

Some Evangelicals, such as John MacArthur, J. Oliver Buswell, and the late Walter Martin, have been abandoning the Trinitarian faith as defined by the First Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). Their abandonment of orthodox Trinitarianism consists in denying the eternal Sonship of Christ, the doctrine that the second person of the Trinity was the Son of God from all eternity. Instead, they claim that the second person of the Trinity only became the Son of God at his incarnation. Apart from the incarnation he was still God, but not *the Son*, just the second Person.

This teaching destroys the internal relationships within the Trinity, because if the Son was not eternally begotten by the Father then neither did the Spirit eternally proceed from the Father through the Son. It also destroys the Fatherhood of the first person, since without a Son there is no Father. Thus the fundamental familial relations among the persons of the Godhead are destroyed and replaced by mere social relationships, a bare existence of three persons in the Godhead. Prior to the incarnation, there is no longer the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but simply Number One, Number Two, and Number Three—the numbers themselves being an arbitrary designation.

The Church Fathers who wrote the creeds had a different view. They recognized that the Bible depicts the Son as having his identity *as the Son* before his incarnation. In 1 John 4:9 we read, that “the love of God was made manifest among us [in] that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.” Thus, the second person of the Trinity was already the Son when he was sent into the world.

The same truth is taught under a different analogy in John 1:1,14 where we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Here the Word (i.e., the second person of the Trinity) is pictured as having his identity as the Word from all eternity. Thus, from all eternity the Word of God proceeded from God, just as speech proceeds from a speaker; similarly,

a Son proceeds from his Father. Under both analogies, whether as the Son of God or the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity is depicted as eternally proceeding from the first person of the Trinity.

Of special interest among the following passages are those in which the early Christians wrote of God as Father prior to the incarnation. Such passages imply the role of the second person as Son *before* the incarnation, since as we have noted, without a Son there is no Father.

IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

“Jesus Christ . . . was with the Father before the beginning of time, and in the end was revealed” (*Letter to the Magnesians* 6 [A.D. 110]).

JUSTIN MARTYR

“Jesus Christ is the only proper Son who has been begotten by God, being his Word and first-begotten, and power; and, becoming man according to his will, he taught us these things for the conversion and restoration of the human race” (*First Apology* 23 [A.D. 151]).

“God begot before all creatures a beginning, who was a certain rational power from himself and whom the Holy Spirit calls . . . sometimes the Son . . . sometimes Lord and Word. . . . We see things happen similarly among ourselves, for whenever we utter some word, we beget a word, yet not by any cutting off, which would diminish the word in us when we utter it. We see a similar occurrence when one fire enkindles another. It is not diminished through the enkindling of the other, but remains as it was” (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 61 [A.D. 155]).

IRENAEUS

“[The Gnostics] transfer the generation of the uttered word of men to the eternal Word of God, attributing to him a beginning of utterance and a coming into being In what manner, then, would the Word

of God—indeed, the great God himself, since he is the Word—differ from the word of men?” (*Against Heresies* 2:13:8 [A.D. 189]).

TERTULLIAN

The Father makes him equal to himself, and the Son, by proceeding from him, was made the first-begotten, since he was begotten before all things, and the only-begotten, because he alone was begotten of God, in a manner peculiar to himself, from the womb of his own heart, to which even the Father himself gives witness: ‘My heart has poured forth my finest Word’ [Ps. 45:1–2]” (*Against Praxeas* 7:1 [A.D. 216]).

HIPPOLYTUS

“Therefore, this sole and universal God, by reflecting, first brought forth the Word—not a word as in speech, but as a mental word, the reason for everything. . . . The Word was the cause of those things which came into existence, carrying out in himself the will of him by whom he was begotten. . . . Only [God’s] Word is from himself and is therefore also God, becoming the substance of God” (*Refutation of All Heresies* 10:33 [A.D. 228]).

ORIGEN

“So also Wisdom, since he proceeds from God, is generated from the very substance of God” (*Commentary on Hebrews* [A.D. 237]).

GREGORY THE WONDERWORKER

“There is one God, the Father of the living Word, who is his subsistent wisdom and power and eternal image: perfect begetter of the perfect begotten, Father of the only-begotten Son. There is one Lord, only of the only, God of God, image and likeness of deity, efficient Word, wisdom comprehensive of the constitution of all things, and power formative of the whole creation, true Son of true Father” (*Declaration of Faith* [A.D. 265]).

LACTANTIUS

“When we speak of God the Father and God the Son, we do not speak of them as different, nor do we separate them, because the Father cannot exist without the Son, nor can the Son be separated from the Father, since the name of ‘Father’ cannot be given without the Son, nor can the Son be begotten without the Father. . . . [T]hey both have one mind, one spirit, one substance; but the former [the Father] is as it were an overflowing fountain, the latter [the Son] as a stream flowing forth from it. The former as the sun, the latter as it were a ray [of light] extended from the sun” (*Divine Institutes* 4:28–29 [A.D. 307]).

COUNCIL OF NICAEA I

“We believe . . . in our one Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, the only-begotten born of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made . . .” (*The Creed of Nicaea* [A.D. 325]).

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM

“Believe also in the Son of God, the one and only, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God begotten of God, who is life begotten of life, who is light begotten of light, who is in all things like unto the begetter, and who did not come to exist in time but was before all the ages, eternally and incomprehensibly begotten of the Father. He is the Wisdom of God” (*Catechetical Lectures* 4:7 [A.D. 350]).

THE LONG IGNATIUS

“[O]ur God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the Virgin. For ‘the Word was made flesh’ [John 1:14]” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 7 [A.D. 350]).

ATHANASIUS

"When these points have been demonstrated, then they [the Arians] speak even more impudently: 'If there never was a time when the Son was not, and if he is eternal and coexists with the Father, then you are saying that he is not a Son at all, but the Father's brother.' O dull and contentious men! Indeed, if we said only that he coexisted eternally and had not called him Son, their pretended difficulty would have some plausibility. But if while saying that he is eternal, we confess him as Son of the Father, how were it possible for him that is begotten to be called a brother of him that begets? . . . For the Father and the Son were not generated from some preexisting source, so that they might be accounted as brothers. Rather, the Father is the source and begetter of the Son. . . . It is proper for men to beget in time, because of the imperfections of their nature; but the offspring of God is eternal because God's nature is ever perfect" (*Discourses Against the Arians* 1:14 [A.D. 360]).

BASIL THE GREAT

"What was in the beginning? 'The Word,' he says. . . . Why the Word? So that we might know that he proceeded from the mind. Why the Word? Because he was begotten without passion. Why the Word? Because he is image of the Father who begets him, showing forth the Father fully, in no way separated from him, and subsisting perfectly in himself, just as our word entirely befits our thought" (*Eulogies and Sermons* 16:3 [A.D. 368]).

AMBROSE OF MILAN

"[The Arians] think that they must posit the objection of his [Christ] having said, 'I live on account of the Father.' Certainly if they refer the saying to his divinity, the Son lives on account of the Father, because the Son is from the Father; on account of the Father, because he is of one substance with the Father; on account of the Father, because he is the Word given forth from the heart of the Father; be-

cause he proceeds from the Father" (*The Faith* 4:10:132 [A.D. 379]).

GREGORY OF NAZIANZ

"He is called Son because he is identical to the Father in essence; and not only this, but also because he is of him. He is called only-begotten not because he is a unique Son . . . but because he is Son in a unique fashion and not in a corporeal way. He is called Word because he is to the Father what a word is to the mind" (*Orations* 30:20 [A.D. 380]).

COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE I

"We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father" (*The Nicene Creed* [A.D. 381]).

COUNCIL OF ROME

"If anyone does not say that the Son was begotten of the Father, that is, of the divine substance of him himself, he is a heretic" (*Tome of Damasus*, canon 11 [A.D. 382]).

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

"The Father is not made nor created nor begotten by anyone. The Son is from the Father alone, not made or created, but begotten. . . . Let him who wishes to be saved, think thus concerning the Trinity. But it is necessary for eternal salvation that he faithfully believe also in the incarnation. . . . He is God begotten of the substance of the Father before time, and he is man born of the substance of his mother in time. . . . This is the Catholic faith; unless everyone believes this faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved" (*Athanasian Creed* [A.D. 400]).

AUGUSTINE

"In the way that you speak a word that you have in your heart and it is with you . . . that is how God issued the Word, that is to say, how he begot the Son. And you, indeed, beget a word too in your heart, without temporal preparation; God begot the Son outside of time, the Son through whom he created all things" (*Homilies on John* 14:7 [A.D. 416]).

PATRICK OF IRELAND

"Jesus Christ, whom we . . . confess to have always been with the Father—before the world's beginning, spiritually and ineffably [he was] begotten of the Father before all beginning" (*Confession of St. Patrick* 4 [A.D. 452]).

COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE II

"If anyone does not confess that there are two generations of the Word of God, one from the Father before all ages, without time and incorporeally, the other in the last days when the same came down from heaven and was incarnate . . . let such a one be anathema" (*Anathemas Concerning the Three Chapters*, canon 2 [A.D. 553]).

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.
Bernadeane Carr, STL, 10 August 2004

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+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, 10 August 2004

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