

The Meaning of the Son's Co-Eternality with the Father: Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist Theology

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Abstract: *This study compares how Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist theologies define the Son's co-eternity with the Father, a doctrine central to Christian faith and often debated in Adventist contexts. Using a qualitative, comparative method, it analyzes confessional texts, doctrinal summaries, and representative theological works across the three traditions. All affirm Christ's full deity and co-eternity. Roman Catholic and Baptist sources typically construe co-eternity through the Son's eternal generation within a timeless divine life, whereas Seventh-day Adventist theology rejects eternal generation and interprets eternity as everlasting duration without beginning or end. Mapping areas of overlap and divergence clarifies misconceptions about Adventist Trinitarianism, counters claim of simple doctrinal borrowing, and locates Adventism's formulation within wider Christian orthodoxy. Practical implications include clearer instructional language for theology classrooms, more precise terms for interdenominational dialogue, and pastorally accessible explanations of the Trinity. The paper closes with a brief note on limitations and proposes directions for further comparative work with additional traditions.*

Keywords: Co-eternal, Eternal Generation, Catholic, Adventist, Baptist

I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Trinity—particularly the co-eternal relationship of the Son to the Father—stands at the heart of Christian theology. In recent decades, a revival of anti-Trinitarian sentiment has unsettled the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These groups argue that early Adventist pioneers rejected the Trinity (Burt, 2009; Stump, n.d.-a), promoting a return to “historic Adventism” based on the conviction that the “earliest traditions” are the most authentic (Knight, 2000; Allaback, 1995). They interpret the Greek term *monogenēs* as “only born” (Stump, n.d.-a), claim that early Christians believed Christ was “brought forth before all time” (Beachy, n.d.), and conclude that the Son, while divine, is not eternal like the Father (Stump, n.d.-a). Consequently, they accuse the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDAC) of adopting the Roman Catholic (RCC) doctrine of the Trinity (Burt, 2009), labeling it a teaching of the anti-Christ (Stump, n.d.-b) and charging the church with “omega apostasy” (Stump, n.d.-a).

This issue has great implications for Adventist Christology and theological identity. While RCC, Baptist, and SDAC theologies all affirm that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is fully divine and co-eternal with the Father, their doctrinal reasoning diverges: RCC theology grounds co-eternity in the doctrine of eternal generation and a timeless divine essence, Baptist confessional sources explicitly confess the Son's eternal deity (e.g., "Christ is the eternal Son of God") and, in historic formulations, speak of the Son as "eternally begotten of the Father," whereas SDAC theology rejects eternal generation and defines eternity as everlasting existence without beginning or end. This divergence fuels misunderstanding and remains a focal point in anti-Trinitarian debates.

Although previous scholarship has examined Trinitarian doctrine within each tradition, few studies have systematically compared how RCC, Baptist, and SDAC sources define the co-eternity of the Son with the Father. Addressing this gap is crucial for clarifying SDAC Trinitarian theology, responding to contemporary anti-Trinitarian claims, and contributing to wider Christian dialogue on the nature of the Godhead.

This study aims to: (a) analyze the doctrinal foundations of co-eternity in RCC theology, (b) situate a Baptist comparator as a representative Protestant witness to co-eternity and eternal generation, (c) trace the historical development and current position of SDAC theology on this doctrine, and (d) identify and evaluate theological similarities and differences between the traditions. By clarifying these nuances, this research seeks to strengthen a biblically grounded understanding of the Trinity and foster constructive theological engagement across denominations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Comparative Studies on Trinitarian Doctrine

The Trinity has long been a central yet contested doctrine within Christian theology. Agenilton Corrêa (2018) observes that "the doctrine of God has been at the very center of Christian theology... the current Adventist position on the Trinity has been questioned because there is a difficulty in grasping the concept of God as a triune being" (p. 61). In his comparative analysis, Corrêa systematically examines RCC and SDAC doctrines, concluding that while both traditions affirm "three co-equal persons," their theological approaches diverge: Catholicism relies on Greek metaphysics and eternal generation, whereas Adventism "accepts the Trinity based solely on Scripture... independent from tradition or any material apart from the Scripture" (Corrêa, 2018, p. 85).

Tony Ogouma (2023) similarly addresses contemporary anti-Trinitarian claims within Adventism. He explains that many argue "the current Trinitarian position of the Adventist Church... is coming from the RCC Church" (p. 140). However, after a detailed doctrinal analysis, Ogouma concludes that "the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity differs from the Adventist doctrine... the Adventist doctrine is based on canonical data, while the Catholic doctrine calls mainly on Church Councils and Church Fathers" (p. 162). Ogouma identifies

four major theological differences: sources of authority, hierarchy within the Trinity, the Son's subordination, and the procession of the Spirit.

B. Doctrinal Development in Adventism

Both Corrêa and Ogouma feature the historical progression of SDAC theology from semi-Arian anti-Trinitarianism to biblical Trinitarian orthodoxy. Corrêa traces this transformation as a "paradigm shift... from anti-Trinitarian to the current Trinitarian view," emphasizing Ellen White's contribution in describing Christ as having "life, original, unborrowed, underived" (Corrêa, 2018, p. 78). Ogouma adds that this development reflects a "dynamic view or progressive revelation" rather than theological borrowing (Ogouma, 2023, p. 151). By 1980, Adventism formally affirmed "one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons" (General Conference of SDA Yearbook, as cited in Ogouma, 2023, p. 151).

C. Research Gap

While both studies contribute significantly to comparative Trinitarian scholarship, neither addresses the precise meaning of the term "co-eternal" in defining the relationship of the Son to the Father. RCC and Baptist theology expresses co-eternity through "eternal generation" within a timeless divine essence, where "the Father... is the principle without principle... It is the Father who generates, the Son who is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, as cited in Ogouma, 2023, p. 148). Adventist theology, in contrast, emphasizes the Son's self-existence, describing Him as "God the eternal Son... with life original, unborrowed, underived" (Corrêa, 2018, p. 78), and explicitly rejects eternal generation.

This nuanced distinction—the very concept of co-eternality—remains unexplored in prior comparative research. As a result, anti-Trinitarian critiques that Adventism merely adopted Catholic doctrine continue to circulate unchecked.

D. Contribution of the Present Study

This study fills that gap by conducting a focused, three-tradition comparative analysis of how RCC, Baptist, and SDAC sources define the co-eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. It builds on Corrêa's and Ogouma's analyses but moves beyond general doctrinal comparison to specifically examine the language and theology of co-eternity. By doing so, it clarifies misconceptions, situates SDAC Trinitarianism within larger Christian orthodoxy, and advances scholarly understanding of the Godhead across all three traditions.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, comparative theological design to examine how RCC, Baptist, and SDAC doctrines define the co-eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. The

research is descriptive and analytical, systematically comparing official doctrinal statements and theological writings to identify conceptual similarities and differences.

B. Data Sources

Primary sources were selected for their doctrinal authority and theological significance:

- **Roman Catholic Theology:**

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997/2000), which affirms the Father as generator, the Son as begotten, and the Holy Spirit as proceeding, within the indivisible unity of the Trinity (nos. 253–255).
- Ecumenical creeds, patristic and scholastic writings, particularly Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, on eternal generation and divine timelessness.

- **Baptist Theology:**

- *The Baptist Faith & Message 2000* (official SBC confession), which explicitly affirms that "Christ is the eternal Son of God."
- *The Orthodox Creed (General Baptists, 1678/1679)*, a historic confession stating: "The Father is of none... the Son is eternally begotten of the Father... all infinite, without beginning; therefore but one God," providing a classic Protestant witness to eternal generation.

- **Seventh-day Adventist Theology:**

- *Fundamental Beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists* (1980; rev. 2015), asserting "one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons."
- *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Dederen, 2000), offering doctrinal exposition on the Trinity and rejecting eternal generation.
- *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrine* (2018), clarifying Adventist understanding of divine eternity.
- Contemporary Adventist theological works rejecting eternal generation and defining eternity as everlasting duration.

C. Analytical Framework

Textual analysis and a historical-theological method were applied to:

1. Examine the doctrinal basis for co-eternity (eternal generation versus inherent self-existence).

2. Compare concepts of eternity (timelessness versus everlasting duration).
3. Assess theological implications for Christology and intra-Trinitarian relations.

Manual coding of doctrinal terminology (e.g., "co-eternal," "begotten," "unborrowed") was used to trace interpretive patterns and doctrinal distinctions across both traditions.

Manual, symmetric coding of doctrinal terminology (e.g., "co-eternal," "begotten," "unborrowed," "underived") was used to trace interpretive patterns across all three traditions, with cross-checks to ensure like-for-like comparison.

D. Scholarly Rigor

- **Source Validity:** Only official church documents and recognized theological works were included as primary evidence.
- **Peer-Reviewed Support:** Secondary literature was limited to peer-reviewed articles, academic books, and theses for historical and analytic context.
- **Methodological Reflexivity.** To reduce interpretive bias, each tradition was first read on its own terms before cross-analysis; terminology was defined prior to comparison; and findings were checked for symmetry in tone, evidence selection, and evaluative language across the three traditions.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Meaning of Co-Eternal of the Son to the Father in Roman Catholic Theology

The doctrine of the divinity of Christ is inherently linked to the doctrine of the Trinity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) identifies the Trinity as the "most fundamental and essential teaching" of the RCC (CCC 234). The Catechism explains:

"Now this is the Catholic faith: We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the substance; for the person of the Father is one, the Son's is another, the Holy Spirit's another; but the Godhead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal" (CCC 266).

Catholic theology asserts that there is "one God in three persons," forming a consubstantial Trinity. This means that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "by nature one God," sharing the same divine substance or essence (CCC 200, 253). With the Father being eternal, the Son is likewise eternal (CCC 465), establishing the co-eternity of the Son with the Father.

Eternal Generation and Divine Timelessness

Roman Catholic theology explains the Son's co-eternity with the Father through the doctrine of eternal generation. Unlike created beings, this divine generation is timeless and

spiritual (White, 2015). The Council of Nicaea (325) defines the Son as "begotten, not made, of the same substance as the Father" (CCC 465). Through eternal generation, the Father communicates His entire divine essence to the Son, making Him consubstantial and co-eternal with the Father (CCC 262; O'Collins & Farrugia, 2015).

Although the Son is eternally begotten, He remains "true God," having come "from true God." The phrase "light from light" expresses this co-eternity beyond time. Origen used the analogy of light radiating from light, and Justin Martyr compared it to fire igniting fire without diminishing the source (Emery, 2007, pp. 71–72). As O'Collins and Farrugia (2015) note, "the substance of the Father has been fully communicated, and the Son is coeternal with the Father" (p. 31).

Arius rejected eternal generation, interpreting divine begetting as a form of creation, thereby suggesting that the Son was not fully God (Emery, 2007). According to Arius, only the Father was unbegotten and eternal; thus, the Son could not be eternal. Emery (2007) summarizes: "the Christ of Arius is neither true God nor true man" (p. 126). Catholic theology firmly refuted this claim, affirming that the Son's generation is eternal and divine.

The Father as the Source of the Trinity

In eternal generation, "the Father is the Source in the Trinity" (CCC 245). The Father's entire divine nature is "given over to the Son, who receives it from the Father," including the attribute of eternity (Sokolowski, 2006, p. 211; Rahner & Donceel, 1975, p. 61). Without this generation, the Father would not truly be a Father, nor the Son truly a Son (Weinandy, 1995, pp. 65–66). Nonetheless, the Trinity is free from hierarchy or superiority; each person is equal in divinity (Emery, 2007, p. 114).

Church fathers articulated this relationship with clarity. Augustine stated that the Son is "coeternal with His Father," emphasizing the "unity of divine substance" (Augustine, 1887/2006, p. 371; Johnson, 2011). Although the Son is God, He "derived" His divine nature by generation from the Father (O'Collins & Farrugia, 2015, p. 158). Athanasius described eternal generation as occurring before "creation and time itself" (Stevenson, 2015; Meyer, 1999), and Hilary of Poitiers asserted that divine begetting is "timeless or beyond time" (Weedman, 2007).

Co-Eternality and Trinitarian Unity

Eternal generation establishes the Son's co-eternity with the Father. The Athanasian Creed explains that within the Trinity, "equal begets equal, eternal begets eternal" (Augustine, 1888/2006). This eternal relationship is based on unity: the Father gives His entire divine nature to the Son out of perfect love (Sokolowski, 2006; Coffey, 2008). Rahner (1993) concludes that eternal generation offers believers assurance of God's immutable nature and eternal salvation.

Summary of Catholic Understanding

The Father's unique relationship with the Son is not based on creation but on eternal begetting (Craig, 2019). Early theologians recognized that the term *Son* conveys relationship, origin, and generation (Zeller & Showers, 2007). By this eternal begetting, the Father and Son share the same substance—identical in essence yet distinct in personhood (Emery, 2007). As the begotten Son, Christ is coequal, coeternal, and coessential with the Father (Emery, 2007), possessing pre-existence and self-existence (Lashier, 2014).

Though Scripture does not explicitly detail eternal generation, early Christians employed the concept cautiously (Wiles, 1961; Lashier, 2014). The generation of the Son is timeless; it has no beginning because God is eternal and not bound by temporal limits (Lashier, 2014). Gregory of Nazianzus described it as "beyond the sphere of time" and "above time," where the Son is "unoriginate in respect of time" since "the sources of time are not subject to time" (Gregory of Nazianzus, 2006; O'Collins, 2009).

Therefore, in Catholic theology, the Son's co-eternity with the Father is inseparable from the doctrine of eternal generation. This doctrine preserves the full divinity of Christ, ensuring His equality with the Father and affirming the eternal unity of the Trinity.

B. Meaning of Co-Eternal of the Son to the Father in Baptist Theology

Baptist theology, rooted in the English Reformation and articulated through its historic confessions, affirms the co-eternity of the Son with the Father by embracing the classic Nicene doctrine of eternal generation. This position situates the Baptist tradition firmly within the catholic consensus on the Trinity, sharing a common heritage with other orthodox expressions of the Christian faith.

Confessional Witness

The Baptist commitment to the Son's co-eternity is formally enshrined in its key confessional documents. The *Orthodox Creed of 1679*, representing General Baptists, provides a classic Protestant witness, stating: "The Father is of none... the Son is eternally begotten of the Father... all infinite, without beginning; therefore but one God" (The Orthodox Creed, 1679). This formulation explicitly grounds the Son's co-eternity in an eternal, non-temporal act of begetting.

Even more influential is the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), which became the doctrinal standard for Particular Baptists in both England and North America. It declares that within the "divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word (or Son) and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and Eternity." The confession clarifies the personal distinctions through the language of processions: "the Father is of none neither begotten nor proceeding, the Son is Eternally begotten of the Father, the holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son" (The Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689, chap. 2, par. 3). This heritage continues in modern statements like *The Baptist Faith & Message 2000*, which, while using more concise language, affirms that "Christ is the eternal Son of God" (Southern Baptist Convention, 2000).

Eternal Generation and Consubstantiality

Classic Baptist theologians expound upon these confessional statements by explaining that "eternal generation" is the theological key to understanding the Son's co-eternal relationship with the Father. John Gill (1697–1771), a preeminent Baptist theologian, argued that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be supported without the eternal generation of the Son, as it provides the only biblical basis for the personal distinctions within the Godhead (Gill, 1769). For Gill, the act of begetting is eternal and timeless, meaning there was never a point when the Son did not exist. He defined this generation as pertaining to the Son's person, not His divine nature, which is shared equally with the Father and the Spirit, thereby affirming His full and independent deity.

This view asserts that "like begets like," meaning the eternally begotten Son must possess the very same divine nature as the Father who begets Him. This secures the Son's consubstantiality (*homoousios*) with the Father. James P. Boyce (1827–1888), founder of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, articulated this by stating that the three persons of the Trinity are equal, and any subordination is one of "order and relationship" in the economy of salvation, not of essence or being (Boyce, 1887).

Rejection of Ontological Subordination

While affirming an economic ordering—in which the Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit—Baptist theology has historically rejected any form of ontological subordinationism. The eternal generation of the Son does not imply inferiority in nature, power, or glory. The Son derives His personal mode of subsistence from the Father, but not His divine essence in a way that would make Him a lesser being or contingent upon the Father's will. As Boyce argued, the divine nature is numerically one and possessed equally by all three persons. The works of the Trinity *ad extra* (outwardly, toward creation) are also inseparable, meaning creation and redemption are the single work of the triune God, further guarding the Son's co-equal power and co-eternal status with the Father.

Summary of Baptist Understanding

In Baptist theology, the Son's co-eternity with the Father is understood through the lens of historic Nicene orthodoxy. The Son is co-eternal because He is "eternally begotten" of the Father—an act that is timeless, necessary, and internal to the divine Being. This eternal begetting communicates the fullness of the divine essence, making the Son "consubstantial" and "co-equal" with the Father. Baptist confessions and systematic theologies consistently affirm that the Son is infinite and without beginning, sharing in one undivided divine "substance, power, and Eternity" with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This framework allows for real personal distinctions without introducing hierarchy or subordination into the eternal life of God, thus preserving both the unity of the Godhead and the full, co-eternal deity of the Son.

C. Meaning of Co-Eternal of the Son to the Father in Seventh-day Adventist Theology

During the deliberation on Fundamental Belief Number 2, several delegates hesitated to use the term "Trinity." One representative proposed "The Triune Godhead" because it explicitly conveys "three co-eternal persons" (Froom, 1971, p. 273). After extensive discussion, on April 25, 1980, the General Conference officially adopted the Statement of Fundamental Beliefs. From 1931 to 1980, the equality, co-eternity, and self-existence of the Son were consistently affirmed (Burt, 2009; Chrissutianto, 2018).

The Trinity

The Statement of Fundamental Beliefs declares:

"There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. He is forever worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1980/2015, p. 23).

In *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrine* (2018), the Trinity is described as having "lived as coeternal, coexistent in utter self-giving and love for one another" (p. 29). All "three are divine, yet they share their divine powers and qualities" (p. 30). The Son is eternal and "one in nature, in character, in purpose" with the Father (p. 52). Thus, SDAC affirm that Christ is fully divine.

Adventist Theological Position

The *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* asserts that the Son proclaimed Himself to be "God, self-existent, and eternal" (Dederen, 2000, pp. 161–162). Fernando Canale explains that the "being of God is an essential coprimordiality of three coequal, coeternal, nonoriginated persons" (Canale, 2000, p. 150). Adventist theology therefore rejects the RCC doctrine of eternal generation, which implies that the Son depends on the Father for His existence. Instead, SDAC affirm the Son's self-existence and nonoriginated divine life.

Theological Shift in Adventism

Historically, early Seventh-day Adventist pioneers were largely anti-Trinitarian. They believed that the Trinity had "inspiration from Rome" and concluded that "Trinity and apostasy came from the same source" (Arasola, 1987, pp. 165, 172; Johnson, 1998).

The transition from anti-Trinitarianism to full Trinitarianism within the SDAC can be traced to the Minneapolis General Conference of 1888, a pivotal moment that "changed the face of Adventism." Whidden (1998) explains that this theological shift was not limited to an emphasis on justification by faith but also embraced the full deity of Christ. Knight (2000) supports this observation. Chrissutianto (2018) notes that acceptance of the Trinity arose from a "complete understanding of the divinity of Christ," which recognized Jesus as "co-eternal with the Father and possessing self-existence" (p. 129).

Ellen G. White played a crucial role in guiding the church toward a biblical Trinitarian position. Burt (2009) states that White was instrumental in affirming Christ's eternal divinity. Prior to the 1890s, she neither identified as anti-Trinitarian nor semi-Arian. Although her contemporaries held varying theological views, she did not oppose them (Thompson, 1982; Knight, 2000).

Following the 1888 General Conference Session, Ellen White's theological understanding of Jesus's divinity and the Trinity deepened significantly. Chrissutianto (2018) explains that "the Christ's righteousness message gave her a deep insight about the need of the fullness deity of Christ" (pp. 93–94). Additionally, John Kellogg's pantheistic teachings—which White strongly opposed—helped the church clarify its understanding of a biblical Trinity (Skrzypaszek, 2018, p. 217).

The 1890s became a "gold-mine of Christological truth" in White's writings, clearly articulating the "eternity and the equality of the Son with the Father" (Webster, 2018, p. 74).

Summary of Adventist Understanding

The SDAC believe that the Son of God is co-eternal with the Father, but His Sonship is unique (Rodriguez, 2015). He was not created but is coequal with the Father (Vitto, 1973), possessing pre-existence and "eternity of being" (Haynes, 1926).

Ellen White (1940) declared: "In Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived" (p. 530).

Canale (2000) explains that this statement refuted foundational errors in early Adventist Christology and theology of God, emphasizing Christ's self-existence. Chrissutianto (2018) notes that White's later writings explicitly affirmed Christ's eternity, describing it as the "full sense of all eternity" since "the Son was never apart from the Father; there is no time when He did not exist" (p. 95). Webster (2018) concludes that SDAC affirm the Son is fully co-eternal and shares the same substance, nature, and character as the Father (p. 450).

D. Comparative Findings

After analyzing the theological foundations of each tradition, notable similarities and differences emerge regarding the meaning of the co-eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. While all three traditions converge on the central affirmation of Christ's full divinity and co-eternity, their theological reasoning, sources of authority, and underlying philosophical assumptions create distinct doctrinal profiles.

1. Similarities

A. Co-eternal:

A foundational point of unity among Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist theologies is the core affirmation that the Son is co-eternal with the Father. The Roman Catholic Church formally declares this in its Catechism, teaching that the persons of the Trinity share

one Godhead where their "majesty [is] coeternal" (CCC 266). The historic Baptist tradition concurs, enshrining this doctrine in its foundational confessions. The *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689) asserts that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of one "Eternity" (chap. 2, par. 3), a belief echoed in earlier confessions like the *Orthodox Creed* (1679), which describes the divine persons as "all infinite, without beginning" (p. 303). Likewise, the Seventh-day Adventist Church explicitly states in its Fundamental Beliefs that God is "a unity of three co-eternal Persons" (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1980/2015, p. 23). Although the church's pioneers were initially anti-Trinitarian, a gradual theological development led them to embrace the belief that Jesus Christ is fully God and co-eternal with the Father, a shift that solidified as they came to a fuller understanding of Christ's divinity (Chrissutianto, 2018). Thus, while their theological journeys and explanations differ, all three traditions arrive at the shared conclusion of the Son's co-eternity with the Father.

B. Same Nature:

All three traditions agree that the Son shares the same divine nature as the Father. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Father and the Son possess the same "divine substance, essence, or nature" (CCC 253). The Baptist tradition historically affirms this same consubstantiality, with the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689) declaring that the Son is "of one substance and equal with" the Father (chap. 8, par. 2). Baptist theologians like James P. Boyce further clarified that this shared nature is the basis of the Son's divinity, stating that it is the "equality and sameness of nature, not of office, which makes the Son truly God" (Boyce, 1887, p. 143). Similarly, the Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms in *Questions on Doctrine* (1957) that Christ is "one with the Eternal Father—one in nature, equal in power and authority" and possesses "all the divine attributes" (p. 35). This is underscored by the uniquely Adventist affirmation that Christ's divine life is "original, unborrowed, underived," emphasizing His full self-existence (White, 1940, p. 530).

2. Differences

Although the Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist traditions agree on the Son's co-eternity and shared divine nature, key distinctions emerge in their understanding of *how* the Son is eternal, the concept of eternity itself, and the sources of authority that shape these doctrines. Roman Catholic theology grounds the Son's co-eternity in the doctrine of eternal generation and divine timelessness. In contrast, the Baptist tradition affirms eternal generation but with a distinct Reformation-era emphasis on *sola scriptura*. Finally, Seventh-day Adventist theology rejects eternal generation outright and interprets eternity as everlasting duration without beginning or end.

A. Eternal Generation:

The doctrine of eternal generation is a central point of divergence among the three traditions. Roman Catholic theology explains the Son's co-eternity through this doctrine, which posits that the Father eternally and timelessly begets the Son. According to Augustine, the Son is co-eternal with the Father precisely because He was "always born, the Son of the Father,

God of God, coeternal of the Eternal" (Augustine, 1888/2006, p. 267). This eternal begetting is not an act of creation, a distinction clarified by the Nicene Creed's formula that the Son is "begotten, not made," but rather a mysterious communication of the divine essence from the Father to the Son (CCC 246).

The Baptist tradition historically concurs, viewing eternal generation as a non-negotiable tenet of orthodox Trinitarianism. Foundational confessions, such as the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), state plainly that "the Son is eternally begotten of the Father" (chap. 2, par. 3) 1. For influential Baptist theologians like John Gill, this doctrine was the very foundation upon which the personal distinctions within the Trinity rest; to remove it would be to render the Trinity "quite indefensible" (Gill, 1773, Vol. 2, p. 56). While affirming the doctrine, Baptist theologians have also clarified that this eternal act does not imply temporal priority or essential inequality, explaining it as a necessary and "ever continuing" act within the divine nature that establishes the personal relation of the Son to the Father without diminishing His deity (Boyce, 1887, p. 143).

In stark contrast to both traditions, the Seventh-day Adventist Church explicitly rejects the doctrine of eternal generation. Adventist theology argues that any concept of derivation, even an eternal one, compromises the Son's absolute self-existence. This position is anchored in Ellen G. White's definitive statement that Christ is the "pre-existent, self-existent Son of God" and that His life is "original, unborrowed, underived" (1940, p. 530; 1958, p. 46). Theologians like LeRoy Froom contended that if the Son "came forth from the Father" at any point, "then He had a beginning, and is less than complete Deity" (1971, p. 292). Consequently, SDAC hold that the doctrine of eternal generation lacks a solid biblical foundation and introduces philosophical constructs that threaten the Son's full co-eternity and equality with the Father (Canale, 2005; Tornalejo, 2016; Gulley, 2011).

B. Concept of Eternal:

The divergent views on eternal generation are rooted in fundamentally different conceptions of divine eternity itself. Roman Catholic theology, grounded in classical theism, defines eternity as timelessness—an "eternal stillness" or an "eternal present" that lacks succession and is qualitatively different from time (Augustine, 1888/2006, p. 218). This framework allows for a timeless act of generation, described as occurring in a "timeless today, before all ages" (Cyril of Jerusalem, 1894, p. 65), making the doctrine of eternal generation philosophically coherent within its system.

The Baptist tradition, while prioritizing *sola scriptura*, historically aligns with this classical understanding. Foundational confessions speak of the Godhead sharing one "Eternity" (*The Baptist Confession of Faith*, 1689, chap. 2, par. 3). Leading theologians like James P. Boyce explicitly distinguished divine eternity from temporal succession, defining God's existence as a timeless state with "no past or future" (1887, p. 70). For Baptists, as for Catholics, this classical view of God existing outside of time provides the necessary framework for affirming the Son's eternal generation.

In direct opposition, Seventh-day Adventist theology rejects divine timelessness as an unbiblical concept derived from Greek philosophy (Canale, 2005; Pfandl, 2006). SDAC interpret the biblical concept of eternity as everlasting duration—an endless existence without a beginning or an end (Sydnor, 2018). Theologians argue that the Bible's portrayal of a relational, interactive God provides strong evidence that the divine nature is inherently "temporal, not timeless" (Gulley, 2011, p. 130). This temporal understanding makes a "timeless" act of generation incoherent, leading SDAC to reject the doctrine of eternal generation as a necessary consequence of their view of God's eternal, durational existence (Canale, 2005).

C. Counterarguments and Replies

The theological objections each tradition raises against the others are direct consequences of these foundational differences. The cross-responses below make these points of contention explicit.

On Eternal Generation and the Person of the Son

- **Adventist Objection to Eternal Generation:** The primary Adventist critique is that "generation," even if described as eternal, inherently implies a beginning and an ontological subordination that compromises the Son's absolute self-existence and equality with the Father (Froom, 1971). If the Son derives His existence from the Father, He cannot be fully self-existent (*autotheos*).
- **Catholic and Baptist Reply:** In response, both Catholic and Baptist theologians argue that this objection imposes temporal and physical limitations onto a divine, eternal act. The historic orthodox defense, articulated by the Church Fathers, is that the Son's generation is *achronōs* ("without time") and *anarchōs* ("without beginning") (Irons, 2017). The Nicene Creed's distinction between "begotten, not made" was specifically formulated to counter any suggestion that the Son is a creature. This eternal act is understood not as a past event but as an "ever continuing" reality within the Godhead that communicates the *full* divine essence, thereby ensuring the Son's absolute equality with the Father (Boyce, 1887, p. 143).
- **Catholic and Baptist Critique of the Adventist Position:** Conversely, a primary Catholic and Baptist critique of the Adventist position is that by rejecting eternal generation, it fails to adequately ground the personal distinctions within the Godhead. If the Son is not distinguished from the Father by His eternal origin (generation), then the distinction between them risks becoming merely functional or modal, rather than personal and ontological.
- **Adventist Reply:** Adventists counter this claim by asserting that the Father-Son relationship is one of role and eternal relation, not of existential origin. They argue that grounding the Son's personhood in His eternal self-existence, rather than in a generative act, better safeguards His absolute equality. From the Adventist perspective, an

ontological origin, even a timeless one, introduces an unnecessary and unbiblical hierarchy. This is resolved by viewing the Father and Son as two distinct, co-eternal, and equally self-existent persons united in purpose and nature (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2015).

On the Nature of Divine Eternity

- **Adventist Objection to Timelessness:** Adventists argue that divine timelessness is an extra-biblical concept imported from Greek philosophy, particularly Platonism (Canale, 2005; Fortin, n.d.). They contend that it contradicts the biblical portrayal of a God who acts sequentially in history, responds to prayer, and relates personally to humanity.
- **Catholic and Baptist Reply:** Classical theologians from both traditions reply that the Bible's temporal language about God is an example of divine accommodation. Because of the "weakness of our concepts," Scripture describes eternity in simpler terms (Mullins, 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, they argue that timelessness is a necessary consequence of God's immutability; a being that experiences a "succession of moments" is a being that changes, which contradicts God's perfect and unchangeable nature (Boyce, 1887, p. 69).
- **Catholic and Baptist Critique of Durational Eternity:** From the classical perspective, the Adventist view of God existing within an everlasting duration subjects God to the constraints of time. This would imply that God experiences change as moments pass, compromising His perfection and sovereignty over time itself.
- **Adventist Reply:** Adventists counter by prioritizing the Bible's phenomenological language over philosophical deductions. They argue that the biblical words for eternity, such as the Hebrew *olam* and the Greek *aion*, refer to "an age that lasts a long time, perhaps forever," not a state of timelessness (Mullins, 2013, p. 4). From an Adventist perspective, prioritizing a philosophical concept like immutability over the Bible's consistent portrayal of a temporal, relational God is to allow a "traditional Platonic dualistic worldview and metaphysics" to supersede scriptural revelation (Fortin, n.d., p. 8).

V. CONCLUSION

Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist traditions all affirm the full divinity of Christ and His co-eternity with the Father. Each tradition teaches that the Son shares the Father's divine nature and eternal existence. Despite this common ground, however, an in-depth comparison reveals that the understandings of how the Son is co-eternal with the Father diverge in significant ways among these three traditions.

Roman Catholic theology explains the Son's co-eternity through the doctrine of eternal generation. In Catholic teaching, God the Father eternally begets God the Son in a timeless act, imparting to the Son the Father's own divine essence—including omnipotence, divinity, and

eternity. Because this generation is outside of time ("*begotten not made*"), the Son has *no beginning*; He is co-eternal with the Father by virtue of sharing the very same substance and attributes as the Father. In this view, *eternity* is conceived as a timeless present, so the Son's begottenness does not imply a start point in time. The result is that Father and Son are one in being: *equal in glory and majesty, co-eternal and consubstantial*. The Father is eternally Father and the Son eternally Son, with no hierarchy of time or being between them. Thus, for Catholic theology, the Son's co-eternal status is derived from the Father in an eternal, mysterious relationship of origin, without diminishing the Son's divinity.

The Baptist tradition historically aligns with this formulation, viewing eternal generation as a non-negotiable tenet of orthodox Trinitarianism. Foundational confessions, such as the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), state plainly that "the Son is eternally begotten of the Father." Influential Baptist theologians like John Gill considered this doctrine the very foundation upon which the personal distinctions within the Trinity rest. While affirming the doctrine, Baptist theologians clarify that this eternal act does not imply temporal priority or inferiority of nature. It is explained as a necessary and "ever continuing" act within the divine nature that establishes the personal relation of the Son to the Father without diminishing His deity.

Seventh-day Adventist theology, by contrast to both Catholic and Baptist teaching, rejects the notion of the Son having any origin or derived existence, even an eternal one. SDAC hold that Jesus Christ, the Son, is unoriginated and self-existent from all eternity. In their view, there was never a time when the Son did not exist alongside the Father. The co-eternity of the Son is therefore inherent to who He is, not dependent on a generative act by the Father. Adventist understanding of *eternity* aligns with the biblical concept of everlasting duration (without beginning and without end) rather than a philosophical timelessness. The Son is co-eternal with the Father simply because He is eternal God in His own right. Phrases such as Christ's life being "original, unborrowed, underived" are used to emphasize that the Son's eternal life and divine nature were not bestowed by the Father but are part of His very being. Thus, while SDAC also speak of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God, a *unity of three co-eternal Persons*, they interpret the Father-Son relationship as one of role, not of existential origin or derivation.

These differences in explaining co-eternity stem from deeper theological frameworks. The RCC draws on both Scripture and long-standing Church tradition and philosophy (e.g., the writings of Church Fathers and the concept of God as timeless) to articulate its doctrines. By using philosophical terms like *homoousios* (one substance) and concepts like divine timelessness, Catholic theology provides a metaphysical explanation for how the Son can be begotten yet eternal. The Baptist tradition, while committed to a *sola scriptura* principle, reaches the same conclusion on eternal generation through its interpretation of Scripture, affirming the doctrine as a biblical truth essential to orthodoxy.

In contrast, the SDAC relies on a *sola scriptura* approach to reject what it views as an extra-biblical concept, grounding its doctrine strictly in biblical revelation and the progression of understanding within Adventist history. Adventist thinkers (including influential figure Ellen G. White) eventually came to uphold the Trinity by focusing on Scripture's testimony to Christ's

eternal divinity, without incorporating the concept of "eternal generation." As a result, even though all three traditions strongly affirm the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God, the meaning of the Son's co-eternity differs. Both the RCC and historic Baptist traditions assert "*eternal begottenness*" as the mode of the Son's eternity, whereas the SDAC insists on the Son's "*beginningless pre-existence*" apart from any generative dependence on the Father.

Implications

This comparative study makes it clear that, despite a shared use of Trinitarian language, the RCC, Baptist, and SDAC understandings of the Son's co-eternal relationship to the Father are not identical. The RCC conception, rooted in centuries of theological tradition, underscores a mysterious relational origin of the Son within the Godhead. The Baptist conception, while also affirming eternal generation, does so with a distinct Reformation-era emphasis on *sola scriptura*. The SDAC conception, emerging from a different historical context, underscores the self-existent eternity of Christ to safeguard His absolute equality with the Father. These nuanced differences are more than semantic; they reflect each community's sources of authority—tradition plus Scripture for the RCC, and a commitment to Scripture alone for Baptists and SDAC—and have shaped how each church formulates the doctrine of God.

By underscoring these similarities and differences, the present study also addresses contemporary concerns and misconceptions. Notably, it sheds light on the claim by some anti-Trinitarian groups that SDAC simply copied the RCC Trinity doctrine. The findings show that while SDAC eventually embraced a Trinitarian view in harmony with Christian orthodoxy, they did so through independent biblical study and arrived at a theological interpretation of "*co-eternal Sonship*" that stands apart from RCC tradition. In other words, the SDAC doctrine of the Trinity—affirming the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one God in three co-eternal persons—was formulated on a distinct biblical basis, not by adopting the philosophical underpinnings of RCC theology. This clarification helps to refute the charge that SDAC Trinitarianism is the "omega apostasy" or a mere import from the RCC, by demonstrating that the *Adventist understanding of the Son's eternity is uniquely its own*.

Beyond this internal apologetic value, these findings have significant practical applications for interdenominational dialogue, theological education, and pastoral ministry (Conner, 1937; Hobbs & Linder, 1982). For interdenominational dialogue, this analysis allows conversations between Catholics, Baptists, and SDAC to move beyond superficial agreements on the term "Trinity" and engage in more precise and honest discussions about the underlying theological frameworks that define their respective beliefs (Iheanacho, 2022; Ogouma, 2023).

In theological education, this comparative approach equips the next generation of ministers and theologians to articulate their tradition's doctrine with clarity and to understand other Christian perspectives without resorting to caricature (Boyce, 1887; Garrett, 2007).

For Adventist educators, it provides a robust historical and theological basis for explaining the denomination's shift from its early anti-Trinitarian position to its current position, framing it

as a process of "progressive revelation" rooted in Bible study rather than doctrinal borrowing (Burt, 2006; Knight, 2000; Ogouma, 2023).

Finally, in pastoral contexts, this clarity helps ministers address the questions of lay members, particularly those troubled by claims that Adventism adopted a "Roman doctrine" (Ogouma, 2023; Pfandl, 2006). It enables pastors to affirm the church's belief in the "heavenly trio" while confidently explaining how and why the SDAC understanding of Christ's "original, unborrowed, underived" life differs from other Christian traditions (Moon, 2006; White, 1940).

In end, the RCC, Baptist, and the SDAC all worship Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God, one with the Father. Yet, the way each tradition conceptualizes the Son's co-eternity with the Father is influenced by different doctrinal premises. For RCC and Baptists, the Son is co-eternal because He is eternally begotten of a timeless Father; for SDAC, the Son is co-eternal because He is the everlasting God who was never begotten in time or eternity. Eventually, this study concludes that these theological systems, while converging on the affirmations of Christ's divinity and eternity, diverge significantly on the explanation of His eternal Sonship. The Trinity doctrine in Roman Catholicism and historic Baptist thought, rooted in Nicene orthodoxy, is not the same in emphasis or origin as that in Seventh-day Adventism, even if all three reach a similar confession that Jesus is God Eternal alongside the Father.

Lastly, it should be noted that this analysis has focused on official theological teachings and historical development in each tradition. Future research could build on these findings by examining how these doctrinal nuances are understood by lay members of each church, or by exploring additional Christian traditions' views on the Father-Son relationship. Such studies would further illuminate how concepts of divine eternity and relationships within the Godhead influence Christian thought and address ongoing debates. In closing, by comparing RCC, historic Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist perspectives on the co-eternity of the Son, this study contributes to a clearer understanding of Trinitarian doctrine and fosters more informed dialogue on a cornerstone issue of Christian theology.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author solely conceptualized the research idea, designed the study methodology, conducted the literature review, performed the theological analysis, and drafted and revised the manuscript. The author accepts full academic responsibility for all aspects of the work, including its accuracy and integrity.

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