ETERNAL GENERATION

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In approaching any topic of theology, but especially the Trinity, one proceeds with a healthy sense of caution, just as one slowly steps toward the edge of the most magnificent view of the Grand Canyon. One is excited to discover the beauty and reality of what sits before him yet does so with caution as not to get devoured by making an unwise or incorrect move. Likewise, thinking about the Trinity is a cautious yet anticipatory pursuit. A theologian is ecstatic at what he may uncover, but proceeds with considerable respect, as to properly honor and do justice to the beauty of God and the reality He has allowed man to understand. This paper will attempt to inch forward toward the splendor of God’s ontology, hoping to understand more about His internal radiance. I will probe the doctrine of eternal generation, ultimately defending it through scriptural, historical, and philosophical means.

PROLEGOMENA

The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that there are three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are in relation to each other and to divinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all specified as God, but are not each other. Each possess the divine essence, but exist as different persons, wholly distinguished from each other. The doctrine of eternal generation teaches that the Son is eternally “begotten” or “from” the Father. The doctrine gives form to the inner life of the Trinity by explaining Sonship as an eternal property, rather than a temporal one received at the incarnation. In other words, the Father has always been the Father and the Son has always been the Son, in virtue of their relation to each other. The Son eternally depends on or originates in the Father yet such generation is not temporal, but eternal.

The doctrine of eternal generation has received considerable support throughout the history of the church. Origen, Augustine, John of Damascus, Aquinas, Barth, and many others
have affirmed the doctrine citing various lines of support. Many of the early church thinkers adamantly affirmed the doctrine, appealing to Scripture and using analogies like John of Damascus’ analogy of fire and light, which will be discussed below. Moreover, Thomas Aquinas, in the middle ages, coined the importance of inner-Trinitarian relations in the Summa Theologiae, citing the fundamental aspect of individuation amongst the persons – their relations to each other.

If we reject eternal generation, then we must claim that the Son became the Son at the incarnation. Thus, the Father did not always exist as Father. This is important because it fails to explain the economy of God - why the Son, and not the Father, was sent. Eternal generation explains that the Son was sent because it is encompassed by the role He eternally possesses. The Son is sent because the inner life of the Trinity is fundamentally constituted in such a way that the Father is the one who sends both the Son and the Spirit to accomplish His will.

In addition, if eternal generation is denied, an individuation problem in the Godhead is created. Before creation and the economic processions of salvation, how can there be distinctions within God? Each person shares in the same set of divine properties and no particular person has a property that another lacks. They are all fully divine. Some claim that the economic processions allow differences in properties because the Son has the property of being in human form, while the Father and Spirit do not. Moreover, the Father has the property of sending the Spirit, yet the Spirit only has the property of procession. Therefore, the economy of God ensures differences of properties. However, such distinctions can only occur upon creation and the salvific missions. Before creation, when God existed in the Godhead alone, how could there be individuation of the persons if the relations implied by eternal generation are denied?
According to the indiscernibility of identicals, two entities are identical if they share every single actual or modal property. In other words, for two entities to be different or individuated, they must differ in at least one respect. For example, if \( a \) and \( b \) share all of the same characteristics, but \( a \) is 5’9” and \( b \) is 6’1”, then \( a \) and \( b \) are not identical. Moreover, this principle extends to modal notions so if \( a \) can possibly be in Dallas right now, while \( b \) cannot possibly be in Dallas right now, then \( a \) and \( b \) are not the same entities. Therefore, in the Godhead, if each person shares in every single divine property and there are no eternal relations between the persons, there is no individuating work being done between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They would all exist as the same person because there would fail to be even one difference of properties. However, the doctrine of eternal generation does the work of individuation by showing that “the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one in all respects except in that of being unbegotten, begotten, and of procession.”

Some theologians such as Grudem and Ware have formulated an alternative view called eternal functional subordinationism. However, this view tries to have its cake and eat it too. It is untenable because it reads the economic back into the immanent. The goal of a project like this one is to begin with the ontological inner life of God and work out into the economic, understanding why God chose to act in the manner He did. To read into the inner life of God through what He did in creation is a dangerous task because it only gives a glimpse of who God is after the creative decree, but not necessarily before. Therefore, we must start with God’s ontology, the inner life of the three Persons before creation.

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SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT

As we frame our thinking of eternal generation, we must first and foremost ask if the doctrine itself is biblical. Scott Swain notes: “The doctrine of eternal generation is a biblical doctrine in that it reflects a faithful interpretation of the divine names revealed in Holy Scripture, specifically, the names that signify the relation between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity.”² For Swain, the revealed names throughout Scripture point to something eternal and interior to the divine life. They are not a mere crutch to help our low human minds understand God, but rather, they actually indicate something about God’s being. Therefore, when God is called Father, He really is Father, eternally. The Son has been Son eternally and not just at the incarnation. Indeed, Hebrews 13:8 declares: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Divine essence is unchanging and remains the same at all times. John of Damascus argues that if the Father became the Father at the incarnation, then His substance changed.³ Yet, this is impossible because God must always exist as an unchanging essence. Thus, the divine names reveal a fact about God that is eternal, not temporal.

The Son is the Image

Scripture also describes the Son as the image of the Father. Hebrews 1:3 declares: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” Athanasius adds that He is the “very stamp of the Father’s being…the ‘power’ and true ‘image’ of the Father’s

³ John of Damascus, An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, ch. 7.
being.” Colossians 1:15 reiterates the same truth: “The Son is the image of the invisible God.” John of Damascus beautifully illustrates the way the Son reflects the Father’s glory like light which radiates the flames of a fire.” Just as it is impossible for the light to exist without the flames of the fire, it is impossible for the Son to exist without the Father. For the Son is the true representation, image, and radiance of the Father’s glory. On the other hand, the Father would not exist without His image. Both the Father and the Son are coeternal and exist consubstantially. However, the Father generates the Son because like the light, the image (the Son) exists to reflect and radiate the flames (the Father) yet neither the flames nor the light from flames can exist without each other. They must stand in a strong dependence relation to each other, with the fundamental difference being that one generates or causes the other in simultaneity.

**Divine Aseity in John 5:26**

Certain texts such as John 5:26 speak of aseity, ascribing “life in himself” to both the Father and the Son. Augustine used this verse as one of his most significant scriptural witnesses to eternal generation. He concluded that both Father and Son possess “life in himself” (divine self-existence). The Son, however, has it granted to Him by the Father. D.A. Carson agreed with Augustine and wrote at length in defense of the “eternal grant” by which Augustine explained the tension of the Son receiving aseity. Carson wrote:

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“A full discussion of John 5:26 could demonstrate that it most plausibly reads as an eternal grant from the Father to the Son, a grant that inherently transcends time and stretches Jesus’ Sonship into eternity past. When Jesus says that the Father has “life in himself,” the most natural meaning is that this refers to God’s self-existence. He is not dependent on anyone or anything. Then Jesus states that God, who was “life in himself,” “has granted the Son to have life in himself.” This is conceptually far more difficult. If Jesus had said that the Father, who has “life in himself,” had granted to the Son to have life, there would be no conceptual difficulty, but of course the Son would then be an entirely secondary and derivative being. What was later called the doctrine of the Trinity would be ruled out. Alternatively, if Jesus had said that the Father has “life in himself” and the Son has “life in himself,” there would be no conceptual difficulty, but it would be much more difficult to rule out ditheism. In fact what Jesus says is that the Father has “life in himself” and He has granted to the Son to have “life in himself.” The expression “life in himself” must mean the same thing in both parts of the verse. But how can such “life in himself,” the life of self-existence, be granted by another? The ancient explanation is still the best one: This is an eternal grant. There was therefore never a time when the Son did not have “life in himself.” This eternal grant establishes the nature of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.”

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8 D.A. Carson, “God is Love” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (199): 139.
Augustine and Carson’s emphasis is that the Son never existed without divine aseity or self-existence. However, outside of time itself, the Father has eternally granted the Son to have “life in himself” just like the fire’s existence grants the light to have existence in itself.

*Monogenes in John 1:14, 18*

The lexical debate regarding the word “monogenes,” found in John 1:14, 18 as well as John 3:16 may lend further support to eternal generation. Charles Lee Irons does an excellent job of explaining the three different instantiations of the word “monogenes.” First, Irons shows that the word can take the form of denoting an only legitimate child or heir such as Isaac, who was called *monogenes*, even though Abraham had another son, Ishmael (Gen. 22:2). Secondly, it could denote a metaphorical “only begotten,” differentiating a biological usage from a metaphorical one. For example, the universe can be called God’s *monogenes*, which has not been produced biologically from his loins, but rather has proceeded metaphorically from his being.

The third reading of *monogenes* distinguishes an object that is the “only one of its kind.” Often employed in scientific literature, this form of the word denotes an organism that is unique or the only one of its species.

I argue that the most likely usage of the word *monogenes* is in the metaphorical sense. The use of this word in Scripture is neither biological nor scientific, but rather speaks of a metaphysical procession of being, from the Father to the Son. John 1:18 adds that the Son “is” in the bosom of the Father, which hints that the Sonship itself transcends temporality. Because it underscores something eternal, it should not be interpreted from a biological perspective.

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Furthermore, it cannot be understood as scientific because it cannot be reduced to “only one of his kind.” Even in NIV and ESV translations, which take the scientific “uniqueness” view, the word “Son” is added. But why add the word “Son,” if the meaning of monogenes is only “unique” or “one of its kind”? Even translators who affirm this “unique” translation cannot help but recognize a relation of Sonship in the text. This hints that the word actually references a relation of begotten Sonship between the Father and the Son.

Irons points out how reading the text as “unique” or “only” presents major problems for the ESV. The ESV translation of John 1:18 reads “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” However, as Irons points out, if “the only God” is a person who is at the Father’s side, then the “only God” is a completely distinct entity. Therefore, the Father does not fit into the category “the only God.” The heart of the translation is to affirm that Jesus is the “only God,” but what it consequently adopts is the denial of the Father’s place inside the affirmation. This is heretical at worst and poor theology at best. Therefore, the best reading of the word monogenes is in a metaphorical biological sense, in which John views the Son as the only offspring, who derives His being from the Father.

This lexical battle has shown that monogenes is most properly translated as “only begotten,” connoting a sense of generation or from-ness. When it is incorrectly translated to communicate “one and only” or “only,” the theological truth of generation or derivation is lost. Even those who translate it as “one and only” cannot refuse to admit that sonship is involved. Therefore, monogenes, as properly understood, provides yet another piece of evidence for eternal generation because it absolutely denotes a form of sonship between the Father and Son. While it may not, and probably should not, be the only evidence used to support eternal generation, it

certainly gives us another reason to strongly consider eternal generation’s place in the truth of who God is.

*Jesus Was Sent By the Father*

Lastly, Jesus was sent by the Father, revealing His subordination in personhood and role, but not in essence. This economic commissioning is attested to throughout Scripture and reveals the immanent life of the Trinity (Matt. 10:40; Luke 4:43; 10:16; John 4:34; 5:23-24, 30-47; 6:29, 38-44; 7:16, 28, 29, 33; 8:16-18, 26-29, 42; 9:4; 12:44-50; 13:16; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5, 28; 17:3, 18; 20:21; Galatians 4:4-6). It is important to notice that these passages always point to the Father’s sending of the Son and never the Son’s sending of the Father. We must ask why the Son was even sent instead of the Father or the Spirit? Augustine argued in *De Trinitate* that the temporal sending of the Son reflects and reveals the Son’s relation of being eternally begotten “from” the Father.\(^\text{11}\) The Son was sent because He has always stood in a relation of generation from the Father. Thus, it is natural that the Father sends the Son and the Son responds in perfect obedience to His will.

Those who object, claim that the sending of the Son subordinates Him to a lower position than the Father as to rob Him of His divinity. Defenders of the doctrine disagree, citing that the submission in role or position does not necessitate a subordination of essence. Rather, the Father and Son are *homoousios*, or of the same substance, which the Council of Nicaea originally affirmed.\(^\text{12}\) Louis Berkhof notes: "The only subordination of which we can speak, is a subordination in respect to order and relationship...Generation and procession take place within


\[^{12}\text{“Homoousios” in Encyclopedia Britannica (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 2015), online: https://www.britannica.com/topic/homoousios, accessed 5 August 2018.}\]
the Divine Being, and imply a certain subordination as to the manner of personal subsistence, but not subordination as far as the possession of the divine essence is concerned. This ontological Trinity and its inherent order is the metaphysical basis of the economical Trinity." Berkhof makes it clear that no subordination of essence exists, but rather subordination of personhood. Thus, each person in the Godhead possesses the full divine essence and are equally divine. The main distinction is personhood, role, and office, which A.H. Strong explains: “...Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while equal in essence and dignity, stand to each other in an order of personality, office, and operation...The subordination of the person of the Son to the person of the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority.” Thus, whether unbegotten like the Father or begotten like the Son or proceeding like the Spirit, there is not inequality of essence throughout the Trinity. Strong illustrates by pointing to 1 Cor. 11:3, in which the man is head of the woman in office or role, but is not more valuable with respect to the essence of the soul. Regarding the soul, both man and woman are of equal value. The marital relationship between man and woman adequately illustrates the relations within the Godhead because it gives differences in role or office, while keeping perfect equality in essence.

While there is insufficient space in this project to discuss all Scriptural support for eternal generation in proper depth, I believe the evidence presented here gives us justifiable reason to affirm, or at least strongly consider, eternal generation’s claim as a faithful representation of

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15 Ibid, 342.
Scripture. Fortunately, there remains a wealth of other reasons to accept an eternal generation view, both in church history and theology, to which we now turn.

CHURCH HISTORY

The doctrine has received consistent support throughout the history of the church, most notably in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed (AD 381), which confesses belief in the “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.” The early church fathers affirmed that the Son came from the Father before all spatio-temporal existence. He is one and the same essence with the Father, fully divine and co-eternal.

Origen

Origen argued on a theological basis stemming from Proverbs 8:22, pointing to the Son as the referent of the text. The passage reads:

22 “The L ORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old;
23 I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be.
24 When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water;
25 before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth,
26 before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth.
27 I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
28 when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
29 when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.

Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

Indeed, who else can claim to be present with the Lord when the universe was formed? If the text is not referring to eternal generation and the Son, when did the Father create His wisdom? How is it possible that He ever existed without it? Rather, The Son is called the Word of the Father (John 1:1) and is His Wisdom. He is the one who was “formed at the very beginning,” which reminds us of the same language used by John in the first words of His epistle. This beginning, spoken of here, refers to the inner life of the Trinity before anything else existed. Moreover, for Origen, the names given in Scripture (“Father,” “Son,” “Word,” “Wisdom”) must be eternal. Consequently, the relations to which the names refer, must also be eternal. Therefore, the Father cannot become the Father, but He must always be. The nature of this relation reveals something interior to God the Father – that He is eternally generative. Origen writes: “His generation is as eternal everlasting as the brilliancy which is produced from the sun.”

Thus, just as light generates brightness, so from eternity, the Son, who is the Father’s Wisdom and image, is begotten from the Father.

Augustine

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Eternal generation also played an important role in Augustine’s theology. It allowed Augustine to affirm the equality of the Son to the Father because it asserted sameness of essence between the two. Secondly, it explained the ontological necessity of the relations between Father and Son. To Augustine, paternity and filiation are not accidental properties, but exist as necessary ones. God would not exist if the Father did not generate the Son. Augustine declares: “The Son was always born, and never began to be the Son. But if He had begun to be at any time, or were at any time to cease to be, the Son, then He would be called Son according to accident.”\(^\text{17}\) Augustine points to an ontological necessity within the Godhead. In every possible world, the Son is the Son and the Father is the Father. God must necessarily exist in this co-eternal relation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He notes: “the Father is not God without the Son, nor the Son God without the Father, but both together are God.”\(^\text{18}\) A co-eternal subsistence of the Father and Son is affirmed, pointing to ontological necessity. In other words, one cannot exist without the other. Yet the Father generates the Son, which is the very thing that differentiates them from each other. At the same time, this does not subordinate the Son by essence. Augustine explains that, “although to be the Father and to be the Son is different, yet their substance is not different; because they are so called, not according to substance, but according to relation, which relation, however, is not accident, because it is not changeable.”\(^\text{19}\) With Augustine, John Calvin affirmed that eternal generation is not an issue of essence, but of persons. The relations themselves do not accomplish the work of essence, but only of personhood individuation.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{17}\) *De Trinitate*, 5.5

\(^{18}\) *De Trinitate*, 6.2.3

\(^{19}\) *De Trinitate*, 5.5.1

Keith Johnson notes, “Apart from eternal generation, there is no basis for distinguishing the Son from the Father in God’s inner life.”\textsuperscript{21} One could point to the economic missions, but these are mere reflections of the inner life of God. Moreover, how do we understand the inner life of the Godhead \textit{before} the economic missions? Before anything else existed, the Trinitarian persons must have been distinguished from each other in some way. This differentiation is instantiated by the relations in which they stand to each other. That the Father is unbegotten makes him the Father. That the Son is begotten makes him the Son. That the Holy Spirit proceeds makes Him the Holy Spirit. These are eternal relations that allow us to distinguish the persons, while affirming their shared essence. However, without eternal generation and the necessary relations within the Godhead, we are stranded, only able to read the economic Trinity back into the immanent trinity.

\textit{Thomas Aquinas}

William Placher makes an astute observation about the problem of relations: “In the case of the three persons of the Trinity, however, if we ask, ‘What is this?’ the answer in every case is, “God.” The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God. Yet the Father is not the Son is not the Spirit is not the Father. Like angels, the three in God lack matter, physical location, or other ways in which we might distinguish among different instances of the same essence, but they are all one God and therefore cannot differ in species.”\textsuperscript{22}


In light of this, Aquinas viewed the relations in the Trinity as the answer to the problem. He placed a significant emphasis on the relations within the Trinity because he understood that the relations had the power to individuate the divine persons. For Aquinas the only difference in the Godhead between the persons is that the Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds or is breathed forth by the Father and the Son.\textsuperscript{23} “The heart of Aquinas’ theory of the Trinity,” notes Placher, “is the claim that the Trinitarian relations ‘constitute and distinguish the divine persons.’”\textsuperscript{24} Thus, Aquinas too, saw the need and benefit of eternal generation because it properly formed distinctions within the Trinity, which could not have been formed otherwise.

\textit{Karl Barth}

Barth supported eternal generation and understood it as giving form to the shape of the Gospel. He looked upon the obedience of the Son in his incarnational existence and intuited that it reflected something more perfect and profound in the inner life of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{25} For Barth, the Son’s obedience unto death was not accidental, but revealed something ontologically deeper. He concluded that the Son is sent and acts in perfect obedience because it is how He eternally exists. Michael Allen develops this line of thinking explaining that the “Trinitarian relations of origin must be extended in the direction of relations of ongoing intra-Trinitarian communion and by showing how the mission of the incarnate Son corresponds to the eternal life of the Son. And how, in so doing, he continues to honor this distinction and ordered relation between theology

and economy.” In other words, the Son has always been submissive to the Father because of His eternal generation from the Father. With Aquinas, Barth understood that the ontological processions extend outward to the economic missions, not the other way around. God unfolds His salvific actions as an unveiling of who He has always been, internally. Thus, filiation of the Son is not confined to the incarnation, but is an eternal reality that originated in the Godhead. Because of this, Barth willingly affirmed eternal generation because it brought defined shape to the Gospel. It made sense of why the Son was sent and what, in particular, the Gospel mission revealed: God Himself.

In light of Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth’s support, we can gather that the doctrine of eternal generation has garnered support throughout various periods of history in the church, on the basis of both scriptural and theological grounds. However, can the doctrine stand, like rock, against the tide of philosophical inquiry, or will it crumble like sand? To this investigation, we now turn.

PHILOSOPHICAL SUPPORT

Philosophical objections to eternal generation are mainly aimed at unintelligibility and subordinationism. The unintelligibility objection claims that the doctrine is just that: unintelligible. It simply does not make sense and seems illogical by nature. Millard Erickson blatantly attacked the doctrine, saying it “does not make sense philosophically” and judged it as “meaningless.” Erickson does not understand how the Son and the Spirit could be “from” the

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27 Millard J. Erickson, Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2009), 251.
Father without being created by Him. Others claim that the term “begotten” has never been clearly developed or defined, making it useless in theological discussion.

The subordinationism objection claims that eternal generation subordinates the Son to the Father. The Son’s generation, according to objectors, robs Him of necessary existence and aseity. It does so by stripping the Son of necessity and fashioning Him as a contingent being. How can the Son truly be a se, if he receives it from another? This too, seems illogical. If He is begotten from the Father, He cannot be self-existent, for the definition of self-existence is to exist in one-self alone, without the causation of anything or anyone. Thus, the Son’s receiving of existence from the Father completely denies His divine aseity and denigrates His divinity. William Lane Craig agrees with this assessment, adding: “Even if [eternal generation] 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).”

Philosopher Mark Makin has presented a few models that appropriately respond to these objections by adequately illustrating how the doctrine of eternal generation is intelligible and does not subordinate the Son below the Father. Makin’s first suggestion is the causal model, which argues: “The Son is eternally begotten of the Father =df. Necessarily, the Father causes the Son to exist eternally.” While causation is typically thought to be diachronic, Makin argues for non-diachronic or simultaneous causation. Due to the timeless nature of non-diachronic causation, the effect is not produced after the cause, but rather exists simultaneously with the cause. According to this view, the Father causes the Son to exist because it is part of the Father’s

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28 Ibid, 184
essence. And therefore, whenever the Father exists, so does the Son. In this case, the Son’s necessary existence is not threatened because He eternally exists with the Father. There is no point at which the Father exists without the Son. Thus, the Son’s existence is caused, but is not contingent. As John Calvin concluded, the Son possesses aseity with respect to His divine essence, but not with respect to His person. He writes:

We say, then, that the Godhead is absolutely of itself. And hence also we hold that the Son, regarded as God, and without reference to person, is also of himself; though we also say that, regarded as Son, he is of the Father. Thus his essence is without beginning, while his person has its beginning in God.”

Thus, just as the Son is homoousios with the Father, His essence is absolutely a se. However, regarding His person, He is generated from the Father.

Makin astutely provides another way to answer the aseity objection by explaining that divine aseity only precludes God from depending on something outside of Himself, but not inside Himself. In this case, the Son is not depending on anything outside of the divine essence for His existence, but is rather depending on someone inside the Godhead, namely the Father. Because of this, His divine aseity is not destroyed because the divine essence itself remains a se.

The second model is the Grounding Model, which states: “The Son is eternally begotten of the Father =df. The father grounds the Son.” Metaphysically, grounding is a relation of necessity. If the grounds for something exist, then the entity grounded must also exist. Recall

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32 Makin, 251.
John of Damascus’ analogy of fire and light. The light is grounded by the fire because wherever the flames of the fire exist, the light also exists. There cannot exist fire without light nor can light from fire exist without fire. The presence of one guarantees the presence of the other. Thus, necessarily, if the Father exists, then the Son must also exist. There is no point in time in which one exists without the other. Their mutual existence is one of necessity yet one derives His being from the other.

Makin’s final, and arguably best, model is his essential dependence model. This model argues: “Y essentially depends on X =df X is a constituent of an essential definition of Y.”33 Makin gives the example of smiles, which essentially depend on mouths. In defining the word “smile,” the word “mouth” will naturally be a constituent of the definition. You simply cannot have a smile without a mouth. Likewise, on this model, the Son essentially depends on the Father because the essence of the Son involves the Father. In other words, to be who the Son is, He must stand in a certain relation to the Father. It is in the definition of the Son to be the image of the Father. Consequently, the Son’s existence depends on the Father because the Father stands as an essential constituent of who the Son is. Thus, the general essence of the Father and Son (their divinity) remain in tact because they are affirmed as equals, but their individual essences (their identities) differ due to their contrasting definitions.

While these models are not without their challenges, they demonstrate that there are tenable philosophical positions regarding the doctrine of eternal generation that do not sacrifice the Son’s divine aseity or necessary existence. Each model affirms that the Father and Son are coeternal and never exist without each other. The diachronic causation embedded in the models explains the Son’s dependence on the Father, without insinuating that the Father ever existed

33 Makin, 255
without the Son. In my opinion, these models adequately enable a positive view of eternal generation on the basis of philosophically reasonable grounds.

**GOSPEL IMPLICATIONS**

If we have been even somewhat successful in establishing eternal generation in this paper, what are the implications? Why should we, as Christians, particularly care? C.S. said, “It matters more than anything else in the world. The whole dance, drama, or pattern of this three-personal life is to be played out in each one of us: or (putting it the other way round) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his [or her] place in that dance. There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made.”

We should care about eternal generation because it grounds adoption, which is absolutely essential to a proper understanding of the Gospel. Sure, God can forgive us, but what good is it if He refuses to adopt us? The glorious blessing of the Gospel is that we now have fellowship with the Holy Trinity. We have joined the “divine dance.” The indwelling Spirit makes us co-heirs with the Son so that we can be adopted as children of the Father. This reality reflects something deeper, something eternal and internal to the Trinity. The adoptive experience we participate in through salvation is a revelation of what God has already done through begetting the Son in eternity. Ultimately, “confessing eternal generation is the consequence of grounding adoptive sonship in a higher sonship that belongs to the essence of the living God.”

If the Son is not eternally begotten, how can we be made into sons and daughters of the Father through Him? We cannot. Rather, it is precisely on the basis of His eternal Sonship that there is true power and

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significance in being made co-heirs with Him. It draws us, contingent beings, into the intimacy of eternal relationship with the Father by connecting us with the true Son. John Owen notes that our communion with God consists in “his communication of himself unto us, with our return unto him of that which he requires and accepts, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”

CONCLUSION

Perhaps you have heard this famous line: “The Trinity: Try to understand it and you’ll lose your mind; try to deny it and you’ll lose your soul.” As we wrap up this analysis of eternal generation, I would like to admit my own human limitation in understanding the Trinity. At times, it seems like we know what to reject regarding the Trinity more than what to affirm. I hope that affirming eternal generation gets us one step further in understanding the truth about God. Gregory of Nazianzus held a high reverence for respecting the mystery of God’s ontology. He reminds us regarding this great, secret doctrine that:

“God’s begetting ought to have the tribute of our reverent silence. The important point is for you to learn that he has been begotten. As to the way it happens, we shall not concede that even angels, much less you, know that. Shall I tell you the way? It is a way known only to the begetting Father and the begotten Son. Anything beyond this fact is hidden by a loud and escapes your dull vision.”

While we can seek to comprehend every corner of the deep things of God, we are clouded by our own limitation and will never comprehensively understand God. Nonetheless, in this project, we

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36 John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 94.
have explored the nature of eternal generation and have hopefully established a truth about God. We know that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and that He is “from” the Father in some way. The logistics of this generation, as Gregory reminds us, may never be known. We are at the mercy of God’s own revelation to us.

Nevertheless, this paper has sought to establish a defense of the doctrine of eternal generation, appealing to scriptural, theological, historical, and philosophical sources. I believe that we stand on a solid rock of evidence to suggest that eternal generation is the most faithful representation of the revelation found in Scripture. It is theologically and philosophically backed by sound reason and doctrine, receiving support from Christian thinkers throughout history.

Without eternal generation, there is no true explanation for why the Son was sent rather than the Father. It grounds the economic processions in the Gospel and gives us reason to rejoice in our adoption. Moreover, it helps us understand the distinctions in the Trinity. Without any generation or procession in the Godhead, all persons would lapse into the same individual. The relations, as Aquinas teaches, are precisely what distinguishes the persons. It gives them unique properties so as not to be identical to each other, according to the Indiscernibility of Identicals. These processions within the Godhead, however, do not subordinate any person in essence, but reveal contrasting eternal roles within the Godhead. While each person has a different role (unbegotten, begotten, proceeding…paternity, filiation, spiration), they remain completely equal in divine essence.

The beauty of the doctrine of eternal generation is that it gives us a glimpse into the inner life of God. And now, though we were once outsiders, we now fellowship in the inner life of the Trinity, rejoicing as we behold His glory. We have taken a step closer to the edge of that magnificent Grand Canyon overlook, beholding the rock formations in all their beauty and
splendor yet unable to understand or comprehend how or why they have been constructed in such a way. Perhaps, the explanations are too lofty for words to describe. Yet we stand in awe, observing and rejoicing over the beauty we have been fortunate enough to stumble upon. Likewise, the truth about the inner life of the Trinity can seldom be explained by earthly logic or words to our feeble minds. Instead of becoming bitter about our lack of comprehensive knowledge, we must embrace the tension and rejoice that God has allowed us to peek at even a glimpse of who He is, was, and will forever be.