

~Other Speakers S-Z: Samuel E. Waldron:

One place at which the historic doctrine of the Trinity is in danger from rationalism in our day is in a widespread doubt among evangelical teachers as to the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit. This doubt is probably due to the seeming contradiction of asserting that the Son is self-existent God and yet eternally generated. The Baptist Confession, in line with both the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration and all the historic creeds of the church, warns us against indulging such doubts upon this subject.

It is often thought that the doctrine of eternal generation involves Subordinationism. Three kinds of subordination must be distinguished. There is subordination in the modes of operation. This has reference to the subordination of the God-man to the Father in the economy of redemption. This may be called economic subordination. Secondly, there is subordination in the modes of subsistence. This has reference to an order and relationship of derivation among the persons (or hypostases) of the Trinity itself. The Son is begotten of the Father. The Spirit proceeds from both. This may be called hypostatic subordination. Thirdly, there is subordination in essence. This has reference to the idea that the deity of the Son and Spirit is a qualified form of the deity of the Father. This may be called essential subordination. It is this which has been historically and properly known as Subordinationism.

The historic doctrine of the church and its creeds is that as to their essence the Son and Spirit are equal in power and glory to the Father, but as to their persons they are eternally generated and eternally proceed from the Father. Thus, as to their essence, they are self-existent, while as to their persons, they are eternally derived from the Father. As the historic doctrines of the church, these two doctrines are not rightly called Subordinationism. That term is properly reserved for the teaching that the Son and the Spirit are as to their essence less God than the Father and essentially less transcendent. Hypostatic subordination and economic subordination are not, therefore, Subordinationism.

The biblical evidence in favour of the eternal generation of the Son may be summarized as follows. The economy of redemption is that of creation (John 1: 1-3; Heb 1:2; 1 Cor. 8:6). Surely it is strange that both in the economy of creation and the economy of redemption the same order is maintained, if this economic subordination does not reflect a certain hypostatic subordination in the Trinity itself?

The Bible teaches explicitly that the Son is begotten, or, at least, derived (John 1: 14, 18). The translation of the key word is, however, disputed. Some translate it in the traditional way, 'only begotten', while others prefer the translation 'unique'. To some extent this problem of translation is related to a disputed etymology. Some derive the word from the verb which means 'to beget' and others from the verb which means 'to become'. Either possible etymology contains the idea of (eternal) derivation.

Proverbs 8:22-31 also contains explicit teaching to this effect, if applied to the Son of God. The New Testament seems to make the application itself (Col. 2:3; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Luke 11:49). Note also Micah 5:2.

It has sometimes been argued that the designation 'Son' is never used of the pre-incarnate Christ. Allowing this interpretation of these terms for the sake of argument, it does not explain the use of the term 'Father.' This term is clearly applied to the first person of the Trinity describing his relationship to the second before the incarnation (John 10: 36; 16:28; 1 John 4:14). It is impossible to disentangle this term from the idea of One who is the cause, source, or begetter. The Father is the Father precisely to the Son (John 5:18; Col. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6).

The argument that the term 'Son' is never used of the preincarnate Christ is not convincing (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:14).

The argument that the term 'Son' means nothing but equality simply does not carry conviction. That it does note equality we do not, of course, deny. However, to say that it denotes only this appears to fly in the face of everything we know not only about the word 'father' but also the word 'son'.

Further evidence for the doctrine of eternal generation is gained from what we may call the doctrine of eternal utterance. The other clear designation of the pre-incarnate Son is the Word. Surely this designation intimates a relationship of subordination between the person designated God and the person designated the Word in John 1: 1. As to their essence both are God, unqualified deity. 'The Word was God.' As to their persons, however, one is called 'the God' and the other is called 'the Word' of God.

Without eternal generation and eternal procession and the doctrine of hypostatic subordination it is impossible to distinguish the different persons of the Trinity. There are no revealed personal relations or properties. Even terminology like the First, Second, or Third Person of the Trinity becomes illegitimate. We are left with three colourless, unvarying, indistinguishable persons in the Trinity. This result smells of the barrenness of human philosophy, not the richness of biblical revelation.

Finally, the suppression of a real eternal fatherhood and a real eternal sonship lessens the glory of redemptive love. Is not the glory of the Father giving his Son for our redemption lessened if we limit the idea of sonship in this sentence to mere equality? The result is that one neutered divine person gives another colourless divine person. On this idea, where is the glory of the Father's sacrifice? Where is the glory of the Son's filial obedience? The tendency to doubt eternal generation and eternal procession diminishes the glory of the gospel.

(This work was taken from pages 56-59 of "A Modern exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith," by Samuel E. Waldron – second edition)