

IMPLICATIONS OF JOHN 5:16–30 FOR THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL GENERATION

by
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The eternal generation of the Son has been a staple element in Christian orthodoxy since Nicaea, and its formulation doubtless occurred earlier:² it is part of the “ecumenical” tradition.³ I have high regard for creeds, generally speaking, and find the retrieval of Nicene orthodoxy a noble venture, but not one so noble as the Reformational retrieval of *sola Scriptura*. “Ecumenical” status, while part of an impressive pedigree that is unlikely ever to attach itself again to any creed this side of heaven, is not unassailable.

While the Reformers substantially upheld the ecumenical creeds, they did not do so slavishly. Indeed, the Reformation was rendered necessary precisely because the majority Christian expression was wrong on so many issues, and a return *ad fontes* was the only valid corrective. The assignment of “orthodoxy” needed to revert to biblical and not to catholic (much less *Roman* Catholic) standards. Of course, the interpretive grid of the Reformers was such that this assignment was never purely objective. The precursors of enlightenment thought were already in development, and the ideas of mystery and supernatural were already under scrutiny. Seemingly fantastical conceptions of the netherworld

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²I am not ignorant of discussions prior to Nicaea, but these arguments were less urgently made, and lacked the precision and nuance that emerged in fourth-century discussion. With the majority I credit Origen with the earliest clear expression of the doctrine, Nicaea with its first “standardized” expression (elevating Athanasius’s development of Origenism and censuring Arius’s aberrant strain), and Constantinople with its mature expression.

³The notion of eternal generation appears in the Athanasian and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds, but not (at least not *clearly*) in the Apostles’ Creed (the term *μονογενῆ* appears in the earliest creed, but it appears without explanation, and to assume eternal generation by its mere appearance begs the question under review). Evidence also exists that ecumenicity remained elusive on the issue prior to Jerome, with many Old Latin translators favoring the Latin *unicus* rather than the *unigenitos* that became nearly universal after the emergence of the Vulgate (late 4th c.). Still, eternal generation appears prominently in two of the three ecumenical creeds, and is by no means denied in the other.

rendered the descent into hell suspect; and the paradox of Christ as γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα (“begotten, not made”), *autothetos* but also ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς (and all this by eternal “act”) seemed to some like so much equivocation and special pleading, leading to redefinition.⁴ I allow the possibility that nascently “modernist” concerns led to the Reformers’ heightened scrutiny of the creeds and of the underlying texts;⁵ still, their high view of Scripture as the *Norma Normans non Normata* was commendable, as well their concern for hermeneutical fidelity to the received laws of language.

⁴Calvin is the most cited among these. While Calvin ultimately accepted the doctrine of eternal generation, his bewilderment over the ideas of (1) generation as eternal act and (2) aseity *ab alio* led him to reduce the concept to an eternal generation of personhood and away from Aquinas’s more robust eternal grant of substance/essence (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 1.13.23–29). While this left open the possibility of functional/economic subordination, it emphatically closed the door on ontological subordination (both ideas which have invited charges of “Arianism” in contemporary debate, but the latter which Calvin saw as the more insidious concern). Among the many discussions of Calvin’s position on eternal generation, see esp. Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Calvin’s perplexity has echoed ever since, especially within the Reformed tradition, where similar frustrations expressed (e.g., Robert Dabney, W. G. T. Shedd, A. A. and Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and Cornelius Van Til) led increasingly to denial of the doctrine on logical grounds: James Oliver Buswell argued that “when one says ‘begotten but not created,’ he is reducing the word begotten to absolute zero.... I believe that the ‘eternal generation’ doctrine should be dropped” (*A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962], 111–12). Robert L. Reymond states that the Nicene formula “virtually denies to the Son the attribute of *self-existence*,...implying that the same divine essence, paradoxically, can be both “unbegotten” and “begotten” depending on whether it is the Father or the Son which is being considered” (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Nelson, 1988], 326, within a larger argument extending from pp. 324–30). John S. Feinberg, after citing multiple logical anomalies in the Nicene model exclaims, “How can this make sense?... This is not mystery but nonsense and confusion” (*No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2001], 489). Millard Erickson hints with Paul Helm that the doctrine of eternal generation is seated in the Neoplatonic “One emanated Mind and Soul” and that it thrives on “speculation” (*Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009], 182–84), concluding, “It appears to me that the concept of eternal generation does not...make sense philosophically” (252). William L. Craig argues similarly that eternal generation is a “relic of Logos Christianity which... introduces a subordination into the Godhead which anyone who affirms the full deity of Christ ought to find very troubling” (“Is God the Son Begotten in His Divine Nature,” *Theologica* 3 [2019]: 26), later arguing that the “doctrine of the generation of the Logos from the Father cannot, despite assurances to the contrary, but diminish the status of the Son because He becomes an effect contingent upon the Father:...the Father alone exists *a se*, whereas the Son exists through another” (*ab alio*) (27). Bolder still is William David Spencer, who, after lamenting the role of eternal generation in “serving those like Arius in undermining the divinity of Christ,” concludes, “To describe this doctrine in an image, it seems to me to have revealed itself to be like the two-faced Roman idol Janus, each face looking in the opposite direction” (*Three in One: Analogies for the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2022], 198).

⁵There are, to the point, no pure biblicists among us.

In so opining, I concede to the contemporary evangelical retrieval movement that theologians are vulnerable (as everyone always is) to the dominant philosophical winds of the day—including Modernism. Incessant pressure to contain/expunge the supernatural and the mysterious in the Bible and especially to naturalize the protological/eschatological bookends of Scripture has long persisted in evangelicalism, and I regret this.⁶ While the compromises of the evangelical do not equal those of mainstream Christian scholarship, there remains an impetus to domesticate the Bible in accordance with a broad variety of natural laws. This is unfortunate, because God, being immaterial and atemporal, is not bound by natural laws as we are: he may suspend them at will and has done so many times. That said, however, there exist epistemological laws (e.g., laws of language/logic) that are extensions of God's very nature and character, and are thus inviolable, even in God (Num 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18; etc.). As such, evangelical insistence on discovering and applying fixed and objective hermeneutical laws, laws of logic, and the like, should not be criticized as “modernist” digressions, but celebrated as exercises in foundationalism rendered necessary by divine immutability and integrity.⁷ If we want to know what is true concerning the doctrine of eternal generation, we need to discover it in the statements of Christian Scripture.

In light of these opening caveats, I intend in this article to inquire simply whether John 5, argued by one major scholar to be the *crux interpretum* for the doctrine of eternal generation,⁸ is as clear a passage in defense of the doctrine as its proponents want it to be. I do not intend in this article to address all the questions raised above in the larger debate over the eternal relationship of the three persons of the Godhead of which eternal generation is a part. I am not even offering a general argument for or against the doctrine of eternal generation. My goal is

⁶I have been particularly influenced in this matter by the warnings of James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). His well-defended thesis is that, “in trying to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science, the defenders of God slowly strangled Him. If anyone is to be arraigned for deicide, it is not Charles Darwin but his adversary Samuel Wilberforce, not the godless Robert Ingersoll but the godly Beecher family” (xiii). In short, by endorsing a sort of Christian naturalism, well-meaning Christians destroyed their own God. This is the tragic legacy of the nineteenth-century Christian academy, and one from which we have yet to recover.

⁷In so arguing, I am resisting not only the naturalist impulse that persists in “modernist” hermeneutics, but also the Platonist impulse currently urging evangelicals to adopt “premodern” hermeneutical methods (which, ironically, seem suspiciously “postmodern”) (see, e.g., Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture According to the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018], and recently, Kevin J. VanHoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024]).

⁸D. A. Carson, “John 5:26: *Crux Interpretum* for Eternal Generation,” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 79–97.

more modest: I simply want to ask whether John 5:16–30 clearly teaches the doctrine.

Defining Eternal Generation

The eternal generation of the Son is difficult to define. Not only have we longstanding disputes about the all-important term *μονογενής* (i.e., is Christ the “only-one-born” or the “one-of-a-kind” Son?),⁹ but we also find, secondly, that those who accept the former definition are swift to caution against regarding divine begetting and human begetting as analogous: eternal generation is qualitatively different from human generation—and in something of a mysterious/ineffable way that resists clear explanation. It is easier to say what being “begotten” is not (i.e., Christ is “not created”) than what it is.

Most significantly, third, is the question of what eternal generation actually generates. All agree that the Father does not generate *more* divine substance, much less alien substance; rather, he shares of his own substance with the Son. Many (esp. since Calvin), but not all, propose the generation of the Son’s *subsistence/personhood* in this eternal act.¹⁰ But speaking in terms of broadest agreement, the eternal generation of the Son is the Father’s eternal act of making the divine *essence* common to Son, without division or alienation of that essence.¹¹

⁹Charles Lee Irons (“A Lexical Defense of the Johannine “Only Begotten,” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017], 98–116) has pushed back mightily against the majority understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Greek scholarship, pointing out weaknesses in the case that *μόνος* + *γένος* (kind) = “one-of-a-kind/unique,” and offering explanations for biblical uses of the term that in which the translation “only begotten” proves difficult (e.g., Heb 11:17; John 1:18; Pss 22:20; 25:16; 35:17; also 1 Clem 25:2). His arguments are weighty, but they have by no means convinced all, and they remain entrenched in a great many lexical sources and modern Bible translations.

¹⁰So, also A. A. Hodge: The eternal generation of the Son is “an eternal personal act of the Father, wherein by necessity of nature, not by choice of will, He generates *the person* (not the essence) of the Son, by communicating to Him the whole indivisible substance of the Godhead, without division, alienation, or change, so that the Son is the express image of His Father’s person, and eternally continues, not from the Father, but in the Father and the Father in the Son” (*Outlines of Theology*, 182, emphasis added). Or Louis Berkhof: “It is that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby He, within the divine Being, is the ground of a *second personal subsistence* like His own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939], 94, emphasis added). Other definitions may be offered, but these suffice. Of note is Kevin Giles’s *The Eternal Generation of the Son* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), though this volume frustrates by failing to provide a succinct definition.

¹¹See, e.g., William G. T. Shedd: “By generation, the Father makes the eternal essence common (*koinōnein*) to himself and the Son” (*Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Alan W. Gomes [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003], 246). Or Francis Turretin: “As all generation indicates a communication of essence on the part of the begetter to the begotten (by which the begotten becomes like the begetter and partakes of the same nature with him), so this wonderful generation is rightly expressed as a communication of

What is excluded in this definition (and significantly for our discussion) is temporally iterative instantiations of the divine in terms of incarnational function (e.g., modalism, semi-Arianism). Eternal generation is emphatically *not* reducible to personal function or modes of existence. Which is to say, eternal generation exists in the realm of ontology, and not economy.¹²

The question under review, then, is whether the contents of John 5 fit this understanding of eternal generation, or whether John is speaking of something else.

Three Options for the Crucial Verse: John 5:26

Discussions of eternal generation in John 5 often focus singularly on verse 26: “As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.”¹³ Considered on bare lexical grounds (i.e., without regard for theological implication) and apart from context, the idea that this verse is a statement akin to eternal generation makes much sense: “As the Father has *aseity* (e.g., independent life), so he has granted the Son to have *aseity*.” Not only does this approach credibly define the key words (ζωὴν ἐν ἑαυτῷ = life *a se*); it also explains how the Son comes to possess this divine attribute “just as” (ὥσπερ) the Father and in distinction from all other beings, viz., via eternal generation. I will label this understanding the eternal generation view in this essay.¹⁴

But this view presents us with a (theo)logical paradox: aseity that is received by grant from another by definition is not *a se*. It seems instead to be *ab alio* (from another) or perhaps *ab extra* (from without). Carson’s answer is that this grant, being an *eternal* sharing, assures that there was never a “time” when Christ did not have life-in-himself; no

essence from the Father (by which the Son possesses indivisibly the same essence with him and is made perfectly like him)” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. George Musgrave Gifer, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997], 1:292–93).

¹²In the contemporary debate one may embrace or reject “eternal functional subordination” irrespective of whether one affirms/denies eternal generation.

¹³Unless otherwise noted, I am using NIV 1984 for English citations and UBS5 for Greek citations.

¹⁴This is the first of three views in Carson’s “*Crux Interpretum*” essay, and the view that he champions (though with a great many cautions); cf. also Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 189; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 282.

Carson concedes that this is not the majority view among contemporary commentators. Among evangelical theologies, however, this view remains strong: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020], 297–98; Stephen Wellum, *Systematic Theology* [Nashville, B&H, 2024], 1:605, 685; Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019–2024], 1:937; John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017], 169; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 232, 289; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 59, 94.

“moment” in which he received it.¹⁵ I am not convinced, however, that this makes any material difference. The salient concern here is not chronological sequence (all sides in the debate agree that Christ does not exist chronologically *after* the Father); but rather (1) source and (2) logical causation/ dependency (i.e., is Christ *of* the Father in an ontological sense?). And if one answers the latter in the affirmative, how can Christ be simultaneously both *of the Father* and also *of himself* (*a se*)?

In view of this conundrum, at least two major alternatives have been proposed.¹⁶ The first of these suggests that Christ is offering an explanation for his functional authority to (1) grant life and to (2) judge, which together constitute what Robert Reymond describes as Christ’s “messianic investiture.”¹⁷ Taken as such, verse 26 pairs with verse 27 as though no period separated them: “The Father has granted the Son functional authority both (1) to grant life and (2) to judge—because he is [a/the] Son of Man.”¹⁸ The strengths of this view are its avoidance of logical paradox and its faithfulness to context; its weakness is elasticity of interpretation: can “ζωὴν ἔχειν ἐν ἑαυτῷ” be translated so

¹⁵So Carson, “*Crux Interpretum*,” 82. In so arguing, Carson echoes a broader argument observable in Shedd, viz., that generation, being both (1) eternal and (2) comprehended within a single essence, is an *opera ad intra* of the Godhead and thus immune to the charge of anything *ab alio* or *ab extra* (*Dogmatic Theology*, 233, 246, etc.). While I appreciate this logic, such internal sharing seems to fall short of the connotation of “granting” (δίδωμι) used in John 5:26.

¹⁶To be fair, there are hybrid views as well. Despite aggressively rejecting eternal generation, Feinberg still views John 5:26 as referencing divine aseity (*No One Like Him*, 242, 258); so, apparently, Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013], 242. Michael Bird defends eternal generation and sees aseity in John 5:26, but also sees in the verse authority “delegated...to raise the dead” (*Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013], 574); see also Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 87, 184, cf. 117–18. Among commentators, Grant Osborne sees “the functional (the power to give life) flowing out of the ontological (they are life)” (*John: Verse by Verse* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018], 134); so also Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 2:112.

¹⁷*Systematic Theology*, 326; Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 289–90; Robert D. Culver, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, England: Mentor, 2001), 450, 456; Timothy George, “The Nature of God: Being, Attributes, and Acts,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel A. Akin (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 202; Rolland D. McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. [Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008–2010], 2:129, 132; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013], 481. Among commentaries who take this view see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), 1:215; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 260; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 198; poss. also Craig S. Keener, who is not firmly committal but speaks of ζωὴν ἔχειν ἐν ἑαυτῷ as a “delegated authority” (*The Gospel of John* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003], 654); and among English translations, the NLT, CEV, and GNB.

¹⁸The anarthrous construction John uses here will be discussed below.

loosely as “authority to grant life”?

The other major alternative to Carson’s view, championed in the present summary by J. Ramsey Michaels, removes distinctively divine elements from verse 26. While the eternal generation view sees the “just as” (ὥσπερ) as connecting the Father uniquely with the Son in terms of essence, and the messianic investiture view in terms of function, Michaels’s view does neither. Having “life-in-oneself” is neither a divine attribute nor a divine prerogative, but is a descriptor that Christ shares with all believers—we are all in possession of eternal/spiritual life. Noting that John uses ζῶν ἔχειν ἐν ἑαυτῷ to describe ordinary believers (cf. similar language in 6:53), Michaels sees nothing at all in verse 26 that is distinctively Trinitarian:

To have ‘life in oneself’ is not something only the Father and the Son share, but something believers can claim as well. Those who ‘eat the flesh of the Son of man’ can be said either to have ‘life in themselves’ (6:53) or simply to have ‘eternal life’ (v. 54). The two expressions mean the same thing: eternal life is theirs as an assured present possession, and that is all Jesus is saying here about himself and the Father.¹⁹

I will label Michaels’s view the “spiritual life” view in the current essay.

The Context: John 5:16–27

¹⁶Because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. ¹⁷Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” ¹⁸For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

¹⁹Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. ²⁰For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. ²¹For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. ²²Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

²⁴“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. ²⁵I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ²⁶For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. ²⁷And he has

¹⁹J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 318.

given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

²⁸“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. ³⁰By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

This pericope is offered in answer to an assumed question asked by Jesus’s enemies: “Why are you working on the Sabbath?” This observation is crucial to its interpretation, setting it in terms of (1) *authority* (*Why are you working?*—what gives you warrant to violate the Law?) and (2) *economy* (*Why are you working?*—why are you doing the specific things you are doing?).²⁰ Of course, part of Christ’s answer involves the establishment of his identity, so ontology plays a role in the discourse. Still, it is notable that economy is the occasion for the discourse.

Christ’s answer is twofold, a fact again critical to its interpretation. I will argue here that in vv. 19–23, Christ justifies his actions by the fact that (1) he is God (a claim that his enemies had already deduced [v. 18], but imprecisely); in vv. 24–27, Christ justifies his actions further by the fact that (2) he is the incarnate Messiah. Verses 28–30 summarize his argument.

Christ Works (on the Sabbath) Because He Is God (vv. 19–23)

In John 5:17 our Lord Christ anticipates the Jews’ question by announcing the preliminary basis for his healing activity: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” The Jews are taken aback by this claim, rightly inferring a claim to divinity (so v. 18). It is likely that they erred by viewing Christ’s claim as polytheistic (i.e., that he was claiming to be a separate or independent god—both blasphemous claims);²¹ still, their understanding remains notable for our discussion. They did *not* regard the claims to fatherhood and sonship as indicating ontological source/generation, but rather homogeneity of nature: “When the Scriptures tell us that one Person within the

²⁰The most obvious “work” in view is Christ’s healing of the lame man, but the unfolding discourse suggests that more is in view. In his answer Christ twice singles out the “works” of granting life and judging. That Christ singles out these two specific works is a bit of a curiosity: Jesus has not *explicitly* granted life (physical or spiritual) to the lame man; nor has he exercised *final* judgment. Still, it seems likely that he has in some sense done both works. At a very minimum Christ has enlivened dead limbs, and the similar event in Mark 2 suggests that he also granted to the lame man spiritual life (so Michaels: “The man Jesus healed is supposed to understand that ‘Look, you have gotten well’ is equivalent to ‘Look, your sins are forgiven’” (*John*, 298; cf. Jas 5:15). Likewise, Christ issues judgments about the lame man’s status/conduct and incidentally about the application of the Mosaic Law.

²¹So Köstenberger, *John*, 185–86; Carson, “*Crux Interpretum*,” 83; Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 276; etc.

Trinity is known as the ‘Father,’ and another as the ‘Son,’ they intend to teach not that the Son is originated by the Father, nor that the Father existed prior to the Son, but that they are the same in nature.”²²

Of course, Christ must issue something of a corrective here—he could not absorb without a response the accusation that he was a polytheist. To use his words from a similar context, Christ could instead say, “I and the Father are one” (10:30). Here in chapter 5, the claim is illustrated rather than stated: “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (v. 19).²³ Jesus leads with an economic claim because that is the question under review (“why are you working?”), but ontology lurks behind his answer.²⁴ Christ does the same things as the Father—not merely healing and instructing, but emphatically divine things like granting life *on his own say-so* (v. 21)²⁵ and even exercising

²²Lorainne Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 122. This is a persistent claim of those who deny eternal generation, and answers the question why the Father/Son metaphor is used if not to connote “begetting” (e.g., Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 112; Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 461; Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 325; et al.). This use of sonship language is well attested in both Greek and Hebrew: when Ezekiel is 95 times called a “son of man,” attention is drawn not to his origin, but to his identity—he is a human; when the Scriptures identify Judas as a “son of perdition” (John 17:12) and Barnabas as a “son of consolation” (Acts 4:36), the term communicates nothing of their “begetting,” but of their nature/character; etc.

The burning follow-up question that perpetually ensues is worth exploring: Why, then, are the titles never reversed? That is, if sonship and fatherhood simply point to a shared essence (A = A), why is the first person of the Trinity never described as a “son” of the second person of the Trinity? The simplest answer, I would hazard, is *chronological*: the invisible Father is introduced first in the biblical corpus; the Son (who is of the selfsame essence as the first) appears second and visibly; and the Spirit (likewise of the selfsame essence) is introduced last. There is, however, an additional answer, viz., that the Father stands within the Godhead as *economically* or *hierarchically* first: in our pericope, the Father *sent* the Son (v. 23)—an economy clearly seen during Christ’s kenosis, and one that existed much earlier (e.g., 1 Cor 8:6) and extends deep into the eternal state (1 Cor 15:28). This essay will not pursue this question as its answer does not materially affect our conclusions.

²³In a nutshell, there is an inseparability of divine operations. Whenever God performs a function, all the members of God participate in that function; when one member of the Godhead acts, all the members of the Godhead participate in that action. There is no room for independent, *ad hoc*, or rogue actions by any member of the Trinity. Nor is any person of the Godhead excluded when God acts. Any one person of the Godhead may take the manifest lead or be the primary actor in any given divine function, but none is ever *categorically* “subordinated” to the others in terms of essential authority much less the restriction of personal freedom.

²⁴In Carson’s words, while “this co-extensiveness of the activities of the Father and the Son is expressed in functional categories, . . . nevertheless it is difficult not to perceive some ontological implications behind the descriptions of the common functions” (*Crux Interpretum*, 84).

²⁵No one but God can grant life to the dead save God. Even the lone possible exception to this statement, Elijah, cannot claim the authority Jesus claimed: “Though Elijah . . . was used by God to raise the dead, Jesus’ claim is much bolder in that he claimed not merely to be God’s instrument in raising other people, but to give life himself to *whom he is pleased to give it*” (Köstenberger, *John*, 187).

divine judgment (v. 22)²⁶—because he is one with the Father. In short, Christ is emphatically God, but, equally emphatically, not another God. He stands in perichoretic relationship with the only God there is.

The purpose and intended result of this arrangement is that Christ earns the very honor/worship that the Father deserves (v. 23). In other words, irrespective of his functional place in the economic Trinity, Christ is not to be perceived as being anything less than equal in authority or essence with the Father: he has the right as God to do all that the Father does, to share as God in all that the Father has, and to receive as God all the worship that the Father receives.

In summary, then, Christ's first answer to the Jews' question is that he "works" on the Sabbath (and also instructs the lame man to "work" on the Sabbath—v. 11) because he is, in essence, the very God who issued the Sabbath command in the first place. Christ's argument may be that as God he is *ex lex*;²⁷ however, his additional role as a faithful Jewish man who necessarily obeyed the Law perfectly seems to preclude this. It seems better to see this as a statement of his Lordship over the Sabbath (so Matt 12:1–8): he had been party to the issuance of the Sabbath command at Sinai, and thus had a *de facto* right to adjudicate its appropriate application (viz., declaring that healing diseases and carrying one's mat are not violations of the Sabbath command, despite the pontifications of the Jews). In either case, however, Christ justifies his actions by claiming to be the Son of God, which is to say that he is God. He *does* "just as" (ὡςπερ) the Father because he *is* of the same substance. That this sonship involves an eternal act of "begetting," however, is neither clearly intimated nor salient to the question under review.

*Christ Works (on the Sabbath) Because
He Is the Messiah (vv. 24–27)*

The next paragraph supplies a second answer to the governing question of the pericope, and a more precise one. Why is Christ "working" on the Sabbath? Because he is the Messiah—the Son of Man (so v. 27). Or, he works because he is the quintessential man and triumphant Messiah: *the Son of Man*.²⁸

²⁶See *supra*, n. 18.

²⁷I.e., that God continued to "work" by maintaining the universe on the Sabbath, thus establishing himself to be above the Law (so Köstenberger, *John*, 185; Michaels, *John*, 302; Keener, *John*, 1:646; etc.).

²⁸The absence of the article in the last clause (Christ is υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου rather than τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, a departure from what is otherwise John's consistent syntactical construction of this phrase) has been something of a distraction, but the distinction should not be overwrought. This curious construct renders at least possible that Christ is deliberately identifying himself as "a" son of man (e.g., a human), and suggesting that the privileges under review fall expressly to him because he was carrying out his human mission perfectly: by his human obedience, he was earning eternal life for his elect and is being rewarded by the Father with the privilege of granting it to them; by his human

Assuming the structure that I have assigned this passage, one would expect parallelism between the two answers, and that is what (ostensibly) we see:²⁹

The Works		The Result	The Warrant
The Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it (21).	The Father...has entrusted all judgment to the Son (22).	Divine Esteem: All will honor the Son just as they honor the Father (23).	Because he is the Son of God (<i>pass.</i>).
The Father...has granted the Son to have life in himself (26).	The Father...has given him authority to judge (27).	Missional Success: Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; those who hear will live (25).	Because he is the Son of Man (27).

Seeing this parallelism is a principal reason why I have elected to interpret the all-important line τῷ υἱῷ ἔδωκεν ζωὴν ἔχειν ἐν ἑαυτῷ not as the bestowment of an “attribute,”³⁰ but of a privileged assignment reserved for God alone—the privilege of granting life.³¹ But do the words sustain this meaning? The following considerations are in order:

- (1) The theological taxonomy of divine attributes as *a se*, *in se*, *ab extra*, *ad extra*, and the like, while extremely useful in theological discourse, are not biblical terms, in the main, but are the product of later historical development. The Apostle John did not possess these theological categories. As such, translating the Greek phrase ἐν ἑαυτῷ as *a se* represents something of an anachronistic translation.
- (2) The phrase ἐν ἑαυτῷ never means “of oneself” or “independently” elsewhere in Scripture. Of the 34 uses of the phrase in the New

obedience he becomes ideally suited to serve as the principal judge of faithless humanity (see, e.g., Culver, *Christian Theology*, 737). Most modern commentators, however, cite Colwell’s rule to suggest that, despite the anarthrous construction, the phrase carries articular force (thus *the* Son of Man) (e.g., Michaels, *John*, 319; Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 259; but see Köstenberger, who sees Colwell’s Rule as explaining this phenomenon “in part” [*John*, 189]). But this decision by no means weakens the Messianic Investiture position, as Christ’s sinless humanity and Messianic mission are one and the same. Whatever translation we accept, attention is drawn to “the transcendent character of Jesus’ messiahship” (Ridderbos, *John*, 200; cf. also Köstenberger, *John*, 189).

²⁹Cf., esp., Brown, *John*, 1:219. Interestingly, Michaels observes the possible parallelism here, but dismisses it as a redundancy (*John*, 318).

³⁰So Köstenberger, *John*, 189.

³¹In Ridderbos’s words, “The expression ‘to have life in oneself’ is not intended as a general description of the divine ‘being’ but as a reference to the fact that, just as the Father as Creator and Consummator possesses life, he has given that possession also to the son, not merely as the executor of individual assignments but in the absolute sense of sharing the Father’s power” (*John*, 198). Cf. esp. Brown, *John*, 1:215.

Testament, 25 are either (1) discursive (e.g., a person thinks “to himself” or multiple persons talk “among themselves”) or (2) reflexive/mutual (e.g., one knows “in himself,” is “deeply moved,” is perplexed “within,” groans “inwardly,” or comes to “his senses”; people discriminate “among themselves,” are amazed “within themselves,” or live in peace “with one another”). Of nine more closely parallel uses (“having” a [noun] + ἐν ἑαυτῷ), four of them Johannine, the sense is always that of an *internal realization* or *experience*:

- Matthew 13:21/Mark 4:17 speak of plants (and certain professing believers) as having no root “in themselves.”
- Mark 9:50 instructs us to have salt “in/among ourselves.”
- In John 5:42 Jesus observes that his hearers do not have the love of God “in their hearts.”
- In John 6:53 Jesus observes unless his hearers eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, they have no life “in them” [notable as the only other instance of having ζῶην ἐν ἑαυτοῖς].
- In John 17:13 Jesus wishes upon his hearers a full measure of *his own* joy “within *them*.”
- Romans 1:27 speaks of receiving “in themselves” the penalty for sins committed.
- 2 Corinthians 1:9 speaks of having received “within” the penalty of death.
- In 1 John 5:10 all true believers have an “internal” testimony of the Spirit.

In short, the phrase under review might possibly be translated *in se* (*in oneself*), but is unlikely to mean *a se* (*of oneself* in the sense of an independent possession or attribute). To be fair, neither does it ever mean “having the privilege of sharing something *ad extra*,” but the tight parallel in verse 21 gives us contextual warrant for this reading.

- (3) The structure/context of the passage does not seem to be a very fertile one, I would hazard, for a sudden announcement of divine aseity. Such an announcement might be plausible had it appeared in the first paragraph (vv. 19–23), the purpose of which is to establish Christ’s divinity; even with this concession, however, the parallelism suggests that authority/economy are squarely in view in both paragraphs: Jesus is working because he has been authorized to do so on account of his identity (vv. 19–23) and his mission (vv. 24–27): he has been given life *to distribute*!
- (4) The motif of Christ’s life as a bestowment to be shared with humanity is also prominent in John, further suggesting that the life in 5:26 is not divine life *a se*, but resurrection life sourced in the

Father, granted to the Son at his Resurrection, and thence bestowed *in kind* upon all believers: “Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me” (John 6:57).³²

- (5) That said, I am not convinced that Michaels is correct in reducing ζῶν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς in 5:26 to a simple synonym for resurrection life.³³ Based in the parallelism in verse 21, it seems best to suggest that what the Son “receives” from the Father is a functional privilege that he shares uniquely with (i.e., “just as”—ὡσπερ) the Father, viz., the privilege of “giving life to whom he is pleased to give it.”³⁴

Epilogue and Summary (vv. 28–30)

Jesus closes with a charge not to be “amazed” by all of this, namely, that his Father has shared these functional prerogatives with the Son, thus giving him the warrant to heal, grant resurrection life, and announce divine adjudications concerning not only the law, but also the destiny of mankind. Still, Christ “does” nothing in strict independence from his Father. Hierarchy persists, and Christ’s goal, as always, is to please the Father until God is all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

Conclusion

The article was written in answer to a simple question: *Does John 5:16–30 clearly teach the doctrine of eternal generation?* It began by defining (as best as may be done) the doctrine of eternal generation. It then discovered three major understandings of the crucial verse (26), two of which fail to detect the concept of eternal generation in this passage. After noticing structural parallels and examining the biblical usage of ἐν ἑαυτῷ in John and elsewhere in Scripture, this article concluded that the likelihood that John 5 teaches eternal generation is low.

This article does not explicitly reject the doctrine of eternal generation, which is a much larger topic (although the author’s sentiments toward the doctrine were only thinly veiled). However, the diversity and strength of alternate interpretive positions proposed render questionable the status of John 5:26 as a *crux interpretum* in favor of the doctrine of eternal generation.

³²Cf. also John 1:4; 4:14; 6:33, 51, 53; 11:25–26; 1 John 5:11; etc.

³³*Gospel of John*, 318.

³⁴So Brown, *John*, 1:215; Bultmann, *John*, 260; also the NLT, CEV, and GNB. For this understanding compare with John 17:2–3—“You granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”