

“Eternally Begotten of the Father”
**An Analysis of the Second London Confession of Faith’s Doctrine of the Eternal
Generation of the Son**

By
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Introduction

The framers of the Second London Confession of Faith (2nd LCF) self-consciously adopted the order, as well as the majority of the language and content of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Savoy Declaration (SD), in part, “to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian Religion, as also with many others, whose orthodox confessions have been published to the world.”¹ As these confessional standards have been regarded as noteworthy for their biblical and churchly trinitarianism, the same may be said of the 2nd LCF. The doctrine of the Trinity in the 2nd LCF is classical (i.e., creedal) and Reformed, an essential element of which is the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son: “the Son is eternally begotten of the Father” (2nd LCF 2:3; cf. 8:1).

1. Reformed Trinitarianism and Modern Evangelical Developments

Two potential obstacles present themselves at the outset of this study. First, despite extensive discussion of the codification of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the patristic era, until recently little attention had been given to the detailed argumentation of the Reformers and their orthodox successors. Richard Muller demonstrates that Reformed theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries argued

¹ *A Confession of Faith, put forth by the elders and brethren of many congregations of Christians (baptized upon profession of their faith) in London and the Country* (London: for Benjamin Harris, 1677), preamble, p. 4.

the classical doctrine of the Trinity on extensive exegetical grounds, especially against various forms of antitrinitarianism.

The second obstacle is theological in nature. For various reasons, a number of contemporary evangelical theologians have rejected the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son. Not unrelated, participants on both sides of the gender debate have argued that the eternal relation of the Father and the Son entails their respective position. In doing so, some proponents of complementarianism (i.e., male headship) reject the classical and Reformed doctrine of eternal generation, in its place advancing the idea of the eternal functional subordination of the Son (EFS). Although they affirm the deity of the Son and his consubstantiality with the Father and the Spirit, these theologians yet suppose the Son to be eternally subordinate to the Father in role and authority. Despite challenges to the orthodoxy and theological coherence of EFS, it remains the case that a wide swath of evangelical thinking is not sympathetic to the 2nd LCF’s doctrine of eternal generation.

These two issues suggest that an analysis of the 2nd LCF’s affirmation of this particular doctrine is necessary and timely. They show, as well, that significant dangers lie in our way, not the least of which are historical anachronisms and heterodox aberrations. To avoid these pitfalls it is necessary to understand that this particular doctrinal formula was carefully defined in the patristic era, confessed as orthodox for centuries, and by the Reformers and Reformed orthodox regarded as a fundamental article of the Christian faith elicited from and explained on the basis of Holy Scripture. Moreover, in light of the charge that this ecumenical formula is speculative and unbiblical, it is paramount to consider the 2nd LCF’s doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son not only as belonging to this broad historical consensus, but also in terms of its biblical foundations and exegetical argumentation.

In doing so, we need to be clear, concise, and above all, careful. A consistent feature of the historic discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity is that this is a revealed mystery rather to be adored than enquired into by reason, since the Triune God is

infinite and incomprehensible. What is to be known of God, and what is to be known of the eternal generation of the Son, is communicated to us, not that we might speculate according to our finite, even sanctified, reason, but that our faith would receive and our piety admire the truth of God’s sufficient self-revelation in Holy Scripture. Yet, since Scripture teaches that the Son is the only begotten of the Father, we are faced with an important question, one which we are compelled to answer with all due reverence and humility: what does it mean to confess from the heart that “the Son is eternally begotten of the Father?”

2. One in Trinity and Trinity in Unity: The Theological Context of the 2nd LCF’s Doctrine of Eternal Generation

The 2nd LCF’s doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son does not reside in either a historical or theological vacuum. The immediate confessional context is the paragraph on the Trinity (2:3), itself situated in the chapter on the nature of God.

This chapter adopts the standard scholastic arrangement of the doctrine of God. The 2nd LCF focuses on two topics: what is God (i.e., divine essence and attributes; 2:1-2), and what sort of God is he (i.e., Trinity; 2:3). The opening clause of this paragraph establishes clearly that the Particular Baptists understood the two topics to be necessarily interrelated or interdependent.

Paragraph 3 underscores that whatever Scripture predicates of the one, true, and living God, is also predicated of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, even though what is proper to each subsistence (e.g., eternal generation) is not and may not be predicated of the divine essence.

The 2nd LCF, therefore, goes to great lengths to teach both the unity and distinction of the divine nature; that is, the Triune God is one, simple, fully actualized, eternal, and infinite essence and at the same time the persons of the Trinity are distinct or distinguished.

2.1. *The Common Divine Essence: Creedal Trinitarianism.* In this chapter the 2nd LCF identifies its doctrine of the Trinity, and thus its doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation, as pro-Nicene. The 2nd LCF argues that the three subsistences in the one infinite and divine essence are of one substance, and therefore of one power and one eternity. This teaching is affirmed everywhere by orthodox trinitarianism. The 2nd LCF, therefore, rejects what creedal orthodoxy has always rejected, namely, the notion that eternal generation implies or entails the Son’s subordination in the Godhead.

2.2. *The Common, Undivided Divine Essence.* The claim that each personal subsistence has the whole divine essence, yet the essence is undivided, is significant in two respects. First, the Particular Baptists were eager to avoid any and all association with the rather vocal antitrinitarian movements of the era. They thus cut off at the root any charge of modalism, Sabellianism, or subordinationism by affirming that each personal subsistence has the whole divine essence. By stating also that the essence is yet undivided they were precluding the charge of tritheism. In fact, in these few words the 2nd LCF reasserts not only the doctrine of the unity of God’s essence (cf. 2:1, “...one only living, and true God”), but also the doctrines of God’s simplicity (cf. 2:1, “without parts”) and actuality (cf. 2:1, “a most pure spirit”), now, however, in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Secondly, this clause draws attention to the *uniqueness* both of God’s essential unity and of the distinction of the persons in the Godhead. By stating that the one, infinite God is a Trinity of personal subsistences, each having the whole divine essence, but without any division of the divine essence, the 2nd LCF argues against the strict identity of essence and subsistence (or person). This is a somewhat technical point, but one which has implications for a proper conception of the doctrines of the Trinity and of the eternal generation of the Son. The divine unity is a numerical unity, incomparable to anything in the created order. Thus, we confess that the Father is infinite and divine, having the whole divine essence; the Son is infinite and divine,

having the whole divine essence; and the Spirit is infinite and divine, having the whole divine essence. Yet they are not three essences, for the common essence is undivided.

This careful statement of the unity and distinction of the divine nature has two far reaching implications. First, the Son, as eternally begotten of the Father, is personally distinct from the Father, but not of a lesser, different, or subordinate essence. Secondly, the personal property of the Son – to be eternally begotten of the Father – must be understood as the begetting of an infinite and divine subsistence (not essence) *within* the one, eternal, undivided, infinite and divine Being.

The collation of biblical texts cited by the 2nd LCF indicate that this doctrine is not the fruit of rationalism; rather, this is a doctrinal formulation grounded in Scripture (cf. 1:6) as interpreted according to the analogy of Scripture (cf. 1:9). God’s proper or essential name, “I am” (Exod. 3:14), reveals that he alone is “infinite in being, and perfection” (cf. 2:1). God is essential or absolute perfection: he is one, simple, infinite, and divine essence. Yet, John 14:11 and 1 Cor. 8:6 interpreted side by side establish that this divine name is properly predicated of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit for two reasons: first, because of the unity of the divine essence and the mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) of Father, Son, and Spirit in the one divine essence (John 14:11); and, secondly, because Scripture ascribes divine names and divine operations in common to both the Father and the Son (1 Cor. 8:6). The Father, the Son, and the Spirit each have the whole divine essence. The Son, therefore, has in common with the Father and the Spirit all the essential properties of the divine essence (2:1-2). He is *very God*, eternal, immense, Almighty, perfect, and infinite. For God is one in Trinity. At the same time, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three slices of one pie, three parts of an apple, three forms of water, or three individual essences of one generic essence, since the one God who reveals himself as “I am” is neither distributed into three parts or components, nor divided into three graded essences or ranked persons: God is Trinity in Unity.

2.3. *One Essence, Three Subsistences: The Confessional Language of Unity and Distinction.* The 2nd LCF, in fact, carefully safeguards this understanding of the unity of the divine essence and the distinction of the persons by adopting the rather technical vocabulary of one *Being* (or nature, essence) and three *subsistences*. In theological usage person and subsistence are roughly equivalent; both are attempts to describe the distinction of persons in the Godhead. Yet certain Reformed theologians argue that *subsistence* is preferable because it expresses more precisely than the loaded term *persona* the import of the Greek term *hypostasis*, a term with biblical precedent (Heb. 1:3). It is frequently the case, in fact, that even theologians who employ the term person explain it by use of the word subsistence. In 2:3 the 2nd LCF employs only the term subsistence.

By itself subsistence can describe a being’s mode or manner of existence. So, for example, the 2nd LCF uses the term to speak of the manner of God’s essential self-existence: he subsists in and of himself eternally (cf. 2:1). As used in the doctrine of the Trinity, however, the term describes the personal mode or manner of existence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit *within* the one divine nature.

3. The Eternal Generation of the Son

The intent of the previous section has been to underscore that when the 2nd LCF speaks of the Son’s personal subsistence, of what distinguishes him as the Son from the Father and the Spirit, it does not do so in the abstract. He is not separated or divided from his relation to the Father and the Spirit within the one, common divine essence. Thus, to speak of the Son’s distinct subsistence, his personal manner of existence or his peculiar, incommunicable properties, is to speak of the Son in the concrete, as he inheres or subsists in the one divine essence, himself having the whole divine essence, and therefore, of one substance, of one power, and of one eternity with the Father and the Spirit. While he is distinguished as the Son, in other words, we can never forget his

own words: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30); or, “I am in the Father, and the Father in me” (John 14:11).

With that said, we have noted *that* the Son is distinct from and related to the Father and the Spirit as to his personal subsistence. The key question, however, remains: *what* distinguishes him, or *how* is he distinct? What are his peculiar relative properties and his personal relation? Coxe gives us the answer: “The relative property of the Son is to be begotten.”² To understand this doctrine I consider first its theological content and secondly its biblical foundations.

3.1. *Theological Content.* In addition to his proper name, “Son,” which is incommunicable, the Son is personally distinguished from and personally related to the Father by reason of this incommunicable property: he is “eternally begotten of the Father.” Only the Son is the Son, and only the Son is begotten of the Father. Yet because he is begotten *of the Father*, he is eternally and personally related to the Father within the divine essence. The key to understanding this doctrine resides in the confessional teaching that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “each have the whole divine essence.” The question the doctrine of eternal generation answers is this: how does the Son have the whole divine essence, but in such a manner that the one common essence is not divided and the distinct persons are not confounded? The answer is simple, yet profoundly mysterious: The Son, as to his personal subsistence in the divine essence (i.e., as the Son), has the whole divine essence because the Father *personally* communicated *his* whole essence (i.e., the whole divine essence the Father has of himself) to the Son *personally*.

In light of the teaching of the 2nd LCF particularly and Reformed orthodoxy generally, I offer the following definition of the Son’s eternal generation of the Father: *the Father’s necessary, eternal, supernatural and incomprehensible personal act of communicating his whole essence to the Son, as to the Son’s personal subsistence, without any imperfection, dependence, succession, multiplication, mutation, causation, derivation,*

² Coxe, *Vindiciae Veritatis*, p. 7.

confusion or division, either of the one common divine essence or of the distinct personal subsistences of the Trinity.

While it is tempting to construe this generation in terms known to us, namely on analogy with human procreation, we must pay close attention to both the contextual strictures and the very language used by the 2nd LCF to describe the Son’s eternal generation of the Father. Specifically, it is important to recognize that the Son is *eternally* begotten of the Father. He is, as the 2nd LCF later reminds us, “infinite, without beginning.” He is neither created nor made, as if he were another thing external to the divine essence or another thing caused by the Father. Indeed, the Son’s generation of the Father is without beginning, without end, and without succession. This indicates, moreover, that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father *within the unity of the Godhead*. The Son’s generation is an *ad intra* (i.e., internal, within the Godhead) personal work of the Father, the person begetting, and an *ad intra* personal work of the Son, the person begotten. For this reason, it is also necessary, rather than voluntary, and is most perfect.

Because the Son’s generation of the Father is eternal, internal, necessary, and most perfect, its manner – that is, how the Father communicates his essence to the Son – is “supernatural” (literally, *hyperphysical*) and therefore “unspeakable.” The Son’s eternal generation cannot be construed in the very same way as the begetting of human procreation, or the begetting entailed in the graces of regeneration and adoption.

Even though we are limited in what we can say regarding *how* the Father communicates his whole essence to the Son, we must say *that* he does so necessarily, indeed, in a truly eternal, spiritual, supernatural, immutable, perfect, infinite, and therefore, ineffable and incomprehensible manner within the unity of the Godhead. The doctrine cannot be dismissed on the grounds of our inability to comprehend, especially since God has revealed that the Son is the consubstantial, coequal, and coeternal Son of the Father, “begotten before all worlds...begotten, not made.”

3.2. *Biblical Foundations.* Yet is this the case? Is the doctrine of eternal generation taught in Scripture? Scripture most certainly teaches the unity of the divine essence and the distinction of persons (Exod. 3:14; Deut. 6:4; Isa. 61:1-2; Matt 3:17; Matt 28:19; John 10:30; John 14:10-11; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14). Scripture also teaches, I argue, the Son’s eternal generation in two ways. The doctrine is “expressly set down” and “necessarily contained” in Scripture (2nd LCF 1:6). This, in fact, was the conviction of our Particular Baptist forefathers. They argued that a doctrine was to be believed only the authority of God speaking in Scripture (2nd LCF 1:10). For this reason, following the WCF and the SD, they cited John 1:14, 18 as the primary biblical foundation of the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation. The doctrine does not rest *entirely* on these two verses, but is taught clearly and sufficiently across Holy Scripture, a conviction shared not only by the Particular Baptists but by Reformed theology more broadly.

The Particular Baptists agreed with the WCF and the SD that the doctrine of eternal generation was the result of a proper interpretation of John 1:14, 18. Since the late nineteenth century, however, the growing consensus has been that the term formerly rendered “begotten” is better translated “only” or “unique.” Most evangelical commentators today favor this reading of all the passages that use the term *monogenes* (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). Does this mean the doctrine is without biblical warrant, as some have suggested? It should be noted that even the most ardent defenders of the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son agree that *monogenes* is to be understood as “one and only.” Yet the doctrine itself does not depend entirely on this one word.

Though we cannot offer an exhaustive interpretation of these Johannine passages here, three observations are in order. First, John speaks of the Son, the *monogenes*, as a fully divine person. In John 1:14, not only is the glory of God ascribed to the Son, but we are also told that the only begotten of the Father is the Word, the

very Word who “is God” (1:1). For which reason, every attribute predicated of God in Scripture is properly predicated of the Son.

Secondly, as a fully divine person, however, he is distinct from yet most closely related to the Father. The Word, the only begotten of the Father, “was with God” (1:1). He is himself God, of the same essence of the Father, having the same, whole, undivided divine essence. At the same time, he is distinct from the Father by virtue of his unique or incommunicable properties: he is the Son, the only or only begotten Son, of the Father (1:18). The Son is not the Father, nor is the Father the Son. Yet they subsist in the Godhead in the closest of all relations. In fact, the Gospel writer expresses this truth by the most poignant and pregnant of phrases in verse 18: the only begotten Son “is in the bosom of the Father.” John 3:16, 18 and 1 John 4:9 are to the same effect: they describe the relation sustained between the Son and the Father. Even if, therefore, one adopts the modern rendering of the term *monogenes*, because the Son is uniquely related to and distinct from the Father as *his* Son, we have every warrant to retain the idea of begetting.

Finally, in all five texts, the distinction and relation of these two fully divine persons, Father and Son, is eternal. This is most certainly the case in John’s prologue, which twice reminds us that the Word or the Son was in the beginning with God (1:1-2). In John 3:16, 18 and 1 John 4:9, the only begotten Son is understood to pre-exist his historical operations *just as* the only begotten Son of the Father: the Father gave him, the Father sent him, not thereby making him his only begotten, but *as his eternally begotten Son*. None of these works are the cause or the reason that Christ is called the only begotten Son. Rather the works manifest that he is the only begotten of the Father, even as his works manifest that the Son and the Father are of the same essence (John 14:10-11). All of these texts, therefore, are describing what the Son has been from all eternity: the Son “eternally begotten of the Father.”

A number of additional biblical passages have been understood historically to teach, if not explicitly, by good and necessary consequence, the doctrine of the Son’s

eternal generation. Perhaps the key text is John 5:25-26. The Reformed orthodox, as well as the Particular Baptists, regarded a large collation of biblical passages as either teaching or confirming this doctrinal formulation. Cheynell, for example, argues four conclusions regarding the doctrine of eternal generation, all of them drawn from Scripture. First, Psalm 2:7 collated with Hebrews 1:3-6 grounds the claim that “the Father did beget his Son.”³ Second, that the Son’s generation of the Father is eternal is argued on the basis of Proverbs 8:22-23, 25 as interpreted alongside Micah 5:2, John 1:1-3, John 17:5, Colossians 1:15, and Revelation 1:18. Not all of these texts are understood to teach explicitly the doctrine. Instead, because they attribute to the Son the divine property of eternity they confirm that his generation of the Father is eternal. Third, that the Son is begotten of the Father in the unity of the Godhead is a point argued from Romans 8:32 and John 5:18. Christ is the Father’s “own” or “proper” Son, and the Father is Christ’s “own” or “proper” Father. In view of the previous three points, Cheynell concludes that because God is spiritual (John 4:24) and immutable (James 1:17), the Son’s eternal generation of the Father is spiritual, devoid of all change, motion, or succession.

Modern interpretations of certain individual texts may differ, even as there was difference of opinion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, regarding the referent of Psalm 2:7. Nevertheless, we ought not to be too quick to dismiss the older exegesis. More to the point, it is clear from this brief survey that the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation was not based on one text, let alone one word. For the Particular Baptists, as for Reformed orthodoxy, this doctrinal formulation was the result of a large collation of biblical texts, interpreted by the analogy of Scripture. We can say, we must say, therefore, that the doctrine of eternal generation is “expressly set down” and “necessarily contained in Scripture.”

4. Eternal Functional Subordination?

³ On these two texts, see also Coxe, *Vindiciae Veritatis*, pp. 7, 21.

There are several arguments advanced among evangelical theologians today for rejecting the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation.⁴ I have addressed several of these in the previous sections. First, every shred of historical evidence, including the carefully worded trinitarianism of the 2nd LCF, sufficiently demonstrates that it is simply contrary to historical fact to claim that the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation actually supports the Arian heresy. Second, though the manner of the Son’s eternal generation is incomprehensible, it is not illogical or incoherent. You and I may not be able to comprehend *how* the Son is the Son of the Father, but we may, indeed, must apprehend by faith *that* he is the Son of the Father. For, third, the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation is “expressly set down” and “necessarily contained” in Scripture, so that the frequently repeated assertion that the doctrine lacks biblical warrant is also wanting.

There is, however, another, far more subtle argument that has gained wide acceptance among evangelicals, which, because of its intention to safeguard the clear biblical teaching of male headship, is all the more dangerous. Prominent evangelical theologians, among them Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware, contend that in the home and the church women are subordinate in role or authority to men because the Son, from all eternity, is subordinate to the Father in role or authority. The Son’s eternal distinction from and relation to the Father is best understood, they argue, as eternal functional subordination (EFS). These theologians are most certainly correct to point out that Scripture teaches complementarianism. Yet, the attempt to root this teaching in the intra-divine life is not only seriously flawed, but is, in no uncertain terms, contrary to the Scriptures, the trinitarianism of the 2nd LCF, and creedal orthodoxy.

Most serious is that the argument compromises the *homoousion* of creedal orthodoxy. If, as the 2nd LCF teaches, the Father and the Son are “of one...power”

⁴ Giles, *Eternal Generation*, pp. 33-37, identifies six overlapping objections: the doctrine (1) has no biblical warrant; (2) is of neo-Platonic origin; (3) is illogical and incoherent; (4) serves no theological purpose; (5) is unnecessary since there are better ways to define the distinction of the divine persons; and (6) implies or necessarily entails either the Son’s eternal subordination or the Arian heresy.

because they are “of one substance” then the Son’s personal distinction *cannot* be construed in terms of subordination of rank or authority.

The truth of complimentarianism does not stand or fall on the basis of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible is clear, and need only be read according to proper principles of interpretation, to substantiate male headship in the home and in the church. To root this doctrine in an appeal to the Trinity is quite dangerous, as it attempts to explain what is finite on the basis of what is infinite.

Conclusion

Words fail us. Yet the Word of God does not fail. It is certain, sufficient, and infallible. Reason fails us. Yet God’s self-revelation in Scripture does not fail. This Word, this revelation, is clear: the Son is “eternally begotten of the Father.” Though we have noted at some length what this doctrine does and does not mean, as well as our inability to comprehend the manner of this generation, we must recognize also that this is a practical doctrine. It is part and parcel of that doctrine of the Trinity which is “the foundation of all our Communion with God, and our comfortable dependence on him.” In fact, eternal life hinges on whether or not we know and believe *this* Son, the only begotten Son of the Father (John 3:16). The danger is clear: “He that believeth on him is not judged: he that believeth not hath been judged already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son” (John 3:18). Yes, this doctrine is a mystery. Yet, it is a revealed mystery necessary not only for worship and prayer, but fundamentally for our salvation, for true, saving faith. May the Triune God grant us the grace to confess with our mouths and believe in our hearts that Jesus is the Christ, *the Son of the living God*, begotten before all worlds, indeed, begotten, not made. Amen.