

Basil against  
eunomius on the  
eternal generation of  
the son



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Introduction:

Basil of Caesarea was a prolific Christian theologian from the fourth century. This paper will center around Basil's Trinitarian theology, especially in his first dogmatic writing, *Against Eunomius*<sup>[1]</sup> on what he claims about the eternal generation of the Son. An introduction<sup>[2]</sup> to first major doctrinal work of Basil, *Against Eunomius*, is in order. As Mark DelCogliano says, "Basil considers belief in the Father and the Son, and in the Father's begetting of the Son, as essential to Christianity."<sup>[3]</sup> For understanding the Father-Son relationship I consider the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son essential as revealed in Scripture.

Eunomius, the Arian theologian, has made his stance known in his Apology<sup>[4]</sup>, which was produced a few years before *Against Eunomius*. Eunomius, in his writing talks about God alone as eternal (Apol. 41). "The Unbegotten" is Eunomius' title or name for God (Apol. 43). "Only-Begotten" is the Son's title (Apol. 53). Eunomius affirms that "Unbegottenness" forms the complete substance of the Father (Apol. 43), and "Begottenness" forms the full substance of the Son (Apol. 49). He trusts that literally nothing can connect the fundamental disparity between the Father and the Son. This drives Eunomius to attest that the Father and the Son are plainly seen as different in substance.

"The primary point in Basil's first major doctrinal work, *Against Eunomius*, is Basil's criticism of core aspects of Eunomius' theology which, trades off the Christian's access to God the Father and undermines His salvation through Christ."<sup>[5]</sup>As Kevin Giles (2012: 134) says concerning Basil:

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The doctrine of eternal generation affirms two fundamental truths basic to the Trinitarian faith: The Father and the Son are one in a divine being and power and yet at the same time indelibly differentiated as the Father and the Son. [6]

I now turn to examine in more detail how Basil and Eunomius comprehend and explain the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son.

There are three fundamental parts to Basil's dispute against Eunomius on the relationship between the Father and the Son. In the first place, Basil sets up that "Unbegottenness" isn't the substance of God. Besides that, he builds up the likeness between the Father and the Son. Lastly, he clarifies how the divine generation should be comprehended. These three fundamental disputes are logically associated. The first formulates for the second, and the third reinforces the second.

### 1. Unbegottenness isn't the Substance of God:

Eunomius uses the terminology "Only-Begotten" and "Unbegotten" as an attempt to help his case that an absence of likeness of substance exists between the Father and the Son (Eun. 115, 118). Basil views the Father's begetting of the Son as communicating a foundational aspect of their identity. There is neither a Father, nor a Son without the begetting.

Furthermore, the Son's generation from the Father implies he shares in the Father's own proper nature. There is an affinity in substance between the Father and the Son. Their likeness in substance is confirmed in John 14: 9, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" and John 12: 45, "And whoever

sees me sees Him who sent me.” These verses, urge careful comparison possible between the Father and the Son. Henceforth, I reject Eunomius’ explanation that there is no likeness or solidarity between the Father and Son (Apol. 42). Basil’s point is that the Son is indivisibly confined with, and undeniably identical to the Father in the domain of substance and he underpins his critique with Scripture.

Similarly, Basil’s disputation that names do not impart the substance of a thing is of great significance (Eun. 103). Basil’s consideration of the term “Unbegotten” as another case of this rule is of extraordinary significance in this discussion (Eun. 106). As Basil indicates, it is absolute conceit and irreverence for Eunomius to attempt to encapsulate God’s substance using a name (Eun. 108). “ There is not one name which encompasses the full nature of God and expresses it sufficiently. Rather, there are several different names, each contributing its own importance, to an idea of God. These ideas may be both weak and insignificant as regards to the whole, but given our position in comparison to God, these should be adequate for us.” <sup>[7]</sup> Thereby, the only name of the Father can neither be “ Unbegotten” nor can it name the full substance of God (Eun. 113). No one can perceive the “ what-ness” of the substance of God. No one name of God can characterize His substance due to God’s inconceivable transcendence. It is vital to observe how we consider the names used for God and how they identify with His substance. An indivisible solidarity is exhibited by the eternally existing formula of substance between the Father and the Son, who perfectly share the one divine being. Henceforth, I dismiss Eunomius’ claim that the names “

Unbegotten/Begotten” are the only names for the Father and Son, also his claim that “Unbegotten/Begotten” define the substances they refer to.

In Basil’s comprehension of the Father-Son relationship, the solidarity of substance and distinction between them is of most extreme significance. This section altogether gives a good example of his philosophical and theological account of the doctrine of eternal generation. On this point, DelCogliano and Radde-Gallwitz assert:

Basil argues that only when we grasp simultaneously both the common and distinguishing features do we begin to understand the Father and the Son” (2011: 51).

As we progress through this paper, we will see how Basil’s significance on both the formula of substance and on the unique marks of the Father and the Son are established on the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation from the Father.

## 2. Likeness between the Father and the Son

Basil counteracts Eunomius’ allegation that no resemblance among Father and Son exists. Basil gives his stance of divine simplicity as he contends for the resemblance of the Father and the Son: “I consider their resemblance to comprise in this very thing, as the Father is free from composition, so too is the Son...one does not think about resemblance as demonstrated by the personality of form, rather as indicated by the substance itself.” Basil continues, “Everything that continues to exist for nature without form and shape is that it has resemblance in the substance itself, and for this

situation, uniformity is a character of power. Christ the power of God (1 Cor. 1: 24). It is clear that all the Father's power is contained in Him. Thus, the Son does likewise, what He sees the Father doing (Jn. 5: 19)." Interpretation of John 5: 19 and 1 Corinthians 1: 24 enables one to move quickly from asserting for resemblance of substance to assert for an equality of substance between the Father and the Son. " Basil and Eunomius conceive of the relationship between nature and power differently. For Eunomius, in a sense, God is powerless; that is, the divine essence can have no products at all. On the other hand, Basil sees the relationship between power, substance and product as a strong argument for the resemblance of the Father and the Son. Power expresses substance; if Father and Son have the same works, then they must have the same power, and if the same power, then the same substance." [8]

The Son's generation and Him sharing in the Father's proper nature enabled Basil to affirm that resemblance of substance exists between the Father and the Son since scripture depicts them as having the same power and dignity. As Prestige (1964: 87) says:

The truth is that God is one, not because one divine Person is more important than the others, whether as being their source or on any other ground...because all three Persons are distinct expressions of a single divine reality. [9]

In John 10: 30, the Son makes Himself one with the Father and communicates their indistinguishable nature by these words. In spite of the fact that the Father is considered the cause of the Son, this does not

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demonstrate the Son as ontologically inferior compared to the Father. The Father as cause and Son's origin, essentially talks about divine nature not inferiority. The following section explicitly addresses more on the Son's eternal generation from the Father.

### 3. The Eternal Generation of Christ

Basil defends Son's eternal and divine generation through His eternal begetting. The Apostle John demonstrated to us the importance of 'was' in this sense when he stated: "I am the one who is and who was, the Almighty" (Rev. 1: 8). The one who was is much the same as the one who is: both are identical and eternal...For something antecedent to the beginning is unfathomable, and from this beginning the being of God (the Word in Jn. 1: 1) is inseparable. The eternal generation' interpretation of Basil is grounded by scripture when he says that the Son's begetting before the ages are testified by divine sayings. The beginning of John's Gospel supports as scriptural testimony to the eternal generation of the Son from the Father. John 1: 1 enlightens the Son's being from eternity, His begetting without passion, His similar nature with the Father, and majesty. John guides us back to the beginning by including "was." The begetting of the Only-Begotten is connected to the eternity of the Father by the phrase 'was' in John 1: 2. John 1: 4 and 9 include the phrases that represent eternity and affirm this account. So, passages such as "the Son is said to be and is the begotten image give a non-spiritual and impassive account of the Son's begetting (Col. 1: 15; 2 Cor. 4: 4). The Son is God's wisdom, power (1 Cor. 1: 24), and righteousness (1 Cor. 1: 30), though not as a possession, nor as a faculty."

[10] On the opposite, the Son is alive and active substance that radiates God's glory (Heb. 1: 3). These scriptures attest to the intimate fellowship, comparability and indistinguishable oneness between Father and Son.

Both John 1: 1 and Psalm 109 spoke of the Person of the Father: " From the womb before the daybreak I have begotten you" (Ps 109: 3). Taken together, we can state both that He was and that He has been begotten. The phrase " I have begotten" indicates the cause from which He has the origination of His being. The phrase " He was" in John 1: 2 signifies His non-temporal existence, which means the Son is not only outside time (timeless), but He has created time and ages. Here Psalm 109: 3 functions as a clear scriptural source to the Son's generation. John 1: 1, which refers to the generation of the Son and to His existence outside time, is now employed as referencing only the Son's eternity. Behr (2004: 309) describes the Son's ' begetting,' in this way, alludes less to a discrete divine act as to the particular relationship in which the Son stands to the Father, one of induction and affinity of being. John 1: 4 and 1: 9 further substantiate the argument.

### Conclusion :

The weight of this paper as expressed in the introduction was to demonstrate that for the understanding of Father-Son relationship as revealed in Scripture the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is fundamental. Firstly, the doctrine helps to uphold diverse important scriptural presumptions. The Father is always the Father is one of them, which necessitates a Sonship of some sort. There is no doctrine in the good news of our salvation more indispensable than faith in the Father and the



Son. With the objective to bring salvation, the Son needed to make the Father known. For the Son to make the Father known fully, He must have a kinship of essence with the Father and He must be indivisible from the Father in every way. As a means to be indivisible from the Father in every way, the Son must be eternal. For the Son to have a kinship in substance with the Father, He should be from the Father so that He has full and complete divinity. These presuppositions lend themselves to the doctrine of the eternal generation.

Secondly, the Father's generation of the Son serves as the ultimate explanation for different Christological and Father-Son texts. In this paper, we have seen the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1: 24, Colossians 1: 15, John 1: 1-2; 14: 9, Hebrews 1: 3 and Psalm 109: 3 have explicitly revealed the Son's generation. These verses assist us to make a point on divine generation, namely, " that the Father makes Himself seen in the Son, completely, immaterially and eternally" (Hildebrand 2007: 169).

Thirdly, important doctrines such as God's perfection, immutability, and His simplicity could blend with the doctrine of eternal generation while giving a truly Trinitarian account of God. To preclude the Son's eternal generation means one winds up as Eunomius " with a disengaged God, abstracted, that is, from any possibility of conveying Himself: (his) God is neither able to beget a Son who is what He is, nor does His action, the result of which is His Son, express what He is; He has revealed knowledge of Himself, so that... Eunomius can claim to know him completely and decisively, however this does not enable us to share in his life" (Behr 2004: 282).

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[9] Prestige, G. L. 1964. *God in Patristic Thought* . London: S. P. C. K. 233, 249, 254f, 258.

[10] Concerning Basil's use and understanding of Col. 1. 15 together with 2 Cor. 4. 4, see Radde-Gallwitz, Andrew. *Basil of Caesarea: A Guide to His Life and Doctrine* . Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2012. 73.