



Monogenēs once more

Description

Following the 2016 Evangelical Theological Society annual conference in San Antonio where Dr. Bruce Ware and Dr. Wayne Grudem publicly announced that they had been wrong to deny the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, the word *monogenēs* has become a hot topic.

This word has become contentious because both Ware and Grudem said that they can now accept the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son because they have been persuaded that *monogenēs* in fact means “only begotten” and thus there is good biblical support for this doctrine.

Ware and Grudem both appealed to the work of Dr Lee Irons (see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lets-go-back-to-only-begotten>). He argues that *monogenēs* means “only begotten” and thus there is good biblical support for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Since the conference, Dr Denny Burk has enthusiastically been putting the same argument (<https://www.dennyburk.com/category/theologybible/>).

Iron’s argument that is now accepted uncritically by Grudem and Ware raises two separate questions: does the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son find its primary biblical support in the word *monogenēs*, and is this Greek word rightly and accurately to be understood to mean “only begotten”? In the Johannine writings the Son is five times said to be *monogenēs* (Jn 1:14, 18, 3:16, 18, 1 Jn 4:9).

In what follows I will argue that the word *monogenēs* is not the biblical basis for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, and for this reason how the word *monogenēs* is translated into English is, as far as the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is concerned, of little importance.

The biblical basis for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

In preparing to write my book, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian theology*,¹ I read carefully Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers who developed the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son in opposition to the teaching of the “Arians” of various kinds. I discovered that the Nicene fathers used the word, *monogenēs*, to speak of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, making the point that what made him unique above all else was that he was eternally begotten.

They never appeal to this word as the basis for their doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. The Nicene Creed of 381 reflects exactly the same thing. The Latin fathers such as Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine of course never mention the word.

For Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers, the biblical basis for explaining the divine Father-Son relationship in terms of a metaphorical *gennaō* is found in a number of Old Testament texts that use the verb, *gennaō*, “to beget”;² Psalm 2:7, Proverbs 8: 26, Psalm 110:3 (109:3 LXX), Isaiah 53:8 and Psalm 45:1. They took these texts to be prophetically speaking of the eternal begetting of the Son. Psalm 2:7 and Proverbs 8:26 were the most important texts for them. Psalm 2 is quoted some ten times in the New Testament. The apostolic authors took this Psalm to be referring in various ways to the Messiah, identified as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In verse 7 of this Psalm, God (the Father) says of the messianic king, “You are my Son, today have I begotten you.”

Following the apostolic writers, the fourth century Greek church fathers read this verse Christologically. They believed that Psalm 2:7 both suggested and confirmed their conclusion that the divine Father-Son act of self-differentiation could be called a *gennaō* and because it was a divine begetting it was eternal and for human beings ineffable. The apostolic writers also identify Jesus Christ with divine Wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30, Col 1:15-20, Heb 1:1-3, etc.), spoken of in personal terms in the Old Testament. On this basis, the Greek fathers of the fourth century assumed that Proverbs 8:26 also spoke of the *gennaō* of the Son before creation. Because all the Greek fathers insisted this was a metaphorical begetting, not a literal one in any sense, they often quoted Isaiah 53:8 “who shall explain his generation?”

gennaō “Birth language” is, however, only part of the biblical support for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son given by the fourth century Greek fathers. They also noted that in the New Testament the Son is often said to be *from the Father*. John, for example, speaks of the Son as *coming from the Father* (Jn 16:28, 6:46, 7:29, 8:42, 9:33, 16:27), and of the Son *coming from heaven*. Closely allied with this *from the Father* language is the Johannine imagery of the Son being *sent on mission* by the Father to reveal and to save (Jn 3:17, 5:30, 7:29, 8:42, 17:3, 23).³

The most important witness to the trinitarian theology of the fourth century Greek Fathers is found in the Nicene Creed of 381, the most authoritative creed in Christendom. This was originally a Greek composition by mostly Greek speaking theologians. In what is said in the Christological clause we have a concise and profound explanation of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son and I am convinced a clear and sharp distinction between the words *monogenēs* and *gennaō*. The clause begins with these words:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only (*monogenēs*) Son of God, eternally begotten (*gennaō*) of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten (*gennaō*) not made, of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.

We have here three affirmations about Jesus Christ. He is confessed to be

1. *the one Lord*, 2. *the monogenēs Son of God*, and 3. *eternally begotten of the Father*. In considering what the second affirmation is saying we note first that *monogenēs* comes before anything is said about the eternal begetting of the Son, which suggests this designation of the Son is not related to his eternal begetting; it speaks of something else. Second, we note that to translate *monogenēs* as *only begotten* introduces repetition that makes little sense. “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son, eternally begotten.” I think the

conclusion that we have three separate affirmations of Jesus Christ in this clause is compelling. He is the Lord; he is the *monogenēs* Son, the divine Son of the Father, like no human Son, and he is eternally begotten (*gennaō*) of the Father.

On the basis of his eternal begetting, the creed affirms that Jesus Christ the one Lord, the only Son of God, to be “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten (*gennaō*) not made, of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.” What these words assert is that on the basis of his eternal generation, the Son is everything the Father is yet he is not the Father but the Son. Derivation does not imply any diminution of the Son in any way, or any division or separation between the Father and the Son. The creed says emphatically that while the *monogenēs* Son is “begotten of the Father” he is no way less than, inferior to, eternally subordinated to or submissive to the Father in any way.

We now see why the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is fundamental to the Nicene Faith. This doctrine establishes the two primary elements of our distinctive Christian doctrine of the Trinity; eternal divine self-differentiation, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and as such he is the Son and not the Father, and the full divinity of the Son. The Son is “true God from true God, one in being with the Father”.

Augustine.

In the many Johannine metaphors that speak of the Son as “from” the Father and “sent” by the Father, the Son’s pre-existence is assumed. Recognising this, the Latin speaking Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of all times, argued for a twofold “from-ness.”⁴ The Son is eternally “from” the Father in his eternal generation, and temporally from the Father in his sending or “mission” into the world to save. From this followed his profound conclusion that the temporal missions of the Son and the Spirit “their coming into the world in history – are antecedently grounded in the eternal processions of these persons within the Godhead” apart from history. What this means is that for him, divine triunity revealed in history confirms that God is eternally triune. The economic Trinity reveals the eternal or immanent Trinity. Augustine agreed that Psalm 2:7 and Proverbs 8:26 gave a biblical basis for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son but for him, John 5:26 was equally important.⁵ “For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted to the Son to have life in himself.” For Augustine, these words speak of the divine life that the Father gave to the Son in eternity.

The Greek word *monogenēs* of course never gets mentioned in the Latin speaking Augustine.

How rightly to translate *monogenēs*?

Once it is recognised that the word *monogenēs* is not the biblical basis for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son how this word is translated into English as far as this doctrine is concerned is of no great import.

With the majority of contemporary biblical scholars, I am convinced that the primary meaning of *monogenēs* is “only”, in the sense of “unique” or “one of a kind.”⁶ I very much doubt if this conclusion will be overturned. I note, nevertheless, that some Christian scholars defend the traditional rendering of this word for various reasons.⁷ And I am aware that sometimes classical scholars in their translations of the fourth century Greek fathers maintain the traditional translation, “only begotten.”⁸ They do so because the Greek fathers, as I have pointed out, concluded that

Jesus is called the *monogenēs* Son because he alone is eternally begotten. In both cases we may call this a “theological translation” of the word *monogenēs*.

For me, how this term is translated is not hugely important. If opting for a theological translation of this noun helps some evangelicals and Reformed theologians to accept the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, what the creeds and Reformation Confessions define as orthodoxy, then I am pleased.

Postscript.

What this recent debate about the meaning of the word *monogenēs* and its relevance for the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son brings to our attention is the huge importance of the theological tradition. All doctrines are best understood when how they developed in history is understood, and nowhere is this more true than with the doctrine of the Trinity in general and the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son in particular. This storm in a teacup over the word *monogenēs* would not have taken life and flourished if more evangelicals had been better informed by having carefully read Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine and by knowledge of the Nicene Creed.

¹ Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.

² The doctrine itself is predicated on four profound theological insights or inferences, first clearly seen by Athanasius and then assumed by all orthodox theologians across the centuries. First, God is eternally triune. He is not one God who becomes three in history. Second, the first two persons of the Trinity are named “Father” and Son. An eternal Father implies and necessitates an eternal Son. There can be no God the Father without God the Son. Third, a Father-Son relationship implies begetting, in this case an eternal begetting. And fourth, in the begetting of a child the being or nature of the begetter is given perfectly to the begotten. In the eternal generation of the Son, the Father perfectly communicates to the Son all that he is. Thus the Son is “God from God, Light from Light, True God from true God, one in being with the Father” (the Nicene Creed).

³ See more fully, Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 84-85

⁴ See further on Augustine, Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 151-171

⁵ He frequently appeals to this text, See *The Trinity*, 1.22, 26, 29, 30, 2.3, 4, 7.4, 15.47. On this see K. E. Johnson, “Augustine’s Trinitarian Reading of John 5: A model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 52/4 (2009), 799-811.

⁶ See Giles, *Eternal Generation*, 66, note 10 and 144-148.

⁷ So R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology and Worship*, Philipsburg: P&R, 2004, 384-387. We should also note that the NKJV, the MEV and the NASB translations maintain “only begotten”.

⁸ See my discussion of this in my *Eternal Generation*, 145, note 124.

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