To Mike Rea,
Mensch
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The great New England Puritan Jonathan Edwards once said that in Christ we find an “admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies.” The more I think about it, the more his remark seems to capture something fundamental about my own fixation with the person and work of Christ. Edwards was speaking about the constitution of Christ himself when he wrote these words in a sermon entitled “The Excellency of Christ.” But it is not just that the incarnation instantiates in one entity an admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies: divinity and humanity, God Incarnate, and so on. It also provides the theologian—indeed, anyone with a stake in the Christian religion—with a compelling topic for investigation and intellectual engagement, for the very idea that a human being might also be divine is as riveting as it is scandalous.

My previous forays into this area have sought to tackle issues bearing upon the metaphysics of the incarnation, or what one might call the philosophical underpinnings of the theological claims made by historic, orthodox Christianity about the person of Christ. This has involved trying to get at what the traditional two-natures doctrine might entail. (Very roughly, the two-natures doctrine is the view that Christ is a divine person who takes on a human nature in addition to his divine one, in order to bring about the reconciliation or union of human beings with God.) It has also involved reflecting on christological method, as well as more

unexpected questions about such things as whether Christ had a fallen human nature, or whether the virginal conception of Christ has any bearing on the medical-ethical quandary about the status of the embryo, or even whether there could be more than one incarnation. At the same time I have also developed an interest in the atonement as the culminating aspect of the work of Christ. To date, the results of my work in this area have been more scattered and occasional, but I hope to remedy that in a sequel to this volume, on the nature of the atonement.

This work is a further contribution to Christology. It is a study in systematic theology written from the perspective of analytic theology. On my way of thinking, analytic theology utilizes the tools and methods of contemporary analytic philosophy for the purposes of constructive Christian theology. Often, analytic philosophy is regarded as an enterprise that is not particularly interested in the origin or development of an idea, only in its utility, or its approximation to the truth of the matter. By contrast, Christian theology is usually thought to be deeply entangled with the genealogy of ideas. It is not just that for many theologians the origins and development of particular notions in the Christian tradition are as important as how we use such notions today. It is also that one cannot present theological arguments without paying attention to the ways in which the ideas contained in these arguments have been shaped by the Christian tradition. One cannot separate out the history from the concepts like the kernel from the husk without doing violence to the subject matter of theology.

Theologians have always been concerned to pass on the deposit of faith committed to them. Analytic theology can certainly be pursued in a way that seriously engages the Christian tradition. Indeed, this is how it is commonly practiced. Nevertheless, there is still a popular perception that analytic theology is an ahistorical project not interested in the genealogy of ideas or the ways in which ideas of the past influence our current thinking—an accusation that brings it under suspicion in the eyes of many systematic theologians. Work being done at the cutting edge of analytic theology shows this accusation is wide of the mark, though, as is often the case, these results take time to filter down to the popular imagination.²

This project is a small contribution to that literature, providing one instance of analytic theology that (I hope) is historically and theologically engaged. It is also written from the perspective of the Reformed tradition, which inevitably shapes the work in important respects, though it addresses thinkers from other theological traditions as well.

One of the main aims of this work is to provide a “joined-up” account of the person and work of Christ. There are books on the incarnation and books on the atonement; this is a book that treats the incarnation and atonement as two parts or phases of one divine work—which is what I mean by a joined-up account. The atonement is the mediatorial work of Christ, but it is not the whole of the work of Christ. We might say that the atonement is a culminating moment of the work of Christ, a work that begins in eternity and is executed in time in the life and action of Christ in history.

With this in mind, the book begins with protological issues, matters pertaining to “first things”—that is, first things as applied to the person and work of Christ. To this end, chapters 1–3 deal with the eternal generation of the Son, the preexistence of Christ, and the relationship between divine incorporeality and incarnation. The first two of these topics have been the subject of some dispute in recent evangelical and systematic theology. The last involves an important cluster of issues about the relationship between God and the world that are much discussed in contemporary theology (viz., panentheism, emergence, and so on). I argue that the traditional, catholic notion that the Second Person of the Trinity is eternally generated by the Father should be upheld, contrary to some recent evangelical criticisms of that doctrine. I also argue that God the Son exists asarkos, or without flesh, prior to the incarnation. However, this raises worries about the relationship between God’s incorporeality and Christ’s corporeality. The third chapter addresses this concern, arguing that God is indeed incorporeal and that the assumption of human nature by the Second Person of the Trinity does not compromise this claim.

Chapter 4 addresses the vexed issue of the divine image, arguing that this should be understood protologically, in terms of humanity being made in the image of Christ, who is the image of God. This concept connects
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up with the seventh and eighth chapters, in which a union account of the atonement is set out, and the relationship between the notion of union with Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit is spelled out. (The connection is something like this: Christ is the prototypical divine image in whose image we are fashioned in the expectation that we will be united to God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the fact that Christ is the image of God makes him a kind of hub or interface between human beings and God, enabling us to be united to God by the Holy Spirit, by means of the atoning work of Christ.) In between these chapters are two pieces (chs. 5–6), the first concerning desiderata for models of the hypostatic union, and the second giving an account of the hypostatic union set out in terms of compositionalism—one of the recent contributions made by analytic theologians to the doctrine of the incarnation. It is important to see what is meant by the hypostatic union if this union is the very means by which human beings are united to God. 3 So it is important to attend to the questions of desiderata for the hypostatic union and a model of that union between the chapters on the christological account of the divine image and the two chapters that spell out union with Christ in terms of atonement and the secret work of the Spirit.

In the final chapter, I turn to address the question of union with Christ more directly, tackling one recent internecine dispute among Reformed theologians about the nature and scope of union with Christ. Although this might be thought to be of little concern to those outside the Reformed community, I think that the issues raised are of wider interest. At any rate, clarifying the matter of the nature and scope of union with Christ as it bears upon this study is surely salient.

Taken together, these chapters present the outline of an account of the person and work of Christ, arguing that only when we see these as parts of one divine act do they make sense. In addition, the work makes a case for a particular way of thinking about the person and work of Christ, one that privileges the idea that God creates a world of human beings made in the image of Christ in order that they may participate in the divine life through

3. As will become clear in the following, by saying that the hypostatic union is the “very means by which human beings are united to God,” I do not mean to suggest that the hypostatic union independent of Christ’s atonement and the secret work of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to unite humans to God, only that it is one of the conditions necessary for this union that has been ordained by God. Since, in the purposes of God, no union with the divine can obtain without the incarnation, discussion of hypostatic union is an important consideration.

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the agency of Christ’s atoning work, by means of the union with Christ brought about by the person of the Holy Spirit. Although this is a work of contemporary systematic theology, it taps into notions of the divine image and union with Christ, alongside an exploration of participation in the divine life, that echo ancient theological themes found in the work of many other theologians of the past, from the early church onwards. The material on the hypostatic union and on matters of protology round out the whole, providing a conceptual snapshot, as it were, of how it is that the Word of God is enfleshed in Christ—hence the title of the work.4

There is a groundswell of interest among contemporary theologians, including theologians from my own Reformed tradition, in the notion of union with Christ and in ways of thinking about his mediatorial work that connects it to other aspects of his incarnation.5 This is part of a growing awareness of the catholicity of Reformed thought, and a recovery of its deep connections with earlier phases of the Christian tradition. An important motif in much recent work concerned with the catholicity of Reformed theology is retrieval—of ideas from the ancient church as well as from medieval and Reformation theology.6 Our concern about union

4. However, I should make it clear at the outset that I don’t claim that the argument offered here is the whole story of the person and work of Christ, or of union with Christ, though I think it is an important aspect of that story. Hence, my claim that this is a “conceptual snapshot” and an “outline of an account” of the person and work of Christ.

5. Recent examples from Reformed thinkers include the work of Todd Billings, Julie Canlis, William B. Evans, Robert Grow and Myk Habets, Michael Horton, Marcus Peter Johnson, Mark Garcia, Robert Letham, and Kathryn Tanner. (References to the works of these theologians are given in ch. 8, footnote 18, and in the bibliography.) Michael J. Gorman’s work is a good example of the wider theological interest in the topic of union with Christ. See, e.g., his recent monograph The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014). Constantine R. Campbell’s comprehensive study, Paul and Union with Christ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), repays careful study. In addition to this there is the revival of interest in thinking about the work of Christ in terms of theosis, or divinization. (See, e.g., Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung, eds., Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.]) Although I do not explore theosis in detail here, it should be clear that I am in sympathy with a version of it. Finally, there are participatory accounts of atonement that tap into similar themes, e.g., Tim Bayne and Greg Restall, “A Participatory Account of the Atonement,” in New Waves in Philosophy of Religion, ed. Yuin Nagasawa and Eric J. Wielenberg (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 150–66, which draws on the work of the New Testament scholar Douglas Campbell.

with Christ is hardly novel. Variations upon this theme can be found in the work of a host of historic theologians, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, St. Athanasius, St. Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, and John Williamson Nevin, as well as in the output of more recent divines such as Thomas F. Torrance and Kathryn Tanner. I am happy to acknowledge my debt to this “great cloud of witnesses” and to their writings. Even if they are not always footnoted in what follows, their influence stands behind much of what I have written. We do indeed stand on the shoulders of giants.
Acknowledgments

Theology is addictive. Theologians spend many of their waking hours thinking about something theological, some problem, some concern that they cannot seem to let go without resolution. Often, the results of these deliberations find their way to the press. But along the way there is usually reading, talking, reflection, note-taking, discussion, rumination, typing up draft after draft, the consumption of large amounts of caffeine-based products, and a lot of time in which the problem is left “on the back burner” while other, more pressing practical tasks are addressed. Writing is a large part of that process. Some of it occurs in one’s head, some of it in notebooks and the margins of texts. Much of it finds its way onto the computer screen in various iterations of a paper or book manuscript. In a sense, the final published version of a work of theology is really only a record of the intellectual struggle that has gone into its resolution. Solving some theological worry is not the same as writing out the solution at which one has been aiming. And writing out the solution is not the same as arriving at the final published form of the text, which usually appears long after the process has ceased to be a live issue for its author. Yet writing is the activity that connects these various stages of the theological process.

So it is with this book. Working through the different parts of this study over the last seven or eight years has involved trying out earlier (and often inferior) iterations of most of the chapters as papers or articles published separately. These were stages along the way toward a greater understanding of the connections between person and work of Christ, or what I shall call a “joined-up” account of Christology—the results of which you now hold

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in your hands. But this result is really the product of a long, generative process with many false starts, several blind alleys, and more revisions than I care to recall. It is a kind of palimpsest, but one whose earlier, partially effaced markings are now (hopefully) only visible to its author.

A precursor to the first chapter was given in a panel on the eternal generation of the Son at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Milwaukee, November 2012. I am grateful for that invitation and the questions and discussion that followed. I thank Paul Helm and Jordan Wessling for reading and commenting on a version of that chapter.

An earlier version of the second chapter was read by Scott Swain, whose comments saved me from more than one serious oversight. Robert W. Jenson also provided trenchant feedback on an earlier iteration of this material that led me to rewrite the entire chapter. I am grateful to them both.


A forerunner to chapter 4 first saw the light of day as an essay in Joshua R. Farris and Charles Taliaferro, eds., The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015). I am grateful to the publisher and editors for permission to reuse much of that material here.

An earlier iteration of the fifth chapter was given as a plenary paper at the inaugural Los Angeles Theology Conference in 2013 at Biola University, and it was subsequently published in the proceedings of the conference: Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., Christology Ancient and Modern: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2013). I am grateful to the publisher for permission to reuse much of that material here.

A version of chapter 6 originally appeared in Anna Marmadoro and Jonathan Hill, eds., The Metaphysics of the Incarnation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). I thank the editors for permission to reproduce much of that material here, with some important changes that reflect developments in my own thinking since its original publication.

Much of the material contained in the seventh chapter was published in an earlier essay that can be found in Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 430–51. I thank the press and editors for permission to reuse the material contained in this volume.
An earlier version of chapter 8 was first given as a plenary address at the Wheaton Theology Conference in 2014 and published in the proceedings of that conference: Jeffrey W. Barbeau and Beth Felker Jones, eds., *Spirit of God: Christian Renewal in the Community of Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015). I am grateful to the organizers of the conference for the invitation, and to the editors for permission to reuse the material in this volume.

I would also like to thank Mark Hamilton and Joshua Farris for reading through and commenting on drafts of the chapters, and Bob Hosack, my editor at Baker Academic, who was willing to take the project on. Thanks also to Darian Lockett and Matt Jenson for their encouragement of the work and for their advice at an important stage of development. Derek Rishmawy provided me with a copy of the paper by Kevin Vanhoozer that helped me in framing the final chapter; my thanks to him for this kindness. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family for their unstinting support, and in particular my wife, Claire. As with all my previous work, she has made it possible for me to write, giving me the space, time, and encouragement to do so. She has also made me think hard about the craft of writing in the last two years, and I am sure that her help has made this a better work as a consequence.

This volume is dedicated to my analytic-theological collaborator Michael C. Rea, who, in addition to his many intellectual accomplishments, is without doubt one of the finest human beings I have had the privilege to call my friend.
Let us now readily attend, with the whole consideration of our mind, to understanding and treating those things which pertain to the mystery of the Word made flesh, so that, with God revealing, we may be able to utter some thing on these ineffable matters.

—Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, book II
The Eternal Generation of the Son

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, Eternally begotten of the Father.

—Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, AD 381

Is the Second Person of the Trinity eternally begotten by the First Person? If he is, what might this mean? And what of dogmatic significance follows from such an affirmation or its denial? In this chapter, I will defend the view that the Father eternally generates the Son, which is the historic position of the Christian church. I will also show that the affirmation or denial of the doctrine has important dogmatic implications. I begin by setting out what is at stake in the doctrine. I will then offer some theological considerations in favor of the doctrine. Finally, I will consider several problems entailed in its denial, focusing on the treatment of eternal generation by the British philosophical theologian Paul Helm. I close with a brief restatement of the doctrine.

What Is at Stake in the Doctrine

The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son provides the traditional dogmatic means by which to differentiate the First from the Second Person.
of the Trinity. It is the relation of origin that (so it is said) distinguishes the Second from the First Person of the Trinity as a particular subsistent relation within the Godhead. It is also a dogmatic safeguard against the error of ontologically subordinating the Son to the Father. This is not the same as the economic subordination of the Son to the Father. We will come to the economic subordination of the Son in a moment. Before doing so, let us briefly consider the question of self-differentiation in the Godhead.

The classic doctrine of divine self-differentiation, at which the creedal statements of the eternal generation of the Son take aim, is Arianism. According to the Arians, God is timeless. Yet there was a moment at which God the Son was not. In commenting on this aspect of Arian theology, Lewis Ayres writes, “Arius insists that the Father is alone God, simple and immutable. The Son is born from the Father before the creation and although we cannot describe the Son’s birth in temporal categories, we should not say that the Son is coeternal.”¹ For if the Son were coeternal in an unqualified sense, he could not be said to be born of the Father, a central tenet of Arianism. This can be seen in the confession sent by Arius and his followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria during the fourth-century christological controversy. In it, they write:

And God, being the cause of all things, is without beginning and supremely unique [monōtatos], while the Son, timelessly [achronōs] begotten by the Father, created and established before all ages, did not exist prior to his beginning, but was timelessly begotten before all things; he alone was given existence [directly] by the Father. For he is not eternal or co-eternal or equally self-sufficient [sunagennētos] with the Father, nor does he have his being alongside the Father, [in virtue] as some say, [of] his relation with him [ta pros ti], thus postulating two self-sufficient first principles. But it is God [only], as monad and first principle of all things, who exists in this way before all things. That is why he exists before the Son [pro tou huiou]. . . . Accordingly then, since he has his existence, his glories and his life from the Father, and all things are delivered to him, it is in this sense that God is his principle and source [archē].²

². Athanasius, De Synodis [On the Synods], translated by Rowan Williams in his study Arius, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2001), 271 (emphasis added). An older, more cumbersome translation of the whole of Athanasius’s De Synodis can be found in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds.,
In patristic formulations of Arianism, the language used can sometimes be confusing—for example, phrases like the infamous line “There was [a time] when he was not,” which might suggest temporal succession in the divine life. In which case there is a time at which there is only God the Father. Then there is a later time at which God the Father generates God the Son. Non-Arian theologians that defend a doctrine of divine temporality may well have a problem on their hands in making sense of this claim, although I shall not deal with that particular difficulty here.³ For our purposes it is important to note that the historic Arians did not think of the eternal generation of the Son in this manner, though their language is sometimes unguarded in this respect.⁴ Instead, as Athanasius makes clear in his reporting of Arius’s views in De Synodis, they thought that the Son is somehow timelessly eternally generated such that he is not of the same substance as the Father, but only of like substance (that is, homoiousios, not homoousios). One plausible way of understanding this Arian claim is as a causal thesis about the Son’s eternal generation. If God the Father is the eternal cause of the existence of God the Son, then the two are not of the same substance. For if the existence of God the Son is logically but not temporally consequent or dependent upon the action of God the Father, then the Father and Son have different individual essences. But this implies two different deities, not two divine persons.

At the heart of the Arian doctrine as I have characterized it is a mistake about the nature of the divine self-differentiation between the Father and the Son. The divine nature or essence is shared between the divine persons. It does not have its source in the Father, who gives it to the Son in eternally generating/causing him. Nor does the Father impart some of his essence to the Son, because, as God, he is indivisible. This must be the

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4. For instance, “We worship him as eternal because of him who was born in the order of time [en chronois]” (Williams’s translation of the relevant part of De Synodis, in Arians, 102). Newman’s translation in NPNF² 4 reads, “We praise him as without beginning because of Him who has a beginning” (457). I take this to be consistent with the claim that Christ has a beginning in time in his human nature, which is not unorthodox.
case, otherwise not only would the Son have his existence from the Father, he would also have his nature from the Father. But then he could not have all the attributes of deity. For not only would he be caused rather than uncaused, he would also lack aseity, being dependent upon the Father for his existence. But since aseity is a divine attribute, this is tantamount to saying the Son does not have the divine essence without qualification or modification. This is made abundantly clear in the second canon of the Fourth Lateran Council of AD 1215, which states,

For the Father begetting the Son from eternity imparted to Him His own substance, as He Himself testifies: “That which my father hath given me, is greater than all” (John 10:29). And it cannot be said that He gave to Him a part of His substance and retained a part for Himself, since the substance of the Father is indivisible, that is, absolutely simple. But neither can it be said that the Father in begetting transferred His substance to the Son, as if He gave it to the Son without retaining it for Himself, otherwise He would cease to be a substance. It is evident, therefore, that the Son in being begotten received without any diminution the substance of the Father and thus the Father and Son as well as the Holy Ghost proceeding from both are the same entity.5

In sum: if the Son is eternally caused by the Father as the Arians claimed, then his nature is derived, and he cannot have the complete complement of divine attributes because he does not exist \textit{a se} (from himself, independent of other entities) but \textit{per aliud} (from or by means of another).

This way of understanding the Arian account of eternal generation presumes some meaning can be given to the notion of atemporal causation. Some contemporary philosophical theologians dispute this. For instance, Richard Swinburne thinks that causation requires some temporal metric.6

5. This translation of the canon can be found at: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp (last retrieved November 11, 2012). Cf. Richard Muller, who writes,

In the traditional western model, as argued by Peter Lombard and ratified by the Fourth Lateran Council, the divine essence neither generates nor is generated; rather the person of the Father generates the person of the Son—with the result that the Son, considered as to his sonship, is generated, but considered as to his essence is not. Or, to put the point another way, there is no essential difference between the Father and the Son, the only difference being the relation of opposition, namely, the begottenness of the Son. The Son, therefore, has all of the attributes of the divine essence, including aseity.


On his view, to cause a thing to happen is to be logically and temporally prior to the thing that is caused. But according to many classical Christian theologians, this is not the case. Take St. Augustine, for instance, who in his *Confessions*, book 11, argues that God creates the world with time, not in time. God causes the world to be; he brings it into existence. But he does not do so at a particular moment in time, for there is no first moment in time until God creates the world with time. God’s action “prior” to creating the world in this context refers to something that is logically or conceptually, but not temporally, prior to creation. If God the Father eternally causes the existence of God the Son, then his existence is logically dependent on the eternal causal action of the Father. But the Son is not temporally dependent on the action of the Father on this traditional Arian way of thinking about the matter.

The orthodox declared that the Arians were mistaken, and this view won the day, being codified in the symbol of the First Ecumenical Council in AD 325 and again in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381, according to which Christ is “begotten, not made” and “of one essence with the Father” (γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοοὐσιον τῷ Πατρί). In other words, God the Son is eternally generated by God the Father but is not eternally caused to exist by the Father. This is captured in the creed by distinction between *being begotten* (gennēthenta) and *being made* (poiēthenta). It should be clear from the context that the referent here is God the Son, not Christ’s human nature, since his human nature is made in the womb of the Virgin and has a beginning in time. What is at stake here is not the moment at which the human nature of the Son began to exist. Rather, the issue concerns the origin of the divine nature of Christ. Specifically,

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7. So as not to complicate the present argument unnecessarily, I shall ignore the doctrine of backwards causation, which is controversial and runs counter to this deep-seated intuition about the priority of causes over their effects.

8. Augustine says things like the following: “However, no physical entity existed before heaven and earth; at least if any such existed, you had made it without using a transient utterance, which could then be used as the basis for another transient utterance, declaring the heaven and earth be made.” Later he says this: “You created all times and you exist before all times. Nor was there any time when time did not exist. There was therefore no time when you had not made something, because you made time itself. No times are coeternal with you because you are permanent” (*Confessions* 11.6; 11.13–14, trans. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 230). See also the discussion of this by Paul Helm in *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), ch. 4.
the issue turns on whether, in being eternally generated, God the Son is also caused by God the Father. The creed underlines the fact that the Son is not made like other creatures are made; he is not brought into being. He is of the same substance (homoousios) as the Father. But it is true to say that he is begotten—that is (on my reading of the anti-Arian animus of the pro-Nicene theologians, at least), eternally generated by the Father.

The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son also has some dogmatic bearing on the question of the functional subordination of the Son in the economy of salvation. Typically, this is understood to be a temporary subordination accompanying Christ’s state of humiliation in the incarnation (as intimated in Phil. 2). I take this to mean God the Son is subordinate to God the Father in his human nature during his state of humiliation.9 Note that this is consistent with divine timelessness. It is the human nature of the Son that is functionally subordinate as a creature to the Father; it is not his divine nature that is subordinate. How could this be if the Son is “of one essence with the Father,” as the creed states? But it is eternally true that the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father in his human nature for the purposes of the state of humiliation. There is no theological problem with this statement, since if God is eternal, becoming incarnate (with all that entails) is an eternal act of God the Son. Clearly this does not imply any subordination of the Son to the Father that would imperil his deity or that suggests a sort of eternal subordination of one divine person to another qua divine person. That way leads back to Arianism.

Theological Considerations in Favor of the Eternal Generation of the Son

In recent times a number of theologians—including, perhaps surprisingly, some evangelicals—have distanced themselves from the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Others have even asserted an eternal subordination of the Son to the Father.10 I have already given reasons for

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9. Cf. Thomas Aquinas: “We are to understand that Christ is subject to the Father not simply but in his human nature even if this qualification be not added; and yet it is better to add this qualification in order to avoid the error of Arius, who held the Son to be less than the Father” (Summa Theologiae III, q. 20, a. 1; translation from Summa Theologica, trans. Brothers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948]).

10. McCall deals with these matters in some detail in Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?, ch. 6. Many of the important articles on this topic among evangelicals in the recent literature
thinking it is unorthodox to claim that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father either ontologically or functionally, *qua* divine. Rather than spending further time on those who straightforwardly deny the doctrine, I will deal with a subtler objection raised in the literature by the British philosophical theologian Paul Helm. However, prior to doing that let me say something in favor of the doctrine. There are, it seems to me, three reasons for retaining it. The first is that it is implied in Scripture. The second is that it was canonized in the ecumenical symbols of the church catholic. The third reason is that it is a means by which to preserve an important claim about the individuation of the divine persons in the Trinity.

Suppose a doctrine is plainly taught in Scripture. Then, I say, a Christian has good reason to hold it. After all, Scripture is the norming norm that norms all other theological authority this side of the grave (*norma normans non normata*). But what if a doctrine is implied in Scripture but clearly taught by an ecumenical council? Then, I would say, a Christian also has good reason to hold it. For I take it that ecumenical councils of the church are a second tier of theological norm or authority under Scripture, wherein the mind of the church (guided by the Holy Spirit) is expressed on matters pertaining to Christian doctrine.\(^\text{11}\) That is just the situation that obtains with the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. It is implied by certain biblical passages (e.g., John 3:16–17; 4:34; 8:42; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 8:6; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 13:8), but it is not explicitly taught in Scripture, just as the doctrine of the Trinity is implied by certain biblical passages but is not explicitly taught in Scripture. No Christian theologian would seriously entertain the proposal that we have been collected together in Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House, eds., *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012). There are no biblical passages that unambiguously demonstrate the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. First Corinthians 15:28 might be thought an exception. It says, “When he has done this [i.e., conquered death in the eschaton], then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all” (NIV). But the context makes clear that the referent here is Christ, or God the Son Incarnate, not God the Son *simpliciter*. In which case it is not at all obvious that the apostle is claiming that God the Son *simpliciter* is eternally subordinate to God the Father. What he seems to be saying is that God the Son Incarnate (i.e., in his human nature) subordinates himself to the Father in the eschaton. But that requires no significant change to God the Son, who eternally subordinates himself to the Father in his human nature in this manner.

\textsuperscript{11} I set out my own views on this matter in more detail in *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), ch. 1.
excise the doctrine of the Trinity from Christianity, because it is codified by an ecumenical council on the basis of the implicit testimony of Scripture and apostolic witness. So no one should deny the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son if it too is implicit in Scripture and canonized by an ecumenical council. As the Westminster Confession puts it, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (1.6). I say we can “deduce” the eternal generation of the Son, like the Trinity, as a “good and necessary consequence” of Scripture.

The doctrine is also clearly taught by key Reformation confessions, which usually closely follow the wording of the ecumenical symbols. (These represent a third tier of theological authority standing under ecumenical symbols.) Three examples will suffice to illustrate this. The second of the Thirty-Nine Articles reads, “The Son, which is the Word of the Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, and very and eternal God [is] of one substance with the Father.” The tenth article of the Belgic Confession, one of the three forms of unity in Continental Reformed churches, says, “We believe that Jesus Christ, according to his divine nature, is the only begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made nor created (for then he should be a creature), but coessential and coeternal with the Father, the express image of his person, and the brightness of his glory, equal unto him in all things.” Likewise, the second chapter of the Westminster Confession, entitled “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity,” says bluntly, “The Son is eternally begotten of the Father.” So it seems that those who wish to distance themselves from or abandon the doctrine must face the fact that they stand against the implicit teaching of Scripture as well as the explicit teaching of the ecumenical symbols and the


13. The Lutheran forms of unity simply reassert the ecumenical symbols, e.g., the Epitome of the Formula of Concord.

14. Cf. the Heidelberg Catechism, another of the three forms of unity. Question 33 asks, “Why is Christ called the ‘only begotten Son’ of God, since we are also the children of God?” The answer given is “Because Christ alone is the eternal and natural Son of God; but we are children adopted of God, by grace, for his sake.”

15. This is echoed by the Baptist Confession of 1689, which largely follows the Westminster Confession apart from matters of ecclesiology and sacramental theology.
confessions of the Reformation churches—which, when taken together, represent quite a united theological front.

This leaves us with the matter of the dogmatic import of the doctrine. It seems clear (to me, at least) that the eternal generation of the Son offers a bulwark against mere monotheism. Traditionally, Augustinian theologians have invoked the basic trinitarian law that *in God all is one where there is no opposition of relations.* This serves to distinguish the unity and perfection of the divine essence from the subsistent relations that differentiate the divine persons and that are the only distinctions within the Godhead (on the presumption that God is metaphysically simple). But, as I have already indicated, the eternal generation of the Son is one of those relations, a relation of origin. These are relations that distinguish or individuate divine persons in the Godhead. So the doctrine plays a vital—indeed, a fundamental—dogmatic role in Augustinian trinitarianism. For those who reject the doctrine of divine simplicity and/or think that there are real distinctions in the Godhead other than the relations of origin, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son may still serve as a bulwark against mere monotheism, but in this case as part of a richer or “thicker” understanding of those features that distinguish particular divine persons in the Trinity.

**Paul Helm’s Objection to the Eternal Generation of the Son**

We come to Paul Helm’s objection to the eternal generation of the Son. Suppose God the Son is eternally generated by God the Father. That is, suppose the divine Trinity exists eternally, without time. And suppose that it is eternally true that the Father generates the Son. What would this mean? What content can we give the claim that one divine person *eternally generates* another beyond the bald affirmation of this claim given in the creed? Taking up this concern, Helm writes:

> The residual problem is not, how can the Son be co-divine when there was a time when the Father was and the Son was not, but, how could the

Son have a timeless relation of begottenness while being equally divine with the Father? Perhaps the solution to this may be found in expunging the language of subordination entirely from the account of the Trinity, in asserting the co-equality of the Father and the Son, not their equality in every respect, but their equality in respect of divinity. The puzzle (at least to me) is why a satisfactory doctrine may not rest content with saying that God exists in three persons co-eternal and equally divine persons. Is the language of begottenness and procession not a reading back into the doctrine of the Trinity per se of those roles which according to the New Testament each person of the Trinity adopts in order to ensure human salvation?17

Some relations of logical or conceptual priority do not require temporal priority. For example, the priority of the monarch over her subjects, or the priority of the major premise over the minor premise in a syllogism—neither requires a temporal priority of one thing over another. As we have already noted, if God is eternal, then the notion of temporal priority (of one event before another, say) has no purchase in the divine life. Eternal generation cannot mean there is a first moment at which God the Son begins to exist, because there is no first moment in God’s life. Indeed, there are no “moments” in the life of an eternal being, according to the classical, Boethian account of God’s eternity, which is the account of divine eternity Helm favors. God lives in an eternal present.18 No part of God’s life recedes from him into the past and no part of his life comes to him from the future. Since the divine persons of the Trinity just are instantiations of the divine nature, there can be no first moment of the life of a divine person either. An illustration will help make the point: if the Trinity is like an eternal, mereological whole of which the divine persons of the Trinity are the only proper parts, no proper part of the whole exists temporally prior to the whole.19

17. Helm, *Eternal God*, 286. See also Helm’s short article “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity” (*Churchman* 115, no. 4 [2001]: 350–57), in which he makes substantially the same case.


19. I am not claiming that God has proper parts, only that this picture may be a useful analogue that helps explain the worry about parts existing independent of wholes.
This brings us to the heart of Helm’s worry. The Son’s being begotten and the Spirit’s proceeding from the Father (and the Son, for those Western Christians enamored of the *filioque*) seem to be ways of distinguishing the divine persons that pertain to their economic, not their ontological, functions. (This is how I understand his concern about “reading back” into the Trinity roles that each divine person takes on for the purpose of securing human salvation.) In which case we might want to deny that these economic functions are necessarily true of the ontological Trinity. For if God is free to create or refrain from creating, then it would appear that he is free not to create. In which case we cannot say that “being eternally begotten” is *intrinsic* to the life of the Son. For it is not a predicate he has independent of the contingent relation he bears to the world that is created.

Let us be clear: Helm is not saying God the Son is *not* eternally begotten of the Father. What he is saying is that *possibly* God the Son was not eternally begotten of the Father, because possibly God does not create a world that requires him to take on the economic role of being the Son in relation to the Father. In which case “being eternally begotten” is an extrinsic predicate of the Son. In other words, Helm’s objection to the doctrine amounts to the claim that the predicate “eternally begotten of the Father” expresses an economic function of the Son that does not capture the ontological relation that subsists between Father and Son independent of any world God deigns to create. On his view, we can rid our trinitarianism of such economic language without losing what is essential to the doctrine. That is, we can do away with the language of eternal generation without thereby collapsing the Son into the Father or removing any reason for thinking the Son and the Father are eternally distinct divine persons in the Godhead.

An example may help illustrate the point. Consider Bruce Wayne. He *is*—that is, he is identical to—Batman. They are one and the same person. But it is possible that Bruce Wayne fails to be Batman. If he had not been orphaned and vowed to take revenge on the villainous scum of Gotham City, then Bruce Wayne would not have become the Dark Knight. Yet he would still have been Bruce Wayne. We might say, Bruce Wayne is contingently Batman. (There are possible worlds in which Bruce Wayne exists,

but Batman does not.) Nevertheless, Batman cannot exist without Bruce Wayne because he just is Bruce Wayne in those states of affairs in which Bruce Wayne becomes Batman. (I presume there are no possible worlds in which Batman exists but Bruce Wayne does not exist.) A similar sort of modal distinction is being made here between the economic and ontological Trinity. If God had refrained from creating the world, then, so Helm thinks, God the Son would not necessarily have been eternally begotten of the Father, though he would still have been the Second Person of the Trinity. His being eternally begotten is an economic function of the Second Person that might have been different had God refrained from creating. For this, according to Helm, is “a reading back into the doctrine of the Trinity per se of those roles which according to the New Testament each person of the Trinity adopts in order to ensure human salvation.”

There are at least three problems with Helm’s line of argument. In the first place, eternal generation is an ontological procession in God, not an economic action that devolves upon one of the divine persons. A second, related concern is that Helm appears to have conflated the missions of God with the eternal generation of the Son as one of the divine processes. Finally, a third possible objection is that Helm’s worry concerns the imputing of generation to the eternal Son, which I take to be a concern with the apparently paradoxical language implied by the doctrine. Let us take these objections in order.

First of all, eternal generation is not an economic function of the Second Person of the Trinity. It is the relation of origin by means of which the Second Person of the Trinity is distinguished from the First and Third Persons—at least according to those Augustinian versions of the doctrine of the Trinity in which divine persons are subsistent relations within the Godhead. On this way of thinking, a divine person is individuated by the particular relation of origin (i.e., the subsistent relation) he bears in relation to the other two divine persons. Indeed, the eternal generation of the Son is a metaphysically necessary eternal divine action by means of which the personal subsistence of the Son is expressed. It is not tantamount to the eternal generation of a distinct divine essence. In fact, on this Augustinian way of thinking, the divine essence is shared between

the divine persons. Yet the divine persons as instantiations of the divine essence exist a se, not per alium—that is, independent of any other divine person, not from another divine person. After all, that is what it means to say these divine relations are subsistent. As St. Anselm of Canterbury puts it in the Monologion 44,

"For it is in no way contradictory that the Son both subsists through himself and has being from the Father. For just as the Father has essence and wisdom and life in himself, so that it is not through someone else’s but through his own essence that he exists, through his own wisdom that he is wise, and through his own life that he lives, so by begetting the Son he grants the Son to have essence and wisdom and life in himself, so that it is not through someone else’s essence, wisdom and life but through his own that he subsists, is wise, and lives. Otherwise the being of the Father and the Son would not be the same, nor would the Son be equal to the Father."

In other words, the divine persons share numerically the same essence, on pain of tritheism. They both possess aseity (they do not exist “through someone else’s essence”) because they have the divine essence essentially. Yet the Son is eternally generated by the Father through whom he is said to have his being. To this we may add the warning of Aquinas, to the effect that “it clearly does not follow” from this affirmation “that what serves as principle of individuation is in some other [i.e., some other divine person], because the divine essence is not in another god, nor is the paternity in the Son.” Aquinas makes it absolutely clear that the procession of the Son cannot yield the generation of another deity outside the Godhead, so to speak. Like the generation of an idea within a mind, the Son is eternally generated within the Godhead by the Father—it is like an intellectual procession in that it is an eternal divine act of internal self-differentiation.

From this it should be clear that the sort of Augustinianism espoused by Anselm and Aquinas requires eternal generation as the means by which two of the divine persons are individuated within the Godhead. Helm is

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an Augustinian about the doctrine of the Trinity, like our two medieval authors. So it is strange that he speaks about what is an eternal subsistent relation within the Godhead (that is, the Son’s being eternally begotten by the Father) as if this were merely an economic function of the Second Person of the Trinity.

But perhaps Helm will reply, far from exposing a flaw in the argument, this only underlines the point at issue. To make this clear, let us refer to the divine persons as G1, G2, and G3. These placeholders avoid confusing divine persons with their relations of origin, which is the point at issue. Now, suppose that G1, G2, and G3 are three instantiations of the one eternal divine life. We might put it like this:

1. G1 is God.
2. G2 is God.
3. G3 is God.
4. “And yet there are not three gods, but one God” (Athanasian Creed).

Now, imagine a state of affairs in which God eternally refrains from creating. He remains the one God subsisting in G1, G2, and G3. So none of these divine persons acquire economic roles, because there is no reason for them to have such roles where there is no act of creation. In a similar fashion, in a world where Bruce Wayne’s parents survive and he is brought up in their loving care, there is no reason for him to become the Batman. How do we distinguish these divine persons independent of their economic functions? By their eternal processions: there is the *generatio activa*, by means of which the Son “proceeds” (i.e., is eternally generated) by the Father, just as there is the *generatio passiva*, by means of which the Spirit “proceeds” (i.e., is spirated) from the Father (and the Son). But here is the rub: according to Augustinian theologians like Anselm and Aquinas, the eternal procession that individuates the Second Person of the Trinity just is his eternal generation by the Father. If we ask the Augustinian, “What distinguishes the Father from the Son in the ontological Trinity?,” the answer is, “Being eternally begotten by the Father.”

This brings us to our second objection to Helm’s reasoning: in claiming that the eternal generation of the Son reads back into the ontological Trinity an aspect of the economic Trinity, he appears to have conflated the missions of God with the divine processions. Whereas the divine missions
are usually thought to be economic in nature, the processions are ontological. That is, the divine missions obtain, provided God creates a world in which the divine persons are active in bringing about human salvation. But the divine processions are de re necessary relations within the divine life. There is no possible world in which God exists without this sort of internal self-differentiation. The eternal generation of the Son expresses the procession of the Second from the First Person of the Trinity. His mission as the mediator of salvation in Christ is distinct from but reflects the eternal self-differentiation of the First and Second divine Persons. Put slightly differently,

“Mission” and “giving” have only a temporal significance in God; but “generation” and “spiration” are exclusively eternal; whereas “procession” and “giving,” in God, have both an eternal and a temporal signification: for the Son may proceed eternally as God; but temporally, by becoming man, according to His visible mission, or likewise by dwelling in man according to His invisible mission.26

It is possible to inappropriately “read” the missions of particular divine persons “back into” the life of God. This would be to conflate the work of God ad extra, in the creation, from his work ad intra, within the divine life. On one plausible understanding of Helm’s worry, it is this that he is concerned about, not the eternal generation of the Son per se.

Finally, and briefly, we touch upon our third objection to Helm. It may be that the juxtaposition of “eternal” with “begotten” or “generation” is what is at issue (as Helm hints, at points). How can the eternal Son be said to be generated or begotten without the implication that he is caused by the Father? Surely this is monstrous, something that no orthodox Christian would want to affirm, a return to the Arian heresy of old. But, as should be clear from even the cursory overview of the Arian controversy in fourth-century Christology outlined earlier in the first section of the chapter, this is not merely to misrepresent the nature of that controversy; it is to invert the very point at issue. Those fathers who framed the Creed of Nicaea in AD 325 and reaffirmed it in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381 were withstanding the Arians in their stipulations about the Son being eternally generated. Far from being incipient Arianism, the

claim that God the Son is eternally begotten of the Father is one of the fundamental tenets of catholic trinitarianism that stands as a dogmatic bulwark against the Arian heresy.

Conclusion

The moral of the story, so it seems to me, is this: we tamper with the deliverances of ecumenical councils on these matters at our peril. There were very good and important dogmatic reasons for distinguishing between generation or begetting and making, as applied to the procession of the Son from the Father. It is indeed strange to say that a divine person is eternally begotten or even eternally generated by another. If we rephrase this as “God the Son proceeds from God the Father in an eternal act of active procession,” some of the heat surrounding the doctrine might be dissipated. In addition to clarifying the dogmatic scope of eternal generation, care must also be taken to distinguish it from the mission of the Son. This is an economic act of God, but one that is distinct from the eternal active procession of the Son. To drive this point home, I propose the following constructive theological glosses on the dogmatic affirmation of the eternal generation of the Son. In endorsing them, evangelicals would be affirming what I take to be the conceptual hardcore of traditional, orthodox Christology:

Thesis 1. The Second Person of the Trinity eternally, actively proceeds from the First Person of the Trinity.

Thesis 2. This eternal active procession is expressed in the ecumenical symbols, as well as in the confessions of the Reformation churches, as the eternal generation of the Son.

Thesis 3. The eternal active procession of the Second Person from the First Person of the Trinity is the relation of origin that individuates the Second Person of the Trinity.

Those non-Augustinian trinitarians who deny that the relations of origin are sufficient to individuate divine persons might substitute the following thesis:

Thesis 3.1. The eternal, active procession of the Second Person from the First Person of the Trinity is a necessary but not sufficient condition...
for the differentiation of the Second Person of the Trinity from the First Person of the Trinity.

This leaves the theses about functional subordinationism, mentioned earlier:

Thesis 4. The eternal active procession of the Second Person of the Trinity should be distinguished from the mission of the Second Person of the Trinity in the economy of salvation. Whereas the procession is a *de re* necessary act of self-differentiation within the divine life, the mission is an economic act that obtains in time as a consequence of the act of creating the world.

Thesis 5. The Second Person of the Trinity is subordinate to the First Person in his human nature during his state of humiliation.

I do not suppose these theses will resolve the current unhappiness about this doctrine within the evangelical constituency. But (I submit) they do underline the importance of attending to both the historical development of doctrine as well as its canonical form in the task of doing constructive theology, including constructive analytic theology. They also offer a way of making sense of the eternal generation of the Son that expresses the difference between procession and mission, as well as between subordination and equality of persons, consistent with the catholic creeds and Reformation symbols. Given that these topics have been the subject of such debate in recent evangelical discussion of the topic, these theses may provide a means by which to deflate some of the concerns of such authors without departing from creedal and confessional orthodoxy.