

## **“Deep Waters”**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

**November 11, 2018**

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I am interested in the text we have read for one reason only: the statement made by the Father, “This is my beloved Son...”

This will be a sermon unlike most of my sermons. It is not part of a series of sermons. More than that, it concerns a somewhat arcane or mysterious subject of Christian theology about which most believers rarely, if ever think. They confess it whenever they recite the Nicene Creed, but, if the truth be told, most have little idea of what they mean by what they say. I am speaking of the doctrine of *the eternal generation of the Son*. In the Creed we say or sing that we believe in Jesus Christ, the *only begotten* Son of God, *begotten* of the Father before all worlds...*begotten not made*...” We are with those words confessing the eternal generation of God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. That is what it means to say that the Son of God is *begotten of the Father*: that he has always been, is, and will always be *generated of*, or from God the Father.

You may be tempted to think that such a subject, while perhaps interesting, has little practical importance for you, but I will argue at the end of the sermon that it is far more important than you may realize. But it certainly is a subject that requires careful thought and reflection. This sermon is an exercise in both: thinking our way through a biblical subject, a principal piece of our doctrine of the Holy Trinity and considering what it means for us.

But before we launch away into these deep waters, let me tell you how this sermon came to be. I read, not so long ago, a review of a book entitled *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology*. It was written by Kevin Giles, an Australian pastor and theologian. I would have been mildly interested in the book and might have purchased it and read it, but what really caught my attention was that the foreword of the book had been written by Robert Letham.

Bob Letham and I studied together in Scotland in the mid-1970s. He was writing a thesis in historical theology while I was writing one in biblical theology. We had different professors, but we attended the same church. Florence and I spent some evenings together with Bob and Laurie. He went on to a pastorate in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, then to seminary teaching, presently at Wales Evangelical School of Theology, and to a writing career. Bob is a significant theologian. His award-winning book, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, has been acknowledged on all sides as one of the most important recent contributions to the study of the doctrine of the Trinity. He has also published a very important examination of our *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the theological environment in which it was produced. I saw Bob a few years ago when he consented to come from Wales to testify on behalf of the defense in the trial of Dr. Peter Leithart, when Peter was accused of false teaching by a member of our presbytery.

What intrigued me was that I knew that Bob Letham had some problems with the thinking and published writing of Kevin Giles. In his book on the Trinity he included an appendix in which he took Giles to task for certain of his conclusions regarding the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and for certain of the implications he drew from those conclusions. In other words, I had reasons to think that Bob Letham and Kevin Giles were theological adversaries. But here was Robert Letham writing an enthusiastic recommendation for Kevin Giles' book on the eternal generation of the Son. Here is how Letham's foreword begins:

“In various journals over the past few years, Kevin Giles and I have expressed our disagreements on certain aspects of trinitarian theology – and those differences remain – yet I am writing a foreword for this impressive exposition of the eternal generation of the Son. Giles rightly argues that this doctrine, which is at the heart of Trinitarian doctrine, is not negotiable.” [7]

That made me all the more interested in Giles' book. Bob Letham obviously thought the book was important; that Giles was defending an important doctrine that has recently been viewed with some skepticism.

As it happens, that is exactly the case. A number of theologians, representing different traditions, even some of our own men – indeed, even one of my own teachers – have expressed doubts about the eternal generation of the Son. They have argued that it is not sufficiently supported by the biblical data, that it is confusing, that nothing very important is lost if we abandon it, and so on. Giles and Letham, on the contrary, argue that the doctrine is an essential element of our understanding of the Trinity, of God himself.

Without a doubt the eternal generation of the Son of God has been the teaching of Orthodox Christianity at least from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onward. It is found in the Nicene Creed as we saw; but it is taught by the church fathers generally – both of the eastern and western parts of the early church – was then taught as well by the Reformers, and was incorporated in the Reformation creeds, including our own *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The eighth chapter of the *Confession*, entitled “Of Christ the Mediator” begins:

“It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, *his only begotten son...*”

Our Presbyterian authorities, together with Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and evangelical Protestant theologians ever since have defended those words, “only begotten son,” the words that express the doctrine known as “the eternal generation of the Son.” But in recent years a surprising number of voices have been raised – in various communions – expressing the thought in one way or another that we can do without the eternal generation of the Son.

Now, it is certainly true that the Bible never says in so many words that the Son of God is eternally begotten or generated. (Most of the Christian doctrine of the tri-unity of God is never said in the Bible *in so many words*.) But it has long been the church's understanding that those words do reflect a reality that is expressly and deeply and necessarily biblical. But, as with every part of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, great care must be taken to ensure that proper

distinctions are made and understood. We use human language to express the truth about God – we can hardly do anything else – but when speaking of God, whose life is to us the deepest of mysteries and will remain far beyond our comprehension, we must take care that our terms are very carefully defined, that we know what we mean by them and, perhaps even more, *what we do not mean by them*; that we stay safely within the limits defined by God’s self-revelation in the Bible. Christianity insists on a self-named and self-revealed God. We do not make up our theology, our understanding of God. God has revealed himself to us and it is that revelation we confess with our minds and our hearts.

So, what is meant by the eternal generation of the second person of the triune God? Well it doesn’t mean that the Father gave birth to the son in the sense in which we use the term *generate*. It doesn’t mean that the Father existed before the Son, as human fathers exist before their sons. It doesn’t mean that the Son had a beginning, as human sons do and as the Arians taught God the Son had. It doesn’t mean that the Father is greater than the Son, has more prestige or authority than the Son. We are not using the term *generate* or *generation* in the sense in which those terms are used in relation to human life. We are talking about God, not man.

But the fact is *we have been taught* in Holy Scripture to speak of and think of the first person of the Triune God as *the Father* and the second person of the Triune God as *the Son*. The relation between the first and second persons of the Triune God is best described as the relation between a Father and a Son. To be sure, we don’t, we can’t understand what that relation is. The inner life of God and the three persons who are the one God is ineffable and beyond our capacity to understand. *But, in some significant way God himself has taught us in his Word that the first person is the Father and the second person is the Son; and not just the Son, but his Son.* That is what we know and all we know.

One of our very best theologians of the person of Christ, the Scot Donald Macleod, has written:

“...it is far from clear what content, if any, we can impart to the concept [of eternal generation]. It is revealed, but it is revealed as a mystery.” [*The Person of Christ*, 131]

Gregory of Nazianzen put this more bluntly in the fourth century:

“But the manner of this generation we will not admit that even the angels can conceive, much less you. Shall I tell you how it was? It was in a manner known to the Father who begat, and to the Son who was begotten. Anything more than this is hidden by a cloud and escapes your dim sight.” [Cited in Macleod, 131]

In other words, though our understanding of a father is that he generates, sires, or produces children who did not exist before, that is not the meaning here. What is more, in human begetting a new life is created from another. That is not the case here either. The Son is as eternal as the Father.

But, as has been pointed out from the beginning, the terms father and son are *correlatives*, that is, there is a mutual relation between the two; they correspond to one another. That is, the father and the son are two persons of the triune God related to one another in a distinctive, specific way that

can be appropriately described to us as the relation between a father and a son. Again, what that relation is, we don't presume to know, but to speak of the eternal generation of the son is simply to confess that the Father is a Father to the Son and the Son is a son to the Father. It is, as Abraham Kuyper put it, our "stammering attempt" to speak of the deep mystery of the divine life. [*Dictaten Dogmatiek*, I, Locus de Deo, 208]

But don't miss the obvious. A father is not simply any person; he is a person who bears a particular relation to a child, a son or a daughter. An adult man is a man whether or not he is a parent, but he is a father only if he has a child. In human generation the father *makes the son* in a way. *But it is not so in God*. The Father and the Son are equally ultimate and equally eternal, though it is still important that the one should be the Father and the other should be the Son. So, it is that in the Creed we say that the Son was *begotten not made*.

As an aside, at this point, let me simply add that the relation between the Father and the Son, described as it is in those terms, is not the relation that exists between the Father and the Holy Spirit or between the Son and the Holy Spirit. That relation is different. Call it *procession*, the term used in the Bible when we read that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father or from the Son or call it *spiration*, a breathing out (since the Greek word for Spirit also means breath or wind); it is a different order of relationship than the relation that exists between the Father and the Son. What is being confessed in all of this is what the early church fathers first called *taxis*, or the "order" of the relationships within the triune life of God. By order they meant that each person had a certain disposition, a certain personal property, a property defined by the relationship each sustained to the others.

So, to sum up, what is being said when we speak of the eternal generation of the Son is that he both shares the Father's nature and that he is related to the Father in some way that is best described as the relationship between a father and his son. That is all. The term "generation" refers only to *the nature of the relationship* between the first and second persons of the triune God. In other words, the eternal generation of the Son is a way of confessing that in some ineffable way we have been taught that the relationship between the Father and the Son is like that of a human father and a human son without any of the creaturely limitations of temporal order, of authority or power, or of personal origin. Another way of saying this is that fatherhood, or generating, is inseparable from the personal disposition or unique characteristic of the first person of the Godhead and generation or sonship is inseparable from the second person. [Kuyper, 209] Or we can say that the personal characteristic of the first person of the Godhead is paternity and the personal characteristic of the second person is filiation or sonship; *whatever that means*.

Now, the terms themselves, father and son, are the principal foundation of this argument and this theological confession of the eternal generation of the Son. But you should know that there are other biblical data that support what we have said so far. There is more here to say that I have time for this morning but suffice it for me to say just two things.

*First*, though it has sometimes been argued that the many biblical references to Jesus as the Son of God refer to him only in his incarnate life, as God *and man* – for after all, we human beings who believe in Jesus are also declared to be sons of God in the Bible – in fact and I would think

very clearly on a number of occasions the Bible refers to Jesus Christ as the Son of God *in his divine nature*. He is, as he has always been, God the Son. In the incarnation the eternal second person of the Godhead took to himself a human nature and was born a human baby. One such text is the one we have read this morning. That day, by the Jordan when Jesus was baptized, the Triune God appeared. The Father to declare that Jesus was his Son and the Spirit to rest upon him. Later in Matthew when we read that believers are to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the same three persons, we are given to understand that Jesus did not become the Son of God when he was born or when he was baptized. He was always the Son.

Another clear and still more famous instance of this usage is found in John 3:16 and 17 where it is said twice that God *sent his only Son into the world*. The church fathers understood that if the Father *sent his Son* into the world, his *only* Son, the reference was and had to be to God the Son, the second person of the Triune God. In fact, five times in the writing of John – four in the Gospel and once in his first letter – Jesus is referred to as God’s *only* or *unique* Son. This designation sets him apart from all other “sons.” [Giles, 81] He is unique precisely because he is the only one who is a son *in himself*, *by his very nature*, or who is begotten in a way consistent with his being God himself, which the New Testament declares him to be in so many different ways. That is why we say “begotten, not made” and “being of one substance with the Father.” Of no human being could *that* be said!

*Second*, Bob Letham points out that in all the five passages where *monogenēs*, only or unique, appears the verb *gennaō*, which means to beget or to give birth is close at hand. That is, “begotten” and “unique” are related to one another in their NT usage. In John 1, for example, we read not only of *the only Son of the Father* but read that those who received Jesus, who believed in his name were born or *begotten of God*! In other words, the ideas of sonship and of being begotten are closely related to one another in the Bible. To say that we are the sons of God is to say in other words that we are begotten of God. This too is the reason why the church early on confessed that the Son of God was eternally begotten of the Father. He was the Father’s son, but he was eternal. Put those two things together and you have eternally begotten or the eternal generation of the son. What distinguishes God’s one and only Son from the rest of us who are children of God is that God the Son was begotten *but not made*! We believers are also begotten of God, his sons, but Jesus is the one and only Son of God. [Letham, 385] We are God’s children by a new birth or new begetting; Jesus is God’s son by an eternal begetting. In any case, I hope you can see that the terms *generation* and *begotten* are intended to refer to the same relation indicated by the terms Father and Son when used of the divine persons.

Alright, your heads are spinning. Mine too. They are supposed to spin, because in thinking about the persons of the triune God we are peering into the impenetrable mystery of the divine life. Remember, Augustine reminds us that even to use the word “person,” for the three in the Godhead is only our effort, after collecting all the biblical data, to say *something* rather than to say nothing at all. Obviously, in the case of God, “person” does not refer to an individual in isolation or separation from other persons. Each person is not one-third of God or he would not be God. They share the divine life and so the life of one another in a completely mysterious way. But, as Augustine put it, if we are not to be reduced to silence a word must be chosen and “person” seemed and has seemed through the ages to be the best choice. [Giles, 78] How else are we to say that the three are of identical essence and co-equal eternally; that the three mutually

indwell one another, yet are irreducibly distinct? [Letham, 491] We don't think about all of this as often as we should and the result is that we are too often altogether too little impressed by God and think of him in altogether too familiar a way. Too much of the time in our thinking he is not the God who is far beyond us and past our finding out.

But this God, three in one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of everything. Who *we* are; what we are like as thinking, speaking, loving human beings, human beings who are always and profoundly *in relationship* with others; all manner of relationships, every one of our relationships to be a relationship of love. I say who and what we are is a reflection of God himself who lives in eternal relationship – thought, speech, and love – within himself. That human life is organized in families, fathers and sons, is because God is both Father and Son. Have you thought about the deep mystery of your life, the extraordinary powers of thought and speech you have, powers that are precisely designed to enable your relationships with others, the profound needs you have for love and connection, all of this is because you are made in the image of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But more than that, the greatest wonder of your life and mine, that sinful, selfish, irreverent, grubby, ungrateful, petty, cruel, indifferent, and uncaring people like ourselves are loved by God, loved with an everlasting love, loved with a Father's love and because of that love have been raised to eternal life in fellowship, loving unity with God, I say again, all of that is because God is love and God is love because God is three persons in an eternal harmony of affection and regard and passionate attraction; because God is a Father who loves his a Son, a Son who loves his Father, and a Father and a Son who loves the Spirit and the Spirit loves them.

It is this relationship between the Father and the Son that accounts for our salvation and our hope for the world to come. The bond between Father and Son in the Trinity – so profoundly expressed in this formula – is what makes the sending of the Son to die and the Lord's anguished cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" on the cross so significant. The eternally begotten Son crying out to his Father. And remember this: It was not the Father who came, but the Son. It was not the Son who sent but who was sent. The Father begets the Son, not the reverse and it is for that reason that the Father is the one who sends, and the Son is the one who is sent. The Son is from the Father – begotten, not made – not the Father from the Son. In other words, the incarnation, the Son becoming man, reveals something to us about the eternal relation between Father and Son. It is a window on the inner life of God; it is also the origin of our salvation.

But there is more. It was the Lord Jesus who said in answer to Philip's request, "Lord, show us the Father..." "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." It is in the Lord Jesus Christ that the whole God is revealed to us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Only because the Son is fully God and equal with the Father, could Jesus have said that; but the only way he could have said that *to Philip* (and so to us) is by coming from on high to be a man among us and for us.

Thomas Torrance was one of the most important 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians. He was also a British army chaplain in the Second World War. During the heat of battle in Italy in 1944 Torrance recollected:

“As I knelt down and bent over him, he said, ‘Padre, is God really like Jesus?’ I assured him that he was – the only God there is, the God who had come down to us in Jesus, shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Saviour. As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away.” [Cited in Letham, *Union with Christ*, 37]

What is God like? Look at Jesus Christ. Who can show us how to become the children of God? The Son of God himself. Who can teach us what it means to be a child of God, no one can do that better than the eternally begotten Son of the Father!

How little we understand and appreciate how God is the source *of everything*, how the very nature of the Triune God *explains everything*, and that everything in life that we hold dear and everything we hope for in the world to come is an outpouring of God’s own life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Every now and then it is important for us to face the mystery, the deep and impenetrable mystery of God. Every now and then it is important for us to consider what it means to say that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The more we ponder God and the three persons, the greater will be our joy, our confidence, our gratitude, and our love!