

Eternal Counsel, Temporal Instantiation and the Revelation of Triune Love.

A creative response to Hugh Osgood

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Abstract: In a brief (1500 words) response to Hugh Osgood, Brad Jersak systematically affirms the direction in which Hugh “tiptoes” to assert that the divine communion of the Trinity is a kenarchy, not a hierarchy. Following David Bentley Hart’s rendering of Revelation 13:8 as the “lamb who has been slaughtered from the foundation of the cosmos”. Brad distinguishes three aspects of Christ’s sacrifice and the Holy Spirit’s process: (i) in the eternal counsel or triune conversation; (ii) at the time of the temporal instantiation (the incarnation); (iii) in each case revealing that the triune God is continuously kenotic (self-giving) triune love.

When was the Son begotten of the Father?

When did the Spirit proceed from the Father (and maybe the Son)?

According to the Symbol of Faith, Christ was begotten of the Father “before the ages” (γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων).

Likewise, according to the tradition, the Spirit proceeds from the Father from all eternity.

So we came to believe through the Nicene and Cappadocian fathers of the 4th century.

Still, it is small wonder that battles with Arian subordinationists persisted for over a century. It is incredibly difficult for temporal minds to hold to something that truly “happened” eternally. The minds of biblical literalists cannot conceive a “begetting without beginning,” especially when “before all ages” uses a temporal term like “before.” How can something said to be eternal also have happened?

Nevertheless, those committed to the co-eternal relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit hold that there never was a “time” when the begotten One was not begotten, or when the proceeding One “began” to proceed—even while claiming that somehow, the Son and Spirit, co-eternal with the Father also “originate” in the Father? These are mysteries held by faith.

And yet... even those who claim to hold to this mystery repeatedly lapse into forms of an eternal subordination, hierarchy, monarchy and the like. We struggle with the Trinity, however eternal, when begetting and proceeding suggest an ‘origin’ of the Word and the Spirit in the Father that makes them ‘subsidiary’ rather than co-equal.

Even the Arians could swallow that the Trinity is *homoousion* (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ) *if* they could connive that the Son and Spirit were still created from and out of the same “substance” as the Father. Trinitarians, by contrast, see the *homoousios* as one co-eternal “essence,” where that essence is *perichoretic* love experienced in the divine communion of a social Trinity—a *kenarchy* rather than a hierarchy.

Hugh Osgood, in a paper given at Ashburnham Place (Oct 2018) titled “Hierarchy, Wrath and Substitution within a Relational Trinitarianism,” problematized the issues afresh and posited a way forward that appears to honour the creeds and the Scriptures, while also beginning to solve the problems stated above.

Dr. Osgood suggested it would be easier to emphasize the co-equal and co-eternal nature of the Trinity while speaking of the ‘begetting’ and ‘proceeding’ in the context of a Trinitarian *conversation* in eternity past. Rather than toiling over who originates from whom, he sees the Trinity in conversation—“corporately God in original and continuing form (the Lord who changes not—Mal. 3:6) ... embracing distinctive creative and redemptive roles to be fulfilled as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

He made a strong case for this from Scripture. I would like to respond with some systematic analysis for further development. Osgood lays out his case biblically this way:

[T]here is something powerful for me in the shaping of the Godhead that took place when the words, ‘Today I have begotten you’ [Ps. 2:7-9] were originally spoken. They prepared the way for the Son to agree, prior to creation, to be the sacrificial Lamb, [cf. Rev. 13:8] for the Father to say to the Son ‘sit at My right hand’ even before the triumph of the cross, and for the Son to make His ascension statement, ‘Here am I and the children God has given Me’ [Heb. 2:13].

While Dr. Osgood treads cautiously, I am convinced we need to explore this terrain so we can adequately test whether it will be fruitful.

We begin by building from the precedent set by Rev. 13:8 if we allow for that text to read as follows:

“All who dwell on the earth will worship him [the beast], whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of **the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world**” (NKJV).

N.T. Wright’s translation sees “from the foundation of the world” as referring to when our names were written in the book of life, rather than the slaying of the Lamb. But David Bentley Hart follows the traditional rendering (though he footnotes the difficulty):

“And all those dwelling on the earth will make obeisance to him [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written in the book of **the suckling lamb who has been slaughtered from the foundation of the cosmos.**”

This text raises three questions that will light the path ahead:

- *How was Christ slain prior to creation?* In the eternal purposes of the triune God (which Osgood describes as a conversation or we might say ‘eternal decrees’).
- *When was Christ’s sacrifice instantiated?* In time, as the Paschal Lamb on Good Friday.
- *What did Christ’s sacrifice reveal of the nature of God?* That the triune God is *kenotic*—self-giving love—from all eternity.

The Greek fathers were adept in both their critique and adaptation of Platonic thought to see that the eternal forms (or ideas) in the mind (*logos*) of God must form (verb) or instantiate in the world for the

Real to be real. That is, the ideas only reach their fulfillment (*telos*) when they become particular in the world. The Word *must* become flesh to be the Word. The Kingdom *must* come on earth as it is in heaven to truly be God’s Kingdom. And the particulars only find their *telos* through participation in the eternal. There can be no dualism.

This means God’s eternal righteousness and justice are ultimately fulfilled in the Incarnation of the righteous and just One *in time*. And that One is imbued with divine righteousness and justice on earth through *willing participation* in the eternal life of the Trinity.

With that in mind, we can transpose the three questions above into the following template:

Eternal Counsel or Triune Conversation	Temporal Instantiation	Revelation of Triune Nature
Lamb slain in <i>redemptive plans</i> of God. (Rev. 3:8)	Lamb slain <i>in time</i> on Calvary.	God is Lamb-like <i>Kenotic</i> love.

So far, the text implies the above if we follow the NKJV and Hart. The thing that “happens” in time is first of all “decreed” within the eternal counsel of the co-eternal and co-equal Godhead. Note: it didn’t literally “happen” in eternity—but it is “decreed” from eternity within the triune God AND just as importantly (see the third column) “reveals” aspects of the eternal nature or essence of God-as-triune-love. Said another way, the temporal instantiation unveils what was already true of God’s own nature “from before all ages.”

With this template, we may also be equipped to plug in “begotten,” “proceeded,” “enthroned” and perhaps a host of other terms and events:

Eternal Counsel or Triune Conversation	Temporal Instantiation	Revelation of Triune Nature
Lamb slain in redemptive plans of God. (Rev. 3:8)	Lamb slain in time on Calvary.	The Triune God is Lamb-like <i>Kenotic</i> (self-giving) triune love.
The Son begotten in the redemptive decrees of the eternal, Triune counsel/conversation.	The Son begotten in time: Incarnation AND firstfruits of the resurrection . “ <u>Today I have begotten you</u> ” (Ps. 2 / Heb. 1). “ <u>Marked out as God’s Son by the Resurrection</u> ” (Romans 1:4).	The Triune God is a begetter (self-giving) by nature.
The Holy Spirit proceeds in the redemptive decrees of the eternal, Triune counsel/conversation.	The Spirit proceeds in time: Pentecost . He proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son.	The Triune God is a (self-giving) Giver of gifts and Lord of life.
The Son is enthroned as King in the redemptive decrees of	The Son is enthroned in time: the Ascension . Both in his ascension to the Cross (in	The previous revelations were all related to God as <i>kenotic</i> (self-giving) love.

the eternal, Triune counsel/ conversation.	John) and his ascension in Acts 1 to the Father's right hand.	Now, by virtue of his cruciform enthronement, we know "Jesus is Lord" should be read as <i>kenotic</i> .
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This template—(1) eternal counsel, (2) temporal instantiation and (3) triune revelation—could be applied on many fronts. Christ's *adoption* is decreed in the Trinity's eternal conversation and might be instantiated in time with his *baptism*. Jesus' *transfiguration* on Tabor must also instantiate (the *Parousia*?) and reveal something essential to the Triune nature. And so on.

While Dr. Osgood humbly tiptoed into the risky business of Trinitarian speculation, he did so with historic problems in mind, sought solutions in the Scriptures and was mindful of the Great Tradition. He stayed within the parameters of the maxim, "All the operations of the Godhead in this world are undivided," more so than many of the Reformers, particularly around the atonement. Risky though it may be, he's done the great service of offering solutions where the blunders of a hierarchical Trinity and subordinationism inevitably repeat themselves.

With the New Testament authors, he identifies the begetting of the Son with the resurrection and the procession of the Spirit with Pentecost, while doing due diligence to their reality in the eternal counsels of the Triune God, where the *instantiations* originated in the heart of co-eternal love.

Note: the Son and the Spirit cannot both literally originate in the Father AND be co-eternal with the Father—"eternal" and "originate" are incompatible where real language is concerned. It is no wonder that the errors of subsidiary thinking recur.

But if **the *instantiations originate in the eternal counsels of the Trinity, rather than the persons literally originating in the Father***, subordination is cut off at the knees while God's eternal *kenotic* nature is revealed on earth as it always has been in heaven.