

A Reconciliation of Jesus Christ's Divinity
And
His Begottenness by the Father

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Introduction

Many Christians today, having grown up in the Church appear not to be as mystified with the Trinity as were the early Church Fathers of the second through the fifth centuries. This is not to say that they have a complete understanding of the Trinity but it is more of an attempt to convey the idea of a comfort or familiarity that is often times confused with and supplants understanding. Yet when one begins to think of the Holy Trinity in terms of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Jeffersonian questions arise as to how can three be one and one be three.¹ Questions of what it means to be both *divine* and at the same time *begotten* challenge human sensibilities. This is only one of many questions the ecumenical church councils such as Nicaea endeavored to answer.

Given the above, it is the purpose of this paper to show how the assertion by the Council of Nicaea (in 325) that Jesus was both divine and eternal while being begotten of the Father is neither mutually exclusive nor inconsistent.²

The Problem

The basic problem erupts from a human perspective, and that is how can Jesus be divine and begotten at the same time? Sensibilities assert, as did a few of the early church fathers, that if one were “begotten” then there is a beginning. If there is a beginning, then that person is a created being and not eternal as God is eternal, not divine as God is divine.³

¹ Christopher Hall, *Learning Theology with the Early Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 54.

² Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 195.

³ Hall, 35.

Arius, an early 4th century church father, suggests in some fairly strong terms

That the Son is not unbegotten, nor a part of the un-begotten in any way, nor [formed out]of any substratum, but that he was constituted by God's will and counsel, before times and before ages, full (of grace and truth), divine, unique, unchangeable, And before he was begotten or created or ordained or founded, he was not. For he was not un-begotten. We are persecuted because we say, 'The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning.' For this we are persecuted, and because we say 'he is made out of things that were not.' But this is what we say, since he is neither a part of God nor formed out of any substratum.⁴

Hall, a noted author and professor at Eastern University describes Arius' position as "wanting his cake and eat it, too" when trying to describe Christ's divinity and his position that Christ was a created creature. Arius' assertion that Christ was "constituted before times and before ages"⁵ is contradictory in one important sense, and that is to be created before or outside time imparts a divine nature apart from humanity's frame of reference or existence. More on this later.

R. P. C. Hanson, who was a professor of theology and Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, indicated that Eusebius may have been reflecting upon closing statements by Constantine that suggested a "doctrine of the Son's eternal generation" when he said that the Son had "existed eternally before he was begotten"⁶. Clearly, even after the Council of Nicaea had completed, the debate and discussion as to what it meant to be begotten and eternal continued.

So what does it mean to be *divine*? What does it really mean to be *begotten of God*? What really was all the fuss about at Nicaea? These questions are pivotal in the understanding of Jesus and his nature.

⁴ Hall, 36.

⁵ IBID., 36.

⁶ Richard Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2005), 166.

What is All the Fuss About?

The Council of Nicaea came together for many reasons. The common view is that it came together to address the question of the oneness of God. Nicaea also came together to address the role and extent of the Bishop's authority, assert the date upon which to observe Easter, deal with the Meletian schism in Alexandria, and to provide guidance on disciplinarian action within the Canon.⁷ But truly when one leaf's through the texts of early church fathers' writing and the Nicene Creed it becomes clear this ecumenical council was about salvation.⁸ The whole of Christianity stands and falls upon salvation and its means of conveyance. Simply put salvation is about forgiveness and eternal life:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (Jn 3:16-18, NIV).

Salvation is core to Christianity, and it is intimately tied to Jesus, the Christ. The promise that one will live forever is a gift (Eph 2:7-9). One may view Jesus as the means by which the gift is given or conveyed. In human history, no one has ever given a gift larger than themselves. As an example, a citizen of the United States may not commit the country without the consideration and agreement of everyone else through their representatives. A citizen by himself or herself does not have the authority to commit the country to the giving. For Jesus to be the means of giving eternal life as a man He would

⁷ Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787) – Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, Mn: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 69.

⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines Revised Edition* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1978), 233.

not have the authority nor the capacity to do so. As something less than God, a created creature, Jesus would not nor could he possess eternal life, and as result he could not give it. It would not be within Him. In this case the gift would be larger than the giver or the means by which it would come, and as result it could not be given.

If Jesus were divine, then one may surmise that he, the giver or means by which the gift is to be conveyed, is larger than the gift. In other words he has the capacity and authority to convey the gift. The early church fathers at Nicaea were protecting the plan of salvation, and the oneness of God when they wrote the following Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign, maker of all things seen and unseen; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, homoousios with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, the things in heaven and the things on the earth, who because of us men and our salvation came down and was incarnated, made man, suffered, and arose on the third day, ascended into heaven, comes to judge the living and the dead; and in one Holy Spirit. And those who say “there was once when he was not” or “he was not before he was begotten” or “he came into existence from nothing” or who affirm that the Son of God is of another hypostasis or substance, or a creature, or mutable or subject to change, such ones the catholic and apostolic church pronounce accursed and separated from the church.⁹

The Bishops at Nicaea were asserting that Jesus was divine, having the authority and capacity to give the gift of eternal life, something he could not give as a created creature less than divine as God is divine.¹⁰ So what does it mean for Jesus to be divine, and what is eternity?

⁹ William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia, Pa: Fortress Press, 1980), 49.

¹⁰ Kelly, 233.

An Investigation into Definitions

Words and their meanings are important. Precise word usage is very important in that they are used to convey meaning. When speaking of Jesus as *divine*, or salvation as *eternal* life, or even *begotten* as it relates to Jesus and his son-ship the speaker is attempting to frame the discussion with context and meaning. Without one or the other the message is lost.

Divine

To be *divine* is defined as “deity; godhood...a being having divine attributions”.¹¹ Divine attributions may be amplified by the qualities of immortality, sovereignty, perfect wisdom, goodness, and purity.¹² So this is to say that Jesus is divine as God is divine. Jesus is one in substance with God.¹³ In essences, the Nicaea Ecumenical Council is attempting to assert as part of the Creed what Jesus has already said in the Gospel of John, “...I and my Father are one” (*Jn 10:30 NIV*), and then again when he said:

If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him...Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say “Show us the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves (*Jn 14:7-12*).

As Athanasius orated, Jesus himself has made the assertion.¹⁴ Jesus the Son and God the Father are of the same substance, they are part of the unity of the Godhead.

¹¹ Jess Sein, ed., *The Random House College Dictionary Revised Edition*, (New York, NY: Random House, Inc, 1975), 388.

¹² David F. Wright, *EERDMAN's Handbook of The History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 156.

¹³ Kelly, 113.

¹⁴ Rusch, 97.

O. Preston Robinson, a former Professor and department head at NYU, said it this way,

It is evident that God is the Father of our spirits and that his son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are separate personages in the Godhead who are one with the Father in their purpose and determination to help all men find salvation and exaltation in his kingdom.¹⁵

Jesus being of the same substance as God has both the means and capacity to deliver the gift of salvation which is eternal life. So what is eternal life? It is life everlasting. But what does *eternal* really mean?

Eternal

Eternal is defined as “lasting forever; without beginning or end; always existing.”¹⁶

This definition on the surface appears to satisfy the nature of being divine, yet it poses a problem for those (Arias) that assert that Jesus was a created creature since he was begotten. And because he was begotten he had a beginning, and since he had a beginning he could not be eternal. Why was this important? Nicaea dealt with the question of Jesus being co-eternal with God in order to assert that he was fully God.¹⁷ If Jesus was not eternal he could not be divine, he could not be God. If Jesus truly is a part of the Trinity, the Godhead, then is there reconciliation between the apparent contradiction of having always existed and being begotten? This then leads one to question exactly what does it mean to be begotten of God?

¹⁵ O. Preston Robinson, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Salt Lake City, Ut: Deseret Book Company, 1958), 74.

¹⁶ Jess Stein, 453.

¹⁷ Rusch, 20.

Begotten

Begotten has two definitions that are of interest here. The first is “to procreate or generate.”¹⁸ Certainly this is understood as the Genesis mandate that God gave Noah and his sons, that they were to be fruitful and multiply, and increase in number (*Gen 8:15-17*). The second definition is “to cause; to produce as an effect.”¹⁹ An example of the later is that Hitler caused the Holocaust through a direct result of his policies he set in place.

The problem with the first definition is that in terms of humanity, the father precedes the child²⁰, which intimates that the child did not exist prior to its birth. This then violates the understanding as to what it means to be divine, “always existing”. This is problematic and leads one to believe that Jesus as the only begotten Son was a created or made creature, an Arian position that was deemed heretical.²¹ Quite the opposite of “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made” of the Nicene Creed. So then what does it mean to be begotten?

One might be tempted to say that the second definition (to cause or produce an effect) is appropriate. But even this definition has problems in that the action of “begotting” is an act of one person. The above cannot be equated with the Godhead, the 3 in 1 and 1 in 3 with which Thomas Jefferson was so troubled.²² Realistically, one is left with the idea that to describe or define *begotten* in terms of the Son and the Father, humanity lacks

¹⁸ Jess Stein, 122.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hall, 20.

²¹ Dowley, 156.

²² Hall, 54.

context and words in which to understand the “pretemporal unity” of that relationship.²³⁸

Thus one has a new dimension in which to discuss and investigate the begottenness of Christ, and that is in terms of space and time.

Space and Time

One may ask what does space and time have to do with whether or not Christ is divine and begotten. The answer has to do with the idea of eternity and the universe. In a previous section *eternal* was defined as that which “lasts forever, without beginning or ending”. If Jesus is part of the Trinity then he is divine and God, without beginning and without ending.²⁴ That would indicate that he precedes the creation of the universe.

The point here is all that is seen, known and understood is bundled up in this object called the universe. All that humanity is able to convey with respect to the meaning and context about Christ is bounded by this universe.²⁵ Humanity’s frame of reference is creation, this universe. Hall, in his book *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* puts it this way “But if they are talking of God, man’s creator, they must not think of him on a human level.” And he continues with this idea when he says “The Arians are guilty of a serious category error. They have applied human categories to God in an inappropriate and illogical fashion.”²⁶ In other words one cannot describe God who is eternal and Jesus who is co-eternal in terms of a limited finite universe which he created.

The real question related to Jesus’ begottenness, is “is *time* eternal”, even to

²³ Rusch, 4.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Hall, 41.

²⁶ Ibid., 40.

the point of preceding the universe? If so then assertions such as “before times” or “before the ages” takes on significance regarding the divinity and begottenness of Christ.

The Beginning of Time

In classical physics it was assumed that time had no beginning and would continue without cessation. This gave rise to the view that the universe “was static and unchanging”²⁷, one that was constant, neither contracting nor expanding. In this model the universe was either eternal in its nature (without beginning and without ending) or it was created to look as if it had no beginning and would be eternal afterwards.²⁸

This changed when Edwin Hubble made a significant discovery in 1929. The universe was not static and in fact observations showed that it was expanding, distant galaxies were moving away in all directions.²⁹ How could this be? The obvious answer was that there was a beginning, a “big bang”. Stephen Hawkins in his book *A Brief History of Time* states that given the expanding universe two possibilities could be considered by way of explanation. The first is that God would have created the expanding universe at any point in time in the past since one point would look like any other point in time. Or the second explanation and the more likely one, that the expansion was caused by an initial big bang in the distant past, the universe began out of nothing.³⁰ In the later explanation one is reminded of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”.

²⁷ Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1988), 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

If it were asked does time precede the act of creation one could point to Genesis 1:1 as asserting that it does not. Yet it wasn't until 1905 with Einstein's theory of relativity that science was able to catch up with biblical understanding. As discussed by Stephen Hawkins in his book, *Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays*, one finds that it no longer is appropriate to talk of time and space as separate entities, but rather as a "space-time object."³¹ Why is this important? It is important in that when the universe was created, time began. If the reader were to consider the big bang as the point at which God created the universe, then time also was created since the two are intimately entangled and inseparable. This means that time had a beginning and is bounded, unlike the static view of the universe where time is eternal.

How does one talk of what happened or what existed prior to the creation of the space-time object? Paul Davies draws a profound conclusion in his book, *Cosmic Jackpot, Why Our Universe is Just Right for Life*. In it he states:

Something must have preceded the big bang. And it's true that we find it hard to imagine tracing history of the universe further and further back to a point at which time just stops. But in fact the notion is neither absurd nor new. Augustine was already there in the fifth century. His considered answer to what God was doing before creating the universe was that "the world was made with time and not in time." Augustine's God is a being who transcends time, a being located outside of time as well as space and matter. Thus Augustine skillfully avoided the problem of why the creation happened at the moment rather than some other earlier moment. There were no earlier moments.³²

This then brings us back to the definition of *eternal* which is "lasting forever, without beginning or end". Time is not eternal. It had a beginning. To assert such phrases as

³¹ Stephen W. Hawking, *Black Holes and Baby Universes and Other Essays*, (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1994), 43.

³² Paul Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot, Why Our Universe is Just Right for Life* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 69.

“outside of time” or “before the ages”³³ are meaningless simply because *outside* and *before* in and of themselves infer a point within the space-time object. In either case, neither existed prior to creation. One cannot profess a “before” when time does not exist. The Bible asserts time had a beginning, and by all accounts science agrees with it.

Conclusion

There was agreement by the early church fathers in the Council of Nicaea in 325 that Jesus was divine. He and the Father were of one substance, “True God from True God, begotten, not made.”³⁴ The disagreements arose based upon when and how he was begotten of God. A few endeavored to explain Jesus’ begotten state as referring to his incarnation.³⁵ To the majority this was insufficient to describe his relationship with the Father who was eternal. The idea that Christ did not exist before he was begotten was first of all in conflict with his divinity (that he always existed with the Father and was co-eternal with the Father). Secondly if he were not divine he could not have conveyed salvation, in that the gift was not his to give nor could he have the capacity to sustain it. And quite possibly the most significant justification is that to describe his begottenness in terms of humanity is to convey meaning and understanding where none are achievable. Jesus, being divine precedes creation and time (space-time). Humanity is bounded by the space-time object and must attempt to describe what it professes to know or understand

³³ Hall, 36.

³⁴ Rusch, 49.

³⁵ Rusch, 35.

by the context that it provides. Any attempt to determine what the begottenness of the Son means prior to creation (where there was no “prior to”) inflates humanity’s capacity beyond what it really is. Therefore all we can truly say is that there is no contradiction in Jesus Christ’s divinity and his eternal begottenness. Beyond that lies the unfathomable.

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Appendix A

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