

# PRIMER

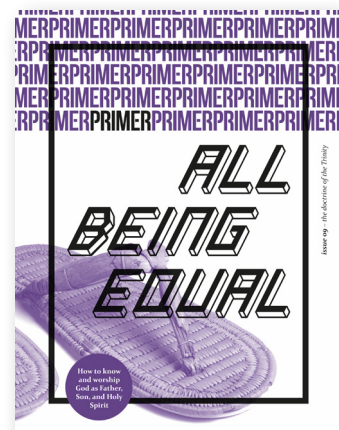
# DOES THE SON SUBMIT?

*Some reflections on the **eternal functional subordination** debate.*

This article expands on themes raised in issue 09 of *Primer*, entitled *All Being Equal*. The issue explores the doctrine of the Trinity with help from Chris Ansberry, John James, Matt Merker, Fred Sanders, Mark Smith, Carl Trueman, and something old from Basil the Great.

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# 1. SAFE GROUND

Many of the basic elements of the doctrine of the Trinity were laid out in *Primer* issue 09 (if you haven't read it yet, you really should, and I'm going to assume you're familiar with it).

One of the diagrams in that issue tries to capture the space within which we are trying to think.



We must not stray beyond these bounds:

- by denying the divinity of any of the persons of the Trinity,
- by denying their distinctions as three eternal persons,
- or by denying their unity in a way that produces more than one God.

As *Primer* issue 09 emphasised, this does not leave us with a picture of three static persons within one God, because Scripture reveals something of their relations to one another and to the world.

The Father has life in himself and he grants the Son to have life in himself (John 5:26). Since the Son is eternal, without beginning or end, this is best thought of as an eternal generation of the Son (on which, see Mark Smith's article in *Primer* 09). As the creed of A.D. 381 says, he was "begotten of the Father before all ages."

The idea of the Father as the source of the Son is part of why the first two persons of the Trinity are named as Father and Son. To be a son is have a father and to come from him. The Spirit is not named as another family member in this way, but as the breath or Spirit of God. And yet built into that image is another image of origins. The Spirit is God's breath: it comes from him. Since Scripture calls the Spirit the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, we have learnt to speak about the Spirit as proceeding from the Father and the Son.

There is, therefore, an appropriate way to speak about an order within the persons of the Trinity. It is fitting to name them as Father, Son, and Spirit in that order. And it is right to describe a kind of asymmetry. The Father has life in himself and does not receive this from the Son; the Son has life in himself and does receive this from the Father. The Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Father does not proceed from the Spirit.

The very names by which God has revealed himself teach us to think in these ways, and the work of the Trinity in our salvation reflects these same dynamics. The Father sends the Son into the world, and not vice versa. Likewise the Father and the Son send the Spirit.

So far, so uncontroversial. But the big question is whether Scripture goes further in describing the Son's eternal obedience to his Father. This is usually known as the *Eternal Functional Subordination of the Son* (abbreviated as either EFS or ESS).

## 2. SHAKY GROUND? INTRODUCING ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION

Each of those words are important. *Eternal* stresses that we are not just thinking about the incarnate Jesus' obedience to God's will. One aspect of Christ's humanity is that he is a second and obedient Adam. So to say that the incarnate Son is obedient to God is not at all controversial. But to say that the Son, as Son, is *eternally* obedient to the Father is a very different thing.

*Functional Subordination* here means that he is subordinate to the Father in his role as Son, but not in his divine nature. Alarm bells ring loudly here because one of the oldest heresies about the Son is called *subordinationism* (or Arianism) which argues that he is not equal in nature to the Father. This heresy is denied by the ancient creeds which rightly call the Son "God from God, Light from light."

To say that the Son is functionally subordinate certainly has unfortunate echoes of that heresy, but the word *functional* is key. Advocates of EFS will insist that we can both affirm the Son's equality with the Father in nature, and talk about a functional difference in roles.

This raises a really important point. When the big controversy blew up on the internet around this topic a few years ago, accusations of Arianism flew about. And yet we need to be careful. Arius was quite explicit in denying the full divinity of the Son, and so the heresy is rightly named after him. But advocates of EFS are just as explicit about their denials of Arianism. They believe the Son is one in nature (*homoousios*) with the Father.

That is not enough yet to say that everything is hunky-dory, but it means we need to be careful. At the very least we might be dealing with a self-contradictory or incoherent position, but we need to acknowledge the denials of outright subordinationism. We also need to realise how the debate has shifted somewhat.

One of the reasons EFS rightly provoked such a strong reaction was that, for a time, some advocates wanted to say that the *only* way to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son was with reference to the Father's authority and the Son's obedience. Writers such as Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware argued against the eternal generation of the Son and *only* wanted to relate the first two persons of the Trinity by means of EFS. This was very serious and much more controversial, given that the Creeds of A.D. 325 and A.D. 381 teach us to speak of the Son as *homoousios* with the Father and begotten by him. When the church has described the essence of the relationship between Father and Son it has reached for begotten-ness, a concept which has a built-in sense of likeness (*we make* things that are different from us, but we can only *beget* things that share our nature). In the early days then, EFS rejected creedal orthodoxy much more clearly. More recently, though, Ware and Grudem have accepted the eternal generation of the Son and so the question has shifted towards asking whether it is coherent to speak about the eternal generation of the Son, and yet also to affirm his submission to the Father in some sense.

On this point, Glenn Butner is very helpful. He is a firm critic of EFS but does not think the charge of Arianism will stick. See *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 20-24.

"If we do not have economic subordination, then there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another, and consequently we do not have the three distinct persons existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all eternity... If the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally "Father" and the Son is not eternally "Son." This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 251. In the revised edition, published in 2000, Grudem includes an appendix addressing "The Monogenes Controversy" in which he argues that "it would seem more helpful if the language of 'the eternal begetting of the Son...' were not retained in any modern theological formulations" (page 1234).

### 3. A THEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL MINEFIELD

It helps to realise that this is not simply a matter of Trinitarian theology. All other kinds of battles are being fought in this debate.

#### a. Theological method

To a large degree, this debate has to do with theological method. Some theologians and denominations hold historical confessions and definitions in very high regard. Others have a theological method that sits more loosely to historical theology or is not bound by one particular confession. Of those, some are enthusiastic about systematic theology and its potential to make distinctions and bring clarity to debates, while others are more *biblicist*, which is to say that they want to be able to tie any theological conclusion to a chapter and verse.

Relatedly, we need to recognise what this debate is trying to establish. Often the debate asks: “what is in line with orthodox Christian teaching about the Trinity?” Is EFS compatible with Trinitarianism as the church has defined it? Some people, as we have just said, will immediately think the only question is “what does the Bible say?,” with varying degrees of confidence that the creeds help us answer that question. But, as Stephen Holmes points out in one essay, even if we are trying to compare EFS to the thing we call *classical orthodox Trinitarianism* we need realise that that is not easy to define. You might say it is defined by the early church creeds but it is not that simple. The creeds evolve in their use of terms and the issues they are trying to address, and they don’t address every issue. None of them explicitly affirm one divine essence (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*). The Son is said to be of the same essence as the Father (*homoousios*), but none of the early creeds say the same thing of the Holy Spirit. And so to appeal to classical or creedal Trinitarianism is really to appeal to a set of convictions and arguments that shape and support the creeds, and flow from them, but are not always explicitly taught in those creeds. The point is, this isn’t a simple task, and we often don’t make explicit what we are debating.

#### b. Power and Gender

The EFS debate has also become entwined with questions of power and gender. In an age that exalts “equality” as a premium social good, any language of hierarchy or submission will be sensitive and provocative. Within the church, debates about the ministry of women have become entrenched along complementarianism and egalitarianism battle lines. One of the undoubted appeals of EFS for some, is that it promises to legitimise the kind of relationship complementarians advocate between husbands and wives. If the Son can be equal to the Father and yet at the same time submissive to him, could that not be a paradigm for marriage and ministry in the church? Or a way of saying that men and women more generally are equal, but have different roles?

That said, complementarians are deeply divided on the issue of EFS. Some are enthusiasts, others are convinced complementarians for other reasons, but do not think we should think of the Father and Son as relating in that way. Instead, for example, they would point to the relationship between Christ and his church as the reality to which complementarian marriage points. This means it’s really unhelpful when you find people describing this as a debate between “feminist” views of the Trinity and “complementarian” views of the Trinity, even though the issues are entangled here.

Stephen R. Holmes, “Classical Trinitarianism and Eternal Functional Subordination,” in *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), see 260-64.

## 4. THE CASE FOR THE ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON

The strongest case for EFS relates comes in John's Gospel in particular. There is a clear pattern in John's Gospel that the Son has been sent by the Father and that their relationship has a certain texture.

The Father is the great giver in John's Gospel. He gives bread from heaven (6:32), life to the dead (5:21), the Spirit (14:16), and answered prayers (16:23). To the Son he has given authority to judge (5:27), work to do (5:36), an elect people (6:37, 39, 10:29, 17:2, 7, 9, 24), authority over all people (17:2), glory (17:22, 24), and a cup to drink (18:11).

In some of those cases, the Father has granted to the Son the authority to do things that are the Father's prerogatives (to judge, to give life). In others, the Son receives gifts and passes them on, such as the word of the Father (17:14) and glory (17:22). In yet other places there is a sense that the Son imitates his Father by being generous in his own right, most notably in the giving of himself (6:51-52), but also the gift of peace (14:27).

What starts to emerge here is a sense that the Father is more than simply the source of the Son but that his relationship to the Son is characterised by a paternal love expressed in generous giving. In the relationship between the two, those gifts travel in one direction, from Father to Son. And yet the Son also bears a family likeness and so proves himself to be generous in the world.

This sense of a family likeness deepens in John 8. Jesus comes to do the Father's work (5:36, 9:3, 10:37). When he is rejected by the Jews in John 8 he tells them that their rejection exposes who their true father is. If God were their father, they would welcome and love and obey the Son (8:42). But their reaction reveals a different family likeness. They are obedient sons to a different father – the devil – dealing in lies and murder. They are carrying out his desires (8:44).

By contrast, Jesus can say "I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me." (14:31). Or consider John 5, where a lengthy defence of the Son's equality with God is also top and tailed with references to the Son's dependence on the Father.

*John 5:19-20*

*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. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.*

*John 5:30*

*By 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.*

Taken together, these passages seem to clearly describe the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son. A relationship that can be characterised as one of equally divine and equally honoured members of the Trinity. And yet, a relationship in which there is the kind of asymmetry that the language of father and son evokes. The Son is from the Father; the Father gives generously to the Son; the Son lovingly obeys the Father and seeks to please him.

Michael J. Ovey,  
*Your Will Be Done:  
Exploring Eternal  
Subordination,  
Divine Monarchy and  
Divine Humility*  
(London: Latimer  
Trust, 2016),  
137–41.

As we saw above, everyone affirms a degree of asymmetry, since the Father eternally generates the Son, but EFS wants to argue that in addition to that from-ness, there are also eternal relationships of fatherly authority and filial (sonly) obedience. In Mike Ovey's careful defence of this position he argues it has the advantages of enriching the distinction between the persons of the Trinity, and it establishes that there is a healthy way in which to relate love to obedience and the exercise of power (something that our culture desperately lacks).

## 5. PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

### *a. How does God's self-revelation in time relate to eternity?*

In Trinitarian theology there is a concept known as *Rahner's Rule* or *Rahner's Dictum*. Named after the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (despite the fact that he wasn't claiming to have invented it), it states that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa." You will have met these terms in *Primer* issue 09. The *economic Trinity* refers to Father, Son, and Spirit, as they act towards the world. The *immanent Trinity* refers to God's eternal existence and relations within himself.

So, what should we make of the idea that "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa"? Well, the rule is rightly criticised for a few reasons. First, it sets us thinking about two Trinities, which is not the most helpful start. Second, the word "is" is a problem. To say that what we see God doing in history "is" what he is like in eternity would introduce all kinds of temporal actions and changes into the eternal being of God.

That said, the rule does seek to express an important truth, namely that God has truly revealed himself. We can take what we see in salvation history and know that we have encountered the true eternal God. If we deny that then we have no hope of knowing what God is like and Jesus' words in John 14:9 make no sense ("Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"). The challenge is then to think carefully about what an eternal and unchanging God's actions in time and space reveal about him as he truly is. As *Primer* issue 08 (*How Great a Being*) argued, this is not a philosophical question but a biblical one. We are really asking: how do we take all that God has said about himself as the uncreated and unchanging Creator and allow that to inform how we interpret the actions of God in history?

This is not, in itself, an argument for or against EFS. But it is one of the puzzle pieces we need to be aware of. As *Primer* issue 09 shows, the standard theological argument has been that the sending of the Son and the Spirit are time-based expressions of eternal realities: the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal *spiration* (breathing out) of the Spirit. In this way, what we see in time is an echo from eternity, but not a 1-to-1 correspondence, since the shift from God's actions in time to his eternal existence is not a small shift. The question we need to come back to is whether we can also say that the incarnate Son's obedience to the Father has an eternal echo as well? Can we read that back into God's eternal existence, and what might that look like? Carefully stated, Rahner's dictum challenges both sides of the debate. It says to advocates of EFS "be careful what you infer about God's eternal relationships on basis of what you see in God's acts in history." To critics of EFS it says "be careful you don't appeal too quickly to the mysterious nature of God's eternal relationships, because the incarnation does reveal the Father and the Son." So, that's puzzle piece number one.

### *b. The simplicity of God and inseparable operations*

If you've read *Primer* issue 08 you will have met the idea of God's simplicity. It is a key way to affirm that there is one God and that he is undivided. He is not made up of

parts. It's an idea that stops us playing God's wrath off against his love, as if those things battle within him. And it's an idea that stops us thinking of God as composed of three persons in a way that would jeopardise belief in one God. It teaches us to say, for example, that the Son doesn't possess a portion of godness, but rather that he is God in the same way that the Father is God and that he is what the whole Trinity is. This is a strong way of affirming divine unity, and for some, it is a truth that is threatened by an account which emphasises difference.

Perhaps more prominent in this debate, though, is the idea of God's *inseparable operations*. Here we are thinking about how God acts in the world. Although we can speak of the Son coming, the Father sending and the Spirit anointing, we need to say that these are not three separate actors, but that God (Father, Son, and Spirit) performs all of those actions. It sounds complicated, but it must be true if we are going to say that there is one God who eternally exists as three persons, and these three are not separate actors. In Scripture, it is affirmed when the Son explains the healing of the lame man in John: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working" (5:17). In that healing, the Father and the Son have done their work, and the Jews rightly hear this is a claim to divinity. Jesus' response is to emphasise again the joint work of Father and Son (see 5:19). In a similar way, Scripture ascribes the work of the Spirit to God, indicating that the work of one is the work of all (see the extract from Basil the Great in issue 09 for more on this).

Of course, the idea of inseparable operations does not mean that there are not still works that we ascribe distinctively to the Father, the Son, or the Spirit – e.g. the Son suffered, not the Father – but the point is that we never say the Son performs something apart from, or without the Father and the Spirit. That *might* still leave room for the Son to be obedient to the Father, but it does caution us against thinking of the persons of the Trinity acting independently.

The argument for God's inseparable operations was also built upon the conviction that actions are grounded in the *will* to act and the *power* to act, and that *will* and *power* arise from our *nature*. Since Father, Son, and Spirit have one nature, then, it would follow, they have one power and one will to enact. And, if they have one will, then that would make it impossible for the Son to submit to the Father, because it would imply the Father and Son have separate wills. This is the next piece of the puzzle.

### *c. How many wills are there in God?*

God has *one* nature. The Son is *homoousios* with the Father (i.e. of the same nature). And, on the logic of what we just said, they therefore share one will, and do so with the Holy Spirit. As John Owen says, "the Father, Son, and Spirit have not distinct wills. They are one God, and God's will is one." The result is that people get very nervous about arguing the Son has a will that is distinct from the Father and the Spirit. One of the traditional ways of emphasising divine unity has

Quoted in John V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 62.

been to appeal to a common will (three persons sharing one nature with one will) but now the language of individual wills sounds too much like a threat to that unity. Consequently, as many think about the relationship between Father and Son in eternity, the only confident assertion we can make is that the Son is eternally generated by the Father, and of one substance with him.

## “NOT MY WILL”

What then about the garden of Gethsemane, you might be wondering? The Son prays “not my will but yours be done.” Well, the standard reading of that passage relies on categories established at the council of Chalcedon (A.D.451). This was the council that established how to speak of Christ’s human and divine natures. It is important to uphold both, because that accounts for the way the Gospels can refer to Jesus’ omniscience and divine power (proper to his divine nature), but also to his hunger and thirst and death (proper to his human nature).

For our salvation, it is also vital that Christ has a human and a divine nature. Since “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10), there was no human being who could bear the sins of humanity and offer the obedience that Adam should have offered. The saviour needed therefore to be divine. And at the same, God was not going to abandon his plans for humanity but to bring them to fulfilment. God, therefore, took on human nature so that he could restore what was broken. The image of God is restored in us as we are united to Jesus because he is truly human.

So: one person, with two natures, and (after some more debate) the church adopted the view that he has two wills. He must have a human will to offer obedience in our place, and our fallen will can only be restored in union with his perfect will. It follows, then, that having a will is a property of nature, and not a person. Jesus Christ, because he has two natures, has two wills. A divine will, and a human will perfectly aligned with that divine will.

One standard approach to Gethsemane, therefore, is to say that Christ’s prayer expresses his human will which submits itself to the divine will. The alternative is to insist that the emphasis in Gethsemane is on personal wills at some level, where the Son is addressing his Father. Again, this is not easy! We are trying to protect the unity of the person Jesus Christ – he is not schizophrenic – but also the unity of God, since the Father and Son are one.

At the Sixth Ecumenical Council in A.D. 681-82. This position is *dyothelitism*, meaning “two will-ism.”

For in depth discussion, and a defence of this reading, see D. Glenn Butner Jr, *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 85-94.

For a defence of this reading, see Michael J. Ovey, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2016), 101-14.

## 6. SUMMING UP AND MOVING FORWARD

Hopefully a few things are clear. First, this is important. We are trying to handle Scripture well and to speak responsibly in light of all that God has said, upholding what Scripture makes clear: there is one God who we name as Father, Son, and




Spirit. Second, the key issue is whether EFS compromises divine unity. Although the subordination language suggested it was about the equality of the persons of the Trinity, the debate is really over whether EFS compromises the unity of God. Third, Christian theology has developed a number of theological convictions in order to account for what we find in the Bible: God's simplicity, his inseparable operations, and the relationship between will and nature. To wrestle honestly with the EFS debate we need to be familiar with them, we need to recognise that they are the key components of classical Trinitarian orthodoxy, we need to determine how much weight we attach to them, and we need to decide how compatible they are with EFS.

How then could we think about the Son's obedience? There are three main ways.

### ***a. The Son is obedient only in the incarnation***

One standard approach that presents the least challenges to classical Trinitarianism, is that texts which speak of submission or obedience only describe the incarnate Christ, just as references to his hunger or thirsting do. Here is the rule:


 Whenever a text speaks of any sort of subordination of the Son to the Father, the text is to be read as speaking of the economy, of the relation of the Father to the *incarnate* Son.

Holmes, "Classical Trinitarianism and Eternal Functional Subordination," 267, emphasis added.

In this approach, other statements, however, are confidently assigned to the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son (e.g. "I and the Father are one"). And some might be thought of as straddling both the eternal and the temporal ("the Father sent me"). But crucially, there is no place for speaking of the obedience or submission of the Son beyond the incarnation. In eternity, all we can say is that the Son is eternally generated by the Father, and that it is proper to name the Father as the first person of the Trinity, the Son second, and the Spirit third, but not in any sense to rank them.


### ***b. The Son is obedient in the covenant of redemption***

What is the covenant of redemption?

 Briefly stated, the *pactum salutis* (covenant of redemption) concerns the saving mission given by the Father to the Son before the foundation of the world, a mission in which the Son acts representatively on behalf of those the Father has given him, together with the Father's promise that the Son will be gloriously vindicated upon the completion of his mission.

Scott R. Swain and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Nottingham: IVP, 2008), 169.

This is not a covenant that defines God absolutely (since these relationships would not be true of him had he not created the world) and they are still part of God's economic action toward the world, but they are eternal (since God is) and they reflect a differentiation between persons of the Trinity. John Owen puts it this way: with the establishment of the covenant of redemption,

 ...there is a new habitude of will in the Father and Son towards each other that is not in them essentially. I call it new, as being in God freely, not naturally.

Chapter 27 of *Vindiciae Evangelicae*.

For more on this approach, see Benedict Bird's "John Owen and the Question of the Eternal Submission of the Son within the Ontological Trinity," *Westminster Theological Journal* 80.2. 2018.

This is a popular way of thinking about some of the language we've mentioned in John: it would mean that the Son can speak of his obedience to the Father in ways that extend beyond the incarnation. At one level this must be necessary, since the Son's obedience clearly includes being sent into the world and so pre-dates the incarnation, if we can put it that way.

This would allow us to say that the Son's part in pursuing the Triune will is to submit to the Father's will by being sent. But his obedience is not built into what the Son is as Son. Rather, they relate in these ways only because they freely entered into this covenant.

### c. *The Son's incarnate obedience reveals something of the eternal relationship between Father and Son*

We might, though, ask whether we have yet exhausted what it means for a Father to be a Father and a Son to be a Son? So far, the only conclusion we have drawn from God's revelation of himself as Father and Son is a kind of asymmetry of origins. Fathers beget sons and not vice versa. In the case of an eternal God we need to make some adjustments to the analogy (the begetting in question is eternal – there was not a time when the Son didn't exist) but the analogy holds. But is there more we can say? Caution is advisable. We must be wary of importing everything we think of as a Father/Son relationship when we think of God, but does Scripture invite us to go further?

This is where mortals fear to tread, and it will be safest if we start with careful reflection on the basic theological concepts of God's will, inseparable operations, divine simplicity and so on. Certainly, we cannot claim to hold to classical Trinitarianism if we deny those things. But, could someone affirm those things and still argue that within the distinction between persons, might there be space to speak of the Son's obedience, of the Father's authority?

Fred Sanders is cautious, not wanting to put a name to it, but argues that the link between the economic and immanent Trinity is strong enough to say that the earthly obedience of the Son reflects *something* in the Trinity's eternal relations.



As for his submission to the Father, I don't know what they call it in the happy land of the Trinity, but when it lives among us it is rightly named obedience.

[scriptoriumdaily.com/18-theses-on-the-father-and-the-son](https://scriptoriumdaily.com/18-theses-on-the-father-and-the-son)

Scott Swain and Michael Allen go a little further by suggesting that the eternal generation of the Son might provide resources for thinking about how the Son relates to the divine will. Remember, in eternal generation we speak about how the Father, who has life in himself, grants the Son to have life in himself. The Son has life in himself, from another. Building on this, Swain and Allen highlight an argument in Thomas Aquinas that there is room here to make a distinction between the ways in which the Father and Son relate to and enact the divine will:



Do not the Father and the Son have the same will? I answer that the Father and the Son do have the same will, but the Father does not have his will from another, whereas the Son does have his will from another... Thus he says I am not seeking my own will, that is, such as would be mine if it originated from myself, but my will, as being from another, that is from the Father.

Scott Swain and Michael Allen, "The Obedience of the Eternal Son," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15.2 (2013): 127.

This is intriguing – it opens up the possibility of thinking about how persons of the Trinity relate to and enact the shared will in distinctive ways while still working within the classical Trinitarian framework.

As the debate continues it is worth thinking about how we should evaluate proposals:

- We should be deeply sceptical of any proposals that are ignorant or dismissive of 2000 years of reflection on God's nature.
- We might reject future proposals on the basis that they contradict one or more of the building blocks of classical Trinitarianism despite their efforts to operate within its bounds. Any response here must be made moderately and charitably given those efforts, and any scriptural arguments need to be addressed.
- We might reject future proposals on the basis that they contradict one or more of the building blocks of classical Trinitarianism and do so knowingly. We are still called to charity here, where the authority of Scripture is affirmed and biblical arguments are made. Wisdom is then called for, in order to weigh the significance of what exactly is contradicted, the biblical support for that doctrine, and the support it enjoys in Nicene orthodoxy.
- We might accept future proposals even though they contradict standard Trinitarian concepts and so conclude that we should do away with those concepts. This is a much more radical position and really requires very careful consideration of the exegetical and historical arguments in favour of classical Trinitarianism.
- Or, we might accept future proposals where we judge that they do best justice to Scripture and can be accommodated alongside an affirmation of God's simplicity, his inseparable operations and a singular divine will. As far as I can see, there is more work to be done on the questions of whether we can speak of will at the level of the persons of the Trinity, and how we think of Gethsemane and what it means for one person with two natures to pray to God the Father.

## 7. CONCLUSION

We should be grateful that this debate is beginning to generate more light than heat. In particular, it has become clearer that the central question is one about God's unity. Despite the language of subordination, the strongest critiques of EFS focus not on the issue of the Son's equal divinity, but rather on the unity of one God. Does submission of one person to another basically entail separate persons and, in this case, separate gods? That is clearly where more work needs to be done.

Pastorally, we need to be alert to the dangers on both sides. It is a clear principle in Scripture that the Father works through the Son and by the Spirit. That unity of action preserves us, for example, from the caricatures of the cross where the Son takes our side against the Father's wrath. On the other hand, John's Gospel describes the fruits of that saving work with clear reference to the contours of the Father's relationship to the Son. We are sons in the Son. Tracing those contours as closely as we can is not easy, but it is vital. Although this can seem like an abstract and obscure debate, we are wrestling with who our God is, and he deserves our most careful attention.

## 8. FURTHER READING

Michael Bird and Scott Harrower, eds., *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019).

D. Glenn Butner Jr, *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

John V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

Bradford Littlejohn, ed., *God of Our Fathers: Classical Theism for the Contemporary Church* (Moscow, ID: Davenant Institute, 2018).

Michael J. Ovey, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (London: Latimer Trust, 2016).

Jonathan J. Routley, *Eternal Submission: A Biblical and Theological Examination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

Bruce A. Ware and John Starke, eds., *One God in Three Persons* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014).

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