

## **A MORE EXCELLENT NAME: ETERNAL SONSHIP AND PSALM 2:7 IN HEBREWS 1**

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*In this article Executive Director of Grace to You, Phil Johnson, masterfully addresses the pitfalls with Incarnational Sonship while retrieving the Biblical necessity for Eternal Generation. Johnson focuses on the New Testament (Hebrews 1) use of the Old Testament (Psalm 2) as a key to properly retrieving the doctrine of Eternal Generation. In this piece Johnson shows how the church of recent generations has neglected and abandoned Eternal Generation on faulty grounds, misunderstanding monogenes, and aims to aid the church in retrieving this precious doctrine taught in Scripture.*

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Three times in the New Testament, the climactic phrase of Psalm 2:7 is quoted verbatim and identified as a Messianic reference: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You” (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5).

Allusions to that phrase also appear in several other key New Testament contexts. For example, the voice of the heavenly Father, speaking at Jesus’ baptism, employs an unmistakable echo of Psalm 2:7: “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased” (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Later, on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father again uses similar words to designate the Son: “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!” (Mark 9:7). Peter’s famous confession also evokes an idea taken from Psalm 2:7: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). And John 3:16, arguably the most familiar verse in all of Scripture, cannot be adequately understood or explained without reference to Psalm 2:7 and the begetting of the Son by the Father.

Of course, “Son of God” is one of the most important titles applied to Christ throughout the New Testament, and every reference to his sonship tacitly points back to Psalm 2:7. It is a vital text—the numerous New Testament citations testify to that. Interpreters should therefore approach it with extraordinary attentiveness and care.

## Background

The Messianic significance of Psalm 2 is apparent on the face of the text. Verse 2 describes the key figures in the Psalm as “the LORD and ... His Anointed” (v. 2). The Hebrew word for “Anointed” is מָשִׁיחַ (*mashiyach*), the word from which the English name *Messiah* is derived. And in verse 7, when the Son speaks (“I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me”), that is not merely the voice of the psalmist. The logical flow of the psalm itself points to the fact that “the Son” (v. 12) *is* the Anointed One mentioned in verse 2. Multiple commentators in the Talmud categorize Psalm 2 as a psalm about Israel’s Messiah.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the messianic significance of Psalm 2 was so clearly and universally understood in the apostolic era that neither the writer of Hebrews (1:5; 5:5) nor Peter (Acts 13:33) felt compelled to make any argument to establish the fact that what we are hearing in verse 7 is the prophetic voice of the Anointed One.

Given that Israel’s Messiah is “One [whose] goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Micah 5:2; cf. John 1:1–2), the phrase quoted from the voice of the Father in Psalm 2:7 poses some significant interpretive challenges. The word “today,” for example, has obvious temporal overtones. Being “begotten” would normally speak of a person’s conception, and that in turn implies that the person has a beginning. Does this verse therefore speak of an event that happened at a point in time? Is it (as the Arians claim) describing the origin of the begotten One’s existence? Alternatively, is this saying that sonship is a role or a title that was conferred on Christ at some definite point in redemptive history?

What is the proper way to understand the New Testament’s use of Psalm 2:7? The Arian interpretation can be speedily and emphatically dismissed. The notion that Christ is a created being contradicts several clear statements of Scripture: “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:2–3). “By Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16–17). He is “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13). One of the fundamental confessions of historic Christianity is that Christ has no beginning or end. He is the eternal “I am” (John 8:58). Arianism denies all of that and is therefore thoroughly unbiblical and categorically anti-Christian.

But what about the idea that sonship is a role the eternal Second Person of the Trinity stepped into, or a new status conferred on him at his incarnation? Is “Son of God” a supervenient title (like a mantle placed on Christ)? Or is his sonship what defines his eternal relationship to the other Persons of the Trinity?

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<sup>1</sup>. “In the Talmud, this psalm is cited in the context of the future coming of the Messiah, and specifically of the wars against Gog and Magog preceding that event. The nations that rage against Israel and the peoples who mutter in vain are the idol-worshippers who will be against the Lord and His Messiah when the battle of Gog and Magog comes at the end of times. Psalm 2:7–8 is interpreted as the words of God that will be addressed specifically to the Messiah, the son of David.” “The interpretation of Psalm 2 in Midrash Tehillim is clearly Messianic.” Aranda M. Gomez, “Medieval Jewish Exegesis of Psalm 2,” *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 18 (January 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2018.v18.a3>.

“Incarnational sonship” is the idea some have set forth as the reason for the temporal expressions in Psalm 2:7. This view is sometimes wrongly conflated with Arianism,<sup>2</sup> but it is not the same thing. Arians (including their modern counterparts, the Jehovah’s Witnesses) believe Christ is a created being and therefore not eternal at all. But evangelical advocates of “incarnational sonship” do not deny the full deity and eternality of Christ. They merely suggest that the expression “Son of God” is a title that applies to his humanity rather than an expression of the essential, eternal relationship that defines and distinguishes his place in the Trinity. Ralph Wardlaw (1779–1853) was a Scottish theologian who held that view.<sup>3</sup> Walter Martin (1928–1989), counter-cult apologist, likewise taught incarnational sonship.<sup>4</sup> Adam Clarke (1762–1832) and Albert Barnes (1798–1870), both prolific commentators, took the same position.<sup>5</sup>

John MacArthur once held the incarnational sonship view but now affirms the eternal sonship of Christ.<sup>6</sup> In an early commentary, MacArthur wrote,

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<sup>2</sup> The charge typically follows this line of reasoning:

“To deny that the Messiah is the Eternal Son of God, is virtually to call in question his Godhead, in doing which we plunge ourselves into danger of the most alarming nature. For the Arians can prove, and no man need deny it, that Jesus Christ existed as the Son of God before the world was (John xvii:1–5). Now, if he existed before the world was, and is not the Eternal Son of God, then he must be a created Son, who was brought into being prior to the world, and by whom, as an instrumental cause, God created the universe. From this conclusion, which is downright Arianism, it will be impossible to extricate ourselves, if we deny the Eternal Sonship of Christ. . . . To deny that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God, is to take a long stride toward Unitarianism.” William Beauchamp, *Letters on the Eternal Sonship of Christ* (Louisville: John Early, 1849), 157.

<sup>3</sup> “Jesus is called in the Scriptures, ‘the Son of God,’ ‘His own Son,’ ‘His beloved Son,’ ‘His only begotten Son.’ But we do not find Him anywhere denominated the eternal Son, or eternally begotten. The eternity of the divine person, the second in the blessed Trinity, is decidedly affirmed; but not the eternity of His sonship.” Ralph Wardlaw, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1857), 47.

<sup>4</sup> “Jesus Christ before His incarnation was the eternal Word, Wisdom, or Logos, of God, preexistent from all eternity, coequal, coexistent, coeternal with the Father, whose intrinsic nature of Deity He shared [but] Jesus Christ is not called by Scripture the ‘eternal Son,’ the error passed on from Origen under the title ‘eternal generation,’ but rather He is the Living Word of God.” Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 102–103.

<sup>5</sup> In his comment on Luke 1:35, Clarke emphatically states, “With all due respect for those who differ from me . . . the doctrine of the *eternal Sonship* of Christ is, in my opinion, anti-scriptural, and highly dangerous. This doctrine I reject.” Adam Clarke, *The New Testament . . . with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, 2 vols. (New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), 1:360–61. In his comments on Psalm 2:7, Clarke added, “It is well known that the words, ‘Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee,’ have been produced by many as a proof of the *eternal generation of the Son of God*. On the subject itself I have already given my opinion in my note on Luke i, 35, from which I recede not one hair’s breadth.” Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible . . . with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, 4 vols. (New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), 3:223.

On Psalm 2:7, Barnes writes, “The passage cannot be understood as referring to Christ without admitting his existence previous to the incarnation, for all that follows is manifestly the result of the exalted rank which God purposed to give him as his Son, or as the result of the promise made to him then.” But commenting on the phrase “Thou art my Son,” Barnes says, “That is, Yahweh had declared him to be his Son; he had conferred on him the *rank and dignity* fairly involved in the *title* THE SON OF GOD” (emphasis added). Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms* (London: Blackie & Son, 1870), 18–19.

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, “Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ” (August 20, 1999). Retrieved July 18, 2020, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A235/reexamining-the-eternal-sonship-of-christ>.

Jesus ... was not by nature eternally subordinate to God the Father but was equal to Him, yet He willingly submitted Himself to the Father during His incarnation, as an obedient son does to an earthly father. It seems that Jesus had not been eternally subject to the Father but was subject only during the time of His humanity.<sup>7</sup>

But in his 1999 retraction, he wrote, “I no longer regard Christ’s sonship as a role He assumed in His incarnation. ... I am now convinced that the title ‘Son of God’ when applied to Christ in Scripture always speaks of His essential deity and absolute equality with God, not His voluntary subordination.”<sup>8</sup>

### Psalm 2 in Hebrews 1

Psalm 2:7 considered in isolation might appear to pose significant difficulties for the doctrine of Christ’s eternal sonship. But all those difficulties are eliminated when one takes into consideration the full context of how and why that verse is cited in Hebrews 1. That is where its true meaning comes into the brightest biblical light.

It is well known that the book of Hebrews was written to confront an epidemic of apostasy among Jewish converts in the early church. The human author is writing to persuade half-hearted people and hangers-on not to fall short of authentic saving faith. Hebrews is therefore filled with Old Testament quotations showing Jewish readers that Christ is greater than any aspect of their religious traditions. He is greater than their cultural heritage. He is greater than the priesthood. He is greater than the sacrificial system. He is greater than *all* the external rules, ceremonies, and symbols of the Mosaic law. In short, Christ is greater than all the religious protocols of the Old Covenant era. Even the unsophisticated simplicity of Christian worship is actually superior to all the liturgy and pageantry—the pomp and circumcision—of Old Testament Judaism.

All of this is established with several chapters of biblical proofs showing that Christ is the fulfillment of every truth that was ever hinted at or foreshadowed in the various types and figures of the Old Testament. He is therefore the resolution and the full unveiling of every mystery that was ever set forth in the Old Testament. He is the answer to every essential question that was left hanging when the canon of Old Testament revelation was complete.

The starting point of Hebrews summarizes the book’s entire message regarding the supremacy of Christ with an emphatic declaration that Christ is the capstone of God’s revelation to humanity: “God ... in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Hebrews 1:1–2). In other words, Christ is truth incarnate, the consummate, full, and final self-revelation of God to the world. More than that, he is God incarnate. “He is the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature” (v. 3). All of chapter 1 is then devoted to a vigorous affirmation of the deity and eternality of Christ, beginning with the assertion that Christ is superior to the angels (v. 4).

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<sup>7</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 107–108. Note that MacArthur’s earlier position stemmed from his belief at the time that sonship necessarily signifies subordination, and he categorically rejected (and still rejects) the idea that Christ is eternally subordinate to the Father. Rather, Christ’s voluntary subjection to the will of the Father pertains to his obedience as a man.

<sup>8</sup> MacArthur, “Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ.”

The writer's argument is an insurmountable refutation for anyone who would deny the deity of Christ. Any careful student of Scripture (even in the Old Testament era) would understand that angels are the highest of all created beings in the universe, but they are not to be worshiped (Deuteronomy 6:13). Even the Seraphim, high-ranking angels who guard the throne room of God (Isaiah 6:2), are themselves engaged in perpetual worship (v. 3). They would expressly refuse all worship or veneration for themselves (Revelation 19:10; 22:9). But "when [the Father] brings the firstborn [his Son] into the world, He says, 'And let all the angels of God worship Him'" (Hebrews 1:6).

That argument is surrounded and buttressed with a series of similar points: Angels are created; Christ is the creator (vv. 2–3). Angels are God's servants; Christ is God's Son (v. 5). The angels offer worship; Christ receives praise (v. 6), *even from the Father*: "Of the Son [God] says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever'" (v. 8). Angels are ministering spirits (v. 14); Christ is a Son begotten by the heavenly Father (v. 5). All of this is still part of the argument that Christ is God incarnate. And notice: the writer proves each point with direct quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures. He quotes Old Testament verses verbatim in each verse from Hebrews 1:5 through verse 13.

So the argument that ties the entire book of Hebrews together is that nothing and no one in all the universe is greater than Christ. Chapter by chapter, he hammers this theme. Christ is higher than the angels. His priestly office is superior to the Old Testament priesthood. His atonement for sins once and for all accomplishes what the blood of millions of bulls and goats could never effectuate. He is far above "every priest [who] stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:11–12). He is better in every way than all the elements of Old Testament religion combined.

And it all starts with the truth that Jesus is God incarnate. He does the works of God—"He made the world ... and upholds all things by the word of His power" (vv. 2–3). He has a permanent position where no lesser being has any right to be, "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (v. 3).

And here is the point that elicits a reference to Psalm 2:7: Jesus "has inherited a more excellent name" than any name ever given to the angels. Bear in mind the context. We are right in the middle of chapter 1, where the theme is the eternality and divinity of Christ. Therefore the "name" spoken of in verse 4 is one that bespeaks deity. What is that name?

It is the same name used for Jesus in John 3:16: He is the "only begotten Son" of God.

"Begotten"?

Psalm 2:7 is of course the principal Old Testament text that identifies the Son of God as "begotten." The Hebrew word is יָלָד, (*yalad*), and it's the same word often translated "begat" some 225 times in the King James Version's Old Testament genealogies—"Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David" (Ruth 4:22), etc.

The Greek word for "begotten" in Hebrews 1:5 is γεννάω (*gennāō*). It is the root used in the word μονογενής, (*monogenes*), translated as "only begotten" in John 3:16.

*Monogenes* can also mean “one of a kind.” Both are legitimate literal English equivalents of the Greek term. That is why the King James Version and New American Standard Bible say “only begotten,” but the English Standard Version renders it “only,” and the New International Version has “one and only.” The Greek term actually carries both meanings simultaneously. *Monogenes* is never used of anything other than sons or daughters, and it always signifies a child who has no siblings from the same parents. Luke uses it three chapters in a row as he relates various narratives about how Jesus healed people. In Luke 7:12, Jesus raises from the dead a young man whom Luke says was “the only son [*monogenes*] of his mother.” The boy was both her one and only child and her only-begotten son. A chapter later, Jairus begs Jesus to come to his house, because “he had an only daughter [*monogenes*] ... and she was dying” (Luke 8:42). Again, she was his only child. In the following chapter, “A man from the crowd shouted, saying, ‘Teacher, I beg You to look at my son, for he is my only boy [*monogenes*]’” (Luke 9:38). That is always the sense of the Greek term: “an only child.”

“Begotten” seems a more precise translation of the word in John 3:16, not only because it recognizes the connection with Psalm 2:7, but also because it underscores what makes Jesus unique. All believers are God’s children by faith and by adoption, as affirmed by many passages: “As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12); “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26); and “All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). Even the angels are called “sons of God” three times in the book of Job.

But Christ is the “only *begotten*” Son of God, and the writer of Hebrews underscores that point by quoting Psalm 2:7.

Note that in the realm of biology, all creatures were made to bear offspring that shared their exact nature and likeness. “God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures *after their kind*: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth *after their kind*;’ and it was so” (Genesis 1:24, emphasis added). The point is that the one begotten is of the same nature as the one who begets. “Adam ... begat [*yalad*] a son in his own likeness, after his image” (Genesis 5:3). To say Christ is “begotten” by the Father is to stress that he “is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3).

No one other than Christ is ever said to be begotten by the Father—not even the Holy Spirit. This is precisely what makes Christ unique—“one of a kind.” He alone is God’s Son by nature—not by adoption; not by appointment; not by creation; and not by his conception in Mary’s womb.

Furthermore, (and this is vital) Christ’s position as “Son of God” is not a role he assumed at his incarnation. That would be no proof at all that Jesus is higher than the angels.

But this is a description of Christ’s eternal essence as the radiance of divine glory. He is always and forever the full and perfect manifestation of the divine nature. He is from eternity past to eternity future “the only begotten Son of God.” His eternal glory rests in that reality, according to John 1:14, “We saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father.”

As an infant begotten by the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary’s womb, Christ had no distinctive glory. In fact, his glory as God’s Son was veiled under his humanity throughout his life: “He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him,

nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him" (Isaiah 53:2). The glory that shone on the Mount of Transfiguration was one bright shining moment of divine glory, unveiled from the divine nature of Christ. That glory was the proof that he is God incarnate. That is the point the apostle makes in John 1:14 when he declares himself an eyewitness to a glory so inexpressibly bright and pure that it could only signify One who is himself deity—begotten by a heavenly Father.

It is clear therefore from the context that the begetting spoken of in Hebrews 1:5 pertains to the deity of Christ, not his humanity. It sets him apart from every created being; it exalts him above the angels; and it magnifies him as God. That, indeed, is the whole point—the writer of Hebrews is citing Psalm 2:7 as proof that Jesus is God.

Notice—his throne is eternal according to verse 8, and according to verses 10–11, so is he. He was there at the beginning of time: "You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands" (v. 10).<sup>9</sup> Verses 11–12 go on to declare both his eternity and his immutability: "[The earth and heavens] will perish, but You remain; and they all will become old like a garment, and like a mantle You will roll them up; like a garment they will also be changed. But You are the same, and your years will not come to an end." Those are incommunicable attributes of deity.

Any reader who studies this chapter in earnest and with care cannot deny that from start to finish it is declaring the deity of Christ. In the process, the text lays a foundation for one of the most important truths of Trinitarian doctrine—namely, the eternal sonship of Christ. It holds up the twin truths of Christ's sonship and his deity—and categorically affirms both. In fact, this passage presents the sonship of Christ as one of the proofs of Christ's deity.

That, by the way, is precisely how virtually everyone in first-century Judaism understood sonship. To say Jesus was the only-begotten Son of God was to say he is absolutely equal to God in his divine nature and authority.

### Subordination?

It is vital to note that there is not a hint of subordination in the designation "only begotten Son." It is an expression that denotes absolute equality. Father and son share the same nature and substance. They are equal in status and privilege. Every person in any first-century middle eastern culture understood that. A son was deserving of the very same respect and honor as the father.

That view is evident in the Gospels. At the pool of Bethesda, after Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, a group of Jewish leaders publicly scolded him for breaking their Sabbath rules. He answered, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working" (John 5:17). The next verse tells us, "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He

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<sup>9</sup> Verse 10 purposely echoes Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Every key expression from the opening verse of Scripture is echoed in Hebrews 1:10: "in the beginning"; "heavens"; and "earth." The verse is actually a direct quotation from Psalm 102:25 ("Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands"). That, he says, is the voice of the Father attributing the work of creation to Christ. It is an emphatic declaration of the deity of Christ. Verses 11–12 continue the quotation from Psalm 102.

not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, *making Himself equal with God*” (emphasis added).

Faithful Jews sometimes spoke of God as “our Father” in the collective sense, as in Isaiah 63:16: “You, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name” (see also Isaiah 64:8). The prophet asks the whole nation, “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?” (Malachi 2:10).<sup>10</sup> Jesus apparently raised no eyebrows among the Pharisees when he taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father ...” (Matthew 6:9).

The Jewish nation saw themselves collectively as belonging to God’s family. But no pious Jew would ever refer to God as “*His own Father*.” The casual familiarity implied in that expression was offensive. Even more than that, to call God “My Father”—especially while claiming to be God’s “only begotten Son”—was to claim prerogatives that simply do not belong to any mere man.

“Son of God,” is clearly a title of deity in the unique way Jesus applied it to himself as “the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18). It was an unequivocal declaration that the Incarnate Christ is equal in rank and authority to God. Both text and context make it clear that the quotation from Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5 is not about Jesus’ conception and birth as a man. The whole point being made in that chapter is that he is eternally God’s Son, one in nature with the Father, equal in authority with the Father, far superior even to the angels, and therefore worthy of worship the same as the Father.

Today?

Nevertheless, we must candidly admit that the hard questions Psalm 2:7 raises need to be answered. How can we say Christ was “begotten” if he has eternally existed? If self-existence is an attribute of deity, how can he be both “God” and “begotten of the Father”? And when did this begetting take place? What does the word “today” in Psalm 2:7 refer to?

Remember that this same phrase from Psalm 2:7 is quoted twice more in Scripture. In Acts 13, the apostle Paul is preaching in the synagogue at Antioch, and he gives an abbreviated history of God’s saving work. He begins to conclude his sermon in verses 32–33: “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten You.’”

Since Paul links Psalm 2:7 with Christ’s resurrection, some commentators believe “today” in that text refers to the day when Christ rose from the dead. But that view would create an even more troublesome interpretive problem. If “today” refers to the first Easter Sunday, that would imply that Jesus was not the “only begotten Son,” and God was not (in the fullest sense) Father to Christ until he rose from the

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<sup>10</sup> The first question in Malachi 2:10 is somewhat ambiguous. The NASB has the word “father” lowercased, as if it is a reference to Abraham as the nation’s “one father” (cf. Luke 1:73). But “Do we not all have one father?” is purposely set parallel to the second phrase in the verse—as if it is the same question recast: “Has not one God created us?” Most translations therefore treat “Father” as a reference to God and capitalize it.

dead. In essence, the verse would mean, “Now that you have arisen from the dead, I have become your Father.”<sup>11</sup>

Paul himself explains the connection between Jesus’ sonship and the resurrection—but he does it in a different context. In Romans 1:4, he says “Jesus Christ our Lord” “was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness.” That is one of many conspicuously Trinitarian verses of the New Testament. The Holy Spirit declared that Christ is eternally a Son to the Father by raising him from the dead. Jesus was irrefutably singled out and “designated” (Legacy Standard Bible) as the one true Son of God by his resurrection from the dead. Paul uses a Greek word ὅριζω (*horizō*), meaning “marked out,” or highlighted—literally “singled out and made conspicuous.” What the resurrection did was signify that Jesus Christ—and he alone—is the one true, eternal, “only begotten” Son of God.

The point should be obvious. If the name “Son” is proof of Jesus’ deity, as Hebrews 1 suggests, then Christ’s unique place as the Father’s only begotten Son cannot be a role he assumed at some point in time. In his humanity, Jesus can experience change and growth, like anyone else. But in his divine nature, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

In other words, there was no point in time when Jesus *became* a Son. The language of Scripture repeatedly confirms this and makes this truth a prominent feature of the gospel message. The New Testament says in numerous ways that “God sent forth his Son” (Galatians 4:4); “God has sent His only begotten Son into the world” (1 John 4:9); He “sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10); “The Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14); “God … gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16); God sent “His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin” (Romans 8:3); God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all” (Romans 8:32).

Christ was not sent from heaven to step into a new role as God’s Son. None of those verses say the Savior was sent to *become* a Son. They say the Son was sent to be a Savior.

Also, by logical necessity, if Christ was not a Son until his incarnation, then the Father wasn’t a Father yet when he sent him. The New Testament says repeatedly that he is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It calls him “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Calling God “Father” presupposes that he has a Son. It’s reciprocal. Unless we are prepared to argue that paternity is not an eternally-defining property of God the Father, we simply cannot deny the eternal Sonship of Christ.

Colossians 1:15 says Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” Isolate that verse from its context, and it might seem to be saying Christ had a beginning. But the very next verse says, “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Barnes took that view. In his commentary on Acts 13:33, he wrote: “It is evident that Paul uses the expression here as implying that the Lord Jesus is called the Son of God because he raised him up from the dead; and that he means to imply that it was for this reason that he is so called in the psalm. The interpretation of an inspired apostles [sic] fixes the meaning of this passage in the psalm; and proves that it is not there used with reference to the doctrine of eternal generation, or to his incarnation, but that he is here called his Son because he was raised from the dead.” Albert Barnes, *Notes Explanatory and Practical, on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Knight & Son, 1856), 278.

or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16–17). In other words, he cannot be a created being. He is the one who through whom everything was created (Hebrews 1:2). John 1 states, “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (vv. 2–3).

It should be clear that like the Greek term *monogenes*, the expression “firstborn of all creation” is not—cannot be—ascribing a beginning to either the existence or the sonship of Christ.

### Eternal Generation?

How then do we explain what it means for the Son of God, “having neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Hebrews 7:3), to be “begotten” by the Father? Classic Trinitarianism has answered that question by describing the begetting of God’s Son as an act of *eternal generation*. That is the technical term theologians coined to explain the timeless Trinitarian relationship between Father and Son.

The expression itself sounds oxymoronic. *Eternal* means “without beginning or end,” and *generation* usually means “Bring into existence, produce; or cause to arise.” Indeed, what can the word *begotten* possibly mean for an eternal, self-existent deity who is the same yesterday and today and forever? Or to put it more simply: how can Christ be *both* eternal and begotten? After all, human beings are begotten as zygotes. How can someone who is God, with no beginning and no end, be begotten—not as a man, but as eternal God? How can “generation” (the act of begetting, which usually speaks of bringing one’s offspring into existence) have anything to do with Christ, who declares himself to be Alpha and Omega, First and Last, Beginning and End, who is and was and is to come (Revelation 1:8; 22:13)?

This is not a new question. Believers in the early centuries of Church history grappled with it and came to a fairly solid consensus. Augustine stated simply that “God without time [outside of time] begat the Son by Whom He created all times.”<sup>12</sup> Some eighty years before Augustine published that, the Nicene Creed (AD 381) had affirmed,

We believe ... in one LORD JESUS CHRIST,  
the only-begotten Son of God,  
Begotten of the Father before all worlds;  
God of God,  
Light of Light,  
Very God of very God,  
*Begotten, not made*,  
Being of one substance with the Father;  
By whom all things were made.” (emphasis added)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel According to St. John and His First Epistle*, 2 vols., trans. H. Browne (London, 1848), 2:222.

<sup>13</sup>. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877), 1:27–28.

Notice the highlighted expression: “begotten, not made.” That is a purposeful use of biblical language. Neither Augustine nor the Nicene creed use the words “eternal generation,” but both statements affirm the *idea* in principle.

Of course, “eternal generation” is not a biblical term, and there are those who reject the language for that reason.<sup>14</sup> But regardless of what one thinks of the terminology, the truth of eternal generation is thoroughly biblical. Jesus is clearly and repeatedly said to be “begotten from the Father” (John 1:14), and this begetting clearly pertains to his deity, not his human nature. He is even called “the only begotten God” (v. 18). Virtually every place in Scripture where the Son is said to be begotten, the point is that Father and Son are of one substance, eternally equal—making it impossible that he was begotten in time, as opposed to eternity. Hence, “eternal generation.”<sup>15</sup> Archibald Alexander Hodge gives this helpful definition:

The eternal generation of the Son is defined to be 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.—See particularly Heb. 1., 3; John x., 38; xiv., 11; xvii., 21. The principal Scriptural support of the doctrine of derivation is John v., 26.<sup>16</sup>

Delving further into the many debates and controversies that surround “eternal generation” in the annals of historical theology would be far beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient for our purposes to note that many who affirm that the *fact* of Christ’s eternal generation is sufficiently clear in Scripture will freely admit that no fully satisfying explanation of the idea can be given. Spurgeon said, “The mysterious

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<sup>14</sup>. Oliver Buswell, for example, does not like the expression *eternal generation* though he does not deny that Christ’s sonship pertains to his eternal nature as God. He seems to equate the idea of “generation” with *subordination*, although (inconsistently, it seems) he has no such concern about the biblical expressions “begotten,” or “Son.” J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 111–12.

Ryrie indicates that he agrees with Buswell’s position, though he gives a slightly different rationale for avoiding the language of “eternal generation.” He writes: “I agree with Buswell (*A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, pp. 105–12) that generation is not an exegetically based doctrine. The concept it tries to convey, however, is not unscriptural, and certainly the doctrine of sonship is scriptural. The phrase “eternal generation” is simply an attempt to describe the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity and, by using the word “eternal,” protect it from any idea of inequality or temporality. But whether or not one chooses to use the idea of eternal generation, the personal and eternal and coequal relation of the Father and Son must be affirmed.” Ryrie then goes on to state rather dogmatically that Psalm 2:7 lends no support even to the principle “eternal generation” aims to convey. Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 54.

<sup>15</sup>. I prefer the view of those who stress that the *person* of Christ is generated, not the substance or the essence. We say the substance is “communicated” through generation, but that is not what is *begotten*. Turretin says it this way: “A person is properly said to generate a person. . . . Although the Son may be said to be begotten by the Father, it does not follow that the Son is the Son of himself because the essence does not generate an essence, but a person (the Father, the Son, who is another one, although not another thing).” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1:293, 301.

<sup>16</sup>. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter, 1866), 146.

doctrine of the Trinity, and the equally mysterious and sublime doctrine of eternal generation are best let alone by feeble minds. I do not think there are half-a-dozen men alive who ought to meddle with [the doctrine of eternal generation].”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, he wisely said,

There has been much disputing about how Christ can be equal with the Father, and equally eternal, and yet be the Son of the Father. This is a great deep into which you and I, dear friends, will do well not to pry. We usually speak of Christ being the Son of the Father by what is called “eternal generation.” I confess that there is a mystery here which I can neither understand nor explain; but as the Father calls him his Son, I unhesitatingly believe that he is what the Scripture constantly calls him, “the Son of God.”<sup>18</sup>

“Much disputing” is an understatement. Debates about how, in what sense, and by what means Christ was begotten underlie most of the Christological controversies throughout church history. To cite just one example, Athanasius wrote this in response to the Arian controversy:

[It is not] right to seek how the word is from God, or how He is God’s radiance, or how God begets, and what is the manner of His begetting. For a man must be beside himself [literally “crazy”] to venture on such points; since a thing ineffable and proper to God’s nature, and known to Him alone and to the Son, this he demands to be explained in words. It is all one as if they sought where God is, and how God is, and of what nature the Father is. But as to ask such questions is irreligious, and argues an ignorance of God, *so it is not holy to venture such questions concerning the generation of the Son of God*, nor to measure God and His Wisdom by our own nature and infirmity. Nor is a person at liberty on that account to swerve in his thoughts from the truth, nor, if any one is perplexed in such inquiries, ought he to disbelieve what is written. For it is better in perplexity to be silent and believe, than to disbelieve on account of the perplexity: for he who is perplexed may in some way obtain mercy, because, though he has questioned, he has yet kept quiet; but when a man is led by his perplexity into forming for himself doctrines which beseem not, and utters what is unworthy of God, such daring incurs a sentence without mercy.<sup>19</sup>

John Owen said, “Of the eternal generation of the divine person of the Son, the sober writers of the ancient church did constantly affirm that it was firmly to be believed, but as to the manner of it not to be inquired into.”<sup>20</sup> Owen goes on to quote

<sup>17</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Strong Meat,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1863), 9:234.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “Lessons from Christ’s Baptism,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1912), 58:183-84.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 4:367. A footnote attached to this passage further says, “Eusebius has some forcible remarks on this subject. As, he says, we do not know how God can create out of nothing, so we are utterly ignorant of the Divine Generation.”

<sup>20</sup> John Owen, *The Person and Glory of Christ* (New York: Robert Carter, 1852), 13.

Ambrose: “I inquire of you when and how the Son was begotten? Impossible it is to me to know the mystery of this generation. My mind faileth, my voice is silent—and not only mine, but of the angels; it is above principalities, above angels, above the cherubim, above the seraphim, above all understanding. Lay thy hand on thy mouth; it is not lawful to search into these heavenly mysteries.”<sup>21</sup>

Francis Turretin says this is a doctrine that cannot be totally explained or comprehended by the human mind. He too quotes Ambrose and follows with a quotation from Gregory Nazianzus, who, in Turretin’s words, “puts a stop to our curiosity when he wishes [this doctrine] to be reverenced in silence: ‘The begetting of God is to be honored by silence; the great thing is for you to learn he was begotten.’”<sup>22</sup>

These men who specialized in biblical doctrine all their lives are not suggesting that the rest of us should abstain from studying these doctrines. They are saying the same thing the apostle says in 2 Peter 3:16—namely, that Scripture includes “some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort … to their own destruction.”

The filiation of Christ is not a suitable place for hobbyists and beginners to experiment with creative theology. Indeed, *none* of the core Trinitarian doctrines is safe playgrounds for theological neophytes. But it sometimes seems as if every dilettante dabbler in doctrine is just itching to tackle the things in Scripture that are the *most* difficult to understand.

That’s a bad idea, and it is folly for greenhorn exegetes to think they can improve historic Christianity’s long-standing creeds by twisting, tweaking, and tinkering with doctrines that they clearly haven’t even begun to grasp. Spurgeon deplored that kind of small-minded theological tampering. He said, “We might like to see two Titanic Puritans enter the field of controversy—two such men, for instance, as Dr. John Owen and Charnock—one might travel a thousand miles to see them grapple one of these lofty subjects; but when the little men of these days meddle with them, it saddens the humble-minded, and affords enlightenment to none.”<sup>23</sup>

We can’t wrap our feeble minds around the idea of eternity—even though it’s such a familiar concept. Yet we obviously cannot simply discard every thought of infinity as an irrational, unreasonable, or absurd concept. Try to conceive of a universe where everything is finite—that’s impossible. So we *must* acknowledge infinity, even while we are forced to confess that we can’t comprehend the idea. The eternal generation of Christ Father is just like that.

Turretin’s approach is the sound one. He writes, “The words of Is. 53:8, although having another bearing, may be rightly used here—‘Who shall declare his generation?’ But only that it may be distinguished from human generation and explained negatively rather than positively.” In other words, although we cannot precisely describe the mode of eternal generation, we can certainly say with biblical authority what it does *not* mean. It does not mean there was a time when Christ did not exist (John 1:1–2). It is not a denial of the Son’s aseity, or self-existence (John 5:26). It does not mean that Christ is eternally subordinate to the Father (John 5:18; Philippians 2:6). It does not mean that the Son derives the divine essence, his glory,

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<sup>21</sup> Owen, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> Spurgeon, “Strong Meat,” 234.

or the attributes of deity from the Father (John 17:5). What is generated is his sonship—the distinctive property of his Person (more on that in a moment).

Psalm 2:7 and Hebrews 1:5 *must* be consistent with the rest of Scripture, so we are driven by the text of Scripture to conclude that here, at least, the word “today” does not speak of a point in time at all. It is the eternal “now” of our timeless God—an inscrutable reality, described in finite and totally inadequate language.

The immediate context of Psalm 2:7 is actually consistent with that interpretation: “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’” Many commentators take that as a reference to the eternal decree of God. It belongs to the time before time, when there was actually no such thing as “today.” Turretin agrees, and adds this:

And so with regard to the word “today” (*hodie*), which is added not to point out a certain time in which that generation began; but that we may understand that all things are present with God, and that that generation is not successive, but permanent in eternity (viz., in it there is nothing past or future, nor any succession of time, but an indivisible “now” [*to nyn*] embracing however all the circumstances of time). As, therefore, with God there is no yesterday or tomorrow, but always today, so this filiation being eternal can properly be designated by the today of eternity.<sup>24</sup>

### Personal Properties?

How vital is the eternal sonship of Christ to our understanding of the Trinity? To eliminate the eternal generation of Christ would destroy the familial relationship that defines the Trinity. It would turn the Father-Son relationship into nothing more than a temporary metaphor—and thus destroy the singular distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

How are the Persons of the Trinity distinguished in Scripture? The answer is given in countless historic creeds and confessions of faith:

The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.<sup>25</sup>

The words used to frame that article of faith are taken verbatim from the Athanasian Creed (*Quicunque Vult*, c. 500), purposely emphasizing both the absolute equality of the three Persons, while also identifying their distinctive personal properties.

This is basic Trinitarianism. The Father begets the Son; the Son is begotten of the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son. Thus, the distinctive personal properties are known as *paternity* (the Father); *filiation* (the Son);

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<sup>24</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 295.

<sup>25</sup> Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), 2.3.

and *procession* (the Holy Spirit). Those properties are what give definition to the personhood of each. In fact, those are their only distinguishing characteristics. Aside from those properties, all three Persons share the same attributes and prerogatives.

As noted near the beginning of this paper, no one besides the Son (including the Holy Spirit) is ever said to be “begotten” of the Father. The Holy Spirit is sent from Christ and proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). The expression evokes the idea of breathing, and that is fitting, because the Greek word for “Spirit” is *pneuma*, a word that means “breath.” When Jesus spoke of sending the Spirit to his disciples, “he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22).

R. L. Dabney is candid with regard to the mystery surrounding these personal intertrinitarian distinctions. He wrote, “That there are such properties and relations, we know; what they are, we do not know.”<sup>26</sup> But like so many aspects of the Bible’s Trinitarian teachings, it would be sheer foolishness to dismiss or explain away important biblical truths just because they pose a challenge to our understanding. The generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit may mystify us, but these are clear and necessary biblical doctrines.

No doctrine is *more* essential to our confession of faith as Bible-believing Christians than the doctrine of the Trinity and the numerous biblical truths that weave our understanding of our Triune God. The writer of Hebrews starts here precisely because no doctrine has more far-reaching significance, and nothing has more serious practical implications than the issue of whom we worship. Remember: he was writing an extended appeal to half-hearted almost-converts who were tempted to revert to Judaism because they had not yet grasped that to walk away from Christ was to turn away from God himself. The full truth of Trinitarian doctrine had been revealed to them. “God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him” (1 John 4:9). As Jesus himself said, it is the duty of all believers to “honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23); “He who hates Me hates My Father also” (John 15:23). The apostle John agreed: “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father” (1 John 2:23); “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God” (2 John 9).

In other words, to turn away from Christ, deny his deity, or neglect to honor him as we honor the Father is to turn away from the true God. Christ’s sonship is not an abstract, arcane, impractical, or insignificant doctrine. This doctrine has practical ramifications in the ultimate and eternal sense, and the eternal relationship between Father and Son is a vitally important doctrine with major implications for the gospel. That is why the Scriptures take great pains to inform us time and again that God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins—and the one whom God sent is “his *only* begotten Son.”

I hope you see the beauty and majesty of that truth—and more than that, I hope you *believe* it.

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<sup>26</sup> R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Co., 1878), 203.