

THE DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY TRINITY,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ETERNAL
GENERATION OF THE SON OF GOD

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God is a subject unsearchably beyond our power of understanding (Job 26:14; Psalm 139:6). This is not to say that God is unknowable, for he *is* knowable (Psalm 9:10; John 17:3; 1 John 5:20), but it is to say that our knowledge of him is limited, so that we cannot understand him completely or exhaustively (Job 11:7; Psalm 145:3). In Holy Scripture, God is represented as revealing himself, albeit in a way that still leaves an ineffable mystery to his Being (Psalm 97:2; 1 Timothy 6:16). However, through his self-disclosure, we are taught that: (i) there is only one God, who exists alone as God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Malachi 2:10); (ii) in the divine essence there are three distinctions, to each of which the term “Person” may be applied (John 14:16,17; Hebrews 1:3); and (iii) the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the same in substance, equal in power and glory, and they are eternally and mutually related (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 John 5:7).

These three Persons, possessing from eternity the same nature, and being eternally related to one another, have a unique, distinctive and personal attribute:

1. The peculiar, eternal attribute of the Father is *Paternity*, or *Begetting* (John 3:16; Hebrews 1:5,8). This appears from the name “Father” (John 5:18; 14:9,10; Ephesians 1:3) and from various declarations respecting his special relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit (Psalm 2:7 – “this day have I begotten thee”: this denotes not one of “man’s days” but is to be understood as “God’s day”, “the day of eternity”; John 5:26; 15:26).

When Scripture asserts – as it certainly does – that the Father eternally begets the Son, it is not to be understood in a human or physical sense, as if, for example, there was with the Father *priority* and with the Son, *dependence*. There is, it is true, some resemblance in the begetting, in that the Persons share the same nature and enjoy a relation of love (John 1:1; 10:30; Romans 9:5. John 3:35; 14:31); but this begetting relates to *Deity* and pertains to Persons possessing absolute *equality* (John 5:17,18;

Philippians 2:5,6), and it takes place in *eternity* where there is no succession as in time (Micah 5:2; Proverbs 8:24,25; John 1:18).

The manner of this generation is indeed incomprehensible and inexpressible, but the truth is that the Father was the eternal Father of the Son, considered as a Divine Person within the Godhead. At no point did he *become* the Father of the Son. He *always was* his Father – God the Father (John 17:5; Hebrews 1:1,2).

2. The peculiar, eternal attribute of the Son is *Sonship* (Filiation), or *Being Begotten* (John 1:14,18; 3:16). This Sonship does not relate to his Mediatorial Office, his Incarnation, or his Resurrection; for as to the first, it was the Son, as the Son, who was appointed to office (Mark 12:6; John 6:39; Romans 8:32); as to the second, it was the Son, as the Son, who assumed our humanity, his supernatural conception and birth simply manifesting his true identity (Romans 8:3; Luke 1:35); and as to the third, it was the Son, as the Son, who was raised from the dead, his resurrection, not being the cause of his Sonship, but the solemn and public declaration of it (Acts 13:32,33; Romans 1:4).

Sonship belongs to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity as he is *God*. According to God's Word, he is "the Son of the living God" and again, "the only begotten Son" of "the Father" (Matthew 16:16; John 1:18; 3:16). He is, then, the Son by nature, and eternally so, begotten as a Divine Person in the past, distant and eternal ages. Certainly "his goings forth have been from of old, *from everlasting* (i.e. a "going forth" which belonged to him as the Second person of the Holy Trinity, Micah 5:2). The Son, under the name of "Wisdom", says, "When there were no depths, I was brought forth (the word is used elsewhere for "generation", Psalm 51:5)...Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth" (Proverbs 8:24,25). He was therefore "the Son" before time and before creation, because we read that it was "*the Son...*by whom he (God the Father) made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1,2).

Scripture testimony is plain enough: he was the "only begotten Son" *before* he came into this world. John 3:16 comes immediately to mind – "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son..."; and to this agree other places and passages, such as 1 John 4:9 – "God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him."

The Council of Nicea, which met in 325 AD, confessed the Son to be “begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.”

3. The peculiar, eternal attribute of the Spirit is *Procession from both the Father and the Son* (John 15:26). Historically, the Greek Church advocated that the Spirit proceeds only from the Father, whereas the Latin Church correctly maintained that he proceeds equally from the Father and the Son. Even when here on earth, the Son of God spoke of “the Holy Ghost, whom *the Father will send* in my name”; but he also said, “if I depart, *I will send him* unto you (John 14:26; 16:7; cf. 20:22 – “he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost”).

Such passages show that, in time, the Father and the Son cause the Spirit to proceed, and they undoubtedly imply an eternal proceeding of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. This is borne out by such phrases as “the Spirit of God (i.e. of the Father)” (Matthew 3:16; Luke 4:18) and others such as “the Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9) and “the Spirit of his Son” (Galatians 4:6 cf. 1 Peter 1:11).

The term “Procession” is meant to designate the relation which the Third Person of the Trinity has with the other Two Persons. Once again, it involves no distinction as to time or origin: the Spirit is a Divine Person (John 14:16,17; 16:13-15 – “him” and “he”; Romans 8:26; Ephesians 4:30 – personal characteristics: “maketh intercession”, “grieve not the Holy Spirit”) and shares the Essence of Deity, being himself ever, always, and fully God (2 Samuel 23:2,3; Acts 5:3,4,9; 1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:22).

Procession points to this sharing of the same Being, but the word also suggests an emanation from the Father and the Son of *the Person* of the Holy Spirit. For us, it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of the precise nature of this Procession. Perhaps it is sufficient to say that, like the spring and the river which form the lake, so, in a way unknown and unknowable to us, the blessed Holy Spirit ceaselessly derives his origin as a Person from the Father and the Son. Abandoning attempts fully to comprehend the mystery, we are constrained simply to worship and to adore.

“The Holy Ghost is of the Father and the Son; not made, nor created, nor begotten, but *proceeding*.” (The Athanasian Creed, mid-fifth century)

The biblical, orthodox doctrine is affirmed in the great 17th century Confessions of Faith. The Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) states: “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” (Chapter 2, Section 3).

In this our day, we lament the widespread ignorance of God, along with the grievous departure from the orthodox doctrine of God, both in the pulpit and in the pew. We acknowledge and confess the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity, particularly defending, from many and various attacks, the blessed truth of the eternal generation of the Son of God.

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