . . . Rather [they postulate] *from* the doctrine of the Trinity a model of human knowledge and love. . . . And this model [they apply] again to God.[30]

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and denying equality with the Father." John 5:17-30; 10:30-33; 14:6-11, 28; 17:3; etc., are instructive in this respect.

[27] L. Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet, 1943) 102.

[28] C. C. Richardson, *The Trinity* (New York: Abingdon, 1958) 94-95, states that Hodgson's view does not escape tritheism. He adds: "Every attempt to find an underlying essence or unity in the three ends up either by really denying the three or by dividing the essence."

[29] Ibid. 34-38.

[30] K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 117-118.

(2) Richardson insists that any analogy from such "relative creatures" as human beings cannot provide a clue to the way in which God is both "absolutely beyond and yet related." We submit that such a view fails to pay sufficient heed to the fact that human beings transcend their own finiteness, as is evident from the fact that they have a conception of an absolute. And that people transcend their own finiteness means that such relative creatures may provide a clue to the way in which God is both "absolutely beyond and yet related."

(3) If we know of no way in which God's beyondness and his relatedness may be united, as Richardson contends, to affirm his unity is simply superstitious.

(4) According to Richardson, behind the analogy of generation "is the concept of the fecundity of the Absolute. . . . The assumption is that the Word is begotten of the Father because the Father as absolute overflows in his goodness and projects his 'idea'—the Word." He contends that the conception of the overflow "compromises the absolute character of the Father" and that there is "a logical inconsistency in the idea" that "the Absolute could generate what is inferior to itself."

In addition to the objection we have registered to the view that the generation doctrine means that the Father "projects his 'idea'" we submit that "the begotten image" is quite different from the neo-Platonic conception of the overflow of the Absolute. In contrast to the conception of the overflow, generation suggests both equality and inferiority (as in the case of the son of a human father). In that a son is human he is equal to his father,[31] but in that he is a son he is inferior.[32]

(5) When Richardson declares that "both these principles [absoluteness and relatedness] exist in God, and neither is prior to the other," he is apparently unaware that he is contradicting himself. Anything that coexists with something else without being "prior" to it is not an absolute. It is conditioned. Unless God's relatedness somehow derives from his absoluteness it is irresponsible to speak of his absoluteness.

(6) According to Richardson: "If the one is in any sense begotten of the other, then the other is no longer absolute."[33] But theists use the term "the absolute" to designate that upon which the universe depends for its existence.[34] In accord with this understanding, what Richardson states only

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[31] Is the analogy of generation inadequate at this point? Could it be taken to mean that the Son is of like substance to the Father and not of the same substance? If so, would this explain why Arius could speak of the Son as "begotten"?

[32] According to Richardson, *Trinity* 38 n. 3: "However much their [Father and Son] equality may be stressed in their sharing the divine essence, their inequality becomes apparent in that the Son, and not the Father, is the agent of creation and is incarnate." We agree. What Richardson overlooks is that begetting implies equality as well as the inequality of which he speaks here.

[33] Ibid. 59.

[34] See R. H. Stetson and J. M. Baldwin in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (ed. J. M. Baldwin; Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1960), 1. 3; H. B. Acton in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (ed. P. Edwards; New York: Macmillan, 1972), 1. 6.

holds if the one begotten becomes independent of the one who begat him. The doctrine of the generation of the Son implies no such independence.

Whatever the difficulties with the doctrine of the generation of the Son, logical and/or otherwise, both Biblical and theological considerations require that a Christian adhere to the doctrine, and all objections thereto are either untenable or incompatible with theological orthodoxy.