

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Number:	10	Gary L.W. Johnson
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BEGOTTEN OF HIS FATHER (Part 2)

Does it really matter what we believe? One person believes this, another believes something else – “so what? – as long as they are sincere, that is all that matters.” This is a fairly typical response to the question of religious beliefs. “To each his own” is the motto heard most often in our society.¹ Christianity – biblical Christianity that is – does not allow such liberty of opinion. The God of the Bible is not an abstract concept. He (and God is He, not She) is not “the man upstairs” nor is He simply a super-being alongside other beings (cf. Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Hosea 11:9). God cannot be identified with anything in creation. To do so is to lapse into idolatry (Ex. 20:4, 5; Deut. 5:8, 9). C. Fitzsimons Allison, in a remarkable little book appropriately titled *The Cruelty of Heresy*, correctly observes: “We are susceptible to heretical teachings because, in one form or another, they nurture and reflect the way we would have it be rather than the way God has provided, which is infinitely better for us. As they lead us into the blind alleys of self-indulgence and escape from life, heresies pander to the most unworthy tendencies of the human heart. It is astonishing how little attention has been given to these two aspects of heresy: its cruelty and its pandering to sin.”² We cannot simply worship God as we like nor can we choose³ to think of God as we like. Likewise, we are not allowed to choose to think about Jesus any way we like. The Bible expresses serious concern over false doctrine (heresy) and its counterpart idolatry (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3; note the emphasis on sound teaching in 2 Timothy 1:13). We are exhorted to be on guard against idolatry (1 John 5:21) and alert to doctrinal deception, especially as it touches the content of the gospel (Matt. 24:4; 1 Cor. 11:2; Gal. 1:18). In light of this, it is imperative that we have right (orthodox) beliefs about God. “There is only one question,” said Emil Brunner, “which is really serious, and that is the question concerning the being and nature of God. From this, all other questions derive their significance.”⁴ This knowledge of God, as the Puritan Stephen Charnock long ago wrote, is more than mere head knowledge. “This knowledge of God is not only a knowledge of God and Christ in the theory, but such a knowledge which is saving, joined with ardent love to him: cordial trust in him, as 1 Cor. 13:12, *Then I shall know even as also I am known*, i.e., I shall love and rejoice, as I am beloved and delighted in by God. It is not only a knowledge of God in his will, but a knowledge of God in his nature; both must go together; we must know him in his nature, we must be obedient to his will. The devil hath a greater knowledge of God’s being than any man upon earth, but since he is a rebel to his will, he is not happy by his knowledge. It must be such a knowledge as leads to eternal life, and hath a necessary and infallible connection with it, as the effect with the cause, which is not between a speculative knowledge and salvation. It must be therefore such a knowledge which

descends from the head to the heart, which is light in the mind and heat in the affections; such a knowledge of God as includes faith in him.”⁵ The expression *Begotten of His Father* is essential to a Biblical understanding of Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

- I. **ONLY BEGOTTEN.** This is the KJV translation of the Greek word *monogenēs*, which occurs nine times in the New Testament. Five times it refers to Jesus Christ (John 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). The other four instances refer to the children of men (Luke 7:12, 8:42, 9:38; and Heb. 11:17). It is unfortunate that this word has been translated “only begotten,” since the Greek *monogenēs* is *not* derived from *gennaō* “to beget,” but from *genos* “origin, race, stock.”⁶ It, therefore, does *not* refer to begetting at all, but stresses uniqueness, and is best translated “unique” or “one of a kind.” It thus implies the idea that Jesus is all that God is and He alone as a Son is this. The various instances of the term in John’s writings carry the following stress: (1) Christ is uniquely God’s Son; (2) Christ is God’s unique revelation to man (John 1:18); and (3) salvation is uniquely through or by means of the Son – John 3:16; 1 John 4:9. John wishes to stress that Jesus is God; not in the sense that He only is God, but that He alone is God the Son. The relationship that He sustains to the Father is unique. It is not one of personal or essential subordination. Kevin Giles helpfully explains: “In the creed of the Council of Nicaea (325), the word *monogenēs* modifies the phrase *begotten of the Father* and means *only*, or *unique*. The clause can be translated either as,

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten [*gennaō*] of the Father, the only [*monogenēs*] [Son] of the being [*ousia*] of the Father.

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, uniquely [*monogenēs*] begotten [*gennaō*] of the Father of the being [*ousia*] of the Father.

In the first translation the Son is confessed as begotten and unique; in the second as the uniquely begotten Son. But whichever translation is preferred, the terms *monogenēs* and *gennaō* in this creed are *not* synonyms. Contra Grudem, the Nicene Creed of 381 makes two complementary assertions. The Son is the unique, or only, Son, and he is the eternally begotten Son. The Creed reads,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God [*monogenēs*], eternally begotten [*gennaō*] of the Father . . . begotten [*gennaō*] not made.

There are other fourth-century creeds, but none of them make *gennaō* and *monogenēs* synonyms, and thus none of them equate these two words, even if it is clear that one informs the other. The Son is *monogenēs* because he alone is eternally begotten of the Father and as such is one in being with him.”⁷

- II. **FROM THE FATHER.** The term *monogenēs* highlights that the Son is *from* the Father and implies that the Son eternally existed with the Father *before* his incarnation. He eternally existed *with* the Father and *from* the Father. Steven Durby points out: “the designation *monogenēs* and the name *Son*, used throughout John’s Gospel, are not arbitrarily assigned. The term *Son* is not applied to one divine person without a real reason, as though the one

called *Son* might just as fittingly have been called *Father*. The terms *Son* and *Father* express who the persons truly are. The Son decisively reveals the Father because he eternally *is* the beloved, in the *bosom* of the Father (1:18; cf. 17:24). As Gregory of Nyssa observes, it is vital not to separate the word *Son* from its signification, and what it signifies is a relation of essential kinship to one who begets. Thus, in addition to the use of the preposition in John 1:14, the names of the persons themselves inform us that the relation of the Word or Son to the Father is a relation of origin. To be sure, there are certain elements in John's teaching that rule out a univocal use of the term *generation* in the case of God. In particular, the generation was not corporeal, since God is incorporeal (cf. John 4:24). Also, the Son never began to exist, since he eternally was with the Father. Not everything that applies in ordinary father-son relations applies in God's case. But John's Gospel does teach that the name *Son* means something: the Son receives from the Father divine life and glory and is the eternal object of the Father's delight (e.g., 1:18; 5:26; 16:15; 17:5, 24). So Gregory of Nyssa: *Calling him Son we say that he truly is what he is called, being shone forth by generation from the unbegotten light*. In short, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and eternally proceeds from the Father."⁸ The Apostle Paul, in Acts 13:33, cites Psalm 2 in reference to Christ's being begotten of the Father. What does this mean? The word Paul used, *gegenneka* (perfect active of *gennaō*) does mean "to beget," but in what sense? To begin with, we are *not* to think in terms of "being born" (comp. w/Isa. 9:6 and Mic. 5:2) but of "generating." The Father will generate according to His nature. He is eternal, infinite and is Spirit. But what is spoken of here is *not* the begetting of the divine nature of the Son. The great Baptist Theologian, John Gill, summarizes it this way: "The divine essence neither begets nor is begotten. It is a divine *Person* in the essence that is begotten. Essence does not beget essence, but person begets person; otherwise there would be more than one essence; whereas, though there are more persons than one, yet there is no more than one essence."⁹ Thus the expression *begotten* does not imply that Jesus then began to be the Son of God, but only that His being so was then declared to the world (comp. Rom. 1:4).

- III. **FIRST BORN OF ALL CREATION.** This expression is found in Col. 1:15 and is in context with the statement that Jesus Christ "is the image of the invisible God." The Greek word for *image* is *eikon*. Christ is the exact representation of the invisible God (comp. Heb. 1:3). *Image* refers to likeness and contains the concept of derivation. In a word, He is the exact copy of God. This word "image" tells us three things: (1) Jesus is THE Son of God; (2) He is the ETERNAL Son of God; and (3) He is GOD (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4 [1 Cor. 11:7 – man is called "the image and glory of God" – man's image is by creation]). The expression "First-born of all creation" (Gk. *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*) is Messianic (cf. Ps. 89:26). It declares that the Messiah is an eternal being. He has a *priority* to all creation. It states a relationship between Christ and creation. He is the Creator, the Sovereign Lord over all creation by His own virtue and authority. Paul declares the Deity of Christ first by His relation to the Father (His *image*) and to the universe (the *first-born*).

Note: Such expressions as "the First-born from among the dead" (Col 1:18), "the First-born of the dead" (Rev. 1:5) and "The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the beginning of the creation of God" (Rev. 3:14) are all soteriological designations that advert especially to Christ's resurrection and not to the nature of His person.

CONCLUSION: The failure to grasp the significance of Christ's work usually leads to defective views of His person (and, naturally, vice-versa). Our eternal destiny depends upon the person and work of Christ. Our election was made in Christ in eternity past, before the foundation of the world (cf. Eph. 1:4, comp. with John 17:24 and 2 Tim. 1:9). If Christ is not eternal, then neither is our election. God the Son sustains an eternal relationship to the Father by way of His nature. If there is not an eternal Son, then there is no eternal Father. The Father as God begets. The Son as God is begotten; the Holy Spirit as God proceeds. We cannot call God, Father, and deny that He begets; and the One that is begotten is the Son. Jesus Christ has always sustained *this* relationship to the Father as the Son. It is part of His glory, which He has always possessed (cf. John 17:24). The terms we have covered in this section are words that relate in one way or another to the *work* of Christ. They set forth the character of His work in the incarnation and redemption. To those who have been redeemed by the Redeemer there is the witness of the Spirit (cf. John 14:15-26, 15:26, 16:13-15). Those who deny the Deity of Christ evidence only that they do not have the Spirit. There is a pressing need today to return to historic Christian faith as it is expressed in the creeds of the early church and the confessions of the Reformed faith. In particular, as Gerald Bray writes, "The creeds of Christendom are basic statements of belief which take up these questions and answer them in the context of the Person of Christ. There is a great need today to return to these foundations of our faith and probe just how they can help us to answer the doubts of our time and bring the gospel of Christ to bear once again on the affairs of men."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ The great Scottish preacher, Thomas Boston, in his sermon "Directions How to Guard Against Atheism" warned his listeners about the insidious nature of such opinions: "Another opinion is, that men of all religions shall be saved, so that it is no matter what religion a man be of, if he walk according to the principles of it, and be of a sober moral life. In these latter times some are grown weary of the Christian religion, and by an excess of charity betray their faith, and plead for the salvation of heathens, Turks, and infidels. But ye should remember that, as there is but one God, and only heavenly Jerusalem, so there is but one faith, and one way by which men can come to the enjoyment of God there. Such libertine principles have a manifest tendency to shake people loose of all religion. To make many doors to heaven, as one says, is to widen the gates of hell." *The Beauties of Boston; A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Samuel McMillan (Christian Focus Publications, 1979), p. 128.

² C. F. Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy; An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Morehouse, 1994), p. 17.

³ Our word "heresy" comes from the Greek word *hairesis*, which, interestingly enough, has as its root meaning, "to choose." A heretic is someone who chooses his own beliefs. The adjective is used by Paul in Titus 3:10 in reference to a person who is divisive or factious. Thus, a heretic came to refer to someone who promotes false teaching and brings division.

⁴ As cited in Donald G. Bloesch, *Christian Foundations; God the Almighty* (IVP, 1995).

⁵ *The Works of Stephen Charnock* IV (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 10.

⁶ Hanson, in his masterful work, writes, "*Genetos* and its privative are almost untranslatable into English. The positive form means *having come into existence*, with the nuance of *mortal, transient, mutable*, and the privative of it does not mean *that which has never existed* but *that which has never not existed*, that which has never had a beginning because it has eternally existed, and therefore that which is incorruptible and immutable. *Gennetos*, on the other hand, means *generated* or *begotten* and the privative of it *ingenerate, unbegotten*, again not in the sense of non-existent but of eternally existent." R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*, 318-381 (T&T Clark, 1988), p. 203.

⁷ K. Giles, *The Eternal Generation of The Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy In Trinitarian Theology* (IVP, 2012), p. 147.

⁸ S. J. Durby, *Jesus And The God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of The Doctrine of God* (Baker, 2022), p. 54.

⁹ John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (rpt. Sovereign Grace, 1971), p. 138.

¹⁰ Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (IVP, 1984), p. 171.