The Only Begotten Son
(Ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός)

by Michael Marlowe

My purpose here is to discuss the meaning of the word μονογενής (*monogenes*) as used in the New Testament, the Septuagint, and in other ancient writings. I am especially interested in its use by the Apostle John in his Gospel and in his first Epistle, and its use in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325. I will argue that the rendering "one and only" is semantically reductionistic and theologically inadequate.

The Greek word μονογενής is an adjective compounded of μονος "only" and γενος "species, race, family, offspring, kind." In usage, with few exceptions it refers to an only son or daughter. When used in reference to a son, it cannot mean "one of a kind," because the parent is also of the same kind. The meaning is, the son is the only *offspring* of the parent, not the only existing person of his *kind*. And so in the Greek translation of the book of Tobit, when Raguel praises God for having mercy on δυο μονογενεις (8:17), he does not mean that his daughter Sara and Tobias were two "unique" persons; he means that they were both only-begotten children of their fathers. In Luke's Gospel, the word is used in reference to an only child in 7:12, 8:42, and 9:38. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, it is said that when Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac he was offering up τον μονογενή, "his only-begotten" (11:17), because although Abraham had another son, God had said that only in Isaac shall Abraham's seed (σπερμα) be named. (Πίστει προσενήνοχεν Ἀβραὰμ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ πειραζόμενος, καὶ τὸν μονογενῆ προσέφερεν ὁ τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀναδεξάμενος, πρὸς ὃν ἐλαλήθη ὅτι Ἐν Ἰσαὰκ κληθήσεταί σοι σπέρμα). [1] When the word μονογενής is used in reference to a son or daughter, it always means "only-begotten."

There are a few places where the word has been understood to mean, "one of a kind" or "incomparable." For instance, in his article "The One and Only Son" Richard Longenecker calls attention to an occurrence in one early Christian source, an epistle written by Clement of Rome:

> Writing about the same time as the fourth evangelist (i.e. A.D. 95-96), Clement of Rome (*1 Clement* 25) spoke of the Phoenix, that mysterious bird of the East, as *monogenes*—that is, as "unique" or "the only one of its kind":

>> Let us consider the marvelous sign which is seen in the regions of the east, that is, in the regions about Arabia. There is a bird, which is named the Phoenix. This, being the only one of its kind (*touto monogenes hyparchon*), lives for 500 years; and when it reaches the time of its dissolution that it should die, it makes for itself a coffin of frankincense and myrrh and other spices, into which in the fulness of time it enters and then dies. But as the flesh rots, a certain worm is engendered, which is nurtured from the moisture of the dead creature, and puts forth wings. Then when it has grown lusty, it takes up that coffin where are the bones of its parent, and carrying them, it journeys from the country of Arabia even unto Egypt, to the place called the City of the Sun—and in full daylight and in the sight of all, it flies to the altar of the Sun and lays them on it. And this done, it then returns. So the priests examine the registers of the times, and they find that it has come when the five hundredth year is completed. [2]

The problem here is that Longenecker does not give us any reason to think that the semantic component "begotten" is absent. In this context, we even see the author dwelling upon the strange manner in which the Phoenix engenders its one *offspring*. Why should we think that there is no idea of "begetting" in the word *monogenes* in this context? We also note that in the immediately preceding paragraph (which Longenecker does not quote) the author is comparing the resurrection of the dead to the regeneration of a plant through its seed:

http://www.bible-researcher.com/only-begotten.html

Let us consider, beloved, how the Lord continually proves to us that there shall be a future resurrection, of which He has rendered the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising Him from the dead. Let us contemplate, beloved, the resurrection which is at all times taking place. Day and night declare to us a resurrection. The night sinks to sleep, and the day arises; the day [again] departs, and the night comes on. Let us behold the fruits [of the earth], how the sowing of grain takes place. The sower goes forth, and casts it into the ground; and the seed being thus scattered, though dry and naked when it fell upon the earth, is gradually dissolved. Then out of its dissolution the mighty power of the providence of the Lord raises it up again, and from one seed many arise and bring forth fruit. [3]

Here we may see a reason why the word *monogenes* is used in connection with the Phoenix: in contrast with the numerous offspring of the plants ("from one seed many arise") the Phoenix is the only offspring (*monogenes*) of its parent. It is probably right to emphasize the *mono* "only" here, as Longenecker does, but there is no good reason to say that the *genes* must mean "kind" without any connotation of "begotten."

Longenecker also argues that the Septuagint's usage of μονογενής for the Hebrew יָחִיד (*yachid*, "only") in some of the Psalms indicates "more general meanings for the term as well, depending on the context." He maintains that "in Psalms 25:16 and 68:6 (LXX) the idea of 'the only one' is nuanced to mean 'desolate' or 'solitary' or 'all alone' ..." (p. 121). But his reference to Psalm 68:6 here is a mistake, because the word used in the Septuagint translation of Psalm 68:6 is μονοτροπος ("living alone, solitary"), not μονογενής. [4] Concerning Psalm 25:16 (where the word does occur), we might ask why μονογενής is used by the translator if he wanted to convey the sense "alone," because in Greek the ordinary word for "alone" is μονος (and that is the word we find in the version of Symmachus at this point). So why does μονογενής appear here instead? It seems unlikely that the Septuagint translator would have reached for this unusual word to convey the meaning "alone" when he could have done that more idiomatically with the word μονος. It may be that he habitually associated the Hebrew adjective *yahid* with only children (in 7 of the 11 occurrences of this word in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to only children), and so he assumed that the word meant "only begotten." In any case, the Septuagint translators often used stereotyped renderings, in which Greek words are used mechanically, without attention to the context or the semantic nuances of the Hebrew words. [5] Hence the use of μονογενής here. We cannot always determine the meaning of Greek words in the Septuagint by equating them with the meaning of the original Hebrew words, because the translator may not have understood the Hebrew the way we understand it. Longenecker then goes on to suggest that the word μονογενής means "priceless and irreplaceable" in Psalms 22:20 and 35:17. Here again he is trying to establish the meaning of the Greek word by associating it with the contextual nuances of a Hebrew word. This method is unsound. The meanings of the Hebrew words cannot be poured into the Greek words like this. The Greek words have their own meanings, and they often represent an interpretation which is at variance with the true meaning of the Hebrew. [6]

Rhetorically, the strongest point in Longenecker's argument comes when he quotes a statement found in a philosophical poem written by Parmenides (fifth century B.C.): "The sixth-fifth century B.C. philosopher Parmenides spoke of Being as 'ungenerated [*ageneton*], imperishable, whole, unique [*monogenes*], and without end' (Frag. 8.3-4), thereby ignoring—particularly in parallel with *ageneton*—any idea of generation in the word as might be found etymologically in *genos*." (p. 121.) Obviously in this context the word μουνογενες (the old Ionic form of μονογενής) could not have been meant to carry the implication that "Being" is "begotten." But it is by no means clear how the proposed sense "unique" (used in some recent translations of the poem) makes sense in the context either. In this poem Parmenides teaches that our perception of change and motion is an illusion, and that an unchanging and unitary "Being" is the only reality. What could he mean by saying that this universal stuff of reality is "one of a kind"? Some scholars have suggested that Parmenides is using μουνογενες in the sense "of one kind" or "homogeneous," i.e., not compounded of different elements. This would make good sense in the context, but there is no other attestation for that sense of the word. Others have decided that the word μουνογενες was not present in the original text. John Burnet argued that the word μουνογενες obtained its place in the text when someone tried to interpret the original wording of the text along the lines of Plato's statements about the cosmos in his *Timaeus*. He eliminates it by emending the text to read ως αγενητον εον και ανωλεθρον εστιν, εστι γαρ ουλομελες τε και ατρεμες ηδ' ατελεστον, which he translates, "what *is* is uncreated and

http://www.bible-researcher.com/only-begotten.html

indestructible; for it is complete, immovable, and without end." [7] John R. Wilson proposes a different emendation: ως αγενητον εον και ανωλεθρον εστιν ουλον μουνομελες τε και ατρεμες ηδε τελεστον, in which μουνομελες "single-limbed" replaces μουνογενες. [8] Wilson mentions the proposed sense "one of a kind" for μονογενής and μουνογενες, but he rejects it, because classical scholars who have suggested this meaning "rely mostly on two passages from Plato's *Timaeus*," he says, in which the sense "only begotten" seems more suitable to the context if we only recognize that the word is being used pleonastically. We will not take a position on the correct solution to interpretive problems in Parmenides and Plato, but clearly, classical scholars who have specialized in the reconstruction and interpretation of Parmenides' poem have looked upon the μουνογενες here as a problem. It can hardly be used to *demonstrate* the meaning of the word—especially for the *Koine* Greek in which John's Gospel was written, more than five hundred years later. We conclude that this example has no probative value.

One of the weakest points in Longenecker's article comes when he argues that the μονογενες τεκνον πατρι in line 898 of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* "must mean something like 'the favored or chosen child of his father'" because Agamemnon "was not the only child of Atreus." But if we look at the context we see that when Agamemnon's treacherous wife uses the phrase μονογενες τεκνον πατρι, she is employing a metaphor. The phrase comes within a series of exuberant comparisons:

> But now, having born all this, my heart freed from its anxiety, I would hail my husband here as the watchdog of the fold, the savior forestay of the ship, firm-based pillar of the lofty roof, only-begotten son of a father, or land glimpsed by men at sea beyond their hope, dawn most fair to look upon after storm, the gushing stream to thirsty wayfarer—sweet is it to escape all stress of need. Such truly are the greetings of which I deem him worthy. (trans. Herbert Weir Smyth)

Agamemnon is a watchdog, a forestay, a pillar. His appearance is like the sight of land to sailors who had given up hope, the dawn after a storm, a stream. His return is like that of an "only-begotten son of a father," upon whom all the family's happiness depends. These are certainly metaphorical comparisons, and not to be taken literally. And they are deliberately extravagant. In his response, Agamemnon even objects to the words of her "wide-mouthed, extravagant exclaim" as a deification which will bring upon him the jealous anger of the gods. In this ironic way Aeschylus foreshadows and sets in motion the tragic fate of Agamemnon. Longenecker ignores the context and misses the point. He treats the μονογενες τεκνον πατρι literalistically, as if it were some matter-of-fact statement about Agamemnon's family.

Passing on from Longenecker to others who have argued similarly, we find the same low quality of scholarship, in which the arguments depend entirely upon a few dubious examples, in combination with word-study fallacies. In 1953 Dale Moody wrote an article titled "The Translation of John 3:16 in the Revised Standard Version," which is often cited by others. At the end of this article he declares that 1 Clement 15:2 ("there is a bird which is called the Phoenix ...") "shows clearly that the above conclusions on *monogenes* are correct," because "the Phoenix was neither born nor begotten, but it could be *monogenes*, the only one of its kind!" Apparently Moody never looked at the passage to which he refers, which explicitly describes how a succession of solitary Phoenixes are begotten and born, by some autogenic process. The passage even decribes how the Phoenix disposes of the bones of its parent. It is "one of its kind" only in the sense that there is just one living at any one time. As we noted above, Clement's whole interest in this mythological bird lies in its death and rebirth.

Another place where μονογενής is said to mean only "unique" or "incomparable" is in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, a Jewish book written probably in Alexandria about 100 B.C. In it we find a hymn to God's "Wisdom" in which it is said that "there is in her a spirit quick of understanding, holy, μονογενες, manifold," and so forth (7:22). But even here it seems that the sense "only-begotten" is not unlikely, because Wisdom in this book is personified. She is called "the artificer of all things" (7:22), "all-powerful, all-surveying" (7:23), "the breath of the power of God," an "effluence" of His glory (7:25), an "effulgence from everlasting light, an unspotted mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (7:26), and so on. She "proclaimeth her noble birth (ευγενεια) in that it is given to her to live with (συμβιωσις) God" (8:3). [9] In the midst of such language, in which the author speaks of the noble birth of a personified Wisdom living with and emanating from God, we can hardly refuse to take μονογενής as a biological

metaphor. Clearly this praise of Wisdom is inspired by Proverbs 8:22 ff., in which God brings forth (Septuagint γεννα "begets") Wisdom "from everlasting, from the beginning."

In John's Gospel and First Epistle the same words and concepts are used to describe the special relationship of Jesus to God. The word μονογενὴς is used as an adjective modifying "Son," and once as a substantive. He uses the word in five places. I give the literal translation from the English Revised Version of 1881, with the corresponding Greek text:

<table>
<tr><td align="center">English Revised Version</td><td align="center">Souter's Greek Text</td></tr>
<tr>
<td>John 1:14. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth.</td>
<td>Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν (καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός), πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 1:18. No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.</td>
<td>Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός, ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο. (Some manuscripts read μονογενὴς θεός "the only-begotten God" here instead of ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.</td>
<td>Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται, ἀλλ᾽ ἔχῃ ζωὴν αἰώνιον.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 3:18. 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 of God.</td>
<td>ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 John 4:9. Herein was the love of God manifested in us, that God hath sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.</td>
<td>ἐν τούτῳ ἐφανερώθη ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν, ὅτι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ ἀπέσταλκεν ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸν κόσμον, ἵνα ζήσωμεν δι᾽ αὐτοῦ.</td>
</tr>
</table>

In four of the five places the word is used as an adjective modifying "Son," and in one of these (1:18) the Son is said to be "in the bosom of the Father." In the one place where it occurs as a substantive (1:14), it is followed by the prepositional phrase "from the Father," which implies sonship. And so we see that in every occurrence John is using the word as a biological metaphor, in which Christ is the "Only Begotten Son" of the Father.

Is there any doctrinal importance in this? Yes, there is. The biological metaphor, in which the Son (and only the Son) shares the *genus* of the Father, conveys the idea that Jesus Christ is a true *genetic* Son, having the same divine *nature* or *essence* as the Father. The meaning of the word μονογενὴς here is not just "only" or "one and only," as in the RSV, NIV, and ESV translations. John is not saying that the Son is "one of a kind." He is saying that Christ is the *second* of a kind, uniquely sharing the *genus* of the Father because he is the only *begotten* Son of the Father, as in the KJV, ERV, and NASB. In the early centuries of Christianity, this point of exegesis acquired great importance. During the fourth century a teaching known as the Arian heresy (which maintained that the Son was a created being) threatened the Church, and in response to it the orthodox Fathers emphasized that the Scripture speaks of a *begetting* of the Son, not a creation. On that Scriptural basis they maintained that the Son must be understood to be of the same *essence* as the Father (ὁμοούσιος τῷ πατρί). They further explained that when Scripture speaks of this "begetting" it refers to something taking place in eternity, not within time, and so there were never a time

http://www.bible-researcher.com/only-begotten.html

when the Father was without the Son. The orthodox teaching on this subject was set forth in the Creed adopted by the Council of Nicæa in A.D. 325:

Πιστευομεν εις ενα θεον πατερα παντοκρατορα, παντων ορατων τε και αορατων ποιητην. Και εις ενα κυριον Ιησουν Χριστον τον υιον του θεου, γεννθεντα εκ του πατρος μονογενη, τουτεστιν εκ της ουσιας του πατρος, θεον εκ θεου, φως εκ φωτος, θεον αληθινον εκ θεου αληθινου, γεννηθεντα, ου ποιηθεντα, ομοουσιον τω πατρι, δι ου τα παντα εγενετο, τα τε εν τω ουρανω και τα επι της γης· τον δι ημας τους ανθρωπους και δια την ημετεραν σωτηριαν κατελθοντα και σαρκωθεντα και ενανθρωπησαντα, παθοντα, και ανασταντα τη τριτη ημερα, ανελθοντα εις τους ουρανους, και ερχομενον κριναι ζωντας και νεκρους. Και εις το αγιον πνευμα. Τους δε λεγοντας, οτι ην ποτε οτε ουκ ην, και πριν γεννηθηναι ουκ ην, και οτι εξ ουκ οντων εγενετο, η εξ ετερας υποστασεως η ουσιας φασκοντας ειναι, [η κτιστον,] τρεπτον η αλλοιωτον τον υιον του θεου, [τουτους] αναθεματιζει η καθολικη [και αποστολικη] εκκλησια.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of one substance (ὁμοούσιον) with the Father; by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost. But those who say: 'There was once when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or, 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church. [10]

Athanasius in his Defence of the Nicene Definition (ca. 353), points to the word μονογενής in John 1:14 as one Scriptural proof for the teaching.

It has been shown above, and must be believed as true, that the Word is from the Father, and the only Offspring proper to Him and natural. For whence may one conceive the Son to be, who is the Wisdom and the Word, in whom all things came to be, but from God Himself? However, the Scriptures also teach us this.... John in saying, "The Only-begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him," spoke of what He had learned from the Saviour. Besides, what else does "in the bosom" intimate, but the Son's genuine generation from the Father? [11]

The Nicene Creed was revised at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, and in this revised form (known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) it continues to be used by the Greek Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and by some Protestant churches, as a confession of faith. Most Lutherans recite this Creed during their worship services at least once a month. Even those who do not use this Creed in their liturgies generally acknowledge the correctness of its teaching. Most Protestant confessions and summaries of doctrine have incorporated its language. For instance, the Westminster Confession (used as a doctrinal standard in conservative Presbyterian churches) reflects the Nicene teaching of the eternal generation of the Son in one of its paragraphs concerning the Trinity: "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." (chapter 2, paragraph 3.) In this

confession, a Scripture reference following the words "eternally begotten of the Father" points to John 1:14 and 1:18, as support for the doctrine.

If the word "begotten" as applied to Christ has had such importance in the history of Christian doctrine, why have some modern versions of the Bible omitted the "begotten" in their renderings of the verses quoted above?

It is because many modern scholars have rejected the interpretation of Scripture embodied in the Nicene Creed. These scholars maintain that the Nicene Creed's interpretation of Scripture is wrong, and they argue that the traditional rendering "only begotten" represents a dogmatically-motivated misinterpretation of the Greek word μονογενής. As one Baptist scholar puts it,

> The phrase "only begotten" derives directly from Jerome (340?-420 A.D.) who replaced *unicus* (only), the reading of the Old Latin, with *unigenitus* (only begotten) as he translated the Latin Vulgate. Jerome's concern was to refute the Arian doctrine that claimed the Son was not begotten but made. This led Jerome to impose the terminology of the Nicene creed (325 A.D.) onto the New Testament. [12]

This author gives the translators who have preferred "only begotten" too little credit, as if this phrase in the early English versions were merely an unthinking imitation of the Vulgate's *unigenitus*, and retained in some modern versions only by the force of a verbal tradition. But the translators of the King James Version were not just imitating the Vulgate when they translated μονογενής as "only begotten." They translated it thus because they understood it thus, in agreement with the interpretation of the word given in the Nicene Creed. And the author's contention that Jerome imposed the terminology of the Nicene creed onto the Scriptures when he used *unigenitus* is unjustifiable. It is no imposition on the word to translate it thus. [13] Athanasius and the other Greek Fathers of the early fourth century did not need any Latin version to interpret this word for them, and in their disputes with the Arians they frequently explained it in the sense, "only-begotten," with exegetical emphasis on the "begotten." In one place Athanasius says very plainly that Christ is called "Only-begotten, because of his generation from the Father." [14] In other places his use of the word is so connected with other words for "begetting" that it is impossible to suppose that it did not carry the meaning "only begotten." [15] If this were not enough, modern scholarly support for this understanding of the word is certainly not lacking either. "Only-begotten" is given as a sense for μονογενής in Lust's *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2nd ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003). In the 2nd ed. of the BAGD lexicon (1979) it is said that "the meanings *only, unique* may be quite adequate for all its occurrences" in the Johannine literature (p. 527), but the lexicon also presents the traditional view, in which the word is understood to mean "only-begotten." See also the article on *monogenes* by Büchsel in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, pp. 737-41. Büchsel concludes that in John's Gospel the word denotes "more than the uniqueness or incomparability of Jesus," because it also "denotes the origin of Jesus ... as the only-begotten." For a full discussion of this matter see John V. Dahms, "The Johannine Use of *Monogenes* Reconsidered," *New Testament Studies* 29 (1983), pp. 222-232. Dahms concludes, "the external evidence, especially from Philo, Justin, and Tertullian, and the internal evidence from the context of its occurrences, makes clear that 'only begotten' is the most accurate translation after all." [16] On the popular level, the recently published *Reformation Study Bible* (Ligonier Ministries, 2005), edited by a panel of respected conservative scholars, includes this note on the phrase "the only Son" in John 1:14 — "This phrase translates a single Greek word and explicitly points to the eternal generation of the Son in the Trinity." [17]

The truth is, those who do not acknowledge this meaning of the word μονογενής in the Johannine writings are themselves dogmatically motivated. Their preferred translation—"only"—is an undertranslation which hides from view a Scriptural *datum* that supports the Christology of the ancient Creed but which happens to be unpopular with modern theologians.

There is a tendency among modern theologians to "divide the Substance" of the Godhead (cf. the warning against this in the Athanasian Creed) by positing such independence and equality of the Persons of the Trinity that we can no longer conceive of them as being one God. Some modern theologians have little use for the term ὁμοούσιος ("one essence"), and they cannot abide the idea that there is any ontological priority of the Father in the Trinity, because this is too "hierarchical" and "patriarchal" for our

egalitarian age. The Son and the Spirit must be made totally equal to the Father in all respects, even if it means making them into three Gods. This trend is largely driven by liberal theologians who favor the new "social Trinity" concept (Moltmann being prominent among them), which imagines the Trinity to be like a voluntary society of persons who are not ontologically connected.

Among the more conservative thinkers there are also some who have criticized the Nicene Creed because they refuse any explanation of the relationship between Father and Son which describes the Son as being secondary to the Father in his "mode of subsistence." In their view, it "detracts from the glory of the Son," as Robert Reymond puts it. This appears to be an over-reaction to modern Unitarianism. Reymond claims that John Calvin was also opposed to the "eternally begotten" teaching of the Nicene Creed for this reason, but he has misinterpreted Calvin. [18] We see a good motive here, because Reymond wishes to defend the divinity of Christ, but he is still wrong. Tritheism is no less heretical than Unitarianism. [19]

One often encounters in liberal writers some statement to the effect that the Nicene doctrine of eternal generation derives from the emanationist metaphysics of ancient pagan philosophy, rather than from the Bible. Not that they care what the Bible says—they only wish to discredit the Nicene Creed in the eyes of those who do care what the Bible teaches. Unfortunately, in recent years this idea has been picked up by some relatively conservative theologians also, such as Paul Helm. In lectures and articles he has repeated this canard, alleging that the Nicene teachings concerning the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit "derive not from the New Testament but from pagan philosophy, from Neoplatonism." [20] But anyone who is really familiar with Neo-Platonism will readily see how implausible it is to maintain that the Nicene Fathers borrowed any element of their Christology from this pagan philosophy. We give a brief description of it from Neve's *History of Christian Thought:*

> With Neo-Platonism we enter the third century of the Christian era. The characteristic defender of Neo-Platonism was Plotinus, who lived in the years A.D. 204-269. His system was epitomized by his pupil Porphyry in the six *Enneads*. "The fundamental conception of this important work," says Weber (*History of Philosophy*, p. 167), "is emanatistic pantheism. It looks upon the world as an 'overflow,' as a diffusion of the divine life, and upon its 'reabsorption' in God as the final goal of existence." This is the monistic trend in the system of Plotinus, in which the world first emanates from God and then returns to Him.
>
> a. *The emanation or overflow.* God is a simple, perfect, absolute existence. He is One, and in Him there is no plurality or diversity. Furthermore He transcends all being and knowledge. His transcendence precludes any positive statement we may make concerning Him. If we attempt to say anything about Him by way of definition, we simply limit Him. Hence we can only say what He is not. We cannot even say that He thinks or feels or wills. Therefore we must be content with negative statements. So far as human knowledge, whether theological or philosophical, is concerned, Plotinus insisted very strongly upon God's unapproachableness and His differentiation from the world.
>
> Although God is the source of all things, He nevertheless did not create the world. For one thing, He does not need the world; and for another thing, He does not will to create the world. The world is only an emanation or "overflow" from God. In this process of emanation or overflow, there are three stages: (1) the *Nous*, or pure in mind; (2) the *Psyche* or *Soul*; and (3) *Matter*. Through the union of the soul with matter arises the world of phenomena, and the soul thereby becomes bound up with mortality and evil. The entrance of the soul into the human body constitutes a genuine fall, caused by the soul fixing its gaze upon the earth rather than upon God. While the body is fundamentally evil, still the soul may be benefited by its period of tabernacling in the body. It will thus gain cognizance of evil, and learn to utilize its own powers, thus starting on its return to God.
>
> b. *The Return or Absorption.* The process is now reversed, and the development proceeds from the lower to the higher. It is the task of the soul to return to God by severing its connections with the crass materiality of the body and by rising higher and higher in gradual stages. Failure to do this will send the soul after death into another body, either human or animal or vegetable, according to the nature and depth of its sin. The pure souls are colonized in the stars; only the very ripest may

return entirely to God. The means by which this ascending development takes place are the mystical ecstasy and ascetic ethics. In the state of mystical ecstasy the soul transcends itself, rises to the world of ideas where it not only recognizes that it is God, but actually becomes God. [21]

Also relevant to our subject is Neve's description of the earlier Gnostic heresies, in which the concept of divine emanations played an important role.

> *The Emanation Theory.* This theory which was held especially by the Alexandrians [he means the Alexandrian Gnostics –M.D.M.] and was extensively developed by them, served to explain how the world and man came into existence. The system of Valentinus [*circa* A.D. 150] in particular had a highly fantastic and speculative process of cosmogony [birth of the world] and theogony [birth of the gods]. From the hidden God there emanated a long series of divine essences (*aeons*) whose inherent divine power diminished inversely with the distance of removal from the original divine source. This process of depotentialization continued until a point was reached where the spiritual element came into contact with matter and was imprisoned in a material body. Thus man and the world were created.

> *The Creator*. The last link in the theogonic chain was the Creator or demiurge. He was thought to occupy a middle position between the world of spirit and the world of matter, and was usually identified with the Jehovah-God of the Old Testament. Although not absolutely hostile and evil, he was an inferior and antagonistic being—a blind intelligence, who was ignorant of the good God and who had unwittingly brought the world and man into existence. Arguing from the characteristics of the Jewish Law as described by Jesus, the Valentinian Ptolomaeus maintained that they could not have originated from the devil. It must have come from the demiurge—the "middle God" or "just God" (Epiphanius *Pan.*, h. 31:3-1 [*sic*]), who was regarded as an angelic being not free from malice and who governed with a loveless external justice. (p. 54)

Can we really suppose that Athanasius and the other Fathers of the Church borrowed their Christology from such philosophy? At several important points it is antithetical to the teachings of the Bible and obviously repugnant to orthodox Christian theology. Surely Helm is wrong when he asserts that the Christian teaching concerning the eternal generation of the Son derives from this source. The mere fact that an idea of emanation is present in both demonstrates nothing. [22] One might as well claim that the Christian teaching about the immortality of the soul derives from Neo-Platonic teachings about the soul's adventures after the death of the body. And in fact there are some who *do* make this claim—liberals and cultists, who make a hobby of attacking the Nicene Creed. Helm's idea that there is a connection between the Christology of the Nicene Creed and the pantheistic emanations of Neo-Platonism is not only unreasonable, it is irresponsible, because it lends aid to the enemies of orthodox Christianity.

I will quote now from Roger Beckwith's answer to Helm and Reymond in "The Calvinist doctrine of the Trinity" (*The Churchman* 115/4 [Winter 2001], pp. 308-315). Beckwith wrongly associates their views with the Calvinistic tradition in his article, because he has taken Reymond's claims about Calvin's teaching at face value (hence the title "The Calvinist doctrine of the Trinity"), and he fails to notice the modernistic origins of Helm's critique of the Nicene Creed. But he gives a concise and convincing reply to their contention that the doctrine is unscriptural.

> Though Calvinist theologians have in general followed the Nicene teaching, with or without the support of their master, some, without going as far as Professor Helm, have ventured to deny the begetting of the Son by the Father in eternity. A good example of this can be found in a recent book where the author, Robert Reymond, lists the main biblical passages usually quoted in support of this doctrine, and claims that they either do not, or do not certainly, teach it. They fall into four classes. First are the many passages which use the expressions 'Father' and 'Son'. He says that these should be viewed as simply denoting 'sameness of nature, and in Jesus' case, equality with the Father with respect to his deity (see John 10:30-36)'. It is difficult to regard this as an adequate account, for though it is certainly true that there is a sameness of nature between the two Persons and that both are God, the names 'Father' and 'Son' imply a reason for this sameness, namely, the begetting of the Son by the Father. The sameness of nature, which enables the Son to reveal the

Father (John 1:18; 12:45; 14:9), is a result of this fact. We saw above that the relationship of Father and Son, including the love it involves, already existed in eternity, so it is not just a way of speaking which depends on the incarnation; and if this is so, the begetting of the Son by the Father in eternity is necessarily implied. [23]

The second class of passage comprises those in which the term *monogenes* is used, traditionally translated 'only-begotten'. These are all, with the exception of one, in the writings of John — John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9, together with Hebrews 11:17. All the Johannine passages refer to Jesus, but the passage in Hebrews refers to Isaac. It is widely held today that the term should simply be translated 'only', not 'only-begotten', and when (outside the New Testament) it is used without reference to children this is certainly so; but because of the extreme frequency of the language of begetting and being born (the same term in Greek) in the Johannine literature, it is held by some that 'only-begotten' is, in this case, a better translation. It certainly seems to make better sense in John 1:14, where the word is used without a noun, and also in John 1:18, if 'God' and not 'Son' is the noun in question (as some maintain, following a variant reading). In the former verse, 'glory as of the only-begotten from the Father' is more meaningful than 'glory as of the only one from the Father', and in the latter verse 'the only-begotten God' can more meaningfully be said to make the Father known than 'the only God' can. Furthermore, if 1 John 5:18 refers to Jesus as 'he that was begotten of God', which is what most commentators believe, it is hard not to see this as relevant to the interpretation of the five passages containing *monogenes*, especially the three in which (as in this verse) the Father is called 'God'.

The third and fourth classes of passage contain only one passage each, John 5:26 and 1 John 5:18. Of John 5:26, Reymond claims that it refers to the Son's incarnate role, as Messiah. It is noteworthy, however, that the passage uses the eternal names of the two Persons, 'the Father' and 'the Son'. If, then, it does mean that the Father has given the *incarnate* Son to have life in himself, this might well be because he had already given him, as the *eternal* Son, to have life in himself. And this would conform with John 1:4, which says of the Word or Son of God, not just from the time of the incarnation but from the time of the creation — 'In him was life'.

Much less doubt attaches to 1 John 5:18. Although its interpretation is not beyond question, the difference of tense between 'whosoever is begotten of God' (perfect) and 'he that was begotten of God' (aorist) leads most commentators to see the latter phrase as referring to a different person from the former, namely Christ. And the time when Christ was begotten of God would have to be the time when the relationship of Father and Son commenced, namely, in eternity.

The biblical basis of the credal doctrine of the Trinity appears, therefore, to be secure. We can be thankful that the Fathers embodied in Creeds the exegetical conclusions which they had so patiently worked out, since this enables churches that use the Creeds to keep those conclusions constantly before their minds. The positive contribution which Calvin made to the exposition of the doctrine, by emphasising the three Persons and their equality, as each being God, was a valuable one, but the doubt cast by some later Calvinists on the eternal impartation of the divine being and nature by one Person to another has been a regrettable development and, insofar as Calvin was responsible for it, he has had a negative influence also. This negative development has involved an attenuation of trinitarian doctrine and a reductionist approach to the biblical evidence on which it rests, and of these tendencies Professor Helm's lecture is a rather extreme example.

Finally, it must *not* be supposed that all translators who have preferred "only" over "only begotten" are deliberately undertranslating the word μονογενής for theological reasons. Many translators simply wish to keep their translations simple and idiomatic, and the word "begotten" does not commend itself to those who are trying to translate the text into a familiar and contemporary style of English. It may also be that some translators prefer to leave out the "begotten" because they fear that laymen will misinterpret this to mean that the Son had a beginning in time. [24] Unfortunately, by failing to convey the "begotten" component of meaning in the word μονογενής they are in effect discarding centuries of careful theological exegesis, and it seems that we can hardly afford this loss in our generation. We need more theological

http://www.bible-researcher.com/only-begotten.html

literacy in the churches today, and it is not helpful when translators strip theologically important words from the text of the English Bible. The rendering "only begotten," or some other equivalent expression, should at least be indicated in the footnotes of English versions, and it is the duty of pastors to explain what this means.

Let what was confessed by the Fathers at Nicæa prevail. —Athanasius, *Letters*, lxi to Maximus, A.D. 371.

Michael Marlowe
Trinity Sunday, 2006

Notes

1. Notwithstanding D.A. Carson's contention that in Hebrews 11:17 μονογενής "clearly cannot mean 'only begotten son'" (*Exegetical Fallacies* [Baker, 1984], p. 29), commentators on the epistle to the Hebrews have never thought that the use of a term meaning "only begotten" in reference to Isaac is very problematic. Calvin writes in his commentary on Hebrews: "It may, however, be asked, why is Isaac called the only begotten, for Ishmael was born before him and was still living. To this the answer is, that by God's express command he was driven from the family, so that he was accounted as one dead, at least he held no place among Abraham's children." (Calvin Translation Society ed., trans. John Owen [Edinburgh, 1853], p. 287.) Similarly, Marcus Dods explains that Isaac is called "only begotten" because "irrespective of any other children Abraham had had or might have, it had been said to him ... in Isaac shall a seed be named to thee (Gen. xxi. 12.); that is to say, it is Isaac and his descendants who shall be known as Abraham's seed" (*Expositor's Greek Testament* vol. 4 [London, 1900], p. 358). These explanations are quite adequate. There is no need to suppose a meaning of "unique" for the word μονογενής here if only we will read the *entire sentence*, including verse 18.

2. Richard Longenecker, "the One and Only Son," chapter 11 in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (International Bible Society, 1991), p. 122. For his quotation of the passage from 1 Clement, Longenecker has used J.B. Lightfoot's translation (without attribution), with only a few changes for the sake of modern English.

3. English translation from Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. C. Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. 1. *The Apostolic Fathers; Justin Martyr; Irenaeus*. (Edinburgh, 1885; reprinted Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953).

4. Perhaps Longenecker has confused the Septuagint with the version done by Aquila, which does have the word μονογενής here. There are a number of such careless errors of fact in Longenecker's article. He states that "in Genesis 22:2, 12, 16, and Jubilees 18:2, 11, 15 (possibly also Jos. *Antiq.* 1:222), *monogenes* is used of Isaac in the sense of Abraham's 'favored,' 'chosen,' or 'unique' son, vis-a-vis Ishmael." (pp. 121-22.) But in fact the Septuagint does *not* have the word μονογενής in Genesis 22. It has the word αγαπητος, "beloved." The word μονογενής does not occur at all in the Pentateuch of the Septuagint. It is hard to understand why Longenecker is citing Jubilees here, because there is no extant Greek text for the Book of Jubilees. And the manuscripts of the Ethiopic version of this book (upon which we rely for any indication of the wording in the lost Greek version) do *not* indicate μονογενής in the places Longenecker cites. They indicate αγαπητος (in line with the Septuagint version of Genesis 22) or πρωτοτοκος "first born." Probably Longenecker just assumed that the Septuagint used the word in reference to Isaac in Genesis 22 because the Epistle to the Hebrews (which often quotes from the Septuagint) uses the word in reference to Isaac in 11:17. But strangely, later in the same paragraph he writes, "the LXX also renders *yahid* by *agapetos* (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16 ...", which seems to indicate that he was aware of the fact that the Septuagint uses αγαπητος instead of μονογενής in Genesis 22. In the same paragraph he also asserts that "in Psalms of Solomon 18:4 and Ezra 6:58, Israel is referred to as both *prototokos* and God's *monogenes*" (p. 122), but there is no "Ezra 6:58." Evidently in this case he has been confused by a statement in Büchsel's article in the TDNT, which says that "There is a striking use of μονογενής in Ps.Sol. 18:4 : 'Thy chastisement comes upon us (in love) as the first born and the only begotten son.' With this may be compared 4 Esr. 6:58 : 'But we, thy people, whom thou hast called the first born, the only begotten, the dearest friend, are given up into their hands.'" Here Büchsel is referring to the Latin text of Fourth Esdras (also called Second Esdras), a book for which there is no extant Greek text. Apparently Longenecker mistook it for a reference to the

Greek text of the canonical book of Ezra in the Septuagint. Longenecker does not seem to have looked at the texts he refers to; he is instead relying upon secondary sources, which we misunderstands, and so he misleads the reader into thinking that the word μονογενής is present in the cited texts.

5. Septuagint scholar Johan Lust writes, "For some Hebrew words, the translators employed a stereotyped Greek equivalent, disregarding the context and semantic nuances. Thus, שלום was translated as a rule by ειρηνη, although the semantic field covered by the Greek word does not coincide with that of the Hebrew. It is well known that this led to Greek sentences which must have been hard to understand for native Greek speakers, e.g. when David speaks of the ειρηνην του πολεμου (the peace of the war) in 2 Sam 11.7." (Introduction to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003], pp. xviii-xix).

6. Longenecker's idea that a meaning of "priceless and irreplaceable" can be established for the word on the basis of these two occurrences (Psalms 22:20 and 35:17) in the Septuagint has no merit. Büchsel argues more plausibly that when the Septuagint uses μονογενής in these places "the reference is to the uniqueness of the soul," with a translation "possible on the basis of the general use of μονογενής for 'unique,' 'unparalleled,' 'incomparable.'" ("μονογενής," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, English edition, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967], pp. 738-9). But he would have done better to compare these occurrences with the one in Psalm 25:16, which he calls "an unfortunate translation based on the mistaken belief that here, too, יָחִיד should be rendered μονογενής." (p. 739, n. 7.) On the word-study fallacy committed by Longenecker here, *cf.* the complaint of Adolf Deissmann: "People think that the problem is solved by ascertaining what Hebrew word or words are represented by the Septuagint word. They then look up the meaning of the Hebrew and thus obtain what they consider the 'meaning' of the Septuagint word. Equivalence of the words—an obvious fact, easily ascertainable—is taken without further ado to denote equivalence in the ideas conveyed. People forget that the Septuagint has often substituted words of its own rather than translated. All translation, in fact, implies some, if only a slight, alteration of the sense of the original. The meaning of a Septuagint word cannot be deduced from the original which it translates or replaces but only from other remains of the Greek language" (*The Philology of the Greek Bible*, trans. by L. Strachan [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908], pp. 88-89).

7. John Burnet, Early Greek Philosophy, 3rd edition. London: A & C Black Ltd., 1920. Burnet explains in a note: "I prefer to read εστι γαρ ουλομελες with Plutarch (*Adv. Col.* 1114 c). Proklos (in *Parm.* 1152, 24) also read ουλομελες. Simplicius, who has μουνογενες here, calls the One of Parmenides ολομελες elsewhere (*Phys.* p. 137, 15). The reading of [Plut.] *Strom.* 5, μουνον μουνογενες, helps to explain the confusion. We have only to suppose that the letters μ, ν, γ were written above the line in the Academy copy of Parmenides by some one who had *Tim.* 31 b 3 in mind. Parmenides could not call what is 'only-begotten,' though the Pythagoreans might call the world so." Even without this last sentence (in which the meaning "only begotten" is assumed for μουνογενες), Burnet's argument for the emendation is quite adequate. Scholars generally admit that problems of interpretation in classical literature are often best solved by such text-critical emendations. The text of Parmenides' poem (written in the fifth century B.C.) is preserved only in quotations of it made in the works of later writers. In this portion of it, the text derives from quotations included in a commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* by Simplicius of Cilicia, written in the sixth century A.D. —more than a thousand years after Parmenides. According to the ordinary canons of textual criticism, such a gap in the documentary evidence for the text of the original composition warrants a high degree of uncertainty about its original wording; and the likelihood of corruption is increased by the abstruse nature of the text. Even scholars who specialize in the interpretation of the Pre-Socratic philosophical texts have said that Parmenides is "extremely difficult to understand and seems self-contradictory to many who study him ... Michael C. Stokes observes that Parmenides wrote in 'riddling fashion,' and Jonathan Barnes contends that 'Parmenides's Greek is desperately hard to understand' and that aspects of it represent an 'almost impenetrable obscurity'" (http://www.enotes.com/classical-medieval-criticism/parmenides, accessed 27 Dec. 2006). It is very unlikely that his poem has come down to us without any corruption.

8. John R. Wilson, "Parmenides, B 8. 4," *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 20, No. 1. (May, 1970), pp. 32-34. Wilson explains: "A solution is to eliminate the awkward prefix in Plutarch and the illogical suffix in Simplicius, and so arrive at the compound μουνομελες, 'single-limbed' which is an effective and logical amplification of ουλον. Unlike ουλομελες, μουνομελες assertively denies any possibility of subdivision, an idea which is duly worked out at 8. 22 ff. ... And far from being unattested, the word is used by Empedocles [B 58], presumably in imitation of Parmenides, to convey exactly that sense of indivisibility which we require here" (p. 34).

9. In quotations from the *Wisdom of Solomon* I have used the English translation by Samuel Holmes in R.H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English, with Introductions and Critical and Explanatory Notes*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1913), pp. 518-568. In his introduction to the book, Holmes compares the author's personification of Wisdom to the personification of the Word (Logos) in Philo, and observes that in Philo "The Logos

is not unbegotten as God ... On the other hand it is not begotten as man ... We shall perhaps not be far wrong if we attribute the same idea to our author with regard to the personality of Wisdom." (p. 528) And the obvious parallels here with John's statements about the Son are too close to be ignored.

10. Greek text from Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (6th ed, 1931), p. 60; English translation from vol 1, pp. 28-29. The Nicene Creed normally recited in churches today is more properly called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is a revision of the original Creed, associated with the second ecumenical council, convened at Constantinople in A.D. 381. In it the relevant sentences read, Και εις ενα κυριον Ιησουν Χριστον, τον υιον του θεου τον μονογενη, τον εκ του πατρος γεννεθεντα προ παντων των αιωνων, φως εκ φωτος, θεον αληθινον εκ θεου αληθινου, γεννεθεντα, ου ποιεθεντα, ομοουσιον τω πατρι· δι ου τα παντα εγενετο ... "And [we believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through whom all things were made ..."

11. English Translation by A. Robertson, from vol. 4 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. In view of the importance attached to this point of exegesis by the Church Fathers, I find it hard to understand how Longenecker can insist upon the NIV's rendering "One and Only." He even maintains that "only begotten" is undesirable "particularly because it leaves open the possibility of an etymological emphasis on *genes* (the idea of generation)." (*op cit.*, p. 126.) He not only disagrees with the interpretation of the word emphasized by Athanasius, he even objects to the rendering "only begotten" *particularly* because it "leaves open the possibility" of this interpretation!

12. Christopher Church, "Only Begotten," in the *Holman Bible Dictionary* (Broadman & Holman, 1991).

13. Likewise John Calvin was certainly not "imposing the terminology of the Nicene Creed" upon the text of Scripture when he used the word *unigenitus* as a translation of μονογενής in his Latin commentary on the First Epistle of John. Rather, he simply recognized that *unigenitus* was the best Latin equivalent for the word, as did Jerome. See Calvin's Latin text at 1 John 4:9 in the Calvin Translation Society's edition of his *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Edinburgh, 1855).

14. Μονογενὴς μὲν διὰ τὴν ἐκ Πατρὸς γέννησιν. *Second Discourse against the Arians*, § 62.

15. For example, at the beginning of his *Expositio Fidei* we find the words: Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα ἀγέννητον θεόν, Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ποιητὴν ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀοράτων, τὸν ἔχοντα ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ τὸ εἶναι· καὶ εἰς ἕνα μονογενῆ Λόγον, Σοφίαν, Υἱόν, ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἀνάρχως καὶ ἀϊδίως γεγεννημένον, "We believe in one Unbegotten God, Father Almighty, maker of all things both visible and invisible, that hath His being from Himself. And in one Only-begotten Word, Wisdom, Son, begotten of the Father without beginning and eternally." (Greek text according to the Benedictine edition by Montfaucon, as reproduced in Thilo, *Sancti Athanasii archiepiscopi Alexandrini Opera dogmatica selecta*, Leipzig 1853.) It would be foolish to argue that in such a sentence μονογενῆ Λόγον means "One and Only Word," especially after ἕνα.

16. D.A. Carson in his *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, 1984) offers a brief response to Dahms, in which he focuses on the Septuagint's translation of Psalm 25:16, μονογενης ... ειμι εγω (I am *monogenes*). The Hebrew here has the adjective *yahid* "only" used in a substantive sense, lit. "I am an only one." Carson assumes that the Septuagint translator would have understood the Hebrew to mean "I am alone" or "lonely." We grant that this is probably the meaning of the Hebrew, but if the Septuagint translator thought so, why does he not use the common word μονος here? We would expect μονος ειμι εγω if he had wanted to say "I am alone." Carson further maintains that the translator cannot have meant "I am an only begotten one" here because "David wrote the Psalm, and David had many siblings" (p. 30, n. 13). But we cannot assume that the Greek translator interpreted this verse with David and his brothers in mind. The Psalms of David are poetry, they contain many hyperbolic and metaphorical statements that were not literally true of David (e.g. Psalm 22:14-18), and this would have been just as obvious to the Septuagint translators as it is to us.

17. Unfortunately, the English Standard Version translation used in this edition does not point to it. We hope that this defect is repaired in future editions of the ESV.

18. See Reymond's *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 324-330. Reymond misunderstands various remarks in Calvin's Institutes which are directed against the teachings of a contemporary, Valentine Gentile, as if they were directed against the Nicene Fathers. According to Calvin, "certain rascals" of his own time (Valentine Gentile and his disciples), asserted that the Father "in forming the Son and the Spirit, infused into them his own deity," and thus in a "dreadful manner of speaking" they say that the Father is the only "essence giver." In opposition to this teaching, Calvin affirms in the very words of the Nicene Creed, that Christ "is the Son of God because the Word was begotten by the Father before all ages." (*Institutes*, 1.13.23). And again, in arguing against the errors of Servetus, who held that "the Word for the first time began to be when God opened his

holy mouth in the creation of the universe," Calvin asserts that "it is necessary to understand the Word as begotten of the Father before time" (1.13.7-8). Reymond completely misunderstands Calvin here if he equates the "dreadful manner of speaking" of Calvin's "rascals" with the Nicene Creed itself. Reymond also badly misunderstands his words at the end of Book 1, chap. 13: "*Certe nihil astute praeterii quod mihi adversum esse putarem: sed dum ecclesiae aedificationi studeo, multa non attingere consultius visum est, quae et parum prodessent, et lectores gravarent supervacua molestia. Quid enim disputare attinet, an semper generet Pater? quando stulte fingitur continuus actus generandi, ex quo liquet ab aeterno tres in Deo personas substitisse.* ("Certainly I have not shrewdly omitted anything that I might think to be against me: but while I am zealous for the edification of the church, I felt that I would be better advised not to touch upon many things that would profit but little, and would burden my readers with useless trouble. For what is the point in disputing whether the Father always begets? Indeed, it is foolish to imagine a continuous act of begetting, since it is clear that three persons have subsisted in God from eternity.") This is *not* directed against the "eternally begotten" teaching of the Nicene Creed, as Reymond would have the reader think; rather, it is directed against the kind of scholastic debate found in Lombard's *Sentences*, book 1, distinction 9, about the propriety of using the word *semper* ("always") in connection with the generation of the Son, which might seem to imply a perpetual begetting *within time*. There is no indication in any of Calvin's writings that he disagreed with the doctrine of eternal generation as set forth in the Nicene Creed. On the contrary: he positively affirms it, and uses it against Unitarian heretics of his time. In a withering review of Reymond's book that appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 62/2 (Fall 2000), pp. 314-319, Robert Letham takes him to task for his misrepresentation of Calvin: "Reymond cites one short paragraph from Warfield's fine article 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity' to argue that Calvin rejected Nicene trinitarianism (334-35). This article is ninety-five pages long and Warfield repeatedly affirms Calvin's approval of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan doctrine of the trinity. For instance, 'It will have already become apparent ... that in his doctrine of the Trinity Calvin departed in nothing from the doctrine which had been handed down from the orthodox Fathers.' He also underlines Calvin's 'pervasive' approval of eternal generation and eternal procession (244-45)! From this long article Reymond extracts one small paragraph and uses it to counter all Warfield has carefully stated over scores of pages. This is shoddy" (p. 319).

19. I do not see how one can hold that Father, Son and Holy Spirit must each have His own "attribute of self-existence," as Reymond demands (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 326), without breaking them into three Gods; and I see no Scriptural warrant for insisting upon self-existence as an "attribute" proper to the Son. It is more correct to say that self-existence pertains to the *essence* of divinity, which the Son shares, but not to the *hypostasis* of the Son as such. So we must reject Reymond's idea that "it detracts from the glory of the Son" when an "attribute of self-existence" is not ascribed to the Son. As Charles Hodge says, "self-existence, independence, etc., are attributes of the divine essence, and not of one person in distinction from the others. It is the triune God who is self-existent and independent. Subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation, is a scriptural fact; and so also is the perfect and equal godhead of the Father and the Son, and therefore these facts must be consistent." (*Systematic Theology*, vol 1, p. 474.) Again, the motive for this appears to be good—Reymond imagines that he is defending the "glory of the Son" (p. 328) by rejecting the Nicene formulations—but we must be careful not to deny part of the Truth while defending another part of it. Tertullian once observed (in *Against Praxeas*, chap. 1), *Varie diabolus aemulatus est veritatem. Adfectavit illam aliquando defendendo concutere.* (In various ways the devil has vied with the Truth. Sometimes he has tried to shake it by defending it.)

20. See Helm's article "Of God, and of the Holy Trinity: A Response to Dr. Beckwith," *The Churchman* 115/4 (Winter 2001), pp. 350-357.

21. J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), pp. 24-25.

22. In his treatise *Against Praxeas* Tertullian describes how the Word may be understood to be begotten by the Father, as an emanation of His eternal *ratio* (correctly interpreting the λόγος in John's prologue as both *sermo* "word" and *ratio* "reason"); and, is if to answer Helm's charge of pagan philosophical influence in this conception, he writes, "If any man from this shall think that I am introducing some προβολη—that is to say, some prolation (*prolatio*) of one thing out of another, as Valentinus does when he sets forth æon from æon, one after another—then this is my first reply to you: Truth must not therefore refrain from the use of such a term, and its reality and meaning, because heresy also employs it. The fact is, heresy has rather taken it from Truth, in order to mould (*struo*) it into its own counterfeit. Was the Word of God put forth (*prolatus est sermo dei*) or not? Here take your stand with me, and flinch not. If He was put forth, then acknowledge that the true doctrine has a prolation; and never mind heresy, when in any point it mimics the truth. The question now is, in what sense each side uses a given thing and the word which expresses it." The essential difference between the use of the emanation concept in the Church Fathers and its use in the metaphysics of Valentinus and Plotinus is that the former use it only to explain the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit in the Godhead, whereas the latter use it to explain the creation of the world. The Gnostics and Neo-Platonists taught that the whole universe consisted of a series of emanations from God.

23. Concerning the meaning of the terms "Father" and "Son," Reymond urges that these words "must not be freighted with the Western ideas of source of being and superiority on the one hand and of subordination and dependency on the other. Rather, they should be viewed in the biblical sense as denoting sameness of nature, and in Jesus' case, equality with the Father with respect to his Deity" (*New Systematic Theology*, p. 325). This attempt to characterize the concept of filial subordination as an unbiblical "Western idea" about the father-son relationship is quite unsupportable. If any distinction is to be drawn between the ancient Eastern and modern Western concepts of sonship, surely it is the ancient Eastern culture which emphasizes more strongly the subordination of the son to the father. The idea that an "equality" exists between family members is a distinctly modern and Western idea, and quite foreign to the Bible. But Beckwith's answer here does not depend upon any cultural considerations like this. His point is that the biblical terms "Father" and "Son" in themselves necessarily include the idea of a begetting. The point is expressed more amply by William G. T. Shedd: "... these trinal names given to God [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] in the baptismal formula and the apostolic benediction, actually force upon the trinitarian theologian, the ideas of paternity, generation, filiation, spiration, and procession. He cannot reflect upon the implication of these names without forming these ideas, and finding himself necessitated to concede their literal validity and objective reality. He cannot say that the first person is the Father, and then deny that he "begets." He cannot say that the second person is the Son, and then deny that he is "begotten." He cannot say that the third person is the Spirit, and then deny that he "proceeds" by "spiration" (*spiritus quia spiratus*) from the Father and Son. When therefore Augustin, like the primitive fathers generally, endeavors to illustrate this eternal, necessary, and constitutional energizing and activity (*opera ad intra*) in the Divine Essence, whereby the Son issues from the Father and the Spirit from Father and Son, by the emanation of sunbeam from sun, light from light, river from fountain, thought from mind, word from thought ... nothing more is done than when by other well-known and commonly adopted analogies the Divine unity, or omniscience, or omnipresence, is sought to be illustrated. There is no analogy taken from the finite that will clear up the mystery of the infinite—whether it be the mystery of the eternity of God, or that of his trinity. But, at the same time, by the use of these analogies the mind is kept close up to the Biblical term or statement, and is not allowed to content itself with only a half-way understanding of it. Such a method brings thoroughness and clearness into the interpretation of the Word of God." ("Introductory Essay" to Augustine's *On the Holy Trinity*, in vol. 3 of *Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Schaff [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887]). It is no "pretentious metaphysical speculation," as Reymond calls it (p. 337), when we merely recognize the plain implications of the biblical terms "Father" and "Son."

24. One would like to think that translators who have a high view of scripture would not simply cut out an important word for fear that it would be misinterpreted, but it does seem likely that this motive is at work here. And the fears are certainly justified. I notice that in the *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody Bible Institute, 1989), Paul Enns in his explanation of the Trinity rightly explains that "the Son is eternally begotten from the Father (John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). The term *generation* suggests the Trinitarian relationship in that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father" (p. 200). But two pages later when he begins to deal with "those who deny the Trinity" on account of "problematic terms" which "seem to imply that Christ is inferior to the Father," he asserts that "It is with reference to the humanity of Christ that the term *begotten* is used; it could never be used with reference to his deity. Begotten does not relate to Jesus' being the Son of God." (p. 202) He then goes on to explain that *monogenes* in John 1:14, 18, 3:16 and 1 John 4:9 means "unique" and not "only-begotten" (p. 203). Enns contradicts himself here, evidently because he is not really familiar with the doctrine of the eternal begetting and its Scriptural basis. If this is the case with writers of popular theological handbooks, how can untutored laymen be expected to interpret the "begetting" language of Scripture in an orthodox way? But this is where the teaching ministry of the church must come in.

C.S. Lewis on the Only-Begotten Son

from *Mere Christianity*

One of the creeds says that Christ is the Son of God "begotten, not created"; and it adds "begotten by his Father before all worlds." Will you please get it quite clear that this has nothing to do with the fact that when Christ was born on earth as a man, that man was the son of a virgin? We are not now thinking about the Virgin Birth. We are thinking about something that happened before Nature was created at all, before time began. "Before all worlds" Christ is begotten, not created. What does it mean?

We don't use the words begetting or begotten much in modern English, but everyone still knows what they mean. To beget is to become the father of: to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you

beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a man makes a wireless set —or he may make something more like himself than a wireless set: say, a statue. If he is a clever enough carver he may make a statue which is very like a man indeed. But, of course, it is not a real man; it only looks like one. It cannot breathe or think. It is not alive.

Now that is the first thing to get clear. What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God; just as what man makes is not man. That is why men are not Sons of God in the sense that Christ is. They may be like God in certain ways, but they are not things of the same kind. They are more like statues or pictures of God.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *   *   *   *</p>

I said a few pages back that God is a Being which contains three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube contains six squares while remaining one body. But as soon as I begin trying to explain how these Persons are connected I have to use words which make it sound as if one of them was there before the others. The First Person is called the Father and the Second the Son. We say that the First begets or produces the second; we call it begetting, not making, because what He produces is of the same kind as Himself. In that way the word Father is the only word to use. But unfortunately it suggests that He is there first—just as a human father exists before his son. But that is not so. There is no before and after about it. And that is why I have spent some time trying to make clear how one thing can be the source, or cause, or origin, of another without being there before it. The Son exists because the Father exists: but there never was a tune before the Father produced the Son.

Perhaps the best way to think of it is this. I asked you just now to imagine those two books, and probably most of you did. That is, you made an act of imagination and as a result you had a mental picture. Quite obviously your act of imagining was the cause and the mental picture the result. But that does not mean that you first did the imagining and then got the picture. The moment you did it, the picture was there. Your will was keeping the picture before you all the time. Yet that act of will and the picture began at exactly the same moment and ended at the same moment. If there were a Being who had always existed and had always been imagining one thing, his act would always have been producing a mental picture; but the picture would be just as eternal as the act.

In the same way we must think of the Son always, so to speak, streaming forth from the Father, like light from a lamp, or heat from a fire, or thoughts from a mind. He is the self-expression of the Father—what the Father has to say. And there never was a time when He was not saying it. But have you noticed what is happening? All these pictures of light or heat are making it sound as if the Father and Son were two things instead of two Persons. So that after all, the New Testament picture of a Father and a Son turns out to be much more accurate than anything we try to substitute for it. That is what always happens when you go away from the words of the Bible. It is quite right to go away from them for a moment in order to make some special point clear. But you must always go back. Naturally God knows how to describe Himself much better than we know how to describe Him. He knows that Father and Son is more like the relation between the First and Second Persons than anything else we can think of. Much the most important thing to know is that it is a relation of love. The Father delights in His Son; the Son looks up to His Father.