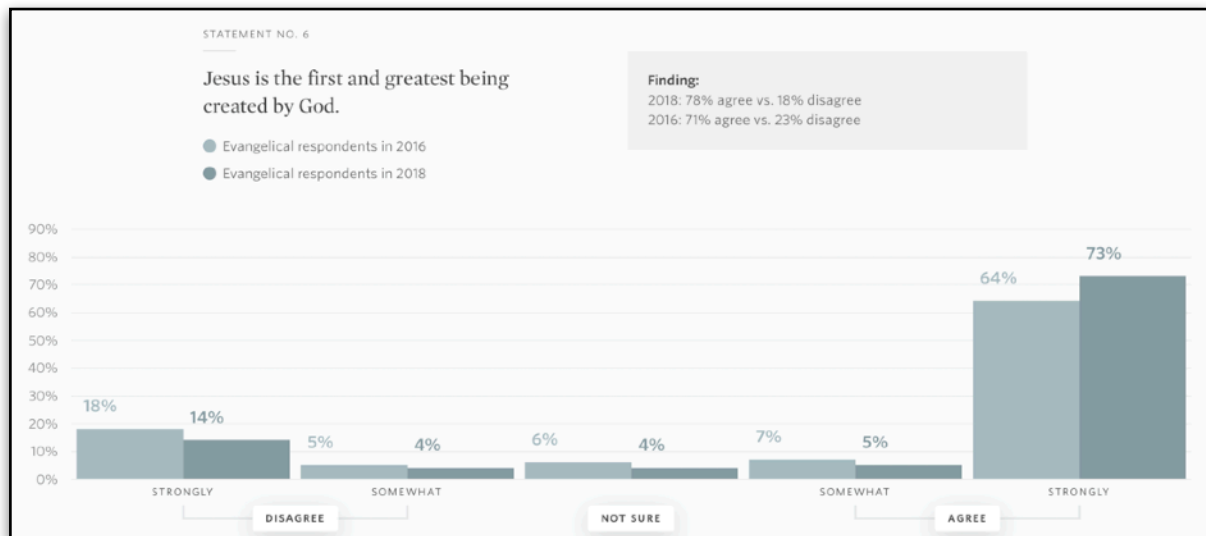


ETERNAL GENERATION OF THE SON

1. This doctrine is important because it specifies what we mean when we say Jesus is “the Son of God.”

- a. Is “the Son of God” God the Son? Is Jesus God ontologically and eternally?
- b. This doctrine grounds two central doctrines of the Christian faith.
 - (1) The deity of Jesus. See *Jesus’ Deity*.
 - (2) The Trinity. See *The Trinity*.
- c. On this subject, we must not go beyond Scripture into philosophical speculation.
- d. Properly speaking, only a man can “beget” (see Mt 1:2-16). A woman “bears” a child.

2. Sadly, many evangelicals today believe Jesus was “created” before the universe.



3. This was the view of Arius (d. 336), who believed:

- a. The Son did not always exist (Ps 2:7; Col 1:18).
- b. The Son was created by God as the first and most glorious being in the universe, the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15; Heb 1:6).
- c. The Son preexisted the universe as the Logos before his virgin birth (Jn 1:1-2).
- d. Through the created Son all else was created (Pr 8:22-26; Jn 1:3; Heb 1:2).
- e. The Son can be called “God” in some sense because of his exalted honour and glory. Nevertheless, he falls on the creature side of the Creator-creature distinction. See *Creator-Creature Distinction*.
- f. The Son is ontologically and temporally subordinate to God (Jn 14:28; 1 Co 15:24-28).
- g. The view of Jehovah’s Witnesses is very similar to that of Arius. They believe:
 - (1) [].

4. The Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) condemned Arianism.

- a. The chief proponents of the eternal generation of the Son were:
 - (1) Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373).
 - (a) See Athanasius, *Against the Arians* and *Defense of the Nicene Definition*.

- (2) The Cappadocian fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa).
- b. The Apostles' Creed stated:
 - (1) "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. AMEN."
- c. The Council of Nicaea determined:
 - (1) The Son is not a creature external to God.
 - (2) The Son is the eternal offspring of the Father.
 - (3) The Son is proper to the very essence of God.
- d. The Council stated: "...[I]n one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, **begotten** of the Father **only-begotten**, that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, **begotten**, not made, being of one substance with the Father."
- e. The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son has been affirmed ever since.
 - (1) Athanasian Creed:
 - (a) "Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the substance of the Father, **begotten** before the worlds; and Man of the substance of his Mother, born in the world.... This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved."¹
 - (2) Chalcedonian Creed (451):
 - (a) "Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, **begotten** of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood **begotten**, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer (*Theotokos*); one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, **Only-begotten**, recognised in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and **Only-begotten** God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us."

¹ The (Online) Book of Common Prayer, "Historical Documents of the Church" (<https://www.bcponline.org>).

(3) *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1643-46).

(a) “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither *begotten*, nor proceeding; the Son is *eternally begotten* of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”

5. John most clearly communicates the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

a. *John*.

(1) **Jn 1:1** 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

(a) **Pr 8:25** 25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I [wisdom] was brought forth (γεννάω).

(2) **Jn 1:14** 14 ...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the uniquely-begotten (μονογενής) Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(3) **Jn 1:18** 18 No one has ever seen God. The uniquely-begotten (μονογενής) God, who is in the chest (κόλπος) of the Father, he has made him known.

(4) **Jn 3:16** 16 ...God so loved the world, that he gave his uniquely-begotten (μονογενής) Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

(5) **Jn 3:18** 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the uniquely-begotten (μονογενής) Son of God.

b. *1 John*.

(1) **1 Jn 4:9** 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his uniquely-begotten (μονογενής) Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

c. *Hebrews*.

(1) **Heb 1:1-3** 1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. 3 He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

(2) **Heb 13:8** 8 Jesus Messiah is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

d. Jesus is the Father’s firstborn Son over all creation, not the first created being (Col 1:15).

(1) **Col 1:15** 15 [The Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως).

e. A few verses speak of the temporal generation of Jesus’ humanity, not the eternal generation of Jesus’ deity (Ps 2:7; Heb 1:5).

(1) **Ps 2:7** 7 I will tell of the decree: Yahweh said to me, You are my Son. Today I have begotten you.

(2) **Heb 1:5** 5 ...To which of the angels did God ever say, You are my Son, today I have begotten (γεννάω, perf.) you? Or again, I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son?

- (3) **1 Jn 5:18** 18 We know that everyone who has been born of God (πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ) does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God (ὁ γεννηθεὶς ἐκ' τοῦ θεοῦ) protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

6. The best translation for **μονογενής** with respect to Jesus is “only-begotten.”

- a. The *-genēs* stem strongly encodes notions of derivation, offspring, and begetting throughout the history of the Greek language. Both *genos* and *gennao* derive from a common Indo-European root, *ǵenh* (“beget, arise”).
- b. γεννάω means “to cause someth. to come into existence, primarily through procreation or parturition...become the parent of, beget...by procreation” (*BDAG*, 193).
 - (1) **Mt 1:16** 16 ...Jacob the father (γεννάω) of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born (γεννάω), who is called Messiah.
 - (2) **Lk 1:35** 35 ...The angel answered [Mary], The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born (γεννάω) will be called holy—the Son of God.
 - (3) **Jn 3:6** 6 That which is born (γεννάω) of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born (γεννάω) of the Spirit is spirit.
 - (4) **Ac 7:8** 8 ...So Abraham became the father (γεννάω) of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.
 - (5) **Ga 4:23** 23 ...The son of the slave was born (γεννάω) according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.
- c. The term **μονογενής** is used most basically and frequently in contexts having to do with biological offspring. Its fundamental meaning is “only begotten” or “only child” in the sense of a parent’s having only one child.²
 - (1) *Luke*:
 - (a) **Lk 7:12** 12 As [Jesus] drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only (μονογενής) son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.
 - (b) **Lk 8:42** 42 ...For he had an only (μονογενής) daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying. As Jesus went, the people pressed around him.
 - (c) **Lk 9:38** 38 And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only (μονογενής) child.
 - (2) During the controversy with the Arians and thereafter, **μονογενής** always included the idea of generation. For example, Jerome’s Vulgate always translates **μονογενής** as *unigenitus*.
 - (3) Such phrases as “**μονογενής** brother” are notably non-existent. This is strange if [] means “one and only” because it is common for one to have an “only brother.”
 - (4) **μονογενής**, when used of persons, always included the idea of generation. Usage determines meaning. Don’t fall for the etymological fallacy!

7. If Jesus isn’t the Father’s eternally begotten Son, the Father’s love for the world isn’t be that impressive.

² *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

- a. As the greatest act of faith in the Bible, Abraham was willing to offer up his uniquely begotten son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. Abraham loved his son (Ge 22:2) because he was uniquely begotten (Heb 11:17).
 - (1) **Ge 22:2** 2 [God] said, Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.
 - (2) **Heb 11:17** 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his uniquely begotten (μονογενής) son....
- b. Abraham's love for his son typifies the Father's love for his Son (Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9-10).
 - (1) **Jn 3:16** 16 ...God so loved the world, that he gave his uniquely begotten (μονογενής) Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
 - (2) **1 Jn 4:9** 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his uniquely begotten (μονογενής) Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
- c. The Son the Father sent to be the propitiation for our sins was his very own, eternally begotten, uniquely generated Son. Otherwise, the type fails, and God's love is not that impressive.

8. The analogy between divine and human begetting must not be stretched too far.

- a. The concept of begetting is a metaphor drawn from the experience of human fathers begetting human sons. The analogy is narrow.
- b. Human begetting is similar to the divine begetting at two points.
 - (1) First, just as a human father begets a son in a way that puts the son in possession of a fully human nature, so also when God the Father begets God the Son, the Son possesses a fully divine nature.
 - (a) Like begets like (1 Co 15:38-41).
 - (b) "The Son is other than things originate [*i.e.*, created], alone the proper offspring of the Father's essence" (Athanasius).
 - (c) "The Father is God, and the Son is God, for whatever is begotten of God is God" (Irenaeus).
 - (d) **Jn 5:26** 26 ...As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.
 - (e) **Jn 16:15** 15 All that the Father has is mine.
 - (f) **Col 2:9** 9 For in [the Son] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily....
 - (2) Second, just as human fathers feel an extra special love bond for their very own flesh and blood children, especially in the case of an only son, so God the Father feels an extra special love bond for his very own uniquely begotten Son.
 - (a) This explains the importance of the typology between Abraham's love for Isaac (Ge 22:2) and God the Father's love for God the Son (Jn 3:16).
- c. Human begetting differs from the divine begetting at two points.
 - (1) First, human fathers precede their offspring in time. A son is always younger than his father. This is not true of God the Father and God the Son.

- (a) The eternal generation of the Son is *achronōs* (“without time”) and *anarchōs* (“without beginning”).
 - (b) As fire begets radiance and yet fire does not precede radiance temporally, as if there was a time when the fire existed without giving off radiance, so the Father begets the Son and yet the Father does not precede the Son temporally (Augustine).
- (2) Second, human begetting involves a number of physical processes not to be attributed to the divine begetting.
- (a) Human begetting necessarily involves sexual intercourse of two persons, male and female, an egg and a sperm, conception, nine months’ gestation, and physical birth of the one begotten. None of these processes apply to the Father’s begetting of the Son.
 - (b) The eternal generation of the Son is *asōmatōs* (“without body”) and *apathōs* (“without passion”).
 - (c) Mary, nor any other female, has anything to do with the eternal generation of the Son. There is no divine goddess.

9. Every believer is born of God, but only the Son is begotten of the Father.

- a. We are born of God (Jn 1:13; 3:3; 1 Jn 3:9), but the Son is the Father’s only begotten (Jn 1:18; 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9).
- b. We may be sons of God (Mt 5:9; Ro 8:14; Ga 3:26) and even in a sense Jesus’ brothers and sisters (Ro 8:29), but we are not the one and only Son (Jn 1:14).
- c. The apostle John.
 - (1) John reserves the term *υἱός* exclusively for Jesus’ relationship to the Father. He reserves the term *τέκνον* exclusively for the believer’s relationship to God.
 - (2) Believers are described as children of God (Jn 1:12), as born of God (Jn 1:13), as born of the Spirit (Jn 3:5), and as of God (1 Jn 3:10), but “Father” never occurs in such contexts, except for Jn 20:17.
 - (3) By contrast, Jesus frequently speaks of God as his Father (Jn 5:17-18) and is often described as the Son of the Father (Jn 3:35; 1 John 4:14; 2 Jn 3).
 - (4) In 1 Jn 5:18, the distinction between Jesus’ sonship and our sonship is preserved in that the perfect participle is used of us, while the aorist participle is used of Jesus.

10. Final Truths.

- a. The Father is uncreated and unbegotten. The Son is uncreated and begotten.
- b. Because of the divine begetting, the Son is fully like the Father.
- c. The Son is not a creature. Never say the Father “created” or “made” the Son.
- d. The Father loves the Son as his only begotten one.
- e. The Father’s begetting of the Son is eternal and timeless.
- f. There never was a time when the only begotten Son did not exist.
- g. The divine begetting differs from human begetting in several ways.
- h. The first and second persons of the Trinity did not become Father and Son at a point in time. They are always and forever God the Father and God the Son.
- i. There is an eternal “fatherness” about God the Father and an eternal “sonness” about God the Son that distinguishes them from one another. But both are equally God.

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