

Reexamining the Eternal Generation of the Son and Its Implications to the Doctrine of the Trinity¹

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The doctrine of eternal generation as taught by the Church Fathers and confessed by the Creeds is affirmed by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. It is defined as “an eternal personal act of the Father, wherein, by necessity of nature, not by choice of will, he generates the person (not the essence) of the Son, by communicating to him the whole indivisible substance of the Godhead without division, alienation, or change, so that the Son is the express image of his Father’s person and eternally continues, not from the Father, but in the Father, and the Father in the Son.”² In spite of the general acceptance of this doctrine, theologians have begun to question its Scriptural validity and its implications to the doctrine of the Trinity.

This study aims to reexamine briefly the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son as found in the writings of selected Church Fathers as well as modern thinkers both proponents and objectors of the doctrine. A critical evaluation will be given to the thought of representative thinkers. In this paper, I argue that eternal generation of the Son

¹My interest in re-examining the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son was due to reading Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

²Archibald A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 182. Eternal generation is also defined as “God the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and God the Son is eternally the Son of the Father.” Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 322. See also Geoffrey W. Bromily, “Eternal Generation,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 393–394.

lacks explicit Scriptural backing. Moreover, the idea of derivation as implied in this doctrine has serious implications to the coeternity of the Trinity.

Eternal Generation in the Early Church

We will begin to re-examine the doctrine of eternal generation in the writings of the selected Church Fathers who wrote on the topic. We will see that this doctrine came up as they labored to explain how one God in three persons relate to each other.

Origen (c. 185–254). Origen is considered as one of the greatest thinkers of the early church.³ He labored to explain the Christian faith using the Platonic philosophical ideas prevalent in his time.⁴ He was a genius in speculative method, which he used to advance the theology of the Trinity.⁵

Origen expresses the idea of eternal generation of the Son from the Father in an attempt to explain the relationship and differentiate the Father from the Son. For him this generation is dependent upon the act of the will of the Father.⁶ Since the Father is eternal,

³Tim Dowley, ed., *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 53.

⁴Ibid. See also Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2006), 1:79. See also Michael Walsh, ed., *Dictionary of Christian Biography* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), s.v. “Origen” (p. 940). As Copleston observes, Origen’s attempted to reconcile Platonic philosophy with Christianity, coupled with his allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures led him to some unorthodox views. See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962), 2:41.

⁵See Jean Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture: A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicea*, trans. John Austin Baker (Gloucester Road, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 2:274–275.

⁶Origen *Origen De Principiis* 1.2.6 (ANF, 4.248, trans. Roberts and Donaldson). Eusebius of Caesarea would later articulate many of the thoughts of Origen. See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58–60.

the begetting must be eternal as well.⁷ Moreover, it is eternal because it is a continuous activity.⁸

The Platonic idea that God is simple, immutable, and transcendent is evident in Origen's Trinitarian view.⁹ For him, God the Father is the only "unbegotten,"¹⁰ and that the Son's "existence" (that is subsistence) is generated by the Father.¹¹ He thinks the Father alone is *autotheos*, "God of Himself,"¹² and "Very God and the True God."¹³ The Father alone is "the fountainhead of the deity" (*pēgē tē Theotētos*)¹⁴ and as such is the origin or source (*archē*) and cause (*aitia*) of the Son and the Spirit."¹⁵ Considering this

⁷Origen *Origen De Principiis*, 1.2.4 (ANF, 4.247).

⁸See Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 90; cf. Origen *Origen De Principiis*, 1.2.4 (ANF, 4.247).

⁹Joseph W. Trigg observes that Origen's view of God as found in *On the First Principles* are steeped in Platonic perspectives. One example is Origen's idea of God's absolute transcendence, which necessitates a "mediator between God and the world," i.e., Christ. For more discussion of Origen's Platonic orientation see Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third Century Church* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1983), 95–100.

¹⁰Origen *Origen De Principiis*, 1.2.8 (ANF, 4.248–249). Gerald Bray suggests that the term *unbegotten* used to describe God the Father is not biblical but of Platonic origin used to describe the "highest form" which is "unchanging, unbegotten, and indestructible, admitting no modification, and entering no combination, imperceptible to sight or other senses, the object of thought." Early Christians, according to Bray knew the origin of the term, nonetheless, used this for they believed this is the Scriptural concept of God. Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 255–256.

¹¹Origen *Origen De Principiis*, 1.2.6 (ANF, 4.248).

¹²Origen *Origen's Commentary on John*, 2.2 (ANF, 10.323, ed. Allan Menzies).

¹³*Ibid.*, 2.3 (ANF, 10.323).

¹⁴John Norman D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Redford Row, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1977), 131. See *Origen's Commentary on John 2.2* (ANF, 10.323); also Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 76.

¹⁵Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 100.

idea, Kevin Giles correctly concludes that for Origen, the other persons of the Trinity derived themselves from the Father therefore not God in the fullest sense.¹⁶

Moreover, Origen believes that the Father is “the primal goodness” and the Son is the “image of His goodness,” therefore even if the Son and the Holy Spirit are good, their “goodness” is derived from the “primal goodness.”¹⁷ Hence, the Logos, being generated by the Father is a “second” God.¹⁸ The Son as the agent of creation was ontologically inferior to the Father.¹⁹ He asserts that this conclusion was based on Christ’s confession: “The Father who sent Me is greater than I.”²⁰

Origen identifies Wisdom in the book of Solomon with the Son and argues that this Wisdom was derived from the being of the Father therefore “never at anytime non-existent.”²¹ Although the Son derives His existence from the Father, he insists that the former has no beginning:

Wherefore we have always held that God is the Father of His only-begotten Son, who was born indeed of Him, and derives from Him what He is, but without beginning, not only such as may be measured by any divisions of time, but even

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Origen *Origen De Principiis*, 1.2.13 (ANF, 4.251).

¹⁸Origen *Against Celsus*, 5.39; 6.60 (ANF, 4.561–601, eds. Roberts and Donaldson).

¹⁹Ibid., 8.15 (ANF, 4.645). Johannes Quasten aptly says that Origen “presupposes an hierarchical order in the Trinity” which means that the Holy Spirit is below the Son and the Son is below the Father. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), 2:79. See also Bryan Litfin, “Origen,” in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy*, ed. Bradley G. Green (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010), 137; Origen *Against Celsus*, 7:57 (ANF, 4.634).

²⁰Origen *Against Celsus*, 8.15 (ANF, 4.645). Giles observes that Origen’s Middle Platonic presupposition becomes evident here for if “the Son and the Spirit are derived from and contingently caused by the Father, they must be less than the Father. In Middle Platonism a cause is always superior to what is caused because what is caused does not *participate* fully in the being of the ultimate cause. What this means is that for Origen derivation implies diminution in divine being and thus diminution in divine power.” Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 100. See also Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 131–132.

²¹Origen *Origen De Principiis*, 1.2.9 (ANF, 4.249).

that which the mind alone can contemplate within itself, or behold, so to speak, with the naked powers of understanding.²²

Contrary to what would later Arius believe, Origen affirms that there is no time that the Son was not. He asserts that “the Son is derived from the Father, but not in time, nor from any other beginning, except, as we have said, from God Himself.”²³

Another element in Origen’s concept of eternal generation is the commonality in nature of the Son to the Father.²⁴ However, he is hesitant to admit that the *ousia* of the Son is “univocally” the same with the Father.²⁵ For this reason many scholars have questioned the idea that Origen believes that the Son is of the same essence, *ousia* with the Father.²⁶

Evaluation. Origen’s Platonistic concept of God who alone is unbegotten or ungenerated, imposed an understanding that the Son’s subsistence was derived from the Father. Origen was consistent in his exposition of the relationship, the differentiation and the consubstantiality of the Son to the Father. However, his view of the Father as the Cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit unmistakably pointed to subordination.

²²Ibid., 1.2.2 (ANF, 4.246).

²³Ibid., 1.2.11 (ANF, 4.250).

²⁴Origen *De Principiis* 1.1.8 (ANF, 4.245); cf. *ibid.*, 1.2.4 (ANF, 4.247). Mark J. Edwards affirms that indeed Origen used the term *homoousios* to explain the unity of the divine persons, and that it was not just a product of interpolation by Rufinus the translator. See Mark J. Edwards, “Did Origen Apply the Word *Homoousios* to the Son?” *Journal of Theological Studies* 49, no. 2 (1998): 658–670.

²⁵John Behr points out that Origen’s primary concern in stating that the essence of the Son is not separate from the Father is to affirm the divinity of the Son and not to assert that the Son and the Father have the same *ousia*. John Behr, *The Way to Nicea: Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 1:188.

²⁶Kelly claims that the idea that Origen believes in the consubstantiality between the Father and the Son is found in Rufinus’ Latin translation. See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 130. Richard Hanson supports this line of thinking. According to Richard Patrick C. Hanson, “Origen never says that the Son comes from the substance of the father.” Richard Patrick C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (George Street, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 67.

Furthermore, Origen's philosophical presuppositions about God's transcendence and simplicity allowed him to consider that "the Son can be divine in a lesser sense than the Father; the Son is θεος (god), but only the Father is αὐτοθεος (absolute God, God himself)."²⁷ Although he affirmed the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit but his vacillation on the ontological equality of the Godhead, warranted correct accusations that he was the precursor of the idea of subordination within the Trinity.

Athanasius (293–373). Athanasius distinguished himself to be the most staunch defender of the doctrine of the Trinity against Arianism. Like Origen, Athanasius links the eternity of God's fatherhood with attributes of God in Greek philosophy namely, simplicity, immutability and perfection.²⁸ However unlike the former, he does not believe that the generation of the Son came to be through the will of the Father.

Athanasius strongly refutes Arius' view that the Son was a created being. For him, the Son was eternally begotten by the Father, but should not be taken like human begetting which requires succession.²⁹ Unlike human begetting, God's begetting is perfect and eternal due to His nature.³⁰ He believes that for God to be called Father implies having a son and to be a son in turn implies a begetting.³¹

²⁷Frank L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1201.

²⁸See Widdicombe, *Fatherhood of God*, 176.

²⁹Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* 3.14, in *The Orations of S. Athanasius* (London: Griffith Farran, no date), 25, quoted in William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1983), 74.

³⁰Athanasius *Discourses*, 1.5.14 (NPNF, 4.315, trans. Schaff and Wace).

³¹*Ibid.*, 1.5.16 (NPNF, 4.315–316).

Athanasius believes that the terms *Father* and *Son* is relational thus imply co-existence.³² In response to Arius' argument that if the Father and the Son coexisted there would be two "Unoriginates" hence there are two gods,³³ Athanasius explains that the term *unoriginate* in reference to God is foreign to Scriptures; however, if it means "what is not a work but has always been," this term can apply both to the Father and the Son.³⁴ However, if the term *unoriginate* means "existing but not generated of any nor having a father," this can only apply to the Father.³⁵ He is quick to add that to divide and separate the Father and the Son in terms of being *unoriginate* and *originate* brings dishonor to both. For Athanasius, it would be more appropriate to distinguish the Father from the Son by calling him Father rather than Unoriginate.³⁶ This idea evidently departs from Origen who believes that the person of the Father "is the one origin and source (*archē*) of the Son and Spirit."³⁷ For Athanasius, the Father and the Son "are the one Godhead"; therefore, distinguishing them by origin is not proper.³⁸

³²Widdicombe, *Fatherhood of God*, 146. Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 114. As Carl Beckwith puts it, for Athanasius, "Father" always implies "Son." To say that there was a time when the Son did not exist is like saying that there was a time when the Father did not exist. Therefore, if the Father is eternal, then the Son must also be eternal. Moreover, the Son's generation does not mean temporality but rather shows relationship. The terms "Father" and "Son" do not mean a division of essence or nature. See Carl Beckwith, "Athanasius," in *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early Medieval Theologians*, ed. Bradley G. Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 163.

³³Athanasius *Discourses* 1.9.30 (NPNF, 4.324).

³⁴*Ibid.*, 1.9.31 (NPNF, 4.324).

³⁵Athanasius *Discourses* 1.9.31 (NPNF, 4.325). James P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, in reference to the above passage, observe that through the use of a subtle play of words Athanasius explains that while both the Father and the Son are "*agenetos* (that is, did not come into being at some moment)" only the Father is "*agennetos* (that is, unbegotten)" while the Son is "*gennetos* (begotten) eternally from the Father." See James P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 581.

³⁶Athanasius *Discourses*, 1.9.34 (NPNF, 4.326).

³⁷Cf. Origen *Origen's Commentary on John 2.2.10* (ANF, 10.323, 332, 333). Giles admits that Athanasius speaks that the Father as the origin *archē* of the Son, but not in the same idea of the

Evaluation. Athanasius like Origen believed in the eternal generation of the Son, but differed from the latter by having the opinion that the generation of the Son does not depend on the will of the Father. He disagreed with his predecessor that the Father is the only Unoriginate, and suggested that the term could be applied to both in matter of coexistence. It appeared that Athanasius accepted the doctrine of eternal generation as stated in the Scriptures. He never fully explained the nature of this generation except that it should not be likened to human begetting. What is evident is that in his Trinitarian theology he carefully avoided any implications of derivation and subordination.

The Cappadocian Fathers.³⁹ The three Cappadocian Fathers, namely, Basil called the Great, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their close friend Gregory of Nazianzus consistently uphold the incomprehensibility of God. For them, God is infinite and transcends His creation. Moreover, they believe that humanity can know God as He has chosen to reveal Himself to us.⁴⁰ The Cappadocians agree with Origen that the Father is to be thought of as the origin/source (*archē*) and cause (*aitia*) of the Son. In contrast to Origen, they insist that this does not indicate any diminution in the being or the power of the Son. In reference to the Trinity they negate the Neo-Platonic notion found in Origen that the cause is greater than what is being caused.⁴¹

Cappadocian Fathers who consider the Father as the *monarchē* of the being of the Son. He adds that Athanasius suggests that the “triune Godhead is the *monarchē* of the three persons. Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 116.

³⁸Athanasius *Discourses*, 3.23.1 (NPNF, 4.394).

³⁹These church leaders lived and worked in Cappadocia hence they are called Cappadocian Fathers. See Robert Letham, “The Three Cappadocians,” 190.

⁴⁰Letham, “The Three Cappadocians,” 228.

⁴¹Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 122.

Basil (c. 330–379). Basil is considered as one of the Church's ablest defenders of the Trinity, after Athanasius.⁴² He is the author of the classic orthodox doctrinal expression of the Trinity as *mia ousia, tres upostasies*, namely, “one substance, three persons.”⁴³ Basil's exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity is found in his arguments against Eunomius, a fellow Cappadoician who challenged the divinity of the Son.⁴⁴ He builds his arguments on the idea that God is incomprehensible, that is He is beyond humanity's capacity to know although His actions can be known.⁴⁵ Basil warns that the term “unbegotten” is not Scriptural but admits that this is an accurate definition of God the Father for this indicates that God has no beginning and “from no source.”⁴⁶ For Basil, the term *unbegotten* means the Father is uncaused, but it is not the name for God. He suggests that “Father” and “Son” as found in the Scriptures are more appropriate terms to use rather than “the unbegotten” and “the begotten.”⁴⁷

⁴²See Roy J. Deferrari, trans. *Saint Basil: The Letters*, in Leob Classic Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), xv, xxvii

⁴³*Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁴⁴Eunomius, bishop of Cyzicus, Turkey, was a Capadocian by birth, followed the Arian view of Christ as a created being. He believes that God the Father is the only “unbegotten” (*agennetos*), and what is caused by Him is produced in time and subordinate in rank and of a different essence or being. See Michel Rene Barnes, “The Background and Use of Eunomius' Casual Language,” in *Arianism after Arius: Essays on the Development of the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Conflicts*, ed. M.R. Barnes and D. H. Williams (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 217–236, quoted in Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 134. In the understanding of Eunomius, the Father is ranked “supreme” for He alone is uncaused, the Son is ranked second for he is caused by the Father and the Spirit is ranked third because he is caused both by the Father and the Son. See Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius* 1.13 (NPNF, 5.50, trans. More and Wilson). See also Basil, *The Fathers of the Church: St. Basil of Ceasarea Against Eunomius*, trans. Mark Decogliano and Andrews Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 91–92.

⁴⁵Letham, “The Three Cappadocians,” 192; cf. Basil *Against Eunomius*, 49.

⁴⁶Basil *Against Eunomius*, 48–49, 114–115.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 48–49. See also Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 128.

Basil illustrates the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father to “light and light,” therefore, “no contrariety exists between them.”⁴⁸ However, he admits an hierarchy in the Trinity in terms of causality. The Father is superior to the Son for the latter is from the former and the Holy Spirit is next to the Son. However he is quick to add that there is no difference in nature within the Godhead.⁴⁹ Indeed, Basil in his dialogue with the Macedonians maintained the distinction of persons of the Godhead yet used the term *monarchia* as a term of concession to the subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Son.⁵⁰

Evaluation. Basil is to be commended for giving emphasis on the distinction and commonality in nature of the Trinity. Nonetheless it is evident that his understanding of the Trinity is not coeternal and co-equal in terms of cause. He was never tentative in admitting that there is an order in the Trinity as to their relation and cause. Although he never allowed a distinction in nature in the Godhead, the idea of subordination is clearly manifested in his Trinitarian theology.

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–389). Gregory of Nazianzus, in his *Theological Orations* against Eudomius, strongly defends the Nicene Faith or the unity, co-equality, and co-substantiality of the Trinity.⁵¹ He strongly affirms the eternal generation of the

⁴⁸Basil *Against Eunomius*, 171–174.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 53, 187–188.

⁵⁰Basil *On the Spirit*, 28.45 (NPNF, 8. 27, 28, trans. Jackson). Hilderbrand, suggests that “Basil appears to use *monarchia*, too, as a concession to the Macedonians. The Macedonians subordinated the Son to the Father and the Spirit to the Son. *Monarchia* can carry these subordinationist connotations and would not offend the Macedonians because it locates the unity of the Trinity in the Father as the source of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Stephen M. Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea: A Synthesis of Greek Thought and Biblical Truth* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 96.

⁵¹See Arthur James Mason, ed., *Introduction to the The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1899), ix–xv.

Son. He writes, “The Father is the Begetter and the Emitter; without passion of course, and without reference to time, and not in corporeal manner. The Son is the Begotten, and the Holy Ghost the Emission.”⁵² He argues that no one can predicate time to the Godhead. He is emphatic that “They are above all ‘When.’”⁵³ There was never a time when they were not.⁵⁴ Expressions such as “when,” “after,” and “from the beginning” are not timeless, however much as we force them,⁵⁵ hence cannot be applied to the Godhead.

Gregory, in emphasizing the coeternity of the Son and the Holy Ghost to the Father, reasons, “They are from Him, though not after Him.”⁵⁶ Moreover, the Son is not less than the Father in reference to their nature.⁵⁷ Like Athanasius, he believes that the eternal generation of the Son was not an act of the will but rather by nature.

Although Gregory is consistent that the Trinity is coeternal, he thinks they are not all *unoriginate*. He writes, “For that which is *unoriginate* is eternal, but that which is eternal is not necessarily *unoriginate* so long as it may be referred to the Father as its origin.”⁵⁸

⁵²Gregory of Nazianzus *The Third Theological Oration* 29.2, 8 (NPNF, 7.301, 303 trans. Brown and Swallow). According to Gregory, that the term “unbegotten” and “begotten” cannot be further explained. When pressed further how was the Son begotten, he retorted, “The begetting of the God must be honored by silence It was a manner known to the Father who begat, and to the Son who was begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a cloud, and escapes your dim light.” *Ibid.*, 29.8 (NPNF, 7.303).

⁵³*Ibid.*, 29.3 (NPNF, 7.301).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 29.2 (NPNF, 7.301).

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 29.10 (NPNF, 7.304).

⁵⁸Gregory of Nazianzus *The Third Theological Orations*, 29.3 (NPNF, 7.302).

Gregory rejects any notion of subordination in nature of the Father and the Son, but ironically by affirming the eternal generation, he concedes that as the “cause” the Father is above the Son.⁵⁹ E. P. Meijering vehemently reacts to this idea saying, “Gregory’s claim that the Father is greater than the Son as the cause but not greater in being is ‘logically untenable.’”⁶⁰ He reasons out that it is either the Father is the cause of the Son hence the latter is ontologically inferior to the former or the Father does not cause the Son so as they are ontologically equal. For him, Gregory’s assertion that the Father is the cause of the Son and yet they are ontologically equal is not possible for the two options are mutually exclusive.⁶¹

Evaluation. Gregory of Nazianzus is to be commended for his consistency in upholding the co-eternity and con-substantiality of the Godhead. He clearly departed from Origen in this aspect. However, the Greek idea of a simple, immutable, and timeless God allowed him to consider the Father as the unoriginate and the Son as originate. Through the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son, he asserted that the Triune God is eternal, at the same time maintaining the concept of derivation, or causation which consequently allows an ontological hierarchy within the Trinity though not in nature but in subsistence.

⁵⁹Ibid., 29.15 (NPNF, 7.306). Christopher Beeley in his study of Gregory’s Theological Orations, comments that even though there are seemingly contradictory and puzzling statements on divine causality, Gregory considers “God the Father as source and cause of the Trinity.” Christopher A. Beeley, “Divine Causality and the Monarchy of God the Father in Gregory of Nazianzus,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007): 204–208.

⁶⁰E. P. Meijering, “The Doctrine of the Will and of the Trinity in the Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus,” *Nederlands theologisch tijdschrift* 27 (1973): 224–234, in E. P. Meijering, *God, Being, History: Studies in Patristic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: American Elsevier, 1975), 103–113, quoted in Christopher A. Beeley, “Divine Causality and the Monarchy of God the Father in Gregory of Nazianzus,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100 (2007): 201–202.

⁶¹Meijering, “The Doctrine of the Will,” 233.

Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–395). Like his brother Basil, Gregory of Nyssa’s expositions on the relation of the Father and the Son are counter-arguments against Eunomius. He strongly rejects the latter’s hierarchical view within the Trinity⁶² by arguing that the Son was eternally begotten, and not created by the Father.⁶³ He asserts that in the Holy Trinity there is a distinction or differentiation of persons as shown by their unique virtues, but no variations in essence due to their commonality.

Like Basil, Gregory does not insist that Scriptures dictate the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. However, they both agree that it is an implication that comes out of reflection.⁶⁴ For Gregory, the Father is both uncreated and *ungenerated* while the Son is uncreated and begotten, and the Holy Spirit is uncreated but neither *ungenerated* nor *unbegotten*.⁶⁵

Gregory of Nyssa, like Gregory of Naziansus, admits that the Father is the “Cause” of the Son and the Spirit, but he dismisses anyway notion that there is a division or “unlikeness of substance” in the Godhead.⁶⁶ He explains the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit “like the ray co-existent with the sun, whose cause indeed is in the sun, but whose existence is synchronous with the sun, not being a later addition.”⁶⁷

⁶²Gregory of Nyssa objects to Eunomius calling the Father as the “Supreme and Absolute Being,” the Son as “another existing through it, but after it,” and the Holy Spirit as “a third ranking with neither of these two.” See Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, 1.13, 14, 15 (NPNF, 5.49–53).

⁶³Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, 1.20, 22 (NPNF, 5.58, 60–61). Gregory asserts that Eunomius is wrong in attributing the existence of the “Only-begotten” and the Holy Spirit to an “unnamed energy.” He likewise rejects the notion that the Father is prior to the Son. *Ibid.*, 1.25 (NPNF, 5.68)

⁶⁴Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, 2.9 (NPNF, 115).

⁶⁵Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, 1.22 (NPNF, 5.60–61).

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 1.36 (NPNF, 5.84).

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

Hence, even though he acknowledges the Father as the First Cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit, there was no interval of time involved or diminution of power within the Godhead.⁶⁸

Like his predecessors, Gregory considers the names Father and Son as correlative terms. The name Father means “having begotten a Son, and also the Begetter is not to be thought of as Himself coming from any cause.”⁶⁹ He emphasizes the distinction of persons and attributes causality to the Father but maintains the equality of attributes. For him the Father is always Father but “the Son must be always be thought of along with the Father . . . all that we contemplate in the Father is to be observed also in the Son.”⁷⁰

Evaluation. Gregory like the other Cappadocians shared a common understanding that the Father is the primal cause of the subsistence of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of eternal generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit made it convenient for them to explain the Monarchia. Although they insisted that there is no division in the nature of the Trinity, they fell short on upholding the the ontological equality by allowing the idea of derivation and procession of the other members of the Godhead.

⁶⁸This is Gregory of Nyssa’s to Eunomius’ Arian line of thinking that there was a time when the Son was not. Gregory of Nyssa argues that in nature the Son was co-existent with the Father but in subsistence, the Father as the source was the “before” the Only-begotten. Ibid., 1.39 (NPNF 5.94). For the Eastern Fathers, even though there are three persons in the Godhead, and each is considered God, there is only one God that is the “source of the whole divinity.” Consequently, God the Father has “ontological superiority” though share full equality in nature with the Son and the Spirit. See J. Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Intermediate Christology*, eds. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 50.

⁶⁹Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, 1.38 (NPNF, 5.86–92).

⁷⁰Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, 1.38 (NPNF, 5.90).

Augustine (c. 354–430). Augustine has a massive influence in the theological formulations including the doctrine of the Trinity in the Christian Church. He opens his discussion *On the Trinity* with a classic Platonic concept of God: “It is difficult to contemplate and fully know the substance of God; who fashions things changeable, yet without any change in Himself, and creates things temporal, yet without any temporal movement in Himself.”⁷¹

Augustine, against the Monarchians, speaks with clarity about the distinction within the Trinity by asserting that the Father has begotten the Son and the Father is not the Son while the Son is not the Father.⁷² Moreover, he affirms the unity, consubstantiality, and co-equality of the Trinity.⁷³ He argues that Christ is of the same substance of the Father—“not only God but also very God.”⁷⁴

Keith Johnson, in his assessment of Augustine’s teaching on the Trinity, outlines elements on Augustine’s understanding of the generation of the Son. First, it is different from human generation.⁷⁵ Second, eternal generation is “*timeless*.”⁷⁶ Augustine asserts,

⁷¹Augustine *On the Trinity* 1.1.3 (NPNF, 3.18, ed. Schaff). Not only a few thinkers have observed that Augustine was “deeply influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism.” See Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas and Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 98. Brown points out that Augustine’s understanding of the soul is in line with the Platonic view. On the one hand Ayres’ claims that in Augustine, the Bible has triumph over the Neo-Platonism. See Lewis Ayres, *Nicea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 366–383.

⁷²Augustine *On The Trinity*, 1.4.7 (NPNF, 3.20).

⁷³*Ibid.*, 1.4.7; 1.6.9; 4.21 (NPNF, 3.18, 20, 85–86).

⁷⁴*Ibid.* 1.6.9 (NPNF, 3.21, 27).

⁷⁵The elements of Augustine’s understanding of eternal generation is outlined in Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 109–110. See Augustine *On The Trinity*, 1.1.1 (NPNF, 3:17). Lewis Ayres explains, “Augustine differentiates the divine generation from a generation that results in any increase-as in the case with material bodies. The three together are thus identical to any one if the term ‘God’ can be used of them all.” Lewis Ayres states, *Augustine and the Trinity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 223.

Third, the Son is of equal nature with the Father.⁷⁷ The eternal generation is “necessary,” meaning, the Son was begotten “*not* by the will but rather of the substance of the Father.”⁷⁸ For Augustine the substance or essence or nature of the Son and the Father is the same.⁷⁹ Fourth, the generation of the Son is likened to the nature of “light.”⁸⁰ Finally, it is “incomprehensible.”⁸¹

Augustine consistently upholds the Son’s equality with the Father. However, in his understanding of John 5:26—“hath given life to the Son, that He might have it in Himself”—means that the Father begot the Son.⁸² He believes that the Son was begotten of the Father to have life in Himself but the Father has life in Himself and was not begotten.⁸³ This idea is consistent with his comments on John 14:26 and 15:26: “The beginning (*principium*) of the whole divinity, or if it is better so expressed, deity.”⁸⁴

⁷⁶Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity*, 109. Emphasis in original. cf Augustine *On the Trinity*, 15.26.47 (NPNF, 3.324–325).

⁷⁷Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity*, 109. See Augustine *On The Trinity*, 15.26.47 (NPNF, 3.324–325).

⁷⁸Ibid, 109–110. Emphasis in original. The begetting as a necessary act means, “without it, God is not God.” John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015), 113.

⁷⁹Augustine *On the Trinity*, 15.20.38 (NPNF, 3.220).

⁸⁰Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity*, 110. Johnson enumerates six elements but the third and fourth elements are the same therefore, I entered his fifth element as the fourth. See also Augustine *On the Trinity*, 4.20.27 (NPNF, 3.83).

⁸¹Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity*, 110. The above-mentioned descriptions of eternal generation are apparently not novel to Augustine. His views in describing the eternal generation of the Son are all aligned with the Early Church Fathers with the exception in his departure from Origen and following the thought of Athanasius and the Cappadocians in describing the eternal generation of the Son as a necessary act and not dependent on the will of the Father.

⁸²Augustine *On the Gospel of John*, Tractate 19.13 (NPNF, 7.127, ed. Philip Schaff).

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Augustine *On the Trinity*, 4.20.29 (NPNF, 3.83–84). See David A. Carson, “God is Love,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (1999): 139.

Evaluation. Augustine is to be commended for his thorough discussion on the Trinity. His Scriptural discourses on the subject stands out as the most systematic treatment of the doctrine. In his *On the Trinity*, he vigorously defended the equality of the Godhead. However, his endorsement of the idea, like Origen that God the Father is the primary cause of divinity, implies subordination at least in source of divinity. His understanding that the Father is unbegotten while the Son was begotten by the Father somehow suggested a derivation and consequently a form of subordination.

Eternal Generation in the Reformation Period

During the Refromation period not many writers gave attention to the doctrine of eternal generation. It was understandable for other issues occupied the theological discussion of the time. Calvin is one of the few writers who discussed the topic thus could be considered a representative of the period.

John Calvin (1509–1564). Calvin affirms the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as One God in Three Persons. However there is a divergence of opinions as whether Calvin supports or rejects the doctrine of eternal generation.⁸⁵ Needless to say that he believes that the “Word was begotten of the Father,” but he likewise affirms the eternity of the Word.⁸⁶

⁸⁵Representatives of those who affirm that Calvin supports the doctrine of eternal generation include: Kevin Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 176-186; Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Asiety of the Son* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49 and Robert Letham. Among others who conclude that Calvin does not support the doctrine of eternal generation are Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 324–337; Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 58–59. See also Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 246–248; Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 194–195.

⁸⁶See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Libray of Christian Classics, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 1:128–131.

Calvin is well aware of the Cappadocians' view that the Father is the Principle or Cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, he is emphatic that in the Godhead there is no hierarchy in essence. He argues that both in the Old and New Testaments the deity of Christ is affirmed and that the name *Jehovah* the "ineffable" name of God which expresses his essence is both applied to the Father and the Son.⁸⁸ Torrance surmises that, for Calvin, the application of the Name *Jehovah* to the Son means he "is to be recognized as the true *Yahweh*, the self-existent God."⁸⁹ Furthermore, Calvin, in quoting John 1:1, 14, asks, "And why should John have hesitated to refer the majesty of God to Christ, when he declared that the Word was ever God."⁹⁰

Unlike most of the early Church Fathers, Calvin rebuffs the notion that the Father solely is the "essence giver." For him, since *Jehovah* is applied to Christ, "it follows that with respect to his deity his being is from himself."⁹¹ Torrance declares that

for Calvin the Deity of Christ and his aseity belong inseparably together: to deny the aseity of Christ is to deny his Deity and call in question the intrinsic consubstantiality of the whole Trinity. Christ is certainly to be differentiated from the Father in respect to his Person, for he is the Son of the Father, but he is not to

⁸⁷However, Torrance observes that unlike the other Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazianzen has no reservation in applying the term *homoousios* in reference to Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 24.

⁸⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:131–138. Calvin's expositions on the Trinity in his *Institutes* are arguments against Servetus.

⁸⁹Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 51; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:134–135.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 1:149. Calvin asks, "But how will the Creator, who gives being to all, not have being from himself, but borrow his essence from elsewhere?" *Ibid.* Torrance in expounding this passage writes, "Calvin will have nothing to do with any idea of derived Deity as if Deity should borrow his being from another! That heresy shatters on the biblical identification of the incarnate Son of God with *Yahweh* with the meaning that in respect of Deity he is of himself (*deitatis respectu ex se ipso isse*." Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 61.

be differentiated from him in respect of his Being which is also the Being of the Father.”⁹²

Calvin is emphatic that divinity is “common to all three Persons” and is not something derived from the Father alone. Each person is in the absolute sense in respect to being is God.⁹³ Although he shuns the idea of derivation of divinity, he admits there is at least an order in relation and position within the Trinity-the Father first, then from him the Son and then from both of them the Holy Spirit.⁹⁴ To further expound his position, Calvin appeals to Augustine stating that Christ is of Himself God, but in reference to the Father, He is called the Son. The Father is of Himself God but in reference to the Son, He is called Father. Calvin then concludes that it is right to say that in terms of relationship, the Father is the beginning of the Son.⁹⁵

Thus for Calvin, statements that seem to suggest some sort of subordination must be interpreted in the light of Christ’s mediatorial or soteriological role.⁹⁶ Based on Calvin’s understanding, Torrance had it right when he said “the subordination of Christ to the Father in his incarnate and saving economy cannot be read back into the eternal personal relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity.”⁹⁷

⁹²Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 62; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:149.

⁹³See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:153–154.

⁹⁴Ibid, 1:142–143. Based on this statement Torrance concludes that Calvin accepts the Western understanding of the Procession of the Holy Spirit, though the former adds that Calvin consistently affirms the Trinity constitutes a unity of one spiritual Being. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, 56. This must not be misunderstood that Calvin adheres to an ontological subordination for he is consistent in denying that the Father is the “deifier” of the Son and the Holy Spirit. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:151–152.

⁹⁵Calvin, *Institutes* 1:143, 144.

⁹⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:154–155. These statements include John 17:3; Phil 2:7,9; John 16:7; 20:17; 14:28.

⁹⁷Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspective*, 67.

Evaluation. Calvin recognized that the Son was begotten from the Father as the Scriptures render. But this is hardly in consonance with the idea of the eternal begetting that is found in the teachings of the Early Church Fathers who wanted to preserve the *Mornarchia* of the Father. The Reformer clearly steered away from the view of his predecessors on the issue of eternal begetting of the Son that implied derivation and subordination. After all Calvin argued, “For to what purpose is it to dispute, whether the Father is always begetting? For it is foolish to imagine a continual act of generation, since it is evident that the three Persons have subsisted in God from all eternity.”⁹⁸

Eternal Generation in the Modern Church

With the revival of the discussion on the doctrine of God, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son received renewed attention. Most thinkers of the early modern period have accepted the doctrine of eternal generation as taught by the Pro-Nicene Church Fathers. However, towards the end of the 20th century, theologians among the evangelical circles have voiced their objection on the doctrine. The following section deals with the differing opinions on the subject.

Louis Berkhof (1873-1957). Berkhof affirms that God is a unity of three distinct persons. He considers the names Father and Son as relational that is, the first person of the Godhead is the Father of the Son. The Father is “not begotten or unbegotten” the agent of “the generation of the Son.”⁹⁹

Built on this view, Berkhof endorses the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son for the reason that the terms *Father* and *Son* suggest a generation of the later by the

⁹⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:158–159.

⁹⁹Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 91.

former. Moreover, he argues that the Son is “repeatedly called ‘the only-begotten,’ John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Heb 11:17; 1 John 4:9.”¹⁰⁰

There are five elements in Berkhof’s understanding of the eternal generation of the Son. First, “it is a necessary act of God.” In this aspect, he differs from Origen who taught that the generation of the Son was dependent on the will of the Father. He follows Athanasius in declaring generation as a necessary act. He agrees with Athanasius that allowing the generation of the Son was dependent upon the will of the Father, makes the former’s existence as “contingent” and thus diminishes the His deity.¹⁰¹

Second, Berkhof considers the generation of the Son as “an eternal act of the Father.” Hence, the Son shares in the eternity of the Father.¹⁰² Furthermore, he explains that the generation was not a completed act, but rather “a timeless act, the act of an eternal present, an act always continuing and yet ever completed.”¹⁰³

Third, Berkhof believes that the Father generated the “personal subsistence” and not the “divine essence of the Son.”¹⁰⁴ This should not be understood that Father generated the Son and then communicated the divine essence, but rather regarded as “one indivisible act.”¹⁰⁵ Fourth, the generation is spiritual and divine. Here, Berkhof follows

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 93.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Ibid. For Berkhof, it is not possible for the Father to generate the essence of the Son for by doing do it is just like the Father generation his own self.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 93–94.

the Church Fathers in explaining that this generation is not to be taken in a “physical and creaturely way” which includes “division or change.”¹⁰⁶

Berkhof’s understanding of the relation of the Trinity is summed up in the following statement:

There is a certain order in the ontological Trinity. In personal subsistence the Father is first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third. It need hardly be said that this order does not pertain to any priority of time or of essential dignity, but only to the logical order of derivation. The Father is neither begotten by, nor proceeds from any other person; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son from all eternity. Generation and procession take place within the Divine Being, and imply a certain subordination as to the manner of personal subsistence, but no subordination as far as the possession of divine essence is concerned. This ontological Trinity and its inherent order is the metaphysical basis of the economical Trinity.¹⁰⁷

Evaluation. Berkhof’s discussion on the Trinity stressed the distinction of persons of the Godhead. He argued for the full deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Conspicuously, he was not concerned about the ontological co-existence of the Godhead for the reason that he believes in the eternal generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit. Although he explained that there is no subordination as to the divine essence of the Godhead, he asserted that there is an ontological order in the Trinity.

Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921). Like all orthodox theologians Warfield affirms the belief in the distinct personalities and ontological equality of the Triune God. However, he is one of the theologians in the modern church to depart from the teachings of the eternal generation of the Son. He observes that the wordings of the Nicene Creed of 325 labored to protect the Trinity against modalism and tritheism, through the doctrine of eternal generation. But Warfield reasons that eternal generation resulted to

¹⁰⁶Ibid, 94.

¹⁰⁷Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 88–89.

subordinating the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father not only in economy but in the mode of subsistence as well.¹⁰⁸

For Warfield the belief in the absolute Deity of Christ without qualification is the linchpin of the Christianity's concept of God.¹⁰⁹ He completely rejects any form of “subordination and derivation of Being” within the Godhead. As Zaspel observes, although Warfield accepts that the terms “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” show the “mutual relation” and differentiates the three persons in the Godhead, and the ordering based on the “exegetical grounds,” this does not fully express the essence of the Trinity.¹¹⁰ Moreover, these terms and ordering “are not strictly followed in the New Testament” and “that the *implications* of these terms [derivative or hierarchical] may be other than commonly assumed.”¹¹¹

Warfield is consistent in his arguments that Father and Son are relational terms and does not necessarily impose derivation or subordination. He argues that in the “Semitic consciousness” the appellation “Son” connotes “likeness” rather than subordination¹¹² and the term “only begotten” (John 1:18) conveys the idea of “unique consubstantiality.”¹¹³ In a similar thought Warfield reasons that the name “Spirit of God”

¹⁰⁸Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 170–171. It must not be misunderstood that Warfield rejects the Nicene Creed. He only finds it necessary that the confession of the Christian faith regarding the Trinity must be free from any elements of subordination which after all was its primary objective considering the theological context when the creed was formulated.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 169.

¹¹⁰See Zaspel, 196.

¹¹¹Zaspel, 196.

¹¹²Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 163.

¹¹³Ibid., 164.

or “Spirit of Jehovah” in the OT does not in anyway imply “derivation” or “subordination” but rather “the designation of God from the point of view of His activity.”¹¹⁴ Warfield points to the passage in John 5:18, wherein the Jews wanted to kill Jesus when He called God his *own* Father. It was understood by the Jews that the claim to be God’s Son is a claim to equality with God.¹¹⁵ Thus for Warfield, the term Son implies likeness to the Father, and should not be taken to imply derivation. He only allows a form of subordination in the “modes of operation” or function but not in the “modes of subsistence” of the Trinity.¹¹⁶

Evaluation. Warfield’s theology on the Trinity is well founded in the witness of the Scriptures. He is to be commended for maintaining the co-equality, co-existentiality, and con-substantiality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is also apparent that his objection on the eternal generation of the Son leaned on Calvin’s arguments. He is convinced that Calvin never endorsed the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Following the lead of the Reformer, he distanced himself from the Nicene Fathers, who even though claimed that the Trinity is *homoousios*, believed that the Son was eternally begotten by the Father. Warfield upheld the self-existent divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit and shunned any notion of derivation within the Trinity.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 166.

Eternal Generation of the Son in the Scriptures

Advocates of the eternal generation of the Son argue that this doctrine is not without Scriptural basis. According to Giles, the term “begetting” in reference to eternal generation “is not simply the best word available, it is suggested by Scriptures.”¹¹⁷ He adds, “Identifying Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of the eternal Father does not necessitate the language of birth or generation, but it certainly makes it appropriate and turns our minds to this possibility.”¹¹⁸

Indeed, the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son as taught in the early Church by both the Nicene and Post Nicene theologians find biblical backing in their understanding of the term *monogenēs* as found in John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9 translated as “only begotten” to mean that “the Father begot the Son.”¹¹⁹ Like their predecessors, modern adherents of the doctrine of eternal generation have appealed to the above Scriptural passage for support. However, not a few modern theologians have begun to question the interpretation of these texts.

Wayne Grudem contends that the Nicene Fathers who endorsed the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son might have misconstrued that *monogenēs* implies the idea of begetting for the reason that this term has been used to refer to “an only child.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 78. Although Giles admits that *monogenēs* in its semantic meaning is “unique” and “only,” nevertheless he reasons that “it implies begetting because all children are begotten.” *Ibid.*, 81. In spite of Giles efforts to prove that the doctrine is warranted by Scriptures, a careful study of the texts put forward shows that at best, the doctrine is based on assumption.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 77.

¹¹⁹See Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 325. See also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity, 2007), 1233–1234.

¹²⁰Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1233.

However, he thinks that this conclusion is a misinterpretation. He appeals to twentieth century studies, most especially to that of Dale Moody's which has shown that the reading of John 3:16 as "begotten" for *monogenēs* is linguistically unsound.¹²¹ According to Moody, *monogenēs* should rather mean "one-of-a kind" or "unique."¹²² Here, I quote Grudem at length,

Linguistic study in the twentieth century has shown that the second half of the word is not closely related to the verb *gennaō* (beget, bear) but rather to the term *genos* (class, kind). Thus the word means rather the 'one-of-a-kind' Son or the 'unique' Son. (See BAGD, 527; D. Moody, 'The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version,' *JBL* 72 [1953: 213-219]. The idea of 'only-begotten' in Greek would have been, not *monogenēs* but *monogennētos*.¹²³

Other texts proponents of the doctrine look to are John 5:26, Heb. 1:3; John 10:38. John 5:26 reads, "For the Father has life in Himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (NIV). David A. Carson based on Augustine's reading of John 5:26 asserts that the passage "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 This eternal grant establishes the nature of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son."¹²⁴ But Reymond argues that there is no consensus among theologians and commentators endorsing the idea that the granting of the life to the Son points to an

¹²¹Ibid. Then he points out that "the general consensus among twentieth century scholars is that the term *μονογενής* does not mean "only begotten," alluding to some form of generation, but rather 'only one' (see Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38) or 'only one of a kind,' or 'unique.'" Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 326.

¹²²See Dale Moody, "The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72 (1953): 213–219.

¹²³Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1233.

¹²⁴For the full discussion, see Carson, "God is Love," 139.

“ontological endowment.”¹²⁵ He claims that the context suggests that the passage refers to the Son’s messianic investiture, for example, to judge, raise the dead, etc.¹²⁶

As John Feinberg correctly observes, the definition of the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son as well as the procession of the Spirit by its proponents is problematic and “are not required by Scriptures.”¹²⁷ He presents his case by using the definition of the doctrine by proponents, “eternal generation of the Son is said to mean that the Father communicates the divine essence to the Son.”¹²⁸ He follows that “to communicate the essence means to share it in common.”¹²⁹

Proponents of this doctrine explain that this generation must not be confined in time for it is eternal, namely, it “has been happening as long as God has existed, which is forever, and it never began to happen.”¹³⁰ Feinberg counters, “If Christ does not begin to receive the divine essence because as divine he always exists as God, i.e. he has always had the divine essence, how does it make sense to speak of the Father making in common with him something he has always had anyway?”¹³¹

A thorough investigation of the the arguments presented above, it can be said that the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son appear to lack a firm Scriptural foundation. Recent scholarly studies of the texts put forward by protents of the doctrine show that

¹²⁵Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 326.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 488–489.

¹²⁸Ibid., 489.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Ibid.

they are not conclusive arguments to warrant the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father.

Eternal Generation and Its Implications to the Trinity

This study has shown that the Early Church Fathers taught the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son with the understanding that God the Father is the fountainhead of the Godhead. They are consistent in their defense of the equality of essence of the Trinity but allowed the idea of derivation of subsistence. The doctrine of eternal generation of the Son is an effort to explain the self-differentiation and relation of the Godhead. But somehow in this effort the ontological equality of the Triune God is compromised. For example, in the Nicene Creed which serves as the unifying reference of the Fathers' teaching of the eternal generation of the Son as Sanders and Issler correctly point out the "ontological priority" of the Father is implied.¹³²

Bishop Bull in his studies has also arrived at the conclusion that the Ante-Nicene, the Nicene as well as the Post Nicene Fathers did not claim that the Son is "αὐτοθεός or self-existent."¹³³ Furthermore, Bull asserted that the Early Church Fathers is unanimous that the Father is superior than the Son for the Father is "the origin and primary cause

¹³²Sanders and Issler, *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, 60. Case in point is the wording in the Nicene Creed used to describe the Son as "begotten from the Father . . . begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being." John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Longman, 1972), 215-216.

¹³³See Moses Stuart, *Letters on the Eternal Generation of the Son of God* (Andover, MA: Flagg & Gould, 1822), 90-91.

(principium)” of the Son, however, “the Son, by nature, κατὰ φύσιν is equal to the Father.”¹³⁴

Moses Stuart in his letters to Samuel Millers regarding the eternal generation of the Son of God gives this conclusion that is worth quoting here:

Any theory, then, respecting the person of the Son of God, which make the Logos a derived being, destroys the radical principle-an elementary ingredient, of his true and proper divinity *Derivation* in any shape, or in any measure; as to all or part of his essential predicates as God- whether you apply to it the name *generation, emanation, creation, procession*, or any other term which has been used---derivation, I say, appears essentially incompatible with proper divinity.¹³⁵

Millard Erickson observes, “Theologians who are cited in support of the idea of eternal functional subordination in most cases tied it to the concept of eternal generation.”¹³⁶ Archibald A. Hodge an adherent of the doctrine admits, “The idea of derivation is necessarily implied in generation.”¹³⁷ He points out that the early theologians consider the Father as “*πηγή θεότητος, fountain of Godhead*, and *αίτία υιοῦ, principle or cause* of the Son, while the Son and Holy Ghost were both called *αἰτιατοι* (those depending upon another as their principle or cause).”¹³⁸ In fact, Hodge claims that in the confession of the early Creeds only the equality of essence of the Son and the Father is upheld but not the mode of subsistence.¹³⁹ This is evident in the wording of the Nicene Creed “God from God, light from light” clearly implies derivation.

¹³⁴Ibid., 91.

¹³⁵Ibid., 92–93.

¹³⁶Millard J. Erickson, *Whose Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 251.

¹³⁷Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 182.

¹³⁸Ibid., 183.

¹³⁹Ibid.

In consideration of the above discussion it can be said that the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son gives up the ontological equality and co-existentiality of the Trinity. Regardless of the vehement protests of its proponents, the idea of derivation and subordination is inherent. Therefore, endorsing the doctrine is akin to accepting that there is an heirarchy in the Trinity.

In disagreement to the idea that there is a derivation in the Trinity, Norman Gulley writes, “The Father cannot literally be the source, when Father, Son, and Spirit are individually and equally self-existent, as Persons of the one eternal God. The terms *derivation* and *procession*, together with *Father* and *Son* do suggests relatedness, but they are confined to relations of origin, which are unnecessary in an eternal Trinity that is without origin.”¹⁴⁰ Almost a century ealier Ellen White expressed the same idea denying any derivation within the Trinity. She wrote, “In Christ is life, original, unbarrowed, underived.”¹⁴¹

Conclusion

The early Church Fathers assumed that the doctrine of eternal generation is implied by the correlative terms “Father” and “Son.” This is not to say that they taught the doctrine without Scriptural backing. Indeed, the Scriptures use the terms “Father” and “Son” but it does not explain much beyond that relational concept. These terms do not necessarily mean that the Father is father by begetting the Son.

¹⁴⁰Norman R. Gulley, *Sytematic Theology: God As Trinity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews Univeristy Press, 2011), 149–150. Emphases in original.

¹⁴¹Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 530.

A close investigation of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son in church history seems to suggest that this is a result of misreading passages of Scriptures which they believe they imply such. Furthermore, the Church Fathers' efforts to prove the unity, equality of the nature, and distinction of persons of the Godhead against the Sabellians and Arians make the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son quite logical. However, the Early Fathers' understanding of God as simple, indivisible, and immutable and totally transcendent, informed by Greek philosophy veered them away from a biblical treatment of the relation of the Godhead. Their efforts to safeguard the unity of nature and the self-differentiation of the Trinity somehow compromised its ontological co-equality and co-existentiality by acceding to the notion that the person of the Son including the Spirit is derived from the Father.

Eternal generation is an attempt to avoid tritheism, yet falls into subordination on the idea of derivation. The biblical understanding of the Godhead as co-eternal and co-equal does not fit well to the idea that the other persons of the Godhead derive their subsistence from another as the doctrine of eternal generation teach. In short, the doctrine of eternal generation is not well grounded in the Bible. At best it is derived from Scriptural implication which carries a theological baggage. The doctrine of eternal generation undermines the ontological equality of the Trinity.