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CLASSICAL TRINITARIANISM AND ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION: SOME HISTORICAL AND DOGMATIC REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Within Anglophone evangelical theology and church life there has been much debate in recent months over the idea of ‘eternal functional subordination’ (EFS) or ‘eternal relationships of authority and submission’ (ERAS). To ask whether EFS/ERAS are adequately trinitarian we must first define ‘trinitarian’. Following Barnes, I argue that the only possible definition is historical. To be ‘trinitarian’ is to hold to the doctrine developed in the fourth-century debates. By insisting on a strong distinction between the divine life *in se* and the economic acts of God, I rule out any appeal to, for instance, the *pactum salutis* in an attempt to defend EFS/ERAS. A consideration of the Father-Son relationship suggests two possible defences of such positions, one relying on finding an eternal analogue to the economic ordering of the divine acts, and the other pressing ‘Father-Son’ language to suggest that the relationship of eternal generation might entail something like EFS/ERAS. An examination of what must be said concerning the simple divine essence, however, excludes both these possibilities. I argue, therefore, that EFS, ERAS, or any similar doctrines are incompatible with classical trinitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable energy in Anglophone evangelical theology in recent years devoted to the ideas of ‘eternal functional subordination’ (EFS) or ‘eternal relationships of authority and submission’ (ERAS). Alongside a number of book-length engagements,¹ there have been many

¹ To sample, merely: Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); Dennis Jowers and H. Wayne House (eds), *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene:

conference papers and, in the summer of 2016, a whirlwind of blog posts. The debate has been highly charged, with accusations of heresy being freely thrown on every side; it has its origins in an attempt to link a particular account of gender roles with the doctrine of the Trinity, through a leveraging of 1 Corinthians 11:3.

Whatever the merits of the appeal to that particular pauline text, and so of the argument about gender roles,² the claims about trinitarian doctrine are interesting. Both sides of the (regularly acrimonious) debate are apparently convinced that there is a relatively monolithic tradition of trinitarian orthodoxy that supports their position. I have argued before that, historically, the church's teaching on the trinity has been remarkably unified;³ assuming that argument was right, which side (if either) of this contemporary evangelical debate can claim fidelity to that heritage? I argue in what follows that there is no possible space for EFS/ERAS in classical trinitarianism; any such doctrine will necessarily be a departure from that tradition.

DEFINING 'TRINITARIAN'

The confessional basis of the American Evangelical Theological Society,⁴ like many other symbolic documents, includes a clause about the doctrine of the Trinity: 'God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.' I reflect that this is not particularly well drafted: in particular, the natural grammatical reading of 'one in essence' is that it refers to the immediately prior subject, and so insists that each person is one in essence, which is rather unfortunate. Grammar aside, though, we can ask about theology: how adequate a definition of the doctrine of the Trinity is this? There are two parts to this (my qualms about drafting aside): there is clearly nothing here that is repugnant to trinitarian orthodoxy; but is believing this

Pickwick, 2012); Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (eds), *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016)

² I hold fairly strongly to the view that there are no good arguments from the doctrine of the Trinity to any human sociality, including gender roles in marriage or church, but that is not the theme of this essay.

³ See Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

⁴ This paper was originally written for the 2016 ETS Conference, at the invitation of the Theology and Gender group. I am grateful for the invitation, and for helpful discussion at the conference.

clause sufficient to trinitarian orthodoxy? Or does one need to believe not only this but something more to be adequately trinitarian?

Asking such questions highlights that the word 'trinitarian' demands definition, and the first point I want to make is that the only possible definition it may gain is historical. Scripture teaches us much about the nature of deity, and about the relationships of the Son to the Father, and so on, and of course we should believe all these things. But Scripture does not define for us the word 'trinitarian'—the word is not a biblical one.

Now, of course, we could define the word by asserting that 'trinitarian' means 'believing that which the Bible teaches about Father, Son, and Spirit,' but such a procedure would be unhelpful. Consider the ETS's confession: it is a matter of record that the requirement to be Trinitarian was inserted to prevent those who claimed to believe the Bible, but who denied the Trinity, from seeking membership. This highlights the fact that the word 'Trinitarian' has typically been used to judge the adequacy of various proposed readings of Scripture. Arians, Socinians, Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Oneness Pentecostals, and various others all read Scripture wrongly because they fail to read it in a trinitarian way. That sentence only makes sense if we accept that 'trinitarian' means something more definite than merely 'whatever I think the Bible teaches'. The claim 'Scripture teaches a trinitarian doctrine of God', that is, is substantive, and not merely a tautology.

Perhaps a parallel example will help here: consider the word 'Calvinist'; it is similarly undefined biblically, and similarly proposes a body of teaching that claims to be biblical, but that others regard as a poor reading of Scripture (in this case, of course, the dividing-lines are between evangelical believers). Calvinists hold a particular set of ideas about fallenness, grace, faith, and election; they hold to these ideas because they believe that they are in fact taught in Scripture, but the word 'Calvinist' refers to that definite and limited set of ideas, not to whatever doctrine someone claims to find in Scripture. The Arminian may argue 'The biblical doctrine of grace is not Calvinist' and have something meaningful to say.

In both cases, then, there is no possible biblical challenge over the definition of the term, only over the correctness of the doctrine so denoted. Of course, I might challenge the definition—the claim that it is not authentically Calvinist to hold to a limited atonement is an example that has been essayed more than once. The only meaningful court of appeal here will be to history: 'Calvinist' describes a historical tradition that has its origins in the Genevan reformer, and is generally considered to find a key point of development in the Synod of Dort; the idea of limited atonement develops during that history (the first explicit articulation, I believe, was in Beza's

responses to Andreae at the Montbéliard Colloquy in 15865); any argument that the idea is, or is not, authentically ‘Calvinist’ will turn on a telling of this history.

Mention of Dort takes me to a second point, slightly more controversial: not only must we define ‘trinitarian’ historically, we cannot do it by simple appeal to this or that historical document. This is the thesis of Barnes’s decisive essay, ‘The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon’.⁶ It is at least arguable that the Canons of Dort provide a definitive account of what it is to be ‘Calvinist’—that argument must be historical in form, of course, but once made and accepted permits a certain abstraction from history. I do not need to know the details of the arguments surrounding Jacobus Arminius and Johannes Wtenbogaert (the author of the *Five Articles of Remonstrance*) to be able to determine whether a position is authentically Calvinist or not; I have a canon, or rather a set of Canons, to measure it by. My claim here is that there is no similar canon, no similar defining symbolic document, for trinitarianism.

This is not an obvious position, in that there are at least three apparent candidates, the decrees of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, and the document we know as the Nicene Creed. It is not hard, however, to show that these are inadequate. The simplest summary of orthodox trinitarianism, the one routinely taught to first year undergraduates, goes ‘*mia ousia, tres hypostases*’. But none of our three documents teach this formula. Famously, Nicaea actually anathematises all who teach more than one hypostasis in the Godhead;⁷ Constantinople, or at least that summary of it that has reached us, makes no mention of *ousia* or *hypostasis* at all;⁸ the Creed will insist the Son is *homoousios ton Patri*, but says nothing similar of the Holy Spirit, and, again, does not use the word *hypostasis* at

⁵ On the various arguments adduced concerning predestination there see Jill Raitt, *The Colloquy of Montbéliard: Religion and Politics in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 147-55 and Gottfried Adam, *Der Streit um die Prädestination im ausgehenden 16. Jahrhundert: Eine Untersuchung zu den Entwürfen von Samuel Huber und Aegidius Hunnius* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), pp. 29-49.

⁶ Michel Rene Barnes, ‘The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon’ in Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (eds), *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, and Community* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 47-67.

⁷ Τοὺς δὲ λέγοντας ... Ἐξ ἐτέρας ὑποστάσεως ἢ οὐσίας φάσκοντας εἶναι ... τούτους ἀναθεματίζει ἡ ἀγία καθολικὴ καὶ ἀποστολικὴ ἐκκλησία. (From the Creed of Nicaea)

⁸ The closest to a trinitarian formula comes in the fifth canon, which merely affirms the single deity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

all. These documents, vital though they are, simply do not codify what we now call trinitarianism.

So how do we define ‘trinitarian’? Barnes’s argument in the paper cited above is that this core Christian doctrine is determined by the debate that, roughly put, occurs between Nicaea and Constantinople—I would want to add Augustine’s interpretation of the Nicene heritage also (which I do not think Barnes would deny, but it was not the focus of his argument then). If we are to understand what the demand to be trinitarian means, we need to be attentive to the fourth century debates, and to understand the doctrine that underlay the affirmations—and particularly the condemnations—made at Constantinople.

The first canon that has come down to us from that Council (one of the undisputed ones) affirms the faith of Nicaea and then condemns a series of positions by name alone. We are told that Eunomians, Arians, Semi-Arians, Sabellians, Marcellians, Photinians, and Apollinarians are all wrong. The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is that teaching which falls into none of these errors, but it is not spelled out. This is not a surprise: patristic theology tended to make progress by denying the possibility of various positions. We might on this basis assert that orthodox trinitarianism is more of a space than a doctrine, and suggest that any account that does not fall foul of these various strictures can stand. There are two problems with this, however. The first is that it does not overcome the basic point that I am arguing here: even if we accept that claim completely, to determine the limits of orthodoxy we will need to discover what Eunomius, Sabellius, Marcellus, Photinus, and the rest taught. This will, inevitably, be historical work.

Second, the history is not generally read as leaving a blank space between these various heresies. What is left when they are all excluded is something quite specific and defined, which we might term Cappadocian trinitarianism (locating Augustine as the most capable interpreter of that tradition). Now, Barnes certainly suggests in the paper I have cited that there were two strands of presentation here: one, represented by Rome, Alexandria and, later, Augustine, locating Arius as the heresiarch of the century and interpreting later errors as different modes of repeating his core errors, and the other represented supremely by the Cappadocians seeing Arius as a fairly minor aberration, and seeing the great elenctic task as opposing Eunomius. There is not here, however, a difference of doctrine, so much as a difference over who the doctrine was to be defined against. Further, it is fair to say that in the two decades since Barnes wrote that paper there has been a massive and compelling body of patristic scholarship on the fourth century that has at least softened the edges of

this picture, and that has found the presentation of later non-nicene theologies as dependent on Arius to be a move more political than theological.⁹

The presenting problem for fourth-century theology was two equally biblical, but apparently contradictory, modes of discourse concerning the divine life. On the one hand, Christians, like the people of Israel, are called to an uncompromising loyalty to one God alone; on the other Christians speak of Father, Son, and Spirit as each being divine. The Constantinopolitan list of heresies bears witness to this: Arians, Semi-Arians, and Eunomians err in so stressing the diversity of Father and Son (or, in the case of the semi-Arians, Father and Spirit) that they deny the divine unity; Sabellians, Marcellians, and Photinians err in so stressing the divine unity that they deny any real distinct existence of the three divine persons.

I have written at some length elsewhere¹⁰ on how these debates played out, and tried to delineate the careful theological moves that enable the Cappadocian statement of a convincing doctrine that falls into neither error. I do not intend to repeat that material here; but I re-iterate that this history, famously complex as it is, is the only available definition we have of what it is to be trinitarian. This does not mean, of course, that everyone who wishes to claim to be trinitarian must become an expert in fourth-century doctrinal history; it does mean that when a question arises about what is acceptably trinitarian, then the only proper court of appeal is to a careful statement and consideration of this history. And so I turn to the novel—they are novel, as will become clear—ideas clustered around the slogans ‘eternal functional subordination’ (hereafter ‘EFS’) and ‘eternal relations of authority and submission’ (hereafter ‘ERAS’). How do these sorts of ideas relate to this complex and historically-defined term, ‘trinitarian’?

The first thing we must insist is that biblical exegesis has no purchase on this question. This is not a surrender of biblical authority, but a consequence of what I have so far argued about the term ‘trinitarian’ being only definable historically. Suppose I came to be convinced both that the Scriptures teach EFS (or ERAS), and that the position was nonetheless incompatible with those positions developed in the fourth century: the proper claim then would not be that EFS was compatible with trinitarian orthodoxy, but that (so-called) trinitarian orthodoxy was unbiblical. I would have arrived in the position of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, or the Oneness Pentecostals, of rejecting trinitarianism out of faithfulness to (what I perceived to be) the Biblical revelation. To return to my former analogy, I

⁹ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) remains the key text here.

¹⁰ Holmes, *The Holy Trinity*, pp. 82-120.

might attempt to prove that the doctrine of unconditional election is false from the Scriptures, but I cannot prove that it is not a proper tenet of Calvinism by exegesis. In exactly the same way, I can try to prove that a position, be it EFS, or confession of the *filioque*, or inseparable operations, or divine simplicity, is right by appeal to Scripture, but I cannot, necessarily, prove that a position is trinitarian by the same procedure. That judgement can only ever be arrived at historically.¹¹

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GOD'S ETERNAL LIFE AND GOD'S ACTIONS IN THE WORLD

Proposals such as EFS or ERAS, as their names suggest, are claims about the eternal life of God—about who God is *in se*. Just as the saying of the incarnate Son that ‘the Father is greater than I’ does not lead to Arianism because it reflects the state of humiliation occasioned by the incarnation, not the eternal equality of Father and Son, so demonstrations of an obedience or submission of the Son to the Father that refer to the Son’s state of humiliation are not adequate to prove an eternal subordination or submission. At one level, of course, this is uncontentious, but there is a point where we need to be careful: the proper distinction here is one that concerns the divine life, and is between theology and economy, not one that concerns the Son’s state, and so is between pre-incarnate and incarnate, or humiliation and glorification.

This plays into the question at two points, corresponding to the beginning and the end of God’s redemptive purposes. In seeking to order the divine works in the world using the concept of covenant, seventeenth-century Reformed authors proposed a ‘covenant of redemption’, a pre-temporal agreement between Father and Son (and, presumably, Spirit, although the point was generally left implicit) that the Son would assume a human nature, suffer crucifixion, and so bring salvation to the elect. Some have suggested that this covenant of redemption offers an example of an eternal, because pre-temporal, ordering in the divine life that shows authority and submission.¹²

¹¹ For this reason I have not even attempted to engage with the many exegetical defences of EFS/ERAS; if adequate, they establish it as *true*, but not as *trinitarian*, and so they are not relevant to my modest argument here.

¹² John Starke makes this error in arguing that John Owen taught an eternal authority of the Father over the Son; Owen is clear that this inequality stems from the *pactum salutis*, and so is not a reality of the divine life. Starke, ‘Augustine and his interpreters’ in Ware and Starke, *One God ...*, pp. 155-172, especially pp. 159-165. Tyler Wittman’s review of this volume in *Themelios* 40

The point appears powerful if we accept the reality of the *pactum salutis*: here is an event in eternity in which the Son submits to the Father's purposes. We might of course offer a rebuttal, which might take a strong form, that the *pactum* has in fact no basis in authority and submission, but instead results in the Father-Son relationship assuming that shape in the work of redemption.¹³ A weaker form of the same point might instead insist that we know nothing of the character of the covenant, and so can claim nothing about the divine life from it. This seems to me to be properly modest, but I think we should go further.

The *pactum salutis* is eternal in that it is pre-temporal, but it is not eternal in the sense that it belongs to the perfect life of God. It is very clearly the beginning of the works of God—the beginning of the great work of redemption. If God had chosen to remain alone in perfect eternal bliss and not to create, there would never have been a *pactum salutis*.¹⁴ So the *pactum* tells us nothing about the eternal life of God (or at least nothing direct—I will come back to this). Similarly, the teaching of Paul in Corinthians that the last act of God's saving work will be the Son's handing over the Kingdom to the Father might appear to speak of an act of submission or subordination in eternity, but again it is, if the language may be allowed, the wrong eternity: it is the consummation of the divine work, not an aspect of the divine life.

The defender of EFS/ERAS could respond to this in two obvious ways. One would be to embrace a broadly Barthian account of the divine life, in which God's eternal decision to be *pro nobis* is a determination of the divine life. (Famously, Barth includes the doctrine of election as the last

(2015), pp. 350-2, demonstrates the point about Owen and the *pactum* effectively.

¹³ This is in fact precisely what Owen teaches according to Wittman.

¹⁴ In the various blog posts that flowed on this issue in the summer of 2016, Jonathan Edwards was quoted more than once as an apparent defender of EFS/ERAS, but the defence relies on a failure to understand this point. The relevant text is *Miscellanies* 1062, which begins with an assertion that there is an economic order in the divine acts, 'a subordination of the persons of the Trinity, in their actings with respect to the creature.' Edwards immediately insists, however, that there can be no eternal subordination with respect to the divine will (*i.e.*, no 'authority' or 'submission') and so faces a conundrum, which he solves by appealing to the *pactum salutis*: the economic subordination 'must be conceived of as in some respect established by mutual free agreement...' Edwards has more to say about the fittingness of this order, which I will consider below. (Quotations from the online Yale *Works of Jonathan Edwards* vol. 20 (ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw).)

word of the doctrine of God, not the first word of the works of God.¹⁵ Is such a move compatible with fourth-century trinitarianism? There are obvious problems: an apparent suggestion of change in the perfect divine life being chief among them, but there is also a modification, at least, of divine aseity. That said, some of the most interesting theological work being done in the USA today is pushing in this sort of direction—I am thinking of projects like Jenson's and, particularly, McCormack's.¹⁶ Suppose one of these projects worked, and it was in fact possible to show that there was a way of holding on to a recognisably-orthodox account of immutability and aseity whilst accepting the act of election, or the *pactum salutis*, as a determination of God's life, not just ours; would the resulting doctrine be adequately trinitarian?

The answer, unfortunately, must be 'no', for all the reasons explored above. Satisfying abstract doctrinal conditions is not enough to make a position 'trinitarian'; rather we must be confessing the same sort of perfect divine life as the fourth-century fathers confessed. A Barthian account, although it might be attractive and even correct, is not this. If Barth is right about this particular aspect of the divine life, then Basil, Gregory and Augustine were wrong—and an account that suggests that Basil, Gregory, and Augustine were wrong about the divine life is, for that reason alone, already not adequately trinitarian on the only meaningful definition of 'trinitarian' we have.

The second obvious response would be to accept the argument above, that the *pactum salutis* belongs to the works of God, not to the perfect life of God, but to insist that the ordering of the works of God reflects the ordering of the divine life. This is much stronger. Basil of Caesarea insisted on this point, that because of the eternal order—*taxis*—of the divine life, all divine works are initiated by the Father, carried forward by the Son, and perfected by the Spirit. This suggests that orthodox trinitarianism recognised, indeed insisted upon, an order in the life of God that is reflected in a created analogue of the Father sovereignly proposing, and the Son apparently obediently acting in response.¹⁷ To answer this

¹⁵ Barth, *CD II/2*, pp. 76-93.

¹⁶ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: OUP, 1997) and Bruce L. McCormack, 'Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger' *SJT* 63 (2010), pp. 203-224.

¹⁷ This is Edwards' continuation in *Miscellanies* 1062: there his, he suggests, 'a natural decency and fitness' to the economic ordering. This is emphatically not any account of 'eternal functional subordination': he is clear that the only order in the eternal life of God is the relations of origin, but because the Son is from the Father in all eternity, there is a fittingness in the Son freely choosing to accept the authority of the Father in the economy.

point, we need to reflect on the teaching encompassed in the slogan *opera externa trinitatis indivisa sunt*. I will take up this reflection later.

THE SON, ETERNAL AND INCARNATE

Much of the worthwhile work in the fourth-century debates depended on clarifying the different ways in which Scripture refers to the Father-Son relation. The basic clarification, achieved most clearly by Hilary of Poitiers,¹⁸ is the one I have already made, between the eternal relation and the relation of the Father to the incarnate Son. ‘I and the Father are one’ refers to the eternal relation; ‘the Father is greater than I’ to the incarnated relation. (Some statements—‘I have come from the Father’—are ambiguous, and Augustine introduced a third category of distinction: statements of relationship that apply equally to the eternal life and the incarnate life of the Son.)

This distinction is basic to the development of fourth-century trinitarianism, and stands as a way of continuing to affirm the co-equal glory of the Father and the Son without ignoring or explaining away Biblical texts that speak of an unequal relationship. It becomes effectively an exegetical 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. Thus the basic doctrinal requirement of absolute equality and simplicity is maintained.

This raises a significant problem for the defender of EFS/ERAS: there is a programmatic basis to orthodox trinitarianism which insists that any Scriptural statement of authority, submission, or subordination in the Father-Son relationship is understood as referring to the economy of salvation, not to the eternal divine life. It is hard to see on this basis how any exegetical argument for EFS/ERAS can proceed without first rejecting a basic claim of the fourth-century trinitarian consensus. Nonetheless, let us press on: what can we say about the eternal Father-Son relationship under the strictures of classical trinitarianism?

The answer is fairly precise. All that is said of the eternal life of God is said of the single *ousia* save only that which refers to the relations of origin.¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, who understood this well, suggests that there are therefore five things only we can know about the persons of the Trinity: that the Father is unbegotten, that the Father begets the Son, that the Son is begotten of the Father, that the Father and the Son together spirate

¹⁸ *De Trin.* IX.14.

¹⁹ This is the way I summarised the point in *The Holy Trinity*, see p. 146.

the Spirit, and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.²⁰ This point is crucial to fourth-century trinitarian theology because it defends the core doctrine of divine simplicity.²¹ To surrender this point, on orthodox trinitarian logic, is to deny the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit; it is to embrace polytheism.²²

What are we going to do with EFS/ERAS under this stricture? Only one line is possible for the defender of these positions: to insist that in the relationship of begetting and being begotten there is either a functional subordination, or a relationship of authority and submission. This point has been recognised and accepted by defenders of these positions.²³ Let me specify the issue here more carefully:

Origen offered the standard defence of eternal generation,²⁴ a doctrine that of course is enshrined in the Creed. God does not change, and so the Son is co-eternal with the Father, and yet the Son has His origin in being begotten from the Father; how do we square these three necessary biblical truths? By, Origen suggests, asserting that the generation of the Son is not the beginning of a new relationship, but the eternal way of being of the Father and the Son. The Father is eternally begetting the Son; the Son is eternally being begotten of the Father (and, to complete the list, the Father and the Son are eternally spirating the Spirit, and the Spirit is eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son). To press forward a bit from Origen, this is the best description—the only description—of the pure act that the life of God is, a single, simple event of ecstatic, perfect, and loving self-donation.

I am aware that some involved in defending EFS have also denied eternal generation;²⁵ I do not have much to say about that except that to deny eternal generation is certainly to deny the doctrine of the Trinity, and,

²⁰ *ST Ia q. 32 art. 3.*

²¹ On this, see (e.g.) Ayres, *Nicaea*, pp. 280-1 & 286-8.

²² Gregory of Nyssa argues this point explicitly in his classic work *Ad Ablab.*, often entitled in English ‘That we should not think of saying there are three gods’.

²³ See, e.g., Wayne Grudem, ‘Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity’ in Ware & Starke, *One God...*, pp. 17-46, especially, pp. 18-32.

²⁴ He addresses it at various points in the extant works, but see for example *De Prin.* 1.2.2. The best interpretation is probably still Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

²⁵ I should note that there have been several verbal reports that two leading figures who have advanced this position in print, Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem, indicated in public at the 2016 ETS conference that they now accepted the doctrine of eternal generation. I cannot yet find any published

given that ‘eternally begotten of the Father’ is a confession of the Nicene Creed, is in grave danger of departing from what can meaningfully be called Christianity—it is, once again, to side with Unitarians and Jehovah’s Witnesses in claiming that the Christian doctrine of God is unbiblical. Assuming then that the doctrine of eternal generation is accepted, if we are going to find an account of EFS/ERAS that is adequately Trinitarian, we are going to have to find it within our confession of eternal generation, as there is nothing else we can say about the Father-Son relationship.

This ‘nothing else’ imposes a strict condition on our derivation: it is not just that our putative account of EFS or ERAS has to be coherent with eternal generation; it has to be shown to derive from that doctrine, because there is nothing other than eternal generation that we can say of the Father-Son relation. Now, this is not immediately hopeless: two lines suggest themselves. The first is to note that this relationship is asymmetric. There is, as we have noted, a proper *taxis*, an order, to the triune life. Durst’s recent book is valuable both in reminding us that the Biblical writers feel free to order the persons in every possible way, and that these different orderings invite us to reflect on different aspects of God’s work in the world,²⁶ but *in se*, in the eternal divine life, it is clearly, on the Biblical witness, proper to speak of the Father first, the Son second, and the Spirit third.

This asymmetry and order does not yet give us an account of authority or submission; it does give us an account of subordination, if that word is etymologically understood: the Son is second to the Father in order, and so is sub-ordered. This point has been routinely made by trinitarian theologians down the ages using language of order and suborder, a fact that a number of recent defenders of EFS have attempted to leverage. They are, unfortunately, mistaking the use of an unexceptional term for the embracing of a novel idea. Nothing may be derived from such usage save that the Son is most properly named after the Father and before the Spirit when we name God.²⁷ Nonetheless, reflection on this asymmetry might

statement to this effect, although I sincerely hope it is true, as all heaven rejoices when a sinner repents.

²⁶ Rodrick K. Durst, *Reordering the Trinity: Six movements of God in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015).

²⁷ To take another text that was cited more than once in blog discussions in 2016, Charles Hodge speaks of ‘a subordination’ in the Trinity (e.g. ST I.445) several times, but clearly means no more than this. It is ‘a subordination of the persons as to modes of subsistence and operation’ that is summed up merely in the assertion that ‘the Father is first, the Son second, and the Spirit third.’ (again, p. 445.)

yet lead us to an account of authority and submission, unless there is some other reason to exclude such an account.

The second line we might push from the doctrine of eternal generation is to note that the relation between a human father and son, particularly in Biblical context, certainly includes authority, submission, and subordination.²⁸ This has some *prima facie* plausibility: God chose to reveal the first and second modes of the divine being as ‘Father’ and ‘Son’, and so we are certainly invited to reflect on what we know of human paternal-filial relationships and to enquire whether we may predicate this of the eternal divine relationship also.

At the end of our investigation of what classical trinitarianism has to say about the Father-Son relationship, then, we are left with two possible lines for the defender of some form of EFS/ERAS, one based around the ordering of the indivisible divine acts, which might be held to reflect an order in the eternal divine life, and the other inviting a reflection on Father-Son language, which might be held to suggest that eternal generation is a relationship of authority and submission. To test these further, we turn to what we must say of the *ousia*, the single, simple, divine life, in order to be faithful to fourth-century trinitarianism.

THE SIMPLICITY OF THE DIVINE LIFE

Let me return first to the doctrine of the indivisibility of divine acts, which I discussed a little above. I have argued elsewhere²⁹ that this is in fact a crucial doctrine for the development of Cappadocian trinitarianism, particularly in Gregory of Nyssa’s much-anthologised *ad Ablabium*. Why should we not say Father, Son, and Spirit are three gods, asks Gregory? His answer turns on the inseparability of divine operations: Father, Son, and Spirit do one thing, and so are one being. Now, this argument is complex in its construction, and relies on a whole set of assumptions which Gregory does not stop to spell out. In the essay just referenced, I try to do some of this work, and suggest that the inseparability of divine saving acts is a corollary, and so a revelation, of the simplicity of the eternal divine life.

The arguments we have already seen point to a proper ordering in that simplicity, and here we get into the places where our language strains to speak well of God’s life. God is pure act, the single, simple eternal act of the begetting of the Son by the Father and the proceeding of the Spirit

²⁸ A point Wayne Grudem has pressed several times in this discussion.

²⁹ Stephen R. Holmes, ‘Trinitarian Action and Inseparable Operations’ in F. Sanders & O. Crisp (eds) *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Proceedings of the Los Angeles Theology Conference* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

from the Father and the Son. That is certainly to say that the relational distinctions that define the divine simplicity have a proper order to them—we most properly name God as the dominical baptismal formula does, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and so there is a *taxis*, an order, in the eternal divine life. This, I take it, is the eternal analogue to the order we found in the inseparable divine acts, but there is no hint here yet of subordination, authority, or submission. This is the point made by Edwards:³⁰ the shape of triune acts in the economy reflects the order of being in all eternity, but does not imply anything more than an order, that the Father is most properly named first, the Son second, and the Spirit third.

Further, this order is never division. The pure act that God is is single and simple. As we have seen, the confession of divine simplicity is crucial to fourth-century trinitarianism, and so is a confession that is necessary for a theology to be adequately trinitarian.³¹ Now, divine simplicity demands the singularity of divine will, divine energy, divine action, and every other aspect of the divine life save only the eternal relations of origin.³² There is one volitional inclination in the divine life, one intention, one activity, and so on. So, any proposal suggesting some form of EFS or ERAS must be consistent with there being a single divine act and a single divine will.

However, diversity of function requires diversity of act: this seems clear enough. Therefore, to hold to any form of functional differentiation, whether subordinationist or some other kind, within a single divine act is surely impossible; it would require an account of how two (or, in fact, three) different functions can exist within the same single and simple act.³³ There is an eternal analogue of the order of divine acts in the world,

³⁰ See nn. 13 and 16 above.

³¹ See again Ayres, *Nicaea*, pp. 286-8.

³² I take it that this is obvious, but it is spelt out by John of Damascus *De fid. orth.* 8, and see now the exposition in Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015), pp. 29-32.

³³ Grudem appears to realise and accept this impossibility, and so devotes space to insisting the doctrine of inseparable operations is unbiblical; unfortunately, this defence falls foul of my basic argument in this paper: rejecting the ecumenical doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of a proposed private interpretation of Scripture is, once again, to side with Jehovah's Witnesses and others who have left the church on the grounds that the received doctrine of the Trinity is unbiblical. See Wayne Grudem, 'Doctrinal Deviations...' pp. 18-27; Grudem focuses upon problems he perceives in the constructions of Erick-

but it is in the order of relations of origin, and not otherwise. There is no space here for an account of EFS/ERAS, or for anything similar.

To assert relations of authority and submission within a single divine will is similarly impossible: authority and submission require a diversity of volitional faculties. Where there is one simple single will, there can necessarily be no authority or submission. This would appear to close off the second option outlined above for defending EFS/ERAS, that of an appeal to the language of 'Father' and 'Son'. When we consider what we know of the divine life we are required to insist that the authority and submission we find in human paternal-filial relationships is not an analogue of anything real in the divine life; the language of Father and Son points to an asymmetrical relationship of origin and nothing more; it cannot be grounds for asserting EFS/ERAS, because to do so would be to offend against other necessary trinitarian claims, particularly divine simplicity.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the central Trinitarian doctrine of divine simplicity necessarily excludes any meaningful account of subordination, or of authority and submission, and so there is no space for an account of EFS, ERAS, or anything similar, within any recognisably orthodox trinitarianism. I have accepted repeatedly that the defender of EFS/ERAS might choose, perhaps out of a desire to be faithful to his/her particular interpretation of Scripture, to hold to these doctrines by rejecting orthodox trinitarianism, but such a rejection entails locating oneself outside of what is commonly understood to be the Christian church—hence my running comparison with Unitarianism and the Jehovah's Witnesses. It may be that EFS/ERAS is biblical and correct, but if it is, the classical Christians tradition of 'orthodox trinitarianism' must inevitably be unbiblical and wrong.

son, Sumner, and Belleville, which in some cases do appear to be genuine problems, but the logic of his argument seems to require him to reject the doctrine of inseparable operations entirely, not merely to reject certain forms of it. There is an attempted retrieval on p. 24, where Grudem accepts that 'in some sense we only understand very faintly' the whole Godhead is involved in every divine act; he denies however that this means 'any action done by one person is also done by the other two persons', a line I find very difficult to make any sense of. The most natural reading would be that Grudem thinks the 'whole being of God' is something other than the three persons, but this would be merely bizarre.